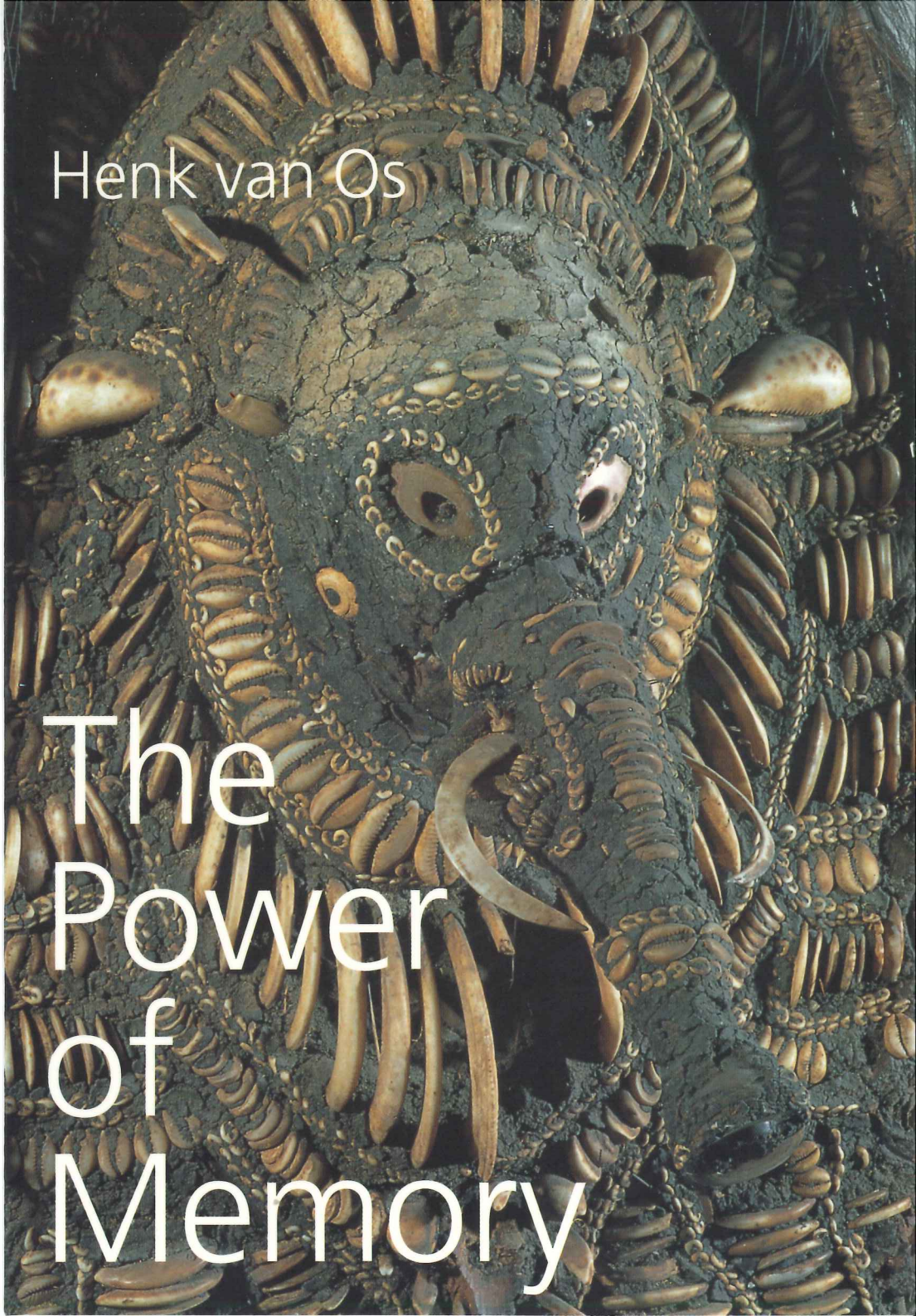
Henk van Os

The Power of Memory



The Tenth Horst Gerson Lecture
held in memory of Horst Gerson (1907-1978)
in the aula of the University of Groningen
on November 18, 1999

Henk van Os

The Power of Memory

De Prom Publishers
Baarn, The Netherlands

fig.1
Horst Karl Gerson (1907-1978)

*The Power of Memory**

We have been delivering Horst Gerson (Fig. 1) Lectures for all of eighteen years now. But why? I daresay most of you here today never knew Horst or have read any of his published works. Shortly after Horst died so suddenly on 10 June 1978, I attended a meeting with a group of friends to set up the foundation that was to organise these lectures. Someone at that meeting asked: "Can we be absolutely sure that the import of Horst and his work was so great that it warrants the organisation of commemorative lectures for years after his death?" It was such a good question that it defied a straight answer. But we tried to find one nonetheless. Horst was an outstanding intellectual and an art connoisseur of international renown. He had contributed a lot to the study of Art History and was like a father to his institute in difficult times. He had shown more care and commitment towards his students than is normally expected of a professor. But, at that time, not one of us dared to say what each of us was feeling: the simple truth is that we loved him dearly and could think of no better way of remembering him after his death than to plague this academic community with a lecture for years to come.

During that meeting in '78 I recalled an anecdote about Horst which, to me, answered the question of what he meant to the future. But I didn't dare to share it at that time. So, I will share it with you now. It happened when Horst was opening a Rembrandt exhibition in Montreal. The press conference was bulging at the seams. American journalists seemed to have made a special effort to descend *en masse*. Well, Horst was, after all, *the* Rembrandt expert of his day, and nowhere in the world is a man who can separate the artistic corn from the chaff more revered than in a society that is capitalist to the core. Horst found it all a bit excessive and far too grandiose. He intimated to those present that he always responded in a singular manner to paintings that he found moving. Then he asked the ladies and gentlemen to bear with him. He stood motionless for one moment before one of the paintings – I believe it was *Landscape with the Bridge* – and, decked out in a dinner suit, proceeded to stand on his head in front of this much-cherished work of art. This was greeted with stunned laughter, flashing cameras and indignation from the officials. The following day, photographs of this eminent art critic going 'over the top' were emblazoned across the front page of many a newspaper in the New World. It filtered through to the Dutch newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* via the *New York Times*. So now his colleagues in Groningen could join in wonder at his antics. But Horst wasn't at all pleased. This was the sort of thing that you did on the other side of the Atlantic; not 'among professors' in Groningen, where the only time you ever stood on your head was to amuse young children (Fig. 2).

fig.2
Horst Gerson standing on his head together
with the daughter of a colleague.

fig. 3
Reliquary Cross with stones from the Holy Land
Late 13th - early 14th Century
Gilt copper, crystal, stones among which agate
H. 50,5 cm
O.L. Vrouwe-Geboorte Basilica Museum, Tongres
photo: Peter Mookhoek

I believe that, that day in Montreal, Horst displayed in public one of his greatest merits: the ability to be absolutely serious about Art History, and still keep it in perspective. I would not like to have to pick up the tab for all the art historians who have never even chanced upon this most admirable quality in their discipline. This, in itself, gives us sufficient reason for continuing to remember Horst through events like these, where we can try again to put into words just how much he meant.

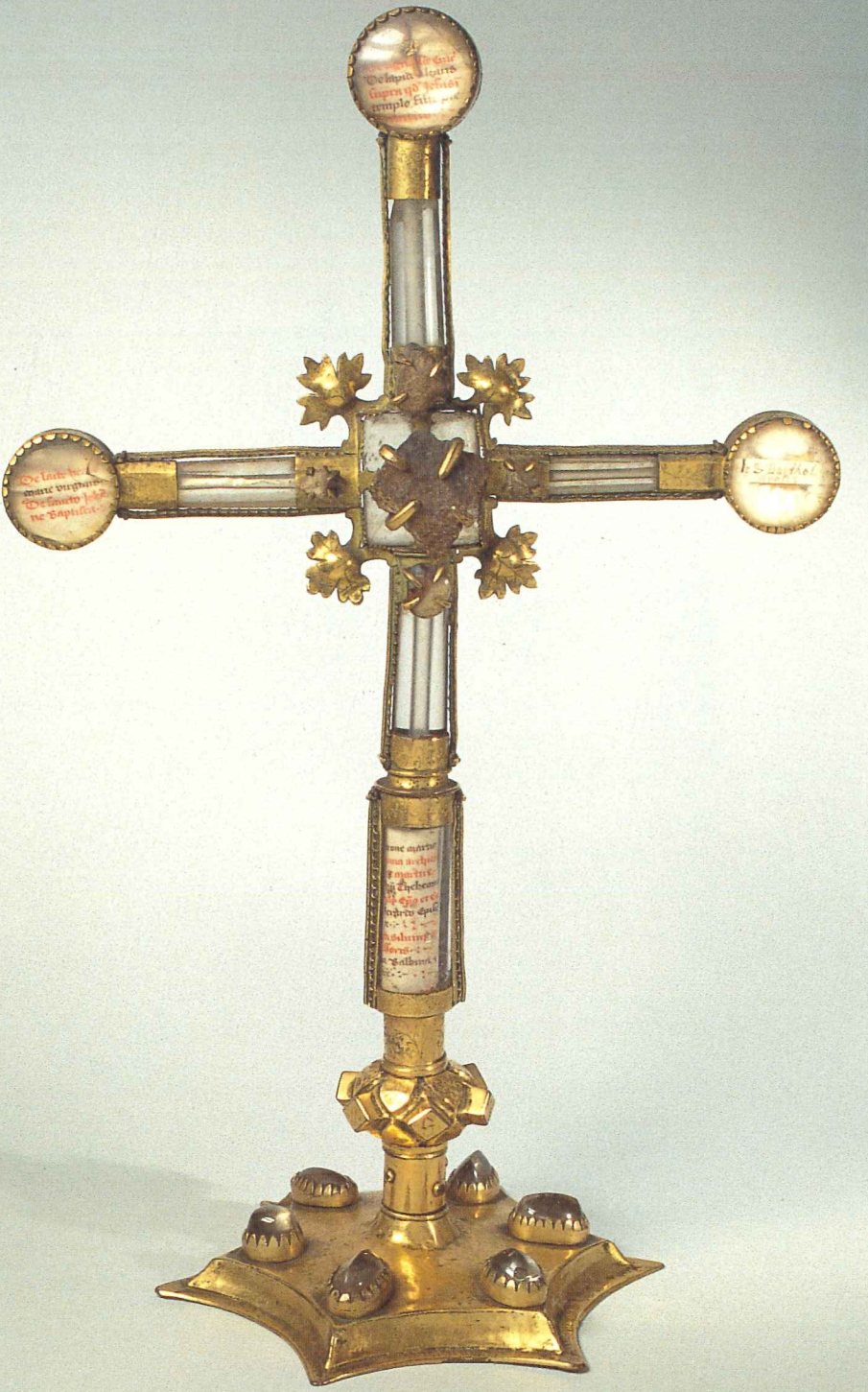


fig.4
Box with stones from the Holy Land
Palestine, 6th - 7th Century
Wood, tempera, gold leaf
H. 4 cm, W. 18.5 cm, D. 24 cm
Museo Sacro, Vatican

When you speak at commemorative gatherings like these you wield a certain power. You turn the memories of a small group into a guiding principle for others. In talking about Horst, as I am doing now, I am trying to give young art historians a forefather who is worthy of their reverence. I am excluding art historians from Horst's own generation for the moment. Memory has power over me, but I also have a certain power over you by causing *you* to remember. This is the effect of an occasion like a Gerson lecture.

