

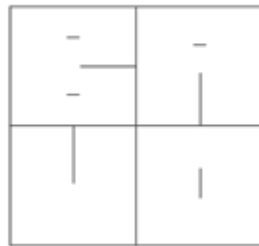
# KONTEKSTI KULTURE

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2023.

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CONTEXTS *of* CULTURE  
STUDIES IN HUMANITIES AND ARTS

I

PETROVAC NA MORU  
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# REFASHIONING THE RELIQUARIES IN THE EARLY MODERN BAY OF KOTOR

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*Abstract:* The encounter between the relic of a saint and the early modern believer was always a dynamic and complex process. Influenced by their cultural background, a subtly shaped sensuous apparatus and social role, the beholder faced yet another puzzling subject – heavenly face of a saint presented in form of bone particle held in a silver container. Therefore, three different bodies were acting in this holy exchange – the body of the believer, the bodily remains of a saint and the image of that body portrayed in the reliquary. The aim of this paper is to emphasize the changeable quality of these bodies through the analysis of reliquaries that incorporated fragments of other sacred objects from the Bay of Kotor. After an earthquake devastated the town in 1662, some body-part reliquaries were “healed” with the help of the silver *ex-voto* plates, which were used to replace their broken parts. Additionally, parts of medieval reliquaries were often used as foundations upon which their successors would be made. Jewellery and personal possessions were melted in order to become parts of a golden crown for Saint Tryphon’s head reliquary. This carefully conducted integration of sacred fragments influenced the creation of memory as a composite process itself, allowing for the creative manipulation of the past to become an inseparable part of the early modern piety.

*Keywords:* body-part reliquaries, Bay of Kotor, Venetian commonwealth, fragmented body, Saint Tryphon, Saint Oswald

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When contemporary observers encounter medieval or early modern reliquaries, they often acknowledge a silver container that emulates, with a different degree of artistic skill, part of a human body with various iconographic representations or certain ornamental patterns. Art historians most often try to untangle and deconstruct these objects and label their individual parts as indicative examples of a certain period.<sup>2</sup> What is often forgotten, however, is the fact that what is presented in front of us is only a skin, an epidermal layer that coexists alongside its own essence – the bone particle of a saint.<sup>3</sup> These two elements are inseparable. Without the reliquary, a bare bone could never convey its message and without the relic, the silver container would be nothing more than an empty vessel. This interdependence of the relic and reliquary, a process of energy exchange, allowed for these sacred objects to acquire a status of subjects and exist as dynamic entities in the eyes and the minds of their early modern consumers.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, they are composite by their nature. Two different bodies – the authentic body of a saint and its silver extension merge and create a dynamic whole. In order to be successful, this process requires another important body – the body of a believer. It is only when we allow for this triangular connection (not only a dialogue between the object and the subject, but agency between various subjects) that we are able to understand what happens when borderlines

<sup>2</sup> When analysing relic chapel of San Gennaro in Naples Helen Hills writes about historicism that often works to abandon historical object in favour of “narrative coherence, guided by the notion of time as progressive, if only in a sense of linearity and continuity” (Hills 2012: 1–21, 4).

<sup>3</sup> On visual dynamic of medieval reliquaries and relics see: Walker Bynum, Gerson 1997: 3–7; Hahn 2012.

<sup>4</sup> On methodological necessity to understand the link between subjects and objects when analyzing relics see the early studies: Montgomery 1996; Geary 1990.

between them are somehow inverted and violated (Daston [ed.] 2004: 9–11; Houtman & Meyer [eds.] 2012: 5–7).

The processes of preserving memory of a saint were varied and particularly recognizable in regards to different visual mechanisms used to make their bodies present and active in any given community (Ditchfield 2009: 552–584). In the early modern Bay of Kotor, an illustrative example of this kind is the “Glorious Head”, a sacred object which contained bones of Saint Tryphon’s head (fig. 1) (Stjepčević 1938: 36; Tomić [ur.] 2009: 125–126).

