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Sacerdotium and *Imperium* in Material Form: The Reliquary of St. Patriarch Niphon II of Constantinople at the Dionysiou Monastery (1515)

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Abstract

Crafted in the form of a cross-in-square church, the reliquary casket of St. Niphon II, former Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (in office 1486–1488, 1497–1498, †1508, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos), displays an unusual architectural form that blends various Byzantine, Gothic, and Islamic decorative features, making it an object of complex eclecticism. The piece, commissioned by the Voivode of Wallachia, Neagoe Basarab, in 1515, evokes liturgical church-form containers such as censers and *artophoria*, but makes an unusual and unwieldy choice for a reliquary, which, in the Byzantine cults of relics, needs to be displayed open for touching and kissing. The study argues that the Dionysiou reliquary was manufactured in the Principality of Wallachia to make a statement about the distinctive hierarchical status of Saint Niphon II as the ecumenical leader of the Post-Byzantine Church of Constantinople. This quality is symbolized by its mixed style and the katholikon-like form, alluding to the Post-Byzantine multicultural context in which Niphon functioned as the sole patriarch of the former Byzantine commonwealth. It testifies to the *sacerdotium* as the Church's power structure and its sacred clerical functions, paired with the sovereignty of the secular power (the *imperium*). Both dimensions are represented in the double portrait of Voivode Neagoe and Saint Patriarch Niphon on the lid's reverse, designed in the form of a katholikon (cathedral) church. The literary sources, iconography, and models, as well as the ritual and symbolic function and materiality of the object, are analyzed in this study, exploring how the reliquary was conceived for display and use, and how its material form evokes the artophorion, linking it to Eucharistic symbolism as a container of sacred matter.

Keywords: reliquaries; relics; architectural forms; church containers; cults of saints; Wallachia; Dionysiou Monastery; Niphon II of Constantinople; sixteenth century; sacerdotium in the Orthodox Church

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1. Introduction

The exquisite church-shaped reliquary found in the katholikon (main church) of Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos contains most of the relics (bones) of St. Niphon II, Metropolitan of Thessaloniki (1482–1486) and Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (in office in 1486–1488, 1497–1498, 1502).[1] The reliquary case, made from gilded silver and fashioned in the form of a rectangular church with five domes (42 × 30 × 42 cm), is dated by its dedicatory inscription to the year of the world 7023 (1514–1515) (Figure 1). It was a donation by Voivode[2] Neagoe Basarab, ruler of the Principality of Wallachia (r. 1512–1521). The object has long puzzled art historians, being exceptional not only for its church-like form—a significant departure from the typical Byzantine box-shaped casket for relics—but

also for its stylistic aspect, which blends a Byzantine architectural structure with Islamic and Gothic decorative details (Nicolaescu 1933; Fousteris 2008; Kalavrezou 2022).



Figure 1. The reliquary of St. Patriarch Niphon II, Dionysiou Monastery, 1515 (after Kalavrezou 2022).

In this essay, I discuss the connections between Niphon and the lord patron who commissioned the object, Voivode Neagoe Basarab. I aim to narrow down the symbolic meanings of this unique and eclectic artifact[3]—the only known case of a church-form container in the Byzantine tradition whose destination can be documented with certainty from its inception as a reliquary and, at the same time, the oldest piece designed to contain the remains of a sanctified Constantinopolitan patriarch that has survived to the present. Finally, I argue that definitions of institutional power intersect with material splendor,[4] ritual function, and iconography in this reliquary object, visualizing them in architectural form, which articulates a message about *sacerdotium* (clerical dignity) and *imperium* (sovereign power, *basileia* in the Byzantine equivalent)[5] and their beneficial rule over the *oikoumene* (the inhabited world). At the same time, the mixed style of the object speaks to the polymorphous, multicultural condition of the Post-Byzantine Church and its leader, the Ecumenical Patriarch, in the late fifteenth- to early sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire.

2. Saint Niphon II of Constantinople: Material and Literary Evidence

The history surrounding the execution of the casket for the relics of Ecumenical Patriarch Niphon II from Dionysiou Monastery is related to his recognition as a saint at the exhumation of his remains in 1515. Our knowledge of the life of Niphon II is derived from several contemporaneous hagiographic sources, written shortly after the unearthing of his relics, seven years after his death (†11 August 1508). His hagiography

has survived in two types of texts: two *synaxarion*-type *vitae*,[6] and a larger *vita* elaborated in a chronicle-like form.

