

Reudenbach, Bruno; Toussaint, Gia (Hrsg.): *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, Berlin:

Akademie Verlag 2005

ISBN-10: 3-05-004134-X, IX, 221 S, ca. EUR 39.80

Reviewed by: Heidi Gearhart, University of Michigan

Reliquiare im Mittelalter is the fifth volume in the Hamburger Forschungen zur Kunstgeschichte series. This annual publication, produced from the art historical seminars of the University of Hamburg, bills itself as a forum for new research, and prior issues have covered themes such as Political Spaces and Political Art, Material in Art and Life, and Animation and Transgression. The choice of medieval reliquaries as the subject of the latest volume suggests that the field of *ars sacra*, a relatively small area of study, is reaching new ground. *Reliquiare im Mittelalter* lives up to this expectation: the volume's authors are some of the most prominent voices in the field and their essays are an impressive array of fine scholarship. Edited by Bruno Reudenbach and Gia Toussaint, *Reliquiare im Mittelalter* contains ten essays that cover a wide variety of object types and a wide swath of chronological and geographical territory, from Cynthia Hahn's essay on early Italian treasuries to Silke Tammen's study of a fourteenth-century Bohemian Man of Sorrows. While most of the essays are in German, a few are in English, and this combination of voices from both sides of the Atlantic produces a volume of depth and variety, highly valuable both for specialists in the field and for those wanting an introduction to current research.

The study of reliquaries was established largely by Joseph Braun, a Jesuit and student of the Bollandist Stephen Beissel. In his most well-known book, published in 1940 as *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung*, Braun analyzed a vast number of reliquaries and reliquary types and traced their development from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and Baroque periods.^[1] Braun's approach, in which reliquaries were catalogued according to type and analyzed according to style, has been definitive for the field. More recently however, reliquaries have become a central part of our understanding of medieval culture, as they bring to the fore issues of devotional practice, political power and social identification.^[2] The essays in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter* both address new concerns and revisit older issues in new ways, opening avenues of research through studies of the collection, materiality, structure, sanctity, visibility, and social and devotional functions of reliquaries.^[3]

Following an introduction by Bruno Reudenbach, Cynthia Hahn's study, „The Meaning of Early Medieval Treasuries,” opens the volume. Hahn claims that the treasury is defined by its perpetual lack of completeness and its ability to „objectify history.” According to Hahn, the treasury is always incomplete and fragmentary because it consists of reliquaries whose power derives from a constant referral to what is physically absent: the rest of the body of the saint and the entire saintly community of heaven. Yet as Hahn examines the early Italian treasuries at Grado and Monza, she finds that the treasury also operates as a unified whole. Each object can be the lynch-pin of a narrative or history, so that the collection of objects becomes a collection of narratives. As a unit, the collection of objects and narratives proves that the community is connected to heaven,

and defines the community's past, present and future. There have been few studies of treasuries as collections of objects and narratives, and few that address the relation of the reliquary to the treasury of which it is a part.^[4] Hahn's consideration of the treasury as a collection both in terms of its fragmentary and unified nature is therefore refreshing and much needed.

Bruno Reudenbach's study „Reliquien von Orten“ follows smoothly on Hahn's essay, for it too deals with a set of relics, and, indirectly, a treasury. Reudenbach examines a set of sixth-century „place relics,” kept in a wooden casket in the Sancta Sanctorum, one of the most prominent treasuries of Christendom. The „place relics” are not the usual remnants of saints, but a collection of stones identified as being from locations significant to the life of Christ. The casket is likewise unusual in its homeliness: the inside cover is embellished with images corresponding to the relics, and the exterior is embellished with a painted cross in a mandorla. According to Reudenbach, the cross links the stones together, making them not only pieces of locations „disengaged” from the physical terrain of Jerusalem, but part of a Christological topography. Reudenbach's study of „common” stones in a wooden casket, and his careful consideration of how the different parts of the reliquary- exterior, interior, and contents- relate to each other is unusual. Such an approach redefines both the parameters of the reliquary and our concept of a relic, pushing the field of reliquary study into new territory.

