

# THE EARLY CHRISTIAN BOOK

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EDITED BY

*William E. Klingshirn & Linda Safran*



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## THE WORD MADE VISIBLE

### *The Exterior of the Early Christian Book as Visual Argument*

#### Introduction

In a paper entitled “The Beginnings of Biblical Illustration,” first published in 1999, I attempted to survey all the surviving biblical manuscripts that contain images made up to about the mid-seventh century.<sup>1</sup> There proved to

In memory of Peter Lasko (1924–2003). I am grateful to Philip Rousseau for the invitation to deliver this paper, and for organizing a most stimulating and instructive conference. Claudia Rapp’s chapter in this volume in particular should be read as a kind of diptych with the present one. I also received helpful comments after repeating the lecture at a joint meeting of the Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies and the Centre for Hellenic Studies, King’s College London. In preparing the lecture, acquiring slides and photographs, discussion before and after the event, and for advice, information, and assistance of various kinds, I am most grateful to Susan Boyd, Evangelos Chrysos, Carol Downer, Anne Duggan, Helen Evans, Carol Farr, David Ganz, Neil Grindley, Judith Herrin, Susan Holman, Tim Kirk, Kevanne Kirkwood, Marie-Pierre Lafitte, Jen Lindsay, Vrej Nersessian, Uschi Payne, Nicholas Pickwood, Julian Raby, John L. Sharpe, Barrie Singleton, and William Voelkle. The library of the Warburg Institute proved, as ever, invaluable. The annotation is primarily to recent works and those containing extensive further bibliography.

1. The paper appears in *Imaging the Early Medieval Bible*, ed. John Williams (University Park, Pa., 1999; paperback ed., 2002), 9–59. A limited account, based largely on the publications of Kurt Weitzmann, has recently been provided by Ioannis Spatharakis, “Early Christian Illustrated Gospel Books from the East,” in *The Impact of Scripture in Early Christianity*, ed. J. den Boeft and M. L. van Poll-van de Lisdonk (Leiden, 1999), 102–21. In the same collection note also the articles of A. Provoost, “Le caractère et l’évolution des images bibliques dans l’art chrétien primitif,” 79–101; and P. C. J. van Dael, “Biblical Cycles on Church Walls: Pro Lectione Pictura,” 122–32. See also Barbara Zimmermann, “Die Codexillustration als neuer Kunstzweig: Spiegel einer geänderten Funktion des Buches in der Spätan-

be only fourteen such books, some of them mere fragments. By focusing on broadly codicological topics, such as planning and layout, rather than questions of date and place of origin, I observed and sought to emphasize the extraordinary range and unpredictability of the material. For example, the two illuminated Genesis manuscripts (the Cotton Genesis and the Vienna Genesis), despite a basic similarity, are totally different from each other in many important ways. Most of the surviving illuminated manuscripts from the period comprise gospel books, or fragments of such books, but even with these it is impossible to use one, for example, to hypothesize about the (missing) contents of another, because they show such disparity.

On the basis of my survey, I reconstructed a scenario for the use of images in early Christian books different from the theory that has long held the field. Instead of considering the survivals as more or less selective and corrupt (in the philological sense), as late copies of numerous earlier “perfect” lost archetypes—the equivalent of authorial “originals”—I proposed a less prescriptive view, in which the surviving material was varied, unpredictable, and by implication creative (albeit not in a romantic manner). According to this theory images only began to appear in biblical books at a relatively late date, say, in the fifth century; illustrated biblical books were always rare, and they were in part a response to—not the explanation for—the ubiquitous presence by the fifth and sixth centuries of Christian images throughout the public and the often overlooked private spheres.<sup>2</sup>

Since writing that paper I have considered the question of the “public” for images in luxury books in a variety of historical contexts,<sup>3</sup> observing how most

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tike?” in *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World*, ed. Leonard V. Rutgers et al. (Leuven, 1998), 263–85; Barbara Zimmermann, “Illustrierte Prachtcodices: Bücherluxus in der Spätantike,” in *Epochenwandel? Kunst und Kultur zwischen Antike und Mittelalter*, ed. Norbert Zimmermann and Franz Alto Bauer (Mainz, 2001), 45–56; Barbara Zimmermann, *Die Wiener Genesis im Rahmen der antiken Buchmalerei: Ikonographie, Darstellung, Illustrationsverfahren und Aussageintention* (Wiesbaden, 2003), esp. 1–53.

2. On Christian images in the private sphere, see, for example, Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, 2d ed. (Princeton, 1999), 177–90.

3. “Byzantium Perceived through Illuminated Manuscripts: Now and Then,” in *Through the Looking Glass: Byzantium Through British Eyes*, ed. Robin Cormack and Elizabeth Jeffreys (Aldershot, 2000), 85–106; “Illuminated Books and the Liturgy,” in *Objects, Images, and the Word: Art in the Service of the Liturgy*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton, 2003), 17–53; “Reading’ the *Bibles moralisées*: Images as Exegesis and the Exegesis of Images,” in *Reading Images and Texts: Medieval Images and Texts as Forms of Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert and Mariëlle Hageman (Turnhout, 2005), 495–525; “Les rois et les reines de France en tant que ‘public’ des *Bibles moralisées*: Une approche tangentielle à la question des

illuminations played little part in shaping perceptions in their own time, unlike today, because they were generally invisible, in striking contrast to, for example, the fixed decoration of a church. My main focus in this paper is an aspect of the luxury book that was, unlike its images, undoubtedly “public” in the sense that it was exposed to public view on a regular basis—namely, the book’s exterior. How were images used on the exterior of early Christian books? This is an obvious question, even banal perhaps, but, surprisingly, it is not one that has been explored before across the whole range of surviving material.<sup>4</sup>

I initially approached the question, it must be admitted, with a number of presuppositions. I assumed that early Christians, for whom the codex-book was such an important accoutrement, would have been interested in the possibilities that the book’s exterior presented to make a visual statement of some sort to themselves and others (depending on the presumed circulation of the book). I assumed that there would be a development over time from simplicity to complexity in schemes of decoration and specifically in the use of images. And I assumed that by the sixth century Christians would be making highly sophisticated visual arguments on the exteriors of their books, as in every other area. One given was that the proportion of material that has survived is minute, but how this situation was to be controlled was less clear.

It was necessary, therefore, to assemble a body of material that could confidently be assumed to exemplify “the decorated exterior of the early Christian book.” Within this large set resides the subset of decorated exteriors specifically using images, which will be of particular interest. One might expect the resulting corpus to take two forms: first, all surviving decorated early Christian book exteriors; second, all images from the period showing the exteriors of Christian books. Neither category, however, is straightforward in compilation or use, and this must be clearly acknowledged at the outset. First, there is

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liens entre les Bibles moralisées et les vitraux de la Sainte-Chapelle,” in *La Sainte-Chapelle: Royaume de France et Jérusalem céleste*, ed. Yves Christe and Peter Kurmann (forthcoming); “Under the Influence of the *Bibles moralisées*,” in *Under the Influence: The Concept of Influence and the Study of Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. John Lowden and Alixe Bovey (forthcoming).

4. Useful surveys are to be found in the early parts of Paul Needham, *Twelve Centuries of Bookbinding 400–1600* (New York, 1979), and, in particular, J. A. Sziirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* (Aldershot, 1999), with further references. Still essential is Frauke Steenbock, *Der kirchliche Prachtband im frühen Mittelalter, von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn der Gotik* (Berlin, 1965). The broad question is not considered in, for example, Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, 1995).

the problem of surviving early Christian book covers themselves: only a tiny proportion of what is already a small sample survives in situ, on the books for which they were made. This at once throws up a very serious obstacle, especially for those who attempt to understand the book by studying it in its totality (the applied codicology that I favor). Second, and even worse, the very status of a good proportion of the objects that have been referred to as early Christian book covers, precisely because they no longer perform their original function, has been challenged: are they, we must ask on a case-by-case basis, in fact book covers at all? Obviously, if they are not, and we include their evidence, our analysis could prove completely misleading.

Third, there is the matter of the representation of books in images. We have to ask on what grounds we should accept any image of a book as archaeologically accurate when it appears in a context—i.e., so-called early Christian art—in which the visual language is predominantly symbolic rather than naturalistic. With this last point in mind I have treated *images* of book covers, of which there are a large number, very cautiously, and largely for purposes of comparison with the covers themselves. To explain further: an image of a book cover in, for example, a wall painting showing Christ or an evangelist is certainly a sort of public statement. But I think such a representation needs to be treated in full awareness not just of its context but of its material and manufacture. To make a painted image of a book cover, like a painted image of clothing, or furniture, or architecture, is obviously not at all the same as to manufacture (as leather- or metal-worker, weaver, carpenter, or builder) the subject that is represented. The one exception I allow myself is the image of a book cover when it occurs *on* a book cover. Such images cannot be assumed to be strictly representational, but they must have been executed with a special awareness of their context. The presence of a degree of self-referentiality in such images opens up a possible path of inquiry.

When surveying the images in the *interiors* of biblical books, I chose to group the material by language, starting with books written in Greek. Such an approach is not possible, however, with book exteriors, for most of them, as noted above, have lost their interiors. The approach I adopt here is based instead on material considerations. I commence with a brief overview of the standard covering of the early Christian book—namely, leather—as providing the context against which the rest of the material must be studied. Because

there is no evidence that in the early period leather book covers were decorated with *figurative* images (I exclude the cross), they are treated here as important principally to the main set of decorated bindings. Moving to the subset of bindings with images, I first consider the unique case of a pair of painted wooden book covers. Remaining in the subset, I then move into the luxury sphere and look at silver covers, and at the one surviving example of a cover of gold decorated with precious stones. Finally I present the ivory covers, visually the most complex by far. Throughout, I attempt to consider, in theory at least, all the evidence from the early Christian world in the period up to roughly the mid-seventh century. Despite the limitations of the evidence, I then risk some general conclusions and observations. As was the case with the reconsideration of early illuminated biblical manuscripts, I deal only in passing with the generally much debated questions of date and place of origin, focusing instead on less frequently considered topics.

