

3 The Limburg Staurotheke

3.1 Overview

As explained in the previous chapter, the Great Palace in Constantinople—and in particular, the Pharos chapel dedicated to the Theotokos—was the storehouse *par excellence* of some of the holiest Christian relics in the Byzantine Empire, namely those related to the Passion of Christ. Most of these objects are known to have been kept there only from lists compiled by various pilgrims and travellers,¹ but one extant amalgam of partial relics is known to have been constructed, artistically adorned and arranged, and combined with text in the late tenth century as a luxury object of imperial devotion and dominion. This object survives today in the German city of Limburg an der Lahn, whence its present-day moniker: the Limburg Staurotheke.

The Staurotheke, measuring 48 × 35 × 6 cm, is a case or reliquary (θήκη) for a double-armed cross relic consisting of seven rectangular pieces of wood assembled together and originally adorned with pearls around the centre intersection.² This primary relic within the ensemble is encased in gold, on the back of which is a dedicatory inscription in Greek executed in repoussé and datable on the basis of the textual content to 945–959, when Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennētos ruled jointly with his son, Rōmanos II.³ While the exact location where the Staurotheke would have been normally kept in the Great Palace cannot be stated with absolute certainty, one ambiguous passage in the *Book of Ceremonies* suggests that it might have been housed within the Pharos chapel, which would not be surprising given the sacred Passion relics contained within the holy vessel.⁴

In terms of composition, the larger reliquary surrounding the relic of the True Cross consists of a rectangular metal box together with a sliding lid; within the box are housed portions of other Passion-related relics in ten smaller compartments.

1 On these lists, see above chapter 1, n. 8.

2 Measurements taken from HOSTETLER 2012, 7, n. 2. There is a lengthy history of research on the contents and provenance of the Staurotheke following the Fourth Crusade to its deposition in the cathedral of Limburg an der Lahn in Germany and down to the present day. See: AUS’M WEERTH 1866, RAUCH 1955, WILM 1955, FROLOW 1961b, FROLOW 1965, MICHEL 1976, KODER 1985, PLANK 1987, KODER 1989, BOURAS 1989, N. ŠEVČENKO 1994, KLEIN 2004 (esp. pp. 105–112), KLEIN 2006, PENTCHEVA 2008, and KLEIN 2009.

3 HOSTETLER 2012, 7.

4 Suggested by KODER 1989, 171, in his reading of the *Book of Ceremonies*, ed. by Dagron/Flusin, II.40 (3:229). This section lists the various objects housed in the Pharos chapel and the church of Saint Stephen in Daphnē, and for the Pharos chapel lists: “The newly fashioned great cross of Constantine, the Christ-loving and purple-born emperor” (Ὁ νεοκατασκευαστος μέγας σταυρός Κωνσταντίνου τοῦ φιλοχρίστου καὶ πορφυρογεννήτου βασιλέως). Translation mine.

Fig. 8: Limburg Staurotheke cover lid. Diözesanmuseum Limburg an der Lahn, Germany.



An inscription around the edges of the case is also extant, allowing for a dating of this portion of the reliquary to the years 968–985,⁵ while the back of the case is adorned with a blossoming cross on a platform of steps, with two six-pointed stars (Fig. 8–10).⁶ In what follows, I shall first examine the texts on the relic and reliquary

5 The precise dating of the inscription and the reliquary has been the subject of some scholarly debate, as noted by HOSTETLER 2012, 7, n. 5; cf. FOLLIERI 1964; KODER 1985; and PENTCHEVA 2010, 160–170.

6 The motif of the blossoming or flowering cross is extant in Byzantine art beginning in the sixth century, with a greater number of surviving examples dating from the tenth century onwards; cf. RICE 1950. The connotations of paradise/Eden suggested by such foliage on



Fig. 9: Inside of Staurotheke with removable cross relic. Diözesanmuseum Limburg an der Lahn, Germany.

depictions of the cross are also mentioned by SHEPPARD 1969, esp. p. 66. Interestingly, Rice does not mention the Staurotheke amongst his examples of the leaved cross in Byzantine art, but does mention the motif's spread westward to Italy and eastward to the Christian communities in the Caucasus and Mesopotamia (RICE 1959, 75–77). See also FROLOW 1961a, 329; FROLOW 1965, 178–186; FRAZER 1973, 148; MANGO/I. ŠEVČENKO 1973, 276–277, and Fig. 153, a slab from the monastery at Kurşunlu dating to the late eighth century; KITZINGER 1974, 7–8; a tenth-century example on the icon numbered B.52 at St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai is discussed in WEITZMANN 1976, 85 (plate CVIII, b). Two such flowering crosses are also illustrated as part of the frontispiece to the lavishly decorated ninth-century collection of the homilies of the fourth-century bishop Gregory of Nazianzos, MS Paris. gr. 510, fol. Bv and Cr. This entire manuscript is examined in full by BRUBAKER 1999, esp. pp. 152–157 (reproductions of the crosses in question are included, Fig. 3–4).



Fig. 10: Back of Staurotheke with flowering cross motif. Diözesanmuseum Limburg an der Lahn, Germany.

in terms of both content and context, proceeding to an analysis of the iconographic programme and design of the reliquary, before moving on to questions of object performance, possible depiction elsewhere in contemporary sources, and audience of both relic and texts, in order to see how the Staurotheke's composition and use sheds light on the development of the understanding of imperial sacrality in Middle Byzantium.

3.2 The cross inscription

The first inscription in this complex object is the inner one, namely, the one inscribed on the back of the central cross reliquary (Fig. 11). The entire text is in continuous majuscule letters, and can be broken into nine lines of twelve syllables each, a common metrical form in Middle Byzantine epigraphy.⁷ Here, I present the text in standard orthography with breathing marks and accents:⁸

θεός μὲν ἐξέτεινε χεῖρας ἐν ξύλῳ
ζωῆς δι' αὐτοῦ τὰς ἐνεργείας βρύων
Κωνσταντῖνος δὲ κ[αί] Ῥωμανὸς δεσπότης
λίθων διαυγῶν συνθέσει κ[αί] μαργάρων
ἔδειξαν αὐτὸ θαύματος πεπλησμένον
κ[αί] πρὶν μὲν ἄδου χ[ριστοῦ]ς ἐν τούτῳ πύλας
θραύσας ἀνεζώωσε τοὺς τεθνηκότας
κοσμήτορες τούτου δὲ νῦν στεφηφόροι
θράση δι' αὐτοῦ συντρίβουσι βαρβάρων

While God stretched out his hands on the wood,
gushing forth through it the energies of life,
the masters Constantine and Rōmanos
with a composition of radiant stones and pearls
showed it [sc. the wood (τὸ ξύλον)] to be filled with wonder.
And while Christ, having broken with it the gates of hell,
restored to life those who had died,
the crown-bearing adorners of this [wood]
crush through it barbarian insolence.

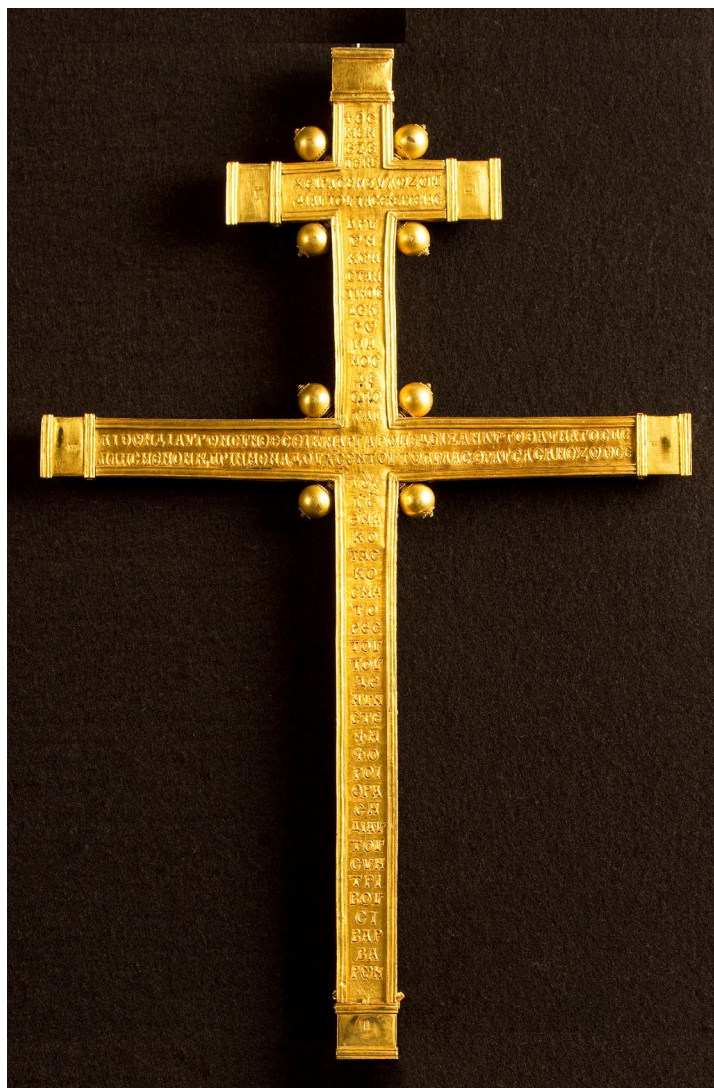
In his close reading of the inscription text, Hostetler convincingly demonstrates how parallels are established both textually and visually between Christ/God and the Byzantine rulers. The nine dodecasyllabic lines are separated into two main groups by the presence of the contrasting markers μὲν and δέ, which Hostetler establishes as being fundamental to a proper understanding of the text and its meaning.⁹ A first element of comparison between Christ/God (the two terms functionally equated here in the inscription) and the emperors is introduced in the paired μὲν-δέ clauses. Just as God stretched his hands out on the cross to give life, so too is the cross extended in display by the emperors. The sovereigns are designated in the inscription

7 HOSTETLER 2012, 8, where he also mentions as reference the entry on “Dodecasyllable” in *ODB* 1:643–644. Cf. also LAUXTERMANN 1999.

8 Text and this translation available in HOSTETLER 2012, 8, as well as in the definitive catalogue prepared by RHOBY 2010, 166–167 (with commentary).

9 HOSTETLER 2012, 8.

Fig. 11: Inscription on reverse of Staurotheke cross relic. Diözesanmuseum Limburg an der Lahn, Germany.



as “masters” (δεσπόται), which is the same term applied by the disciples in the New Testament to Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Christ shows forth the wondrous nature of the cross by having it gush forth the life of the resurrection, while the emperors show it to be such through the composition (συνθέσει) of the pearls and precious stones. Furthermore, these adornments had additional significance in the Middle

¹⁰ Mentions can be found in the Acts and two epistles (Acts 4:24; 2 Tim 2:21; 2 Pet 2:1). Other mentions are found in the exclamation of Symeon to God when presented with the infant Jesus (Luke 2:29) and that of the souls of the martyrs beneath the heavenly altar crying out for justice in the vision of Revelation (Rev 6:10). In later Byzantine history in the 12th century, the term “despot” comes to mean a kind of provincial governor; cf. “Despotes” in *ODB* 1:614.

Byzantine period beyond merely denoting imperial opulence: pearls were symbolic of divine knowledge and God himself, while precious gems in imperial adornments and vestments served to signal piety, faith, and wisdom.¹¹ Additionally, the emperors parallel the divine creative act in this literal putting-together of wood and stone, with the red stones and white pearls also evoking perhaps the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side at the crucifixion.¹² Finally, a parallel is created between Christ breaking down the bars and chains of hell by means of the cross as a weapon, and the emperors—the “crown-bearers” (στεφηφόροι)—crushing the diabolical threat of the barbarians by wielding this very same cross of Christ almost like an instrument of war, now present before the reader.¹³ These comparisons between Christ and the emperors span time and space,¹⁴ connecting the Byzantine rulers intimately with the divine plan of God's saving activity, the uniquely salvific instrument of the cross, and the status of being crown-bearing masters.¹⁵ I shall return to the implications of crushing the “temerities” or insolence (θράση) of the barbarians below when examining the possible audience(s) of the relic and this inscription, but one further observation on this relic is key to providing context for the inscription text: the presence of specific imperial names and their location on

11 Cf. PARANI 2003, 12, n. 5, who provides bibliography on pearls and their symbolism in Byzantium.

12 HOSTETLER 2012, 9, who cites PENTCHEVA 2007, 110, for this interpretation of the red jewels representing the blood of Christ. Of note here is also the placement of the words λίθων and μαργάρων on the cross inscription: “The line [of text here] ends with the word *margarōn* at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal arms ... Originally, this set the word next to the pearls embellishing the cross, uniting the text with the materials added by the Emperors. The conscious placement of inscription and materials is also found in the position of the word *lithōn* (stones) at the end of the left cross arm This situates the word in the corresponding position of two radiant stones that embellish the front” (HOSTETLER 2012, 11).

13 HOSTETLER 2012, 10. The link with battle imagery is made possible here by the Homeric meaning of κοσμήτωρ as “one who marshals an army, commander, leader”, as can be found in the *Iliad*; cf. LSJ, s. v. “κοσμήτωρ, ὁ”. I am thankful to Hostetler for pointing out this possible meaning of the word in this context; cf. HOSTETLER 2021.

14 HOSTETLER 2012, 9.

15 This is the case with another extant staurotheke: Hostetler notes a similar inscription on a 12th-century cross reliquary of Emperor Manuel I Komnēnos (HOSTETLER 2012, 10); cf. also RHOBY 2010, 185–186. Rhoby also records another inscription (RHOBY 2010, 332–333) on a cross reliquary and ivory panel from the tenth century and kept in the church of Saint Francis in Cortona, Italy, which establishes a parallel between Christ's salvific victory over death and Emperor Constantine's victory over the barbarians via the relic. The inscription on the panel reads: “Previously, Christ gave a cross unto salvation to Constantine, the mighty ruler, while now, since a lord victorious in God possesses this [cross], barbarian tribes are put to flight” (Κ[αί] πρὶν κραταιῷ δεσπότηι Κωνσταντίνῳ / Χ[ριστὸς] δέδωκε σταυρὸν εἰς σωτηρίαν· / κ[αί] νῦν δὲ τοῦτον ἐν Θεῷ νικηφόρος / ἀναξ τροποῦται φύλα βαρβάρων ἔχων; translation mine). As Rhoby notes, the “victorious” emperor here is Nikēphoros II Phōkas (r. 963–969), under whom Basil Lakapēnos also served.

the object, which constitutes a clear development and change in the association of Passion relics with the emperor when compared to the texts and imagery of the Mandylyon as seen in chapter 2.

While other Passion relics, such as the Holy Lance and Sponge, are noted as having been brought to Constantinople as early as the seventh century,¹⁶ the relics themselves seem to have been deposited in the Great Palace/chapel of the Theotokos of the Lighthouse without any further specific or express association of the relic to a given ruler: as discussed via the example of the Mandylyon above, the icon-relic comes to be associated with the ruler as such, that is, with the ‘office’ of Byzantine autokratōr, and thus can also be exported in artistic depictions throughout the empire and beyond into church buildings as a symbol of the close bond between heavenly and earthly *despotai*. This general status of the Passion relics seems to change in the tenth century with the creative ‘synthesis’ inscribed and displayed on the cross relic within the Limburg Staurotheke. Here, two imperial names are connected in gold with the humble yet precious wood of the cross: Constantine (VII Porphyrogennētos) and Rōmanos (II), his son. If the links between Constantine and the Mandylyon were clear but not exclusive (that is, the liturgical texts for the icon-relic’s translation speak in general terms of the emperor without mentioning any specific ruler by name), the pointed personal link here could not be clearer: specific imperial names are fused in gold to the back of one of the holiest relics in Byzantium, preserved in the palace precincts.

As Hostetler shows in his analysis of the visual layout of the inscription text on the back of the cross, the imperial names are located centrally between the two bars of the cross and amidst the original pearls, which “dr[a]w attention to the names of Constantine and Rōmanos, thus linking the Emperors with their material contributions.”¹⁷ Furthermore, he notes that in the middle of the lower crossbar on the inscription, what we find centred in the middle of the inscription—and again, amidst the pearls—are the words “pearls” (μαργάρων), as well as “Christ with this” (χ[ρ]ιστὸς ἐν τούτῳ). The centrality of the emperors amidst the pearls, at once both luxury item and symbol of divinity, is paralleled by the centrality of Christ working salvation by means of this object. Yet I believe there to be a small misreading in Hostetler’s analysis, a misreading which obscures an even deeper connection between Christ and the emperor-as-anointed here in this inscription. Hostetler speaks of “the energies of life gush[ing] forth” through the wood of the cross, which fact energises the cross for the emperors in their battles against the barbarians. But a close

16 These two relics are said to come to Constantinople in the year 614 in the *Chronicon Paschale*, transl. by Whitby/Whitby, p. 157, although Klein argues that this date is problematic, suggesting instead the year 629; cf. KLEIN 2006, 88.

