

Some Textual Sources for the Purse as Reliquary

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This paper focuses on a class of purse-shaped portable reliquaries ranging in date from the seventh to the twelfth centuries.¹ While a number of these reliquaries have been researched for technical and formal qualities, questions of the origin and particular significance of the purse form have not been addressed.² This paper introduces the history of a few example reliquaries, surveys the formal qualities held in common by these objects, and follows with evidence suggesting possible textual bases for the purse as a Christian symbol and, consequently, for the specific use of the purse form as a reliquary.

Why the purse? Such a tenebrous question may best be answered with just a little bit of common sense. A purse is by definition any small, portable vessel with the capacity to contain other items, most often items of some readily accepted worth, such as coins.³ The purse was, and will for our research purposes be, a universally recognizable holder for money or riches, smaller than a chest, and marked specifically for its ease of portability.

Relics in the medieval church were made and understood to be objects of immense spiritual value, and as such, were kept in an astonishing variety of costly holders.⁴ Sometimes they took the form of boxes, or glasses; they may have been statues, paintings, sculpted heads, feet, or other body parts, and considerable scholarship has been devoted to the understanding of the functions and symbolism unique to each form. Purse-shaped reliquaries are among the oldest of the reliquary types. From the earliest days of relic veneration these sacred remnants, no doubt considered as priceless possessions, are found to have been housed in purses, or vessels the shapes of which approximated that of a purse. A decidedly purse-shaped container would bring to any mind the immediate intimation of wealth. That these purse-reliquaries were most often en-

cased in hammered gold and gemstones, sculpted and engraved with at times elaborate imagery and ornament, reiterates the oft-repeated maxim that the contents were deserving of the cover.

This explanation may, in fact, be all there is to the use of the purse as a model for reliquaries. But a few observations suggest that there was a special significance to the purse shape sourced in Biblical texts, writings of church fathers, accounts of saints' lives, and the pervasive traditions of pilgrimage and mission work. Each of these sources would surely have been familiar to the clerics commissioning the manufacture of such reliquaries—and tied to the unique ways that the purse-reliquary was employed during rituals and religious events. What we are looking for is some evidence that the purse form was felt by those commissioning such sacred vessels to contain an extra, perhaps metaphoric significance—that the specific selection of the *purse* bore with it unique subtexts and alluded in its function to a number of essential traits and meanings of the reliquary.

The importance of relics for the early Christian church is widely and uniformly attested. Examples of the powerful culture that developed around the use of relics are to be found in almost every account of the lives and practices of early Christians and the church leadership. Writers like St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Chrysostom, St. Gregory Nazianzen, and many other great doctors endorsed the veneration of relics. For the church leadership, relics were important as objects around which their legitimacy and legacies were often fashioned. St. Jerome wrote: "We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the Creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore Him whose martyrs

¹ For more on reliquaries see Peter Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800-1200* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994).

² I must begin by citing my great indebtedness to David A. Hinton, Suzanne Keene, and Kenneth E. Qualman's 1981 article, "The Winchester Reliquary," the only work that I am aware of which treats the unique problems of the purse reliquary. I refer often to their research for historical contexts and technical specifications, and without this reference would not have had an adequate basis from which to explore questions of symbolism and meaning. (Hinton, David A., Suzanne Keene and Kenneth E. Qualman, "The Winchester Reliquary," *Medieval Archaeology* XXV [1981]: 45-77.)

³ Let this not be interpreted as my asserting any particular or appropriate contents for the purse reliquary. My interest is in tracing the symbolic ori-

gin of the purse form as appropriate for containing Christian relics, and yet one must begin by granting that throughout history the need has existed for purses, and that the essential symbolism of the purse is tied to money in one form or another.