This reliquary of Kotor’s patron saint is composite in several different ways. Firstly, it contains parts that originate from different periods in the past. The lowest part and the handle were most likely made in 16<sup>th</sup> century (Tomić [ur.] 2009: 125). The silver crown with images of Saint Tryphon and Virgin Mary is a century older, while the golden calotte, according to the archival sources, was used to replace an old one in 1622.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this object has been changed gradually, always with careful and thoughtful consideration of the past. It is no surprise that it was this very reliquary that resisted bolder renovation that occurred during the baroque period. The Glorious Head was an essential part of Saint Tryphon’s relic chapel and the most important sacred object in town (Ulčar 2017: 67–86). It was carried in processions, used to heal the sick and protect the entire community.<sup>6</sup>

Creative incorporation of older parts made the roots of the saint’s cult, as well as its resilience and durability visible to beholder.<sup>7</sup> At the same time,

<sup>5</sup> BAK, Church Archive Kotor, KR II, 194.

<sup>6</sup> For the description of ceremonies with this reliquary see: BAK, Church Archive Kotor, KAP I, January 13<sup>th</sup> 1776; Stjepčević 1938: 54–56.

<sup>7</sup> On using fragments of older reliquaries during the medieval period see: Cambier 2014: 26–43.



*Fig. 1. Reliquary of Saint Tryphon's head, 15<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Tryphon's cathedral, Kotor (photo: Stevan Kordić)*

those parts also possessed sacred power due to their long-term closeness to the saint's body. In that way, the reliquary was capable of conveying the message of authenticity and stability of Saint Tryphon's presence in Kotor. On top of that, early modern believers found a way to further develop this important interaction between the saint and the town. When Venetian goldsmith Benedetto Rizzi commenced his work on a new golden calotte for the saint's head, people of Kotor were eager to participate by donating golden jewellery. Private possessions of men and women, their necklaces and rings, were melted in order to become a part of their saint.<sup>8</sup> Gold was thought of as material that remembers, so common laymen gifted objects that once decorated their bodies for the purpose of decorating another, this time, holy body. These were two ways of shaping and reshaping the contact between saint and community through composing sacred body by using various fragments. Just like many others, Saint Tryphon's reliquary acquired and preserved its compact power through careful combination of individual elements – older reliquaries and secular objects.

Another interesting example of creative reshaping occurred in Prčanj, probably during late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 2).

The object in question is composed out of, at least, three different fragments from three different reliquaries. The lower, gilded part carrying a silver 18<sup>th</sup> century cylinder likely dates back to the late medieval period.

<sup>8</sup> The cost of the material and the fee paid directly to the Venetian goldsmith Benedetto Rizzi were covered by a 'golden necklace, treasured in the chest in front of the iron grid and by the other alms of the faithful, namely by the sale of some rings and other things that sick people used to give to their Saint Martyr Protector': BA XX, (14), 407, translated in Croatian by Ivo Stjepčević in: Stjepčević 2003: 44–45.

Inside the crystal protective layer, we can see a golden carrier intended for the three smaller reliquary medallions, which was probably crafted during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Not only did this merging require careful selection and combination of elements that spanned several centuries, but it also inspired its executor to be more inventive. Since the handle in the lower part was badly damaged, and the small round holes for gems or jewels were empty, someone filled them with painted circular papers that were covered with glass. Today, after even more damage was caused to the town, only four of them remain visible. They contain depictions of the Last Supper, Virgin Mary with baby Jesus (which bears striking resemblance to the image of Our Lady of the Rocks), *Imago Pietatis* and Veronica's *volto santo*. The idea of this rather naïve restoration should not be dismissed merely as an aesthetically unsuccessful and financially undemanding project. On the contrary, the 19<sup>th</sup> century creator of this reliquary treated these ready-made elements in the same way that church authorities did in the case of Saint Tryphon. Older reliquaries, even when severely damaged, were routinely reused because of the power that was for centuries associated with their status. On the other hand, figural motives of Virgin Mary, Jesus or other saints were also commonly applied to the reliquaries as elements that further enhanced the sacred power of these objects. Bones, materials, inscriptions and figures worked together in a remarkably dynamic way, whose complexity could be seen most clearly in the body-part reliquaries.