But nowhere did the power of memory play a more compelling role than in the veneration of holy relics by the Christians of the Middle Ages. This practice was

not inspired only by the exemplary lives of prodigious individuals from the past. No, the heroes of faith had far more to offer than mere example. They conferred well-being, healing, protection and the ultimate promise of victory over death. The church gave the believers a sense of their own past by organising the veneration of sacred places and relics: the mortal remains of its most faithful servants. This afternoon, I want to speak to you about this manifestation of the power of memory and the lavishly decorated receptacles which bring radiance to fragments from that past.

The magnificent treasury of the Church of Our Lady at Tongres, the oldest town in Belgium, houses an outstanding example of a cruciform reliquary dating from around 1300 and which, up to now, has drawn only marginal attention from art historians (Fig. 3)[1]. It is almost completely transparent. It is as if the smith used the copper with the sole purpose of holding together the rock crystal. This transparency throws into even sharper relief the stones which are affixed at the intersection of the beams. These stones were brought from the Holy Land. At the start of the fourth century, Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, had opened up the Holy Land to pilgrims. She had unearthed the 'true cross' and had splendid basilicas built at holy sites, also in the name of her son. Before long, the pilgrims started pouring in, each with a desire to take home a souvenir of his rigorous journey. And this is how the stones may have arrived in Tongres.

There is a small wooden sixth- or seventh-century box in the Vatican, which contains stones from several holy sites in Palestine (Fig. 4). The images on the lid refer to the places where the stones come from. What is especially fascinating about this box is that it shows how the art of painting can bring meaning to objects which are, themselves, not much to look at[2]. In the same way, fragments of the Berlin Wall which we may take home as souvenirs only become meaningful if we have a mental picture of the wall itself. But stones from the Holy Land had more meaning then, than pieces of the Berlin Wall have now. In the Christian world they took the place of pagan amulets, but they never entirely supplanted them. They too possessed magic properties and afforded protection against all manner of evil. These tokens of past events held far more power than our modern-day souvenirs. In fact, they had ramifications which stretched not only into the past but into the present and the future as well.

Perhaps the Tongres stones were originally kept in a box similar to the one in the Vatican. Be that as it may, around 1300, someone hit upon the idea of boosting their efficacy by mounting them on a cross. Behind the glass you can see the

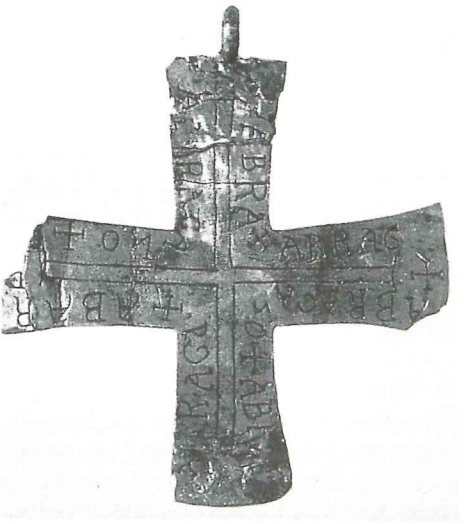


fig.5
Funerary Cross with inscription 'Abracadabra'
6th - 7th Century
Silver
H. 9 cm, W. 8.3 cm
Musée Cantonal d'Archéologie et d'Histoire, Lausanne

cedulae: strips of parchment bearing the names of the saints whose mortal remains would make this cross effective. Thanks to sacred relics this cross is suffused with visible meaning. The believer prays to the relics here on Earth in order to prod the saints in Heaven into action on his behalf. They must intercede for his salvation. What makes the Cross of Tongres so exceptional is the elementary way in which various strands of memory are brought together in one clear sign. The stones remind the believer of the site of the cross upon which the Saviour died while the relics remind him of the saints who followed Christ to a martyr's death. These two strands of memory reinforce each other through their arrangement in the shape of a cross.

The upright of the cross has a six-knot nodus in which JHESUS is engraved in capital letters. Though the cross does not bear the actual figure of Jesus, He is still present through the text. Ever since the early Middle Ages, miraculous powers had been ascribed to inscriptions of His name or monogram[3]. Rhine-

fig.6
Louis IX healed by the True Cross
Matthew Paris, 1257-1258
in: *Historia Anglorum*
Ms Roy.14.C.VII, fol. 137 v
British Library, London

stones were greatly sought-after rarities because they were believed to possess healing properties[4]. The Cross of Tongres really seems to have overdosed on magic. Its talismanic function gives it a certain affinity with the famous sixth- or seventh-century cross in the Musée Cantonal at Lausanne, which bears the magic inscription of the abracadabra (Fig. 5). Anyone who wears a cross with this magic formula upon his breast is assured of protection against the evil eye. Storms will subside, the sick will be cured, and demons will take flight. The cross that hangs around the neck of a modern bishop is a direct descendant of a cross like this, which – please note – was found in a Christian grave[5]. The Cross of Tongres will certainly have helped priests to ward off evil and it had such a neat format; perfect for taking along when you visited the sick. A miniature in the *Historia Anglorum* shows no-one less than King Louis IX of France being summoned back from the gates of death – "a portis mortis revocatus" – when the Bishop of Paris brandishes a cross before him (Fig. 6)[6].

The Crosses of Tongres and Lausanne share the same primary function: healing and protection. But, having said that, I should stress that the only thing that both crosses had in common was the fact that they served as an amulet. The Cross of Lausanne makes no allusions to past incidents. Its magic powers rekindle no memories. The power of the Cross of Tongres, on the other hand, lies precisely in the distillation of religious faith and history; or rather, the distillation of religious faith *in* history. Artists like Beuys and Boltanski would be jealous, even though they are interested in a totally different experience of history. It all happened a long time ago on Golgotha. Thereafter Christian martyrs followed Jesus to the death. Around 1300 an artisan gathered together the mortal remains of this past and turned them into a sign of salvation. Christian faith replaced pagan magic through the power of memory.

Of all the souvenirs from the Holy Land the ones that were treasured most of all were Particles of the Cross. Taken in isolation these often minute pieces of wood look pretty helpless. They derive their importance from the way they are presented by the surrounding art. Their ability to evoke memory is determined by the setting. In the twelfth century, relics of the cross were often displayed in precious, richly decorated panels known as *staurotheques.* There is one in the treasury at Tongres. It is copper-plated and decorated with engraved and partially enamelled images. It is neither the most splendid nor the most precious of the staurotheques, but it has a rich iconography which clearly illustrates how different memories were revitalised by these kind of reliquaries (Fig. 7)[7].

Imagine for a moment that you are being shown this precious reliquary by the Bishop of Tongres or one of the priests from the Church of Our Lady. On the reverse you can see the remains of the band upon which the staurotheque hung around the priest's neck (Fig. 8). For the time being, however, the relic itself is kept out of sight behind two little doors. Because first, you must comprehend that something truly exceptional is happening here. The ten Bishops of Tongres, all the way from from St Maternus to St Servatius, are lined up *en email*.
It seems that this receptacle is intended as a historical monument as well.

fig.7
Reliquary Panel (front)
Liège, shortly after 1180
Gilt copper, engraved, enamel, vernis brun
H. 28.9 cm, W. 20 cm, D. 2 cm
O. L. Vrouwe-Geboorte Basilica Museum, Tongres
photo: Peter Mookhoek

fig.8
Idem fig.7 (rear)
photo: Peter Mookhoek

Servatius had, at one time, moved the bishop's seat of the *Civitas Tungrorum* to Maastricht[8]. So, the relic must have evoked an illustrious, but distant history of holy bishops. This is confirmed by the inscription around the edge: "Pontifices meruit hos inclita Tongris habere donec eam potuit Hunnorum gens abolere" (Illustrious Tongris was worthy of these prelates until the moment that it was destroyed by the Huns).
The inscription around the inner edge indicates that the magnificent past referred to here is definitely over and done with: "Hoc Salvatoris tibi Tongris pignus amoris Legia dat lignum cunctis venerabile signum" (To you, Tongres, Liege gives, as a token of love, this sign of the Saviour, wood worthy of veneration by all).

This staurotheque is therefore a precious gift, but like so many diplomatic gestures, it attested to a relationship of political dependence. In other words: "Tongres, you have a wonderful past, but the Bishop of Liege is now the boss. He loves you so much that he is presenting you with this relic."

The prodigiousness of the relic is not only expressed through the glorious ecclesiastical history of Tongres. Scenes from the Old Testament show that the sign of the cross, or even the mere physical presence of wood, can offer salvation, grant hope and afford protection. Two plaques on the upper edge show Moses marking the homes of the exiled Israelites with a tau cross in order to spare the lives of their firstborn (Exodus 12:22). Below we see Elijah with the widow of Zarephath gathering wood (1 Kings 17). In the image to the left, an angel intervenes as Isaac is about to be sacrificed, and points Abraham to the burning wood so that he can sacrifice a lamb instead (Genesis 22:11-13). On the opposite side is a representation of the spies who were sent into the Promised Land. They are carrying a cluster of grapes which, together with the staff, forms a tau cross (Numbers 13:23). Above to the left, Moses and Aaron raise up the serpent of copper to save the children of Israel from snakebites (Numbers 21:9). The Old Testament is plundered here to underscore the importance of this fragment of the cross[9].