⁴ Church fathers often warned against considering the costly casings to be the true worth of the objects. Yet there was the parallel concern that the gold or gemstones or other precious matter might be seen as nothing more than decoration. (See Henk van Os, *The Way to Heaven*, published in conjunction with the exhibition "The Way to Heaven. Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages," held in the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, and the Museum Catharinjneconvent, Utrecht, 16 December 2000 to 22 April 2001. [Amsterdam: De Prom, 2000]).

they are.”⁵ Bishop Acca of Hexham obtained “relics of the blessed apostles and martyrs of Christ from all parts and put up altars for their veneration, establishing various chapels...for this purpose within the walls of the church.”⁶

Relics were needed not only for altars, however: Cuthbert noted, “After Terce, we walked in procession with the relics of the Saints, as the customs of the day required.”⁷ Nor did relics necessarily stay within the immediate radius of the church: Bishop Germanus, according to Bede, traveled the countryside with saints’ relics, once curing a girl’s blindness by applying to her eyes a little bag that hung around his neck.⁸ Similarly, relics might have been carried from place to place to raise money or to assist in conversions.⁹

Based on the purse-shape of the set of reliquaries associated with Saint Willibrord of Emmerich,¹⁰ there is good reason to suspect that he originally stored his relics in a purse round his neck when he set off northwards from Rome to convert the heathen: he was thus protected by the holy power of the bones that he had received from the pope himself. At the Battle of Hastings William the Conqueror had with him the relics on which Harold had sworn his oath of allegiance, and fought with them hung round his neck.¹¹

Even if it was never intended that the reliquary be taken outside of the church, it was sensible that there should be a strap to fit round the bearer’s neck, so as to free his hands, and so as to allow for the visibility of the reliquary. There appear to be provisions for strap-fittings on the sides of almost every known purse-reliquary. On many, including the Winchester reliquary and the St. Stephen’s Purse at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Figure 1), the signs are only of delicate wear on the gilding, suggesting that these objects were very carefully handled—supported by the straps only for short periods—or that the fittings were simply retained as “purse-like” details. On others, such as the reliquary of Bishop Altheus (Figure 2), or the purse at Cluny (Figure 3), the objects show more wear on the faces, sides and around the strap fittings, and appear therefore to have been items of some regular use—gilded and ornamented with gems and figures, but suggestive of a certain restrained and serviceable plainness.¹²

That relics were often expected to be so carried from place to place informs the conception of the relic object as one fun-

damentally linked with transience. The primary relic is, after all, matter at once loose from its departed physical host, though connected to a greater spiritual body as matter imbued with a divine charge. But for a believer to reap spiritual benefit—to see a miracle performed—corporeal proximity is needed. The history of most relics is a sequence of movements—they ambled in person, and were later divided and taken far from the corpse. To see the power of a relic maximized geographically—to expand the effects of its voltage from the sphere of the altar or located reliquary—the relic must commandeer another’s legs.

If we go by the number of surviving examples, the most popular small reliquaries seem to have been the house-shaped type—shrines and caskets—models which allowed for a hinged lid, and with it, convenient access to to the vessel’s contents. Surprisingly, purse-shaped reliquaries were not made with this accessibility in mind; they were far smaller and narrower, and most often not designed to be opened.¹³ The purse-reliquaries, then, while commonly incorporating ornaments resembling lids and clasps, were purses only in shape and not in function. In most cases, to open the container would have meant its disassembly, and while it is possible to imagine the annexing of additional relic objects to the matériel around which the purse was first fashioned, the labor would have made it a significant and highly uncommon event. These were closed purses, and in this differ from other reliquaries designed after vessels. This is especially suggestive of a particular significance to the *shape* of the purse as a reliquary form. The “purseness” was in the suggestion that the reliquary was a purse, and not in its function.

In all of the known objects surveyed for this paper, the relic and its purse make up a unit, suggesting that the contents were intended to remain safe and concealed, and that the purse-object was not then taken as separable from the substances which charged the unit with holy energy. That purse-reliquaries were worn, and surely did travel great distances with their wearers, might possibly—in a world of thieves and rival relic collectors—have compelled their being made “without strings,” that is, of a design free from the danger of finding one’s strings cut, the purse open, the relic swiped. But more essential to the issue than concerns of physical safety, many reliquaries (perhaps all) were intended as corporeal manifestations of the value and grandeur of their contents.

⁵ In “Ad Riparium”, i, P. L., XXII, 907, as translated in *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume IX* (The Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

⁶ *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colegrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Book V, Chapter XX (Oxford, 1969) 31, cited in Hinton, Keene, and Qualman, *Medieval Archaeology*: 48.

