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## The Power of Relics and Reliquaries in Byzantine Liturgy and Ritual

Shaylee Briones

Christianity gave the Byzantine empire unity, control, and power. Emperors used Christianity to unify their people under one religion and to keep control. Though a political move for Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the center of life for all those in the Byzantine empire. The impact of Christ and his teachings on Byzantium is prevalent through the churches, mosaics and art, and objects of ritual created and used in the name of Christ. One of the most influential objects for worshippers in Christianity are relics and reliquaries. **Relics** are objects associated with the body of a person who is worshiped; and after the death of that person, the object itself is worshiped. **Secondary relics** are items that once touched the body of someone who is worshiped. These objects rose in importance in Christianity and were believed to contain special protective, healing, and blessing powers. Some relics were regarded as sacred to the point that human hands were unworthy to touch them.<sup>1</sup> To hold the power of and preserve these relics, boxes were created to house the relics, called **reliquaries**. Reliquaries range in size, shape, and purpose. Yet, reliquaries added to the power of rituals and worship in Byzantium by connecting the worshipper to a divine being through the collection of relics, through the imagery on the reliquary, promoting personal liturgy and becoming an extension of the owner.

Commonly, reliquaries are in the shape of a box with elaborate carvings, paintings, and ornaments. These box reliquaries focus on the preservation of relics and seldom allow the worshipper to view the relic itself. The reliquary then takes on the power from the relic,

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<sup>1</sup> [The Procession of the Apostles](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apostles_-_Arian_Baptistry_-_Ravenna_2016_(2).jpg) as found in the Arian Baptistery, Ravenna, shows the apostles walking around the baptism of Christ holding the crowns of martyrdom. These crowns were so holy that gloves and a cloth was needed to hold it. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apostles - Arian Baptistery - Ravenna 2016 \(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apostles_-_Arian_Baptistry_-_Ravenna_2016_(2).jpg)

becoming the object of worship. For example, the *Artophorion* (Reliquary of St. Anastasios the Persian),<sup>2</sup> is a four-sided box made to resemble a Byzantine church with a domed roof, protruding dome windows, and a decorated door. The inscriptions along the exterior offer a dedicatory prayer to heaven. This relic was supposed to hold the Eucharist but became the home of the head of the Persian saint Anastasios.



Figure 1: *Artophorion* (Reliquary of St. Anastasios the Persian), Byzantine, Antioch, 969/70, Silver and silver gilt (repoussé), niello

Another example of a box-like reliquary is the *Chasse with the Crucifixion and Christ in Majesty* reliquary.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the *Artophorion* from Byzantium, this reliquary from France has four vertical sides with a two-sided, pointed roof and is categorized as a chasse. This reliquary also resembles a church, but gives more visual space to bejeweled with images of Christ, and the apostles. Rather than just house the relic, this reliquary is part of the worship

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<sup>2</sup> [the \*Artophorion\*](https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/relics/Reliquary-of-St-Anastasios-the-Persian.php) (Reliquary of St. Anastasios the Persian), Byzantine, Antioch, 969/70, Silver and silver gilt (repoussé), niello

<https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/relics/Reliquary-of-St-Anastasios-the-Persian.php>

<sup>3</sup> [Chasse with the Crucifixion and Christ in Majesty](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464483), 1180–90, France; copper, enamel and turquoise. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464483>

process itself. The imagery of the crucifixion of Christ, the triumph of Christ, and corresponding apostles is also common in Byzantine reliquaries because it teaches the viewer about the power of the relic and the reason they are worshipping. Worshipers felt connected to the relic inside by studying the story depicted on the outside. Whether the bone of an apostle or the crown of thorns were found inside, the exterior of this chasse reliquary aids to the worship of Christ by connecting the viewer to the death and resurrection of Christ through the detailed imagery of Christ's sacrifice.