17 HOSTETLER 2012, 10; cf. also HOSTETLER 2011, 49, where he examines a reliquary from the Protaton church on Mount Athos and argues that “the *placement* of the dedicatory inscription in relationship to the image and the contents of the reliquary provides a more nuanced message than that which is explicitly stated in the inscription itself.”

examination of the Greek text here shows that we do not have an intransitive patient-focused verb, but rather a transitive one: the participle βρύων in the nominative singular agrees with Christ as the subject of the first clause (a fact that Hostetler does get correct in his translation cited here). Nonetheless, the location of this word immediately above the name Κωνσταντῖνος in the inscription within the centred portion, and surrounded originally by pearls at the corners of the crossbar, permits a visual association of the emperor with the life-giving energy of Christ in word and with the divinity via the proximity of the pearl adornments. A further link between the emperor and the divine can also be derived from another meaning of the verb βρύω, namely, “to teem with” or “to be abundant in” something: in this case, the pearls (μαργάρων, which would act as the genitive complement required by this meaning of the verb). Such a reading goes against the primary reading of the inscription when read as a grammatical, syntactic whole; yet although the participle βρύων here is firmly part of the first μέν clause, it *visually* spans both clauses and a focused view on the centre of the inscription isolates these words into a new context permitting the second reading of the verb. In such a case, Constantine “abounds in pearls”, that is, is rich in the precious symbol of God himself. This final interpretive possibility, focused on the elements that are centrally situated and easily visible, is yet further enriched in my view by going back to the top and again to the bottom of the second cross-bar: the sequence θεός-βρύων-Κωνσταντῖνος-Ρωμανός-δεσπότηι-μαργάρων-χ[ριστῷ] ἐν τούτῳ emerges. God, Christ, the named emperors and masters all, are linked together in this reading in an act of gushing forth life and abounding together in pearls, the simultaneous symbol of royal wealth and divine knowledge. This symbolism and location will be pertinent below when we turn to the question of audience and who saw (or was meant or able to see) this inscription and this placement of words.

The inscription on the back of the cross is not the only text joined to the sacred relics in the Staurotheke’s composition. A large inscription along the edges of the lid is also extant, important for dating the construction of the larger box portion of the reliquary, but also for further explicating the linkage of specific persons to these holy objects in the Great Palace. It is to this outer text that we now turn.

3.3 The lid inscription

On the lid covering the larger reliquary case, one finds another inscription that runs along all four edges of the lid (Fig. 8); both this inscription and the outer case of the reliquary date several years after the cross relic inscription, as mentioned above.¹⁸ The text of the inscription I provide here follows the ordering of the verses as established by Enrica Follieri and accepted by Andreas Rhoby in his magisterial

18 See n. 5 above.

collection of Byzantine epigrammes, with orthography standardised (translation mine):¹⁹

οὐ κάλλος εἶχεν ὁ κρεμασθεὶς ἐν ξύλῳ
 ἀλλ' ἦν ὡραῖος κάλλει χριστὸς καὶ θνήσκων
 οὐκ εἶδος εἶχεν ἀλλ' ἐκαλλώπιζέ μου
 τὴν δυσθέατον ἐξ ἁμαρτίας θέαν
 θεὸς γὰρ ὦν ἔπα[σ]χεν ἐν βροτῶν φύσει
 ὃν Βασίλειος [ὁ] πρόεδρος ἐξόχως
 σέβων ἐκαλλώπ[ι]σε τὴν θήκην ξύλου
 ἐν ᾧ τανυσθεὶς εἴλκυσεν πᾶσαν κτίσιν

The one who was hung on wood had no beauty
 but Christ was ripe with beauty even while dying.
 He had no form, but he was beautifying my
 appearance, made unsightly from sin.
 For though being god, he suffered in mortal nature;
 eminently venerating him, Basil [the] *prohedros*
 beautified the case of wood,
 having been stretched onto which, he [sc. Christ] drew all creation.²⁰

19 For these references, see n. 5 above as well. Koder has proposed a different ordering of the verses and suggests that the section ὃν Βασίλειος ὁ πρόεδρος ἐξόχως / σέβων ἐκαλλώπισε τὴν θήκην ξύλου on the cover inscription was added later; cf. KODER 1989, 176.

20 I differ from the translation provided by in HOSTETLER 2012, 7, n. 5, on two key passages. Hostetler divides the meaning of the line ἀλλ' ἦν ὡραῖος κάλλει χριστὸς καὶ θνήσκων, taking the first section up to the word κάλλει and linking this with the foregoing line, thus giving the translation: “He did not have beauty, the one suspended on the wood, yet Christ was complete with beauty”, and then takes καὶ θνήσκων with the next line, thus giving “and in dying he did not have form, but he beautified my appearance deformed by sin.” This reading is problematic in terms of the rhetorical structure of the inscription, since it disregards the parallel sets of οὐκ ... ἀλλά, which I take into account in my translation above, reading καὶ θνήσκων as a concessive clause. In the final line, Hostetler reads εἴλκυσεν (from the verb ἔλκω, later Greek ἐλκύω) as meaning “to rescue” (“he [Christ] rescued all creation”). Neither LSJ nor LBG provide such a gloss for this verb, which means rather “to draw (after oneself)” or “to pull” (cf. LSJ, s.v. “ἔλκω”; LBG, s.v. “ἐλκύζω”, “ἐλκύνω”, “ἐλκύω”). In my opinion, this meaning of drawing or pulling to oneself in the case of the Staurotheke inscription’s use of the term is strengthened by the verb’s use in another contemporary inscription on a reliquary of the hand of John the Baptist, probably dating likewise to the tenth century (and perhaps also commissioned by Basil?) and made for the translation of the relic from Antioch to the capital in 957 at the behest of Constantine VII Porphyrogennētos, which reads: “The hand of the Forerunner, which once a barbarian hand held fast, now Lord Constantine has transferred to the city, having drawn [it] now thence” (ἦν βάρβαρος χεὶρ χεῖρα τὴν τοῦ Προδρόμου / κατεῖχε τὸ πρίν, νῦν ἐκέισεν **ἐλκύσας** / ἀναξ μετῆξε πρὸς πόλιν Κωνσταντῖνος) (cf. RHOBY 2010, 187–188; emphasis and translation mine). Moreover, from the perspective of a patristic/

Similarities exist between this late-tenth-century inscription on the outside of the Staurotheke and the mid-century one on the cross relic. Both inscriptions employ the dodecasyllabic or ‘political verse’ metre; both are executed in large majuscule with little variation in letter size and no complicated ligatures; both inscriptions name specific patrons behind the text or reliquary. Yet significant differences are also present in the two texts which I believe help to underscore at once the heights to which wealthy patronage could soar and the exclusive echelons of divine association which only the emperors could enter. The earlier cross inscription is marked by the paired μέν-δέ clauses, which establish parallels between the person/activity of Christ and those of the ruling sovereigns. Here, there are no parallels between God and humanity, but rather merely seemingly contradictory contrasts with regard to Christ himself, demarcated by the term ἀλλά (“but”): Christ is hung on the cross devoid of beauty and yet still somehow “ripe” like fruit with beauty even in death;²¹ Christ is deformed in death and yet reshapes the human form which is unsightly (or possibly “hard to discern on account of sin”, another interpretation made possible by a different meaning of the word δυσθέατος used here²²); Christ is divine and beyond suffering, yet suffers in his humanity—a key paradox underscored by the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451.²³

The mention of “Basil [the] prohedros” is helpful for establishing the patron of this outer reliquary as being Basil Lakapēnos, the illegitimate son of Emperor Rōmanos I and holder of the high title of parakoimōmenos;²⁴ such an office and lineage with access to both the emperor’s court and the emperor’s wealth enabled Basil to put his name on (and his patronage behind) several outstanding extant works of Byzantine liturgical art,²⁵ a pattern followed by other high-ranking and wealthy

associative reading here, there are scriptural precedents for the language of ‘drawing to oneself’ being associated with Christ, which could also be an allusion intended when the inscription speaks of the emperor as drawing holy things to himself; cf. John 6:44, 12:32.

- 21 The texts of the New Testament refer to Christ as being the “first-fruits” of the resurrection and a vine bearing the fruit of the faithful as branches who themselves bear fruit; cf. 1 Cor 15:20; John 15:1–11.
- 22 LSJ, s.v. “δυσθέατος”; cf. *LBG*, s.v. “δυσθεωρήτως”, for a related word from the same verbal root and meaning “in a manner difficult to discern/recognise”.
- 23 The definition (ὅρος) of the faith, defined at the fifth session of the council on October 22, 451 and promulgated at the sixth session on October 25, 451, set forth the doctrine of Christ having two natures but one person as being orthodox and contributed to the schism of the so-called Oriental Orthodox churches of Armenia and Mesopotamia from the Roman and Byzantine communion. For a thorough introduction to the issues and events of this council, as well as a translation of its acts, see: PRICE/GADDIS 2005, esp. 1:1–85 (background) and 2:183–243 (definition of the faith and its promulgation).
- 24 A detailed study of Basil can be found in BROKKAAR 1972, 199–234. The term parakoimōmenos, meaning the one “sleeping at the side [of the emperor]”, was the highest office for eunuchs at court in the Middle Byzantine period; cf. “Parakoimōmenos” in *ODB* 3:1584.
- 25 Known surviving examples of Basil’s patronage, besides the Limburg Staurotheke, include: a reliquary containing the head of Saint Symeon the Stylite and now preserved at

Byzantine aristocrats in this period.²⁶ The mention of the office of *prohedros* also helps narrow the *termini inter quos* for the Staurotheke's production.²⁷ But in stark contrast to the emperors on the cross inscription, Basil is not connected via parallel or imitation to Christ, but only via veneration and supplication: he remains on a level below the emperors in their sacrality, even though his name is also placed on a vessel of sacred objects, and his later inscription—in its near perfect imitation of the earlier one on the cross—might reflect a conscious desire to imitate in style and form the mid-century imperial reliquary patronage.²⁸ Style here, in my view,

the Camaldolese convent in Florence (for inscription and details, cf. RHOBY 2010, 219–221); a diskos and chalice now held in the treasury at Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice (cf. LAURENT 1953, esp. pp. 195–196); a reliquary of the head of Saint Stephen the Protomartyr, kept until 1628 by Franciscans on Crete and lost sometime thereafter (the inscription survives in copy, noted in RHOBY 2010, 212–213, and in BOURAS 1989, 407); three manuscripts commissioned by him: (a) the miscellany of war treatises now known as MS Ambrosianus B 119 sup. and preserved at the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan (cf. BEVILACQUA 2013), (b) a copy of the homilies of John Chrysostom now preserved at the Monastery of Dionysiou (MS Dionysiou 70) on Mount Athos, and (c) a volume containing the four Gospels and the Pauline epistles now kept in Saint Petersburg (MS Publ. lib. gr. 55). He may also have been the patron of the MS Vat. Gr. 1613, the so-called Joshua Roll (cf. WANDER 2012, esp. pp. 93–132). Cf. also “Basil the Nothos” in *ODB* 1:270 and Ross 1958 (who provides images of the diskos and chalice at Saint Mark's in Venice).

- 26 Besides the Basilian examples mentioned above, RHOBY 2010 provides several other examples of such elite patronage via inscriptions mentioning the patron/patroness, dating from the tenth to 12th centuries, which mostly seem to hail from the immediate circle of the reigning families and their relatives: a cross mentioning Maria Komnēnē, second daughter of Alexios I Komnēnos (*ibid.*, 152); a cross mentioning Constantine, the grandson of Emperor Manuel I Komnēnos (*ibid.*, 158); a lost reliquary of Saint Christopher mentioning a certain Michael (perhaps Michael VII Doukas) (*ibid.*, 172); a lost reliquary of John the Baptist mentioning a certain Anna (posited by Rhoby to be the second daughter of John II Komnēnos) (*ibid.*, 173); a cross reliquary naming Alexios Doukas (five men bore this name, all of whom were also grandsons of Irene Doukaina, who herself is also mentioned in the inscription) (*ibid.*, 174–175); a reliquary cross naming Rōmanos (either Rōmanos II Porphyrogennētos or Rōmanos III Argyros) (*ibid.*, 240); a staurotheke naming an empress (βασιλίς) Maria (either Maria of Alania, wife of Michael VII Doukas and later of Nikēphoros III Botaneiatēs, d. 1103; or Maria of Antioch, second wife of Manuel I Komnēnos and murdered in 1182/1183) (*ibid.*, 266–267); a cross naming Irene Doukaina, wife of Alexios I Komnēnos (*ibid.*, 268); a cross mentioning a certain Leo, possibly the brother of Nikēphoros II Phōkas (based on the mention in the inscription of him being *domestikos* of the West) (*ibid.*, 288–289); a cross reliquary naming Rōmanos (either Rōmanos II Argyros or Rōmanos IV Diogenēs) (*ibid.*, 303–304); and the previously-mentioned cross reliquary and ivory panel naming Nikēphoros (II Phōkas) (*ibid.*, 332–333). A detailed overview and study of how these inscriptions, including the naming of patrons (both imperial and other elites, such as nobles and monastics), functioned, can be found in HOSTETLER 2016.
- 27 Basil was elevated to this rank by Nikēphoros II Phōkas after 963 for helping to sideline Joseph Bringas and to elevate Nikēphoros to the imperial throne; cf. Leo the Deacon, *History*, ed./transl. by A.-M. Talbot/Sullivan, 3.8 (p. 99).
- 28 Here we can note the supplicatory and offertory tone struck by Basil in the inscriptions commissioned or composed by him on other reliquaries. The inscription on the now-lost

is of the essence: though the reliquary contains portions of the most sacred Christian relics and stages the relic of the True Cross as a victorious weapon against the barbarians, the outer inscription speaks not of the carnage wrought by victory in battle, but rather of beauty: namely, Christ's paradoxical beauty in death, his work of restoring an ugly humankind to its pristine beauty through his death and resurrection, and the cooperation of this particular human being, Basil, in this creative act of making beautiful the case of the precious wood. Just as Christ drew all creation to himself on the cross at the crucifixion—a past, completed action as brought out in the aorist verb form used (εἰλκυσεν)—so too is Basil's adornment fully accomplished (ἐκαλλώπ[ι]σε) in the same tense. Yet the drawing (i.e., ἔλξις) of Christ and the beautifying of Basil continue beyond the *fait accompli* of the text. Both in action and depiction, the artistic programme of the Staurotheke is also instructive in terms of interpreting the reliquary's significance for communicating imperial sacrality in Byzantium.

head reliquary of Saint Stephen the Protomartyr read: “Your head, O chief athlete, fame of martyrs, which stones of martyrdom previously crowned, I too now crown with gold and silver material, showing [my] happy longing with a meagre gift; on account of which I—your Basil of kingly house, affine of the ruler and bearing the rank of *meas baïoulos* and *parakoimōmenos*—beseech salvation of soul, O blessed [saint]” (Τὴν σὴν κάραν, πρῶταθλε, μαρτύρων κλέος, / ἦν μαρτυρικοὶ πρὶν κατέστεψαν λίθοι, / στέφω κἀγὼ νῦν ἐξ ὕλης χρυσαργύρου / δῶρω πενιχρῶ δεικνὺς ὄλβιον πόθον· οὗ χάριν αἰτῶ τῆς ψυχῆς σωτηρίαν / ὁ βασιλικὸς σὸς Βασίλειος, μάκαρ, / γαμβρὸς κρατοῦντος καὶ βαΐουλος μέγας / καὶ παρακοιμώμενος ἐκ τῆς ἀξίας) (RHOBY 2010, 212–213), while the inscription on the head reliquary of Saint Symeon the Stylite now kept in Arezzo reads: “A pillar of fire was previously Israel's guide from the land of Egypt to a good land; but you too, O divine father Symeon, have a pillar, a guide leading from earth to the heavenly path. I, then—Basil of kingly house—adorn your venerable head with longing” (Στυλὸς πυρὸς πρὶν Ἰσραὴλ ὁδηγέτης / εἰς γῆν ἀγαθὴν ἀπὸ γῆς Αἰγυπτίας· / στῦλος δὲ καὶ σοί, Συμεών, θεῖε πάτερ, / ἐκ γῆς ὁδηγὸς εἰς τρίβον οὐρανίαν· / κοσμῶ τὸ λοιπὸν σὴν σεβασμίαν κάραν / ὁ βασιλικὸς Βασίλειος ἐκ πόθου) (ibid., 219–221) (both translations mine). Note as well the parallel usages of contrasting a previous action with the present time of the inscription, as well as the epithet *βασιλικός* stressing Basil's connection to the throne despite his illegitimate birth, and the sense of longing (πόθος) in both texts. Supplication on the part of Basil is also present in the inscription in raised letters (similar to what is seen on the Staurotheke) on the base of the chalice and diskos pair commissioned by him and now kept in the treasury of Saint Mark's Cathedral, Venice, which reads: “Lord, help Basil the very illustrious Proedros and Parakoimōmenos” (Κύριε βοήθει Βασιλείῳ τῷ ἐνδοξοτάτῳ προέδρῳ καὶ παρακοιμωμένῳ); cf. ROSS 1958, 271 (image on p. 273); Greek text in RHOBY 2010, 264, who refers to the volume compiled by GUILLOU 1996, 78 (no. 75). Finally, we can also note an inscription on a gold ring containing a rhomboid emerald in the middle, on which is etched a portrait of Christ and the words “O Lord, help Basil, parakoimōmenos of the master” (Κ[ΥΡΙ]Ε ΒΟΗΘ[ΕΙ] ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΩ ΠΑΡΑΚΟΙΜΟΥ[ΜΕΝΩ] ΤΟΥ ΔΕΣΠ[ΟΤΟΥ]) (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Cabinet des Médailles, inv. no. Schl. 126), where “master” here is an epithet equally applicable to both Christ and the emperor. Cf. CHEYNET/MORRISON 1992, 309 (no. 219), cited in: LILIE et al. 2013, available online: <https://www.degruyter.com/database/PMBZ/entry/PMBZ23078/html> (accessed 19/02/2022).