⁷ Cuthbert’s letter to Cuthwin on the death of Bede: in L. Sherley-Price, *Bede: A History of the English Church and People* (Hammondsworth, 1955), cited in Hinton, Keene, and Qualman, *Medieval Archaeology*: 48.

⁸ Bede, Chapter XVIII (1969) 59, cited in Hinton, Keene, and Qualman, *Medieval Archaeology*: 48.

⁹ Hinton, Keene, and Qualman, *Medieval Archaeology*: 48.

¹⁰ Saint Willibrord was a Northumbrian missionary to Ireland and the Low Countries, and a figure connected to the vast stores of relics kept in the treasury of St. Martin’s church in Emmerich. In 692 Willibrord received Apostolic authorization by Pope Sergius in Rome. It was presumably on the occasion of his consecration that he was presented with a box of holy relics, in order to assist him in the winning of souls. (Henk van Os 71.)

¹¹ Again, I am indebted to Hinton, Keene, and Qualman for David A., Suzanne Keene and Kenneth E. Qualman. “The Winchester Reliquary” in *Medieval Archaeology*, Volume XXV, 1981. pp. 45-77.

¹² Hinton, Keene, and Qualman, *Medieval Archaeology*: 49-50.

¹³ For a more thorough description of the technical specifications of some example purse reliquaries, see Hinton, Keene, and Qualman, *Medieval Archaeology*.

Without the contents, there would be no reason for the vessel, therefore to enable through design its cursory removal might have threatened the stasis of the object/charge relationship.

The purse has a rich and varied iconographic heritage, not all of which is appropriate prefiguration to the design of a vessel host for sacred remains and their conveyance, display and veneration. In one of its earliest forms, the purse is attributed to Mercury, the god of Commerce. For obvious reasons, the purse or wallet is almost universally linked in symbolic meaning to currency and its exchange in trade. With such mercantile associations, the purse as money bag has been symbolically linked to the sin of avarice, and in this meaning is played over and over in imagery from antiquity, through the Christian world into the modern age. A purse is at times held or worn by the personification of Melancholy, as it refers to the futility of seeking earthly wealth. In more recent centuries the purse came to symbolize in still life the transience of earthly riches, and was a marker of greed and vanity in representations of secular activities, both low-life and high-life genre scenes. Likewise, in its linkage with greed, it is a symbol traditionally attributed to Judas Iscariot.¹⁴

There is, however, a heritage of the purse suggestive of more redemptive qualities and which might be argued appropriate inspiration to the shaping of a reliquary. Matthew the tax collector,¹⁵ Lawrence the deacon,¹⁶ and the Breton abbot Brieuic¹⁷ each have a purse. It is also counted among the traditional attributes of the bishop; the bishops Willibrord, Enger (Figure 4), and Altheus (Figure 2) are identified with the purse, and a grouping of three purses often indicates a representation of the bishop St. Nicholas of Myra.¹⁸

It is not, however, the intention of this research to suggest any direct relationship between the purse reliquary and

the purse as the attribute of particular saints, rather to assert that there do exist these and other instances of the use of the purse as a defining characteristic for a type, and that these types are two—the disciple and the bishop. Through a brief analysis of a few texts, one may likewise attest that the idea of the purse in the Christian mind was linked to some specific metaphoric uses in the Gospels, and that these metaphors were sufficiently grounded for there to arise a system of services for the purse which included the design of reliquaries.

Firstly, let us consider the matter of the purse as one attribute of the disciple—and subsequently of the bishop whose larger symbolic designs are apostolic. Purses (or some representational cast thereof) are frequently incorporated into lore and texts about shepherds; as well, they are found in texts about Christ's disciples, who are traditionally likened to surrogate shepherds in the absence of their master.

In Matthew, Chapter 10,¹⁹ Christ warns his disciples against carrying hard currency in their purses, and by this suggests that the devoted shall find their needs provided for, that the purse itself may be carried—there is no explicit forbiddance of the bag—but that its contents ought to be something other than coin. Here is suggested that the vacant purse would, in fact, be the repository of spiritual wealth, insomuch as the disciple would be made to rely on his faith in Providence to sustain him, and not faith in corrupting and impermanent metals. It is the disciple's faith that fills the purse, as well as God's divine power to effect sustenance for his most loyal followers.

