

The Meaning Behind the Appearance of the St. Stephen Burse Reliquary

The *St. Stephen's Burse* reliquary, also known as *St. Stephen's Purse*, is thought to have been created in 800-830 AD. This reliquary is now part of the Imperial Treasury in Vienna. This reliquary is in the form of a purse, or a pilgrim's bag, and is an overall trapezoid shape. The original core of the reliquary contains hollow recesses where the relics were once kept. It has a very distinguished appearance as it is encrusted from top to bottom in varying precious stones and jewels, and has varying figurative images that line one side panel in the form of medallions. This reliquary also has medallions on the back panel that were thought to be similar to the side panels, but what remains now is a replacement that was put there in the 19th century. The aim of this paper is to focus on the meaning of the placement of the relics within the reliquary, and their relationship to the placement of all the decorative elements on the exterior of the *St. Stephen Burse* reliquary. Does the imagery on the outside reflect what's held within the inside?

While the idea of reliquaries might seem a little out of the ordinary for us by today's standards, the purpose of medieval reliquaries was something that was fundamental to Christian beliefs at the time. According to Cynthia Hahn, the sight of the holy often inspired early medieval faith. Shouts, prayers, and hymns might have greeted a miracle, and a wondrous odor confirmed the presence of an incorrupt body; but in most miracle stories it was the "things seen" that turned the heart toward faith. Relics were a way to encounter the holy presence of saints. Relics are distinguished in two different ways: primary relics were actual remains of a saint like that of a bone, and secondary relics which were objects or matter (as we will see) that came in contact with or was touched by a saint. People from the Middle Ages believed that having a relic, or the

bodily remains of a saint or objects or matter that was touched by a saint, and being able to actually witness a relic was a way to have an audience with the saint as it was believed that the saint (while dead) was active and present in their relics. Reliquaries were used to house these remains of a saint or sacred objects. Often times these prized relics were the prime reasoning behind people undertaking pilgrimage from church to church. According to Hahn, reliquaries were not artworks when they were made and surely were not “art for art’s sake,” instead they are intended to elicit veneration and to honor the relic. Relics were seen as things that were even more cherished than any type of jewel or gold for that matter, and it made sense that the objects created to house these relics were adorned with materials that were thought of, and are still thought of, as incredibly precious because the relic within was something seen as beyond value. While reliquaries protected the relic (especially from enthusiastic touch) they could add value – not only because of the worth of materials, but also because these precious containers, as Hahn says, defined the encapsulated object as deserving of conspicuous honor and veneration.

Reliquaries come in many shapes and forms and are found all throughout history. Sometimes these reliquaries’ outer appearances resembled what the inner containers held. For example, some reliquaries that contain bone fragments from a saint’s head might be created to resemble a figurative head, or a holy sandal was indicated by the presence of a foot. Other times, however, reliquaries are smaller and more personable and richly decorated in precious jewels and other stones, leaving little to no clues as to what is held within the reliquary. *St. Stephen’s Burse* reliquary is one of those intimate and beautifully incrustated reliquaries.

St. Stephen's Burse reliquary is shaped in the form of a purse, or burse, also known as a pilgrim's bag. The overall shape of this reliquary is trapezoidal and is reminiscent of other typical depicted pilgrim bags at the time, like the one that is carried by St. James in this alabaster sculpture by Gil de Siloe. Both of these pilgrim bags are similar in shape and share a distinguished break between the top part, which tapers towards the top, and the bottom part, which is an even rectangular shape.

The innards of St. Stephen's reliquary (for which we have no photograph), has multiple compartments, perhaps like the interior of this Byzantine True Cross reliquary from the early 9th century. These compartments of the St. Stephen reliquary are thought to have been made to hold multiple relics; the largest of these compartments, that is located at the bottom, still contains a relic in the form of a small piece of fabric that was added later. According to the Art Museum in Vienna, while this reliquary no longer contain its original relics, its precious contents is thought to have been the blood-soaked soil from the martyrdom of St. Stephen. St. Stephen was the first martyr and was stoned to death outside the city of Jerusalem after scolding his enemies for not having believed in Jesus. His particular reliquary is made from gold foil on willow-wood, precious stones, pearls, and glass. The front is enriched and encrusted with jewels that, at first glance, appear to be just placed anywhere where there is free space -- because this reliquary is bejeweled from end to end. On closer inspection, it's clear to see that the jewels are set in a broad and plainly indented setting that is regularly repeated.

As reported by Peter Lasko, the sides of this reliquary are more simply decorated with round medallions in gold foil, decorated with four repeated figural scenes that are struck from dies. These scenes contain figures that aren't typically associated with

Christian imagery, figures like: a goddess of revenge, a fisherman, an equestrian figure with a falcon, and an archer aiming at a bird in a tree.