3.4 Imagery and iconographic programme of the Limburg Staurotheke

3.4.1 Imagery and iconography on the Staurotheke cover

The sacred relics contained within it notwithstanding, the Limburg Staurotheke is one of the most outstanding extant works of Middle Byzantine artistic programming and execution that has survived the plunder of the Fourth Crusade intact. The case opens via a lid that slides out and can be completely removed from the reliquary; the bottom of the lid also bears a latch connecting it to the rest of the case when shut (the lid is currently displayed above and separate from the remainder of the case in Limburg; see Fig. 8). The first line of Basil's inscription ("The one who was hung on wood had no beauty") is on the top of the lid portion, and this text finds literal reflection in the iconographic programme below: no image of the crucified Christ appears. Instead, contained within an outer border of diamond-like enamel work and an inner golden rectangle replete with filigree and circular groups of gems and precious stones, is a square area containing nine equal-size enamel icons, which are further framed by gems and eight smaller enamel icons of saints at the corners of the frame and in the centre of each bar. Present at the centre is Christ in glory and robed in imperial purple, holding a book of the Gospels in his left hand and blessing with his right. Flanking him on either side are John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary in intercession, with the Forerunner being accompanied by the archangel Gabriel and the Theotokos by the archangel Michael on their respective icons. On the upper three and lower three icons we find depicted the apostles and evangelists in pairs (clockwise from top left): James and John the Theologian; Paul and Peter; Andrew and Mark; Philip and Simon; Luke and Matthew; Bartholomew and Thomas; while on the outer frame we find (again clockwise from top left): Saint John Chrysostom, Great-Martyr Theodore, Great-Martyr Eustratios (?), Great-Martyr Dēmētrios, Great-Martyr George, Saint Nicholas of Myra in Lycia, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint Basil the Great of Caesarea. The detail in the enamel work and filigree work, combined with the abundance and size of the affixed gems, visually proclaims the Staurotheke as a work of immense artistic craftsmanship, beauty, and luxury, marking it out as an object of the highest prestige.

The cover iconography, however, also communicates a message: one of divinity and power, universality and particularity. Christ, the Son of God, is depicted as an enthroned ruler extending his blessing to the viewer. He is supplicated by the Virgin and the Baptist, though with the two figures on opposite sides of where one would expect them in a typical *deësis* formation.²⁹ Perhaps the unusual placement of the Forerunner at the place of honour at Christ's right hand could be a subtle hint at the interplay of Basil the prohedros and the various emperors he served: John

29 Cf. "Deesis" in *ODB* 1:599–600.

the Baptist was a blood relative of Jesus, paved the way for the latter's ministry, never married, and was hailed by Christ himself as the greatest born of women;³⁰ Basil was the cousin and uncle to emperors in the late tenth century, enjoyed close proximity to the throne as one of the senior advisors at court, was a eunuch, and was one of the wealthiest and most privileged persons in the Empire. Likening himself, however obliquely, in image to the humble desert-dwelling John by extension would signal a likening of Christ (besought by John) to the emperor (besought by the *prohedros*), a supplication echoed in the final lines of the cover inscription as well.³¹

Alternatively, Johannes Koder has presented a different interpretation, positing that the depiction of John the Baptist in the icon here bears similar facial features to Emperor Constantine VII and thus suggests that the Baptist here personifies the emperor, beseeching Christ; furthermore, Koder suggests that Christ's words about John being the greatest of those born of women³² could then be applied to the emperor.³³ To my eye, the enamel face of the Baptist here does not particularly resemble either the face of King Abgar on the Sinai icon or the face of Constantine VII on the Moscow Ivory,³⁴ and the supplicatory pose of John here with hands raised aloft towards Christ—while similar to the pose of Constantine VII on the Moscow Ivory—is a common feature of both John and the Virgin Mary in such *deësis* depictions.³⁵ Additionally, the naming of the Baptist as “the greatest born of women” need not lead us to interpret him as representing the emperor even from a theological point of view. Taking recourse to a patristic manner of reading here, seeking contexts and associations, we find that the verse immediately preceding Matthew 11:11 (where Christ speaks of John in these superlative terms), reads: “This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way before you.’”³⁶ This statement, in turn, is a quotation of the prophecy from Malachi 3:1, where the appearance of the messenger (*ἄγγελος*, which can

30 Cf. Matt. 11:11, Luke 7:28.

31 Cf. PENTCHEVA 2007, 114. Pentcheva, however, reads the inscription as an instance of Basil, as patron, beseeching Christ for “eternal beauty and youth, meaning salvation and life in paradise” (*ibid.*, 114, n. 22), seeing herein a desire on the part of Basil for healing from the “ugliness” of being a eunuch (*ibid.*, 115). She seems to base this interpretation on a reading of the cross only being depicted in glory in Eastern Christianity as opposed to the “gory details of Christ's Passion on the cross” which are found in Western European sources and depictions. The Byzantine liturgical texts of the Middle Byzantine period, however, provide plenty of ‘ugly’ death imagery associated with the crucifixion as well as prolonged and profound engagement with the theological significance for Byzantine Christianity of a painful death suffered willingly and unjustly by Jesus, which facts lead me to reject her interpretation as being plausible. On these texts, see JANERAS 1988 and TUCKER 2023, 189–192, 482–491.

32 Cf. Matt 11:11.

33 KODER 1989, 183–184.

34 On these images, see chapter 2 above.

35 See above this chapter, n. 29.

36 Matt 11:10; cf. also Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27.

also be translated as “angel”—and thus the various angelic beings depicted on the Staurotheke also serve to underscore this messenger imagery) immediately precedes the entry of the Lord himself into the temple. With this cloud of theological images also surrounding the iconographic witness of John depicted here in the deësis scene, I am more inclined to think of John as representing Basil, who as *para-koinōmenos* of the royal household would be responsible for ‘preparing the way’ of the emperor in the palace and ultimately to the ‘temple’ of the palace chapels or even Hagia Sophia.

As Anthony Cutler has observed, the figures present in a deësis tableau in Byzantine art could vary, with other saints and angels supplicating the God-man Jesus Christ instead of John and Mary.³⁷ Yet nowhere does he state that the placement of the Virgin and the Baptist in a deësis depicting these two persons was in flux or that a large number of surviving objects (or even a noticeable minority) depict the Baptist instead of the Virgin as standing at the right hand of Christ. Three other luxury objects, however—namely, ivory triptychs—also survive from the late tenth century and depict the same deësis formation as that found on the cover of the Limburg Staurotheke: the so-called Harbaville Triptych, housed today at the Louvre (Fig. 12–13);³⁸ an ivory deësis triptych obtained by Pope Benedict XIV in 1755 from a private collection and kept now at the Vatican Museum (Fig. 14–15); and an ivory triptych preserved at the Museo Nazionale del Palazzo di Venezia in Rome (Fig. 16–17). The three objects share an uncanny number of similarities in terms of iconographic programme and design elements, which has led many scholars in the literature and exhibition catalogues featuring these triptychs to posit a common provenance from the same workshop.³⁹ Yet no one has suggested what I believe the case to be: that all could indeed be commissions made personally for Basil or else influenced by his taste and style as exhibited in the Staurotheke cover. All four objects are executed in ivory, a material usually reserved for religious or ceremonial objects despite its relative abundance at workshops in the Middle Byzantine period.⁴⁰ All four objects have a nearly identical programme in the centre interior panel (top tier: Christ flanked by the Virgin to his left and John the Baptist to his right; bottom tier: five apostles, all the same and in the same order (James, John the Theologian, Peter, Paul, Andrew); all save the ivory from the Museo Nazionale depict Christ

37 Cf. CUTLER 1987.

38 I am thankful to Evan Freeman for pointing out this connection at a presentation I made on my doctoral work, following the bibliography of which item I came across the other ivories also discussed here.

39 On these objects, see the following studies and catalogues: LINAS 1885; SCHLUMBERGER 1891; MOLINIER 1896, 31–37; PEIRCE/TYLER 1927; KANTOROWICZ 1941; CAIN 1958, 149; RICE 1958, 34, 36; BECKWITH 1959; WEITZMANN 1964, esp. pp. 167–170; GOLDSCHMIDT/WEITZMANN 1979, 33–34; LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1982, 99–101; CUTLER 1991, 2:645–659; GABORIT-CHOPIN 2003, 86–93; DURAND/DURAND 2005, 133–155; CORMACK/VASSILAKI 2008, 132–133, 400–401; and MORETTI 2010, 121–152.

40 Cf. CUTLER 1985, 34, 53.



Fig. 12–13: Interior (above) and exterior (below) of the Harbaville Triptych. Ivory with color residues. Constantinople, late tenth century. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 14–15: Interior (above) and exterior (below) of the Vatican Museum triptych. Ivory. Constantinople, late tenth century. Vatican Museum, Vatican City.



Fig. 16-17: Interior (above) and exterior (below) of the so-called Casanatense triptych. Ivory. Constantinople, late tenth century. Museo Nazionale del Palazzo di Venezia, Rome.

enthroned (although the latter does show him standing on a dais). Numerous other saints are common to all four objects: military saints, liturgists, bishops.⁴¹ All four depict on the back panel a cross budding, either simply with roundels at the ends of the crossbars, or also with other floral imagery.⁴² In the case of the Harbaville Triptych, the similarities are even closer, with similarly shaped six-pointed stars and remarkably similar floral borders on the interior, as noted by Linas in the late 19th century;⁴³ moreover, the Harbaville ivory also shows traces of polychromy on all parts of its surface, which Carolyn Connor has posited could be an attempt to mimic gold enamel⁴⁴—precisely what we see in the enamelled covering of the Limburg Staurotheke. To my mind, the intentionality of design here on the part of Basil, rather than simply the acceptance by the *parakoimōmenos* of a workshop's (rather idiosyncratic) *deësis* programme offered to him, is also highlighted finally by the fact that the order of the relic compartments within the Staurotheke places the relics associated with the Virgin and John the Baptist in the expected order: the items pertaining to the Virgin to the right of the cross (the viewer's left), and those connected to the Baptist to the left thereof.

A further bit of evidence, which in my opinion mitigates against identifying John the Baptist at the right hand of Christ as representing the emperor, is the outer inscription of the reliquary. Were the emperor to be represented by John at the very heart of the lid's iconographic programme, one might expect some explicit mention of either Constantine or some emperor in general in the text. Yet this text—visible to any who might glimpse the reliquary and be able to read—mentions only Basil specifically. Secondly, as mentioned above, the naming of Basil's title of *prohedros* permits a dating of the construction of the reliquary to the years 968–985.

41 Saints common to all four objects, besides the ones noted in the central interior panels, include: Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Gregory (Theologian/Wonderworker), Nicholas of Myra; Great-Martyrs Eustratios, Dēmētrios, George, Theodore (Recruit/General), Eustathios. Apart from the Staurotheke, the other three also depict the martyrs Arethas and Prokopios.

42 The distinction of the appearance of the cross on the back of the Staurotheke is due, I believe, to the reliquary not merely referencing the blossoming cross (as the other objects do) but rather actually containing the True Cross relic; here, the double bars and the stepped platform reflect the actual appearance of the relic inside the Staurotheke and refer to its use in the rites at the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross in Hagia Sophia; see this chapter below, n. 97.

43 LINAS 1885, 32: "L'affinité des bandeaux avec la bordure de l'hiérophane de Limbourg est palpable"; *ibid.*, 37: "Que l'on compare maintenant à notre triptyque, et l'hiérophane à date certaine de Limbourg ... on restera convaincu que tous ces monuments sont du même temps et qu'une même école les a enfantés." Nonetheless, Linas suggests in the end that the Harbaville Triptych was commissioned simply by a rich patrician for home furnishing (*ibid.*, 39) and does not link the work to the *parakoimōmenos* Basil.

44 CONNOR 1998, 19, 76.

Constantine VII died in 959,⁴⁵ followed on the throne by his son Rōmanos II, then by the general Nikēphoros II Phōkas in 963, then the usurper John I Tzimiskēs in 969, and finally Rōmanos II's son Basil II in 976, who eventually ousted his relative Basil Lakapēnos from court and exiled him in 985. For John the Baptist to represent the long-deceased Constantine VII in this later period of Basil's life, marked by great vicissitudes in court life and by various men on the imperial throne, does not make much sense: Basil the prohedros survived at court for such a long time as a senior officer no doubt through great tact and networking, but also surely through making himself useful and indispensable to whoever should wear the imperial crown. Each and every emperor was envisaged as representing and patterning himself after Christ, and with such a representation in mind, the reliquary would be less likely to have caused offence than by having the lid's central icon be a visual reminder of a specific former ruler, whether dead or deposed. There is no hard evidence either way to fix the interpretation of the lid's programme, but given Basil Lakapēnos's longevity at court, his service under five sovereigns, his own artistic patronage and influence, and his enduring proximity to the throne as one of the emperor's right-hand men, the depiction of John the Baptist at the right hand of Christ in this small *deësis* icon as representing Basil the servant *par excellence* seems much more plausible to me than does Koder's reading.

Moving beyond the Forerunner and Christ: the pairing of the archangels on these two icon panels is no surprise. Gabriel announces the impending conception of the Forerunner to Zachariah in the Gospel of Luke,⁴⁶ and both the Virgin and Michael were perceived as heavenly protectors of the imperial capital.⁴⁷ Both archangels

45 On November 9, according to Skylitzēs, *Chronicle*, ed. by Thurn, 17 (247), although this date has been disputed by GRIERSON/MANGO/I. ŠEVČENKO 1962, here p. 58, who posit November 19 as the date of the emperor's repose.