The oldest chronologically are the synaxarial *vitae*. They were composed shortly after the unearthing of the relics of Niphon. The synaxarial *vita* composed for St. Niphon's *akolouthia* (liturgical office for a saint) by the monks at Dionysiou, a short text conceived for liturgical use, to be read at the vespers of the saint's feast on 11 August, has not survived in its first form, but in two reworked redactions, both edited by Michael Angelos Kakouros (Kakouros 2008, p. 280 sqq.) The oldest one preserved is a literary version of the original *vita*, reworked by the rhetor Justin Dekadios from Corfu around 1515–1516.[7] The text is kept in a copy in the Varlaam Monastery on Meteora, Ms. Varlaam 38, ff. 105v–108v, dated 17 March 1518. The copy was produced by the Dionysian monk Leontios Rakendytis (ῥακενδύτης, "dressed in rags") for the ktetors of the Varlaam Monastery, Nektarios and Theophanis of the Apsarades family, who were spiritual disciples of Saint Niphon (Kakouros 2008, p. 280). The other is a shorter, simpler version made by the monks at Dionysiou in 1521–1538, preserved in a manuscript from 1599 (Dionysiou 751).

Synaxarial hagiographies recount that, originally from the Peloponnese, Niphon (then young Nicholas) began his education in Epidaurus under a certain Antonios, later becoming a disciple of Joasaph the Hesychast. He was tonsured as a monk on Mount Athos, subsequently elected Metropolitan of Thessaloniki (1482), and eventually Ecumenical Patriarch (1486). He was deposed and then reelected in 1498, being sanctioned with deposition twice "because of his outspokenness and his ability to rebuke and the excess of his freedom"—in Justin Dekadios's words (Kakouros 2008, p. 341, 3A).[8] Having left Constantinople for Adrianople, where he served at the Church of Saint Stephen, in 1502, Niphon met by Voivode Radu the Great, ruler of the Principality of Wallachia (r. 1495–1508), who was returning from Constantinople. Engaging in discussions with Niphon and admiring his virtue and discernment, Radu invited him to Wallachia "as the affairs there demanded a great and significant reform and correction;" and he "departed apostolically."[9] Niphon arrived in Wallachia to organize the Church and to chastise the morals in the land, "for the nation was lawless due to the lack of admonishers, and that led most of them, as has been said, to many lawless acts" (Kakouros 2008, 3B, cf. p. 342).[10] There he met a young boyar named Neagoe, who became his spiritual son.[11] In Wallachia, Niphon proved a "perfect source of much benefit and salvation for the ruler himself, who greatly honored him, treated him as a saint, [. . .] entrusted him with all the territory and [ecclesiastical] authority under him, and, upon Niphon's departure, sent him away with substantial gifts of money and provisions" (Kakouros 2008, p. 342).

After a few years, Niphon returned to Mount Athos. Settling in Dionysiou Monastery, he devoted himself to asceticism, to the spiritual guidance of disciples,[12] and to works of benefaction. According to the synaxarial sources, Niphon, with Wallachian financial support, managed to ransom Christian prisoners from Ottoman slavery, gave alms to the poor, supported the schools on Athos, and renovated the katholikon of St. John the Baptist at Dionysiou, painting it, adorning it with "sacred furnishings" (e.g., iconostasis, stands, lecterns, pews), and undertaking other buildings and renovations. He issued canons and rules for the monks, and, after reaching a venerable age, departed this life to Christ on 11 August 1508 and was buried at Dionysiou (Kakouros 2008, pp. 343–44).

In 1515, Neagoe became Voivode of Wallachia in 1512 by claiming descent from the ruling dynasty (known after his adopted dynastic name as Neagoe Basarab).[13] He remembered his spiritual father—seven years had passed since his death—and sent some of his most faithful boyars to Mount Athos to obtain Niphon's relics. Neagoe arranged for his relics to be brought to Wallachia. The boyars brought the ruler's letters to the Dionysiou monks, who, unable to refuse his request—"since from him derived their liveli-