Luke records in Chapter 22,²⁰ that in the hours preceding his arrest, Christ modified his previous order, and while rhetorically suggesting that the principle of the purseless disciple is not flawed, Christ made it understood that the purse (with

¹⁴ Associations between Judas Iscariot and the purse are numerous, though the sourcing of the purse as reliquary to the likeness of Christ's betrayer is highly unlikely. At any rate, Judas does provide certain associations which are not at all inappropriate to the understanding of the purse as an object with many, and at times contradictory, nuances.

St. John tells us that Judas carried the purse. After describing the anointing of Christ's feet by Mary, the Evangelist continues: Then one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, he that was about to betray him, said: 'Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?' Now he said this, not because he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and having the *purse*, carried the things that were put therein. (John 12:4-6. [Author's italics.])

¹⁵ While none of the surviving purse-reliquaries may be directly associated with St. Matthew, there do emerge from this Evangelist's connection to the purse some suggestions of symbolic interpretations. As the purse is linked to taxes and excise, one might argue the crucial roles of the bishop and deacon in providing for the coffers of the church through the collection of donations and tithes. Both titles would have had access to relics, and likely would have commissioned the creation of appropriately nuanced reliquaries.

¹⁶ Tradition has it that Pope Sixtus II, when arrested, instructed Laurence to distribute to the poor the church's treasures, consisting of precious vessels and money, for which, as deacon, he was responsible. He is often shown with a dish of coins or a purse, a censer and the martyr's palm or the processional cross, which it was the deacon's duty to carry. ("Laurence," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1910 ed.)

¹⁷ Born in Cardiganshire (Ceredigion), Wales; died in Brittany, c. 510. Brieuic was the founder of a monastery near Tréguier, Brittany, and another which grew into the town and see called Saint-Brieuc. In Tréguier, he converted a wealthy nobleman named Conan who provided the funds to build a monastery in northern Armorica. Then Brieuic is said to have returned to Britain and with the help of his relative, Prince Rigald of Domnonia, built the church of Saint Stephen there. Because of the legends regarding his great charity, Brieuic is considered the patron saint of purse-makers. ("Briouic," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1910 ed.)

¹⁸ "[Nicholas's] attributes are three golden balls or purses, lying at his feet or placed on a book." (James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, [New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974], 256.)

¹⁹ "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give./ Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your *purses*. / Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat." (Matt. 10: 8-10. King James Version. [Author's italics.])

It is important to note that the word "purse" in the King James Version is translated from the Latin *bursa*, a word in turn adopted from the Greek term for a wallet or money bag. It is clear then that the original idea expressed in Matthew's Gospel was that of the purse as container for material wealth.

²⁰ "Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you *without purse*, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. / He said to them, "But now if you have a *purse*, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a

its earthly wealth implied) might now be among the possessions of his disciples. What had changed was that the disciples would no longer be working from a common coffer; they would, in the bodily absence of their master, be required to see to their own maintenance in matters for which coins provided. These verses contain the first and essential edict that those engaged in the holy mission of disseminating Christian thought are to at least marginally concern themselves with having wealth enough to protect their body and mission from succumbing to the elements. Henceforth the purse may be understood as appropriate vestment for anyone committed to the service of the church; and most obviously for the priest or bishop as keeper of the coffers of the parish or see. The common purse of Christ and his disciples becomes the fund of resources from which a congregation draws sustenance. It is from this original declaration that the purse, worn together with sandals, a cloak, and the itinerant's stave, becomes the attribute of the holy pilgrim.

St. Augustine elucidates in his fifty-first sermon the import and meaning of Christ's first directive that the disciple ought best to be without a purse in the corporeal sense of a bag of material wealth in which one invests his future:

... Do you understand what you hear, what "Carry no purse," means? What is a purse? Money shut up, that is, concealed wisdom. What is, 'Carry no purse? Be not wise within your own selves only. Receive ye the Holy Ghost.' It should be a fountain in you, not a purse; from whence distribution is made to others, not where it is itself shut in.