46 Cf. Luke 1:5–25.

47 A rich vein of scholarly literature exists on the Virgin as special protectress of the city: EBERSOLT 1921, who presents photographs of coins from the reign of Constantine IX Monomachos (r. 1042–1054) showing the Virgin with hands upraised in prayer (*virgo orans*), wearing the maphorion relic housed at the Blachernai palace and adorned with the words ΜΡ ΘΥ / Η ΕΠΙΣΚΕΨΙΣ (“Mother of God / the protectress”) (*ibid.*, 50); BAYNES 1949, 172–173; CAMERON 1978; CAMERON 1979; KALAVREZOU 1990, esp. p. 171; MANGO 2000; PENTCHEVA 2002; PENTCHEVA 2003; CAMERON 2004; PENTCHEVA 2006; BRUBAKER/M. CUNNINGHAM 2007; M. CUNNINGHAM 2015; and KRAUSMÜLLER 2016. Numerous churches and monasteries were dedicated to her throughout the Byzantine capital; Janin identifies 136 such sanctuaries (JANIN 1969, 156–244), while a total of 24 churches and monasteries had the Archangel Michael as their sole patron (*ibid.*, 337–350), besides other churches dedicated to the angelic powers in general, where Michael was also probably venerated: two monasteries dedicated to the nine ranks of angels (*ibid.*, 111–112); the *Nea* church built by Basil I in 876/877 and dedicated to the archangels Michael and Gabriel (*ibid.*, 361–364); and two additional churches built by Basil I and dedicated to both Michael and Gabriel in the Arkadianai district (*ibid.*, 66).

appear with typical wings, dressed in what appear to be imperial-style *lōroi*,⁴⁸ each with one hand raised with palm outward in perhaps a monitory pose, and the other hand bearing a *labarum*.⁴⁹ This angelic duo thus can be seen as firmly and securely framing the central supplicatory deësis trio with symbols of enduring heavenly power and protection, while being clothed in contemporary courtly dress and bearing the ancient military banner of Constantine, the first Christian emperor.⁵⁰

The significance of the choice of the remaining enamel figures on the lid of the Staurotheke to the entire artistic programme cannot be determined with any certainty. Of the twelve apostles depicted, only two are known to have been honoured with chapels in the palace itself (in addition to other locales in Constantinople);⁵¹ nonetheless, a complete number of the twelve disciples in the lid's iconographic programme, following an associative/patristic reading, calls to my mind the fulness of the church as symbolised by the full number of the twelve apostles, and thus also the apostolic authority inherited from them by the bishops and patriarchs, standing around the central figure of Christ on his throne—an icon, perhaps, of the heavenly ideal to be reflected in the bishops and patriarch around the enthroned emperor as guardian of the relics and the Lord's anointed on earth? The smaller enamel icons of the episcopal trio of John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory the Theologian honour champions of Chalcedonian orthodoxy and thus could be seen as providing visual *bona fides* for the faith of the imperial house (as possessors of the reliquary) and of Basil (as the artistic patron); but of the three bishop saints, only Basil had a chapel dedicated to him specifically in the palace, besides other institutions in the city,⁵² and the joint Byzantine commemoration of the three men together as the Feast of Three Hierarchs did not arise until after the Staurotheke's construction, in 1082.⁵³ The other smaller icons depict several great-martyrs and Saint Nicholas; while only Nicholas is documented as being patron of a palatine chapel,⁵⁴ it is not surprising that military saints—and the patron of sailors and navigation, of great importance for the maritime metropolis⁵⁵—should be found to adorn a reliquary

48 Cf. PARANI 2003, 42–50.

49 Cf. PARANI 2003, 31–33 (images of emperors holding the labarum) and 45–47, 196 (images of angels); cf. also “Labarum” in *ODB* 2:1167.

50 Cf. PARANI 2003, 32–33.

51 Besides the chief location of the church of the Holy Apostles (cf. JANIN 1969, 41–50), Janin records palatine chapels dedicated to John the Theologian (*ibid.*, 269) and Peter (*ibid.*, 398).

52 The palatine chapel dedicated to Saint Basil is mentioned in the *Book of Ceremonies* (II.8, 11, 13); besides this church, there was a monastery dedicated to the archbishop of Caesarea as well as a skeuophylakion and church near the Forum of the Ox; cf. JANIN 1969, 58–59.

53 Cf. JANIN 1969, 258.

54 This was the so-called New Church built on the palace grounds by Basil I in 876/877, which had a quintuple dedication: to Christ, the Theotokos, the archangels Michael and Gabriel, the prophet Elijah, and Saint Nicholas. Cf. JANIN 1969, 361; MAGDALINO 1987.

55 Cf. “Nicholas of Myra” in *ODB* 2:1469–1470. A detailed study of the history of the cult and the patronage of sailors can be found in GROOT 1965, esp. pp. 36–43 and 152–160, while

for objects perceived to have great defensive power for the city and empire; furthermore, as I shall explore below, this could also be a signal of identity and relevance to a potential audience of the reliquary.

3.4.2 Imagery and iconography on the Staurotheke interior

With the lid removed, the viewer sees the relic of the True Cross, visible and originally adorned with pearls at the crossbar intersections and with jewels at the ends of the bars, amidst other smaller compartments bearing additional relics (Fig. 9 above). Surrounding the central relic in immediate proximity are enamel icons of what appear to be archangels depicted in various poses; all are depicted standing upright and most hold what seem to be labara or sceptres in the one hand, while the other hand is either extended in an *orans* gesture⁵⁶ (in the case of two angels) or else holds an orb as a symbol of authority and power (in the case of eight angels).⁵⁷ The clothing of the archangels here is also distinctive. Of the six archangels depicted below the bottom crossbar of the Cross relic, four are clothed in the chlamys—one of the imperial court garments—with two in what appear to be purple robes with gold *tablia* or rectangular panels added to the fabric edges.⁵⁸ Beginning in the 11th century, angels can be found depicted in Byzantine art wearing the chlamys as a sign of their heavenly ministry, much like ministers at the imperial court.⁵⁹ In the earlier Middle Byzantine period, however, the chlamys (together with the crown) were the initial regalia in which a new emperor was dressed at his coronation.⁶⁰ Various forms of chlamys on some archangels, together with various forms of what appear to be male and female versions of the *lōros* garment on the four archangels situated above the lower crossbar,⁶¹ would seem to situate the angels here surrounding the cross not merely in service at the court of heaven, but also at the Constantinopolitan court of the tenth century: an honour guard around the emperor's 'invincible trophy' to be wielded against his enemies. Despite the dearth of occasions on which the emperor himself would be dressed in the *lōros* (only on the highest feast days

the artistic motifs used to depict Nicholas, including at sea and with sailors, is treated in N. ŠEVČENKO 1983.

56 With the exception of several icons of the Virgin, this pose becomes rarer after the eighth century, when the bowed stance of *proskynēsis* becomes more common. Cf. "Orans" in *ODB* 3:1531 and "Proskynesis" in *ODB* 3:1738–1739.

57 Cf. PARANI 2003, 33–34, who also mentions the earlier work by SCHRAMM 1958, esp. pp. 12–19.

58 On this term, cf. PARANI 2003, 349.

59 PARANI 2003, 99.

60 PARANI 2003, 12–13.

61 According to Parani, angelic beings were originally depicted in Byzantine art wearing the late antique garments of the *chitōn* and *himation* together with sandals; depictions of angels in imperial dress, be it chlamys or *lōros*, only date to after the iconomachic period at the end of the ninth century (PARANI 2003, 41–45).

and when receiving especially prominent guests),⁶² Maria Parani has observed that “[b]y the tenth century, the triumphal imperial symbolism of the *lōros* had acquired a mystical dimension”,⁶³ a dimension given visual form in the Staurotheke with the archangels thus arrayed.

On either side of the centre area with the cross relic and enamel archangel icons on the interior of the Staurotheke are a series of ten smaller compartments, each of which are covered by an enamel lid with icons of angelic beings and lettering describing the contents of each box. The upper six compartments originally contained⁶⁴ portions of six other relics associated with Christ (from left to right and top to bottom): the swaddling bands (τὰ σπάργανα), the towel with which Christ wrapped himself (τὸ λέντιον), the Crown of Thorns (ὁ ἀκάνθινος στέφανος), the purple robe of mockery (τὸ πορφυροῦν ἱμάτιον), the napkin wrapped around his head (ἡ σινδόνη), and the sponge used at the crucifixion (ὁ σπόγγος). The lower four compartments contained partial relics pertaining to the Virgin Mary (three) and John the Baptist (one) (again, from left to right and top to bottom): the veil of the Theotokos (μαφόριον), the Virgin’s belt kept at Chalkoprateia (ζώνη), the Virgin’s belt brought from Zela (ζώνη), and some of the hair of John the Baptist (αἱ τίμιαί τρίχες). The ordering of the relics related to Christ himself seems to be chronological, beginning with the swaddling bands of his birth, continuing with relics from various points in the Passion, and concluding with the sponge, after tasting the vinegar offered on which Christ uttered the words “it is finished” (or rather, the single Greek word, τετέλεσται) on the cross according to the Gospel of John.⁶⁵ Below these, we find relics of the greatest saints of the Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, situated alongside the cross as yet another representation of the *deësis*, as it were, not in icon form but in the presence of the partial relics themselves.⁶⁶

62 The *lōros* is prescribed in the *Book of Ceremonies* to be worn on the feast of Pascha (I.1, 18, 46; II.40), at the crowning of a caesar (I. 52), and once upon the occasion of receiving a Muslim embassy in 946 at a banquet on the Transfiguration on August 6 (II.15). An appendix to the *Book of Ceremonies*, known as the *Klētorologion* of Philotheos and compiled in 899 during the reign of Leo VI, also mentions the emperor wearing the *lōros* on Pascha and suggests that the same occurs on the feast of Pentecost, stating that “on the holy day of Pentecost, a procession is made according to the pattern of the majestic [day] of Pascha” (Τῇ δὲ ἀγίᾳ τῆς πεντεκοστῆς ἡμέρᾳ τελεῖται προέλευσις κατὰ τὸν τύπον τῆς τοῦ σεβασμίου πάσχα). Text and translation in: BURY 1911, 168, 172.

63 Cf. PARANI 2003, 23.

64 These smaller relics are no longer housed within the Limburg Staurotheke, but are contained within a new cross-type reliquary crafted by Wilhelm Rauscher in 1908 which allows the relics to be seen, unlike in the Byzantine reliquary. This smaller see-through reliquary is housed in the same room as the Staurotheke today in the diocesan museum in Limburg. Cf. HEUSER/KLOFT 2009, 191.

65 John 19:30.

66 Although this time in the traditional order, with Mary on the right side and John on the left. Cf. KODER 1989, 177–179.

3.4.3 Six-winged, many-eyed: tetramorphs and their significance on the Staurotheke

The compartment lids, besides bearing centrally placed descriptive labels of the relics contained within them in clear, majuscule Greek, are all adorned with angelic beings which are also labelled and surround the relic designation, with one figure on either side (see Fig. 9 above). Six of the lids (on rows 1, 3, and 4) are labelled “powers” (ἐξουσίαι) and depict angelic beings adorned with six polychromatic wings (two folded above visible heads, two hanging at the sides, and two folded above visible feet). The other four lids (rows 2 and 5) are labelled “rulers” (ἀρχαίαι [written APXAIE]⁶⁷) and depict angelic beings with four wings covered in eyes (two folded above, two folded below), with hands and feet visible, and each figure bearing four heads, one definitively anthropomorphic, one bird-like, and the other two of different but ambiguous animals; each of these figures is accompanied by two red wheels, one on either side of the feet, with seem to have six blue diamond-shaped spokes apiece. The combinations of imagery and titles with the angelic beings on the compartment lids seem at first glance to be a bit confused. Heavenly beings with six wings covering faces and feet (represented here by the upward and downward crossed pairs of wings) would seem to depict the seraphim as mentioned in the vision of Isaiah,⁶⁸ while those with four wings covered in eyes and with the four different heads seems to reflect the descriptions of the biblical cherubim found in Ezekiel;⁶⁹ such tetramorphs are very common in Byzantine imagery.⁷⁰ From the scriptural narratives, the seraphim and cherubim are closest in proximity to God himself from amongst the orders of heavenly beings: they stand above his throne,⁷¹ they serve as his footstool and chariot,⁷² they guard the entrance to Eden,⁷³ and images of the cherubim were made to rest above the ark of the covenant.⁷⁴ The seraphim and cherubim are also classed as the first and

67 The nominalised adjective ἀρχαία, dialectal ἀρχαίη (sg.), ἀρχαίαι (pl.) can also be simply equivalent in meaning to the word ἀρχή (“rule, governance”; cf. LSJ, s.v. “ἀρχαῖος”), which aligns more with the numerous scriptural passages using the word ἀρχή to denote both earthly rule(rs) and spiritual power(s), whether good or evil. The spelling of the term that ends in -ε rather than -αι reflects pronunciation changes in Middle Byzantine Greek, when the Ancient Greek diphthong /ai/ was monophthongised to /e/; cf. HOLTON et al. 2019, 9.

68 Cf. Isa 6:1–7.

69 Cf. Ezek 1:5–11. A similar being with a merging of these sets of characteristics (many heads, many eyes, but six wings instead of four) is found in Rev 4:6–9.

70 Cf. PALLAS 1971 and RECKER 2023. The latter work appeared too late to be considered here, although I do note briefly that the Limburg Staurotheke is conspicuously absent from Recker’s study.

71 Isa 6:2.

72 2 Kgdms 22:11, Ps 17:11, Isa 37:16.

73 Gen 3:24.

74 Exod 25:18–22.

second ranks, respectively, of the nine total ranks of angels in Pseudo-Dionysios's influential theological treatise *On the Celestial Hierarchy* from the turn of the fifth century AD.⁷⁵ Here, however, the entities are called "powers" and "rulers", which in the Pseudo-Dionysian ranking constitute the sixth and seventh orders of angels, respectively,⁷⁶ but which Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century also considered as appellations for the seraphim and cherubim.⁷⁷ How might we understand or interpret this contradiction or mixture of images and titles on the reliquary compartment lids, given the context of the object and what I perceive to be its central preoccupation with manifesting and expressing imperial sacrality?

Historians of Byzantine art have noted that confusion exists up through the 12th century in terms of painters and iconographers mixing and matching names of angelic ranks with various characteristic traits in their depiction, deriving perhaps from the fact that Greek-speaking artisans could readily understand what was meant by liturgical descriptions of such angels as being "many-eyed" (πολύομματα) and "six-winged" (ἑξαπτέρυγα), but what the terms *cherub[im]* and *seraph[im]* denoted was not unambiguously clear.⁷⁸ The liturgical texts themselves, such as in the anaphora of the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, could also have been an occasion for the mix-up, with hearers not quite understanding the chiasmic structure in the description of these celestial ministrants around the throne of God: "the cherubim and the seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, high aloft, feathered" (τὰ χερουβίμ καὶ τὰ σεραφίμ, ἑξαπτέρυγα, πολύομματα, μετάρσια, πτερωτά).⁷⁹

75 Pseudo-Dionysios, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, ed. by Heil/Ritter, 6–7.

76 Pseudo-Dionysios, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, ed. by Heil/Ritter, 8.1, where Pseudo-Dionysios writes of "the divine authorities and powers" (τῶν θείων ἐξουσιῶν καὶ δυνάμεων).

77 Cf. PEERS 2001, 46 (who cites here DE' MAFFEI 1982, 100, n. 52), provides the source as being Gregory of Nyssa, *Refutation of the Confession of Eunomios*, ed. by Migne, PG 45:556C: "They will especially say that all things have come into being through him [sc. God], and that this is so on account of their being included in all things. To them we shall say that 'all things came into being through him' [John 1:3], and what came about, as Paul says, were visible and invisible things, thrones, authorities, rulers, dominions, powers; the cherubim and seraphim are amongst those referred to as 'thrones' and 'powers' by Paul (Πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ γεγενῆσθαι πάντως ἐροῦσιν, ἐν δὲ τοῖς πᾶσι συμπεριελῆσθαι καὶ τοῦτο, πρὸς οὓς ἐροῦμεν ὅτι Πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο· ἐγένετο δέ, καθὼς ὁ Παῦλος φησι, ὁρατὰ καὶ ἀόρατα, θρόνοι, ἐξουσίαι, ἀρχαί, κυριότητες, δυνάμεις· ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἀπηριθμημένοις διὰ τῶν θρόνων τε καὶ τῶν δυνάμεων, τὰ χερουβίμ καὶ τὰ σεραφίμ ὑπὸ τοῦ Παύλου κατεῖληκται) (translation mine).

78 Cf. PALLAS 1971, 55–56.

79 PALLAS 1971, 59. Scholarship into the history of the Divine Liturgy holds that in the early Middle Byzantine period, the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great of Caesarea, with its longer anaphora and prayers, was more common; however, by the beginning of the 11th century, Ekv'time Mtac'mindeli (also known as Euthymios of the Holy Mountain), abbot from 1005 to 1016 of the then-Georgian-speaking monastery of Iviron on Mount Athos, notes in a series of questions and answers that already by this point in time, people were preferring the anaphora of Saint John Chrysostom for its brevity. Based on this and other euchological evidence, Stefano Parenti in his study on this transition posits that the

The compartment lids on the Staurotheke are simply a tenth-century continuation of this Middle Byzantine linguistic and artistic confusion of the heavenly hosts.

