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HAMBURGER FORSCHUNGEN ZUR KUNSTGESCHICHTE
Studien, Theorien, Quellen

Herausgegeben vom
Kunstgeschichtlichen Seminar
der Universität Hamburg

RELIQUIARE

IM MITTELALTER

Herausgegeben von
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Akademie Verlag

2005

From Bones to Stones – Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries

In the earliest preserved account of martyrdom, the *Life of St Polycarp*, written some time after the middle of the second century, we read that when the saint had uttered his final amen on the pyre, the flames burst out around his body like a protective vault within which the bystanders saw not what one would expect, a clump of burning flesh, but rather a shining body, 'like gold or silver smelting in a furnace,' a body, moreover, that released the most pleasant of fragrances. Brief as it is, this remarkable passage sets forth qualities that will continue to color the hagiographic imagination during the entire Middle Ages, with its long procession of saints secreting the sweet odor of sanctity and pulsating through light-filled auras; its congregation of bones transmuted into something luminous and priceless, of dead matter transvalued into a shining material. Yet, as if this latter analogy needed to be ward off, Polycarp's *vita* hastens to add that the saint's relics 'were dearer than precious stones and finer than gold.'¹

I would like to explore here some of the reasons that allowed this particular comparison to be drawn: why it is that bones could be thought of in the same breath as stones, why too gems were used so conspicuously and consistently on the reliquaries that encased saints' earthly remains. In other words, what follows is not going to be about *Edelstein allegories*, the prodigious edifice of medieval allegorical interpretations so admirably studied by Christel Meier in her book *„Gemma spiritualis“*. Working in the interstices of that edifice, I wish to offer a more anthropologically inflected study of a facet of what can be called the material imagination in the Middle Ages; a probing of the web of associations that allowed for incommensurable things to be brought together across the seemingly great divide cleaving the otherworldly from the earthly, the invisible from the visible, the animate from the inanimate.²

Many scriptural passages encouraged the topos of the saint's body as being infinitely more valuable than any costly matter – Job's plangent meditation on the precious ores mined beneath the earth's crust, where sapphire and onyx and crystal and coral are hidden but God's wisdom cannot be found (Job 28), or Ps 18,11, with its injunction to desire the Lord more than gold and precious

stones, are but two such instances. The comparison appears in almost any kind of medieval source, from hymns, exegetical, homiletic and devotional literature, to collections of *exempla* and didactic treatises, even down to Christine de Pizan's early fifteenth-century manual of behavior for exemplary womanly conduct, the *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, in which the author exclaims:

What in this world is more pleasant or more delectable to those who desire worldly riches than gold and precious stones? But yet those riches cannot enhance an ambitious person as much as virtues do.³

Comparing and contrasting saints and stones was an especially ubiquitous exercise in hagiography; metaphors of saints as heavenly jewels, of virtues more radiant than gems return again and again. The *Life of St Agnes* (fig. 1) offers a particularly nice example insofar as it stretches the topos into a narrative that plays throughout with opposed value systems. Precipitating her earthly demise, the young girl is said to have spurned the jewels her suitor Procopius had offered, because she preferred to adorn herself with the treasures promised by her celestial bridegroom. In Jacobus de Voragine's retelling, Agnes announces to the young man that '[my spouse] has placed a wedding ring on my right hand and a necklace of precious stones around my neck, gowned me with a robe woven with gold and jewels.' And she concludes by professing her faith, the belief that her ethereal lover already holds her close, has united his body to hers, and has shown her 'incomparable treasures,' which he promises to bestow on her as long as she remains true to him.⁴ One could also refer to the *Life of St Eligius* (d. 660), the celebrated Merovingian bishop and maker of marvelous reliquaries. According to his hagiographer, the holy man would undo his work and rip apart the 'golden bracelets, jeweled purses, and other gold and gems' in order to re-deploy them in the economics of charity, to ransom slaves and succor the poor. And the author goes on to stress that the saint's elegant attire was but a veil concealing the true riches hidden beneath the hair shirt that covered his flesh, those 'ornaments of good which are so precious that he earned them as his heavenly reward.'⁵

The same idea can be found in one of the earliest developed accounts of the cult of relics, the *De laude sanctorum*, composed by Victorinus, bishop of Rouen, about 396. He wrote this encomium to welcome the relics (*mirabilia*, he terms them once) sent by his friend Ambrose, the powerful bishop of Milan and likewise a key figure in the development of the cult of saints. Celebrating the arrival of the 'troop of the saints' in his city along the lines of a Roman *adventus*, Victorinus develops the comparison several times, as when he recalls the thick crowd of people that hastened toward the newly arrived bodies and in its midst the chaste women adorned with the light-giving ornaments of the Psalms rather than with showy jewelry, which, following Paul, is but dung, *stercorum*.⁶

At the same time, and just as ubiquitously, saints were said to be like precious stones, as glorious an ornament of heaven as gems were of the physical

