



## WOODEN CASKET

Sicily, c. 1200

Willow wood, frame remnants,  
oak and spindle wood, red bronze  
Inv. 39

After his death in 874, Saint Alfrid, the revered founder of Essen Abbey, was buried in the east crypt of Essen Cathedral. A fire in the church in 1275 severely damaged his remains, which were then placed in this casket.

The casket was made in Sicily, probably in an Arab workshop. Between 831 and 1091, Sicily was under Arab rule. During this period, many people of Arabic origin settled on the island, remaining there during the subsequent periods of Norman and Hohenstaufen rule.

The casket's Sicilian-Arabic origins are indicated by, among other things, its wooden mosaics and palmette and herringbone ornamentation. In Islamic cultures, wood was considered a superior material, used in the design of mosques and of religious objects. Among other objects, minbars (pulpits in a mosque) were decorated with wooden mosaics. Palmette and herringbone ornamentation can be found in Islamic architecture of the period. The carved pattern on the bottom of the casket and its metal fixtures also suggest a Sicilian-Arabic origin. This kind of mosaic casket was modelled on the ivory boxes made in Sicily by Arab craftsmen.

Originally, this house-shaped box probably had a different function: the engraving on the clasp depicts a man giving a ring to a woman. In this way, the box is identified as a dowry item, where perhaps a bridal letter or marriage contract was kept. Until the end of the 19th century, the wooden casket containing Alfrid's bones was held in the stone tomb in the east crypt, which can still be seen today. Istanbul, which also holds a relic of Abraham.