Yet the Limburg Staurotheke is no provincial production in which spare parts and confused programming are fused together. Given its location in the Great Palace (probably in the Pharos chapel next to the imperial bedchamber), the number and sanctity of the relics housed within, the luxurious and meticulous quality of the enamel⁸⁰ and craftsmanship elsewhere on the reliquary, and the high status of its patron⁸¹ Basil Lakapēnos, the Staurotheke and its art are much more likely to have been fashioned with a clear (although not necessarily unambiguous) programme in mind. Johannes Koder has posited that all thirty angelic figures depicted on the inside of the Staurotheke be taken as a whole to represent the thirty *silentiarioi* or court officials⁸² who attended the emperor as mentioned in the *Book of Ceremonies* and/or singers and choristers singing praises to the emperor in imitation of the angels in heaven.⁸³ This interpretation would create an interesting parallel between the lid and the interior: one would see at first Christ enthroned at the centre, surrounded by the deësis scene and encompassed by the disciples, the ministers of the Gospel par excellence; removing this, the eye would then move to

change from the longer Basilian liturgy to the shorter Chrysostomian one had already begun before the ninth and tenth centuries, gaining momentum in monastic communities in Constantinople in the ninth century. Cf. PARENTI 2001, esp. 911 and 922.

80 On Byzantine enamel in general and its impact on Western medieval art, see the brief but definitive essays by BUCKTON 1988, BUCKTON 1995, and BUCKTON 1996.

81 During his lengthy tenure as parakoimōmenos, Basil was able to commission many objects and introduce his taste (and power) into different contexts. Though any commissioning of a luxury object would involve discussions between patron and workshop and some compromises perhaps on design and scope, it is reasonable in the case of the objects associated with Basil to assume the greatest amount of input from him as a politically powerful and well-educated patron from the highest echelons of Byzantine society, who furthermore had the best workshops of the empire at his disposal in the capital; here I disagree with the strong claim put forward by Cutler that “in almost no case in Byzantium can it be shown that the person who paid for the work also had a determinative role in its design” (CUTLER 1994b, 299), primarily based on my reading of the positioning of John the Baptist on the Staurotheke cover above and the three examples of a highly marked ‘reversed’ deësis in the ivory triptychs discussed above. For more on Basil’s power and patronage, see: BOURAS 2008 (who notes in her study gifts made by Basil to Western envoys, which would in turn serve to project his taste beyond Byzantine borders); WANDER 2012, 93–132; BEVILACQUA 2012; and FEATHERSTONE 2014. On ivory and ivory workshops in the Middle Byzantine period, see: CUTLER 1994a, esp. pp. 66–78. On Byzantine enamel works, see: WESSEL 1967, HETHERINGTON 1988, and HETHERINGTON 2006. On the intersection of art and politics in Byzantium more broadly, see: CUTLER 1984, CORMACK 1992, CUTLER 1995; and for the later Byzantine period, esp. vis-à-vis patronal inscriptions, see: DRPIĆ 2016.

82 The *silentiarioi* were palace officials charged with maintaining security and silence; cf. “*Silentiarios*” in *ODB* 3:1896.

83 KODER 1989, 179–180, who also mentions TREITINGER 1956, 78.

the cross, interpreted in Byzantine theology as a divine throne,⁸⁴ surrounded by ministers who themselves are ‘aflame’—namely, the seraphim.⁸⁵ Koder’s interpretation of the interior programme of the Staurotheke, however, does not take into account the labelling of the angels, and I believe that the mixture of images and titles here is a key to unlocking other interpretive possibilities.

For a luxury object closely associated with the emperor in the Great Palace, it is not surprising to find cherubim and seraphim, the highest-ranking angels, decorating the Staurotheke. The reliquary contains the most precious relics of the Christian church within itself, functioning not merely as a case but also as a new “ark” (κιβωτός): this word is used in Byzantine hymnography to refer to reliquaries,⁸⁶ but I would offer here that we might also be seeing in the enamel angels a reproduction in miniature of the ark of the covenant, with cherubim on the compartment lids ‘hovering above’ the sacred treasures within.⁸⁷ Contained within the ancient ark of Israel was the rod of Aaron, dead wood which budded forth flowers;⁸⁸ here

84 This theme finds expression in how Byzantine theology interprets Ps 98:5 (“Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool, for he is holy”) and Ps 131:7 (“We shall enter into his tabernacles with thanksgiving, we shall worship at the place where his feet stood”) to refer typologically to Christ on the cross, and thus transfigure the place of crucifixion into a place of royal session. For a recent study on this kind of typological reading of the Old Testament, see: BUCUR 2019, esp. pp. 138–156.

85 Cf. Ps 103:4: “[The Lord] who makes spirits (winds) into his messengers (angels) and a flame of fire into his ministers” (ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πυρὸς φλόγα).

86 Cf. LSJ, s.v. “κιβωτός, ἡ”. On the term’s usage in particular vis-à-vis relics in the period immediately before that studied here, see SPRECHER 2023.

87 Near-contemporary examples of such many-winged cherubim hovering over the ark in artistic depictions can be found in the three extant Byzantine illustrated manuscripts of Kosmas Indikopleustēs’s *Christian Topography*: a ninth-century copy contained in MS Vat. gr. 699, fol. 48r, available online at: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.699 (accessed 06/04/2022); an 11th-century copy, contained in MS Florence Laurenziana Plutei IX 28, fol. 112v, available online at <http://mss.bmlonline.it/s.aspx?Id=AWODjo5nI1A4r7GxL9fD#/oro/234> (accessed 06/04/2022); and another 11th-century copy, contained in MS Sinai gr. 1186, fol. 82r, available online at: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedmonastery.00271076642-ms/?sp=86&st=imag> (accessed 06/04/2022). These miniatures and manuscripts have been the basis of two studies: MOURIKI-CHARALAMBOUS 1970 and BRUBAKER 1977. Similar depictions of many-winged cherubim above the ark in the tabernacle of witness are to be found in two 12th-century manuscripts illuminated by the monk James of the Kokkinobaphos monastery: MS Vat. gr. 1162, fol. 133v, available online at: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1162 (accessed 06/04/2022); and MS BNF Paris. gr. 1208, fol. 181v, available online at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10723812k/f194.item> (accessed 06/04/2022). On these manuscripts and their artistic programmes, see: LINARDOU 2004, LINARDOU 2007, and EVANGELATOU 2014 (which also includes a colour reproduction of the miniature in MS Paris. gr. 1208 [ibid., 261, Fig. 24]).

88 Cf. Num 17:25, Heb 9:4. The account in 3 Kgdms 8:9 states that only the two stone tablets of the law lay within the ark, but the statement comes in the lengthier passage of King Solomon uttering the consecration prayer of the first temple and thus also points to the Israelite king as a sacred figure.

we find concealed within this new “ark” the wood of the cross, an instrument of death and torture, which buds forth with life for the Church⁸⁹ and victory for both God and emperor (a motif even more ‘hidden’ on the back of the Staurotheke, to which I shall return below). Yet these same angels that look like seraphim and cherubim are called “authorities” and “rulers”. In *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysios writes that these authorities “have not abused their authoritative power to base ends in tyrannical fashion, but are rather led unbounded on high to divine things in good order, and also lead those after them [sc. the lower angelic ranks] in goodly manner, and are likened, insofar as God allows, to the source of authority which grants authority, and which they make visible as far as possible to the angels amongst the well-ordered ranks of the authoritative power in accordance with this authority”,⁹⁰ while the “rulers”, who signify divine authority and rule, “have wholly turned themselves towards the Rule above all rule and lead others [sc. angelic ranks] in a ruling manner and are modelled after this [Rule] as far as possible and display the rule-granting Rule as well as its superessential ruling order to the well-ordered body of the angelic powers.”⁹¹ Depicting the highest heavenly powers fluttering above the holy relics and around the cross of Christ while calling them by instantly understandable Greek names denoting power and might (rather than via the recognisable Hebrew terms, whose denotation but not etymology would be readily understood), the iconographic programme within the Limburg Staurotheke could be seen in its context within the Great Palace and the Pharos chapel to be further cementing the link between heavenly and human rule and authority. Christ’s life finds summary in the selection of Passion relics included, and heavenly and earthly ministers attend both the cross and Christ enthroned in glory in the enamel icons. Basil Lakapēnos spared no expense in the adornment and crafting of this unique reliquary; even the back/bottom of the Staurotheke is decorated with a flowering cross standing on a raised platform.⁹² Yet despite

⁸⁹ See above this chapter, n. 6.

⁹⁰ Pseudo-Dionysios, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, ed. by Heil/Ritter, 8.1: οὐ τυραννικῶς ἐπὶ τὰ χεῖρω ταῖς ἐξουσιαστικαῖς δυνάμεσιν ἀποκεχρημένης ἀλλ’ ἀκρατῆτως ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα μετ’ αὐτὴν ἀγαθοειδῶς ἀναγούσης, καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐξουσιοποιὸν ἐξουσιαρχίαν ὡς θεμιτὸν ἀφομοιουμένης καὶ ταύτην ὡς δυνατόν ἀγγέλοις ἀναλαμπούσης ἐν ταῖς κατ’ αὐτὴν εὐκόσμοις τάξεσι τῆς ἐξουσιαστικῆς δυνάμεως (translation mine). The use of the singular here in the Greek derives from earlier on in the passage, where the grammatical subject in an accusative-infinitive clause is “the explanatory name of the holy dominions ... and of the holy powers ... and of the holy authorities” (τῶν μὲν οὖν ἁγίων κυριοτήτων **τὴν ἐκφαντορικὴν ὀνομασίαν** ... τὴν δὲ τῶν ἁγίων δυνάμεων ... τὴν δὲ τῶν ἁγίων ἐξουσιῶν) (emphasis mine).

⁹¹ Pseudo-Dionysios, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, ed. by Heil/Ritter, 9.1: τὸ πρὸς τὴν ὑπεράρχιον ἀρχὴν αὐτάς τε ὀλικῶς ἐπεστάθαι καὶ ἐτέρων ἀρχικῶς ἡγεῖσθαι καὶ τὸ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἐκείνην ὡς δυνατόν ἀποτυποῦσθαι τὴν ἀρχοποιὸν ἀρχὴν ἀναφαίνειν τε τὴν ὑπερούσιον αὐτῆς ταξιαρχίαν τῇ τῶν ἀρχικῶν εὐκοσμίᾳ δυνάμεων (translation mine).

⁹² See n. 6 above; also KODER 1989, 182, who notes the so-called *Stufenkreuz* motif here; cf. also ERICSSON 1968, which Koder mentions.

Basil's name on the outer inscription, the clear focus in the collection of relics and imagery in this reliquary is on divine protection and power, funnelled through the cross and other Passion relics, housed in the Great Palace near the emperor, and the presence of imperial names joined to the cross itself in the inmost inscription. The divine and the human, the sacred and the imperial, are fused together in the combination of word and image, wood and stone. How this fusion might have functioned or been activated, though, depends on how the Staurotheke (and in particular, the relic of the True Cross, which could be removed) was used: in other words, on the relic's/reliquary's performance and the potential audiences of such performance.

3.5 The Staurotheke and relic performance

Following Koder's reading of the *Book of Ceremonies* above, we can identify the storage location of the Limburg Staurotheke prior to its seizure in the Fourth Crusade as being within the Great Palace, and more specifically probably within the Pharos chapel. In many Byzantine churches, including those throughout the capital of Constantinople and those in the palace, relics were venerated by the faithful in the course of specific pilgrimages or on the feasts of the saints in question.⁹³ Yet while the Middle Byzantine period provides evidence of frequent or repeated processions involving icons,⁹⁴ there does not seem to have been a comparable movement of relics outside of the churches to which they had been respectively translated after such translation, save for the relics of the True Cross, which were processed throughout the city each year in August.⁹⁵ Remaining hidden away in sacred repositories and believed to be special storehouses of spiritual blessing and power, relics invited the faithful to seek them out, to 'uncover' them anew from their cloths and boxes, to glimpse or kiss them and thus come close to the saint or event associated with the specific sacred object.⁹⁶ But not all objects remained stationary, waiting for the pious to come to them. The very structure of the Limburg Staurotheke, considered first apart from any other historical evidence, seems to go against this trend: the central cross relic can be removed from the larger reliquary, and the inscription on the back of this particular relic would suggest a reader or

93 Several key studies on the role of relics in the Byzantine capital from its imperial founding up to the Fourth Crusade are available in: MERCATI 1936, MEINARDUS 1970, MANGO 1990, MERGIALI-SAHAS 2001, WORTLEY 2009, PENTCHEVA 2012, SULLIVAN 2012, and HAHN/KLEIN 2015. On relics depicted within iconographic programmes, see: ŠALINA 2005.

94 Cf. JANIN 1966; also MANOPOULOU 2016 and BRUBAKER/WICKHAM 2021.

95 As outlined in the *Book of Ceremonies*, II.8; cf. below this chapter, n. 115.

96 On relics as inviting both examination and performance, see PENTCHEVA 2008 and PENTCHEVA 2012. On the issue of the hiddenness of relics, particularly in the Western medieval context, see chapter 2 above, n. 286.

audience for this relic apart from and outside its larger case (more on audiences below). This special status of both cross relic and greater reliquary as being movable relics that could ‘perform’ or function in spaces outside the Pharos chapel seems to be reflected in several literary sources of the period, which in turn suggest possible audiences for the objects. It is to these texts that we now turn.

3.5.1 The *Book of Ceremonies*

The tenth-century compilation of historic and then-current court practice and etiquette in Constantinople, known as the *Book of Ceremonies*, outlines the imperial protocol for everyday and special occasions, including high church feasts and the emperor’s activities thereon.⁹⁷ Included in the ceremonies outlined are those related to the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14),⁹⁸ the procession of the cross (August 1),⁹⁹ and the veneration of the cross on the third Sunday in Great Lent,¹⁰⁰ all of which explicitly mention the movement of relics of the cross from the Great Palace to other sacred spaces and out into the city.

On the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross in September, the ceremonial text tells us that the emperor venerates “the precious woods” (τὰ τίμια ξύλα) in the Small

97 The title *Book of Ceremonies* derives from the Latin title (*De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae*) given to the work by Johannes Henricus Majus, a colleague of the 18th-century German scholar and book collector Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach (1683–1734), adopted by Johann Albert Fabricius in his description of the text within his *Bibliotheca Graeca* (1705–1728, with later revisions and additions by Gottlieb Christoph Harless from 1790–1812), and later used in the edition prepared by Johann Jakob Reiske and published at Bonn in 1829/1830. The term then became common in German, French, and English parlance. A Greek title is sometimes given, “Explanation and Presentation of the Order of the Palace” (ἡ τῆς βασιλείου τάξεως ἐκθεσίς τε καὶ ὑποτύπωσις), taken from the prologue of the text, but no such title per se precedes the work. The *Book of Ceremonies* survives (mostly) complete in a single medieval manuscript, MS Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig Rep. I 17 in Leipzig (a digitalised copy is available online at: <https://digital.ub.uni-leipzig.de/object/viewid/0000013160> (accessed 25/09/2023)). The latest critical edition of the text, together with a complete French-language translation, commentary, glossary, and indices, has been edited by Dagron and Flusin; a thorough overview of the background of the text and the manuscript transmission history can be found therein in 1:3–192. The Greek text as printed in their edition is used throughout the present study. A complete English-language translation of the *Book of Ceremonies*, together with introduction, glossary, indices, and a reproduction of the edition prepared by Reiske, has been prepared by Moffatt and Tall. Studies on the surviving manuscripts of the text are available in: BURY 1907, ROCHOW 1976, FEATHERSTONE 2002, and FEATHERSTONE/GRUSKOVÁ/KRESTEN 2006.

98 *Book of Ceremonies* I.31.

99 *Book of Ceremonies* II.8. Note that the dates are presented in the text according to the Byzantine calendar year, which began on September 1 and ended on August 31.

100 *Book of Ceremonies* II.11.

Sekreton¹⁰¹ above the southwestern vestibule of the narthex of Hagia Sophia,¹⁰² whither they had been brought from the Great Palace by the referendary at some time prior to the celebration of the festal vigil.¹⁰³ The emperor himself then escorts the same “precious woods” down into the narthex, through the imperial doors, and into the nave, where he meets the patriarch. The two then enter the sanctuary and venerate the Gospels before proceeding out to the ambo¹⁰⁴ in the centre of the church, where ceremony dictates that the emperor ascend up to the third or fourth step of the ambo, at which point the patriarch meets him at the ambo and elevates the cross in blessing in the four cardinal directions. The relic of the cross is then set forth for public veneration while the emperor departs again to the palace.¹⁰⁵

Several textual details here hint at a possible identification of the relic of the cross within the Limburg Staurotheke as being the relic used in this rite on this feast in September. Contrary to the English translation of the *Book of Ceremonies* by Moffatt and Tall, the cross relic is referred to consistently in the Greek text as “precious woods” (τίμια ξύλα): a plural noun, rather than a simple singular “wood” (ξύλον) or the perhaps expected “cross” (σταυρός).¹⁰⁶ The use of the plural here in my view could be a reference to, and reflection of, the composite nature of the Staurotheke’s relic of the True Cross, which consisted of several wooden fragments. The emperor is described as standing on the third or fourth step of the ambo with the cross in hand; if Dagron and Flusin’s dating of the various portions of the text is correct, this ceremony for September 14 goes back to the reign of Michael III (847–867),¹⁰⁷ predating the Staurotheke’s creation and inscriptions by close to a century. Interestingly, the back of the Staurotheke’s case depicts a blossoming cross elevated on a platform of four steps; Koder has noted that such stepped crosses or *Stufenkreuze* are a sign of imperial triumph,¹⁰⁸ which would further undergird the associations of this specific cross relic with the imperial person and creating

101 The term *sekreton* (Gr. σέκρετον, borrowed from Lat. *secretarium*) generally meant a governmental bureau or court tribunal; in this context, however, the Small Sekreton refers to a small reception room above the southwestern ramp in Hagia Sophia (the Large Sekreton was above the southwestern vestibule) which was occupied by the offices of the patriarchate. Cf. “Sekreton” in *ODB* 3:1866; DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 6:103 (glossary), who also mention MANGO 1959, 51–54.