### Leather Book Covers

Once the codex-book was sewn, it needed a protective covering. This was true whether it was composed of a single quire of variable length or of many regular quires, and whether written on papyrus or parchment. Coverings, in addition to preventing excessive wear and tear on the outer pages of the book, could stabilize the sewing of the gatherings, help to keep the pages aligned, and, when fastened by ties or clasps, could limit buckling of the pages due to humidity. The stiffer the coverings, the greater the protection they offered, from sheets or envelopes of parchment, to leather-covered “soft boards” generally made of recycled sheets of papyrus, to stout wooden panels up to a centimeter or more in thickness equipped with clasps to hold the leaves under compression. The usual covering material for a book throughout the entire manuscript era was leather.<sup>5</sup>

Leather is an easy material to decorate. Especially when softened by moisture, it can be readily and permanently impressed, scored, punched, cut, and then, when dry, colored or gilded. Doubtless the many techniques by which leather artifacts of all sorts were decorated (I am thinking of such personal

5. The broadest recent survey is Szirmai, *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*.

and fancy goods as shoes, saddles, harnesses, tents, and so forth) were available as potential models to those who bound manuscripts with leather covers at any date. Quite probably, leather book covers were left without any form of decoration only at the lowest levels of expense.

Cassiodorus, in a well-known chapter of his *Institutiones* (written in southern Italy around the third quarter of the sixth century), specifically mentions bindings when talking of book production. Translated literally, he says:

We have provided workers skilled in the covering of books [*in codicibus cooperiendis*] so that a handsome external form may clothe the beauty of sacred letters. . . . For them [the bookbinders] we have represented becomingly, if I am not mistaken, numerous types of designs [*facturarum*] depicted in one book, so that the learned person can himself choose which form of covering [*tegumenti*] he should prefer.<sup>6</sup>

Like many things connected with Cassiodorus, his useful depictions of bindings have not survived, but I take it that he had depicted a range of designs that could be employed on the covers of sacred books and not, for example, diagrams of different sewing or structural matters, which were not relevant to his concerns. His diagrams might have looked, therefore, a little like the modern reconstruction diagrams of early decorated Coptic bindings (fig. 1).<sup>7</sup>

That decoration was not, however, ubiquitous on leather book covers of the earliest period is suggested by the eleven mid- to late fourth-century bindings found intact in a hoard of Coptic gnostic manuscripts at Nag Hammadi (north of Luxor) in 1945.<sup>8</sup> The bindings are of a quite complex wraparound envelope type, the leather covering stiffened by sheets of reused papyrus. The volume containing, among other texts, the Gospels of Thomas and Philip (Codex II) is a substantial codex of 176 pages in a single quire, 27 × 15 cm. It was the only one of the Nag Hammadi codices to have the exterior of its binding extensively decorated with incised lines and freehand spirals, volutes, and

6. *Inst.* 1.30.3, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, *Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones* (Oxford, 1937), 77. A less literal translation is provided by Leslie Webber Jones, *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings by Cassiodorus Senator* (New York, 1966), 134.

7. For example, the diagram in *The History of Bookbinding 525–1950 A.D.*, exh. cat., Baltimore Museum of Art (Baltimore, 1957), pl. 10; or Hugo Ibscher, “Koptische Einbände aus Ägypten,” *Berliner Museen: Berichte aus den preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 49 (1928): 87, 89, 90.

8. Jean Dorese, “Les reliures des manuscrits gnostiques coptes découverts à Khénoboskion,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 13 (1961): 27–49. A general introduction is provided by James M. Robinson, *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices: Introduction* (Leiden, 1972). Szirmai, *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, 7–11, has further references.

so forth in several colors.<sup>9</sup> The incised designs can be resolved into crosses of both + and × type.

There are numerous other surviving Coptic bindings, beneficiaries of the preservative properties of the dry desert air of Egypt, but it is important to note that most of these are much later in date.<sup>10</sup> We will consider just two well-known exceptions here. The first, the Glazier codex (Morgan Library, MS G.67) is a very small fifth-century Coptic Acts (chapters 1–15, 2 only; it would have been in two volumes), just 12 × 11 cm.<sup>11</sup> It has a leather spine strip decorated with a tooled pattern of concentric circles within horizontal lines. Because of the unusual (to modern eyes) construction of the binding, the wooden boards were left completely uncovered, and the book was held shut by wrapping it with two long leather bands, one vertical, the other horizontal. Three other fifth-century Coptic bindings with similar uncovered boards have survived, and this will be important in discussing the Freer Gospels, below.<sup>12</sup> Given the very limited decorative potential of such bindings, it is interesting to note that the Glazier codex closes its text with a full-page image of an ankh cross flanked by peacocks.<sup>13</sup> The presence of the image is remarkable, but note that there was no link between the decoration of this book's interior and its exterior, a point to which we shall return.

The second well-known example forms part of the collection of fifty or so Coptic bindings from the monastery of St. Michael, near Hamouli in the Fayyum, acquired for the Morgan Library in 1911–20 (compare the reconstruction drawings in fig. 1).<sup>14</sup> When excavated in 1910, the bindings were still on the books for which they were made, but all were subsequently removed.

9. Dorese, "Reliures des manuscrits gnostiques," 42–45, and pl. 6. See also *L'art copte en Égypte: 2000 ans de Christianisme; Exposition présentée à l'Institut du monde arabe, Paris, du 15 mai au 3 septembre 2000 et au Musée de l'Éphèbe au Cap d'Agde, du 30 septembre 2000 au 7 janvier 2001* (Paris, 2000), no. 18.

10. For example, the interesting bindings of the manuscripts from St. Merkourios, Edfu, dated 979–1053; see Jen Lindsay, "The Edfu Collection of Coptic Books," *New Bookbinder* 21 (2001): 31–51.

11. Needham, *Twelve Centuries of Bookbindings*, no. 1. Dimensions are of binding; the page size is less square, 12 × 9.8 cm.

12. *Ibid.*, 9.

13. Kurt Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum (New York, 1979), no. 444a; Harry Bober, "On the Illumination of the Glazier Codex: A Contribution to Early Coptic Art, and Its Relation to Hiberno-Saxon Interlace," in *Homage to a Bookman: Essays on Manuscripts, Books and Printing Written for Hans P. Kraus on His 60th Birthday*, ed. Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt (Berlin, 1967), 31–49. I did not include the Glazier codex in Lowden, "Beginnings of Biblical Illustration," as it has no (human) figurative decoration.

14. On the find, see Needham, *Twelve Centuries of Bookbindings*, 12–13.

The most aesthetically ambitious of the Morgan bindings was on MS M.569 (fig. 2), and measures some 38.5 × 29.5 cm.<sup>15</sup> It is notable that the binding is that of a gospel book (the only one among the Hamouli material), written on parchment, and covered with leather over papyrus “boards.” It is generally dated to the seventh or eighth century. The decorative technique is painstaking and very elaborate: a cut red-leather openwork layer was finely sewn to a layer of parchment covered with gold leaf, over a brown leather layer. The design, similar on front and back covers, consists of a small central cross within a medallion filled with geometrical interlace, the whole within a rectangle decorated with a variety of motifs, including a small cross at the top center. The interior of the front cover has a very carefully worked inscription, “Archangel Michael,” in the same cutwork technique, but a colophon in Greek indicates that the manuscript had earlier belonged to a nearby monastery dedicated to the Mother of God. The date of the M.569 binding is unclear; it might be as early as the seventh century, and might even partially predate the manuscript to which it was attached.<sup>16</sup> Two comparable bindings are preserved in Berlin and Vienna, and all three may be close in date.<sup>17</sup> As for M.569, it would appear that the highly elaborate design was employed to mark out this gospel book from others in the monastery. But in visual terms the cover did not convey specific information about, for example, the book’s content or authorship.

That the Fayyum-type decoration, which goes back to simple incised patterns already found at Nag Hammadi, became ubiquitous in the late antique world is beyond dispute. Allowing for major gaps in the chronology, it can be seen that as we move out of the period considered here into the late seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, bindings decorated in related techniques and styles have been found at the very ends of the known world—in insular Britain, for example, as in the famous case of the Gospel of John found in St. Cuthbert’s coffin,<sup>18</sup> across the Islamic world,<sup>19</sup> and even among the Man-

15. *Ibid.*, 13–16; *History of Bookbinding 525–1950*, no. 26; *Art copte en Égypte*, no. 41.

16. Needham, *Twelve Centuries of Bookbindings*, 16.

17. *P. Berol.* 14018 and *Erzherzog Rainer Pap.* inv. no. 34; see Needham, *Twelve Centuries of Bookbindings*, 15–16 and nn6–7.

18. The Stonyhurst Gospel, London, British Library, MS Loan 74; T. Julian Brown, ed., *The Stonyhurst Gospel of Saint John* (Oxford, 1969); some further references in Szirmai, *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, 95–96.

19. Szirmai, *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, 51–61, with some comments and references on early decorated covers on p. 59. See also *History of Bookbinding, 525–1950*, no. 37.

ichaeans in the Turfan region of eastern central Asia.<sup>20</sup> One of the fragmentary Manichaean bindings is of leather cut in interlacing geometrical patterns to reveal the gilded surface of an underlayer, and looks familiar after consideration of M.569. But are such decorative exteriors (as distinct from underlying structures) Coptic in more than a very loose generic sense?

The failure of leather covers to survive except in desert environments is hardly surprising, given that the materials of which they were made decay readily and have little or no value when recycled, and hence are unlikely to be specially preserved. Although we have not one single leather binding from the early period (up to ca. 650) that is not from Egypt, it would seem unjustifiable to locate the production of such covers in that region alone. The vast majority of all the books produced in late antiquity presumably had leather-covered bindings. The use of pattern, focused on a central motif and often symmetrical (hence potentially cruciform), was probably very common in decorating their exteriors. Even though such designs could be highly complex, and potentially open to symbolic and possibly even figurative readings, no surviving leather book cover was illustrated with human figures, although we cannot rule out the possibility that such covers might once have existed. It is against this reconstructed background of innumerable leather covers of broadly similar if individually varied type that the figured, and the far more costly luxury, bindings must be judged.

### Painted Wood Book Covers

The leather-covered binding was, it is agreed, standard and hence ubiquitous in late antiquity, but the painted wood binding seems to have been very rare.<sup>21</sup> We have but a single surviving example (fig. 3), the covers of the early fifth-century Greek Gospels (“Codex W”) in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (purchased by Freer in Cairo in 1907).<sup>22</sup> Since they were first

20. Zsuzsanna Gulácsi, *Manichaean Art in Berlin Collections* (Turnhout, 2001), no. 70, and p. 247 (see also nos. 71–72).

21. There are examples from Antinoë (third–fourth century) of wooden panels with incised decoration without leather covers; see *Art copte en Égypte*, no. 40. For plain boards on early codices, see Szirmai, *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, 23–26. There is a twelfth-century example from Gerona of a book with figurative carved wooden covers; see Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, no. 85; it is not clear whether the panels might originally have been gilded or painted.

