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The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries

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Abstract

Although they have often been considered as mere representational labels identifying the relic contained, body-part reliquaries, or what I would prefer to call shaped reliquaries, participate in a fluid exchange of signs, "speaking" much more than their contents. First, they often do not contain what they seem to say they contain. Second, their speech is complexly metaphorical. Third, in that both function primarily as metaphor, there is a peculiar slippage of meaning and importance between contained and container. Fourth and finally, shaped reliquaries of body parts signify specifically through the implied fragmentation of the relic-body, in this way insisting upon a larger whole. Such fragmentation was a problematic but powerful new discourse in the central Middle Ages.

Germans designate shaped reliquaries as "redende Reliquiare," but what do so-called "speaking reliquaries" say?¹ Apparently, like the thirteenth-century reliquary arm of Peter (Fig. 1), they are usually thought simply and plainly to speak their contents. As one recent catalogue put it, "the form of the reliquary assumed the shape of its relic. . . . feet, fingers, hands, legs, and heads."² But is this true? We must ask: if relics are contained in simple representations of a reconstituted body part, where are the spines or hipbones?, the ankles and clavicles?, the *left* arms?³ I would contend that, rather than speaking their contents, such reliquaries speak most loudly about other concerns—concerns about function rather than content.

The proposition that reliquaries explicitly reveal their contents is a theory with a venerable history and an inviting appearance of logic. This approach characterizes naturalistically shaped reliquaries as a mediation or transitional stage between the relic as index/sign and sculpture as the more arbitrary icon/sign. That is, a long tradition of scholarship has proposed, both explicitly and implicitly, that representational reliquaries set the stage for the development of sculpture and other forms of monumental representation.⁴

Unfortunately, this formulation is doubly wrongheaded. It not only rashly underestimates medieval ability to handle complex sign systems, but is, as well, contrary to fact. Scholars, notably Ilene Forsyth in *Throne of Wisdom*, have proved that reliquaries do not necessarily precede pure sculpture. Forsyth argues that "no simple explanation exists" concerning such a development from reliquary to sculpture.⁵ Others, notably Renate Kroos and Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen, have indicated that shaped reliquaries have their own inher-

ent value and importance.⁶ Finally, although body-part reliquaries existed from as early as the ninth century, the largest cluster of examples is from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, well after the initial development of medieval monumental sculpture.

If body-part reliquaries do not clearly and only speak their contents, then what *do* they say? The enunciation of four characteristics will help clarify how these containers for dried up bits of body participate in a more fluid exchange of signs than that of merely pronouncing a simple label. As we will see, first, they often do not contain what they seem to say they contain. Second, their speech is neither that of simple statement nor straightforward description; rather, it participates in complexly metaphorical systems of meaning. Third, because both container and contained function primarily as metaphor, there is a peculiar slippage of meaning and importance between them. Fourth and finally, shaped reliquaries of body parts signify specifically through the implied fragmentation of the body, in this way insisting upon a larger whole. Such fragmentation was a problematic but powerful new discourse in the period under discussion.

As both origin and consequence of these four characteristics, the religious contexts of shaped reliquaries—their use in liturgy and cult as well as reception by their audiences—are each more significant than any external feature. A consideration of such practices and perceptions will be most useful in leading us to an understanding of these objects.

One document that may allow us particular insight into the medieval understanding of relic fragments survives from the twelfth century. Written on the occasion of the translation of certain relics of Mamas to Langres, the text evidences a remarkable willingness to impart specific meanings to the relics of fragments of bodies:

The first relic sent was the collarbone which contains the arteries which carry a thought which is in the heart so that the tongue might burst forth into voice; the second was the arm, through which work is perceived; third, a long bone which seems to be from the tibia or femur . . . Fourth and finally, the head came, as if so that he might speak, since thinking, speaking, and acting are communicated through the collarbone and the arm.⁷

Although he cannot work the tibia into his system, clearly this medieval writer sees each of the other relics as having a

specific function and significance, qualities that presumably would extend to similarly shaped reliquaries. We will see that the fragmentation of the saintly body, despite its controversial history in the West,⁸ was perceived as allowing that body increased action and power in the world, especially the world outside the church.

Finally, in this essay, one particular type of body-part reliquary will serve as a focus of discussion. The reliquary arm, because of certain circumstances, will serve admirably to pry loose many of the notions about shaped reliquaries. First and foremost, circumstances of preservation favor a focus on arm reliquaries: they are the most common surviving form of body-part reliquary.⁹ In addition, not only do numerous early examples survive in relatively unchanged form, but also early documents attest to their use. Furthermore, as in the discussion of the bodily fragments of Mamas above, the arm was perceived as the site of work or action, and arm reliquaries, as we will see, have a particularly active history. Notwithstanding these distinctive qualities of arm reliquaries, I would argue that the conclusions reached in this essay are, in the main, generalizable to other sorts of body-part and shaped reliquaries.