In 1667, a massive earthquake caused severe damage to some parts of Saint Tryphon's cathedral in Kotor. Numerous reliquaries were broken and archive material contains evidences of contemporary efforts to overcome its consequences. For example, nobleman Radeta Chiapечи bequeathed part of his funds to be used annually





*Fig. 2. Reliquary of Saint Roch, Saint Peter and Saint John of Nepomuk, 15<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century, Prčanj (photo: author)*



*Fig. 3. Bottom of the arm-shaped reliquary, 15<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Tryphon's cathedral, Kotor (photo: Stevan Kordić)*



*Fig. 4. Bottom of the arm-shaped reliquary, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Tryphon's cathedral, Kotor (photo: Stevan Kordić)*



*Fig. 5. Bottom of the arm-shaped reliquary, 15<sup>th</sup> century with ex-voto, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Tryphon's cathedral, Kotor, (photo: Stevan Kordić)*



for reparation of the two reliquaries in cathedral (Tomić [ur.] 2009: 122). Later on, the 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about more destruction, which culminated in the infamous act carried out by Napoleon's general Gautier, who melted dozens of silver reliquaries in order to make coins during the siege.

It is evident from the aforementioned stories that the process of refashioning and repairing holy objects was conducted with great care during the early modern period. However, the focus of this paper will be placed on body-part reliquaries that were repaired (or rather, healed) with the help of the silver *ex-voto* plates. Several examples from the Kotor relic chapel contain this intriguing combination that merges two different kinds of objects – early modern votive examples of popular piety used as “patches” for the most sacred medieval treasure in town. Therefore, the first question these objects raise is: why exactly were the silver votive plates used as materials for repairing damaged reliquaries? During 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, silver was widely used and notably visible in churches of the Bay. A great number of icons obtained silver casings that were lit by candles held in large dazzling candlesticks; Saint Tryphon's cathedral had, among other treasures, the whole altar made from this very material (Tomić [ur.] 2009: 185; Butorac 1999: 290). Therefore, the reason behind the use *ex-voto* plates for this purpose should not be reduced to the pragmatic explanation that suggests lack of materials or the convenient shape of these objects. Also, since reliquaries were highly valued and carefully protected as the most precious treasure in cathedral, any kind of conclusion that implies ignorance or negligence on the part of their guardians should also be dismissed.<sup>9</sup> In order to answer the previously posed

<sup>9</sup> Three guardians, “thesaurarii”, were taking care about the relics during the year and holding three keys of the chapel: Stjepčević 1938: 13.

question, it might be useful to know more about the function or new role that these plates had after they were removed from the walls and reused as parts of the holy limbs.<sup>10</sup> Most of them could be found on round surfaces on top or at the bottom of the reliquaries, depending on whether the addition was placed on the arm or leg-shaped container.

This very place has its own micro history, which could be traced from the medieval period onwards. It is important to note that this tiny space was invisible to the beholders in the relic chapel, but also during processions.<sup>11</sup> If we compare late medieval and early modern examples, we could draw a conclusion that this spot had a similar purpose, taking into account all the differences in visual vocabulary and form. This was the spot used for either inscriptions or figural representations. Therefore, many of them contain examples of figures of saints or saints' names. Furthermore, representations of Jesus, *arma Christi* or Christograms were commonly displayed during the early modern period (fig. 3).