While we don't really know exactly who this reliquary was made for, recent examination of the materials used to make this purse reliquary has lead scholars to believe that the *St. Stephen's Burse* reliquary was traditionally placed during coronations in the Palatine Chapel of Aachen located in modern day Germany in a niche created for it in Charlemagne's marble-slab throne where it remained until 1794. Little is known about the early history of this piece however; it was part of the Imperial Treasury at Aachen, found together with the so-called sword of Charlemagne and the *Coronation Gospels*. This reliquary is associated with the Emperor Charlemagne and his son, Louis the Pious, but it would not have been known that the reliquary had been later augmented if not for an examination that took place in 1924. During this examination, a cloth relic was found within the reliquary that was marked with an early twelfth-century seal of the cathedral chapter of Worms. It is not unusual, according to Lasko however, for relics to be added to reliquaries throughout their history, especially during the medieval period, because often, reliquaries would be taken on by new owners who cemented their claim by adding a new relic.

The physical appearance of this particular reliquary is pretty stunning. It is a fairly small reliquary, measuring about a foot and a half in height. While it measures only a foot and a half tall, this reliquary's appearance seems to be larger because of the ornate details and materials that were applied to it.

A reliquary's form had the potential to carry metaphorical meaning. This is true with the *St. Stephen's Burse* reliquary. Hahn quotes the passage in the Gospel of Luke

from the Christian scriptures, “sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Hahn proposes that, among the most prevalent forms during the early medieval era, the burse reliquary was a symbol of “treasure in heaven” based upon this Biblical text. This comparison is wonderfully abstract, as well as delightfully concrete, operating on more than one level and concerning more than one sort of treasure. These treasures include the tangible face value of the materials used to create the reliquary, and actual spiritual treasure that is held within it in the form of relics. Unlike some reliquaries, like the two we saw earlier, whose exteriors reflect the contents of what is on the inside, burse reliquaries oftentimes used precious stones and gold to convey the stature of the contents. According to Jordan Koel, these burse reliquaries often times were only small enough to hold relics like bone fragments or ash; yet, these contents were thought to be more precious than gold. Thus, why the outsides were adorned with such sumptuous materials. Sometimes, these burse reliquaries were even small enough to wear, like the reliquary purse of *John the Baptist*. As Hahn states, this reliquary had two small hooks on either side and was originally made to be worn around the neck, possibly by a Bishop. Yet, these burse reliquaries deny direct tactile or visual access to the relics. You can’t see the relics. On the St. Stephen’s Burse reliquary, there is a clasp that is delineated in gems added in the fifteenth century along the upper edge. But this clasp will never be unfastened, enforcing the fact that the purse does not open. If you can’t see the relics within, what is the role of the reliquary’s exterior?

St. Stephen's Burse reliquary is extremely valuable for its total surface covering, which has cabochon settings of row upon row of closely spaced multicolored gems, set in indentations. The application of these precious jewels as well as gold is related to a section of the *Book of Exodus* when describing the making of the tabernacle, "And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring firstfruits to me: of every man that offereth of his own accord, you shall take them. And these are the things you must take: gold, and silver, and brass." I think this quotation directly relates to the outer appearance of this reliquary because it is adorned with the very materials that God spoke to Moses about. This makes the placement of these materials intentional. Yet, it appears that the artist was only concerned with applying as many jewels as possible to reflect the holy content, and less about the actual artistic makeup of the cover. The settings of various heights that stretch from top to bottom as well as side to side, creates an impression of unorganized riches. Upon closer examination however, the formal intention of the arrangement of the stones becomes evident: there are bands of cabochon stones that frame the entire front. This divides the front panel into a box and roof and along the central axis. It's also noted that these cabochon stones have been smoothed and polished but are not faceted; the latter reflects a technique that was developed only later. The main axis of this box creates a cross of jewels and can be interpreted as a *crux gemmata*, the imperial sign of victory. Thus, can we understand this array of precious jewels and stones to reflect the spiritual value of the reliquary's contents? This interpretation would make sense because the materials used to craft this reliquary were, and still are, seen as extremely high in value, and are a representation of priceless riches.

These reliquaries were seen as exactly that, a container that held something that was just as precious as the jewels and stones that encrusted it: the relics of a saint.

The surviving side panel of this burse reliquary has a more simple style than the jewel encrusted front panel. The side has medallions stamped into gold foil that show of fishermen, falconers, bird-hunters, and a goddess of vengeance. These images are odd because they are not typical of a holy object like that of a reliquary, however, stylistically they relate to ninth century contemporary book illumination at the court school of Charlemagne, like the Utrecht Psalter.