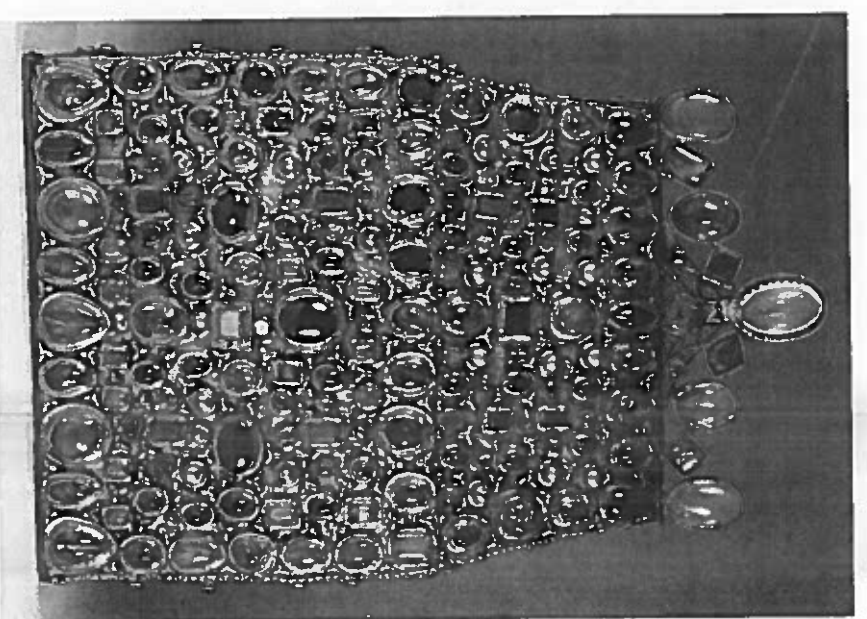


1. Procopius offering a box of jewels to Agnes. *Life of the Royal Gold Cup* (London, British Museum), French, ca. 1380

world. The most powerful justification for this convergence was provided by the Heavenly Jerusalem and its promise of an everlasting life bathed in the splendor anticipated by precious stones. For in defiance of human engineering, the most perfect architectural utopia, built on the precious cornerstone, the Christ-stone rejected by men but to whom the *lapides vivi* will ascend (1s 28, 16; 1 Pt 2, 4), is not only made of pure gold 'shining as clear as glass' but has foundations adorned with twelve precious stones.⁷ References to the Heavenly Jerusalem specifically abound in hagiographic writings. To take just one example: in his *Life of Alfred of Rievaulx* (d. 1167), Walter Daniel compares the saint's miracles to gems before evocatively describing his last four years as an effort to compact 'the ark of his life within the breadth of a single cubit,' to keep 'the fabric of a pure temple, his body, in good repair' and to square and polish 'all the stones of the spotless sanctuary, his breast.'⁸ He was not alone in thinking that saints had extricated themselves from a life of dull sinfulness through their impeccable virtue, their ever so vigilant chasteing of flesh and impure thoughts. Like stones, humans could only throw off their best light once they had been worked upon by expert hands, the hardships through which God had tested them. The *Annolied*,⁹ composed about 1070-80 at the abbey of Siegburg to promote the memory of the recently deceased founder, an avid collector of relics and equally avid enforcer of episcopal authority in his city of Cologne, explicitly resorts to this parallel when it compares the trials imposed by the supreme *aurifaber* to a goldsmith's repeated efforts to polish a topaz.⁹

Yet the metaphor of the Heavenly Jerusalem, spiritual as it may have been, was not always beyond brick-and-mortar. Pouring gems into the foundations of important monuments as a propitiatory gesture had been a widespread practice in the ancient Mediterranean world, and is, perhaps more surprisingly, attested to in the Middle Ages. The famous and famously jewel-enamored Suger reports that in 1140 after King Louis VII, the bishops, abbots, and he himself had laid the first stones in the crypt of Saint-Denis to support the new chevet, some deposited gems onto them all the while chanting the hymn *lapides preciosi omnes muru tui*.¹⁰ After all, the *lapides vivi* themselves could morph into mineral creatures, be it Hyacinth, Agate, Margaret (pearl), Gemma, Hypopolitus (built on the Rock), Ambrose (amber) and even St Denis, whose name some derived from *diogenia*, a black gem held to be useful against drunkenness. In one of the most complex reflections on reliquaries and their interaction with the holy ashes they contain, Thiofrid of Echernach (d. 1110) took the Heavenly Jerusalem on a lengthened, three-step associative journey. Since (1) the glorious city is the saints' heavenly abode, (2) it is only fitting they be honored with the most precious materials on earth, (3) provided we remember to behold them with our spiritual eyes, which tell us that the real treasures lie inside – treasures that justify, even redeem, what remains otherwise worthless and vile, the dung that clings to our carnal eyes.¹¹

If saints were spiritually precious it was by virtue of double displacement that turned what is worthless (bony fragments, human waste, ashes and dust) into something priceless (a relic), while what seems most valuable unmasked itself as dead and meaningless. That this semantic process was at the same time an economic one can be garnered from the prestige that both relics and precious stones enjoyed as commodities throughout the Middle Ages. Ever since Isidore of Seville, the preciousness of precious stones was considered to be one of their first and foremost characteristic; and, as with saints, that was a consequence of their rarity, their being sparsely scattered amid the sea of coarse matter and common fallibility.¹² When looking at the early medieval purse reliquary of St Stephen in the Schatzkammer in Vienna (fig. 2), whose front is profusely strewn with stones, it is easy to forget how much a surface of rarities this would have been, how each stone had to be patiently collected, whether recycled from earlier pieces; received as a pious gift, in which case it often came from personal jewelry; purchased through the long-distance trade of luxury goods; or stolen from enemy booty.¹³ The magnificent Carolingian *burra* appears to be literally carpeted with gems;¹⁴ it is a miniature mineralogical museum of sorts, an epiphany of preciousness that must have dazzled contemporary viewers while reminding them of their own lackluster status. By tradition, the reliquary protected some (lost) earth soaked with the blood of the protomartyr Stephen, himself not unacquainted with stones. Yet the object shields that physical legacy from our view, thereby suggesting that the martyr's blood, in imitation of that shed by Christ, has been cleared of its impure status and has been transmuted instead into the most desirable of substances, more desirable than



2. Purse reliquary of St. Stephen (Vienna, Schatzkammer),
ca. 800–830

the stones we see, for had St Peter not said, 'You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.' (1 Pt 1, 18–19).