Apart from that, the round spaces contained names or coats of arms of donors or artisans, silversmiths who made the reliquaries. In contrast, during the early modern period, in addition to the artisans' names, the stamps of their workshops were present as well. (fig. 4)

Therefore, the function of this tiny silver spot could have been twofold. It could have been a medium used for enhancing sacred power of an object by adding an image or a name of a holy person or it could have a promi-

<sup>10</sup> On agency of *ex-voto* plates see: Herman Jacobs 2013; Didi-Huberman 2007: 7–16.

<sup>11</sup> Through description of the main procession with reliquaries on Saint Tryphon's day can be found in: NAP, Church Archive Perast, Timotej Cizila, Bove'd Oro, Fond XI, R XVI.



*Fig. 6. Saint Oswald, Giovanni Venanzi, cca. 1700, Saint Tryphon's cathedral, Kotor (photo: author)*

ment votive dedication, through which artisans or patrons recommended themselves to God. Once again, just like in the case of Saint Tryphon's head or reliquary from Prčanj, the use of other objects could either multiply their holy energy or allow the

community or an individual to participate in it, to be remembered.

Taking into account these complex mechanisms of participating in life of saints and their earthly remains, it is possible to approach the custom

of placing votive plates on damaged medieval reliquaries from the same angle. In order to be more specific, however, it is necessary to examine the iconography of these objects more closely.

Few of them contain representations of holy figures, such as Virgin Mary or saints. This could be easily placed within the group of motives that could have emphasized the continuity with their medieval and early modern neighbours – the image of a holy person whose task is to empower the whole object.

More provocative is the choice of a votive plate that contains the praying figure of a donor (fig. 5).

This anonymous man is praying to the figure of a saint in military garments holding in left hand a bird carrying a ring in its beak. This rather unusual iconography (for early modern Bay of Kotor, at least) proves to be less exotic once this figure is identified as the saint whose painting is treasured today in the Museum of Saint Tryphon's cathedral. It depicts Saint Oswald of Northumbria, a 7<sup>th</sup>-century British saint, king and a great soldier who united two different parts of the British Isles. This image is a work by the lesser known Venetian painter Giovanni Venantio, and it was likely crafted around 1700 (fig. 6) (Tomić 2005: 14–16).

This particular iconography is explained by events found in saint's vita: the raven was used as a mediator between him as his bride, carrying a ring in both directions. It could very well be true that this very painting was used as a model for the figure on the plate. In the right hand, this saint holds a sceptre, which could be discerned on another votive plate. Although severely damaged, the image represents a saintly king in military attire (fig. 7). On the same leg-shaped reliquary, another votive plate is used as a "patch" which only contains the praying figure.

Similar relationship of anonymous laymen praying to the saintly king is visible on both sacred objects. Third example, originating from the same treasury, contains a peculiar depiction of a young noble man with, again, bird and the ring (fig. 8).<sup>12</sup>

Although it likely dates back to the late Middle Ages, the metalwork with visible nails that were used to attach the round plate on top of the reliquary could suggest that it was a later adjustment to the medieval reliquary.

This iconographic clarification only complicates and multiplies the aforementioned question. Is it possible that late 17<sup>th</sup>/early 18<sup>th</sup> century painting triggered the cult in Kotor and that votive plates were offered to this particular saint? Even more curious is the reason behind the choice of using the image of Saint Oswald on damaged reliquaries in the cathedral. Obviously, his Northumbrian hagiography could hardly be related to Venetian Kotor. More plausible for this story would be the presence of his cult in other Venetian lands. His nearest and most developed cult was the one in Sauris, a territory that was ruled by the Republic of Venice. The church of Saint Oswald was a pilgrim centre during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. What is important for this story is that he was famous all across the Venetian Republic as a protector against diseases. Most precisely, he was invoked as "the saint protector of bones".<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the material consequences of his cult remain insufficiently researched, but it is known even from contemporary pilgrim sources that this saint was famous for successful and fast healing of damaged bones. This opens a new possibility for inter-

<sup>12</sup> For the short descriptions of these body-part reliquaries see: Jakšić 2009: 126–146.