hood"[14]—unearthed the relics. Upon exhumation, the monks discovered that Niphon's relics filled the air with an indescribable holy fragrance. His sanctity was thus acknowledged. Metropolitan Neophytos of Anchialus, a disciple of Niphon who happened to be at Dionysiou at that moment, departed for Wallachia with Neagoe's envoy of "archons" (boyars), to accompany the relics (Kakouros 2008, pp. 344–45). In Wallachia, Niphon's relics healed a paralytic who had suffered for many years by touching the coffin. The synaxaria further recount that the Wallachian ruler had the saint's head and right hand kept in a monastery newly built by him at Curtea de Argeş. This is the Dormition of the Mother of God Monastery, built between 1512 and 1517 to serve as his mausoleum (for it, see Moldovan 2019; Negrău and Sullivan 2019a, 2019b). For the rest of Niphon's relics, Neagoe commissioned the sumptuous silver-gilt reliquary, which was sent to Dionysiou through Metropolitan Neophytos. Neagoe provided the brethren at Dionysiou with numerous other goods, so much so that the monks continued to subsist thanks to this ruler's generosity (Kakouros 2008, p. 345). The reliquary was placed in the church of St. John the Baptist, where St. Niphon's *synaxis* (liturgical office) was celebrated on 11 August.[15] The narrative of the synaxaria concludes at this point.

A second, more extensive version of the *vita*, which for convenience I will name the chronicle-*vita*, was composed on the occasion of the saint's official canonization ceremony on 15 August 1517, in Curtea de Argeș, the capital of the Wallachian Principality (Simedrea 1937; for bibliography and further discussions, see Panou 2007, pp. 61–85; Păun 2015; Olar and Cristea 2021, 2026). It was written by Gabriel the *Protos* (leader of the council of abbots at Mount Athos). This version was composed before 1518 as well, since the Varlaam copy of the synaxarial *Vita*, executed by Leontios on 17 March 1518, already borrows certain details from Gabriel's version (Kakouros 2008, pp. 329–30, 36).

The extended *Vita* was written by Protos Gabriel in Wallachia, most probably in August 1517, when he was invited, together with the abbots of the monasteries of Mount Athos, to take part in the solemn canonization ceremony of St. Niphon, organized by Voivode Neagoe Basarab and Ecumenical Patriarch Theoleptos, at the voivodal seat of Curtea de Argeş. He composed the text in a chronicle-like manner. The literary piece consists of two concurrent narratives that weave into each other: the hagiographic life of Niphon per se, and another narrative thread, which is a Wallachian chronicle recounting, with numerous details, events from the Wallachian court while Niphon resided there, and a complicated series of incidents that continued after his departure and death.

The earliest surviving manuscripts of the chronicle *Vita* version date only from the seventeenth century, in both Romanian translation (edited by Simedrea 1937) and Greek variants (edited by Grecu 1944). Both the synaxarial *vitae* and the chronicle *vita* underwent multiple revisions and even additions in the following centuries to serve multiple monastic and political functions (for further discussion on the texts' versions, see Grecu 1944; Năsturel 1967; Kakouros 2008, Olar and Cristea 2021, 2026). Their discussion would extend beyond the scope of this study, since my analysis of these texts will be limited to the narrative portions concerning the making of the cult of Niphon from the period 1515–1517.

The chronicle *Vita* authored by the hieromonk Gabriel the Protos presents a somewhat different account of the events while Niphon remained in Wallachia, in ca. 1502–1505. According to this source, the former patriarch resided at the political seat of Târgoviște, where he effectively governed the Wallachian Church until 1505, when relations between Niphon and Voivode Radu deteriorated over disputes concerning canon law and political authority. Niphon, citing church canons, refused to marry the voivode's sister, Caplea, to a Moldavian boyar who had abandoned his wife. In response, Radu accused him of disobedience to the ruler, as well as to the laws and customs of the state (Simedrea 1937, pp. 10–11; Grecu 1944, pp. 87–93). During this conflict, the text states that Niphon was

repudiated by the ruler and left in Târgoviște without any means of sustenance. The young boyar Neagoe cared for the former patriarch by secretly bringing him food and developed a mentor–disciple relationship with him: "the blessed Niphon strengthened Neagoe with his teachings so that he would grow and elevate himself in all good deeds, to rise in good fortune, and to be well-pleasing before God and people" (Simedrea 1937, p. 11; Grecu 1944, pp. 91–93, 97–99). Ultimately, Radu promised Niphon that he would provide him with as much material support as was necessary, only if Niphon refrained from opposing the ruler's decision in the marriage affair of Caplea with the Moldavian boyar, for which Radu had secured blessings from multiple hierarchs. Niphon was urged to depart from Wallachia, and Radu engaged that he would continually ensure his sustenance and provide whatever he required[16] (Simedrea 1937, p. 11; Grecu 1944, pp. 94–95). Niphon admonished Radu, threatening him with the wrath of God for these sins, and left Wallachia. He came to Mount Athos, first to Vatopedi and then to Dionysiou Monastery. There, he died in 1508. Radu fell ill and died in 1508 as well, never having had the chance to reconcile with Niphon after his transgression of the church canons.