Unlike later reliquaries, such as the exquisite Bohemian Passion reliquary in Baltimore discussed by Silke Tammen in this volume (cf. Tammen's fig. 1), where a ruby inserted in the middle of the crown of thorns speaks of martyrdom, the purse offers but a faint echo of the drama that lies buried behind its densely shimmering surface. Dark red garnets, whose unequal contours are emphasized by large collets, let the eye discern several crosses, one large embracing the entire vertical front and four smaller ones in each of the corners.¹⁵ Yet no matter how distant in time and different in form, both objects rely on precious stones for their visual impact as well as for their meaning, one sparingly, the other abundantly. And while that so tangible metaphoricity is predicated on the *similitudo* of the sacrificial blood to preciousness and the color red, contrasts

nourished by the vast reservoir of *dissimilitudines* are just as much at work here: not only the paradox of unassuming leftovers having more value than the most pristine materials, but also the paradox of blood and dust or splinters of wood hardened into gleaming substances; the paradox, too, of believing but not seeing and of seeing yet not believing. Victorius of Rouen had been almost painfully alert to these tensions when he felt compelled to impress it upon his barely Christianized audience that the 'small relics' and the 'little blood' that were entering their city were not an expendable nothing, but, on the contrary, some essential stuff that shines 'more than the sun.'¹⁶

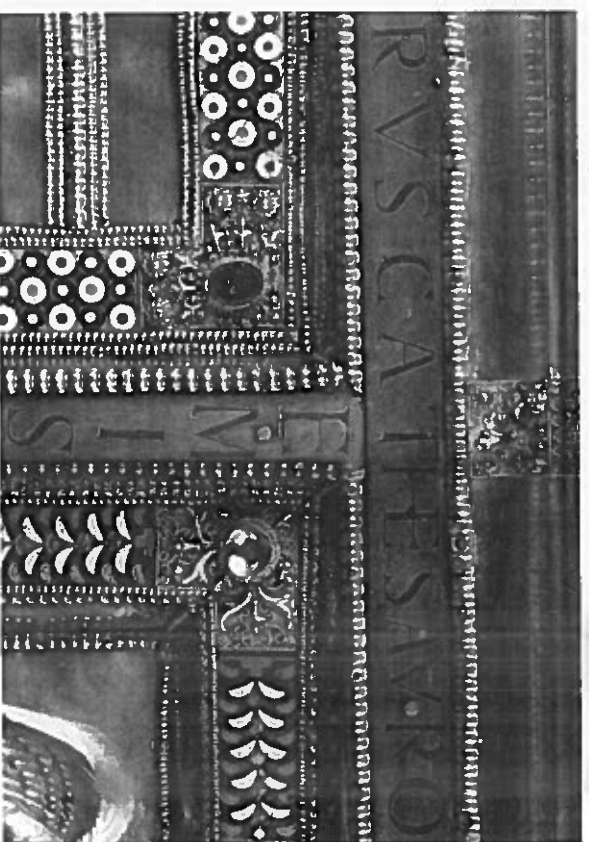
The crosses articulated by the dark red stones on St Stephen's purse are framed by a multicolored border made, besides garnets, of amethysts and sapphires and emeralds, which are also used, though smaller in size, as fillers next to pearls and stones of yellow hues. The resulting composition is one of both finely articulated chromatic patterns and harmonious overall luminous effect. And that is important because luminosity was the main property whereby stones and bones could be gathered in one and the same physical and conceptual place. It founds the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem; combined with the comparative topos, it informs the verses inscribed on the rim of the Ambrose tomb-altar in Milan, crafted by Master Vuolvinus at the behest of Bishop Angilbert about 840 (fig. 3):

'Carrying life, the resplendent shrine decorated with gems shines beautifully on the outside on account of the sparkling beauty of the metals. But it is in the interior that the real treasure lies, more precious than any metal, for it is has been given the holy bones.'¹⁷

Richly sheeted with gem-studded silver and gold as this powerful altar is, the inscription demands from the beholder no less than a paradoxical way of seeing, asking us to look through the seductive matter upon which our gaze may be tempted to rest.

In a correspondingly opposite move, luminous phenomena could assume an almost hyperrealist value in the cult of saints, notably when the faithful saw rays of light surging from saintly tombs or witnessed their apparition in the shape of glowing balls.¹⁸ We tend to forget, however, that stones too could be blessed with an illuminating power that went well beyond their generic physical characteristics. Thus the chronicle of Evesham Abbey reports that the shrine of its patron saint, Ecgvine, set up in the middle of the eleventh century, was decorated with 'three gems which illuminated a large part of the church at night' while the famous early eleventh-century, miracle-working crucifix at Waltham Abbey was not only expertly carved from a black stone (*ex atro silice*) but sported a gem, apparently of a lower voltage, capable of providing 'a dim light which enables those standing round to see.'¹⁹

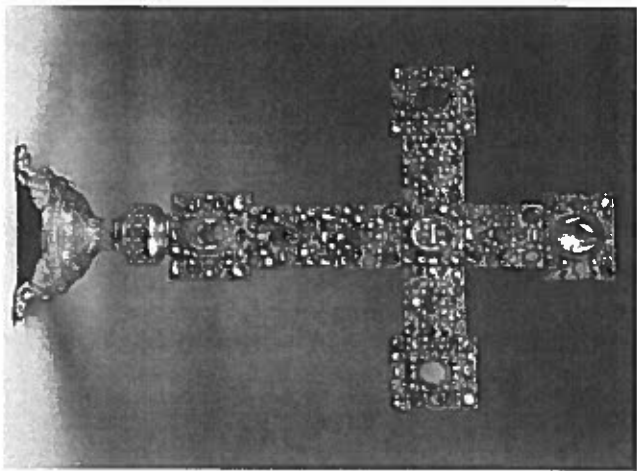
The splendor of medieval reliquaries, then, is not simply a matter of transfiguration. This is always light embodied, light tied to matter, to earth and water, just as saints are also and always made of bones and sinews and blood. And it



3. Ambrose Altar. Top rear side (Milan, S. Ambrogio), ca. 840

is a fact that an object like St Stephen's purse shines in reality considerably less vividly than when seen in reproductions, which have the unfortunate tendency to flatten out its tactile asperities, to brighten its dark alloyed gold, turning what is a massive, corrugated and numinously glowing surface into a glossy fiction. Because they come in different hues, sizes, and densities, the stones animate its front side into an ever-shifting visual experience that would have been considerably heightened when seen under flickering candlelight.