22. The panels have the accession numbers FGA 06.297 (Matthew and John), 06.298 (Mark and

published by Morey in 1913 and 1914, these panels have been little studied.<sup>23</sup> Their execution certainly postdates the Greek gospel manuscript they enclose, and Morey concluded that they were painted most probably in the first half of the seventh century, a date that has been accepted. Given the fragility of the painted surface, with its heavily applied encaustic-bound pigments, they are surprisingly well preserved. At some date the covers were chained, seemingly to prevent them from opening fully and hence perhaps to offer them a modicum of protection.<sup>24</sup>

Each beveled panel measures about 21.3 × 14.3 × 1.6 cm—quite small, about the size of a modern paperback novel. Traces of pigment on fragments of the binding structure on the edges of the boards indicate that the painting was executed with the book already bound, and this is remarkable. The standing evangelists with massive yellow haloes (imitating gold leaf—the pigment has been identified as orpiment)<sup>25</sup> fill the available space. On the better-preserved back cover the bearded figures are identified by inscriptions as Luke on the left and Mark on the right. The much less well preserved front cover has Matthew, presumably, on the left, and a fragment of John on the right. The order Matthew, John, Luke, Mark is the order of the Gospels in the manuscript within, and the point is important.<sup>26</sup> Each evangelist displays a large book with a seemingly gold and jeweled cover. The covered hands with which the figures support the books are an indication of reverence, and also perhaps a reminder of how the Freer Gospels themselves would have been carried.

Because of the fragility of the painted surfaces of the covers, their practi-

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Luke). The text was published as *Facsimile of the Washington Manuscript of the Four Gospels in the Freer Collection*, ed. Henry A. Sanders (Ann Arbor, 1913); Charles Rufus Morey, "The Painted Covers of the Washington Manuscript of the Gospels," in his *East Christian Paintings in the Freer Collection* (New York, 1914), 63–81. See also Henry A. Sanders, "New Manuscripts of the Bible from Egypt," *American Journal of Archaeology* 12 (1908): 49–55, and pl. 3; Hugo Buchthal and Otto Kurz, *A Hand List of Illuminated Oriental Christian Manuscripts* (London, 1942), no. 309.

23. Some exceptions are Jules Leroy, *Les manuscrits coptes et coptes-arabes illustrés* (Paris, 1974), 87–89, pl. 26; Gary Vikan, "Byzantine Art as a Mirror of Its Public," *Apollo* 118 (1983): 164–67; Kurt Weitzmann, "An Early Coptic/Arabic Miniature in Leningrad," *Ars Islamica* 10 (1943): 119–34, esp. 124–25.

24. As suggested by Morey, "Painted Covers," 64.

25. See Conservation Report, April 1954, on file at the Freer Gallery of Art. I am grateful to Tim Kirk for access to this material as well as to the covers themselves.

26. This is the "so-called Western order"; Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3d ed. (New York, 1992), 56–57.

cality must be open to question. When it is recalled that they decorate a much older book, it seems reasonable to ask if they were perhaps made in some sense to enshrine the text, a text that perhaps had gained a relic-like status due to an association with some holy person. The later provision of chains, effectively preventing the use of the text, would seem to confirm this “enshrinement.” The Greek text would have become increasingly illegible in a Coptic milieu as the bilingualism characteristic of the early centuries gradually declined. From this it follows that the images on the covers had a special function: they acted as a guide to, in effect as a substitute for, what was enclosed within. The very legible inscriptions (Matthew, John, Luke, and Mark) provided the information the viewer needed. I suggest that this was a book that, by the time the covers were painted, was intended primarily for display and for processional use, not to be routinely read from in the liturgy. It was in turn this lack of “normal” use, due to its special status, that ensured the survival of the fragile paint surface on the book’s covers. When not on display, the book was probably kept wrapped in a textile for further protection.

The unique painted binding of the Freer Gospels was thus the result of exceptional historical contingencies. The boards were initially bare, because in the fifth century this was how they were left (compare the Glazier codex discussed above). Multiple holes in the top edge and fore edge of the front cover show that, like the Glazier codex, the Freer Gospels were originally secured with long leather bands. As they would have damaged the paint surface, they were presumably cut away, or had already broken off, when the boards were painted. Had the Freer Gospels been an early fourth-century manuscript, it might have had an envelope binding. Had it been a product of the sixth century, it probably would have had leather-covered boards. In either case its binding would not have been easy to paint at a later date. It was the changing technique of binding the codex in Egypt that in part explains these painted covers—this, and the desire at a later date to preserve and embellish the original binding with the venerable Greek gospel book retained within.

### Silver Book Covers

The direct evidence for silver-covered bookbindings, originally partly gilded, comes from two hoards, both excavated clandestinely: one in Syr-

ia in 1908–10 and the other in southern Turkey in 1963. The first, formerly known and separately discussed as the Antioch, Hama, Riha, and Stuma treasures, is now considered to have been a single burial and is referred to, after a Byzantine settlement close to its assumed find spot, as the Kaper Koraon treasure.<sup>27</sup> It consists of some fifty-six silver liturgical objects from a church treasury, formed over a century or so between ca. 550 and ca. 650. The other, known as the Sion treasure after its presumed use in the church of St. Nicholas at Sion, near Myra, mentioned in some of the inscriptions, consists of more than fifty silver liturgical objects plus twenty-two pieces of silver revetment, most of strikingly massive weight and high-quality workmanship, many given by or under a Bishop Eutyhianos in the mid-sixth century.<sup>28</sup>

The Kaper Koraon treasure had two pairs of rectangular silver plaques, now both in the Metropolitan Museum, with a fragment in the Louvre; the Sion treasure had two pairs of silver plaques, now both at Dumbarton Oaks, with a fragment in Antalya, where there are also fragments of a third pair of plaques. In every case we are dealing with silver revetments that once would have covered the wooden boards of the book's binding but that now lack any trace of their support. The designs were hammered into the sheet silver from the back and the detail then chased on the front. The silver sheets were then folded around the boards (Sion plaques) and might additionally be nailed in place on both front and back (Kaper Koraon plaques). The repoussé technique, however, results in panels in which the relief decoration is quite easily crushed or distorted.

The generally accepted function of any or all of these plaques as book covers was challenged in the 1980s,<sup>29</sup> but can, I suggest, be maintained on a range

27. Marlia Mundell Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium: The Kaper Koraon and Related Treasures*, exh. cat., Walters Art Gallery (Baltimore, 1986), 3–36.

28. Susan A. Boyd, "A 'Metropolitan' Treasure from a Church in the Provinces: An Introduction to the Study of the Sion Treasure," in *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate in Sixth-Century Byzantium*, ed. Susan A. Boyd and Marlia Mundell Mango (Washington, D.C., 1992), 5–37. See also the broader account by Susan A. Boyd, "Art in the Service of the Liturgy: Byzantine Silver Plate," in *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*, ed. Linda Safran (University Park, Pa., 1998), 152–85.

29. Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium*, 202–3, 207, 210. For example the statement on p. 203: "If, contrary to their widely accepted designation as 'bookcovers' . . . these plaques [in the Metropolitan Museum] instead formed part of an iconic revetment . . ." Note that Helmut Buschhausen, *Die spätrömischen Metallschreine und frühchristlichen Reliquiare* (Vienna, 1971), cat. B 22–23, 254–56, had already questioned the function of some of the small fragments as originating from book covers rather than, for example, reliquaries.

of what might be termed circumstantial grounds: they come in pairs; their size and shape is commensurate with a function as book covers, as is their decoration; and their vertical edges, where they survive, have cuttings that could be explained as elements of the binding structure and/or clasp system of books. Their condition, with one cover sometimes considerably more worn than the other, is also characteristic. And no more satisfactory alternative function for them has yet been proposed.<sup>30</sup> When the silver plaques are considered in the context of the other objects gathered together in this paper, their function as book covers is confirmed beyond reasonable doubt.

### *Silver Book Covers: Kaper Koraon Treasure*

Each leaf of the first pair of panels in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 4) measures approximately 27.5 × 21.4 cm (max.). This implies a page format for the enclosed book twice as large as the Freer Gospels. Each plaque is decorated with a standing saint beneath an arch supported on spiral columns and flanked in its spandrels by peacocks, the whole within a vine-scroll border with a cross at the top center.<sup>31</sup> Originally the plaques would have been partially gilded.<sup>32</sup> One figure, doubtless St. Peter, turns to the left, gestures with his right hand, and with his left hand holds a large processional cross by its extended shank. The other figure, surely St. Paul, turns to the right and holds, and I would say displays, a large book in both hands. The obvious deduction is that these panels were made to cover a book of Acts and Epistles—broadly speaking, the deeds of Peter and the writings of Paul—that would be used for the epistle readings in the liturgy. The particular treatment of Peter and Paul on the covers seems to allude deliberately to the processions of a normal lit-

30. See also the arguments supporting their uses as book covers in Margaret E. Frazer, "Early Byzantine Silver Book Covers," in Boyd and Mango, *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate*, 71–76. Note that Catherine Metzger, in *Byzance: L'art byzantin dans les collections publiques françaises: Musée du Louvre, 3 novembre 1992–1er février 1993*, exh. cat. (Paris, 1992), 116, left open the possible use of the Louvre/Metropolitan Museum plaques as iconic revetments. The Metropolitan Museum plaques with Saints Peter and Paul were recently described as follows by the curator: "These two plaques may have framed an image of Christ, composing a tripartite icon for contemplation or veneration." See Helen C. Evans, Melanie Holcomb, and Robert Hallmann, *The Arts of Byzantium* (New York, 2001), 22. See also p. 47.

31. Nos. 50.5.1–2. See Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium*, nos. 44–45; Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, no. 554; *Early Christian and Byzantine Art: An Exhibition Held at the Baltimore Museum of Art, April 25–June 22 [1947]*, ed. Dorothy Eugenia Miner (Baltimore, 1947), no. 390.

32. Frazer, "Silver Book Covers," 72n10.

urgy, or perhaps to a stational liturgy.<sup>33</sup> Peter carries the cross, Paul the holy book. What is more, if we look carefully at Paul's book we can see that it is not open facing us in order to reveal a text, but rather with its outside toward us, to display its covers.<sup>34</sup> (This would seem to be the significance of the carefully executed vertical decoration of the book's spine.) St. Paul carries and displays the silver-covered book in his hands as we assume this silver-covered book was itself carried and displayed. The self-referentiality of the image *of* the book within the image *in* the book (or on this case *on* the book) is characteristic of the possibilities of book decoration already being explored by artists in the sixth century.<sup>35</sup> An interesting question is which of the two was originally the front cover. The same question is raised by many of the other pairs of plaques, and some general remarks are therefore appropriate.