<sup>13</sup> "Il pellegrinaggio a Sauris (Carnia) per pregare nella chiesa dedicata a S. Osvaldo": <http://www.costalissoio.it/varie/SAURIS/sauris.htm> (accessed 25. 11. 2023).





Fig. 7. *Leg-shaped reliquary, 15<sup>th</sup> century, with ex-voto, 18<sup>th</sup> century (?), Saint Tryphon's cathedral, Kotor (photo: Stevan Kordić)*

pretation. If we recall that the reliquaries were not only instruments of treasuring memory of saints, but also dynamic and present subjects throughout the past centuries, it could be possible to accept that the process of their healing symbolized more than a mere opportunity for commemorating the commune of personal identity and that the use of votive plates could have involved various mechanisms of participating. Believers and consumers of these objects wanted to participate more directly in the processes of their preservation precisely

because they considered them powerful and alive.

The use of votive plates and their direct application on the skin of saints' reliquaries instead of newly created images of particular saints further complicate the message that was conveyed to the believer. The early modern people applied memories of successful healing of their own bodies by the hand of a particular saint to the damaged limbs of holy bodies. The entire community could have identified with the image of a praying fi-



*Fig. 8. Bottom of the arm-shaped reliquary, 14<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Tryphon's cathedral, Kotor (photo: Stevan Kordić)*

gure, so the votive aspect is notably emphasized. One cannot but notice how communication between the saints and the people was dynamic – once helped by divine mercy, they used its material memory to return the favour. Moreover, the particular motives of Virgin Mary or saints, but also Saint Oswald, might have had an important role in empowering and healing these broken holy limbs. Memory of past help, materialized in silver votive plates, was reused in order to establish an interesting dialogue between the subjects of this exchange. Agency of common laymen (praying figure), Virgin Mary, Saint Oswald and other saints was not surprising when compared to the medieval and other early modern examples. Using their images in the shape of votive offerings is probably another creative evidence of an active, two-way exchange between Heaven and Earth during the early modern period.

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## PREOBLIKOVANJE RELIKVIJARA U BOKOKOTORSKOM ZALIVU U RANO MODERNO DOBA

*Sažetak:* Susret između relikvije sveca i vjernika iz ranog modernog doba uvijek podrazumijeva dinamičan i kompleksan proces. Pod uticajem svog kulturološkog porijekla, delikatno oblikovanog čulnog aparata i društvene uloge, posmatrač se susrijeće sa još jednim zagonetnim subjektom – nebeskim licem sveca predstavljenim u formi čestice kosti čuvane u srebrnoj posudi. Dakle, tri različita tijela su bila uključena u tu svetu razmjenu – tijelo vjernika, tjelesni ostaci sveca i predstava tog tijela portretisana u relikvijaru. Cilj ovog rada je da naglasi promjenjivi kvalitet ovih tijela kroz analizu relikvijara koji su sadržavali fragmente drugih svetih objekata iz Bokokotorskog zaliva. Nakon zemljotresa iz 1662. godine, koji je devastirao grad, neki relikvijari sa djelovima tijela, „izliječeni“ su pomoću *ex-voto* pločica kojima su zamijenjeni slomljeni djelovi. Dodatno, djelovi srednjovjekovnih relikvijara često su korišćeni kao podloge na kojima će biti napravljeni njihovi nasljednici. Nakit i lični predmeti topljeni su kako bi postali djelovi zlatne krune za relikvijar u kome se čuva glava Svetog Tripuna. Ova pažljivo sprovedena integracija svetih fragmenata uticala je na kreiranje sjećanja kao samog kompozitnog procesa, dopuštajući kreativnom odnosu sa prošlošću da postane neodvojiv dio pobožnosti u ranom modernom dobu.

*Ključne riječi:* relikvijar sa djelovima tijela, Bokokotorski zaliv, venecijanski komonvelt, fragmentirano tijelo, Sveti Tripun, Sveti Osvald



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