This pulsating quality is likewise present on many Romanesque versions of the *crux geminata*, such as the one in the treasury of the cathedral of Fritzlar, later associated with King Henry II (fig. 4).²⁰ Though many of the stones are according to Theo Jlich's patient examinations later replacements, some of the more important ones are authentic, including several variegated agates and the large cameo set at the bottom, carved with the paradisiacal motif of birds drinking from a cup. The exquisitely crafted mounts and little platforms that separate them from the background proper are original as well. Neither inert object nor incorporeal sign, such a weighty jeweled cross presents itself as a glorious coagulation of artifice and nature, sacrifice and redemption, mystery and revelation. Conceived as an intricate assemblage of miniature Heavenly Jerusalems capped by different dome-stones, the general impression it conveys is one of *varietas*, of difference within sameness: saints shared that too with stones, for just as the latter's appearance changed without altering their belonging to the same (mineral) essence, so saints were comparably graduated depending on



4. So-called Henry Cross (Fritzlar, Museum des St. Petri Domes), 11th or early 12th century

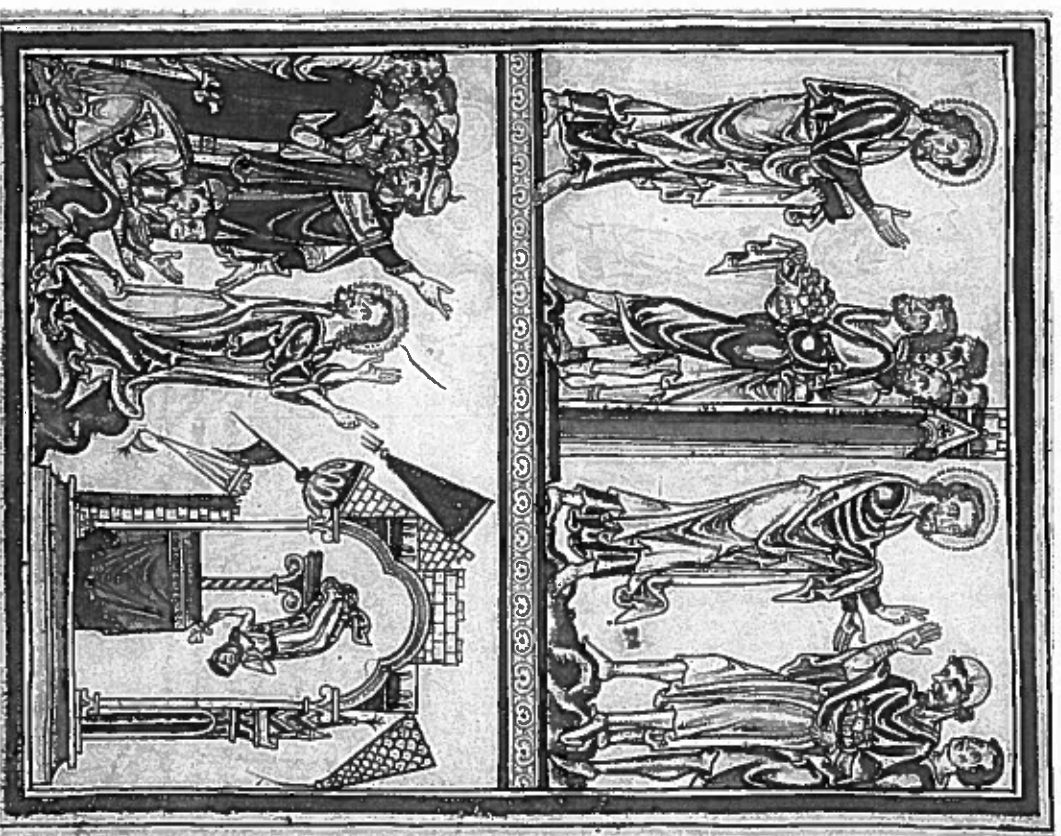
their *merita*, though they all came together in the *communio sanctorum*. With one exception, that is, for none of the stones matches in appearance the one at the center, a flat oval rock crystal that enlarges the small splinters of the True Cross and therefore fastens our gaze onto what otherwise might get lost among the surrounding bounty. As the most perfectly colorless stone, thought to be congealed ice, rock crystal carried connotations of purity and baptism and was often associated with Christ, whose divine luminosity likewise fundamentally differed from that associated with angels or the elect.²¹

Later alterations should warn us against iconological readings. But even in instances where we can be reasonably confident that we are looking at the original state, attempts to extend this type of analysis to entire objects are quickly frustrated. A range of interpretations, congruent as well as divergent, can be applied to each kind of stone; conversely, many different stones can symbolize Christ and, for that matter, any saint, virtue or moral value. On surviving jeweled crosses, the typology of the gems inserted in the center is almost endless, encompassing not only the unblemished rock crystal or red sacrificial stones, but also the highly valued celestial sapphire. In fact, the specific species of stone was not as important as its quality, which required that it had to be a particularly striking specimen, whether of unusual size or purity or else a *spolia* of

ancient provenance.²² In other words, there was no simple one-to-one correspondence between a stone and its referent, and one can say that what confronts us when looking at reliquaries sometimes strewn with hundreds of stones is a fertile web of associations that are neither entirely random nor completely reducible to language. Stones are bearers of the most memorable optical effects; much as we try, they are always in excess of verbal translations. To borrow Georges Didi-Huberman's fine phrasing, stones tug the visible away from the legible and open up the dimension of the visual, for they are coated with the flavor of what is at once here, elsewhere and in between.²³

