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Studies

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

REPRESENTING THE HOLY GRAIL ON RELIQUARY SARCOPHAGI IN SYRIA

Abstract: This scholarly article examines the depiction of the Holy Chalice within a significant category of Christian reliquaries, with a specific focus on examples from Syria. The research delves into the analysis of numerous sarcophagi reliquaries distinguished by their utilization of the libation system and explores the various artistic representations of the Chalice within this context.

Keywords: *Reliquary, Sarcophagus, Chalice, Libation, Syria.*

INTRODUCTION:

Paradise; the search for immortality; the ability to achieve miraculous healing; the achievement of perfection; the finding of the spiritual essence of human; unity with God; obtaining abundant goodness that does not cease. All of these are things for centuries the human being wanted to achieve; all of them are gathered in what is called: The Holy Grail - Holy Chalice!

Various synonyms, including cup, grail, and chalice, have been employed to describe this revered relic, all of which signify a singular and profoundly significant Christian artifact. However, it is worth noting that both terms "Holy Grail" and "Holy Chalice" are the same, although for some, the term "Holy Grail" refers exactly to the original cup that is connected with the Christian tradition and which we will discuss later, Conversely, "Holy Chalice" may encompass all sacred cups, irrespective of their specific religious associations. However, in this article, both terms have been utilized impartially, as they ultimately denote the same essential symbol and its spiritual significance, serving as a bridge between the material and spiritual realms.

The Holy Chalice, commonly referred to as the Holy Grail, is typically described as a vessel or cup from which Jesus Christ partook during the Last Supper with his disciples. As they gathered, Jesus conveyed the profound significance of this act, declaring "*Take it and eat it, for this is my body*",¹ he then gave thanks and offered them the cup and said "*Each of you drink from it, for this is my blood, which seals the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many.*"² It's noteworthy that during this moment of the Last Supper, Jesus emphasized not only the significance of his blood but also its connection to the cup. This is evident in the Gospel of Luke, where he states: "*This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for*

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¹ MATTHEW 26: 26.

² MATTHEW 26: 27-28.

you.”³ Subsequently, the Holy Grail was believed to have been employed by Joseph of Arimathea (Youssef Al-Ramy) to collect the precious blood of Jesus during the crucifixion and the sacred water that flowed from his wound.⁴ As a result, the Holy Grail is widely regarded as a symbol of spiritual fulfillment, often representing the divine, the sacred, and the ultimate truth.

During the Byzantine era, the Chalice held a profound significance within ecclesiastical life as it served as the vessel for consecrated wine. Much like the consecrated bread in the Eucharist, the Chalice symbolized the body of Jesus Christ, while the wine it contained represented his blood, shed at his crucifixion. This sacred communion not only conveyed forgiveness of sins but also sanctification. The Eucharist, often regarded as the most intricate and paramount sacrament, serves as a gateway to immortality and stands as the source and summit of the Christian spiritual journey. From the early days of Christianity, the Holy Grail was attributed with extraordinary attributes, encompassing healing properties, spiritual potency, divine grace, and even the promise of eternal youth. These qualities endowed the Holy Grail with profound religious and spiritual significance.

A significant aspect of theology, religious expression, and devotion within the Eastern Christian church was the cult of saints and the veneration of their relics, a tradition that developed no later than the mid of fourth century.⁵ Saints were believed to possess a unique connection with God through their devout lives, endowing them with the ability to perform miracles. It was also commonly held that they resided in heaven with God after their earthly passing, leaving their mortal remains behind.⁶ From the earliest days of the church, Christians exhibited reverence for the bodies of martyrs and saints. This reverence extended to an interest in the tombs of these revered figures, a belief in the sanctity of their bones and remains, and the custom of visiting their cemeteries to offer prayers. This tradition began to take place within the Christian communities around the 350s.⁷ The veneration of the deceased and their burial places laid the foundation for the development of the cult of relics. These remains, referred to as relics, were believed to represent the entirety of the saint’s spiritual essence.