Relics and Shaped Reliquaries

In order to understand the primarily metaphorical and functional significance of arm reliquaries, the notion that such containers merely fleshed out and labeled the objects contained must be relinquished. That axiom of art historical literature is proven suspect by the fact that many body-part reliquaries do not hold the body part implied. For example, as attested in an inscription on the base, one of the thirteenth-century arm reliquaries at St. Gereon in Cologne contained unspecified relics of Sixtus, Agapitus, Felicissimus, Nereus and Achilleus (Fig. 2).¹⁰ The second right arm at St. Gereon contained relics of some thirty saints including additional relics of Nereus and Achilleus.¹¹ The arm reliquary of Peter, now in Binche, made *ca.* 1230, apparently contains a leg bone (Fig. 1).¹²

Even arm reliquaries that do contain bits of arm or hand may well contain other relics. The arm reliquaries of Stephen and Nicholas in the Halberstadt Domschatz, again of the thirteenth century, contain respectively some piece of the arm and head of Stephen and the finger of Nicholas.¹³ The arm of St. James, twelfth-century, in Binche, in addition to bits of the saint's arm, also contains relics of the hair of Mary, the hair of Peter, the head of St. Thomas, the arm of St. Denis, and relics of numerous martyrs, according to an inscription on the base of the arm.¹⁴ Unfortunately, many arm reliquaries presently in museums lack inscriptions and are now devoid of contents. Thus, it is no longer possible to determine what they held. Others in treasuries have not been fully investigated. Nevertheless, these few examples establish a significant pattern of the lack of correspondence of relic(s) to container.



FIGURE 1. *Reliquary Arm. ca. 1230. Binche, Collégiale Saint-Ursmer (photo: Copyright IRPK-KIK, Brussels).*



FIGURE 2. Reliquary Arm. Ca. 1220–30. Cologne, Saint Gereon (photo: Rheinischen Bildarchiv, Cologne).

Another possibility weakens the connection of the relic to reliquary: on occasion arms may have served as containers for virtually interchangeable relics. For example, it has been suggested that the arm of Lawrence in the Guelph treasure (ca. 1170, now in Berlin, Staatliche Museen), was originally made for relics of Bartholomew and only later customized for Lawrence.¹⁵ More generally, it should be noted that medieval inventories frequently use the terminology “manus,” presumably in reference to arm reliquaries because few simple hand-form reliquaries exist.¹⁶ The confusion of terminology argues most effectively against a neat one-to-one correspondence of contained and container.

Indeed, at least one early arm reliquary did not contain any part of a body. The eleventh-century *Vita Gauzlini* de-

scribes “a relic of the burial shroud of . . . Christ, . . . [in] a container resembling a right arm made of gold and precious gems.”¹⁷ Furthermore, a particular use was specified for this reliquary. During a procession on Ascension day, the abbot “strengthened [the crowd] by a benediction made by the relics.” Thus, rather than an indexical icon that slyly skirts the issue of idolatry through its relic status, this object was specifically conceived as a stage prop for the liturgy.

The later history of arm reliquaries clearly continues this early focus on function and the significance of the hand form. Ordinaries from Rheims, Amiens and Essen, to name a few, attest to the practice of the priest lifting and actually using arm reliquaries to bless the people during liturgical performances, an issue to which we will return.¹⁸ It has also been suggested by Marie-Madeleine Gauthier that at least one arm reliquary, that of Saint Anthony the Hermit in Lucca, displayed now in an unusual horizontal position with palm down, may have been used at a shrine in making a healing gesture.¹⁹ A miracle story recounted by Guibert of Nogent describes such a healing in detail. The twelfth-century monk recounts the healing of his noble cousin by the bejeweled golden arm reliquary of St. Arnoul. At first the arm was laid on the body of the sick man, a procedure which chased the “complaint . . . to another part.” Only after the “touch of the holy arm pressed it hard,” did the disease vanish.²⁰

In sum, the only certain description of the contents of arm reliquaries is that they contained relic *fragments*. Such fragments are especially valuable to the medieval Church because they are *not* the buried body of the saint, the *corpus* irretrievably immured in a tomb. Instead, relic fragments are a more active and portable form of saintly body. Amiens, which owned the entire body of St. Firmin, placed an unspecified fragment in an arm reliquary in the thirteenth century for use in processions and benedictions, emphasizing the utility of the portable arm reliquary as a liturgical prop.²¹ Ellen Shortell describes an even more extensive reuse of fragments of the body of St. Quentin in an essay in this volume.

So, although many arm reliquaries probably did contain at least a fragment of an arm, hand, or finger, it is clear that the arm shape is not closely tied to content but rather quite the reverse: the arm relic is sought out because it supports the desirable arm form. Ultimately, the compelling interest of the hand or the arm of the saint is its status as an active “limb” of the saintly body²² and its potential for touch and gesture in the form of the arm reliquary.

In considering the first quality of arm reliquaries, I have crossed over into a discussion of the second, their metaphorical qualities. To further understand these metaphorical, and also rhetorical and referential qualities, I would like to focus on one aspect of arm reliquaries that is unique among reliquaries, that is, their ability to make gestures. The meaning and function of those gestures may be found by investigating their occurrence in the gestural system of the liturgy.

Arm reliquaries almost invariably show one of two gestures, the open palm of the St. Gereon reliquary (Fig. 2), or the so-called “blessing gesture” already singled out and here exemplified by the arm of Peter (Fig. 1).²³ It is possible to contextualize these two gestures as two parts of one liturgical gesture—the sign of the cross.²⁴ This is just one of the gestures that such arm reliquaries could be used to make, but it is perhaps the most important. An investigation of the meaning of the gesture will expand our understanding of the potential “action” of the saints through these arms.

Arm reliquaries might imply, especially to the modern viewer, that the sign of the cross is a frozen attitude of the fingers. Instead, it is important to understand that the gesture is a performance. In its most common form, the right hand moves in the form of a cross, up and down, side to side. The medieval visual artist, without recourse to moving images must encapsulate it in a single hand position, a telling gesture, often that of blessing.²⁵ The historian must in turn reconstruct the movement and setting of the gesture. In this endeavor, illustrated manuscripts will be of assistance, since if no less frozen, manuscript images at least provide a context for action.