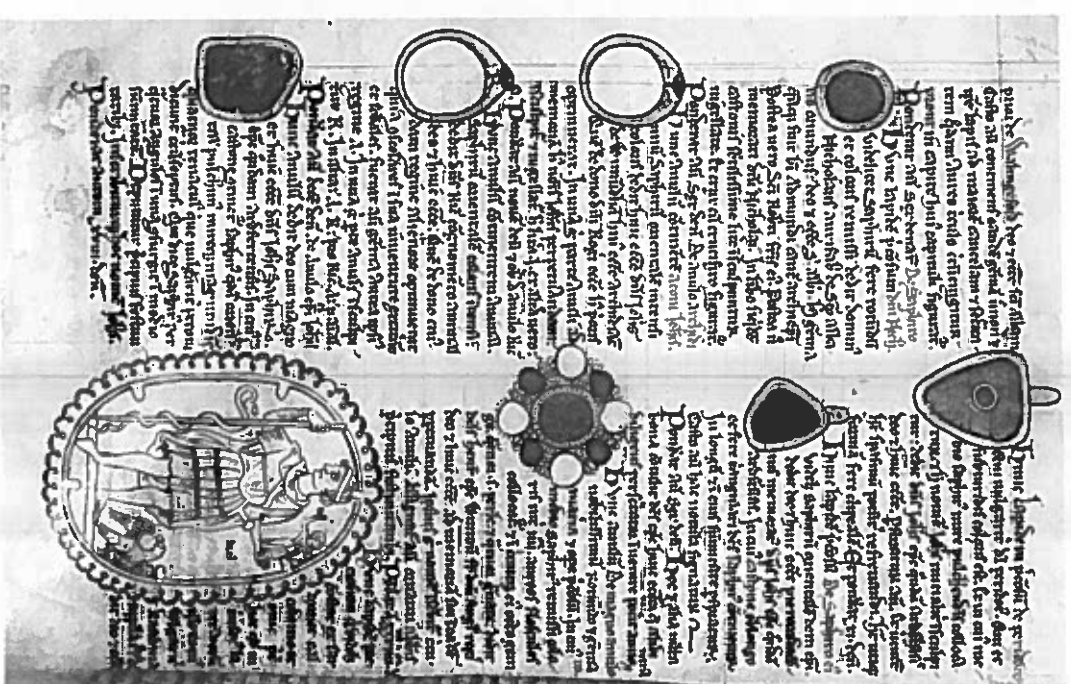
There was one last strand of associations that brought relics and bones together, something that had less to do with the way they looked than with what they did. If in the view of many world-weary exegetes a radical gulf separated the sacramental matter that were holy bodies from earth's natural products, in that of others both were endowed with *virtus*, the power to act that made neither thing entirely inanimate nor fully animate. For the mineral realm that view harked back to conceptions formulated in Greek and Roman lapidaries, and it explained that stones, equipped with a vegetative soul, were able to perform as well as to grow, engender and die; to experience sympathies and antipathies; to attract and repel; to smell and taste.²⁴ Accordingly, stony and bony particles were considered to be the vessels through which the divine could speak to humans, which is why they both were fundamentally different than man-made artifacts, including reliquaries, the dead skin lined inside and out with living substances. So much alive that stones even enjoyed the benefit of miracles we normally associate with people. A now little-known passage in the life of the evangelist John tells of an event on his return to Ephesus after his exile on the island of Patmos. He happened to come upon a preaching pagan philosopher who was urging his fellow citizens to divest themselves of their worldly goods. To drive his point home, this Crato had demanded that two rich brothers sell their patrimony and buy the most priceless gems with the proceeds, which they were now smashing in the public square (fig. 5). Somewhat unexpectedly, St John was not pleased with this public execution of precious stones and, stepping in, reminded the onlookers that while it certainly is a good thing to do away with material possessions, this ought to be done in a more productive manner; that wealth rather than being simply destroyed should be converted into spiritual currency. Unimpressed, Crato returned to the charge, now challenging St John: 'If your master is truly God, and if it is his will that these gems should benefit the poor, then you put them together again.' Which is what occurred, with the added bonus that everyone was instantly converted at the sight of so great a miracle.²⁵ The didactic purpose of the parable is obvious; less so is the fact that it takes the shape of a resurrection of stones, occurring shortly after dead Drusiana's bones had been called back to life.

The power to effect and to affect was expected of relics and stones alike, whether it was to bring physical and spiritual healing, to ensure a good crop, to protect from enemies, or to secure health, salvation, good luck, love and wealth.²⁶



5. *St. John and the precious stone miracle. Apocalypse in French* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale), England ca. 1250

So great is the functional symbiosis that at times it becomes hard to say which one did the miracle. Take, for instance, the eye-healing gem that had belonged to the ring worn during his life by Palladius, an obscure Merovingian saint and bishop of Embrun in the French Alps.²⁷ We could consider this to be a contact relic; yet the legend thinly disguises the possibility of a case of mistaken identity as to the origin of the healing *virtus*. That possibility is attested to less ambiguously for a much renowned cameo kept at a major Benedictine Abbey,



6. *Matthew Paris, 'Liber Additamentorum'* (London, British Library), ca. 1244

St. Albans. We know it well because Matthew Paris includes its tale in the inventory that he drew of the notable gems owned by the abbey, a remarkable inventory illustrated with exceptionally precise drawings (fig. 6). The ancient cameo, engraved with a figure of a Roman emperor holding a winged Victory, concludes the list, looming much larger than the jewels that come before; in fact, it was so large that it could barely fit in one's hand. It had been given to St. Albans in the early eleventh century by King Ethelred II, probably intending it



7. *Middleham Jewel* (York, Yorkshire Museum), ca. 1450–1475

for a new shrine of the patron saint. But the monks changed their minds and decided to keep the gem separately in the treasury so that it could continue to be used for what it did best: assist women in childbirth.²⁸ Were the brothers anxious about a possible competition? A confusion made by the women who came to obtain help?