Gabriel's text details the complexity of Niphon's adventures in Wallachia in much more detail and presents a completely opposite dynamic between him and Radu the Great than the synaxarial lives, which briefly mention that Radu treated Niphon with much reverence and that they parted on good terms. The veracity of all these events and the negative portrayal of Radu are disputed by historians, who take into account that they matched the political agenda of Neagoe Basarab. To a certain extent, the political events recounted in the text may have been reinterpreted for the purpose of denigrating Radu—Neagoe's predecessor and political adversary—in order to legitimize Neagoe's rule (Neacşa 2018).

In 1515, Neagoe, according to the chronicle *Vita*, sends an envoy to the Dionysiou Monastery to request that the monks unearth Niphon's relics and transport them to Wallachia. The ruler's motive for seeking Niphon's relics, notes Protos Gabriel, was to perform a memorial service at Radu's tomb in the Dealu Monastery at Târgoviște, where Radu was interred. Thereby, Neagoe would pray before Niphon's relics and supplicate for their posthumous peace and absolution (Simedrea 1937, pp. 20–22; Grecu 1944, pp. 141–55). This intriguing turn of events differs completely from the synaxarial Lives. When Neagoe's emissaries began the exhumation, they reported that the relics emitted a sweet fragrance, and all in attendance bore witness to the saint's holiness. The relics were placed in a wooden chest and transported to Wallachia, where the ruler observed a nocturnal vigil at Radu's tomb. During the vigil, Neagoe experienced a vision in which he was persuaded that Saint Niphon, performing a baptismal-like rite, cleansed Radu of his sins, which had acted like a disease that had decayed Radu's body and emitted a foul odor (Simedrea 1937, pp. 21–22; Grecu 1944, pp. 151–53).

As Niphon's holiness was proved by miracles, the chronicle *Vita* records that Neagoe made a chest entirely of gilded silver, put Niphon's relics in it, and sent it to the Monastery of Dionysiou, together with Metropolitan Neophytos of Anchialos and an envoy of boyars (Simedrea 1937, p. 23; Grecu 1944, pp. 155–57). The Athonite monks, in turn, offered Neagoe the head and the right hand of the saint. The text continues that, on Mount Athos, at the grave of Saint Niphon, Neagoe built a chapel in the holy name of Saint Niphon.[17] The monastery was enriched by him with substantial wealth, and "tall buildings" were erected there (Simedrea 1937, p. 23), the text referring to the defensive towers made with the financial aid of Radu and Neagoe (Cândea 2011, II, cat. 430–32; Liakos 2017, pp. 169–70 and cat. 22).

During his lifetime, Neagoe kept the relics of St. Niphon with him. The text uses panegyrical topoi to express the devotion shown by Neagoe to Patriarch Niphon: "He received those gifts (i.e., the relics) with great joy, as did the Prophet Moses with the tablets

of the old law, and he bore them with him wherever he went, both to the court and to the church; and on the way he carried them in a carriage as Israel carried the Ark of the Covenant" (Simedrea 1937, p. 23; cf. Grecu 1944, p. 157). The voivode arranged, in concert with the Ecumenical Patriarch Theoleptos and the council of the abbots from Mount Athos, the canonization of Niphon in Wallachia, which took place with great pomp. Neagoe prepared, on this occasion, the consecration of the monastery he had erected at Curtea de Argeș with a liturgical ceremony on 15 August 1517, the great feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, to whom the monastery was dedicated. During this consecration ceremony, Neagoe personally performed the installation of the holy icons within the iconostasis,[18] including the revered icon of the Mother of God *Eleousa* (the Merciful; on it, Negrău 2023, pp. 87–89) and of Christ "the Stabbed"—a celebrated holy image brought from Constantinople (Negrău 2022, p. 275)—alongside other double-faced icons placed in the narthex, among which was a sumptuously adorned icon of Saint Patriarch Niphon (Simedrea 1937, p. 29). Within this ceremony, the canonization of Saint Niphon took place. Participating in the liturgy were Ecumenical Patriarch Theoleptos, the Metropolitan Macarie of Wallachia, and the abbots of Mount Athos, led by Protos Gabriel.[19] A description of this liturgical celebration was left in his hagiographic text (Simedrea 1937, pp. 28–29).[20]