In illustrated saints’ lives, especially those of bishops and apostles, the arm, especially the hand, creates an important center of interest in saintly activity. The gesture of the sign of the cross in particular functions as a locus of power for these saints. The sign of the cross, of course, has an important and long history in Christian ceremony and life. The Latin *signaculum* or Greek *sphragis*, as part of the Christian sacred vocabulary, has its origins in the New Testament texts of the Epistles and Revelation: “we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads” (Revelation 7:3).²⁶ In scriptural and patristic texts, rather than being a gesture made with the hand, the *signaculum* signifies a spiritual seal like the Jewish circumcision (Romans 4:11). The Christian *signaculum* differs from the Jewish in that it is not a mark on the body but resides in the body (Galatians 6:17): the seal that identifies the Christian to the Lord (II Timothy 2:19), the seal given by the Holy Spirit (II Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13), but also the seal that can be sometimes visualized as a cross.

This sealing “. . . unto the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30), came to take its place in the baptismal ceremony. The *signaculum* insured the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit,²⁷ and sealed out evil and demonic powers. Finally, although the whole signified the sign of the cross, it was administered in two parts in liturgical ceremony, especially the baptism: the laying on of hands and the specific gesture called the *signaculum crucis*.²⁸

However, the Christian involvement with the sign only began with baptism. The Fathers emphasized that the great numbers of evil spirits and temptations in the world could only be protected against by constant vigilance. The sign of the cross

was recommended as a renewal of the seal and as a prophylactic against demons used with the trinitarian profession, “. . . in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.”

From this understanding differences of use emerge. A bishop applies the sign or seal and a virgin (or other non-priestly saint) can only renew it upon herself or perhaps turn it outward in defense. So, for example, two very different gestures represented in a manuscript of ca. 970 from Fulda can both be understood as examples of the sign of the cross. In his *vita*, holy Bishop Kilian is depicted performing the first part of the *signaculum* during baptism, the laying on of hands (Hannover Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek Ms. I 189, fol. 5, Fig. 3). Kilian’s gesture and open hand give the viewer a forceful sense of the “impression” of the interior mark, the “sign of the cross.”²⁹ In the same manuscript, the virgin Margaret, in prison, makes a hand gesture identified as the sign by the text. With it she defeats a dragon (fol. 20, Fig. 4).³⁰ The latter is the more expected and identifiable visual formulation of the gesture because of the distinctive position of the fingers and is the one upon which we will focus.

As in the case of Margaret the sign of the cross often escapes its defined boundaries in the liturgy and in the uses of personal piety into the context of miracles. There, its interpretation becomes more complex. For example, Martin, in an eleventh-century Touronian manuscript, makes the sign of the cross in order to raise a hanged slave from the dead (Tours, Bib. mun. ms. 1018, fol. 18, Fig. 5).³¹ In this eloquent image, a circle of hands condenses the drama through which the miracle is accomplished.

As Magdalena Carrasco has observed, the imploring gesture of the dead man, although here contrary to reason and to the text,³² is instrumental in evoking the miracle.³³ It implies the faith that is so essential in initiating the miraculous. The gesture also has the wonderful quality of describing a rising line, as if the limp lower part of the body, having slipped from the broken rope, is now being raised upward through the arm and its conjunction or crossing with Martin’s arm. Martin then duplicates this “crossing” configuration with the sign of the cross. However Martin’s gesture is only empowered by a further gesture, that of the Hand of God, also making the sign of the cross.³⁴

But remarkably, the gestures are not the *same*. God makes a gesture with two fingers extended and a thumb touching the last two retracted fingers. Martin extends the little finger as well. These gestures are known today as the *Benedictio Latina* and *Graeca* respectively,³⁵ but certainly could not have been so known by the Touronian miniaturist.³⁶ Are either or both the sign of the cross? Both are commonly known as a blessing gesture and Carrasco has associated such gestures with the Roman *adlocutio*, finding their meaning in God’s Word.³⁷ Nonetheless, I think in a medieval context, bolstered by the evidence of the text of Martin’s life, at least Martin’s gesture must be identified specifically as the sign of the cross, although



FIGURE 3. *Kilian Baptizing*. Ca. 970. Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, MS I 189, folio 5 (photo: Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek).

it may indeed come as a determining gesture that completes speech. I would like to suggest that the artist is thinking here of representing first God's gesture as a sort of natural power and then its mundane reflection in the hand of Martin as clearly differentiated, perhaps liturgically mediated. Thus, Martin's gesture would be triply motivated—by the request of the dead man, by the power of God and by Martin's status as bishop. All three motivations are signaled visually by elements contained within the sacred space designated by the framing arch—that is, the hand of the slave, the hand of God, and the crozier held in Martin's left hand. All three elements point toward the saint and set the stage for the effectiveness of the

saint's gesture. This interpretation of motivation moves a great distance from the proposed personal and bodily origin of Margaret's gesture of protection through the sign of the cross. Martin is clearly positioned as a servant of God and his people.

Alternately, a miracle in the text of the *vita* of Liudger specifies a much more precise, even concrete, interpretation of the function of the sign (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. theol. lat. fol. 323, fol. 12, Fig. 6).³⁸ In the eleventh-century Werden manuscript, the bishop makes the gesture in front of a blind pagan's eyes and asks if the man can see the cross. Of course the implication is that vision and faith arrive simultaneously, but only because the gesture truly



FIGURE 4. *Margaret Defeating the Dragon*. Ca. 970. Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, MS I 189, folio 20 (photo: Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek).

signifies the cross, in a strikingly visual sense. The sign enters in through the eyes and is then impressed on the soul. However, once more, Liudger's gesture is not powerful in itself. Unlike his proud companions, Liudger has descended from his horse, he is modestly garbed and is depicted as the humble and human means of transmission of the power of God represented by the divine hand gesturing from above.