For another illustration of the deep affinities between stones and relics we can turn to a surviving object, the Middleham Jewel, so named after the castle in Yorkshire where it was found in 1985 (fig. 7). Dated to the third quarter of the fifteenth century, this compact, lozenge-shaped reliquary pendant made of bright gold contained in its interior four small pieces of embroidered silk that would have wrapped the now lost relics. An eye-catching pure sapphire is inserted above an incised Trinity and encroaches on the inscription on the frame: *ecce agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis*, a liturgical formula whose protective function is well documented, here maximized by the *amanizapla* (a powerful magical invocation of God's name) that follows.²⁹ While such proximately might trouble modern conceptions of religious behavior, many medieval commentators subscribed to the view that *miracula* and *mirabilia* (a better word



8. *Chalice dropping into the chalice of St. Lupus* (Church of Saint-Loup-de-Naud, Western portal), mid-12th century

than magic) need not be mutually exclusive. Augustine suggested as much when repeatedly referring to the mysterious properties of stones as examples of the 'permanent miracles of nature, that foreshadow 'the miracles of the world to come.' And the insatiably curious Gervase of Tilbury went a step further when squarely charging those who dismissed the power of stones as having a 'lack of faith' (*incredulitas*): for marvels, though in theory mere natural phenomena beyond our comprehension, in practice act remarkably 'like the supernatural miracles willed by God, and provoke the same reaction in the beholder, namely wonder.'³⁰

Nevertheless, relics were sacramental matter of the highest order: no stone could claim that, could it? But what are we then to make of the miracle bestowed on another Merovingian saint, Lupus of Sens, according to which when he gave thanks by saying mass after having miraculously freed a host of prisoners in Paris, the heavens suddenly burst open to let a huge precious stone drop into the chalice, a stone that eventually became a sweet-smelling, miracle-working relic in its own right (fig. 8)?³¹ As miracle stories go, this has a rather perplexing ring to it. It does, however, resonate with ancient myths about

objects that drop meteorite-like from the skies, echoed in medieval legends of heavenly gifts; more importantly, it insinuates the possibility that a mere stone could be hoisted up to the status of a truly sacramental object, provided it could claim an unearthly provenance. Failing that, the only other option was priestly intervention. As it were, for that too there was a provision in medieval practice: the ritual of the consecration of precious stones. Thomas de Cantimpré gives its fullest description in his mid-thirteenth-century *Liber de natura rerum*, though it is attested to and was certainly performed before that date. According to him, the gems were placed on a linen cloth stretched over the altar immediately after mass; the priest then asked God to bless (*consecrare et sanctificare*) them with his presence thereby cleansing them of the blemishes of impure origins and the stain of the original sin. The *virtus* of stones was brought hereby into the fold of the church, nature harnessed to legitimate uses.³²

It appears that objects too could perform a similar service when harboring a *mélange* of stones and bones. Most famous, but not unique, is the so-called Ben-na Cross commissioned by archbishop Willigis (d. 1011) for his cathedral in Mainz. Now destroyed, this early monumental crucifix is known thanks to a later detailed inventory description, which makes it clear that the sculpture must have been an exceptional artistic feat, over life-size and covered with some 600 pounds of gold, apparently obtained by melting tribute money extracted from the defeated Lombards. Claimed to be the costliest cross anywhere, it was so precious that it was only exhibited when the emperor or some other high dignitary came, or at Christmas and Easter; at any rate, only when the bishop expressly asked for it. Two unusually big carbuncles were set into its eye sockets and its belly was stuffed with both relics and precious stones, the latter more beautiful than what one would find in the entire Roman empire.³³ By putting stones and bones side by side, this crucifix enacts a remarkable exchange of matter, material and medium, of image and object. Another and no less original reliquary described in the same inventory should not go unmentioned: a melon-shaped emerald cup that on feast days was suspended alongside other vessels from a golden pole above the high altar. Dangling in mid-air, it was first filled with water, and then two or three little fishes were added, so that when they swam, the text maintains, old women and other impressionable folk clamored that the stone had come alive.³⁴

Taking stones literally was by no means the preserve of *uteluae* and *rustici*. When, in the above-mentioned Life of Alfred of Rievaulx, Walter Daniel comes to the description of the saint's recently deceased body, it is a mineral parallel that imposes itself to him; the corpse, he writes, sparkled like a carbuncle. What is remarkable about this unremarkable analogy is that the author got into trouble for it, so that he felt compelled to justify himself sometime later in a letter. In this spirited counter-attack, he explains that he had meant the simile to be but a figure of speech, a hyperbole intended to give an appropriate idea of the miraculously shining body of the saint. His protests to the contrary precisely show that interpreting *ad litteram* was well within the realm of possibilities.³⁵