The chronicle *Vita* written by Protos Gabriel, which praises Neagoe as the ideal pious ruler, was obviously composed for his benefit and at his command (see Olar and Cristea 2026). Nevertheless, the composition holds great value, as it reveals the process by which a former ecumenical patriarch was canonized and celebrated in the troublesome period for the Byzantine Church half a century following the fall of Constantinople. For the data concerning Niphon's biography and the Wallachian events, Gabriel relied not only on the synaxarial *vitae* and the information made known to him at Dionysiou and in Wallachia, but also on his own personal experience with Niphon, whom he encountered during the latter's lifetime, to which Gabriel himself testifies at the conclusion of his text, in a first-person prayer addressed to Saint Niphon:

> "And grant me salvation as well, who have written, by God, your life out of my ignorance and lack of instruction. Yet with your too holy prayers, as far as I have heard with my ears from your holy and blessed mouth, and from other faithful men, and which I myself have also seen, these I have given to the people" (Simedrea 1937, p. 32).

3. Church-Shaped Containers and the Reliquary of St. Niphon

While the synaxarial *vitae* do not provide a description of the reliquary, noting only that the precious object was made entirely of gilded silver (Kakouros 2008, p. 345), the chronicle *Vita* of Protos Gabriel ostensibly offers a detailed account of the object: "[and Lord Neagoe] made a chest entirely of pure silver and plated it with gold, embellished with beautiful pearls, precious stones, and enamel, and on the lid, he had it painted the full image of St. Niphon, and at his feet he made his own image kneeling and praying to the saint" (Simedrea 1937, p. 23; Grecu 1944, pp. 155–57). The description, however, contains several inaccuracies. Specifically, it mentions that the reliquary is adorned with pearls and precious stones, but the object itself shows no evidence of ever having had such gem settings. The painting within the lid is reportedly portraying Niphon in full silhouette, with Neagoe kneeling at his feet. In reality, Niphon is rendered as a portrait-like figure, and Neagoe appears to his right, also in a mid-figure pose, with his hands extended in prayer toward him (Figure 2). Due to these discrepancies, Nikos Panou suggested that the passage appears to describe an imaginary casket rather than the real one, arguing that this was a deliberate stylistic device on the author's part, intended to emphasize the Deësis scene in which Neagoe venerates Niphon and the implications of power that it entails (Panou 2007,

pp. 73–75). Although I agree that the text was indeed designed to focus on Neagoe's Deësis and its implications for his political power, I doubt that the author intentionally described an imaginary object instead of the real one. Protos Gabriel had probably seen the object opened for veneration, because he definitely saw the icon of Niphon and Neagoe inside the lid, but he may have missed the fact that the lid had a church shape on the outside, which is not visible when the casket is open (see the open reliquary in Figure 3). Otherwise, the text clearly states that this was the reliquary for the relics of Niphon, which Neagoe made and sent to Dionysiou in the year the relics were uncovered. This discrepancy proves, in my opinion, that Protos Gabriel wrote the *Vita* somewhere where he did not have access to the object and described it from memory. The text was most likely completed by him during his prolonged sojourn in Wallachia, on the occasion of the canonization of St. Niphon, in August 1517 (cf. Simedrea 1937, p. 30). Gabriel himself had his residence at Karyes on Mount Athos and should have had the occasion to see the reliquary at least once, because in his capacity as *protos* of the Holy Mountain and former acquaintance of Niphon, he should have come to Dionysiou at some point to recognize the holiness of the unearthed relics after their return from Wallachia later in the year 1515 (or early 1516), and to venerate Niphon as a newly acknowledged Athonite saint. But, as time passed, his mental image of the reliquary became blurred.

The gilded silver reliquary has an inner wooden chest that contains the actual relics, which is lined with purple silk embroidered with gold flowers (Figure 3). The metal lining on the interior, around the relic parts, is a late eighteenth-century addition. The icon that once was inside the lid (22.5 × 35.5 cm, tempera on wood) is a piece executed by a Cretan-trained painter (see Figure 2).[21] It depicts Saint Niphon dressed in a *sakkos* (patriarchal liturgical overrobe) and bearing an *omophorion* (a band worn around the neck and shoulders by bishops), holding a Gospel in his left hand, while Neagoe, the Voivode of Wallachia, is depicted on his right in a posture of prayer, slightly reduced in size, wearing a sumptuous red and gold Byzantine *granatza*, a robe of imperial heritage.[22] This painting was removed from the lid in the early twentieth century and replaced with a modern variant (Figure 3; cf. Iorga 1933, p. 28, Figure 2). The original one has since been exhibited within the monastery as an independent icon.