If, in these cases, repeatedly, the power of the living saint and bishop's hand is carefully focused and specified as a means of transmitting God's will and power through gesture, what of the power of dead saints' hands, that is, relics or arm reliquar-

ies? Fortunately, an arm reliquary in Copenhagen carries an unusually explicit inscription: "Dextera domini fecit virtutem," that is, "The right hand of God makes saintly power."³⁹ The reliquary made by Abbot Gauzlin mentioned above bore an inscription that similarly implied that the hand was a means of transmission of God's grace: in that case it bestowed joy upon the populace.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Basilius arm reliquary of Essen (Fig. 7), carries a plaque on its "glove" depicting the hand of God with the inscription "Dextera Dei," once more implying the presence of God's right hand. Thus, even in the case of the relic, it is made clear that the ultimate source of



FIGURE 5. *Martin Rescues a Hanged Slave*. 11th century. Tours, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 1018, folio 18 (photo: Tours, Bibliothèque municipale).

power is God. The right arm of the saint through God's will does God's work through its action and its gestures.

If, however, the power of saints and their relics lies in God's grace, perhaps prompted by the saint's presence as intercessor before God in the heavenly court, nevertheless, the remarkable number of surviving arm reliquaries attests to the special status of the limb in the Middle Ages. Relic arms not only had the ability to act, they *had* acted in life. It was as if such relics were marked by power transmitted through the hand in life that remained available in death. Thus, even when, as was sometimes the case, arm relics were not sheltered in arm-shaped reliquaries, still the limbs are preserved with a special reverence. On an irregularly shaped box-like Byzantine reliquary containing the hand of Margaret/Marina in the Museo Correr in Venice, the thirteenth-century inscription reads: "... save me from the storm of the evil spirits of my mind and give me victory over them and power, dispensing a gift comparable to your nature. . . ." ⁴¹ Margaret's nature is considered to be one with the sign she made. As we have seen, the virgin saint used the gesture of the sign of the cross to defend her body from the devil. Her hand was perceived as especially sanctified by the power that passed through it. Thus, the hand, a sort of weapon with which she made the sign of the cross



FIGURE 6. *Liudger Heals a Blind Man*. 11th century. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, MS Theol. lat. fol. 323, folio 12 (photo: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz).

that conquered the devil, is enshrined and invoked. Tellingly, many of the saint's other recorded relics are hand, arms, or even fingers. ⁴²

Charlemagne presents a parallel example of a powerful figure of action in life; he was revered as a saint imbued with the virtues of a king. His arm was preserved as a relic separate from the rest of his body in a box-shaped reliquary of the twelfth century ornamented with images of other emperors and given to Aachen by Frederick I Barbarossa. ⁴³

Relics, Hands, and the Liturgy

Arm-shaped reliquaries, however, seem to be preponderantly those of saints who were associated with the institutional church, especially bishops. Bishops' hands are sacralized in a much different way from those of lay saints—the saintly bishop's hand above all had been blessed through the liturgical rituals he performed, specifically the Mass. In a passage often quoted in the medieval West, St. John Chrysostom metonymically located the special sanctity of the celebrant. He asks us to: "Reflect upon what must be the *hands that serve for such a great thing*." ⁴⁴

Indeed, bishops wore jeweled gloves during liturgical ceremonies to designate this otherworldliness of their hands.

Arm-shaped reliquaries are similarly distinguished by their garments. Braun cites arm reliquaries that are fitted with episcopal gloves,⁴⁵ or depicted as wearing them, such as the eleventh-century arm from Essen mentioned above (Fig. 7), and notes others that are adorned with episcopal rings.⁴⁶ Virtually all arm reliquaries are dressed in gorgeous jewelled garments reminiscent of the finest liturgical vestments.⁴⁷

If hands and hand relics are especially blessed through the liturgy, it is no surprise that arm reliquaries in turn find a special place in the liturgy. As I noted above, Ordinaries attest to the practice of the priest lifting and actually using such arm reliquaries to bless the people during liturgical performances.⁴⁸ One very specific variant of that use sheds further light upon the popularity of the arm reliquary form. The Roman rite ended with a blessing by the bishop, a renewal of the sign of the cross upon the people to end the mass. This “episcopal blessing” was explicitly forbidden to priests but strongly desired by the congregation. Eventually, priests came to use relics from the altar, or a piece of the true cross, or eventually even a cross, paten or corporal to make this blessing and sign of the cross. One of the earliest documents concerning an arm reliquary mentions, perhaps significantly, that it resided “super altarium.”⁴⁹

For the feast of the circumcision at Essen, a powerful women’s monastery, the Ordinary specified that the arm reliquary of Basilus (Fig. 7) was taken from the high altar and the final benediction was pronounced using the arm: “Benedictio Dei Patris omnipotentis descendat super vos et maneat semper, Amen.”⁵⁰ This is explicitly “the invocation of heaven’s power and grace” in Jungmann’s words,⁵¹ and it would seem a fitting use for the arm relic of a saint. In the example of Basilus we have the fortunate coincidence of surviving object and liturgical documentation, but such a usage can be extrapolated for many other arm reliquaries.