There are two scenes which place the veneration of the cross in a historical context. Above, to the right, the cross appears to Constantine with the message that he will be victorious with 'this saving sign'. Below a heavily armoured Emperor Heraclius defeats the heathen king Khosrow who had scandalously defiled the Holy Cross when it was in his possession. I am explaining this framework in such detail to help you understand that a fragment of the cross derives its meaning through the evocation of all sorts of other memories. And then the doors open – this is a truly blessèd moment. Angels hover with swaying censers. The 'bells and smells' of the ritual – like all these images – are crucial accessories when fragments of wood are elevated to the stuff of redemption.

Now that the doors have opened, the relic itself is revealed (Fig. 9). A cross has been fashioned from a piece of wood. The symbols of the four evangelists in the corners confirm that the cross must be regarded as the essence of the gospel stories. Jesus appears in order to indicate that he sacrificed Himself on the cross to redeem the faithful. Mary and John conjure up the scene of the crucifixion. The allegorical images of Church and Synagogue highlight the institutional assimilation of Christ's death on the cross. Here too, memory-evoking scenes are


MOISES
IVDAS
SCA MARIA
ECCLESIA

needed. Someone, at some stage, must have discovered the cross to which this fragment once belonged. The credit goes to St Helena who, by taking a foceful stand in Jerusalem, managed to persuade the Jews into divulging the secret hiding place of the cross. While she was threatening to burn them at the stake, a character called Judas turned up who knew the real hiding place and unearthed the cross for her. With a bit of goodwill you might even say that this Judas was the first archaeologist and Helena his project manager[10].

If Jerusalem was the best place for finding holy souvenirs, then Rome was the best place for mortal remains. The influx of pilgrims mounted when the memory of the martyrs became ritualised and their dead bodies were elevated to the glory of the altars. As time went on, the pilgrims started wanting access to mortal remains on their own home soil. But the popes in Rome refused to part with them. On 29 June 519, Emperor Justinian asked for the relics of the apostles. Pope Hormisdas wouldn't hear of it and sent back word that he had already entrusted the *brandea* to the emperor. The brandea were pieces of cloth which had been in contact with the corpses, and preferably, the blood of holy martyrs. In this particular case the pope was referring to no less than the brandea of the apostles Peter and Paul. He felt that Justinian would just have to make do with them. Then Empress Constantina had a go in 594. But she was refused as well, this time by Pope Gregory the Great. Gregory even wrote a letter to Constantina telling her that the brandea were every bit as effective as the actual bones. His predecessor Leo I, who was tired of persistent attempts by the Greeks to cast doubt on the power of contact relics, cut the cloths with scissors until they started to bleed. Imagine his complacency as he faced the disputants: "Told you so. No different from the real thing"[11]. I daresay he felt that he had drawn blood in more way than one that day.

One or two ivory chests from the early Christian era have survived which, judging from the iconography, were used for storing brandea (Fig. 10). The images show the holy places where the cloths originated[12]. They were typical souvenirs which served as amulets and, in the long run, really only fuelled the desire for the bones themselves.
One event brought about a radical change in the relationship between the relics

fig.9
Idem fig.7 (with opened shutters)
photo: Peter Mookhoek

fig. 10
Brandea Casket
Rome?, first half of 5th Century
Ivory
H. 19 cm, W. 20.5 cm, D. 16 cm
Museo Archeologico, Venice

and the Christian world. In 756 Rome was seized and plundered by the Langobards. Their leader, King Aistulf, ordered his men to scour the local grave sites and excavate as many saintly remains as possible. These pious desecrators triumphantly collected the sweet-smelling corpses – because the corpses of saints spread an *odor aromaticus* – and took them back to their own towns and villages – adding, in the process, a whole new dimension to the notion of loot!

The disastrous events of 756 made the pope realise that it was time to find a protector with more successful politics and greater military strength. He did not approach the emperors in the East, but the rulers in the North West, the Carolingians. And he rewarded them for their support with the bones of

Christian martyrs. These relics led to the widespread establishment of centres of worship. You could argue that the ideological cohesiveness of the Carolingian empire was due largely to the redistribution of Roman relics over North West Europe. This might go some way to explaining why the *Libri Carolini* contain these words: "The Greeks have built almost all their hope upon their belief in images but, this much is certain, we honour the saints through their bodies, their relics, or even their clothing in the time-honoured tradition of the church fathers"[13]. When one considers how hard these very Greeks had tried to get their hands on relics from Rome, this seems like a pretty arrogant way of kicking eastern relic worshippers when they're down. They had, after all, already appealed to the pope in vain. But this indicates all the more that the memories of saints only acquired power through the physical presence of mortal remains.

Now, there was one group of favourites who did have access to powerful relics from the Holy City long before the Carolingians opened the martyrs' graves in Rome. These were the Irish missionaries who came to the Low Countries to convert our forefathers. A unique object has survived this period (Fig. 11). The treasury of St Martin's Church in Emmerich contains a reliquary with an inscription on the back which reads: "HE SUNT RELIQUIAE QUAS SCS WILLIBRORDUS ROME A PAPA SERGIO ACCEPIT ET EMBRIKI TRANSPORTAVIT". (These are the relics which St Willibrord brought to Emmerich after receiving them from Pope Sergius in Rome). According to the inscription, the relics that were responsible for Christianising the Netherlands were inside this very *arca*. Willibrord, the first missionary to the Low Countries, was ordained as archbishop by Pope Sergius in Rome in 695. No doubt he was supplied with these holy accoutrements to make his mission extra effective.

The passage of time did not leave revered objects like Willibrord's arca unperturbed. Whereas altarpieces, say, were often discarded once they had served their purpose, reliquaries were adapted over and over again to reflect current needs. They were far too precious to be thrown away. Anyway, they were usually the focus of deep reverence. In order to date the original object you often have to peel off the many accretions from later periods. In this case, the process of peeling leads to excellent results (Fig. 12). So let's first get rid of the hideous angels and towers which support the arca and were added at the end of the sixteenth century by a smith who was obviously a little short on skills. The arca was converted then into a receptacle for a consecrated host, which would serve as a sort of monstrance on the altar. The angel in the middle sports a banderole bearing the words "Ecce panis angelorum" (Behold, the bread of angels). This

fig.11
Arca of St Willibrord (rear)
Lower Rhine / Utrecht, Ca. 1040
Gold plate, gilt copper over oakwood, filligree, gems, precious stones, vernis brun
H. 62 cm, W. 48.7 cm (bursa: H. 32.2 cm, W. 34.8 cm)
Treasury of the Church of St Martin, Emmerich
photo: Annegret Gossens

was to leave you in no doubt that this receptacle contained a consecrated host. This host, so the story goes, once belonged to Willibrord. The missionary to the Low Countries had actually consecrated it himself. You could certainly expect a miracle or two from a wafer as old as that[14].

The radical change in the function of the arca coincided with the practice of host adoration which was immensely popular, especially during the Counter Reformation. This adoration brought the believers back to the core of the liturgy: the eucharist.

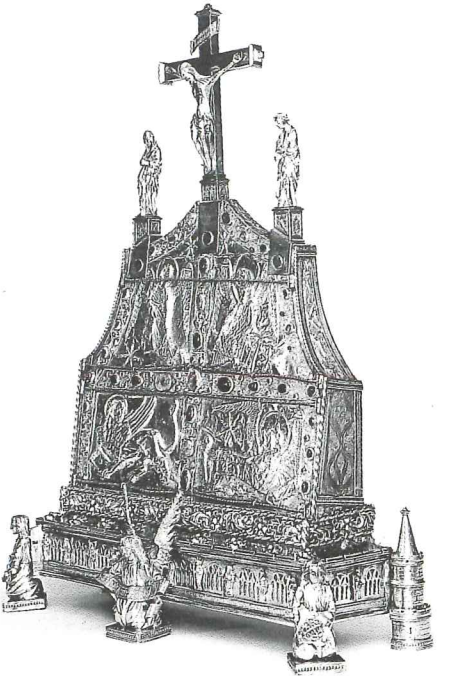


fig.12
Idem fig.11 (side view)

We now have to imagine away the pedestal with the figures of the apostles and the pretty, fluted edge. The arca itself could be placed in this richly ornamented base and removed again. The style of the ornamental pedestal suggests that it dates from around 1500. Let's do some more peeling. Canon Wolter Coman left instructions in his last will and testament of 6 January 1388 that a crucifixion scene was to be mounted atop the "capsa sancti Willibrordi". This would better equip the arca for its role in the life of Emmerich. During a solemn ritual Counts of Gelre and later Counts of Kleve had to swear on Willibrord's precious relic that they recognised the rights of Emmerich. Oaths like these were sworn on many

medieval reliquaries as they were usually the most precious and sacred object that could be found[15]. As Coman also bequeathed a sum of money for the repair of the *capsa* we may assume that the silver chords that are held together with hinges were also added at the end of the fourteenth century. It is possible that the ornamentation on the flank also dates from this period.

Once we have mentally stripped the arca of all the additions, we are left with an art object which we know, at least, has a back that dates from the eleventh century. It was then that the technique of *vernis brun* was developed, which is used here to depict the crucified figure of Christ and the four evangelists. Vernis brun is a cheap imitation of enamel. On the other side of the arca the evangelistic symbols reappear, but this time on golden plaques (Fig. 13). However, something suspicious seems to be afoot. The ox, which traditionally symbolises Luke, is missing and Mark is doubly represented by two lions; one with wings and one without. Attempts have been made to explain this remarkable duplication by assuming that the lion on the left, which differs in style from the other three evangelistic symbols, was added during a later restoration. But this is impossible. For this friendly feline with the wagging tail is a typical example of an eleventh-century Ottonian lion[16]. The other three symbols are even older. Evangelistic symbols with stars belong in the Carolingian era and often appear in illuminated manuscripts. What could then have happened to Willibrord's arca?