The lofty interpretative edifice that coupled bones and stones along metaphorical lines could indeed be haunted by the specter of literalism. Bones without stones were at risk of not seeming so precious, after all. Is that not the gist of the well-known criticism leveled by St Bernard of Clairvaux against the cult of relics when he opines that it had in essence become a cult of reliquaries? And is that not the sense of the action of the good lady of Prüm, who in the mid-ninth century had set out on a pious pilgrimage charged with donations but who when seeing that the saint's tomb was not adorned with precious materials turned back convinced that one 'won't find anything holy in that place'?³⁶ Could we imagine a flourishing cult of saints without the sumptuous reliquaries that made them so tangibly present? Instead of thinking of bones and stones in a dualist fashion as the two opposite faces severing here from there, now from then, we should reckon that the ligaments that bound them were considerably richer and more multifaceted. If in the words of many churchmen holy bodies were incomparably better than precious materials, other contexts show that they could be understood as sharing deep affinities; that they even were indispensable to each other. Let us remember that many traditional cultures throughout the world, including in pre-Christian Europe, upheld the belief that their very special dead would eternally survive only if they could be surrounded and, as it were, absorbed by the hard metals and shining stones that encased their frail remains. Christianity's unique gesture will have been at once to produce and discount the splendid visual evidence of gem-entrapped relics, asking us to avert our eyes from the stones and to fasten them onto the bones instead. But for all the insistence of this injunction, the texture with which the world is woven had a way of coming back, stubbornly and luminously.

¹ Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford 1972, pp. 15 and 17. This same passage provides the thread through one of the best discussions of the cult of relics and forms of medieval piety: Anton Legner, *Reliquien in Kunst und Kult zwischen Antike und Aufklärung*, Darmstadt 1995.

² Christel Meier, *Gemma Spiritualis. Methode und Gebrauch der Edelsteinlegende vom frühen Christentum bis ins 18. Jahrhundert*, München 1977. For a more anthropologically oriented understanding of medieval objects and substances, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les Reliques et les images*, in: Id., *Le Corps des images. Essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge*, Paris 2002, pp. 273–294.

³ Christine de Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies or The Book of the Three Virtues*, trans. by Sarah Lawson, Harmondsworth 1985, p. 35.

⁴ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, Readings on the Saints, trans. by W. G. Ryan, Princeton 1993, vol. 1, pp. 101–104. The convenience's sake, I will continue to refer to source and edition whenever possible. The nouns sumptuary tropes are however preserved in the earliest, fifth-century redaction of the *Acta*.

⁵ Dado of Rouen, *Vita S. Eligii*, ed. by B. Krusch (MGH SS rer. Merov. 4), Hannover pp. 669–742. English trans. by Jo Ann McNamara, pp. 669–742. English trans. by Jo Ann McNamara, pp. 669–742.

⁶ Victorius Rotomagensis, *De laudibus sancti*, ed. by J. Mulders – R. Demeulenaere (CCI Turnhout 1965, sect. III, p. 74, and sect. X, note 5) pp. 37 and 44.

⁷ Apoc. 21, 18–20. The number and particular choice of gems was dictated by an Old Testament antetype, the pectoral, or ephod, worn by Aaron, as described in Ex 28, 15–21.

⁸ Walter Daniel, *The Life of Alfred of Rievaulx*, ed. and trans. by Maurice Powicke, Oxford 1978, pp. 42 and 48. The entire text is a beautiful exercise in material thinking.

⁹ 'Damit aber der große Ruhm / seiner Seele nicht irgendeine schade, lat Gott an ihm, wie der Goldschmied tut, / wenn er eine schöne Spange herstellen will: / Das Gold bringt er im Feuer zum Schmelzen; / er macht sie kostbar mit kunstreicher Arbeit / und mit den zierlichsten Golddrähten: / schon schließt er die Topase; / mit mancherlei Zubereitung / verleiht er ihnen ihren farbigten Glanz. / Ebenso schließt Gott St. Anno / mit vielerlei Mithras; Das Annofried, ed. by Eberhard Neumann, Stuttgart 1975, sect. 38.

¹⁰ Suger, *De consecratione* 7, in: Suger, *Œuvres*, ed. by François Gaspard, Paris 1996, vol. 1, p. 29.

¹¹ Theofridus Epemacensis, *Floris gylgylphiti sanctorum* I, line 32 and II–III, ed. Michele Camillo Ferrari (CCCC 133), Turnhout 1996, pp. 32 and 35–39. See also Ferrari's discussion in the present volume.

¹² *Preiosi lapides idea dicti sunt, qui care valent [...] Omne enim quod parum est, magnum et pretiosum vocatur*, Isidorus, *Etymologic* XVI, 6 (Migne PL 82), 570C. The definition was reiterated by Hrabanus Maurus in his *De iudicio* (or *De rerum naturis*) XVII, 7 (Migne PL 111, 465A), who adds that because of its precious stones signify the apostles and saints in general. Patrick Geary, *Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics*, in: *Id., Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca 1994, pp. 194–218, usefully reminds us of the ways in which relics were embedded in early medieval exchanges of objects and values.

¹³ While Suger's efforts to secure the rarest gems to adorn the *trésor sacré* and reliquaries are well known, countless other testimonies speak of comparable endeavors. A nice example concerns Sigfridus, bishop of Sherborne, said to have been sent to India in 883 to distribute alms in fulfillment of an oath contracted by King Alfred: he came back, his bag full of 'exotic gems' that could be admired on objects displayed in English churches. Otto Lehmann-Brockhaus, *Latinsche Schriftquellen zur Kunst in England, Wales und Schott-*

land vom Jahre 901 bis zum Jahre 1307, München 1956, vol. 3, no. 5941.

¹⁴ Dating varies between the reigns of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. The sides are stamped with gold medallions bearing classicizing iconography, while the back and crest are later replacements. The wooden core contains several small cavities in the back, and a larger one in the bottom, probably made in the twelfth century, when new relics were added. See Karl Hermann Usener, *Zur Datierung der Stephansbursa*, in: *Miscellanea pro arte*, FS Hermann Schnitzler, Düsseldorf 1965, pp. 37–43.

¹⁵ Meier (as in note 2) pp. 147–151.