102 *Book of Ceremonies* I.31.

103 This detail is not noted in the Leipzig manuscript (and is consequently also missing from the Dagron/Flusin edition), but is included in the praxapostolos MS Dresden SLB Gr. A. 104, dated to between the tenth and 12th centuries, fol. 134v. See AKENT’EV 2008, 97; cf. also TUCKER 2023, 138–141.

104 This was a central stepped platform in the centre of Hagia Sophia; cf. “Ambo” in *ODB* 1:75–76.

105 Ceremony outlined in *Book of Ceremonies* I.31.

106 This plural translation is brought out in the French-language translation, which uses *les précieux Bois*; cf. DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 1:230.

107 DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 1:119.

108 Cf. KODER 1989, 182.

a parallel between the imagery on the outside of the case with the naming of the emperors on the cross inscription. Placing such a stepped cross on the back of the Staurotheke also parallels the placement of such stepped crosses on the reverse of some Byzantine imperial coinage beginning under Tiberius II (r. 578–582)—a motif significantly employed by Hērakleios on gold solidi in the early seventh century after the retrieval of the True Cross from the Persians, and used as late as under the post-Crusade Palaiologan rulers—in which imperial visages are clearly linked with this specific depiction of the cross.¹⁰⁹ Péter Somogyi has claimed that the stepped cross motif was merely used by Hērakleios to show a decisive change from the policy and tenure of his predecessor in imperial office, the usurper Phokas (r. 602–610), and that Hērakleios’s descendants maintained this specific depiction of the cross simply to show dynastic continuity.¹¹⁰ This reading of the evidence both disregards the earlier coinage bearing this type of imagery and does not explain the re-use of this specific imagery by later Byzantine rulers on coinage after the demise of this dynasty.

Moreover, while some have opined that the *Stufenkreuz* motif represents the cross as the apex of Christian virtues,¹¹¹ more convincing to my mind is seeing a link between this iconography and the jewelled cross (*crux gemmata*) erected by Emperor Theodosios II at Golgotha in Jerusalem in the early fifth century, a notion posited by Heba Gayed.¹¹² Within the sacred complex of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one must ‘ascend’ several steps to Golgotha from the entrance into the church; these steps along with curtains that might have formed part of a templon in front of the altar and/or area where the jewelled cross stood are also depicted on a late-sixth- or early-seventh-century metal pilgrim’s ampulla.¹¹³ Similarly, the central bema in Hagia Sophia was stepped and marked by colonnades and curtains, which would thus enable one to create a visual parallel between the coin and Calvary, with both the gold solidus and the grave of Golgotha being tied to an anointed one, a *christos*, a connection discussed at greater length later on in this chapter. Besides being visualised via the steps of the bema, the connection of Golgotha to the liturgical rite of blessing with the cross in Hagia Sophia also subtly underscores the narrower meaning of ‘new Zion’ to be the imperial palace; as the Christ is crucified outside the Holy City, so too is this rite of elevation done outside of the palace and in the cathedral. Certainly, Hagia Sophia was a much larger and much more ‘public’ venue than any

109 The Dumbarton Oaks Coin Collection provides images, transcriptions, and descriptions of more than fifty Byzantine coins presenting this combination of imperial portrait on the obverse and stepped cross on the reverse, ranging in date from the late sixth century under Tiberius II to the late 13th century under Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1258/1259–1282). Cf. https://www.doaks.org/resources/coins/catalogue#b_start=o&c6=stepped (accessed 26/09/2023).

110 SOMOGYI 2016, 149.

111 As noted in GAYED 2018, 921.

112 GAYED 2018, 922–923.

113 Cf. GAYED 2018, 923 (Fig. 8), who cites here the still-essential work on these pilgrim souvenirs, GRABAR 1958, plate X.

of the palatine chapels and for those reasons alone—not to mention the key role played by the patriarch in this rite—made sense as the location for the festivities, but this logical explanation need not mean that a symbolic equation of cathedral with Golgotha on this feast, and thus implicitly again of the palace as Zion, might not also have resonated with Byzantine viewers of the spectacle.

Finally, the additional ceremonial information provided in the MS Dresden Sächsische Landesbibliothek Gr. A. 104, dated variously between the tenth and 12th centuries,¹¹⁴ notes that the “precious woods” used in the rite of elevation were not cross relics kept at Hagia Sophia, but rather ones brought from the Great Palace by the referendary, who in turn received them from the *papias* or palace gatekeeper;¹¹⁵ moreover, the Dresden manuscript also notes that the precious woods were brought to the cathedral in their “case” (θήκη), only referring to the relic in the singular as “the cross” (ὁ δὲ σταυρός) once the elevation rites have been completed.¹¹⁶ I believe, then, that these details all suggest that the cross relic in the Limburg Staurotheke could have been both “the cross” and “the precious woods” used to bless the church and world on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.

The next rite mentioned in the *Book of Ceremonies* that involved the relics of the True Cross is the procession of the cross throughout the palace precincts and out into the city, rites that were several days long and date to the early part of Constantine VII’s reign according to Dagron and Flusin.¹¹⁷ Here, we find mention of a single “precious and lifegiving cross” rather than several “precious woods”.¹¹⁸ The initial veneration is made by the sovereigns in the Chrysotriklinos hall, after which the cross is brought out from the skeuophylakion of the Great Palace¹¹⁹ and paraded around the entire palace and city:

Then the *papias* raises the precious cross above his head, wearing, that is to say, a *skaramangion* and true-purple *sagion*.¹²⁰ Escorted by the imperial clergy and the *protopapas* of the Church of St Stephen of the Palace of Daphne and stewards

114 Cf. TUCKER 2023, 138–141.

115 AKENT’EV 2008, 97.

116 AKENT’EV 2008, 104.

117 To wit, ca. AD 946–950. Cf. DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 1:133.

118 *Book of Ceremonies* II.8. The section is entitled in the manuscript “What must be observed on the first of August, when the precious and life-giving cross comes out” (Ὅσα δεῖ παραφυλάττειν τῇ πρώτῃ τοῦ Αὐγούστου μηνός, τοῦ τιμίου καὶ ζωοποιοῦ Σταυροῦ ἐξερχομένου) (DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 3:57).

119 This was the place housing the precious liturgical vessels and/or relics of a church; Hagia Sophia had its own skeuophylakion, but DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 3:56, believe this mention to be referring to the Pharos chapel, given the involvement of the *papias*, the eunuch in charge of palace facilities; cf. “*Papias*” in *ODB* 3:1580 and “*Skeuophylax*” in *ODB* 3:1909–1910.

120 The *skaramangion* was a short tunic adapted from riding dress and common in the Middle Byzantine period, while the *sagion* was a similar kind of cloak derived from military dress; on both terms, cf. PARANI 2003, 348.

of the Palace, all carrying candles, it goes through both the terrace and the Chrysotriklinos, and is led away and set up in the Lausiakos Hall on the left-hand side, in front of the door of the Chapel of St Basil, for the obeisance of all the senate. After the obeisance, it is again carried by the *papias*, that is to say, escorted by those previously mentioned, and is put away in the Palace of Daphne in the Church of St Stephen the Protomartyr. The cross begins on July 28th to go around and to sanctify every place and every house of this God-guarded and imperial City, but especially the walls themselves, so that both this City and the whole area around it are filled with grace and holiness. This continues until August 13th. On the morning of the 13th of the said month, it goes into the Sacred Palace and is set up on the throne which is in the Chrysotriklinos. The palace-stewards sing the customary Crucifixion hymns and, when the prayer of supplication has been said by the *protopapas* of the Palace of Daphne, they give the response, “Making strong”, as usual. Immediately the cross is raised again by the *papias* and, escorted by the *protopapas* of the Palace of Daphne and the palace-stewards, it goes around sanctifying the bedchambers and the whole Palace. Then it is put away in the Chapel of St Theodore, and in the evening the *papias* and the deputy carry it to the Church of the Theotokos of the Pharos, and hand it over to the sacristan.¹²¹

We see here that a single relic is taken out from the Pharos chapel and sent forth by the emperor(s) to bless palace, city, walls, the imperial bedchamber: essentially, the protective power of the cross connects all the city to the emperor and his dwelling place.

In their commentary on these rubrics, Dagron and Flusin note the singular use of “cross” here and speak also of the third instance in which cross relics find occasion for performance in Constantinople: namely, the third Sunday of Great Lent. There, the *Book of Ceremonies* mentions “the precious crosses”¹²² that are brought out for veneration from the same palatine skeuophylakion, i.e., the Pharos chapel: one is brought to the so-called New Church, one is brought to several stations by the *papias*, and one remains in the Great Palace.¹²³ Dagron and Flusin suggest that the three crosses here are three complete cruciform relics: a larger one, which they posit as being the one contained in the Limburg Staurotheke, and two

¹²¹ *Book of Ceremonies* II.8; translation from MOFFATT/TALL 2017, 539–540.

¹²² *Book of Ceremonies* II.11: “What must be observed when the precious crosses are about to come out in the middle week of the holy forty days [sc. of Great Lent]” (Ὅσα δεῖ παραφυλάττειν, τῶν τιμίων σταυρῶν μελλόντων ἐξιέναι τῇ μέσῃ ἑβδομάδι τῆς ἁγίας Τεσσαρακοστῆς) (DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 3:71).

¹²³ *Book of Ceremonies* II.11. In the case of the third cross, Dagron and Flusin believe this to indicate the Pharos chapel. The text reads: “The other cross remains in the holy palace” (Ὁ δὲ ἕτερος σταυρὸς ἐναπομένει ἐν τῷ Ἱερῷ Παλατίῳ), on which statement the editors comment: “Il faut sans doute comprendre que cette troisième croix ne quitte pas l’église de la Théotokos du Phare, c’est-à-dire le Palais” (DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 3:72, n. 11).

smaller ones.¹²⁴ Neither the sources nor the French scholars provide any hints as to which of the three crosses remained in the Pharos chapel on this occasion. However, given that the smaller crosses would probably be easier to carry for a longer amount of time than the larger one, and the fact that the larger one (i.e., the one in the Staurotheke) remaining in its reliquary ensemble would present a more sensible and complete aesthetic and spiritual programme amidst the other relics and enamel iconography as opposed to the cross-less Staurotheke and a smaller cross left in the Pharos chapel for veneration, I can only surmise that the cross within the Staurotheke on this occasion is the one that remained in the Great Palace for veneration by the imperial family and palace elites in the middle of the Great Fast. Given this constellation of crosses, one can see the power and blessing of the cross being extended in Great Lent—as at the beginning and ending of the Byzantine calendar year—out from the Great Palace to the entire city as a form of simultaneous divine and imperial philanthropy. Yet in my view, the abiding presence of the larger cross relic within the Limburg Staurotheke would not only ensure an enduring connection of the cross with the other Passion relics assembled there in a Lenten context, but would also firmly link the Passion and resurrection of Christ with the person of the emperor in the imperial chapel of the Lighthouse.

3.5.2 Two tenth-century military harangues by Constantine VII Porphyrogennētos

Beyond the *Book of Ceremonies*, there exist two other texts from the second half of the tenth century which reference the Passion relics and perhaps the Limburg Staurotheke. The two speeches, attributed to Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennētos, survive in a single codex of military treatises, MS Ambrosianus B 119 sup., an English-language translation and study of which has been published by Eric McGeer.¹²⁵ Following the work of the Italian Byzantinist Carlo Maria Mazzucchi, McGeer dates the first of Constantine VII's speeches to the latter part of the year 950,¹²⁶ with the second speech coming nearly a decade later in August or

124 DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 4.2:665–666: “Aucune source ne permet de supposer qu’il existait alors d’autre relique que les trois croix mentionnées dans le *De cerimoniis* et bien localisées à la Théotokos du Phare, non à Sainte-Sophie. Les pèlerins qui visitent Constantinople avant le pillage de 1204, l’*Anonyme de Mercati* au XIIe siècle et Antoine de Novgorod en 1200, sont formels sur ce point; Robert de Clari, lui aussi, n’évoque que les morceaux de la croix de l’église du Phare, deux selon lui, ‘gros comme la jambe d’un homme et longs d’une demi-toise.’ Il est très probable que la stavrothèque du Xe siècle, pièce maîtresse du ‘trésor du Palais,’ avait à peu près la même forme et la même disposition que celle, byzantine mais un peu plus tardive, dans laquelle la relique arriva à Paris en 1241.”

125 McGEER 2003. On the manuscript itself, see DAIN 1967. On these orations in the manuscript and their status as models of protreptic or exhortative oratory, see also ERAMO 2017.

126 McGEER 2003, 116.

September 958.¹²⁷ These texts are significant for understanding the sacrality of the emperor vis-à-vis the Passion relics in several ways. In the earlier speech, the divine character of the emperor is alluded to in the words addressed by the sovereign to the soldiers on the front: “I still want you men, my peculiar people, my strength and my indomitable might, emboldened by this faith, to fight against the enemy more eagerly than before.”¹²⁸ The phrase “my peculiar people” (ὁ λαός μου περιούσιος), as McGeer notes, recalls Exodus 19:5, where God speaks to the people of Israel using the same adjective: “You shall be my peculiar [or: special] people” (ἔσεσθέ μοι λαός περιούσιος). Just as the Lord of Hosts spoke to the people in the wilderness, so too does the earthly Byzantine sovereign speak here to his armed hosts at the battle-front in the wilderness, further underscoring in my view a possible link between the sovereign and the divinity in their common address to and solicitude for the chosen people of Byzantium.

The allusions to the emperor as a Christ-like divine figure can also be seen at the end of the harangue, where rewards are promised for the gallantry in battle that will be reported back from the front lines to the emperor:

[Y]ou will keep written records, so that when you come here you may tell us, in order that we will look with favour upon the men and deem them worthy of our praises and rewards. The strategoi who command the smaller themes will be transferred to larger ones, while the strategoi of larger themes will be honoured with gifts and other recompense, whereas the commanders of the tagmata and other units who fight courageously will be rewarded in proportion to their deeds, some to become tourmarchs, others kleisourarchs or topoteretai. Not only these men, but also the rest, members of the common soldiery who display the traits of valour, will receive their due reward. But we who now receive information through you about each soldier will soon not have you or any other witness to these men, but our eyes alone, and when we are present in person and beholding for ourselves the valour of each man, we will ourselves present awards to the combatants.¹²⁹

127 McGeer 2003, 123.

128 McGeer 2003, 118.

129 McGeer 2003, 120. Several military offices and terms are mentioned in this passage. *Stratēgos* originally meant “general” but by the Middle Byzantine period, this term referred to military governors of imperial districts who held this post for a term of three or four years (cf. “Strategos” in *ODB* 3:1964); *tagmata* originally meant simply regiments of troops, but in the period under question, these were military units under the direct command of the emperor and his domestikoi, rather than under the stratēgoi of the surrounding districts (cf. “Tagma” in *ODB* 3:2007); *tourmarchai* were the military commanders second to the stratēgoi and in charge of smaller detachments called *tourmai*, hence their name (cf. “Tourma” and “Tourmarches” in *ODB* 3:2100–2101); *kleisourarchai* were the administrators of *kleisourai* or smaller geopolitical subdivisions of a theme or district (cf. “Kleisoura” in *ODB* 2:1132); *topotērētai* were lieutenants (a literal Greek equivalent of

The distribution of gifts and rewards for military service is not unusual in this context,¹³⁰ but given the sacred aura around the emperor as a quasi-Christ-like figure, a patristic/associative reading of this text may also be intended to recall the Parable of the Talents from the Gospels,¹³¹ where servants faithful in small things are given greater prestige and reward, while the lazy servant is cast out from his master's service. Given the protreptic and exhortative nature of this speech, it is not surprising that Constantine VII does not mention what he might do, or give to, lazy and cowardly soldiers; but the emperor's promised acts of rewarding could be understood to mirror those of the Lord mentioned in the parable.