Figure 2: Chasse with the Crucifixion and Christ in Majesty, 1180–90, France; copper, enamel and turquoise. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464483>

By comparing these two box reliquaries, many Byzantine elements become apparent. For example, the *Artophorion* reliquary embodies classic architecture as seen in the Byzantine era. Looking at Hagia Sophia built in Constantinople during the rule of Justinian I, similar details are found on both Hagia Sophia and the *Artophorion*. Apparent are the domed roofs, **arcade** of arched windows beneath the dome, spikes on top of the domes, and **semi-domes** protruding from the sides of the building. While both reliquaries serve the same purpose of protecting the relic

and connecting with the viewer, one uses imagery of Christ's death to aid in worship, while the *Artophorion* uses symbols of the sacred church of Hagia Sophia, helping the viewer feel like they are in a church themselves.



Figure 3: Hagia Sophia, 532-537, Istanbul, Turkey

Reliquaries differ in size and shape which also gives them new meaning and power. Like the purposes of the reliquaries mentioned above, other reliquaries focus on creating unique images through sculptures, reliefs, and altar-like shapes. The Enkolpion triptych is one example of this. Starting as a small painted box, this reliquary opens to reveal low relief sculptures of Christ enthroned, Mary, John the Baptist, and the twelve apostles. This display presents an array of traditional Byzantine features such as elaborate gold figures and background, the motif of Christ enthroned (with Mary and John worshiping on the sides of Christ, this motif is also called **Deesis**), the warped perspective shown in the step stool and down-turned feet, and the meticulous details of the clothing worn by Christ, the saints, and Constantine. At the feet of Christ kneels Constantine, not only symbolizing his submission to God, but shows how sacred and holy

Emperor Constantine was considered by depicting him in the same vicinity as Christ.



Figure 4: Enkolpion triptych, interior with the Deesis and apostles, eleventh or twelfth century, gold and enamel, 7.1 × 6 cm (closed), private collection (photo: owner), from Ivan Drpić, “The Enkolpion: Object, Agency, Self,” in *Gesta* volume 57. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698842>

This triptych aids the worshipper by presenting these intercessory characters to the audience and guiding them in prayer through the inscriptions around them. Art historian Ivan Drpic exploits this idea through his research of the spiritual experiences that came from personal reliquaries in Byzantium also known as **enkolpia**. He shares that in the *Enkolpion Triptych*, “The presence of Constantine’s figure contributed a critical ingredient to the devotional efficacy of this object... The miniature effigy bridged the distance between the earthly realm occupied by the wearer and the resplendent vision of the heavenly court seen through the “doors” of his enkolpion. Offering the possibility of a vicarious access to the object’s inner sanctum bathed in

gold, the portrayed supplicant served as both a proxy and a model to emulate.”<sup>4</sup> Drpic explains how the figure of Constantine in this triptych acts as intercessory for the viewer and acts as a powerful instrument of worship. Although this miniature altar may not have held an object of significant worth, the purpose and style of this triptych is compatible with the purpose and designs of other reliquaries in the Byzantine period.

While the reliquaries mentioned previously range in size, miniature personal reliquaries also have a complimentary purpose. **Enkolpia** are personal reliquaries that are worn around the neck and that lay on top of the heart on the chest, symbolic of allowing Christ into one’s heart. Enkolpion can be a cross or medallion, often with depictions of Christ. These miniature reliquaries serve the same purpose of protection, healing, and prayer to the individual. Drpic states that by associating reliquaries with the heart, they become “sites of interiority, reflection, and introspection.”<sup>5</sup> Enkolpia can be in the shape of a cross,<sup>6</sup> an openable case containing relics, or a decorative pendant. Whatever shape, these personal reliquaries were sacred to those living in Byzantium and essential to their daily personal rituals.

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<sup>4</sup> Drpic, Ivan. “The Enkolpion: Object, Agency, Self,” from *Gesta volume 57, No. 2, Fall 2018*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/698842>

<sup>5</sup> Drpic, Ivan. “The Enkolpion: Object, Agency, Self,” from *Gesta volume 57, No. 2, Fall 2018*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/698842>

<sup>6</sup> [Reliquary Pendant](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/754083), 10th-11th century, Byzantine, copper alloy  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/754083>



Figure 5: Reliquary Pendant, 10th - 11th century, Byzantine, Copper alloy.