Again, the reliquary functions, not as a site of power but as a transmitter. This is a utility that perfectly suits the saint or ecclesiastic’s role as active and self-sacrificing servant of the people. As the inscription on the Essen reliquary reads “Serve Dei vivi/benedic nos sancte Basili,”⁵² “Servant of the living God, bless us saint Basilus.” The potency of the saint and his relic is brought by means of the reliquary to visible and functional power as an “arm” of the body of the Church. Bishop’s arms especially continued to serve their congregations by dispensing the power of blessing after death as relics specifically in the context of the liturgy, but any saint, bishop or no, could exercise this power through his or her arm reliquary.⁵³

The Saintly Body

One last example of a bishop saint thus enmeshed in the holy, transformative power of the liturgy, however, demonstrates that the categories of living saint and wonder-working relic body could be elided in the Middle Ages. The saint could become, in effect, a living reliquary. Martin the sainted



FIGURE 7. Reliquary Arm of Basilus. 11th century. Essen, Münsterschatz (photo: Essen).

bishop of Tours, whose miracle-working right hand we have already discussed at length, was depicted in a now lost sixth-century fresco, as quite literally transformed by the Eucharist.⁵⁴ Fortunatus, in verses written about the fresco, describes how Martin celebrated the mass with miraculously bejeweled and golden hands:

... suddenly, his nourishing hand sparkled with heavenly beauty, corruscating with the varied splendour of noble jewels, scattering rays of light in all directions as a wheel; His arms were vibrating lightning through 'purple' jewels; their brightness as well as the ruddy light of gold beamed even in the sunlight, through which the miraculous character of the event was even more believable.

Fortunatus goes on to characterize the jewels as a "new mantle" and a "tunic," and asks who the artist might be, finally calling the whole a "mystery."⁵⁵ Martin here is clearly garbed or even encased in grace as a *living* bishop. The miracle is constituted, however, not in Martin's actions but through God's grace. Fortunatus warns the viewer to "Be stunned into silence then, O man, when grace weaves its tissues!"

Of particular interest here: if Martin's hand constituted an arm reliquary rather than the "nourishing hand" of a living bishop,⁵⁶ it would be the sheath, not the relic that seems to take precedence. In the early medieval miracle story of Martin but also in the general honor in which gold and gemmed reliquaries were held, the metaphorical mode of meaning has prepared the way for the third quality noted above: there is a slippage between the status of the contained and the container.⁵⁷ The golden and gemmed body-part reliquary comes to represent the glorious resurrected body as Caroline Bynum argues,⁵⁸ or even more clearly, as in the case of Martin, the body imbued with grace and remade into a celestial fabric during life. The arm reliquary is not a representation of the fragmented relic or beleaguered human body, but becomes the true and active arm of the saint, transfigured by God's will and grace.

This reversal of container and contained arises from a genuine reversal of status. Unadorned relic bones are inexpressive, anonymous, perhaps even repugnant. Without proper identification and a cultural matrix—what medieval sources call a proper veneration—relics remain inert.⁵⁹ The reliquary in some sense enables or even constitutes the power of the relic. An argument can be made that the container ultimately supersedes the contained.⁶⁰

The reliquary is not a simple (or glorious) representational equivalent for the relic, but along with its gesture, is an active and powerful sign, as such indicating an origin of meaning and power that is elsewhere. For the saint, that origin might be considered to be the tomb and the saintly *corpus*, but it is not limited to that fixed site. Rather, the power of the saint is also not inherent in his or her corporeal body but founded in the saint's simultaneous residence in the City of God.

Part and Whole

This inescapable tie of the reliquary to the larger powers of heaven and also the Church brings us finally to our fourth quality of meaning in shaped reliquaries. If we recall the issues raised above by the sign of the cross, it is clear that the gesture is established and supported in its meaning by the Church. The trinitarian profession that accompanies the gesture is even specifically defined in the thirteenth century as establishing the community of faith.⁶¹ What at first might have seemed a private gesture of protection was discovered to be an instrument provided through the operation of the Church, calling upon the grace of God. Similarly, relics serve only as part of a larger system. The church uses its "limbs" to effect the wishes of the head, that is Christ, as in the biblical metaphor.⁶²

These meanings are clearly expressed in the additional ornament that is occasionally added to the basic representation of the draped arm in arm reliquaries. The two arm reliquaries made in the thirteenth century for the monastery of St. Gereon, as discussed above, contain a large number of saints' relics. There is, in fact, no fiction that either of those reliquaries represents the arm of a single saint; the cohort of saints contained are clearly depicted, along with Christ, in the enamel borders at the bottom edge of each of the reliquaries (Fig. 2). The ornamentation thus insists upon the essential connectedness of the arm reliquary—not the arm of one saint but the active limb of these many courtiers of heaven, reaching out from the City of God, supported by the power and sanctity of their company and ultimately originating in Christ or God. The reliquary's power is not singular but the power of the entire Church. Some late reliquaries express the idea quite literally, depicting the arm itself as a columnar Gothic architectural fantasy representing the Church, from which the hand of the saint extends.⁶³

The part thus becomes more powerful in that it infers a larger and truly glorious whole. These body parts forcefully insist upon their fragmentation in order to evoke a whole beyond the individual. Just as even a small relic still contains the presence of the entire saint according to Christian doctrine,⁶⁴ so a body part subsumed in a liturgical function conveys its evident grace in its shining sheath, and ultimately, represents the place of the relic in the whole of the church and salvation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, what do body-part reliquaries say? They do not only say "arm," "hand," "head," or "foot." Ideas that have been associated with body-part reliquaries that posit an uncomplicated representation of the body lead the modern viewer radically astray. Such ideas may be applicable to another class of body-part representations deceptively like body-part reliquaries, that is, *ex-votos*. The comparison is instructive. In an affirmation of corporeality, a celebration of the restoration

of the body, ex-votos represent the healed limb or body part as palpably and concretely as possible.⁶⁵ Ex-votos speak in a single voice, they speak their body part, and they speak thanks and witness to God's power.