The second speech from 958 was sent from the emperor to be read to the soldiers preparing for the assault of Samosata by Basil Lakapēnos, who had been sent thither to support John Tzimiskēs in the endeavour.¹³² The presence at the battlefront of the palatine parakoimōmenos, the artistic patron and courtier behind the creation of the Limburg Staurotheke, as the one declaiming this imperial speech is key, I believe, to understanding the relics and other saints mentioned in this harangue, as well as the increased proximity of the sovereign to the soldiers, which comes across through Constantine VII's relayed words. While the first speech in 950 likened the relationship between emperor and army to that between God and the chosen, 'peculiar' or special people of Israel, this later oration "forges closer bonds of unity and kinship between army and emperor", as McGeer writes,¹³³ with the emperor offering his own body and soul to the army and being linked to them in one body, just as the Christian church is to find unity in the common bond of the body of Christ:

The sacred words of the holy Gospel, wishing to express the greatness of God the Father's love for [hu]mankind, say *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son*¹³⁴ unto death, whereas I give not my only begotten son but my whole being, in body and soul, and I link and mix my flesh with your flesh and my bones with your bones, and I consider each one of my limbs united with and of common origin with you, and my very soul, one though it is, I distribute and divide among all of you, and I want my host assembled to be made animate and to be brought alive by me in the part that is mine.¹³⁵ *Children, whom I have*

the Greek term, meaning "place-holder") under the tourmarchai (cf. "Topoteretes" in *ODB* 3:2095–2096).

130 Cf. McGEER 2003, 120, nn. 46–47, which also refer to: McGEER 2000, 86–89; and HALDON 1984, 307–318, 328–337.

131 Cf. Matt 25:14–30, Luke 19:11–27.

132 McGEER 2003, 123, who notes here the historical source as being Theophanēs Continuatus, *Chronographia*, ed. by Bekker, p. 461, line 9–p. 462, line 4.

133 McGEER 2003, 124.

134 Cf. John 3:16.

135 This is not a direct quotation, but probably a reference to Ezek 37:1–14, where God promises the prophet that he will bring his spirit upon the bones of the dead house of Israel and resurrect them.

*begotten through the Gospel*¹³⁶ and *implanted in the inheritance of God*,¹³⁷ whom God has raised to maturity and brought to the full measure of youthful vigour, accept the present exhortation issued to you from the very depth of my soul and the hidden chambers of my heart.¹³⁸

The language of giving “not only [his] only begotten son, but [his] whole being” to the army, as well as allusions to sending his own spirit to revive them and to plant them in his inheritance, establishes Constantine VII for his hearers as being very much like unto God. We have here a speech proclaiming the divine characteristics of the emperor, delivered by the chief palace servant and blood relation Basil Lakapēnos, who thus serves in a way at the front lines in my reading as both prophet and forerunner for the sovereign, going before the emperor to prepare the latter’s forces for battle and embodying in action John the Baptist, just as the Baptist, in my reading, typifies Basil on the Staurotheke.

But this oration is not only concerned with the emperor and Basil and the army: it is also concerned with relics, and a specific subset of them. In a lengthy passage, the emperor speaks of the succour he is providing his troops, derived from the holiest objects in the Great Palace:

So that you may know how much I am on fire in my soul for you, that I am completely consumed, that I burn all over as I devote my exertions to your salvation and to *prospering you*,¹³⁹ behold, that after drawing (ἀπομυρίσαντες) holy water from the immaculate and most sacred relics of the Passion of Christ our True God—from the precious wooden fragments [of the True Cross] and the undefiled Lance, the precious Titulus, the wonder-working Reed, the life-giving blood which flowed from His precious rib, the most sacred Tunic, the holy swaddling clothes, the God-bearing winding sheet, and the other relics of His undefiled Passion—we have sent it to be sprinkled upon you, for you to be anointed by it and to garb yourselves with the divine power from on high. For I trust in my true God and Saviour Christ, that just as He restored and endowed the human race with life through the blood and water which flowed from His precious rib, so will He through the sprinkling of this holy water quicken and restore you and furnish you with confidence and might and domination against the enemy.¹⁴⁰

As McGeer notes in his introduction to the second speech, this listing of Passion relics from the Great Palace is the first of its kind, pre-dating those from pilgrim accounts by nearly two centuries, and we know from the *Book of Ceremonies* (as

136 Cf. 1 Cor 4:14–15.

137 Cf. Exod 15:17.

138 McGEER 2003, 127–128 (italics his).

139 Cf. Ps 67:19.

140 McGEER 2003, 132–133 (italics his).

discussed above) that the “precious wooden fragments” of the cross were kept in the Pharos chapel.¹⁴¹ The list of relics mentioned here, immersed or brought into contact with water to be sprinkled later in blessing, do not match perfectly with those contained in the Limburg Staurotheke, although a good degree of overlap does exist (cross fragments, swaddling bands, tunic, and perhaps the “other relics” mentioned). Given the dating of the speech, the involvement of Basil Lakapēnos with the commissioning of the reliquary and the delivery of this speech to the front-lines—as well as the Passion relics mentioned—it does seem possible that the assembly of relics mentioned here in the oration could in fact be those contained within the Limburg Staurotheke. This link is also suggested by the concluding doxology at the end of the emperor’s speech, where the sovereign expresses a final wish to the soldiers: “that you may cause Our Majesty to be joyful and to rejoice in your achievements, and to be embellished by your heroic deeds through the intercession of the immaculate Mother of God, His mother, and all the incorporeal angelic powers, and the saints who have served Him from eternity and been martyred for His sake. Amen.”¹⁴² The Virgin Mary, the angelic hosts, and the martyrs had long been associated with military campaigns and defence of the Byzantine Empire before the 950s,¹⁴³ but the listing here has interesting parallels to the iconographic programme on the Limburg Staurotheke, where we find the Mother of God, the angelic powers, and several great-martyrs depicted.¹⁴⁴

Additionally, some of the specific vocabulary in the final sections of this second military harangue are reminiscent of both the text and imagery of the Staurotheke.¹⁴⁵ The Greek word translated by McGeer as “embellished” here is ἐνωραϊζομένην, which has as its root the adjective ὡραῖος (“beautiful”), a word also used on the lid inscription to speak of Christ, who is said to be not outwardly beautiful or comely at his crucifixion. The context makes clear here that the embellishment is one of the emperor himself,¹⁴⁶ and thus the speech could also be seen in its closing lines to foreground a further similarity between divine beauty and the beauty of the sovereign. More interesting to my eye is the word which McGeer translates here as “relics”. Throughout this passage describing the relics used to obtain the

¹⁴¹ McGEER 2003, 126.

¹⁴² McGEER 2003, 134.

¹⁴³ For sources on this tradition, see above this chapter, n. 47.

¹⁴⁴ Nancy P. Ševčenko has suggested that these parallels could mean that “[p]erhaps the Staurotheke was made for use away from the palace, away even from the city” as a field reliquary or imperial enkolpion offering protection in battle (N. ŠEVČENKO 1994, 292–292).

¹⁴⁵ I was able to consult the Greek text of this manuscript at the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan and to make a transcription of the text thanks to Mr Trifone Cellamaro, head librarian there, who arranged for me to consult the manuscript on site.

¹⁴⁶ I follow McGeer’s translation of the Greek text here, reading τὴν βασιλείαν ἡμῶν in the sense of “imperial majesty”, a usage found both in the Septuagint and in later patristic authors, rather than as “empire”; cf. LSJ, s.v. “βασιλεία, ἡ”; Lampe, s.v. “βασιλεία, ἡ”.

“sanctification” (ἀγίασμα) for the frontline soldiers, we do not find the customary word for such holy remnants (i.e., λείψανα), but rather “symbols” (σύμβολα), things representing something other and beyond what they themselves are. More than mere relics of holy men and women, the objects contained in the Limburg Staurotheke—like the Mandyllion—represent the reality of the incarnation and the union of human and divine on earth in the body of Jesus Christ, a reality and presence transmitted to the objects that came into contact with this divine-human body. Engaging a patristic/associative reading here, the choice of the word σύμβολα rather than λείψανα could be seen as serving to heighten the sanctity of the blessed water being distributed.

The word choice could also perhaps point yet again in double reference to the emperor, whose palace held these ‘symbols’ and was thus sanctified. Perhaps a century after the creation of the Limburg Staurotheke, the monk and philosopher Michael Psellos, in a panegyric to Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (r. 1042–1055), speaks of the imperial palace as a divine place, synonymous with the tabernacle of witness and the ark of the covenant and containing the ‘symbols’ of truth which are suspended from the ceiling (a reference to the Mandyllion and Keramion in the Pharos Chapel)¹⁴⁷ as well as of the emperor as distributing and dividing amongst his people divine waters.¹⁴⁸ Such an understanding of the emperor as performing

147 Michael Psellos, *Orations*, ed. by Kurtz, p. 28, l. 22, from a speech entitled “Of the same (sc. Michael), another speech to the same emperor [i.e., Constantine IX]” (Τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἕτερος λόγος πρὸς τὸν αὐτὸν βασιλέα): “Whither shall I then turn my gaze? To the divine imperial palace, to the tabernacle of witness, to the resting place of your ark, in which the symbols of the truth are suspended?” (Ποῖ τοίνυν ἄγω τὸν θεατήν; ἐπὶ τὸ θεῖον ἀνάκτορον, ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ μαρτυρίου σκηνήν, ἐπὶ τὴν κατάπαυσιν τῆς σῆς κιβωτοῦ, ἔνθα τὰ τῆς ἀληθείας ἀπώρηται σύμβολα;) (translation mine).

148 Michael Psellos, *Orations*, ed. by Kurtz, p. 30, l. 25, from the same speech: “For since the Creator wanted all virtue to dwell in one [human] from amongst all, he created for you an animate temple and fashioned for you a sunlike form; he imbued you with a breath/spirit not sullied by the baseness of matter. He set you upon the highest point of power, so that, as he is to you, you might be to us, sharing with us the sources from above and distributing them through pipes, so that each might receive as they are able. For you have been fixed as some kind of middle point between us and what is better: however much you lack in comparison to them, to that extent you exceed us” (Βουληθεὶς γὰρ ὁ δημιουργὸς ἐνὶ τῶν πάντων ζύμπασαν καταχωρῆσαι τὴν ἀρετὴν ἐμψυχὸν σοι δημιουργεῖ τέμενος καὶ πλάττει μὲν σοι ἡλιῶσαν μορφήν, ἐμπνεῖ δέ σοι ψυχὴν μὴ μολυνομένην ταῖς τῆς ὕλης ἐσχατιαῖς· ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ἀκροτάτης τοῦ κράτους περιωπῆς τίθησιν, ἵν’, ὅπερ ἐκεῖνός ἐστι πρὸς σέ, τοῦτο σὺ πρὸς ἡμᾶς γίνῃ, μετοχετεύων ἡμῖν τὰς ἐκεῖθεν πηγὰς καὶ διαμερίζων ταῦτα εἰς ὀχετούς, ἵν’, ὅσον ἂν ἕκαστος δύνηται, δέξηται. ὥσπερ γάρ τι κέντρον μέσον τῶν κρειττόνων καὶ ἡμῶν πηξάμενος, ὅσον ἐκεῖνων λείπῃ, τοσοῦτον ὑπερανέχεις ἡμῶν) (translation mine). This notion of the emperor being the “middle point” calls to my mind scriptural passages from the New Testament which speak of Christ as precisely such a ‘mediator’ between God and humankind: cf. 1 Tim 2:5; Heb 8:6, 9:15.

a sacred and intermediary role could indeed derive from the language and rhetoric displayed in these earlier tenth-century texts.

One final document remains for us to examine as a possible source documenting part of the Limburg Staurotheke's relic collection and the sacred connection to the emperor: the illuminated *Menologion of Basil II* and the miniature depicting the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross contained therein.

3.5.3 The *Menologion of Basil II* and depictions of the cross relic

Dated to around 1000, the so-called *Menologion of Basil II* (MS Vatican Greek 1613) is a codex commissioned by Emperor Basil II Porphyrogennētos (r. 976–1025) that contains short saints' lives and miniature illuminations for most entries.¹⁴⁹ The text begins on September 1, the start of the Byzantine civil and ecclesiastical year, and continues to the end of February (no matching manuscript, whole or portion, for the remaining six months of the year has survived). One such miniature, for September 14, depicts the exaltation of the cross in a curious mixture of chronological references (Fig. 18).

The text on the folio for this date speaks of the origins of the feast, namely, the finding of the cross by Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century and its 'exaltation' from beneath the earth. The date for the feast was then set on the day after the consecration of the Church of the Anastasis (the Holy Sepulchre, September 13), when the cross relic was brought out to the faithful for veneration.¹⁵⁰ In later centuries, after the loss of the relic to the Persians and its subsequent recovery by Emperor Hērakleios in 629, the cross was brought to Constantinople and kept in the Great Palace sometime around 637/638,¹⁵¹ and in time the custom developed for the relic of the cross to be brought into the cathedral of Holy Wisdom on the feast and to be 'exalted' or lifted up in blessing over the faithful and the four corners of creation, as discussed above.

149 A black-and-white facsimile of the manuscript was printed in the early 20th century (cf. CAVALIERI 1907), while a complete colour facsimile of the manuscript has been more recently produced in D'AIUTO/MARTÍN 2005. Studies on the manuscript include: I. ŠEVČENKO 1962, ROHMANN 1999, D'AIUTO 2008, ZAKHAROVA 2010, D'AIUTO 2012, and N. ŠEVČENKO 2013.

150 The history of this feast, emerging from the church at Jerusalem in the fifth century and spreading to Constantinople by the seventh century, is outlined with evidence in TONGEREN 2000, 17–39. See also: BERNARDAKIS 1902a, BERNARDAKIS 1902b, and HALLIT 1972. A discussion of the seventh-century sources and contemporary scholarship on the murky beginnings of the feast's celebration in Constantinople can be found in TUCKER 2023, 393–397.

151 For a discussion of the problematic chronology across various sources on this event, see KLEIN 2004b, esp. pp. 42–43.



Fig. 18: Miniature of the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross and accompanying text for September 14. MS Vat. gr. 1613, fol. 34v. Constantinople, 11th century. Vatican Library, Vatican City.

In the *Menologion*'s narrative text on this date, the newly-recovered cross was lifted up on a “high place” by Makarios, the bishop of Jerusalem, so that all the people wishing to behold the precious relic might catch a glimpse of it.¹⁵² Turning to the image below the text, we see the bishop—marked out by the liturgical vestments of phelonion, cuffs, and omophorion/pallium—holding the cross aloft. Makarios was bishop of Jerusalem from 312 until just before 335¹⁵³ and was later considered a saint in both Western and Eastern churches, hence the halo in the miniature. However, the rest of the image bears an uncanny resemblance to Hagia Sophia in the tenth century, as an examination of the miniature shows. We find the bishop not in the Church of the Anastasis, but at the top of what appears to be the ambo in Constantinople. From the rites prescribed for this feast in the *Book of Ceremonies* as examined above, we know that the ambo consisted of several steps, upon which

152 Cf. *Menologion of Basil II* (MS Vat. Gr. 1613), fol. 35: “The entire people also, seeking to venerate [the cross] but unable to do so because of the vast crowd, asked if they might see it. Then the bishop Makarios, going up to a high place, lifted it up. And the people began to cry, ‘Lord have mercy!’ And the exaltation [of the cross] was modelled” (Ζητῶν δὲ καὶ ὁ λαὸς προσκυνῆσαι· καὶ μὴ δυνάμενος διὰ τὸν ἄπειρον ὄχλον· ἤτήσατο κἂν ἰδεῖν αὐτόν· τότε ἀνελθὼν εἰς ὕψηλον τόπον Μακάριος ὁ ἐπίσκοπος ὕψωσεν αὐτόν· καὶ ἤρξατο κρᾶζειν ὁ λαὸς κύριε ἐλέησον· καὶ ἐτυπώθη ἡ ὕψωσις) (translation mine). Available online at: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1613/ (accessed 23/11/2021).