¹⁶ Victorius Rotomagensis, X, ed. by Mulders – Demeulenaere (as in note 6) p. 86, ed. by Buc (as in note 6) p. 44.

¹⁷ *Aemulat alina fors nulloque decore venusta / Arcan metallorum geminis quae compita cornat / The sacra lanca haec cuncto polire metallo / Ossibus interitis pollet donata sacris*, Mirella Ferrari, *Le iscrizioni*, in: *L'Altare d'Oro di Sant'Ambrogio*, ed. by Carlo Capponi, Milano 1996, p. 150, with further examples.

¹⁸ Arnold Angenendt, 'Der Leib ist klar, klar wie Kristall', in: Klaus Schreiner (ed.), *Förderung im Mittelalter*. Politisch-soziale Kontexte, visuelle Praxis, körperliche Ausdrucksformen, München 2002, pp. 387–398; or, in an abbreviated form, in: *Id., Heilige und Reliquien*. Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart, München 1997, pp. 115–119.

¹⁹ Both examples and additional ones are discussed in C. R. Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New Perspective*, Ithaca 1982, pp. 35f. and 119. On the Waltham crucifix, see also Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Translation d'images et transfert de pouvoir: Le crucifix de Pierre de Waltham (Angleterre, XIe–XIIIe siècle)*, in: Schmitt (as in note 2) pp. 199–216. Like the glimmering coals from which its name was derived, the carbuncle (our garnet or ruby) was most often thought to be endowed with endogenous light properties.

²⁰ *Ornamenta Ecclesiae* [exhibition catalogue], ed. by Anton Legner, Köln 1985, vol. 3, p. 112; Theo Jülich, *Gemmenkreuze*. Die Farbigkeit ihres Edelsteinbesatzes bis zum 12. Jahrhundert, in: *Aachener Kunstblätter* 54/55, 1986/87, pp. 175–178.

²¹ As St Paul had said, 'There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and ano-

ther glory of the stars' (1 Cor 15, 41). On rock crystal, see Ulrich Henze, *Edelsteinlegende im Lichte mittelalterlicher Bild- und Reliquienverehrung*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 54, 1991, pp. 428–451. That the gem at the center had Christological associations is lent visual support by the *crux gemmata*, adorned with an *imago clipeata* of Christ, included in the Transfiguration mosaic in the apse of Sant'Apollinare in Classe at Ravenna.

²² *Gemma dalla corte imperiale alla corte celeste*, ed. by Gemma Sena Chiesa, Milano 2002, for early examples and excellent discussion.

²³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, Paris 1990, pp. 26–64. Also Meier (as in note 2) pp. 52ff.

²⁴ Meier (as in note 2) pp. 309–314.

²⁵ Jacobus de Voragine (as in note 4) vol. 1, pp. 51f.

²⁶ Meier (as in note 2) pp. 361–466.

²⁷ AASS, June 21, 0097C.

²⁸ Contrary to other aspects of Matthew Paris's oeuvre, the literature on this document is disappointing. I summarize after the original passage as given by Thomas Wright, *On Antiquarian Excavations and Researches in the Middle Ages*, in: *Archaeologia* 30, 1844, p. 445, note k. We also learn that midwives applied the *kadian* between the breasts of the women about to give birth before sliding it down toward the *occiduum corporis partem*, and that at one point it was permanently borrowed by a powerful matron of little scruples, only to be returned many years later by her repentant daughter.

²⁹ Peter Murray Jones – Lea T. Olsan, *Middleham Jewel: Ritual, Power, and Devotion*, in: *Viator* 31, 2000, pp. 249–290.

³⁰ Augustine, *De civitate dei* XXI, 6; Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia*. Recreation for an Emperor, ed. and trans. by S. E. Banks – J. W. Binns, Oxford 2002, pp. 559 and 610f. See also Jacques Le Goff, *Le Merveilleux dans l'Occident médiéval*,

in: *L'Imaginaire médiéval*, Paris 1985, pp. 17–Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, Princeton 1991; and especially Caroline Walker Bynum, *Miracles and Marvels*, The Limits of Alchemy, in: Franz J. Felten and kolias (eds.), *Vita Religiosa im Mittelalter*, FS Kaspar Elm, Berlin 1999, pp. 799–817.

³¹ AASS, September 1, 262; Jacobus de Voragine (as in note 4) vol. II, p. 144; as well as C. Maier, *The Western Portal of Saint-Loup Naud*, New York 1979, pp. 399–402. In the lapidary tradition, several stones are heaven-born, as the *glossopetra* that falls during moonless nights or the *crinitus* generated by lightning.

³² Thomas of Cantimpre, *Liher de naturis re*, ed. by Helmut Boose, Berlin 1973, XIII, pp. 374; Gervase of Tilbury (as in note 30) pp. 614 includes a somewhat different discussion of consecration of stones.

³³ Otto Lehmann-Brockhaus, *Schriftquellen zur Kunstgeschichte des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts für Deutschland, Lothringen und Italien*, I York 1971, nos. 2643 and 2860.

³⁴ This object has also caught the attention of Gioa Tossaint, *Heiliges Geben und edler S* Der Edelsteinschmuck von Reliquaren im 5. und 6. Jahrhundert, in: *Das mittelalterliche Wahrnehmung*, in: *Das Mittelalter* 8, 2003, pp. 41–66. I thank her for having sent me her essay, which covers some of the sources and ideas as those developed here.

³⁵ Walter Daniel (as in note 8) pp. 61f. (*tu pater defunctus ut caribundus*) and 76–77, view that only simple-minded folk could what they saw for what it is continues to inform modern discussions. For a classic critique of the two-tiered model, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago 1980.

³⁶ Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Itinerary of a Medieval Religion*, London 1975, p. 17, with other examples.