I imagine that it went something like this. There wasn't much left of Emmerich in the eleventh century after it had been razed and plundered time after time by the Viking invaders. As happened in other towns at the end of World War Two, there was very little left of the things that bound Emmerich with its past. Fortunately, St Martin's Church still had some very old relics which, according to legend, had been brought from Rome by St Willibrord. They were kept in a somewhat dilapidated *bursa,* a type of reliquary which was fairly common at the time (Fig. 14)[17]. All around – in Cologne, Munster and Osnabruck – the most wonderful shrines and reliquaries were the focus of deep veneration. Emmerich saw its chance. A smith of somewhat average talent was given the job of refurbishing the old bursa and turning it into an arca. It was inlaid with precious gems and golden plaques which were on hand. The recycling of costly material was routine at that time[18]. But only three of the four golden plaques that adorned the bursa

fig.13
Idem fig.11 (front)
photo: Annegret Gossens

fig.14
Reliquary Purse
Meuse (Maastricht or Cologne?), Ca. 1160-1180
Gilt copper over oakwood, enamel, vernis brun
H. 15.4 cm, W. 14.1 cm, D. 4.4 cm
Treasury of the Basilica of St Servatius, Maastricht

had survived. So they looked for a replacement. And came up with another lion. Vernis brun was applied to the back. This is how an old purse was upgraded to an arca with no fewer than eight evangelistic symbols, three of which were lions.

Now that we have finished dissecting Willibrord's arca, it looks as if the original bursa does indeed have origins which lie deep in the past. Could it really have contained the relics which the great missionary used to convert our forefathers? We will never know. The earliest inventory of the relics dates from 1611. It shows that relics were, at any rate, added through the centuries. But analysis of the remains of the cloth used for wrapping the relics reveals coptic fragments from the sixth century. So, it would be perfectly feasible to suggest that the arca was intended for relics given by Pope Sergius to Willibrord so that he could give new Christian forebears to the heathens in the Low Countries.

Just imagine for a moment that Willibrord came to convert our forefathers carrying these relics in a bursa around his neck: a missionary who was filled with the divine power of relics which had been given to him by none other than the Pope himself. Because they had once belonged to Christian heroes the bones which Willibrord gave the heathens of the Rhine Delta to worship were far more efficacious than those of the ancestors they had venerated up to then. If you adopted this new faith you could appropriate these heroes as your own forebears. The Church Father Ambrose expressly contested the heathen practice of ancestor worship in order to promote the worship of saints. He said that they were the only relatives that you were free to choose for yourself[19].

Anyone who exchanged the worship of ancestors for the worship of saints had to surrender something in the process. The power of personal memory was replaced by faith in the representatives of an institution. In other words, you became a sharer of a collective memory. The heroes of the church befriended you, but you could only get access to their memorabilia via the ecclesiastical authorities. Time and again the crucial role of the bishops and priests in relation to the veneration of relics was re-affirmed[20]. Indeed this veneration was itself largely directed at the founders of the institution of the church. The worship of Willibrord in Emmerich is a typical example.

Although there are very few reliquaries left in the Netherlands, they do include at least three impressive head reliquaries of the founding fathers of the church. Maastricht has a sixteenth-century reliquary of St Servatius, the fourth-century Bishop of Tongres (Fig. 15). The Basilica of St Plechelmus at Oldenzaal houses a silver bust of the saint of the same name. Plechelmus was the first bishop in the region and one of Willibrord's companions (Fig. 16). The Amsterdam Rijksmuseum has a fourteenth-century head of St Frederick, the ninth Bishop of Utrecht, which was fashioned by Elyas Scerpswert, the first smith that we know by name in our part of the world (Fig. 17). The reliquaries of Servatius and Plechelmus still play important roles in the spiritual experience of the local community and are born aloft each year in a saint's day procession (Fig. 18).

Each of these three reliquaries has its own distinctive exterior and its own fascinating history[21]. Believers in the Middle Ages acquired a new past through veneration of the memory of the founders of the church in the Netherlands. The saints took over from the heroes and ancestors, but somehow they retained the traits of the objects they supplanted[22]. If – as I do – you experience the veneration of Christian relics as an expression of something more universal – the

fig.15
Reliquary Bust of St Servatius
Maastricht (?), Ca. 1400 and late 16th Century
Neo-gothic base: August Witte (Aachen), 1908
Silver, gilt silver and copper, silver-plated copper, (semi-)precious stones, enamel, glass
H. 65.6 cm, W. 51 cm (excl. base)
Treasury of the Basilica of St Servatius, Maastricht

fig.16
Reliquary Bust of St Plechelmus
Second quarter of 15th Century
Silver, partly gilt, engraved, enamel
H. 88 cm
Basilica of St Plechelmus, Oldenzaal
photo: Frans Wienk

fig.17
Reliquary Bust of St Frederick
Elyas Scerpswert (Utrecht), 1362
Silver, partly gilt, engraved
H. 45 cm , W. 24 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

fig.18
The reliquary bust of St Plechelmus carried aloft in a solemn ceremony.

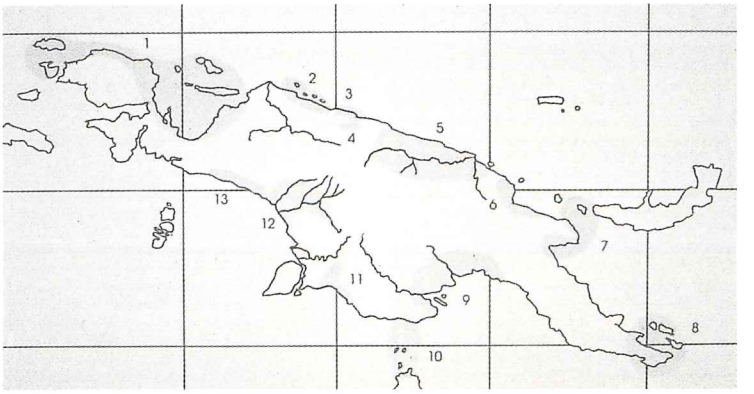


fig.19
Map of Irian Jaya, the former Dutch colony of New Guinea

power of memory – you may feel the need to actually see these powers in action somewhere else. It was this need which took me in search of real ancestor worship at Geelvink Bay in former New Guinea (Fig. 19). The works of Theo van Baaren, in his time one of the leading authorities in comparative religious studies and one of Horst Gerson's best friends in Groningen, had introduced me to a highly intriguing religion in which ancestors and head reliquaries play the central role. Dutch missionaries were successful in persuading the Papuans to abandon the practice of ancestor worship in record time. As a result, many of the finest Papuan reliquaries, known as *korwars,* became redundant and ended up in ethnological museums in the Netherlands. One of the most beautiful and evocative of these korwars can be seen in the ethnological museum at Leiden (Fig. 20 and 21)[23]. It is a rudimentary wooden sculpture of a human figure with a very large head containing a skull.

The artist who makes a reliquary like this one embarks first of all on a ritualised search for the right tree, so that the carving will be fashioned from the right wood. He starts with the idea of a receptacle and its contents; which is highly redolent of the idea behind a Christian head reliquary. The difference between the two objects is not so much that the Papuans represent the whole body. The korwar's head is too prominent to suggest a conclusion like that. What really matters here is that the body of a korwar actually represents a shield. The vast majority of korwars are made up of a head and a shield. The effect of ancestor

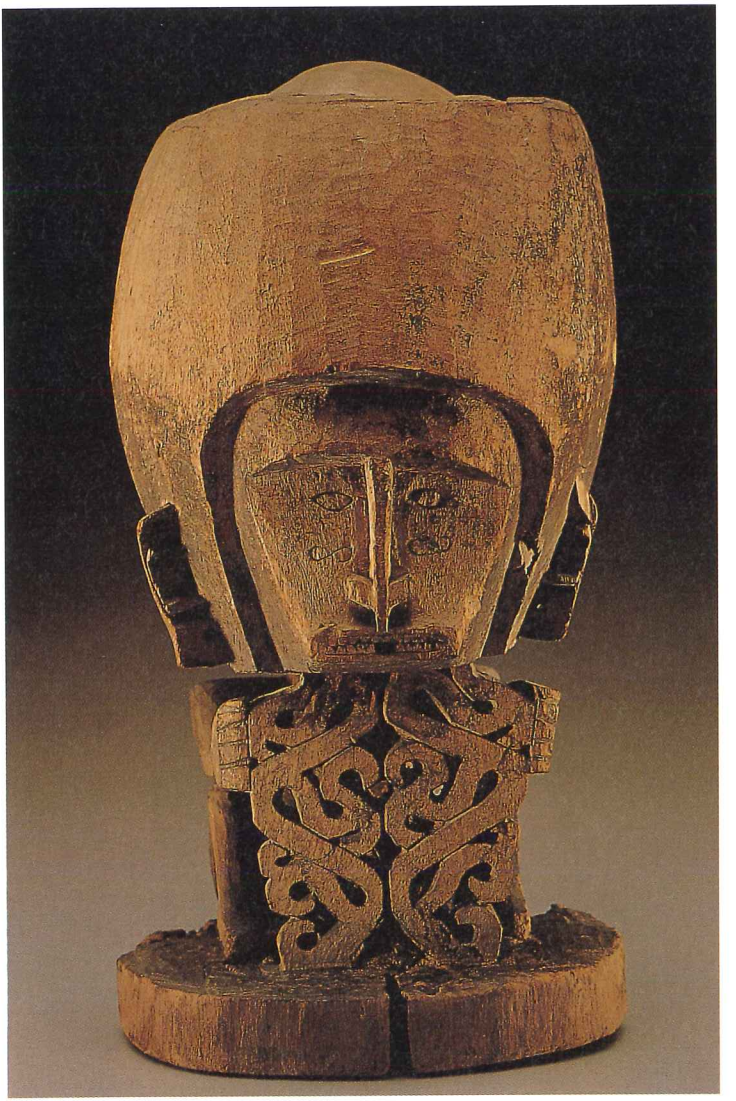


fig.20
Korwar (front)
Geelvink Bay (Biak Numfor District), Irian Jaya
Wood, bone, human skull
H. 40 cm, W. 20.5 cm (head), D. 26 cm (head)
Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden

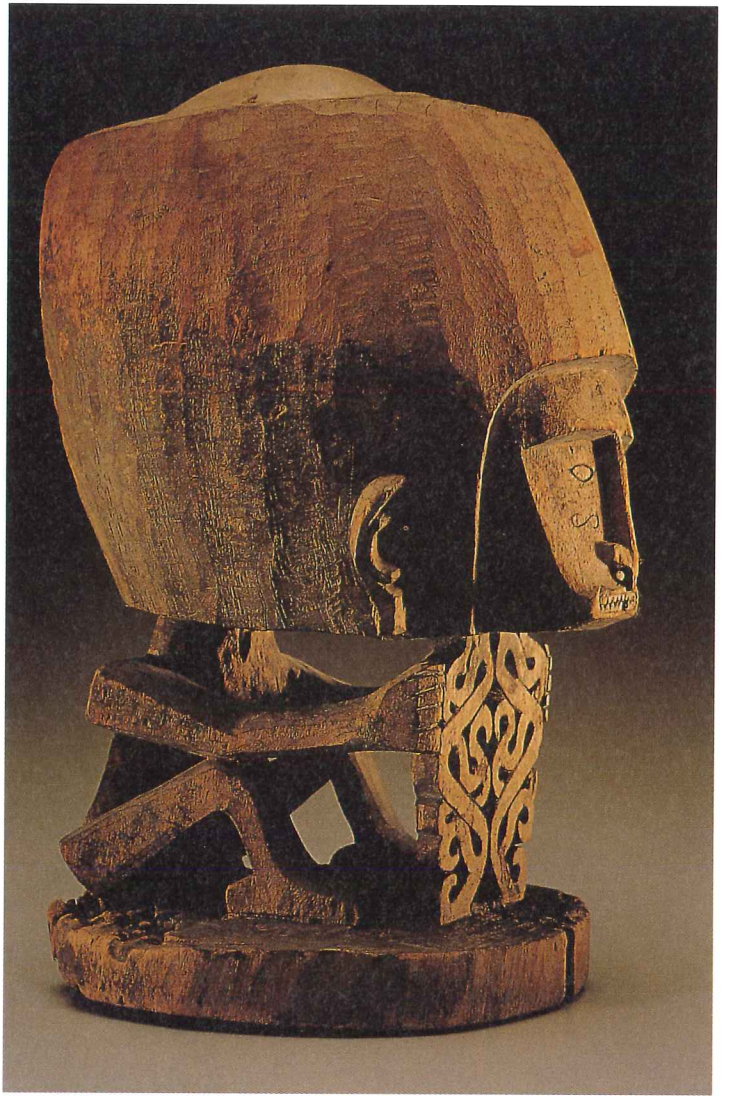


fig.21
Idem fig.20 (side view)

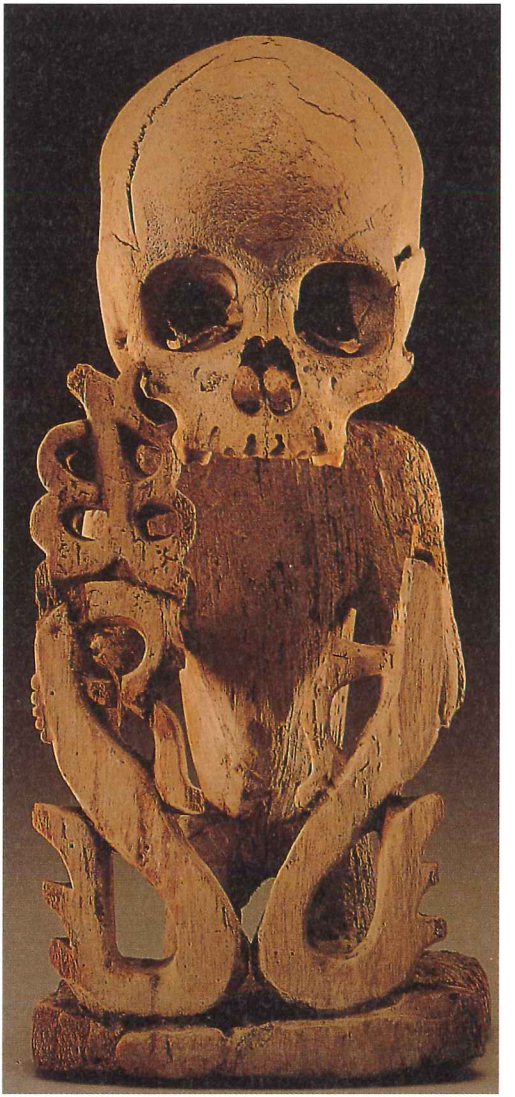


fig.22
Korwar (front)
Geelvink Bay (Rumberpon Island), Irian Jaya
Wood, human skull
H.36.2 cm
Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden

fig.23
Idem fig 22 (side view)

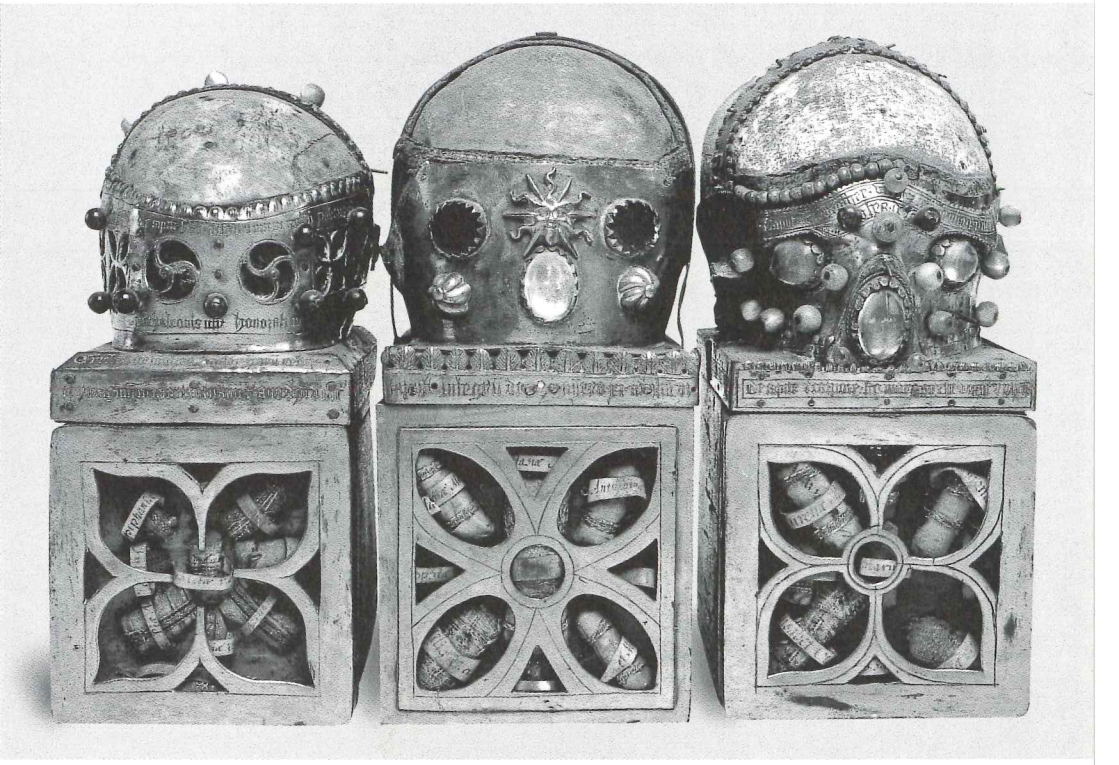


fig.24
Skull reliquaries from the Monastery of Iburg
Johann von Langen, late 15th Century
Silver, gilt brass, stones, wax, glass, human skulls
Cathedral treasury, Osnabrück

worship that the believer hoped for – namely protection – is an intrinsic part of the image.

Christian head reliquaries were adorned with tokens of worship: crowns, necklaces, rings and other jewellery. Sometimes even a representation of a worshipper was added as in the case of the bust of St Plechelmus. But whatever it is that the Christian believer expects to gain from his worship is never visible in the reliquary. The saint in question is apparently too remote for that. The fact that korwars do show what they were expected to provide gives them a special intimacy[24].

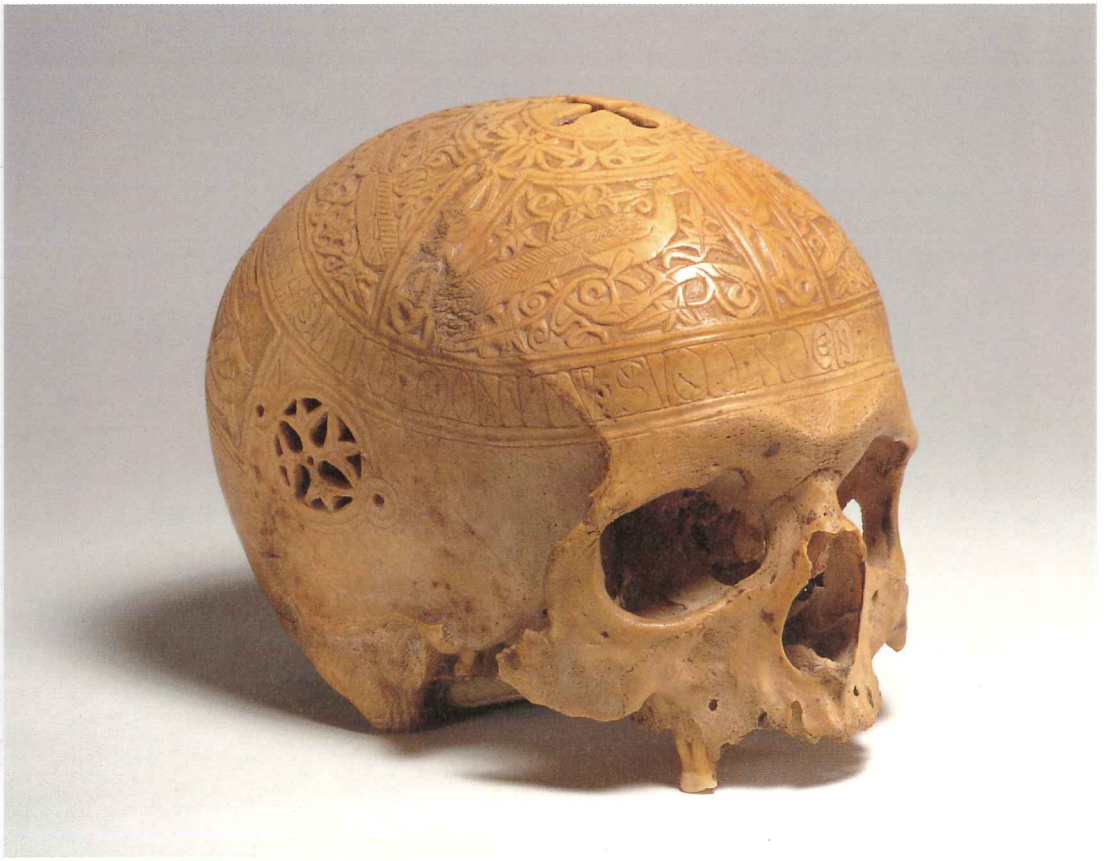


fig.25
Carved Skull
Moissac, Ca. 1100
Human skull
H. 16 cm, W. 14 cm, D. 19 cm
Private collection