The reliquary, however, must be viewed as expressing an essentially different view of body: a body enclosed, shrunk and radically dismembered but thereby set apart. By its disassociation from things of this world, this body is supplemented with power in life through the liturgy and granted power in death through a very real connection with Paradise. Rather than an effigy of thanksgiving for restoration, the arm reliquary container is instead a sort of conduit or active "dispenser of power."⁶⁶ In effect, the transfigured golden and gemmed hand of the saint reaches out directly from an alternate and glorious residence in heaven. It does not so much speak as make an authoritative gesture at God's behest, sending a message of succour and joyous consolation, manipulating a powerful language of signs.

NOTES

1. I prefer the designation "shaped" reliquary. The German terminology itself is more general than the usual English "body-part reliquary." Such general designations do not exclude related reliquaries such as those discussed by Thomas Head in this issue.
2. J. W. Mann, "Medieval Art," *The Saint Louis Art Museum Bulletin*, XX (1992), 45.
3. When such parts do exist they are generally late and very few in number. One might call them the exceptions that prove the rule.
4. J. Braun, *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1940) does not treat it as a new idea. Ilene Forsyth discusses something of the background: *Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton, 1972), 32–39.
5. Forsyth, *Throne*, 32.
6. R. Kroos, "Vom Umgang mit Reliquien," in Cologne, Schnütgen Museum, *Ornamenta Ecclesiae: Kunst und Künstler der Romanik. Katalog zur Ausstellung des Schnütgen-Museums in der Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle*, ed. A. Legner, 3 vols. (Cologne, 1985), III, 25–49; and H. Westermann-Angerhausen, "Spolie und Umfeld in Egberts Trier," *ZfK*, L (1987), 305–36.
7. "Canonicus Lingonensis," in *Exuviae Sacrae Constantinopolitanae*, ed. Count Riant, 3 vols. (Geneva, 1877–98), I, 33–34. Cited and translated in C. W. Solt, "Romanesque French Reliquaries," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, IX (1987), 165–236, esp. 179. It seems to me that rather than collarbones, it is usually ribs that are given special attention, perhaps because that part of the body encloses the heart.
8. See J. M. McCulloh, "The Cult of Relics in the Letters and 'Dialogues' of Pope Gregory the Great: a Lexicographical Study," *Traditio*, XXXII (1976), 145–84. McCulloh discusses the reluctance in the West to dismember holy bodies, especially that of Peter. Solt, "French Reliquaries," argues for the continuing importance of the tomb of the saint in preference to fragments. P. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1978), 25, cites a miracle which makes it quite clear that the placement of relics on altars in the tenth century was still problematic. Here, I would assume that such relics were partial rather than entire bodies. However, there is also much evidence for dismemberment, see: N. Hermann-Mascard, *Les Reliques des saints: Formation coutumière d'un droit* (Paris, 1975), esp. 64. I intend to publish further observations about reliquaries which concern their visibility, some of which were delivered in May 1996 at the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium in a talk titled "The Discourse of Relics: Saints, Stories and the Sacred."
9. The 1600 volume, *Tesori nascosti nell'alma città di Roma*, lists over 2,500 relics of which 470 are specified as bodies and 86 are heads but 97 are arms, hands or fingers. Other body parts, excepting teeth at 22, barely make it to double digits. Cited by B. Bessard and G. Mariotti, "Dispensers of Power," *FMR*, XLII (1990), 113.
10. *Ornamenta*, II, 244. Even head reliquaries do not always hold heads. The diminutive eleventh-century head reliquary of St. Paul, now in the Münster Domkammer, contained a tooth. *Ornamenta*, III, 138.
11. *Ornamenta*, II, 242.
12. *Ornamenta*, III, 154. The arm comes from the Benedictine abbey of Lobbes and may have been made by Hugo d'Oignies.
13. *Ornamenta*, III, 133–36.
14. *Ornamenta*, III, 153.
15. P. Lasko, *Ars Sacra: 800–1200* (Baltimore, 1972), 205.
16. Braun, *Reliquiare*, "manus," 62–63. One clear example is that cited in the Fritzlar inventory of 1546 referring to an extant arm reliquary as a hand.
17. Andrew of Fleury, *Vita Gauzlini abbatis Floriacensis monasterii in Vie de Gauzlin, abbé de Fleury*, ed. and trans. R.-H. Bautier and G. Labory (Paris, 1969), 60–63. I would like to thank Thomas Head for drawing my attention to this text.
18. See notes 21 and 48 below.
19. M.-M. Gauthier, "Un saint du Pays de Liège au bras long," *Études d'art medieval offerte à Louis Grodecki* (Paris, 1984), 110.
20. *Self and Society in Medieval France: The Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent (1064–1125)*, ed. J. F. Benton (New York, 1970), 226. The arm also "wrests" itself from thieves. My attention was drawn to the text by the excellent essay, "Remembering the Saints" by Virginia Reinberg in the exhibition catalogue *Memory and the Middle Ages*, ed. N. Netzer and V. Reinberg (Boston College Museum of Art, 1995), 17–32. This essay makes some of the same points as I do here. However, we arrived at this agreement independently (Reinberg's essay appeared after this talk was initially given).
21. *Ordinaire de l'église Notre-Dame Cathédrale d'Amiens par Raoul de Rouvroy (1291)*, ed. G. Durand (Paris, 1934), 47 and 551.
22. The terminology "limb" comes from the biblical terminology for the saints, II Corinthians 12:12. The saints are the limbs; the head of the body of the Church is Christ.
23. The one outstanding exception is St. Lachtan's arm which makes a sort of fist. In discussions with Pippin Micheli, she has tentatively suggested that such a gesture may have been appropriate to the use of relics in Ireland as battle-standards. Also see: A. T. Lucas, "The Social Role of Relics and Reliquaries in Ancient Ireland," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, CXVI (1986), 5–37.
24. I would contend that the sign of the cross is the most likely context for these hand poses but other and more general gestures may be implied.
25. E. Gombrich, "Action and Expression in Western Art," in *Non-Verbal Communication*, ed. R. A. Hinde (Cambridge, 1972), 391–401, discusses some issues of the distillation of movement into gesture. He also comments upon how few gestures and expressions there are available for the use of visual artists, p. 390.