Brigitte Buettner's essay „From Bones to Stones: Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries” likewise considers stones and the connections they make between the otherworldly and the earthly, though she deals not with common stones, but with precious ones. Buettner looks at the associations between the bones of saints and precious stones, and at the reasons for the connection between the two. Buettner's study does not attempt to pin down meanings to stones; rather she finds that the stones are unstable signifiers. Both earthly and heavenly, they transfigure and embody light, and thus have a destabilizing effect. Buettner's essay is rich; she uses variety of primary sources to back up her argument, and her claim that the stones have a destabilizing function significant for the meaning of the reliquary as a whole is new and provocative. Her study also shows that ornament, often dismissed as secondary to imagery, can operate with complex connotations and functions.

In the next essay, „Gold und Asche. Reliquie und Reliquiare als Medien in Thiofrid von Echternachs Flores epytaphii sanctorum,” Michele Ferrari addresses the only known surviving treatise on relics. Written between 1098 and 1104/5, Thiofrid of Echternach's Flores epytaphii sanctorum tries to define the nature of relics. Ferrari shows that Thiofrid's treatise, while often thought to be „naïve,” is actually carefully constructed to mirror holy history, and its contents are based on rhetorical, exegetical, and logical structures. Using Aristotle and Porphyry, for example, Thiofrid likens the reliquary and relic to the species gold and ash, and finds that sanctity lies with the ash, not with the gold. This analogy justifies reliquaries, since it is then the relic that sanctifies the reliquary and not the reverse. Written nearly fifty years before Abbot Suger's treatise on Saint Denis, Thiofrid's text is an earlier example of an analytical approach to relics than is thought to have existed.^[5] This claim is significant: illuminated by Ferrari's fine analysis, Thiofrid's treatise opens new ways of thinking about twelfth-century justification of liturgical expense and provides an alternative to the oft-cited Dionysian argument of Suger.

Following on Ferrari's theme of reliquary justification, Hedwig Röckelein examines the use of rhe-

toric to authenticate relics in „Die Hüllen der Heiligen.’ Zur Materialität des hagiographischen Mediums.“ Röckelein’s essay examines the way that the rhetoric of hagiographic texts „wrap“ relics, and relates it to the textiles that physically wrap the holy fragments. Using texts such as the eighth-century vita of the missionary saint Boniface, and looking at metaphors of weaving found in Greek, Latin, and early medieval rhetoric, Röckelein finds similarities in the functions and characteristics of hagiographic texts and textile wrappings. Saints’ biographies vary according to audience or occasion and use rhetorical figures to emphasize the virtues of the saint and authenticate his sanctity. In a similar way textiles use precious stones and pearls to authenticate and illustrate the virtue of the relic they enclose. Röckelein deftly illuminates the commonalities between texts and textiles, most significantly in their shared functions of communication and performance. Grounding her claims with deep layers of evidence from primary sources, Röckelein’s argument is convincing, engaging, and highly valuable, for it overcomes the traditional separation of media, showing that texts and textiles are intertwined in their authenticating function.

Following on the theme of the wrapping of relics, Gia Toussaint’s „Die Sichtbarkeit des Gebeins im Reliquiar - eine Folge der Plünderung Konstantinopels?“ reconsiders the major issue of Byzantine influence and the development of reliquaries with visible relics. Most twelfth-century relics in western Europe were wrapped in textiles and enclosed within reliquaries, invisible and hidden. In the thirteenth-century, more and more relics were visible, shown within their reliquaries behind rock-crystal windows. This shift is usually understood as resulting from the influx of reliquaries from the Byzantine Empire after the sack of Constantinople in 1204. Toussaint’s essay challenges and complicates this explanation. She argues that in the late twelfth-century there was an increasing desire to see holy material, which was spurred on by the liturgical development of the elevation of the host, institutionalized by the Paris synod of 1198-1203. According to Toussaint, the importation of Byzantine reliquaries appeased anxieties surrounding the visibility of relics and provided models for new containers, but Europeans’ desire to see the holy fragments was already well established by 1204. Toussaint’s essay complicates and challenges deeply held assumptions of Byzantine influence, and for this the essay is quite important; yet its strength also lies in its careful construction of a more subtle model of change, based on the author’s careful analysis and wide scope.