The imperative need for containers to house the remains of saints and the sacred objects collected from the sanctified sites played a pivotal role in the development of reliquaries, which were designed as receptacles. These receptacles were designed to serve as protective encasements, reliquaries not only modified these objects, which were considered nasty stuff or unremarkable, into spectacular and impressive objects, but they also safeguarded and concealed the relics, ensuring their invisible preservation and security.

Reliquaries have played a crucial role in facilitating the act of seeing, touching, and venerating relics. And the most important and renowned forms of reliquaries are sarcophagi reliquaries. They take the shape of a coffin-like container,

formed as a rectangular box with an interior cavity and a lid. They come in various sizes, ranging from miniature boxes measuring less than 20 cm in length to full-sized coffins.⁸ In later periods, many of these sarcophagi reliquaries were sealed as a means of safeguarding the relics they contained, although some remained unsealed, providing access to their contents.⁹ But on the other hand, it remains unclear whether these reliquaries were regularly or sporadically opened over time.¹⁰ Some sarcophagi reliquaries were supplied with locks to enhance the protection of the contents, and in this case, indicating a deliberate design for potential reopening.¹¹

Sarcophagi reliquaries were supplied with a specialized system of pipes designed to facilitate the circulation of the poured liquids, which could be water or oil. These liquids are poured inside through an aperture in the lid known as the libation hole. Once inside, the liquids flowed over the bones or any other kind of relics, eventually they are collected at an outlet located below, called the exit hole.¹² Such way was recognized to generate the indirect close contact relics.¹³ (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The circulation system of the Syrian reliquaries – A reliquary from the Louvre museum

³ LUKE 22:20.

⁴ GUÉNON 1984, 1; COMFORT 2000, 3; NICKELL 2007, 56.

⁵ WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 8.

⁶ KALINOWSKI 2011, 9-10.

⁷ WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 24, 26.

⁸ WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 134.

⁹ HAHN 1997, 244.

¹⁰ WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 148.

¹¹ WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 134, 148.

¹² CANIVET 1978; WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 137.

¹³ WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 138.

Syria gained renown for its production of such reliquaries, which held a significant place within its Christian tradition. These objects were considered to be powerful objects of devotion and piety. Numerous sarcophagi reliquaries from the Byzantine era have been discovered in Syria. These Syrian sarcophagi exhibited remarkable diversity in their shape, materials, and even their manufacturing techniques. The most opulent examples were crafted from marble, but there were also some made of limestone, basalt, sandstone, and more.¹⁴

What distinguishes these Syrian sarcophagi reliquaries is the incorporation of the representation of the Holy Grail on one of their walls, with the exit hole often taking the form of a Chalice. In some instances, a cavity can be seen on the reliquary wall, is crafted forming the Grail. Representing the Grail on Christian sarcophagi reliquaries within the Byzantine era carries profound significance rooted in religious and spiritual Christian values, serving as a symbol to the Holy Grail and its connection with Christ. Such representation is unique to the Syrian region and is not commonly found elsewhere. Only the Syrian-style reliquaries are distinctive in their inclusion of this design. But what is the reason behind representing the Holy Grail particularly in the Syrian region?

Within the Byzantine tradition, particularly in Syria, it was customary to depict religious symbols on sarcophagi reliquaries, and the Holy Grail was among the symbols widely used and depicted on Syrian reliquaries. These representations could take the form of sculptures, carvings, or various other artistic expressions (Fig.2). The reasons behind this specific choice of representation in the Syrian region may be linked to the unique religious and cultural context of the area during that era.



Fig. 2. 6th century Reliquary from Damascus Museum

Indeed, the symbolism and function of sarcophagi reliquaries that were dedicated to holy saints, and the process of pouring libations are closely similar and parallel the significance of the cup and the blood of Christ in Christian theology. Just as the cup served as a receptacle for the holy blood of Jesus, these reliquaries served as containers for relics and sacred remains, emphasizing their connection to the divine. Moreover, sarcophagi reliquaries played a role in the Eucharist. They were placed on the altar to celebrate the Eucharistic, emphasizing the communion with the blood of martyrs and saints.¹⁵ As previously discussed, the process of libation, with its connection to the blood of Jesus and the Holy Grail, held profound meaning for Christians. This

symbolism deeply influenced the adoption of the chalice's shape and its spiritual significance within Christian practice and devotion.