Augustine's interpretation is especially useful for us, suggestive as it is of the kind of purse that is meant to hold the collective wealth of all believers whose proximity allows them to receive the wisdom contained there. Such would be the reliquary purse, given an understanding of the spiritual charge that the relic holds as equivalent to a form of "wisdom," a channel of God's energy that directs the thoughts and actions of believers away from the accumulation of earthly treasure and towards the kinds of behaviors that guarantee salvation—veneration, humility, prayer, and the investiture of faith in objects the cost of which was the life of the martyr. Likewise, the reliquary purse may be likened to Augustine's "fountain"—a free-flowing fountain of wisdom—open for withdrawals though never diminishing in its funds. To paraphrase Augustine, wealth paid out in the currency of Christian wisdom is inexhaustible; for a disciple of Christ to deliver the message of peace and wisdom to Christ's followers is not for the disciple himself to forfeit the benefit of that message.

If there is meant to be a vessel for such wisdom, if the disciple should carry a holder of wealth as emblem of the true riches he possesses, that holder ought to possess qualities of corporeal permanence and security reflective of the idea that true wisdom ought not be frivolously exchanged between vessels. This would suggest that the purse once filled with its wealth (the purse-reliquary with its relic) would necessarily be both open for free withdrawals—that it be not wise within itself only—and that its encumbrance would never be lightened, lest it prove itself mutable.

In Luke, Chapter 12,²¹ custody of a "purse that will not wear out" is likened metaphorically to the faithful state of knowing one's true treasure to exist in heaven, safe from theft or decay. Again, it is not the purse as a simple container for something more precious, but the synthetic concept of the purse as both receptacle and contents, indivisible, and without strings. The purse form as the basis for a reliquary is analogous then to the entire Christian system of body and soul, but constructed in three stages around the life of a martyr—or whomever provided the relic. There is the spiritual energy, the dust in which this energy is held, and the reliquary which holds the dust; yet, the three are inseparable once the relationship is established. The purse contains certain riches in a world of deceptive and uncertain ones, insomuch as its coin is the very soul and proof of Christian thought practiced.

The very intensity of the torment that martyrs underwent, as with the gridiron death of St. Laurence, that they might be forced to deliver their material goods to the enemy, is proof that the substance that made them good could not be taken from them. The relic of the sainted martyr, when stored in a purse, is a demonstrative metaphor. The faithful do not themselves have to undergo death in order to know the folly of trusting in possessions which, without any useful fruit at all, disquiet and even torment their anxious owners.

Reliquaries are the treasuries of the most valuable objects in the church; yet, they are "earthen"—of wood and glass and gold and gemstones—and must be so, for there is no way to craft wholly spiritual containers for the spiritual contents if men are to be the custodians. That these reliquaries may be made in the shapes of purses is consistent with the idea that they were meant to communicate a lesson of true wealth, and at the same time allude to the apostolic origin of church servitude.

In Corinthians, Chapter 4,²² the greatest treasure in Christendom, the life of Jesus Christ, is described as having itself dwelled in an earthen vessel—more specifically in earthen *vessels*, implying that there was more than one unit for the storage of this spiritual wealth, and that therefore the

sword, sell your cloak and buy one." (Luke 22: 35-36. King James Version. [Author's italics.]

²¹ "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. / Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide *purses for yourselves that will not wear out*, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. / For where

your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:32-34. King James Version. [Author's italics.]

²² "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." (2 Corinthians 4:7. King James Version.)

body of Christ (in the form of the communion host and in the surrogate relics of martyred saints) is omnipresent. But the passage also implies the earthen nature of such vessels to be symbolically significant—a contrast between the temporal substance of man and the immaterial power of God. An earthen purse is then the most appropriate purse for a relic—one form of spiritual treasure, and that form that may be most readily likened to the intangible treasure of Christ's martyred body—because it at once contrasts and accentuates the divinity of the source of power behind it. Beside the fact that craftsmen could not be asked to fashion vessels from a purely spiritual medium, the gold and wood and enamel of a purse reliquary is the body that must be made of earth so that the spirit can exist among men for the salvation of men.