At issue is the interpretation of two types of physical evidence: the presence of holes and cuttings in the vertical edges of the plaques, and the strikingly greater wear and damage to one of a pair of covers. Both are problematic. Cuttings in the vertical edges of plaques (where they survive and can be examined) might be evidence of the book's binding, but they might also be evidence of the provision of clasps; i.e., we could be looking at either edge. This is the case with the Peter and Paul plaques. Frazer concludes, "On the basis of the holes, the plaques could be aligned either way."<sup>36</sup> In this case, however, she feels that a "tiebreak" is available: "the fact that the St. Peter plaque has suffered much more wear than that of Paul suggests that it was the lower cover."<sup>37</sup> This is explained by the assumption that greater wear on the back cover would have resulted from laying the book down, either for storage or on an altar. But if we stop to consider the latter point, it begins to appear less cogent. When a precious book is laid on a protective textile or cushion and then opened for

33. For a useful introduction and further bibliography, see John A. Cotsonis, *Byzantine Figural Processional Crosses* (Washington, D.C., 1994). See also John F. Baldwin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development and Meaning of Stational Liturgy* (Rome, 1987), and the remarks of Thomas F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park, Pa., 1971), 148–49.

34. Compare the description in Frazer, "Silver Book Covers," 72: "saints holding books, seemingly decorated with punched leather covers."

35. For example in the Rabbula Gospels; see Lowden, "Beginnings of Biblical Illustration," 26–30, and fig. 9.

36. Frazer, "Silver Book Covers," 75.

37. *Ibid.* The deduction that the back cover would have been the more worn was already made in *History of Bookbinding 525–1950*, no. 3 (and no. 4).

use, it will more probably be the *front* cover that suffers the greater wear and tear.<sup>38</sup> We have already seen that it is the front cover of the Freer Gospels that is the more damaged. As we proceed we shall encounter further cases in which the cover that was certainly on the front of a book is again found to be the more worn.<sup>39</sup> In sum, it appears to be necessary to reverse the argument from wear and, where there is no evidence to the contrary, deduce that the more worn of two precious covers is more likely to have been the front, not the back. Returning to the Metropolitan covers, I therefore conclude that Peter was on the front, and that when the book was opened flat to reveal the covers as a diptych, Paul and Peter processed with book and cross toward, rather than away from, one another.

If the first pair of covers is for a volume of Acts and Epistles, the second pair (fig. 5), slightly larger at 28.5 × 23.2 cm (max.), is surely for a gospel book. The Metropolitan Museum panel shows two standing saints, probably two of the evangelists, the one on the right with a short beard, flanking and supporting a huge cross.<sup>40</sup> Each evangelist also holds and displays a book. The Louvre fragment, which is all that survives of the matching cover, has a third evangelist with a long beard displaying a book and supporting a cross in the identical fashion.<sup>41</sup> (The Metropolitan Museum plaque, because less damaged, ought to be considered the back of the book.) There are two elements of this imagery to which I want to draw attention. The first is that the evangelists (like the St. Paul) appear to display the open exterior, i.e., the silver covers, of the books they hold; the representation of the book's spine is again very clear. This suggests once more a reference to the processional function and display of such a

38. Compare the words of Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523), *Letter to a Friend*, ed. G. Olinder, *Acta Universitatis Gotoburgensis* 56, no. 1 (1950): 14\*–15\*: "Salute the Cross and take the Gospel in your hands and put it before your eyes and your heart and go and stand on your feet before the Cross . . . and lay on a cushion every [gospel] book, in which you read . . ." Cited in Peter Brown, "Images as a Substitute for Writing," in *East and West: Modes of Communication*, ed. Evangelos Chrysos and Ian Wood (Leiden, 1999), 15–46, at 29.

39. A comparable example in repoussé gilt silver is the tenth-century Gospels of St. Eusebius in Vercelli Cathedral: see Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, no. 28, and figs. 42–43, clearly showing binding structure as well as much greater wear to front cover.

40. No. 47.100.36. See Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium*, no. 46; Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, no. 555; Frazer, "Silver Book Covers," 72–73, 75–76.

41. Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines Bj 2279 (formerly AC 98). See Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium*, no. 47; Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, no. 555; Byzance, no. 63; Buschhausen, *Spätromischen Metallschreine*, cat. B 23, 256.

book, with its covers spread open in diptych form. The second point to note is the way in which the evangelists do not merely flank the cross, a relatively common visual formula in the sixth century,<sup>42</sup> but quite unequivocally raise and support and present the cross to the viewer. Perhaps they are processing toward us bearing Christ himself. As the cross is an image of Christ, so is the gospel book. As the evangelists bear Christ, so does the person who carries this book in procession. But there is not a complete identification, for the actions of the evangelists, like their writings, are balanced and complementary. Thus a more heavily symbolic use of images seems to have been explored on the gospel book's cover than was the case on the accompanying volume of Acts and Epistles.

### *Silver Book Covers: Sion Treasure*

The Sion treasure plaques adopt related yet different approaches to the use of images. Only one of the two pairs of covers at Dumbarton Oaks is figurative, and we shall look at it first (fig. 6).<sup>43</sup> Both figured panels are very similar, albeit not identical. The better-preserved cover is 25 (originally ca. 26.5) × 23.8 cm and weighs 317 g (perhaps originally one Roman pound).<sup>44</sup> Note that the proportions of the plaque indicate a book with a notably squarer page format (H: W = 1.1:1) than can be found with any of the other silver covers. The panels are decorated with a central standing figure of a beardless Christ, blessing with his right hand and holding up with his left a large closed book with a cover decorated with five small bosses perhaps intended to suggest large gems. Christ is flanked by two standing saints not holding books. Above is a scalloped niche beneath a gable supported on spiral columns with peacocks again in the spandrels; a fragment with the fourth peacock is in Antalya.<sup>45</sup> Gilding is used in

42. A useful starting point is Erich Dinkler and Erika Dinkler von Schubert, "Kreuz," in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, 8 vols., ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum (Rome, 1970), vol. 2, cols. 562–90, esp. 579–81.

43. DO 63.36.8 and DO 65.1.3. Boyd, "Metropolitan' Treasure," checklist nos. 23 a–b. Dumbarton Oaks, *Handbook of the Byzantine Collection* (Washington, D.C., 1967), no. 69; Frazer, "Silver Book Covers," 73–76.

44. Frazer, "Silver Book Covers," 74, reconstructs the panel as 31 × 26 cm, but her initial measurements are incorrect.

45. Reproduced in Nezhir Firatli, "Un trésor du VIe s. trouvé à Kumluca, en Lycie," *Studi di antichità cristiana* 27 (1969): 523–25, pl. 252, fig. 7. See also Buschhausen, *Spätromischen Metallschriften*, cat. B 22, 255.

an odd manner on the drapery. On the better-preserved plaque (the back, according to my interpretation) is a pointillé inscription in Greek: "For the memory and repose of Prinkipios, deacon, and Stephane and Leontia." The words "Prinkipios" and "deacon" flank the head of Christ. The more fragmentary front plaque preserves only the words "of Konon, deacon" in a similar position on either side of Christ's head. These inscriptions are quite crudely worked in comparison to the rest, and could be an afterthought. Could they also help in identifying the function of the book that the plaques decorated? The point will be considered in a moment.

The second set of plaques (fig. 7) are very much larger—ca. 37.5 × 30 cm (max.)—and more than 50 percent heavier (the better-preserved plaque weighs 495 g).<sup>46</sup> They are for a book with pages more than twice as big as any of the other silver covers. The excellent state of preservation of the gilding suggests they have been little handled. In the field beneath a similar conch, this time surmounted by an arch,<sup>47</sup> is a gilded cross decorated and treated as though it were a separate piece of metalwork attached to the cover. It is very carefully formed with a prismatic body, teardrop terminals, and beaded edges. Flanking the lower arm of the cross are two somewhat anthropomorphic stylized gilded trees, presumably palms, which appear to bend their trunks as well as their branches toward the cross.<sup>48</sup> The range of allusion in this composition is probably wide: at various levels we see a paradisiacal scene of the tree of life, or Christ as the tree of life; we also seem to see Christ transfigured between Moses and Elijah and Christ crucified between the Theotokos and St. John. And if, as seems very likely, these covers are from a gospel book, we probably also see Christ flanked by the evangelists (two on the front of the book, two on the back).<sup>49</sup>

46. DO 63;36.9–10. Boyd, "Metropolitan' Treasure," checklist no. 22 a–b; Dumbarton Oaks, *Handbook of the Byzantine Collection*, no. 70; Ernst Kitzinger, "A Pair of Silver Book Covers in the Sion Treasure," *Gatherings in Honor of Dorothy E. Miner*, ed. Ursula E. McCracken, Lilian M. C. Randall, and Richard H. Randall, Jr. (Baltimore, 1974), 3–17.

47. Kitzinger, "Pair of Silver Book Covers," 13, interpreted the arch as a gate of paradise.

48. Cypressess, according to Kitzinger, "Pair of Silver Book Covers," 7–8.

49. The evidence of clasps/binding is puzzling since there are cuttings in the vertical edge of only one side of checklist no. 22a; i.e., either the binding or clasps have left no trace. The evidence is nonetheless interpreted as indicating that the better-preserved plaque 22a was originally on the front; Frazer, "Silver Book Covers," 74–75, and figs. S22.1–9. This supersedes the statement in Kitzinger, "Pair of Silver Book Covers," 4n8.

Returning to the figurative covers of the Sion treasure (fig. 6), we can see that although to a modern eye their visual content makes them appear more important, their much smaller size and commensurately lesser bullion value implies a lower status for them.<sup>50</sup> This would be consistent with their use as covers for the less important Acts and Epistles volume; the seeming repetition of the same two saints, Peter and Paul, on front and rear would thus be deliberate, no mere economy of craftsmanship. The presence of the inscriptions recording the prayers of two deacons, Konon and Prinkipios, would be fully appropriate on this book if we could be confident that it was the responsibility of the deacon to read the epistle in the sixth century. In later centuries, however, the deacon read the gospel and a lector the epistle, which suggests an entirely different explanation for our covers. St. Nicholas at Sion could well have had, indeed must have had, more than one gospel in a silver binding, just as it had numerous chalices, patens, and so forth (often in matching paired sets).<sup>51</sup> The duplication of silver gospel covers could have been the result of multiple donations. In this scenario the figurative covers need not have been for an epistle manuscript; the repeated saints front and rear would in this case be the four evangelists.