In the shape of a cross, figure five depicts an enkolpion with the scene of the crucifixion of Christ. Similar to the triptych shown above, this cross has the deesis motif with Mary and John on the right and left of Christ. Christ wears a **colobium**, a traditional garb worn during the Byzantine time period.<sup>7</sup> Again we see analogous styles of perspective with the podium and feet of Christ. Along with the depictions of Mary as an **orant** (hands raised in prayer) and the apostles on the reverse sides holding their gospels, these carvings all show classical Byzantine artistic elements. This reliquary pendant would be worn on a chain around the neck and clasped in prayer by the owner. Whether it held a relic inside or not, this personal reliquary enhanced the worship and dedication of the owner by being a constant reminder of the sacrifice of Christ and by giving the owner constant protection.

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<sup>7</sup> Metmuseum.org. (n.d.). from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/754083>.



Another example of a personal reliquary is the *Reliquary Pendant for the Holy Thorn* from France, a pendant which opens and contains a thorn from Christ's crown of thrones.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the *Chasse with the Crucifixion and Christ in Majesty* reliquary, this small pendant contains scenes from the life of Christ including the crucifixion, the nativity, and the annunciation to the shepherds. This intricately detailed reliquary teaches the owner about the life of Christ with imagery while bearing the power of Christ's thorn. In contrast to the cross reliquary pendant shown above, the *Holy Thorn* reliquary pendant contains many colors, layers of art, and a relic. Although they look different, the purpose is equal: to strengthen the worship of and give power and protection to the owner.



Figure 6: [Reliquary Pendant for the Holy Thorn](https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/relics/Reliquary-Pendant-for-the-Holy-Thorn.php), French (Paris), ca. 1340, Gold, enamel (basse-taille), amethyst, rock crystal, vellum, thorn <https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/relics/Reliquary-Pendant-for-the-Holy-Thorn.php>

These reliquaries also contain power beyond protection and worship. Drpic states that reliquaries can take on the spirit of the owner, becoming a proxy for them. Drpic writes, “The enkolpion’s proximity to the body, its reassuring presence and cohabitation, and the intensity of

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<sup>8</sup> [Reliquary Pendant for the Holy Thorn](https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/relics/Reliquary-Pendant-for-the-Holy-Thorn.php), French (Paris), ca. 1340, Gold, enamel (basse-taille), amethyst, rock crystal, vellum, thorn <https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/relics/Reliquary-Pendant-for-the-Holy-Thorn.php>

the physical, mental, and affective responses it elicited empowered this object and charged it with a distinctly personal valence. As a result, the enkolpion could operate as a physical extension of its owner.”<sup>9</sup> Drpic states that because of the sacredness of these personal reliquaries and association with the heart of the owner, enkolpion not only gives power to the wearer, but can take on the qualities of that person as well. The significance of these qualities meant that a person could use the reliquaries as a proxy to be in constant prayer, to worship to god, and as Drpic states, “to [be treated] as a living being.”<sup>10</sup> Drpic shows how vast the connection between the worshiper and reliquaries was. Not only did relics and reliquaries aid in daily devotion, but their power could extend the physical presence of the owner, just as the depiction of Constantine in the *Enkolpion Triptych* extends its intercessory power to the worshiper.

Relics and reliquaries were some of the most powerful and influential objects for ritual and personal worship. They allowed for viewers to learn about the life of Christ, connect with saints in worship, and for the power of relics to reach into the lives of worshipers. Whether the reliquaries are large altarpieces, box shaped containers, or personal jewelry, the purpose of bringing people closer to God is the same. By using material objects such as relics and reliquaries, Christianity grew in size and strength as Christians used them to worship, pray, and increase their daily devotion to God. These reliquaries and many more added to the power of rituals and liturgy in Byzantium by connecting the worshiper to a divine being through the imagery on the reliquary, through the collection of relics, promoting personal liturgy, and acting as proxy for the owner.

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<sup>9</sup> Drpic, Ivan. “The Enkolpion: Object, Agency, Self,” from *Gesta volume 57, No. 2, Fall 2018*. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698842>

<sup>10</sup> Drpic, Ivan. “The Enkolpion: Object, Agency, Self,” from *Gesta volume 57, No. 2, Fall 2018*. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698842>