Like Toussaint’s reconsideration of the oft-assumed „Byzantine influence,“ Susanne Wittekind’s essay, „Caput et corpus. Die Bedeutung der Sockel von Kopfreliquiaren“ also addresses an aspect of reliquaries that is often referred to, but rarely carefully analyzed: the bases of head reliquaries. In contrast to many studies that consider the image program of a reliquary separately from the structure of the object, Wittekind expands the parameters of her analysis, linking the iconographic characteristics of reliquary bases to their ornamental and structural functions. Wittekind uses five reliquaries from the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries as the basis for her study, including the Alexander Reliquary of Stavelot and the Cappenberg head. According to Wittekind, the head reliquary’s base makes the entire object analogous to Christ and the church. The base, adorned with images of apostles or scenes of a saint’s life, becomes the body of the mystical church, the community of the holy, as governed by Christ, its head. Wittekind’s analysis of the imagery of the base in relation to the structure of the entire reliquary is new: often these elements of the reliquary are examined as separate entities. Wittekind’s argument is effective and demonstrates a new method for study that brings together image programs, reliquary types, and reliquary structures in a search for meaning and function.

Following on Wittekind's study of reliquary structure is Horst Bredekamp's and Frank Seehausen's study of the reliquary of Isidore of Seville: „Das Reliquiar als Staatsform. Das Reliquiar Isidors von Sevilla und der Beginn der Hofkunst in Léon.“ Commissioned by King Fernando I and Queen Sancha in 1063, the shape of the large casket shrine is often thought to foreshadow the great Rhenish shrines of the twelfth century. Rather than seeing it within this chronology, however, Bredekamp and Seehausen admirably examine the shrine within the context of King Fernando's rule and the political and social aspirations of Spain during the Reconquista. Their examination is notable for its subtlety, and, perhaps more significantly, because they do not see the images as a two-dimensional program wrapped around the object like a comic strip, for which structural shifts or ornamental programs are of lesser importance. Instead, Bredekamp and Seehausen successfully use the structure and the ornament of the shrine as important parts of their analysis, linking these elements to the image program and to the historical context. This approach provides a new model for the study of shrines. Stylistic, structural and ornamental peculiarities, they argue, are significant; through such references, Fernando is able to link himself to the great Latin tradition, to the emperors of the North, to past Visigothic and to local Asturian traditions.

With a similar concern for rulers and social identity, Lisa Victoria Ciresi examines the roles of three shrines in Coronation rituals in „Offerings and Kings: the Shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne, and the Aachen Karlsschrein and Marienschrein in Coronation Ritual.“ Ciresi argues that the Shrine of the Three Kings, with its themes of epiphany and the cult of kingship, can be connected to similar characteristics on the later Marienschrein and the Karlsschrein. Yet rather than being a study of „influence,“ Ciresi examines the ways in which the use of motifs of epiphany or offering were used in ritual coronation ceremonies. Using descriptions of coronation rituals as a basis of interpretation, Ciresi argues that the Marienschrein, with its image of the Virgin and Child about to receive offerings, evokes the Epiphany scene and Christ's role in conferring kingship. In a complementary manner, the Karlsschrein, with its rulers depicted on the roof, shows a genealogy of gift-givers guided by the Virgin, whose image is shown on the end of the shrine, opposite that of Charlemagne. By linking the ritualistic functions of the shrines and showing their interlocking themes of epiphany, kingship, and gift-giving, Ciresi's essay skillfully rejects the normative assumption that reliquaries functioned as independent units within a setting or group of reliquaries; instead she shows the extent and significance of their interdependence.

In her essay „Dorn und Schmerzensmann. Zum Verhältnis von Reliquie, Reliquiar und Bild in spätmittelalterlichen Christusreliquiaren,“ Silke Tammen studies a Bohemian Man of Sorrows, now at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, in an attempt to reconcile and reconsider what Anton Legner has defined as the „symbiosis“ between relic and image.^[6] This mid-fourteenth century object once held a relic of the thorn, but now consists of a figure of the Man of Sorrows, flanked by angels and objects of his torture. Tammen argues that this object need not be considered either an image or a reliquary; it is part of the development of „scene“ reliquaries in the thirteenth century, where figures are larger in scale and relics are reduced in size. The setting of a relic in a narrative, Tammen argues, creates a „double presence“ where the border between „reliquary“ and „image“ is blurred, making the entire object a vehicle for Passion devotion. The object localizes and historicizes the thorn to the forehead of Christ, while also acting as a monstrosity. Tammen's study effectively argues for the interconnectedness of reliquary and image, elements usually seen as complementary but essentially separate. Significantly, this interconnectedness does not force a choice between reliquary and image, but each reinforces the other, blurring the distinctions

between the two.