A fragment of Christ, flanked on the left by a long-bearded saint not holding a book, is in the museum at Antalya.<sup>52</sup> A further unpublished fragment provides another right arm and hand for a figure again standing to the left of Christ.<sup>53</sup> In other words, we have parts not just of a further cover but of a third pair of covers, although too little survives to be able to pursue the reconstruction further. The fragments might have been from yet another gospel cover, if we allow the principle of multiplication of liturgical treasures to have played an important role.

Before moving on from silver covers, three large silver plates found in a treasure of church silver at Luxor in the 1890s need to be considered briefly. They were published by Strzygowski in the catalogue of the Cairo museum, however, not as oblong plates (of the type sometimes termed a *lanx*), but spe-

50. Compare the Sion and Riha patens, reproduced juxtaposed and to the same scale in John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London, 1997), 80–81.

51. Boyd, "Metropolitan' Treasure," e.g., 8.

52. Firatli, "Un trésor du VIe s. trouvé à Kumluca," 525 and pl. 253, fig. 8; Buschhausen, *Spätrömischen Metallschreine*, cat. B 22, 255–56.

53. Visible in a photograph of the Antalya fragments kindly communicated to me by Susan Boyd. Compare the comments in Frazer, "Silver Book Covers," 74.

cifically as “book containers” (*Buchbehälterdeckel*).<sup>54</sup> The three large rectangular dishes (up to 65 × 50 cm) each had a central incised and gilded cross and two had donor inscriptions. In each case the plate was supported by a rectangular foot.<sup>55</sup> What remains unclear from Strzygowski’s discussion, not aided by a lack of photographs of the backs of the objects, is why he should have concluded that these were not merely plates with a raised foot of standard late antique type.<sup>56</sup> The “container” (*Kasten*) on the back was, in two of the three cases, seemingly too shallow to take a bound gospel book.<sup>57</sup> Could these objects (if they did once hold books) nonetheless have been early examples of so-called “book shrines”?<sup>58</sup> The possibility should be borne in mind. However, unless further evidence comes to light, it would seem wise to exclude the Luxor plates from a discussion of the early Christian book cover.

### Gold Book Covers

Silver was a prestige material for church treasure in the sixth century, but hardly rare, even if little has survived. The nearly five hundred pounds of silver in the Sion treasure (that part that has been recovered) cannot have been unusual for an eastern Mediterranean church at the time.<sup>59</sup> The silver, as we

54. Josef Strzygowski, *Koptische Kunst: Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire. nos. 7001–7394 et 8742–9200* (Vienna, 1904), nos. 7202–4, 341–45, and pl. 39. The material was guaranteed wide circulation by its inclusion in *Dictionnaire d’archéologie Chrétienne et de liturgie* vol. 5, cols. 775–845, s.v. “Évangélaire,” esp. cols. 838–39, figs. 4218–19. Unfortunately not reproduced in Gawdat Gabra, *Cairo, the Coptic Museum and Old Churches* (Cairo, 1999), but seemingly still in the museum.

55. These were of the height × width proportions of a page of a book: no. 7202, 21.5 × 15.7 cm; no. 7203, 28.5 × 21.5 cm; no. 7204, 27.5 × 22 cm.

56. Compare, for example, David Buckton, ed., *Byzantium: Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture from British Collections* (London, 1994), no. 15 (the Corbridge Lanx), no. 12 (Esquiline treasure); Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, no. 126 (Ariadne Lanx from Augst, Römermuseum).

57. In catalogue-number order the depths of the “containers” were 2.5 cm, 4.2 cm, 2.2 cm.

58. Compare the magnificent eighth-century book shrine found in an Irish lake in 1986; Eamonn P. Kelly, “The Lough Kinala Book-Shrine,” in *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland*, ed. R. Michael Spearman and John Higgitt (Edinburgh, 1993), 168–74. For a superbly preserved medieval example, see Adam S. Cohen, *The Uta Codex: Art, Philosophy, and Reform in Eleventh-Century Germany* (University Park, Pa., 2000), 192–93 and col. pl. 1; see also Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, nos. 39, 44, 56, 59 (Uta Codex). In general on medieval books as relics, see Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality, and the Scribe* (London, 2003), 66–72, 208–12; specifically on Coptic material, see p. 211 and fig. 80. For examples of later Coptic book shrines, see *Art copte en Égypte*, no. 45 (dated 1526) and no. 46 (dated 1255).

59. It has been estimated that when Khusro sacked the city of Edessa in 622 and removed 112,000

have seen, was partially gilded, but there can be no question that gold and jeweled book covers were, in comparison, far more costly. When in 384 Jerome wrote to Eustochium a letter that enjoyed wide circulation, he specifically criticized books written in gold on purple parchment and “bedecked with jewels.”<sup>60</sup> A miracle recorded by Gregory of Tours in the *Gloria Confessorum* even hinges on the difference in value between gold and silver bindings, but here a jewel-encrusted binding is treated positively. For a “cover for enclosing the holy Gospels, a paten, and a chalice made from pure gold and precious gems,” gifts of the fifth-century Emperor Leo (457–474), a devilish goldsmith substituted fakes made of silver gilt. The earth swallowed the craftsman, but the objects were preserved at Lyon, where Gregory had seen them “many times.”<sup>61</sup> Nor is it surprising that in the entire period up to 650 the one and only book mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis*, with its extraordinary lists of gifts to or by popes, is a “Gospels with gold covers and precious jewels, weighing fifteen pounds,” presented along with other treasures to Pope Hormisdas by the Emperor Justin around the year 520.<sup>62</sup> Exactly what the fifteen pounds represented in this case cannot be established, but very probably the reason why gold or silver bindings are recorded only once is because (a) they usually did not contain much weight of precious material, and (b) such covers could not be separately weighed, as could, for example, a chalice or candleholder.

The one surviving gold and jeweled binding from the period (fig. 8), in the cathedral treasury at Monza, is documented by an inscription carved and inlaid with red and blue niello on narrow gold strips nailed to the two covers.<sup>63</sup> The placing of the strips complements the carefully considered geom-

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pounds (more than fifty tons!) of silver from its churches, this would have represented some fifteen hundred to five thousand pounds of silver per church, a figure that no longer seems incredible. See Boyd, “Metropolitan’ Treasure,” 17. For this and other statistics, see Marlia Mundell Mango, “The Monetary Value of Silver Revetments and Objects Belonging to Churches, A.D. 300–700,” in Boyd and Mango, *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate*, 123–36.

60. Jer. *Ep.* 22.32: “Membrana colore purpureo, aurum liquescit in literis, gemmis codices vestiuntur,” ed. Isidore Hilberg (CSEL 54:193).

61. Raymond van Dam, trans., *Gregory of Tours, Glory of the Confessors* (Liverpool, 1988), 68–70.

62. “Evangelia cum tabulis aureis et cum gemmis pretiosis, pens. lib. XV,” *Liber pontificalis* 54.5, in Pietro Guglielmo et al., eds., *Liber Pontificalis* (Rome, 1978), 2:137.

63. For further references, see *Splendori di Bisanzio: Testimonianze e riflessi d’arte e cultura bizantina nelle chiese d’Italia*, exh. cat. (Milan, 1990), 55; Roberto Conti, *Il Tesoro: Guida alla conoscenza del Tesoro del Duomo di Modena*, 2d ed. (Monza, 1983), 38–39, cat. 21; Roberto Conti and Carlo Bertelli, *Monza: Il duomo e i suoi tesori* (Milan, 1988), 24–25; Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, 78–80, cat. 12.

etry of the covers perfectly, but the inscription looks like an afterthought.<sup>64</sup> However, the method of attachment to the ground is identical to that of the nearby cameos and gammadia. The inscription reads: "Out of the gifts of God Theodelinda, most glorious queen, offers this to St. John the Baptist, in the basilica which she founded, in Monza, near her palace."<sup>65</sup> There are traces of clasps on the right edge of the "Theodelinda" plaque and on the left edge of the "Monza" plaque.<sup>66</sup> These indicate that two clasps were attached to the fore edge of the back ("Monza") cover, and hinged forward to lock onto pins on the edge of the front ("Theodelinda") cover. The traces of the attachments for the clasps on both panels not only confirm their function as book covers but also establish that the inscription began, as we might expect, on the front cover. Unfortunately, the modern display of the covers shows them reversed. In terms of more general arguments about distinguishing fronts and backs, it can be noted that the front cover is considerably more worn and damaged, especially at the top right corner.

The Theodelinda in question was a Lombard ruler (d. 625) to whom Pope Gregory the Great sent, as gifts on the baptism of her son as a Catholic in 603, a fragment of the True Cross, and a gospel (or merely a gospel reading: *lectionem Sancti Evangelii*) kept (*inclausam*) in a *theca persica*, a container of Persian craftsmanship, long assumed to refer to these very book covers.<sup>67</sup> The proposed identification of the binding with Gregory's letter is problematic, however, and perhaps tells us more about how modern art history works, always keen to link objects and documents, than about late antique art patronage and gift giving. The Monza covers could well have been made not in Rome or the eastern Mediterranean but in the Milan region. To judge from

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Note that the covers are not included in Isabella Baldini Lippolis, *L'oreficeria nell'impero di Costantinopoli tra IV e VII secolo* (Bari, 1999).

64. Conti, *Tesoro*, 38, considered it "applicato in epoca di poco posteriore." A. Lipinsky, "Der Theodelinden-Schatz im Dom zu Monza," *Das Münster* 13 (1960): 146–73, esp. 159: "auf die älteren Buchdeckel nachträglich aufgesetzt worden."

65. Conti and Bertelli, *Monza*, 24: DE DONIS DI OFFERIT / THEODELENDIA REG(INA) / GLORIOSISSEMA / S(AN)C(T)O IOHANNI BAPT(ISTE) / IN BASELICA / QUAM IPSA FUND(AVIT) / IN MODICIA / PROPE PAL(ATIUM) SUUM.

66. *Ibid.*, fig. 10.

67. Gregory the Great, *Ep.* 14.2 (CCSL 140A:1082–3). The reference to the gospel is in line 37. For the putative connection to the covers, see, for example, Lipinsky, "Theodelinden-Schatz," 159; Conti, *Tesoro*, 39. For the interpretation of *lectionem* as "reading," see Claudia Rapp's chapter in this volume.

the wording, Gregory's gospel might have been wrapped up in a "Persian" textile, or even enshrined in some kind of container.<sup>68</sup>

The Theodelinda covers are highly symmetrical, and virtually identical (in this sense reminiscent of the silver-cross covers of the Sion treasure). They are large, measuring 34 × 26 (or 26.5) cm.<sup>69</sup> They are both mounted on modern wood panels. Each consists of a large jeweled cross set within a cloisonné enameled frame. The rectangular fields in the arms of the cross are decorated with gamma-shaped enameled panels, and within the angles they form are recycled Roman cameos, all originally, it would seem, facing the cross. The two dark green stones representing Christ and the Virgin at the bottom are replacements made in 1773, and the cameo at the bottom right may have been moved at the same time. The four cameos per cover are probably intended to stand for the four evangelists, notwithstanding the fact that two are female heads. The nonsymbolic image content of these covers, nonetheless, is small.