So what are these figures and why are they here? Like Cynthia Hahn, I believe they have a meaning. They are not simply decorative or precious motifs. First of all, they were made specifically for *this* reliquary. They aren't like the cameo pendant of the ancient Roman emperor Augustus that was added to the Lothair Cross, just to augment the preciousness of the object. In this instance, the cameo was an ancient treasure that was highly valued and was applied to the cross to add value to the artwork. This is not the case for St. Stephen's reliquary. Perhaps the most effective method to describe these medallions is to think of them as metaphors. A metaphor is a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else. In a way, St. Stephen's Burse reliquary is one big metaphor of a virtual pilgrimage. The reliquary is shaped as a traveling pilgrim's bag, so the shape is a metaphor for traveling for a religious purpose. The relic within was the blood-soaked soil from St. Stephen's martyrdom. Thus, the reliquary itself (in its shape) transports the devout in a kind of metaphorical pilgrimage to Jerusalem and back in time to witness St. Stephen's martyrdom—and the establishment of a community of Christian saints.

But how does this idea of metaphor help us to understand the medallions?

Historians and scholars are still confused as to why these figures are included on this reliquary. On the one hand, some have suggested that they're included just for their preciousness, but the history on St. Stephen himself proves to potentially give some more insight. I believe that the story of St. Stephen relates to the use of the image of a goddess of revenge and is even a metaphor for the revenge that was sought out upon St. Stephen. According to Charles Souvey, before St. Stephen was killed, there was conflict that broke out in regards to his uncommon oratorical powers and unimpeachable logic. St. Stephen was challenged to a dispute by the cavilers of the synagogues of the Libertines, and when they came out completely discomfited, this wounded their pride and inflamed their hatred for Stephen so much that they bribed false witnesses to testify that they had heard him speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God. My theory is that the revenge they sought against St. Stephen could very well be represented in the image of the goddess of revenge that is used in one of the medallions of this reliquary. Hahn suggests that the goddess of vengeance and her inscription *MALIS VINDICTA* may be a warning to "keep hands off." On the other hand, Hahn suggests, that the medallion with the fisherman could be a reference to the Apostles and their characterization as "fishers of men." While that could be a possible explanation as to why the medallions showing fishermen were used, it doesn't really explain the other images. Meyer Schapiro has said that they could possibly represent the three elements or fields in which evil is to be averted: air, water, and earth, symbolized by the archer, the fisherman, and the rider. This suggestion is enticing. It suggests the idea of the cosmos: not only of Heaven, but of Christ's earthly realm.

And here, I think we can apply Mircea Eliada's theory of the sacred. In this theory, he suggests that "one must be prepared to encounter the sacred" For our understanding of the St. Stephen's Burse Reliquary and its relic of the ground upon which St. Stephen was killed: "If one is not prepared, dirt is simply dirt." I think this statement is very true, because there is always a questioning of how authentic these relics are that are housed in these reliquaries that are passed down from century to century, and I think that regardless of how authentic or "real" the relics within in are, it doesn't matter, because to the people that are using them, they are real and authentic and that is enough. And to a medieval devotee this was a revelation of holy presence and God's grace.

The reliquary with its specific and intentional imagery reveals this: Eliada says that a sacred place must be: enclosed, set aside or set apart. The St. Stephen Burse reliquary is fully enclosed and is impossible to open, which sets the relic inside apart from the outside or "secular" world. Furthermore, a sacred site has a boundary. St. Stephen's reliquary has bands of cabochon stones that act as a frame to enclose the entire front, and this creates a boundary for the holy object. And finally, a sacred site has a center that is the most important because it is there that manifestations or revelations of the sacred occur and where there exists the possibility of breaking through from the level of earth to the level of heaven. This idea applies to Schapiro's idea of the medallions representing the three elements of air, water, and earth in a way that kind of represents the idea of the cosmos. Within the center of the reliquary itself was housed earth that had came into contact with a saint and it is within this reliquary's center where a holy and spiritual encounter can take place within this secular world. So, in this way, the reliquary represents an axis mundi: a break in the registers of heaven and earth to create a link

between the two through the relic of a saint. The medallions in this sense are metaphors for this alignment and connection between the realm of the worshipper on earth, and the realm of the holy: God and the community of saints.

In this way, we can understand the reliquary as a protective container that is impossible to open and you can't see the contents, which makes its outward appearance all the more important. *St. Stephen Burse* reliquary is intricately embossed with a vast variety of precious jewels and stones. The outer appearance seems to reflect the preciousness of the contents that are located inside. There has been some debate as to why the images that are depicted on the outer side panel are included being that these images are not typical for Christian imagery. Following Schapiro and Eliada, we should see these medallions as metaphors for the cosmos and for an animated alignment between Heaven the devout on earth. So too, the outer exterior of this reliquary reflects the inner contents in that the relic is viewed as an object that is just as precious as the jewels encrusting it. The bedazzled front panel, along with the figurative side panel, connotes the contents of the relic within. And the overall shape creates a kind of visual metaphor for the viewer and allows the audience to experience the splendor and presence of the saint himself.