26. G. W. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexikon* (Oxford, 1961), 1355–57; J. F. Nedermeyer, *Mediae Latinitas Lexicon Minus* (Leiden, 1976), 970; A. Blaise, *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens* (Strasbourg, 1954), 758. See Revelation VII.
27. E. Maass, “Segnen, Weihen, Taufen,” *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, XXI (1922), 241.
28. J. Dölger, *Sphragis: Eine altchristliche Taufbezeichnung in ihren Bezeichnungen zur profanen und religiösen Kultur des Altertums*, Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums, V, Heft 3/4 (Paderborn, 1911), 181.
29. C. Hahn, *Passio Kyliani. Ps. Theotimus, Passio Margaretae, Orationes, Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe . . . des Codex Ms. I 189 aus der Besitz der Niedersächsischen Landesbibliothek Hannover, Kommentarband, Codices Selecti*, 83* (Graz, 1988), 31.
30. Hahn, *Passio Kyliani*, 33.
31. See T. Sauvel, “Le Miracles de Saint-Martin. Recherches sur les peintures murales de Tours au Ve et au VIe siècle,” *Bmon*, CXIV (1956), 153–79, esp. Fig. 2.
32. The representation does not correspond to the text of the life of Martin at all. In Ch. 8.2 Martin is travelling about with Hilary and comes upon a group of people mourning the suicide of a slave. Martin insists that everyone leave the room and then lies on the dead body, gradually reviving it. “Soon life began to return to the features of the dead man, as his still languid eyes were lifted to look into the face of Martin. Forcing himself slowly to rise and grasping the hand of the blessed man, he stood up.” *Fathers of the Church. A New Translation* (N.Y., 1949), Sulpicius Severus, tr. B. M. Peebles, 114. For the Latin text and a French translation see J. Fontaine, *Sulpice Sévère. Vie de Saint Martin*, Sources chrétiennes, 133 (Paris, 1967), 270–71. This textual version of the miracle would preclude Martin making any manual gesture at all because the slave grasps his hand. It also does not mention the sign of the cross. Nevertheless, I think that the artist stays with the spirit of the text in using the gesture of the sign of the cross because Martin uses it so often in his life. Fontaine, *Sulpice*, 528, 726, 744–45, 1170–71, argues for the importance and power as a standard or weapon that the sign takes in the text.
33. M. Carrasco, “Spirituality and Historicity in Pictorial Hagiography: Two Miracles by St. Albinus of Angers,” *Art History*, XII (1989), 6.
34. Sauvel compared the scene to the dead rising from their graves, “Miracles,” 170.
35. M. Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge, 1987), 20–21. E. Fehrenbach discusses a group of hand gestures (6) under the entry “Bénir (Manière de),” arguing that the gesture came to be used for benedictions after the fourth century: in F. Cabrol, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, 15 vols. in 30 (Paris, 1910), II.1, 746–58. H. Leclercq discusses the uses of the sign of the cross as discussed in texts which can be made with one finger or the hand, in “Croix (signe de la),” *ibid.*, III, 3139–43.
36. Fehrenbach, “Bénir,” 755, does argue that some unnamed eleventh-century artists knew the difference.
37. Carrasco, “Spirituality,” 5–8.
38. H. Schrade, *Die Vita Heiligen Liudger und ihre Bilder*, Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte und Altertumskunde Westfalens des Landesmuseums für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte des Landeskonservators von Westfalen-Lippe, Sonderheft XIV (Münster, 1960), 20.
39. *Ornamenta*, III, 153. The inscription is on an arm reliquary in Copenhagen. It was first cited by Gauthier, “Bras long,” 110; although she believes that the inscription identifies the hand as that of God. I find this too literal an interpretation. T. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1988), 153–57, discusses the hagiographic use of the word *virtus*. See also, T. Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800–1200* (Cambridge, 1990), 102. Kroos notes the frequency of the word *virtus* in reliquary inscriptions: *Ornamenta*, III, 38.
40. The inscription reads: “Gaudia laeta fert manus ista, Sindone Christi plena refulgens.” The life of Gauzlin specifies that after being blessed with the hand, the crowd was joyous. The blessing hand of God, “Dextera Dei,” was used on the seal of the abbey and at least one scholar claimed that it was a representation of this arm reliquary. Rather, it would seem that the image on the seal was a representation of God’s power present just as the arm reliquary was such a representation. *Vie de Gauzlin*, 60–63, esp. 62, n. 1.
41. M. C. Ross and G. Downey, “A Reliquary of St. Marina,” *Byzantinoslavica*, XXIII (1962), 41–44.
42. AA SS, Iul. V, 28b.
43. Now in the Louvre, a present to Josephine. See, Cologne, Schnütgen-Museum, *Rhin-Meuse: Art et Civilisation 800–1400*, ed. J. Stiennon and R. Lejeune (Cologne, 1972), G6, 244. It may be of interest that a few arm reliquaries, quite late, are dressed in mail, perhaps implying another set of ceremonies performed by these reliquaries: Braun, *Reliquiare*, 400. Also Charles III, the Simple, must have had some metaphorical meaning in mind when he gave the hand of Denis in friendship and alliance to Henry I of Germany. Hermann-Mascard, *Reliques*, 64.
44. Italics mine. Lib. IV, 4 (Migne, PG, XLVIII, 681). Discussed by: M. Lépin, *L’Idée du sacrifice de la messe d’après les théologiens depuis l’origine jusqu’au nos jours* (Paris, 1926), 57. This and other quotations from Chrysostom are mistakenly cited during the ninth and tenth centuries as Basil, presumably because they were available in Latin only as part of a collection entitled: “Dialogue between John and Basil”: Lépin, *Sacrisse de la messe*, 58.
45. Braun, *Reliquiare*, 399; also see H. Leclercq, “Gants,” *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, VI, 624–27.
46. As well as other, perhaps votive rings. Fig. 2 exhibits a bent finger that was probably bent from putting on or taking off a ring. Braun, *Reliquiare*, 400–401.
47. Alternately, such garments could be perceived as royal but if so, this would be a reference to the court of heaven, finally carrying much the same meaning as liturgical garments.
48. See n. 21. Also, *Ordinaire et Coutumier de l’église Cathédrale de Bayeux (XIIIe siècle) publiés d’après les manuscrits originaux*, ed. U. Chevalier (Paris, 1902), xiv, 65–66; and *Ornamenta*, III, 38. Such movement is more effective as mimesis in the Middle Ages, as Hans Belting argues, than is modern “realism” of artistic form: H. Belting, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages*, trans. M. Bartusis and R. Meyer (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1990), 5. Perhaps their use in liturgies also explains why many arm reliquaries take the form of an open or gently cupped hand gesture—the reliquary may have performed the imposition.
49. Braun, *Reliquiare*, 388.
50. *Ornamenta*, III, 48, n. 273. The arm of Basilus was brought to Essen, received, and placed on the high altar. It was then used to bless and returned to the altar. F. Arens, *Der Liber Ordinarius der Essener Stiftskirche* (Paderborn, 1908), 30. For information on the formulae for the blessing in the Roman rite see: J. A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, 2 vols., trans. F. A. Brunner (Westminster, MD, 1986), II, 443.
51. Jungmann, *Roman Rite*, II, 69.
52. *Ornamenta*, III, 38.