In broad terms, the decorative pattern of the cover resembles that on the book held by Christ in the famous sixth-century icon at Sinai.<sup>70</sup> The simplicity of the design and its focus on the jeweled cross, however, are reminders that a chronological progress in the use of imagery from simplicity to complexity—one of the preliminary presuppositions of this paper—ought *not* to be assumed; this is one of the latest objects in our survey and in terms of visual content one of the least ambitious. Yet it is impressive, lavish, and beautiful. We could perhaps advance the argument that in this instance the cost of the materials outweighed any value that large-scale images could have added. In a reversal of the Ovidian tag, *opus non superabat materiam*.

### Ivory Book Covers

When we move to ivory book covers we encounter a material seemingly less costly than silver, though the situation may have been different in the fifth

68. Strzygowski, *Koptische Kunst*, 341, drew attention to possible links between such a *theca* and the Luxor (putative) book containers discussed above.

69. Conti, *Tesoro*, 38. Note that the heights of the two panels according to Conti and Bertelli, *Monza*, 24, are 30 cm and 33.8 cm.

70. This point is often made. See the discussion in Kurt Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons*, vol. 1, *From the Sixth to the Tenth Century* (Princeton, 1976), 14.

and sixth centuries, and one that was quite widely available in late antiquity.<sup>71</sup> We shall need to consider four sets of book covers—there are also fragments of at least five more—that are in the form of so-called “five-part diptychs.”<sup>72</sup> These are pairs of revetments, each “wing” assembled from five separate panels of ivory in order to produce an object of a size and shape appropriate to a book cover, despite the inherent limitations of the narrow curving shape of the elephant’s tusk. All of these five-part diptychs have survived in secondary use, and their relation to such imperial objects as the famous “Barberini diptych” in the Louvre has clouded their original function, so that they are sometimes treated as plaques rather than as book covers.<sup>73</sup> But this seems to me unwarranted: the dimensions, proportions, iconography, pairing, and later history of use and imitation of such objects are all fully consistent with a primary function as book covers. (What I have not included are any of the tall, narrow, “normal” diptychs, which, even if later reused as book covers, show no sign that this was their original intended function.)<sup>74</sup>

All of the five-part diptychs were originally, and most still are, mounted on wooden boards.<sup>75</sup> The assemblages of ivory plaques would seem to have been too unstable and fragile to function as book covers without a rigid support. Even though the vertical side panels have tenons top and bottom locked into a mortise in the top and bottom panels by two ivory dowels, thus creating a quite sturdy structure, the main panel in each case was cut with a simple rebate on all four sides, which was merely located in a shallow notch cut in the edge of the “frame.”<sup>76</sup> As a result, the central panel cannot fall forward out of its setting, but to be secure the whole assembly would need to be held in place

71. On the cost and availability of ivory, see Anthony Cutler, “Prolegomena to the Craft of Ivory Carving in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” in *Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen Âge*, ed. Xavier Barral I Altet (Paris, 1987), 2:431–71.

72. See the useful general discussion in Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, 11–21.

73. See, for example, the treatment of the ivory “plaques,” as the five-part diptychs are termed, in Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, nos. 458–61, 475–76.

74. For such “single-panel” diptychs, see, e.g., Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, nos. 4, 6, 9. Obviously (or presumably) not originally made as book covers are her nos. 1, 2, 3, 7. No. 1 is indeed only a diptych because the ivory panel was sawn in two in secondary use. To fit such ivories, a manuscript would have to have had unusually, and hence characteristically, tall and narrow pages.

75. The Ravenna panel was recently remounted on Plexiglas. Luciana Martini and Clementina Rizzardi, *Avori bizantini e medievali nel Museo Nazionale di Ravenna* (Ravenna, 1990), 127.

76. Some preliminary remarks on construction can be found in Anthony Cutler, “Barberiniana: Notes on the Making, Content, and Provenance of Louvre, OA. 9603,” in *Tesseræ: Festschrift für Josef*

by a rigid backing panel of some sort; glue alone would have been inadequate to the task.

In contrast to the repoussé technique used on the silver sheets, the technique of carving in ivory permits highly detailed, even minute craftsmanship, and apart from damage and wear to the surface of the areas in highest relief, the ivories in general are in good condition. Nonetheless, the varying patterns of shrinkage and warping of the constituent panels—caused by the “grain” of the ivory curving in two planes—has created stresses that have led to opening of the joints, splitting of the mortises, and distortion of the rectangular form to a varying extent in all the examples. The resulting pattern of damage is characteristic, and where not cut away can be a useful pointer to the original provenance of now-dispersed pieces.

### *Ivory Book Covers: Milan Cathedral Treasury*

The earliest surviving five-part ivory cover stands a little apart from the others in both material and visual content. It is now preserved in the cathedral treasury of Milan (fig. 9), where it has been since at least the first half of the twelfth century.<sup>77</sup> The panels are very large, measuring 37.5 × 28.1 cm. They are now separately framed and mounted on a modern wood support; the edges and backs of the panels are, unfortunately, invisible. The front cover, identifiable by the content of the images, is centered on a haloed Lamb of God composed of garnets inlaid in small cells in a silver-gilt mount, the whole set within a rich garland of fruit and grain, probably symbolizing the four seasons. At the four outer corners of the panel are simpler wreaths of bay (?) leaves enclosing, above, the winged symbol of an evangelist holding an open book: the man (Matthew) at the left, the ox (presumably Mark, following the identification proposed by Irenaeus, rather than that of Jerome)<sup>78</sup> at the right, with two bearded figures in the corners below—the evangelists in human form. The intervening areas are filled with eight narrative scenes, which cannot, however,

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*Engemann* (Münster, 1991): 329–39 at 335–36; reprinted in his *Late Antique and Byzantine Ivory Carving* (Aldershot, 1998). His remarks are amplified here by my own observations.

77. Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, 3d ed. (Mainz, 1976), no. 119; Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, no. 5; Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires du Moyen Age* (Fribourg, 1978), 26–27 and nos. 24–25.

78. Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, 69, identifies the symbol as Luke’s, but she later notes that the order man-ox-lion-eagle is not biblical (70).

be read in a straightforward narrative order. Starting below Matthew's symbol at the top left we see the Annunciation to the Virgin at the spring (from the Protevangelium of James 11.2), the Magi observing the star, and the Baptism. At the right we see the Virgin introduced to the temple by the angel (Protev. 7.2), the twelve-year-old Christ teaching in the temple, and the Entry to Jerusalem. In the top panel is the Nativity, with Joseph most unusually holding a frame saw, and in the bottom panel is the Massacre of the Innocents before Herod. Insofar as the narrative images of the front cover can be said to have a program, it appears to focus on the incarnation and infancy of Christ, with a notable inclusion of nonbiblical material. The Baptism and Entry to Jerusalem images seem to stand outside the main theme.

The back cover is dominated by a jeweled silver cross on a rocky base from which flow the four rivers of paradise.<sup>79</sup> The four corner medallions include, as before, the evangelist symbols (lion and eagle) above holding books, and the bearded evangelists Luke (presumably) and John below. In the eight narrative panels, starting at the top we have the Adoration of the Magi, then at the left three miracles of healing: of the blind, of a paralytic, and the raising of Lazarus. At the bottom is the miracle at Cana, and then reading up the right side we have the Widow's Mite, the Last Supper, and an image of Christ, seated on the cosmos, touching the garlands extended by two flanking figures. This last scene is puzzling. In terms of a possible program on this cover we have a mixture—primarily miracles, but with infancy and perhaps postresurrection elements.

Taking the two covers together, the presence of the evangelist symbols makes it clear that we are dealing with the covers of a gospel book. Indeed, the repetition of quaternities—four symbols, four evangelists, four rivers of paradise, four seasons—is surely a form of visual commentary on the content. The technique of execution of the lamb and cross suggests north Italian manufacture, perhaps in the middle of the fifth century, and from the use of materials it appears that symbols of Christ, the lamb and the cross, were of greater importance in enhancing and communicating the significance of the object than the more naturalistic images of Christ in human form.

79. Kitzinger, "Pair of Silver Book Covers," 8, made a connection with the cross on the Sion Treasure covers at Dumbarton Oaks (see fig. 7).

*Ivory Book Covers: Ejmiadzin Gospels*

The three other more or less complete five-part diptychs, all made a century or so after the Milan diptych, show many similarities to one another. They differ from the Milan diptych most obviously in their lack of applied metal decoration, but this is slightly misleading, as symmetrical drill holes, for example on the crosses (top center, figs. 10, 11, 14), indicate that small metal ornaments or semiprecious stones were once applied to their surfaces.<sup>80</sup> The first of the group of three (fig. 10) now forms the binding of an Armenian gospel book from Ejmiadzin dated 989 (in the Matenadaran Library at Erevan). It measures 36.5 × 30.5 cm. On the front cover the central panel frames an enthroned Mother of God and Child between, it would seem, two angels. The top panel has flying angels carrying a cross in a garland. Small crowned busts appear in the corners, probably personifications of Sol and Luna. Below, on the left, we see the Annunciation, and Joseph and Mary with the water of conviction (Protev. 16). At the right are the Nativity (above), and the preceding Journey to Bethlehem (below). Across the bottom panel, moving vigorously (and somewhat surprisingly) from right to left, is the Adoration of the Magi. The third magus is pursued by a flying angel. Joseph sits at the left, and the Theotokos and Child are also attended by an angel.

At the center of the back cover is an enthroned Christ, represented young and beardless, holding a book and flanked by two bearded figures, Peter and Paul. Above, two flying angels support a cross in a garland, as on the front cover. Below, to either side, are scenes of healing: Christ curing the dropsiac (probably), and the blind man swimming in the pool at Siloam (possibly) to the left; Christ healing the palsiac and two demoniacs at the right. At the bottom is the Entry to Jerusalem, in which Christ and his followers move as forcefully to the right as the Magi move to the left on the front cover. In every scene on the back cover Christ holds a conspicuous cross staff.