The discovery of several cups considered to be the Holy Grail in various locations, with Syria being particularly notable, has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the presentation of the Grail on sarcophagi reliquaries. The Antioch chalice, found in Syria in 1910 as part of liturgical objects on an altar, is one such remarkable example, with its potential dating back to the sixth century (Fig. 3).¹⁶ The presence of such significant relics likely influenced the depiction of the Grail on sarcophagi reliquaries, especially during the period when these reliquaries were dated between the 5th and 7th centuries.



Fig. 3. The Antioch Chalice 500-550 The-Metropolitan-Museum of Art

As people began to witness and experience the miracles associated with these relics, their faith in the Holy Cup grew stronger. It is probable that the original cup, believed to be associated with Jesus' blood, was indeed located in Syria during that era. This heightened connection between the concept of the Grail and Jesus' blood with the remains of saints likely contributed to the association and representation of the Grail on sarcophagi reliquaries in the region. The intertwining of these spiritual elements held profound significance for the Christian community of that time.

Indeed, the Holy Grail can be intimately linked to the concept of saints, especially by serving as a symbol of their holiness and divine connection. As previously discussed, figures like Joseph of Arimathea, who played a significant role in the Grail legend and was considered a saint, and he who held the cup, hold a crucial place in this connection. The association between saints and the Holy Grail helps developing a deeper understanding of the spiritual

¹⁴ MINCHEV 2003, 9; NOGA-BANAI 2019, 222.

¹⁵ CHIBNALL 1993, 314.

¹⁶ NICKELL 2007, 59.

significance of the Grail within the Christian tradition. The Grail is not only a relic, but a symbol connected to the holiness and divine grace embodied by saints.

Numerous narratives have arisen surrounding the form of the Holy Grail. Some accounts assert that it was not a cup but rather a dish, aligning with the etymology of the term "grail," which denotes a platter. However, this narrative can be challenged by the prevalent representation of the Chalice in the shape of a cup, not only on sarcophagi reliquaries but also in various contexts. The Chalice was portrayed in a multitude of shapes and orientations. On certain sarcophagi, it assumed a form on the long front wall, while on others, it could be observed on the short side wall, either carved inward or protruding outwards, and sometimes featuring handles (Fig. 4). These diverse depictions appear to be influenced by the various shapes of the Holy Grail found not only in Syria but also in other regions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the representation of the Holy Grail on Syrian sarcophagi reliquaries stands as an artistic manifestation deeply rooted in the Byzantine tradition, which held considerable sway in the region. Such depictions of this revered religious symbol are integral to the Christian

tradition, offering insights into the spiritual beliefs and practices of early Christians. These representations constitute an indelible facet of Christian art, serving as a vital vessel for preserving the faith and values of the Syrian Christian community.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the term "grail" means something that people desire and are looking for but is difficult to find or get, therefore it conveys the notion of a sought-after and elusive treasure. Consequently, the quest for the genuine Grail is inherently arduous. It is believed that the original Grail resided in Syria, possibly contributing to its widespread use and representation on reliquaries in the region. While conclusive evidence regarding the exact role of the Holy Grail in Syrian culture and religion remains elusive, it is evident that this profound symbol left an indelible mark on the Christian community in Syria, assuming various forms and associations with their Christian reliquaries.

Ultimately, this article has endeavored to elucidate the core concepts surrounding the Holy Chalice and its profound connection to Christianity and Christian saints. It seeks to establish that the Holy Grail and the saints are intricately linked, both serving as potent symbols representing the divine presence in the world.



A reliquary from Apamea museum



A reliquary from Church of Blat-Homs

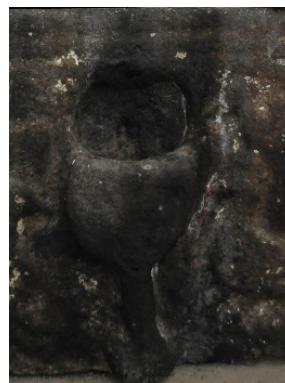


Fig. 4. Representing the Holy Chalice on the front long wall or the side short wall of the reliquary

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