This volume, though small in size, is exceptionally rich in content. The essays, each of very fine scholarship and distinctive in both material and method, are arranged so that themes flow from one essay into the next. Loose groupings are thus created: Hahn and Reudenbach consider relics as parts of a set; Reudenbach, Buettner, Ferrari, Röckelein, and Toussaint address the relation between the interior relic and its container, the reliquary; Wittekind, Bredekamp and Seehausen, Ciresi, and Tammen examine social functions of the shrine and the intersections of reliquary structure and iconography. One by no means must read the book in order, however, as thematic similarities and thematic junctures emerge across the volume and highlight the complexities of the issues in the field, as in the similar instabilities of Buettner's stones and Tammen's scene reliquary.

The book is attractive: it is small and slim, with a bright and modern-looking neon green cover, making it accessible and affordable. Not surprisingly, all the images are in black and white, which is unfortunate given the importance of the colors and shimmering qualities of the objects, but even this does not diminish the overall appeal of the book. With its wide scope, variety of themes, and most importantly, its extremely fine scholarship, *Reliquiare im Mittelalter* provides the reader with a great depth of knowledge and a provocative new look at its subject.

[1] Joseph Braun, *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1940).

[2] Some of the more influential sources for reliquary study are two exhibition catalogues, edited by Anton Legner: Anton Legner, ed., *Rhein Und Maas, Kunst und Kultur, 800-1400, exh. cat.*, 2 vols. (Cologne, 1973); Anton Legner, ed., *Ornamenta Ecclesiae: Kunst und Künstler der Romanik*, 3 vols. (Cologne, 1985); and most recently, a volume of *Gesta* dedicated to reliquaries, which also contains an essay on the state of research of body-part reliquaries by Barbara Drake Boehm: „Body-Part Reliquaries: the State of Research,” *Gesta* 36, 1 (1997) 8-19.

[3] For reliquary collections see Hahn, „The Meaning of Early Medieval Treasures,” 1-20. For materiality see Reudenbach, „Reliquien von Orten,” 21-41; Buettner, „From Bones to Stones - Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries,” 43-59; and Röckelein, „Die ‚Hüllen der Heiligen‘,” 75-88. For object structure see Reudenbach, 21-41; and Wittekind, „Caput et corpus,” 107-13. For issues of sanctity see Ferrari, „Gold und Asche,” 61-74; and Röckelein, 75-88. For visibility see Toussaint, „Die Sichtbarkeit des Gebeins im Reliquiar - eine Folge der Plünderung Konstantinopels?,” 89-106. For social function see Wittekind, 107-135; Bredekamp and Seehausen, „Das Reliquiar als Staatsform,” 137-164; and Ciresi, „Of Offerings and Kings,” 165-185; and for devotional function see Hahn, 1-20; and Tammen, „Dorn und Schmerzensmann,” 189-208.

[4] Amy Remensnyder, for example, has addressed the connections between the reliquary, its narrative, and its role in the community of the church in „Legendary Treasury at Conques: an examination of the dynamics of new commemorative meanings regarding the foundation legend of an 11th century monastic community in southwestern France: reliquaries and imaginative memory” *Speculum* 71, 4 (1996) 884-906.

[5] Erwin Panofsky, ed. and trans., *Abbot Suger, on the Abbey Church of St-Denis and its Art Treasures* (Princeton, 1948).

[6] Anton Legner, *Reliquien in Kunst und Kult zwischen Antike und Aufklärung* (Darmstadt, 1995) 224.

Recommended Citation:

Heidi Gearhart: [Review of:] Reudenbach, Bruno; Toussaint, Gia (Hrsg.): *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, Berlin 2005. In: Arthist.net, Jul 12, 2006 (accessed Dec 19, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/reviews/126>>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>