Ancestors were not remote but nearby. They were worshipped for as long as they were remembered. So, after a few generations, old korwars were replaced with new ones. Religion seemed a matter of course in New Guinea. No institutions or authority. Only the odd shaman here and there. Van Baaren had an exceptional talent for articulating clearly and concisely the mystery of religious phenomena. This is what he writes in relation to korwars:

fig.26
Idem fig.25 (rear)

"In ancestor worship man is able to return to the security of childhood as he usually attributes a higher power to the dead than to the living; he may feel even safer than when he was a child and his parents and grandparents were still human beings on earth. [...] The veneration of ancestors also provides a link with times past and thus produces a feeling of permanence in a world otherwise subject to change"[25].

fig.27
Abbot Durannus
Moissac, 1100
Marble
Cloister of the Abbey of St Peter, Moissac

Korwar artists did a lot more than make holders for skulls. They also used their sculpture to present the skulls as sacred objects in themselves (Fig. 22 and 23) [26]. From the early sixteenth century we see many similarly prepared skulls in the Christian world, such as these head reliquaries, which are now kept in the treasury of Osnabruck Cathedral (Fig. 24). But we haven't finished yet. Recently I received a tip about a naked skull engraved by an eleventh-century craftsman. Nothing has been published to date on this unique object (Fig. 25 and 26). The elegant inscription does not tell us exactly who the skull belongs to, but it does refer to a gift involving a certain Durannus and Ansquitilius. These two names bring us straight to one of the focal points of the Middle Ages, the abbey at Moissac. This cloistered establishment was revitalised in the eleventh century by

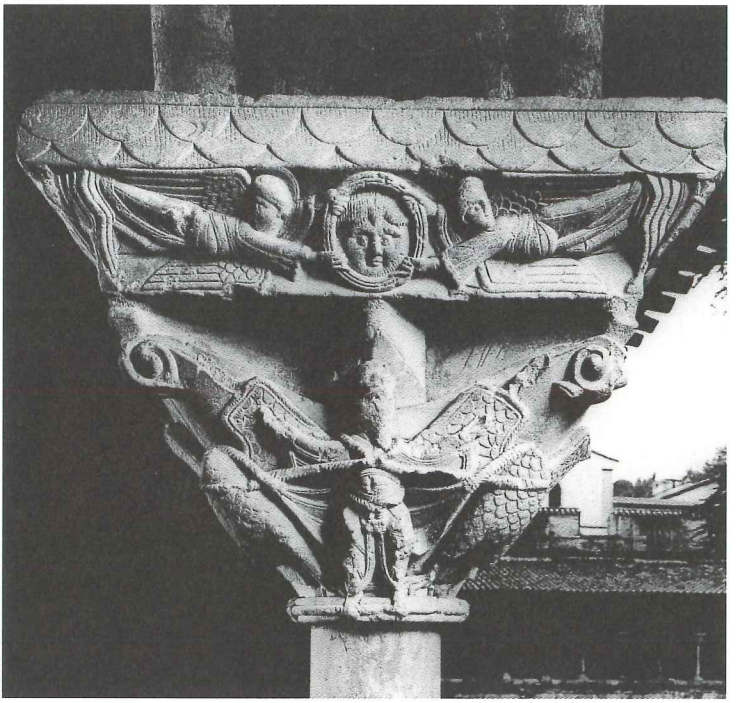


fig.28
Abacus with angels carrying a clipeus
Moissac, 1100
Marble
Cloister of the Abbey of St Peter, Moissac

Abbot Durannus, who came from the monastery at Cluny. Durannus was later succeeded by Ansquitilius. The inscription appears to indicate that Durannus had given the skull to Ansquitilius "so that his name would be remembered for ever"[27].

Ansquitilius had a cloister built which is now regarded as one of the greatest monuments of Romanesque art. It was intended as magnificent tribute to his illustrious predecessor, whose image he places alongside those of the apostles (Fig. 27). The inscriptions in the cloister are strikingly similar to those on the skull. Motifs on the capitals, such as angels resembling Roman Victories who approach with *clipei* repeat the ornamentation on the skull (Fig. 28). And the bird carvings echo the splendid peacocks symbolising immortality.

fig.29
Korwar
Geelvink Bay (Schouten Islands/ Biak Island), Irian Jaya
Wood, beads
H. 22 cm
Volkenkundig Museum Gerardus van der Leeuw, Groningen

fig.30
Shield with skull of an ancestor
Banaro Tribe (Sepik District/ Keram River), Irian Jaya
Wood, cane, human skull, clay, teeth, feathers, seashells, mother-of-pearl
H. 125 cm, W. 50 cm, D. 20 cm
Missiemuseum, Steyl
photo: Peter Mookhoek

fig.31
Togatus Barberini
Early 1st Century A.D.
Marble
H. 165 cm
Musei Capitolini, Rome

In short, the skull belongs to the world of Moissac[28]. Ansquitilius laboured tirelessly to have his predecessor upgraded: Durannus had to be sanctified. This would, after all, add to his own legitimacy as the new boss of Moissac. Perhaps this also explains the later addition of the coat of arms showing the three bishop's mitres; an explicit reference to the fact that Durannus was ordained Bishop of nearby Toulouse in 1059 (Fig. 26)[29]. The skull was meant to ensure that the power of memory continued to exercise its influence over its beholder. The name of your predecessor had to be consecrated "ad immortalitatis memoria". This is institutionalised ancestor worship with a vengeance!

But there are also korwars which hold no relic. Here the divine power is represented by the sculpture itself. A fine specimen of this kind of korwar was found among the collection of Theo van Baaren and is now on display in the Gerardus van der Leeuw Museum of this university (Fig. 29). Van Baaren tended to assume that these figures – which were not reliquaries – were of a later date than the korwars that held skulls. Other ideas have been mooted since. This debate on how korwars developed is strongly reminiscent of the art history debate on whether figures which serve as reliquaries can be seen as the precursors of independent sculptures[30].

At the mission museum in Steyl, a rare and fascinating work of New Guinean art can be seen in which the relationship between the shield and the skull is reversed (Fig. 30)[31]. This is not a skull with a shield but a shield with a skull. After korwars, shields were the most important product in the local art manufacture. What they offered was not so much protection against physical violence as against the hostile forces that emanated from the opponent. The very sight of one of these shields was meant to scare him off. But the shield could only create this effect if it contained the indwelling spirit of the ancestor. And for this you needed a skull. As the skull of an ancestor was the most precious possession one could ever hope to possess, it needed to be kept in a holder made of the best material available – a belief that was also held by Christians in the Middle Ages. However, in the case of the Papuans the 'most precious material available' was not gold or silver, but a pig. So the reliquary incorporated a pig's head and the shield was made of everything porcine: everything from the pig's tusks to the mud it rooted around in. The shields and korwars of New Guinea are a highly unique example of the power of memory because the nature of that power, namely safety and protection, is visible in the work itself.

New Guinea, or present-day Irian Jaya, is a long way from here. But for the early