153 Mentioned in Sōzomenos, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. by Hansen, 1.2.

the emperor ascended. The curtains on the background between the pillars and the rounded area behind these also recall the circle of pillars around the ambo and the apse in the cathedral, based on descriptions we have from the speeches of Paul the Silentiary.¹⁵⁴ What is more, the emperor remained on the ambo, bearing candles and garbed (along with his courtiers) in the skaramangion, a Persian-style tunic belted at the waist and with large armholes or slits on the side.¹⁵⁵ This setup seems to be what we have before us in the *Menologion* miniature: the fourth-century bishop relocated to tenth-century Hagia Sophia, standing on the ambo and surrounded by the emperor and his officers at the exaltation rite. This blending of fourth-century historical festal origins and tenth-century then-contemporary liturgical practices provides us with a framework for interpreting the final ‘player’ on this miniature stage: the cross that is raised aloft. A close look shows a double-barred cross, able to be held in both hands easily by one person, with rough dimensions slightly larger than the head of the bishop here. Although there is no evidence in the image of pearls placed at the bar intersections, gems at the crossbar ends, or of a silver backing, the historical context, liturgical sources, and shape of the cross all suggest here in my view that this image is also representing the ‘great cross’ contained within the Limburg Staurotheke, removed from its case and brought from the Great Palace to Hagia Sophia for this rite on this date. Furthermore, the same imagery and same style of portable, handheld, double-barred cross raised aloft by the patriarch in the rites of exaltation seems to find contemporary confirmation in the 11th-century Gospel lectionary MS Vat. Gr. 1156, with the ambo of the cathedral depicted (albeit seemingly only with clergy and no imperial officers, and despite the differences in relative proportion between the cross and the patriarch in the respective miniatures) (Fig. 19).

In the preceding pages, we have taken a closer look not only at the words and images adorning the Limburg Staurotheke and its contents, but also at textual and possible pictorial witnesses to its objects and perceived power. In doing so, centuries after its artistic conception and execution, we have placed ourselves in the position of observer, admirer, critic: in short, we have become the Staurotheke’s present-day audience. Notions of audience and performance, as alluded to above, now come to the fore, a thread of inquiry prominent in contemporary studies on material culture, the material turn, and the ‘lives’ of objects apart from their creators.¹⁵⁶ In

154 Cf. Paul the Silentiary, *Description of Hagia Sophia*, ed. by Stefani and English transl. by Bell.

155 Cf. PARANI 2003, 57 and 61. For another good analysis of source documents and surviving images of imperial court dress for emperor, empress, and dignitaries, see also: PILTZ 1997, esp. pp. 41–43.

156 This theoretical perspective emerged from the social sciences but has found increased consideration and application in historical disciplines as well. Besides the foundational works noted in the introduction, n. 13, see also: GOSDEN/MARSHALL 1999, DASTON 2004, WOODWARD 2007, HICKS 2010, and most recently, with a specific emphasis on ‘speaking’ objects in pre-modernity, EDELMANN-SINGER/EHRICH 2021.



Fig. 19: Miniature for feast of the Exaltation of the Cross and accompanying lectionary text for September 14. MS Vat. gr. 1156, fol. 250v. Constantinople, 11th century. Vatican Library, Vatican City.

its original time and place, who was the audience, the viewer, intended for these Passion relics and their containers? Who was meant to see (and perhaps also, intelligibly read) the inscriptions brought on both the cross relic and the cover? What understanding of the relationship between object, owner, and viewer was intended to come about through this vision/performance? In this concluding section of the chapter, I turn to questions of the Limburg Staurotheke's performance, and based on the descriptive sources examined above, investigate several specific figures or groups under whose gaze the Limburg Staurotheke might plausibly have come. Such study will help us see how the object worked in concert with the emperor to perform functions of holiness within the imperial orbit and transmit this understanding to the various intended audiences of the relics.

3.6 Potential audiences of the Limburg Staurotheke

3.6.1 The emperor and his court

Given the location of the Limburg Staurotheke within the Great Palace (and as proposed in this chapter, within the Pharos chapel), as well as the inscription on the reverse of the cross relic, a primary audience of the reliquary and its contents in the Middle Byzantine period would have been the emperor, his household, and court

dignitaries. We know that the Pharos chapel was situated in immediate proximity to the emperor's bedchambers,¹⁵⁷ thus allowing for consistent close proximity and immediate access on the part of the sovereign to these prized treasures. We also know from the *Book of Ceremonies* that several fixed ceremonies took place in the Pharos chapel at which courtiers and officials were present, besides several occasional services and rites such as the coronation of an augusta.¹⁵⁸ As shown above with reference to the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, we also know that the cross reliquary—if not, as suggested by the Dresden manuscript, the entire Staurotheke—was sent from the palace to Hagia Sophia, held by the emperor, and returned to the emperor's chapel afterwards. The constant physical proximity of the emperor to these relics, his handling of them, and the court's viewing of these rites in which the emperor played a key and visibly tangible part, can be seen as furthering an understanding of the emperor as set apart and sacred: not only by virtue of the imperial purple, but also by virtue of the physical connection to holy objects enjoyed by him and none other. This connection could potentially also be made clear via the reading aloud of these inscriptions on specific feasts or occasions as a means of “buttress[ing] the praise of the emperor” amidst the elite of the court and the cathedral, given the highly encomiastic style of the inscriptions, and as has been recently suggested by Brad Hostetler.¹⁵⁹

Indeed, the close connection of these holy objects to specific persons comes to the fore in the inscriptions on both the cross and the reliquary. The names of the emperors Constantine and Rōmanos are placed on the back of the cross, and Basil names himself in the cover inscription, again linking the sovereign and another royal relative (and highest-ranking court officer) with sources of sacred power and healing. It is true that Basil, a eunuch and illegitimate royal son, never sat on the imperial throne, and the fact that he chose to name himself on the reliquary inscription rather than the emperor at the time might tempt the present-day reader

157 Cf. JANIN 1969, 235.

158 Cf. *Book of Ceremonies* I.48. Other instances when the church of the Theotokos of the Lighthouse is used are noted in: I.18 (starting point of the morning procession for when the feasts of Pascha and the Annunciation coincide [a so-called *Kyriopascha*], which DAGRON/FLUSIN 2020, 1:134, n. 75 note as having taken place thrice, in AD 764, 848, and 927), I.23 (liturgy on Thursday of Renewal Week after Pascha), I.28 (vespers for the feast of the Prophet Elijah with the court), I.29 (station on the way to the New Church on the feast of its dedication), I.33 (station on the way to the church of Saint Basil in the Lausiakon palace on the feast of Saint Basil), I.38 (veneration of the cross by the court on the third Sunday of the Great Fast), I.39 (the same, for when the feast of the Annunciation falls on the third Sunday of the Great Fast), I.40 (vespers for Palm Sunday), I.41 (liturgy on Palm Sunday), I.42 (liturgy on Holy Thursday), I.43 (veneration of the Holy Lance by the court on Holy Thursday), I.44 (vesperal liturgy on Holy Saturday), I.50 (investiture of a girdled patrician woman), and II.8 (re-deposition of cross reliquary in the Pharos chapel after its trans-urban peregrination after August 1).

159 Cf. HOSTETLER 2021.

to see here an attempt at securing sacred status for himself rather than for the emperor;¹⁶⁰ yet several facts mitigate against such a reading, in my view. Nothing in the inscription commissioned by Basil contradicts the interior cross reliquary inscription or puts into question the notion of imperial sacrality; the analysis of the Staurotheke's pictorial programme as presented above situates Basil-*qua*-Baptist firmly in a position quite close to the throne of power but nonetheless one of service and supplication; and finally, numerous other luxury objects from the Middle Byzantine period survive with inscriptions naming Basil, probably as part of a personal programme of (perhaps larger-scale) artistic patronage and taste-shaping on the part of the parakoimōmenos, where he could perhaps execute a level of absolute power and control just out of reach in his political activity. Those at court with eyes to see—and able to read—and who had the opportunity to behold the reliquary with its cover in the Pharos chapel or on other occasions would note Basil's name and associate him not necessarily with the relics inside—as both the interior text and the public ceremony did with the emperor—but *would* associate him with its beauty and “embellishment” as the outer inscription itself proclaims.

This beauty, however, would also hold true for a semi-literate audience at court and elsewhere. As Andreas Rhoby has argued, building on the work of Margaret Mullett, many Byzantine inscriptions bear what he terms “signal words” which would have been easily recognisable and, if not understandable, at least awe-inspiring in form and function to a semi-literate audience not well-versed in Attic classical texts but cognisant of common key terms in religious and political discourse.¹⁶¹ Rhoby further cautions that inscriptions in such cases should not be analysed apart from the objects on which they are found,¹⁶² given that they constitute “an important symbiosis” with their concomitant images and objects—in this case, relics—for all who should behold them.¹⁶³ If it is true that only a small elite would have been able to quickly read and interpret high-style inscriptions,¹⁶⁴ even when executed in clear and legible form without excessive and intricate ligatures (as is the case with the Limburg Staurotheke inscriptions), nonetheless the high level of craftsmanship, the expensive luxury materials used, and the knowledge of what objects lay within the reliquary could easily endow the owner of such an object—the emperor—with a similar aura of mystique and holiness amongst the illiterate.¹⁶⁵ That being said,

160 For a discussion of this reading proposed by Pentcheva, see above this chapter, n. 31.

161 RHOBY 2016, 273–274. Cf. also MULLETT 1990, 163. On similar issues with reading and literacy in medieval Western Europe, see: CAMILLE 1985, esp. pp. 32–33.

162 RHOBY 2016, 278.

163 RHOBY 2011, 326.

164 RHOBY 2016, 270.

165 RHOBY 2016, 274: On semi- and illiterate audiences' interactions with inscriptions, Rhoby writes: “In addition, one must also consider the respect with which inscriptions were approached, especially those that were not understood and seen instead as powerful magical signs in the sense [of] the ‘Herrschaft des “Buchstabens”’ [as] described by Herbert Hunger.” For the latter text, cf. HUNGER 1984.

it seems to me that this aura would be one necessary only in extra-curial contexts, such as discussed below in the presence of the Byzantine armed forces. Amongst the body of courtiers and clerics who frequented the palace, illiterate persons are unlikely to have been either numerous or notable.

3.6.2 The patriarch and other clergy

Another important audience for the relics and their inscriptions, in light of the ceremonial occasions outlined in the *Book of Ceremonies* and my analysis of textual and pictorial evidence from the Dresden manuscript and the *Menologion of Basil II*, would be the patriarch and cathedral clergy in Hagia Sophia. If my reading of these sources is correct, and the cross relic used by the patriarch in the elevation rites was—at least from the mid-tenth century onwards—the one contained in the Limburg Staurotheke with the imperial names on the reverse, this inscription would be a plainly visible message confronting the patriarch on one of the high feasts of the Byzantine liturgical year. In blessing the people and symbolically the four corners of creation with the cross relic, the patriarch would see and read (at least silently to himself) in this act of blessing not only the name of Christ, but also those of Constantine and Rōmanos. In the foregoing analysis, I have shown how the textual parallelisms in the inscription establish clear ties between the identity and activity of Christ and the rulers: these links would be on full display in word and in deed for the patriarch on such occasions. Blessing the people with the cross, the patriarch would be extending this blessing in the name of both God and emperor, and again this link of sacrality would be underscored by the fact that on this great feast, celebrated with splendour in the capital's cathedral, the central relic lay not in the cathedral but in the Great Palace, its arrival and departure mirroring that of the emperor on the feast. Though Constantine and Rōmanos were temporal rulers whose reigns were not eternal, the eternal rule of Christ and the continued use of this relic in imperio-religious ceremony would allow for this link of power and sacrality to pass to any other person sitting on the throne: whoever could be called *despotēs* and *stephēphoros* could be a new Constantine, a new Rōmanos, and thus come into parallel with Christ's person and power via the relic's liturgical performance.

3.6.3 Military leadership and troops

A final potential audience, in light of the Constantinian war harangues studied and translated by Eric McGeer, would be the imperial armed forces, to whom the emperor had words of encouragement sent and on whom water blessed by the relics was sprinkled. Nancy Ševčenko has posited that the Staurotheke, with its various

Passion relics, might have acted as a “field reliquary”, a source of military and spiritual power for the emperor and his troops on the frontlines, or as a personal imperial enkolpion;¹⁶⁶ as she notes, the appendix to the *Book of Ceremonies* mentions that in imperial processions on the battlefield, the emperor was preceded by an officer of the bedchamber (*koubikoularios*) “carrying the precious and lifegiving woods with the container on his neck”, while further ahead another golden and gem-studded cross was carried by a standard-bearer.¹⁶⁷ While the second military harangue of Constantine from 958 makes mention of water blessed by contact with the relics, which was to be sprinkled on the soldiers ostensibly for blessing and protection, it does not explicitly mention that the relics themselves, along with their reliquary/container (θήκη), were also present. Nevertheless, the text also does not specifically state that this was *not* the case; it could be that the “precious woods” and their container were kept in immediate proximity of the emperor’s person, while the imperial soldiers were simply sprinkled with the blessed water, which would have been an easy way to provide those fighting for the sovereign with mediated access to the holy objects in the unstable and unpredictable environment of the battlefield without endangering the relics themselves. In this case, the soldiers would be participating and sharing in the grace and power of the relics *as mediated by the emperor*, who would be acting as the sole arbiter and dispenser of the relics’ sacred protective power.

3.7 Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, I have presented a close reading of the art and inscriptions on the Limburg Staurotheke in order to understand how this collection of objects worked to promote an idea of imperial sacrality and to communicate this idea to various audiences. Glimpses into how this message reached its intended audiences in the

¹⁶⁶ N. ŠEVČENKO 1994, 292–293. On this type of object, cf. “Enkolpion” in *ODB* 1:700.

¹⁶⁷ N. ŠEVČENKO 1994, 292–293, who mentions this text. Originally published in the Reiske edition as an appendix to the *Book of Ceremonies*, John Haldon has shown that the text in question was a separate treatise commissioned by Constantine VII for his son Rōmanos, which Haldon calls Text C in his edition and translation; cf. HALDON 1990, 50. The passage reads as follows: “In front of the emperor march the *praipositoi* and the *koubouklion*, and in the middle of the *praipositoi* marches a *koubikoularios* carrying the holy and life-giving wood of the Cross, with the case about his neck. In front of the *koubouklion* march the imperial officers, and in their midst marches a *signophoros* bearing a golden, bejewelled cross” (ἐμπροσθεν δὲ τοῦ βασιλέως περιπατοῦσιν οἱ πραιπόσιτοι καὶ τὸ κουβούκλιον, καὶ μέσον τῶν πραιποσίων περιπατεῖ κουβικουλάριος βαστάζων τὰ τίμια καὶ ζωοποιὰ ξύλα μετὰ τῆς θήκης ἐπὶ τοῦ τραχήλου, ἔμπροσθεν δὲ τοῦ κουβουκλίου περιπατοῦσιν οἱ βασιλικοί, καὶ μέσον τούτων περιπατεῖ σιγνοφόρος βαστάζων σταυρὸν χρυσοῦν διάλιθον) (cf. HALDON 1990, 124–125, italics his). Note that in Haldon’s translation, he uses the singular “wood” in English, although the same word in the Greek text (ξύλα) is plural.

palace, the capital, the cathedral, and far afield in battle survive in several key documents from the tenth century: the *Book of Ceremonies*, military speeches, and perhaps manuscript miniatures depicting liturgical rites from the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. Besides the Limburg Staurotheke, no other comparable relic treasury, conceived of as a single artistic and spiritual whole, has survived from the Middle Byzantine period, and the combination of luxury materials, technical expertise and craftsmanship, and sacred objects all played a part in the Staurotheke's survival and *Nachleben* in Western Europe after the Fourth Crusade.¹⁶⁸ Despite the very personal touches applied to the relics and the reliquary by emperors Constantine VII and Rōmanos II and the parakoimōmenos Basil, the message of imperial sacrality proclaimed by the Limburg Staurotheke through its storage location, ritual usages, and potential travels was one that could still be applied to any and every Byzantine sovereign, strengthening the sense of imperial sacrality imbued in the office and thus transmissible to any officeholder, rather than forging a unique, personal connection to a given specific occupant of the throne. Instructive against the background of both the Staurotheke and the Mandylion, objects linked to the emperor-as-figure, is the contrasting example of the Holy Stone, brought to Constantinople in the 12th century and linked specifically to one particular emperor, Manuel I Komnēnos. An examination of the sources surviving on this relic will permit us to see the extremes to which the association of relics with the imperial figure could go: an extreme which events show might have been rejected for being too personal, but which ultimately did not detour the trajectory of the public image of imperial sacrality, such as we find in full blossom at the end of the Middle Byzantine period in elite poetry and canonical commentary. It is to the Holy Stone as one final imperial relic that we now turn our gaze.

168 Cf. RAUCH 1955 for the reliquary's history in the German lands after the Fourth Crusade.