



THE CROSS OF THEOPHANU

Essen, ca. 1040–45, 12th century,
modern day Iran or Iraq, 9th–10th century (quartz vessel)
wood, gold, gilt silver, enamel, pearls, quartz, samite silk
INV. 6

Along with the Reliquary of the Holy Nail, the Cross of Theophanu is one of the earliest surviving display reliquaries of the European Middle Ages. According to the inscription found along its edges, the cross was donated by the Abbess Theophanu, who held office from 1039 to 1058.

Two fragments of the True Cross can be seen behind the large quartz cabochon in the centre of the cross. The senkschmelz technique for producing enamels was used by goldsmiths in 10th century Byzantium.

The enamels were probably taken from older pieces already in the possession of the Ottonian dynasty. A sirmugh can be seen in each of the enamel panels on the right-hand arm of the cross. The sirmugh was a mythical creature which originated in the pre-Islamic culture of Persia. The motif made its way to the West via Islamic and Byzantine art.

The sirmugh has positive connotations, symbolising strength and power. The other coloured enamels show birds, a lion, a griffin, and various plants.

The quartz vessel below the cross is considered to be Abbasid or Byzantine, made in the 9th or 10th century, either in the Abbasid Empire in modern-day Iran or Iraq, or else in Byzantium. It is shaped roughly like a molar tooth. The bottleneck into which it once fit has not survived, and the material has here been repurposed to serve in the decoration of the lower end of the Cross. Quartz vessels like these were frequently used in reliquaries in the West. casket.