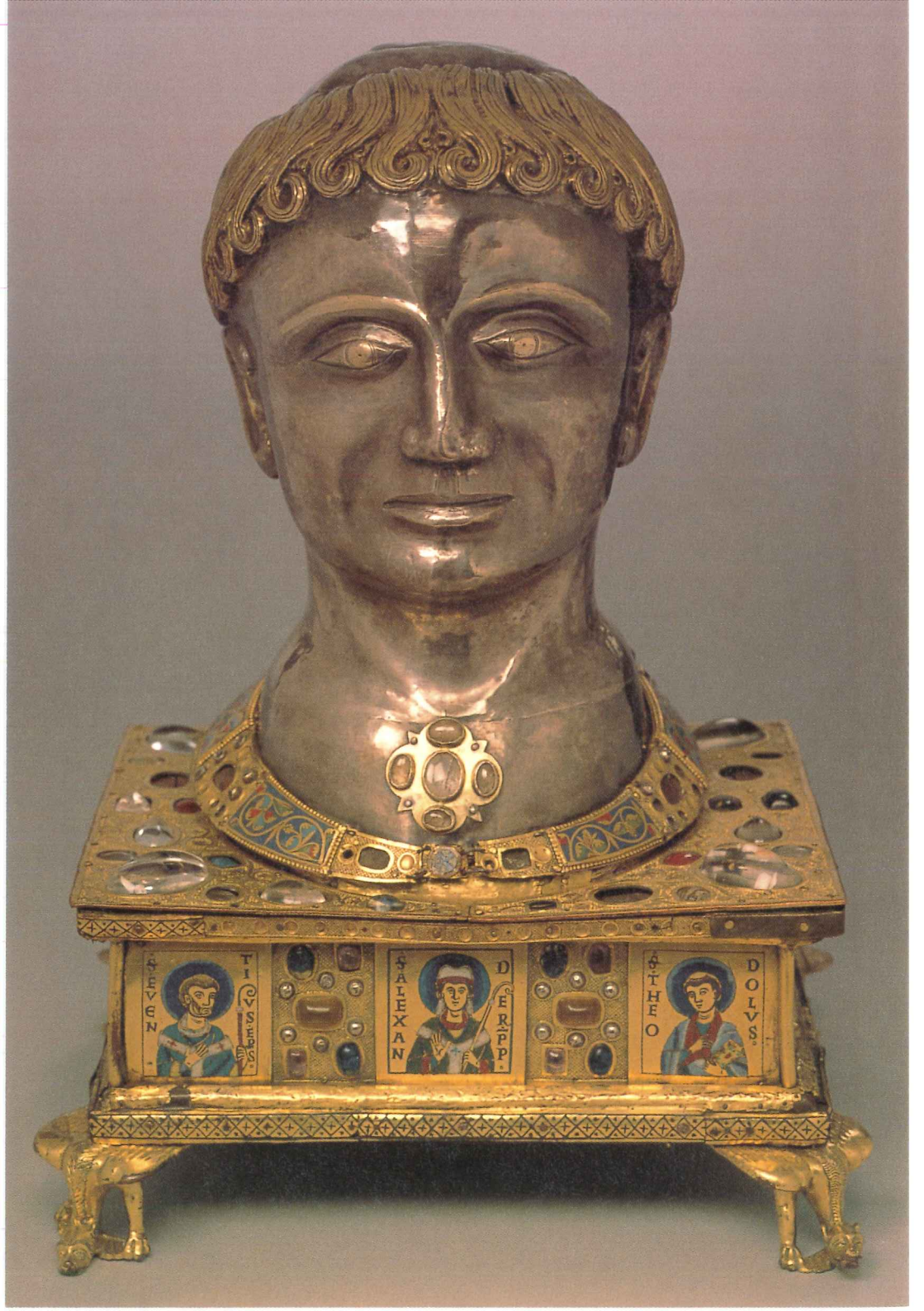

SEVEN
TIVSEDS
SALEXAN
DERPP
ATHEO
DOLVS

fig.32
Head Reliquary of St Alexander
Godefroid de Claire of Huy, Ca.1145
Silver with gilding over wood, engraved, enamel, precious stones, bronze
H. 44.5 cm, W. 23.5 cm
Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels

fig.33
Head of an unknown saint
Western Europe (Netherlands?), second half of 14th Century
Copper, partially gilded, engraved, traces of polychromy
H. 18 cm, W. 13.9 cm, D. 15 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Christians the heathen practice of ancestor worship was all too close. In fact, in Rome itself. This is particularly evident in the figure of the *Togatus Barberini* from the Palazzo dei Conservatori (Fig. 31) which depicts an important Roman from the time of Caesar Augustus. In one hand he holds the head of his father; in the other, the head of his grandfather – ancestor worship. In her historical imagination Marianne Kleibrink envisages this distinguished gentleman paying a visit to the theatre with a head in each hand. Taking the old folks along on a night out[32].

Heads like these were commonplace all over Europe throughout the Middle Ages and many people were still aware of their original function. This is the most Roman example of heads that were made in the Romanesque style of the twelfth century. One might be inclined to assume that it was an object of ancestor worship but this was not the case. It was mounted by an artist on a reliquary of St Alexander, which is in the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels (Fig. 32). It has always been assumed that this head belonged to the martyr Alexander, who was pope from 105 to 115[33]. But this cannot possibly be true. For the real Alexander appears on an enamel on the portable altar underneath, which also houses his relics. He looks there as a pope should. Probably, this reliquary belongs to a special group of medieval works of art which were first brought together by William Heckscher[34]. These include crosses and reliquaries in which classical heads, both real and imitation, have been introduced. Obviously, we cannot automatically assume that this Roman head from the Romanesque period was linked to ancestor worship and that it was Christianised by being mounted on a reliquary. On the other hand it would be totally implausible to infer that we are dealing only with an offbeat artistic experiment commissioned by the scholarly Abbot Wibald of Stavelot. By sheer coincidence the Rijksmuseum has a bronze head just like this, dating from the fourteenth century (Fig. 33). The technical details suggest that it too was mounted on a reliquary[35].

I've come to the end of my story and would like to round off by leaving you with some food for thought. The nature and intensity of relic worship among Christians in the Middle Ages is explainable only against the background of non-Christian religious traditions. The pedlar selling amulets, the pagan priests, the quacks and magicians who were active during the first centuries of Christendom and have been so graphically described by Peter Brown remained on the scene throughout the Middle Ages. Household gods, idols and ancestors were worshipped routinely. The church had to respond and found an answer in organising the veneration of relics. But this was not a one-off response which

fig.34
St Augustine on the beach
(predella scene from the altarpiece, formerly in the Church of S. Barnaba, Florence)
Sandro Botticelli, Ca.1485
Tempera on wood, 20 x 38 cm
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

triggered an autonomous development, as is all too readily assumed. There was an ongoing dialogue. Otherwise it is incomprehensible that a practice which could scarcely be justified in theological terms could increase so spectacularly.

No-one understood this better than Thomas Aquinas himself. As Wim Vroom has already pointed out, when Aquinas addresses the theme of relics he does not even attempt to offer a theological justification[36]. In his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas quotes a passage from *De Civitate Dei* by St Augustine: "For if a piece of clothing, a ring or any other object that belonged to a father becomes all the more precious to his offspring in accordance with the love they bear the parent, then bodies themselves should certainly not be disparaged given that we are bound much more intimately and closely to these than anything we wear upon them". Aquinas concludes that "If you love someone, then you revere what is left of him after his death; and this is true not only of the body and its constituent parts, but also external objects such as clothing." Aquinas contended that such veneration applied all the more to God's saints, our intercessors in Heaven. He does not justify the veneration of Christian relics with theological reasoning, but points to basic human motivation. Ultimately, Aquinas has only one argument: the power of memory.

Let us now return to the forefather we are honouring here today. Horst Gerson. On 22 February 1966 Horst delivered a lecture in this very place entitled *The Language of the Art Historian*. He spoke then of the powerlessness of the art historian to find the right words to convey the aesthetic experience of works of art. For, at the end of the day, Horst cared far more about Art than Art History. I share that sense of powerlessness when, like today, I venture into an area where aesthetic and religious experience overlap. Nowhere is that overlap more discernible than in the veneration of relics in their holders. Hideous objects framed in the most precious and most beautiful materials that people could obtain. We continue to make fumbling attempts to express something that is beyond comprehension. There is a story in the lives of the saints which also touches on this sense of powerlessness.

One day St Augustine was walking along the seashore at Civitavecchia. Once again he was lost in contemplation about the great question of his day, the mystery of the Trinity. Then he ran into a little boy who was busy with a shell in a pool (Fig. 34). "What are you doing?" he asked. "I'm scooping the sea into my pool" was the answer. "But that's impossible" said Augustine. "No less impossible than trying to understand the mystery of the Trinity with the mind of a human" said the child[37]. Now that we are dealing in metaphors I'd like to conclude by saying that I hope, in the past hour, you have been folding neat little paper boats in your historical imagination which you will sail in my little pool on the seashore.

* *This publication is in many ways a co-production. I am very much indebted to the assistance, the inquiring spirit and stimulating wit of Thijs Tromp. While I was preparing this lecture I benefited greatly from the erudition and critical support of Truus Coppus, Jan Euwals, Jan Piet Filedt Kok, Willem Frijhoff, Hans Gerritsen, Barbara Kellum, Marianne Kleibrink, C.H.J.M. Kneepkens, Lammert Leertouwer, Dana Leibsohn, Gerard Lemmens, Jan Rudolph de Lorm, P.C.E.J. Molenaars, Peter Mookhoek, Marie-Luise Schnackenburg, P. Seesing, Dirk Smidt, L. Tagage and J.B.A. Velers. I owe special thanks to Brigitte Buettner, from whom I learned so much when I was teaching a seminar on reliquaries at Smith College during the fall of 1998. I would also like to thank our Smith students, who were a continuous source of inspiration when I was writing this lecture, and Elly de Jong, who took care of the preparations of the manuscript with her usual, and at the same time, unusual dedication.*

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37
see Addendum.

St Augustine on the Beach

Research: M.D. Haga and Thijs Tromp

St Augustine on the Beach

During the autumn of 1998 the Bruges altarpiece depicting scenes from the life of St Augustine was displayed in the exhibition *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: early Netherlandish painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. One of the representations on the huge central panel shows St Augustine and the child on the beach (Fig. 1). The catalogue refers to this story as the best-known legend (p. 128) about St Augustine. But best-known to whom? Not to the author of the most authoritative and widely-read, late medieval compendium of lives of the saints, Jacopo da Voragine. At least, there is no mention at all of this story in his *Golden Legend*, written around 1260. Alternatively, he may have known it, but decided to omit it, because the child's statement constituted an offence to the theological thinking prevalent at the time. For, his admonition is an antidote to the conviction that human ratio, if used in the right way, can penetrate the mysteries of faith. This way of thinking, which lies at the very roots of high scholasticism, is still very much alive today, as is evident from *Fides et Ratio*, a recent encyclical by Pope John Paul II. The question is, where do we find the first documented account of this "best-known" episode from the life of this St Augustine? Most handbooks of iconography refer only to the *Acta Sanctorum* of the mid-seventeenth century.

Interestingly enough, the earliest mention of the story stems from the *Libri Miraculorum* by Caesarius von Heisterbach (ca. 1180 - ca. 1240). This account does not however refer to Augustine walking along the seashore, but to a professor from Paris strolling along the bank of the River Seine! Although the *Libri Miraculorum* are certainly not a well-known hagiographical source for twentieth-century scholars of iconography, somebody like Jacopo must have been familiar with the work of the story-teller from Heisterbach. The Cistercian Caesarius, however, should be located at the other end of the spectrum of thirteenth-century theology. The Parisian professor is asked by his students to explain the "sacramentum Trinitatis" by means of an effective example. He promises to come up with one, but after a sleepless, brain-racking night has to confess in class that he is unable to produce a good story. Still puzzled by his students' question, he walks along the Seine where he meets an "infantulum speciosissimum", who is trying to siphon the water from the river into his "fossa".

