Jackie Mann

Title: Set of Reliquary Boxes
Date: c.350-450 CE
Geography: Varna (formerly Odessos), Bulgaria
Culture: Byzantine
Medium: Box 1: Marble; Box 2: silver; Box 3: gold, garnets, precious stones (6.1 x 4.7 x3.8 cm)
Dimensions: Box 1: 22.4 x 15.5 x 15.6 cm; Box 2: 9.3 x 5.6 x 11 cm; 6.1 x 4.7 x3.8 cm
Current Institution: Museum of Archaeology, Varna (Варненски археологически музей, *Varnenski arheologicheski muzey*)

Fig. 1. Set of reliquary boxes; marble, silver, gold and precious stones; c.350-450. Reproduced under fair use license from Bagnoli, Martina, Holger A. Klein, et al. eds. *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

alt="three small boxes that could nest within one another with the largest made of marble, the next largest of silver, and the smallest of gold with precious stones"

Keywords: reliquary, relics, Bulgaria, Late Antiquity, Byzantine

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This set of reliquary boxes was found on the western coast of the Black Sea near Varna, Bulgaria (the Greco-Roman town of Odessos) during excavations of a monastery dating to 350-450 CE.[1] The boxes were discovered in the floor beneath a church altar. The three boxes were nested within one another so that the marble casket contained the two smaller boxes: one of silver and, within that, one of gold and precious stones. The innermost gold box contained two tiny fragments of bone and a piece of wood wrapped in cloth.[2] These fragments have been identified as relics: physical objects that believers understood to carry the full power of a holy person. Boxes designed for the containment and recognition of such relics have the special status of reliquaries. The design of the three containers, the use of valuable materials in their creation, and their location under an altar suggest that Varna was a powerful and city with multiple cultural connections in the 4th and 5th centuries CE.

Analysis of the set reveals a nuanced and far-reaching typology. The overall form is reminiscent of that of sarcophagi that, in turn, reflected classical architectural styles found in temples throughout the ancient world. By having the shape of both sarcophagi and temples, reliquaries like the set at Varna resembled monuments to their contents. While "sarcophagi" translates most literally to "eaters of flesh," intended as disintegrators of bodily remains, these miniaturized versions also maintained other features of the above precedents, including allusions to divine presence; suggestions of permanent memory; and aspirations for perpetual commemorative rites.

While the shape of sarcophagus reliquaries retained features of earlier funerary containers, their shrunken size resulted from changes in the treatment of holy bodies. The rise of the Christian cult of saints brought about new monumental structures known as *martyria*, namely sites that marked places of Christian martyrdom and often sheltered the grave of a martyr. An early example of the construction of a martyrium is the second-century building of a shrine on Vatican Hill, located above the presumed site of St. Peter's crucifixion and grave. Even more famous was the fourth-century mausoleum and adjacent basilica marking the site of Christ's Passion, Burial and Resurrection. Churches were eventually granted the same privileges as martyria, becoming permanent houses for the holy dead, and relics were moved into church buildings via the translation of saints' bodies. In Constantinople, the Church of the Holy Apostles is said to have been intended to house the relics of all the Apostles (though only the relics of three were ever acquired) and housed the remains of Eastern Roman emperors and their families for many centuries beginning with Constantine I (d. 337).

The trend of preserving and venerating relics in churches continued. As the number of churches throughout the Christian world increased and the demand for relics grew, saints' bodies were broken apart to meet that demand. This division and diffusion of relics led to smaller containers that held smaller amounts: hence, small-scale sarcophagus reliquaries like the set in Varna. The choice to maintain the shape of sarcophagi, even as containers grew smaller, ensured that audiences would recognize the contents as human remains. Meanwhile, the continued use of the form also ensured that audiences would conceive of the contents within as complete, rather than fragmented. Sarcophagi, by their size, implied their concealment of a complete, intact body. But, as explained by Victricius, bishop of Rouen (c.330-407), even the smallest part of a saint's body should be understood by the faithful to partake in the whole. If a saint's body is wholly

[1] The set of reliquary boxes was found during archaeological excavations by K. Skorpil at Canavar (Djanavar, Dzhanavar) Hill near Varna in 1919.

[2] Martina Bagnoli and Holger A. Klein, eds., *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2011), 38-39.

present in even the smallest fragment, then that fragment should be housed by a container that visually implies this wholeness. Arguably, this is what a sarcophagus-shaped reliquary sought to achieve.

Fig. 2. Set of reliquary boxes; marble, silver, gold and precious stones; c.350-450. Reproduced with the written permission of the Museum of Archaeology, Varna.

alt="three small boxes that could nest within one another with the largest made of marble, the next largest of silver, and the smallest of gold with precious stones"

The archaeological context of small sarcophagus-shaped reliquaries deposited beneath late-antique church altars is a well-known phenomenon. In fact, while not all reliquaries beneath alters are sarcophagus-shaped, the most widespread and consistently attested location for relics in churches of the fourth to seventh centuries is underground, and innumerable examples of reliquaries comparable to that at Varna have been found throughout Europe and the Levant. It was thought that presence of relics beneath altars sanctified churches by underscoring an altar's sanctified centrality within ecclesiastical ritual. By the fourth century, the installation of relics had become a standard part of the consecration of ecclesiastical foundations—as well as of the subsequent enhancement of their status. While evidence of the practice of burying relics beneath altars exists from much earlier, "the already pervasive practice was officially and uniformly codified" during the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, when the bishops assembled there "ratified a canon which prescribed that all altars must be associated with the remains of saints."[3]

All this is to say that the presence of a sarcophagus-shaped reliquary buried beneath a church altar in Varna by c.450 CE provides evidence to suggest that the western Black Sea region was an active participant in the same popular Christian practices and beliefs as the rest of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. This presence of objects of both physical and spiritual value in Varna should not be surprising, as it also reflects the city's power during the 4th and 5th

[3] Ann Marie Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 154-155.

centuries as the seat of a bishop—as well as its interconnectedness with the trading world of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity during this time.

Biography

Jackie Mann, MA, MLIS, is a Librarian at Loyola University Chicago specializing in Early Byzantine art and cultural heritage studies. She can be contacted at jmann@luc.edu.

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