53. It would be interesting to know in what ways the arm reliquary of Elisabeth of Thuringia was used by the convent of Altenberg an der Lahn. *Ornamenta*, III, 138.
54. H. Kessler, "Pictorial Narrative and Church Mission in Sixth-Century Gaul," *Studies in the History of Art*, XVI (1985), 75–91.
55. Translation by Giselle de Nie, for a talk at Kalamazoo in 1994, "Gregory and his Poetic Spokesman Venantius Fortunatus: 'Simple' and 'Jeweled' Representations of Divine Actions for Different Occasions": *Vita Martini*, IV, 305–30 (*MGH AA*, IV, 357–58).
56. It is interesting that Fortunatus wavers between singular and plural in this description. I would assume that the "nourishing hand" is Martin's right.
57. C. Rudolph, *The Things of Greater Importance: Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art* (Philadelphia, 1990). Rudolph argues for the importance of gold in reliquaries. See esp. 67, 72, 78.
58. Caroline Bynum, "Material Continuity, Personal Survival, and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in its Medieval and Modern Contexts," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), 239–97; and *idem*, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 1995), 209–12.
59. Translations of relics, which often produce miracles, are essentially concerned with identifying and setting relics in a situation of appropriate veneration. See Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 10–15, 119–24. For the development of proper veneration in a population see P. Brown, "Relics and Social Status in the Age of Gregory of Tours," in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982), 222–50.
60. A modern example may provide a parallel. Like a powerful logo such as that on a Coca-cola bottle, the reliquary is that which identifies the contents as "the real thing." Indeed, Coke's brown liquid, virtually indistinguishable from generic colas, would have no special qualities without the red and white logo on the hourglass bottle. The effects of advertising and product loyalty, however, make the liquid and especially the bottle into a portable symbol of the good life, available for picnics but tied to a power elsewhere. The important idea that one might draw from the comparison is that the reliquary must be understood in its function as a sign.
61. In the thirteenth century, scholastics defined a Christian as one who said the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, the Credo and made the sign of the cross as a symbol of the trinitarian profession. J. C. Schmitt, *La Raison des gestes dans l'Occident medieval* (Paris, 1990), 322.
62. See n. 22.
63. Braun, *Reliquiare*, Figs. 455, 470: examples in the Louvre and in Hall, Heiltumsbuch.
64. See the discussion of Vitricius of Rouen in E. W. Kemp, *Canonization and Authority in the Western Church* (Oxford, 1948), 3–6.
65. D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1989), 155.
66. This is the title of the article by Bessard and Mariotti in *FMR* cited in note 9 above.