In comparison with the Milan ivories, the use of images on the Ejmiadzin covers appears to have been more consistently thought out. The presence of the evangelists and their symbols has been suppressed (but we can still assume, I believe, that the covers were for a gospel book), and in place of the

80. Compare the Barberini diptych: *Byzance*, no. 20.

central lamb and cross we have two images of Christ in human form. The narrative structure of the panels works better. Here the Theotokos and Child are flanked by an infancy cycle, and the mature Christ and apostles by a miracle cycle. Both panels culminate, in narrative terms, in processions: the procession of the Magi bearing gifts to Christ in their covered hands on the front, and the procession of Christ himself, bearing a cross, followed by palm bearers and welcomed by the people of Jerusalem on the back. I suggest that this processional focus is not fortuitous; the makers of the Ejmiadzin covers knew they were to be displayed and viewed in processions.

A further point to emphasize is that mounting holes in the ivories leave no doubt that the Mother of God and Child/Infancy cover was on the front of the book, and the Christ enthroned/Miracle cover was on the back. Unfortunately, in Steenbock's standard work on luxury book covers, these ivories, along with all those of similar pattern, including such Carolingian derivatives as the famous Lorsch gospel covers, are reproduced and discussed with the miracle panels termed the front and the infancy panels described as the back.<sup>81</sup> It is also clear with the original, though less obvious in photographs, that the front (Theotokos) cover is the more worn of the two, a point to bear in mind. I shall return to the basic front/back distinction briefly in the conclusion.

81. That the Lorsch Christ panel was without a doubt originally the *back* cover of the gospel book was established by Margaret H. Longhurst and Charles Rufus Morey, "The Covers of the Lorsch Gospels," *Speculum* 3 (1928): 64–74. When the book was divided, probably not when rebound in 1479 but more likely in the mid-sixteenth century (Hermann Fillitz, "Habens tabulas eburneas: Der Elfenbeinschmuck des Lorsch Evangelii," in *Das Lorsch Evangeliar: Eine Zimelie der Buchkunst des abendländischen Frühmittelalters*, facsimile and commentary, ed. Hermann Schefers [Darmstadt, 2000], 103–10, esp. 109–10), the cover that went with the latter half (Luke and John)—the original back cover—was remounted to form the front cover of the Luke-John volume. The book is now removed from the binding: Luke and John form MS Vat. pal. lat.50, and the ivory cover is in the Museo Pio Cristiano. Longhurst and Morey also found, by examination of the back surface, that the bottom panel of the Vatican cover recycled part of a consular diptych of Anastasius (A.D. 517). (Fillitz, 104, erroneously recorded this as the top panel.) Morey further argued that the top panel was the surviving part of a damaged five-part diptych. But he then proposed, bizarrely, that the remaining panels were a late tenth-century restoration of a Carolingian restoration of the original (72–73). Peter Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800–1200*, 2d ed. (New Haven, 1994), 21, argued that the top and bottom panels of the other cover, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, were also reused late antique works because of their shape. While this could be true for the top panel, the figures in the bottom panel have been adapted from the start to the sloping shape (there has also been some postmedieval trimming of these edges), indicating that it must be Carolingian.

*Ivory Book Covers: St. Lupicin Gospels*

The second closely related five-part diptych (fig. 11) is now attached to MS lat. 9384 in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. It is a ninth-century Carolingian gospel book written in silver majuscules on purple parchment.<sup>82</sup> It came from the library of St. Lupicin in the Jura and measures 36.9 × 30.3 cm.<sup>83</sup> The present binding structure is from the reign of Charles X (1824–30), but the book and the ivories were already together in 1717, and possibly long before that. The book's pages, however, are far smaller than the ivories (roughly 32 × 25 cm), and the text is incomplete and very worn and damaged at both ends, suggesting a spell unprotected by a binding. Taken together, the evidence precludes the possibility that the book could have been made to fit the ivories; the combination is thus in some sense fortuitous, and the result is awkward (and fragile). The positions of the covers have also, I believe, been reversed vis-à-vis their original arrangement, but there are no traces on the ivories of the binding or clasps that would indicate which was the spine and which the fore edge. I shall therefore treat them with the Mother of God and Child flanked by angels as the centerpiece of what would in the sixth century have been the front cover.

Here the Christ child holds a conspicuous cross staff. At the top we see two flying angels supporting a cross in a garland, but the relief carving is shallower and cruder than Ejmiadzin and the effect is less elegant. It is notable that both angels also carry a book. At the left are the Annunciation and Visitation. At the right we see Joseph and Mary with the water of conviction, and the Journey to Bethlehem. The bottom panel has the Entry to Jerusalem, with Christ carrying a cross (this last scene was on the back cover of Ejmiadzin).

The center of the St. Lupicin back cover is occupied again by an enthroned Christ, but this time he is bearded and mature, even elderly—perhaps the Ancient of Days of Daniel's vision (Dan. 7:9). He displays a book with a cross on its cover, and is flanked as before by Peter and Paul. Above, two flying, book-carrying angels again support a cross in a garland. To the left Christ heals a

82. *Byzance*, no. 27; Vollbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike*, no. 145; Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, no. 10; Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires du Moyen Age*, 37–38 and no. 38. I am most grateful to Mme. Marie-Pierre Lafitte for permitting me to examine the manuscript.

83. The measurements are those of Danielle Gaborit-Chopin; see *Byzance*, 74. Larger measurements are given by both Steenbock and Vollbach (see previous note).

blind man and the man sick with palsy. To the right he heals the woman with an issue of blood and a possessed man. It is notable that here, in comparison to the closely related image in Ejmiadzin, the bending demoniac's shackles are more visible, and the figure behind, clearly identified as a second demoniac by his naked torso and manic hair in Ejmiadzin, has become an apostle holding a book (compare figs. 12 and 13). In the panel below, Christ addresses the Samaritan woman at the well and raises Lazarus. In all the narrative images Christ, youthful and beardless, conspicuously holds a cross staff, and in three scenes one of the apostles is holding a book. These again seem to me elements appropriate to a processional function for the book whose covers we are considering.

The overall parallel between the covers of Ejmiadzin and St. Lupicin is very conspicuous (figs. 10–13). But perhaps even more striking is how neither merely repeats the other's images: the differences we see thus invite a more detailed exegetical analysis, one that will have to wait, however, for another occasion. But such differences as we see are not, I am sure, to be dismissed as merely exemplifying the results of "provincial" copying (in the St. Lupicin covers) of a "metropolitan" model (the Ejmiadzin covers).

#### *Ivory Book Covers: Murano Diptych*

The third of the three closely related five-part diptych covers is now fragmented, and one of the ten constituent panels is missing (fig. 14). In the Middle Ages the diptych was in the monastery of San Michele at Murano in the Venetian lagoon. The better-preserved back cover (as I shall term it) is now in the Museo Nazionale at Ravenna,<sup>84</sup> whereas the front is divided between collections in Manchester (center panel, John Rylands University Library), St. Petersburg (left panel, cut in two, Hermitage), Berlin (top panel, Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst), and Paris (bottom panel, Louvre).<sup>85</sup> The Ravenna plaque measures 35.5 × 30.5 cm. In one important detail, however, the dismantled cover is better preserved than its erstwhile companion: all the con-

84. Martini and Rizzardi, *Avori bizantini e medievali*, 62–65, 127. See also next note.

85. Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, no. 8; Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike*, nos. 126–129; Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, nos. 458–61 (reconstructs Hermitage panels at right, rather than at left, on p. 511; comparison with the Ejmiadzin and St. Lupicin covers suggest the left side is correct); see also *Byzance*, no. 24 (now Louvre, OA 11149, acquired 1987 at the sale of the Marquis de Ganay collection).

stituent ivories retain extensive traces of a surface decoration comprising large gilded stars on the background and decorative motifs on the drapery. These must have been systematically cleaned off the Ravenna panel.<sup>86</sup> I shall examine the covers in what I presume to be the correct narrative and hierarchical order, starting with the Mother of God and Child.<sup>87</sup>

Beneath a fluted baldachin flanked by large crosses, an enthroned Theotokos and Child are here flanked by the Magi presenting gifts; an angel at the left provides symmetry. Below, on the same central panel but at smaller scale, is the Nativity, including the midwife Salome (see Protev. 20). In the top panel flying angels again support a cross within a garland. On a small scale at either end are archangels in imperial dress, each holding the orb of the cosmos and a cross standard. At the left of the central panel is the Annunciation to Anna (Protev. 4), including the unique detail of the sparrows in a laurel tree (Protev. 3). Below (now a separate panel) is the Visitation.<sup>88</sup> The corresponding panel at the right is lost. In the bottom panel we see the Annunciation, Mary and Joseph and the water of conviction, and the Journey to Bethlehem—here the Virgin on an ass is led by an angel holding a cross staff.

At the center of the well-preserved back cover in Ravenna, again beneath a fluted baldachin flanked by large crosses, is an enthroned youthful Christ holding a rolled scroll. He is flanked by the bearded figures of Peter and Paul, each displaying an open book held in a cloth-covered hand; probably the pages rather than the covers are intended to be visible, but the incised lines are too schematic for certainty. The two figures behind are probably angels.<sup>89</sup> (The four figures echo the four flanking figures on the front cover.) In the area immediately below, an angel with a cross standard rescues the three orant Hebrews from the furnace (cf. Dan. 3:25). In the top panel the composition again echoes that on the front cover. The flanking panels each have two scenes at quite large scale: Christ heals a blind man (above), and a demoniac (below)

86. The conservation report records the removal of traces of old abrasive cleaning agents; see Martini and Rizzardi, *Avori bizantini e medievali*, 127.

87. Note that for Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, 73, the Ravenna plaque was the front cover.

88. Identified by Herbert L. Kessler, "Two Carved Plaques with St. Anne," in Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, 510–12, as a further Protevangelium scene preceding the Annunciation to Anna. A subsequent scene is more probable given the usual reading of these flanking panels from the top downward. In addition, the comparison with the Visitation of the St. Lupicin cover is very close.