The dialogue that follows between the man and this most beautiful boy is exactly the same as the conversation that St Augustine is reported to have held with the child on the beach. Now the professor has found an excellent example. He goes back to his students, tells them the story and concludes "quod sacramentum Trinitatis et unitatis non ratione, sed fide discutiendum esset". However, in a

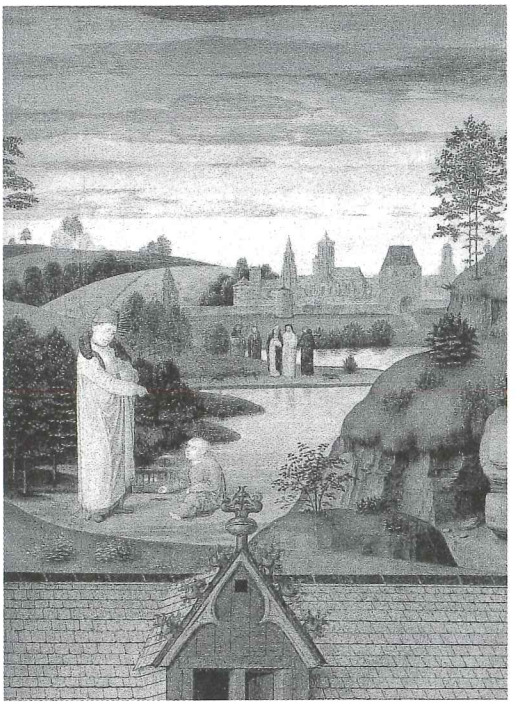

fig.1
St Augustine on the beach
(detail of the Bruges altarpiece depicting scenes from the Life of St Augustine)
Master of St Augustine, last quarter of 15th Century
Oil on wood
The Cloisters, New York

paragraph that comes shortly after the one on the Parisian professor, St Augustine is called in as a witness "quod sacramentum Trinitatis, similiter et incarnatio Domini necnon et sacramentum altaris ratione nequeant explicari"[1]. The story of the professor and the *infantulum* became a topos. Both Lanfrancus of Canterbury (1005-1098) and Alanus of Lille (1428-1475) have been given the credit for the dialogue with the boy near the water. St Augustine however became by far the best-known stroller along the waterfront. After all, he smells a rat at a much earlier date. In the famous but apocryphal letter to Cyrillus he hears a voice asking him: "Augustine, Augustine, quid quaeris? Putasne brevi immittere vasculo mare totum?"[2].

fig.2
St Augustine and the child
Stephan Hauser, 1484
Woodcut, 26.7 x 19.3 cm
Collection Edmond de Rothschild, Paris

In the iconography of St Augustine we encounter this story with some regularity only in the second half of the fifteenth century. The scene appears in fresco cycles by Benozzo Gozzoli in the Church of S. Agostino in San Gimignano and underneath an image of the saint by Pinturicchio in the Pinacoteca in Perugia. In addition to being represented in the predella scene of Botticelli's S. Barnaba altarpiece and the Bruges painting, Augustine and the child are depicted on an altarpiece painted by Jaime Huguet in 1463 for the Church of the Augustinian Hermites in Barcelona (now in the Museum of Catalan Art). They also appear on a late fifteenth-century Netherlandish altarpiece in the Church of St Stephen in Jerusalem[3]. In the famous altarpiece by Michael Pacher of ca. 1483 in the Alte

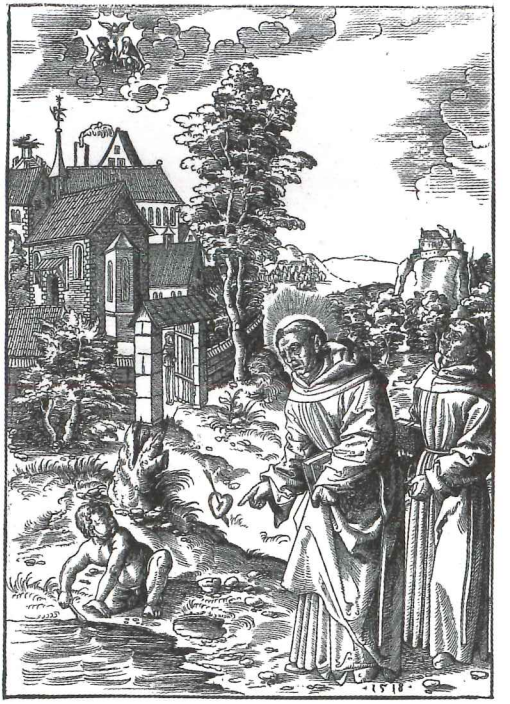

fig.3
St Augustine on the beach
Wolf Traut, 1518
Woodcut, 29.1 x 20.5 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Pinakothek in Munich the child is already represented as an attribute of the saint. One of the most moving representations of St Augustine and the child is to be found on a German woodcut of 1484 by Stephan Hauser in the Collection Edmond de Rothschild (Fig. 2)[4].

We first encounter the full story in textual form in *Catalogus sanctorum et gestorum eorum*, which was written by Petrus de Natalibus, around 1370, and printed in Venice in the early sixteenth century. Here we also find separate elements of the scene, such as the spoon. Augustine was not only thinking about the mystery of the Trinity but also preparing a book on it. After delivering his

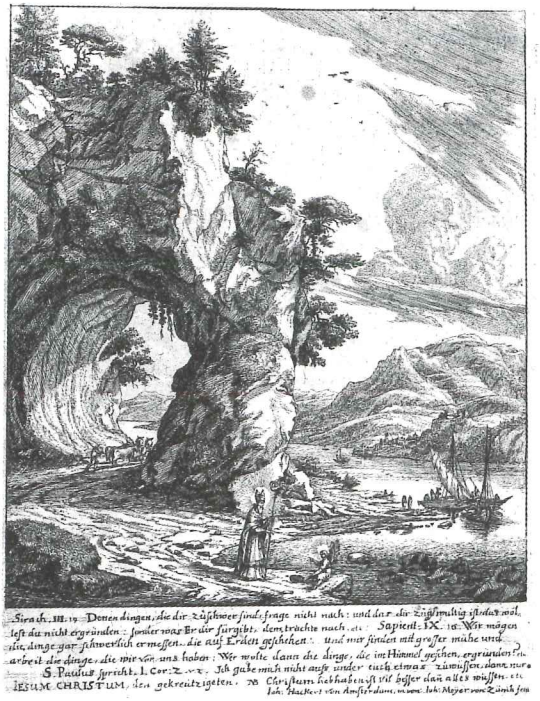

fig.4
St Augustine on the beach
Johann Meyer von Zürich (1655-1712) after Johan Hackaert (1627-1700)
Etching, 21.7 x 16.8 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

enlightening statement, the child disappeared and Augustine "se humiliavit". From this, one can easily conclude that the child was in fact Christ in disguise. This is how we meet him in the Hauser woodcut.

Wolf Traut presents a highly elaborate early rendering of the scene in a woodcut of 1518 (Fig. 3)[5]. Here the Trinity actually appears in the sky. St Augustine has become a German Augustinian, who is walking in a German landscape near a German convent. His main attribute, the pierced heart, occupies a central position as a kind of emblem of the saint's intense love of God[6]. Augustine's companion, who sees the Trinity in heaven but does not notice the child on

earth, reminds us of Brother Leo, the friend of St Francis, who also appears repeatedly behind his master.

Looking at this very German woodcut of 1518, one cannot help thinking of the most famous Augustinian of that time, Martin Luther. Luther abounded in love for his Saviour as an answer to Gods grace, and experienced, not just as a theologian but as an emotional human being, that it was impossible to unveil God's mysteries through reason. Actually, the story of St Augustine on the beach is one of the very few stories of saints that were also recited in Protestant circles. Hence, we need not be surprised when we find the scene represented in the pious Calvinist environment of the family of Gerard Ter Borch, produced by his son Harmen in 1648 and 1650 and by his daughter Gesina in the 1660s. It is virtually the only scene of a saint to appear in their sketchbooks[7].

It was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth century that the scene of St Augustine on the beach acquired the popularity that it has retained to date. It still is a story that teachers love to tell Sunday-school children everywhere. The Prentenkabinet at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum has a remarkable print by Johann Meyer von Zürich after a representation by Johan Hackaert (Fig. 4). It shows St Augustine and an angelic boy in one of those fantastic landscapes that appealed so much to the imagination of the period. Underneath is written a fascinating theological framing of the scene. Apparently, by that time, St Augustine on the beach had also become firmly anchored in theological thinking.

Notes Addendum

1
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2
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3
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4
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5
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Cover illustration:
Shield with skull of an ancestor (detail)
Banaro Tribe (Sepih District/Keram River), Irian Jaya
Wood, cane, human skull, clay, teeth, feathers, seashells, mother-of-pearl
H. 125 cm, W. 50 cm, D. 20 cm
Missiemuseum, Steyl
Photo: Peter Mookhoek

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Nowhere did the power of memory play a more compelling role than in the veneration of holy relics by the Christians of the Middle Ages. This practice was not inspired only by the exemplary lives of prodigious individuals from the past. No, the heroes of faith had far more to offer than mere example. They conferred well-being, healing, protection and the ultimate promise of victory over death. The author experiences the veneration of Christian relics as an expression of something more universal, as the power of memory. Therefore he feels the need to actually see these powers in action somewhere else. It was this need which took him in search of real ancestor worship at Geelvink Bay in former New Guinea. In the lecture new research will be presented and also hitherto unknown and rather spectacular reliquaries will be published.

Henk van Os is University Professor of Art and Society at the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of many studies on early Italian art. As general director of the Rijksmuseum he organised the exhibition Art of Devotion in 1994 and wrote a book on the subject, that is considered the best general introduction to late medieval art for private devotion. He is preparing a major exhibition on medieval reliquaries for the year 2000 in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam and the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht. This publication is supported by het VSB Fonds.

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