²³ Here, I would like to suggest the need for elaborating on the connection between the collection of relics, the reliquary, and itinerancy, perhaps best through a more pointed investigation into the life of Bishop Willibrord, whose receipt of the relics from the Pope in Rome and transport of them with him during his campaign of conversion certainly suggests the pos-

In conclusion, the purse-type reliquary may be interpreted as having been born of the Biblical and early-Christian tradition of apostolic itinerancy,²³ and as exemplifying the Christian philosophy of likening the tenets of the Church to treasures in need of repositories. The purse reliquary emerges as a physical metaphor for one correct type of repository for these treasures (i.e. a fallible, but necessary earthly host for a perfect spiritual wisdom.) While further research is certainly in order, the information presented here suggests sufficient evidence of the need for a reappraisal of the conceptual significance of the purse form in early-Christian and medieval relic housing and veneration.

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sibility of the establishment at that time of a type, after which similar purse-reliquaries might have served as mnemonic registers of the holy Roman origin of many relics, and the necessary practice of conveying them from Rome (or from other sites) across land to the congregation for their betterment and salvation.



Figure 1. Purse Reliquary of Enger, Carolingian, gold and embossed silver on oak, with cloisonné, pearl, and gemstone inlays. Height: 6.25 inches. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz Kunstgewerbemuseum.



Figure 2. Reliquary of Bishop Altheus, late 8th century Frankish, silver gilt on wood. Height: 7 inches. Sion, Valais: Cathedral Treasury.



Figure 3. Purse Reliquary, Frankish, 8th century, repoussé gilt bronze on wood. Height: 3.75 inches. Paris: Musée de Cluny. Photo courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

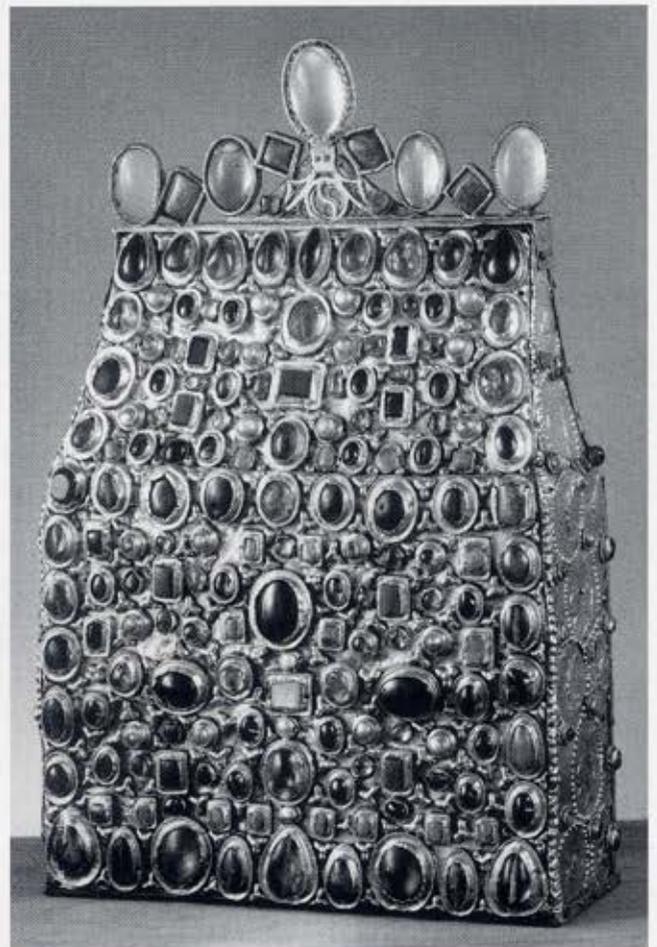


Figure 4. St. Stephen's Purse, Carolingian, first third of the 9th century. Clasp: 15th century; reverse side: about 1827. Gold plate on wood, precious stones, pearls, glass. Reverse side: silver gilt. Height: 32cm. Kunstistorisches Museum, Vienna.