89. Perhaps apostles, according to Martini and Rizzardi, *Avori bizantini e medievali*, 62.

at the left, and raises Lazarus (above) and heals the man with palsy (below) at the right. In each scene Christ holds a conspicuous cross staff. At the bottom is the story of Jonah, which reads from right to left. Surprisingly, a non-biblical angel addresses the prophet as he lies in the shade of the gourd plant.<sup>90</sup> The simplified compositions result in a high degree of legibility. The presence on this panel of two Old Testament narratives prefiguring salvation through Christ is striking. Their widespread use in art of the fourth through sixth centuries in many media makes their absence on the other five-part diptychs notable.<sup>91</sup>

The Ejmiadzin, St. Lupicin, and Murano covers are widely scattered now, but their numerous similarities suggest (a) that they could originate from a single source despite differences in levels of craftsmanship, and (b) that they are probably roughly contemporary. The mid-sixth century is accepted as the most likely date for their production, but their place or places of manufacture have been much disputed. Constantinople remains a plausible default option in my view. The survival of further isolated ivory panels,<sup>92</sup> such as the Mother of God and Child in the British Museum (fig. 15)—closely related to the fragmentary front cover of the Murano diptych—shows that other book covers of this type were disassembled at various dates (in this case by the twelfth century, for it has a prayer in Greek inscribed on the back).<sup>93</sup> The reuse of the St. Lupicin covers on a Carolingian *codex purpureus* may be postmedieval, but further Carolingian evidence suggests the possibility that in the sixth century

90. The source of this detail remains to be established.

91. For a recent survey of typology, see Catherine Brown Tkacz, *The Key to the Brescia Casket: Typology and the Early Christian Imagination* (South Bend, Ind., 2002).

92. The following are fragments of five-part diptychs of an iconographic type that is close to the book covers considered here: (1) Vollbach no. 131 (London, British Museum, central panel with Christ); (2) Vollbach no. 132 (Paris, coll. Marquis de Vasselot, central panel with Christ); (3) Vollbach no. 133 (Paris, Louvre, broken central panel with Christ [see *Byzance*, no. 23], perhaps with Vollbach no. 130 (Moscow, Pushkin Museum, lateral panel [see *Byzance*, 70])); (4) the panels recently brought together by Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, "Les trois fragments d'ivoire de Berlin, Paris et Nevers," in *Byzantine East, Latin West: Art-Historical Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann*, ed. Doula Mouriki et al. (Princeton, 1995), 49–63; (5) probably Vollbach no. 156 (Saulieu, Mairie, two central panels recycled on the covers of the twelfth-century gospel lectionary from St. Andoche [*Byzance*, no. 26]).

93. O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of the Ivory Carvings of the Christian Era* (London, 1909), no. 14, photograph of back on p. 12. A fine color image is available at [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass). Search under "Ivory. Adoration of the Magi." A recent survey on the ivory is provided by Antony Eastmond in *The Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vasilake (Milan and London, 2000), 266–67.

these ivories could well have covered *codices purpurei*, assuredly the most costly products of late antique book manufacture.<sup>94</sup> The comparably large dimensions of the surviving *codices purpurei* and the ivory covers are consistent with such use.

### Conclusions and Proposals

To sum up, the basic structure of the binding of the early Christian book was a pair of boards, generally of wood but occasionally of some less rigid material. How such boards were decorated was in part related to the limitations and possibilities of the material used to cover them. If left uncovered, the boards could be painted, but this must always have been an unusual, because impractical, procedure. Handling of the book would have quickly eroded the pigment. Hence any binding of this sort requires an unusual explanation. If the boards were covered with leather, which was the usual practice, the leather could be and probably generally was decorated. This material lent itself to the application of geometric patterns, probably from an early date, exploiting the symbolic and symmetrical potential of the cross. Revetting of the boards with sheets of silver, when decorated in repoussé, encouraged the use of a decorative scheme comprising relatively simple large-scale forms that could then be further emphasized by selective gilding. Symmetry was again important. Figures and symbols could be used, separately or in combination, and Christ might be represented in human form or as a cross. If gold and jewels were applied to a book's binding the materials might be left little altered; the cross remained the most potent symbol. Doubtless some gold covers were decorated, like silver-gilt covers, in repoussé. It is not surprising that none survive, given the relative fragility of the result and the ease with which precious materials could be removed from the covers of books and recycled.<sup>95</sup> It seems that only when books were revetted with ivory plaques, which could be worked in minute detail, were really ambitious pictorial schemes attempted. The proportion of such covers that survives is relatively higher than for gold or silver revet-

94. Probably the best Carolingian evidence is the Lorsch Gospels; see above.

95. The earliest repoussé gold covers in Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, are front covers of the Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram (Munich, Clm 14000) and the Lindau Gospels (New York, Morgan Lib. M 1), nos. 20–21.

ments because the ivory plaques, while valuable, were not so easily recycled, or at least not in a form that totally obliterated their original function. The possibility that there were also other ways of presenting the early Christian book to a public—for example, in some sort of book-shrine—also needs to be borne in mind.

Crucial to all aspects of the design and use of the book is an awareness of its diptych-like form. Even so, when we look at early book covers it seems to me striking how frequently both front and back were equally, sometimes even symmetrically, decorated. (A glance into the medieval period and beyond shows that such equality of treatment was by no means universal, with high-status and high-cost decoration often reserved for the front cover—a procedure still familiar in book design today, and readily explicable in terms of storage and display.)<sup>96</sup> Luxury covers, it should be recalled, were merely re-vetments; the functional element was the underlying wooden panel, so there was no structural *need* for the gold or silver or ivory plaques to be paired. One explanation for the pairing might lie in a desire not to devalue the sacred: perhaps to decorate only the front cover could have been taken to imply that the beginning of the book was more important than the end. (At this point I am assuming that such covers were generally on gospel books.) But I do not think that that can have been a strong reason. The crucial element, I believe, was that the primary function of such covers was display. Display might have been temporary, as when the book was carried processionally during the liturgy, or it might have been long-term, as when the book was set up on an altar. At such times, such books might have been carried and/or displayed closed, or open with the sacred text visible. But I think we also have to consider a third possibility: that they were sometimes—and when given an especially costly cover may even have been intended to be—displayed open with the covers, not the text, toward the viewer. This is what some of the covers themselves show in self-referential images of the book on the book.<sup>97</sup>

As with all diptychs, the process of opening a book's covers for display

96. Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, nos. 22, 33, 38, 42, 46, 47, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 57, etc.

97. On the question of visibility, see Claudia Rapp's chapter in this volume. S. R. Holman kindly drew my attention to the fifth-century (?) mosaics of the Rotunda/Ag. Georgios in Thessalonike, in which books appear to stand open on altars with their covers toward the viewer. A poor reproduction is in Theocharis Pazaris, *The Rotunda of Saint George in Thessaloniki* (Thessalonike, 1983), col. pl. 4, and pls. 12, 14.

(hinging at the left) transforms the relationship between what might seem a (literally) superior front and inferior back cover to one in which the back now appears to the left, and the front to the right. This brings the left (back) cover not merely into equal prominence, but also sets up the probability of a narrative or progressive reading of the two together, from left to right. Furthermore, there exists a possible tension between these two modes of viewing, one with the book open, and the other with it closed. There can be no question that with the five-part ivory diptych covers in particular, opening them for display—primarily on an altar but also possibly in processions—would have enabled a far richer program to be communicated than could be provided by one cover alone. Yet precisely because of the division implicit in the diptych form, there could have been a danger that the imagery chosen for the two covers might have seemed to divide the human and divine natures of Christ. Perhaps, therefore, particular narrative and symbolic formulae, with their focus on the incarnation and miracles, already adumbrated in the Milan covers, were selected and arranged so as to function, diptych-like, as effective affirmations of orthodox (anti-Monophysite) doctrine.

Finally, we come to the intriguing question of the relationship between the exteriors of early Christian books and their interiors, what we might call the public and private spheres. Was there, as Kitzinger stated, a strong link between the decorative schemes of the two?<sup>98</sup> We can accept that the full-page cross, for example, could quite probably have been found both on the cover and occasionally inside an early Christian book, even if in the sole example that we can still investigate, the Glazier codex, this was not the case. In general, however, the treatment of book covers was much less varied, and hence is more predictable, than the treatment of images within books. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that there are no images within books in the early period that resemble in the slightest the centrally planned compositional schemes so characteristic of the five-part ivory diptychs. Is this evidence that such diptychs were in fact not made as book covers? I would dispute the point. I believe that the makers and users of luxury books had the clearest understanding of the difference between “outside” and “inside,” and thought hard about what was appropriate as a cover for the Gospels. The characteristic iconography of a

98. Kitzinger, “Pair of Silver Book Covers,” e.g., 2: “an inner relationship can be observed between designs on the cover and designs in the interior of codices.”

five-part diptych, those themes—including the Protevangelium scenes—common to all the examples, imply that the images were intended to affirm the broad significance and meaning of the gospel texts, not to “illustrate” them by some combination of what are sometimes called the “narrative” and “iconic” modes, nor to focus on specifically liturgical events (the Last Supper, for example), nor to record or recall the major feasts of the church year.

The early Christian book cover was, I conclude, a locus for public affirmation of orthodox belief. Its decoration suggested links not with the pictorial content of the book within,<sup>99</sup> not even, except in the most general terms, with the text within, but rather with other public displays of imagery: the decoration of altars and ambos,<sup>100</sup> the items that stood on altars, other precious objects to be used processionally, particularly the cross, and the other fixed and movable decorations of the contemporary church interior.<sup>101</sup>

When the gospel text was written on the animal-skin sheets of a book, the word was made flesh. When the gospel was bound and its exterior decorated with images, the word was made visible. When such a book was displayed in a procession or on an altar, the viewer beheld via its exterior the *doxa* of the word, the glory, that is to say, of God incarnate.

99. Steenbock, *Kirchliche Prachteinband*, 70–71, proposed that the images on the Milan diptych were derived from a much richer lost gospel cycle ([zu rekonstruierende] Evangelienillustration), but she did not specify whether this might have been in a manuscript or not. But Kitzinger, “Pair of Silver Book Covers,” 17, concluded (on the use of the cross and the gate of paradise), “it may well be that this is one of the cases where the cover designer took the lead and the miniaturist followed suit.”

100. For some starting points, see Jean-Pierre Sodini, “Les ambons médiévaux à Byzance: Vestiges et problèmes,” in *Thymiana stē mnēmē tēs Laskarinas Boura* (Athens, 1994), 1:303–7; Nezih Firatli, *La sculpture byzantine figurée au Musée Archéologique d’Istanbul* (Paris, 1990), nos. 178–79.

101. *Addendum*. For a reference to a pair of silver book covers, each decorated with images of saints, see the proceedings of the iconophile Council of Nicaea, 787 (Mansi 13:184), cited by Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453* (Englewood Cliffs N. J., 1972), 154. Note that these covers were not on a liturgical book, but a volume with writings of Constantine *chartophylax*. On the other hand, the earlier reference in the same text to “two silver-bound books” from the collection of the Great Church at Constantinople (Mango, 153–54), might rather be translated as “two books decorated with images,” without mention of their covers.