Figure 2. Voivode Neagoe Basarab praying to St. Niphon II, painting on the inside lid of the reliquary of St. Niphon, 1515, Dionysiou Monastery.



Figure 3. The reliquary of St. Niphon opened. Dionysiou Monastery.

The painted panel bears no inscription. The reliquary has a donation inscription, in Greek, engraved in metal on a narrow band bordering the lid, which survives only in part and was subsequently restored:

> "This venerable and holy coffin is that of the Most Holy Archbishop of Constantinople, *Kyr* (=Msgr.) Niphon of New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch, which was adorned and completed in Christ God by the most faithful and Christ-loving [lord Neagoe Basarab]. Here reposed the Patriarch in the venerable and holy monastery of the revered Forerunner and Baptist John. Here reposed the most-holy, honoured father and luminary [. . .] in the year 7023 (1514–1515)." (cf. Kalavrezou 2022, p. 246; see the original Greek inscription in Fousteris 2008, pp. 464–65; Liakos 2017, cat. 20).

The reliquary chest has the form of a longitudinal church with five domes (Figure 4). Although it suggests, through its domes, a cross-in-square church layout, its proportions evoke churches with long nartheka.[23] Surprisingly, the piece can be categorized not within a broader typology of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine reliquaries, but within those of liturgical containers, alongside artophoria (ἀρτοφόριον, container for the *prosphora*, the consecrated bread, or for the Eucharist), or censers in the shape of miniature architectures of precious metal.[24] However, unlike artophoria, whose function and symbolism are related to the Eucharist, this reliquary lacks a clearly marked altar apse.



Figure 4. The reliquary of St. Niphon II, view of the closed lid from above (after Kalavrezou 2022).

It would fall outside the scope of this article to develop an extensive discussion of the typology of reliquaries or artophoria in Byzantium. However, to trace the origins of this intriguing object, it is worth examining the symbolic features of existing pieces in architectural form and outlining a possible tradition linking relics with church-shaped containers. In the early centuries, such containers for the relics of saints took the form of *larnaka* (λάρναξ)—a type of enclosed coffin, box, or chest, shaped like a compact rectangular house or temple, with a gabled roof and sometimes acroteria.[25] These coffins in architectural forms had ancient antecedents and were employed in Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire as urns, or sarcophagi, for human remains. The West, however, preserved the ancient *larnax* form for reliquaries for a longer time than the East. Among such illustrious examples are the Gothic reliquary of St. Maurus (executed circa 1225–1230 for the Benedictine Abbey at Florennes, now in the castle of Bečov nad Teplou, Czech Republic) (Wickstrom 2022, pp. 33–69; Šumbera 2025), and the enameled reliquaries worked in Limoges (Gauthier 1950)—for instance, the famous "chasses" of St. Thomas Becket, the earliest of which was made ca. 1180–1190 (Caudron 2016). Alternatively, in Byzantium, aside from the *larnaka* for the larger relics, reliquaries were usually cassettes or coffin-like caskets made either of wood,[26] metal, or luxury ivory boxes.[27] Their iconography was not distinguishable from that of the artophoria (Elsner 2015, pp. 19–21), attesting to the long-standing connection between the tombs of the saints and the altars on which the Eucharist is celebrated (for the relation between relics and the Eucharist, see Snoek 1995; Betancourt 2024, pp. 218–19). Such cassettes were also related to the portable altars, which also held relics, and became part of the movable display of the treasure of the church (Hahn 2012, p. 193; Hahn 2017; Garrison and Gatti 2023, pp. 338–41). We can see such examples of sumptuous cassettes in the West, for instance, the luxurious reliquary of St. Servatius in the Quedlinburg Cathedral treasury (ninth-century ivory casket, with metal and gem additions in ca. 1200) (Garrison and Gatti 2023; Stead 2023, pp. 366–86). In Byzantium, such an example is a gilded silver reliquary casket from Trebizond, today at San Marco in Venice, initially dated by scholars to the fourteenth to fifteenth century (Buckton 1984, pp. 201–3) and reconsidered today as an eleventh-century piece commissioned in Constantinople, possibly by Emperor Basil II (r. 976–1025) or Patriarch John Xiphilinos (in office 1064–1075), and given as a present to the Monastery of St. Eugenios in Trebizond (Schäfer 2019).

Another Byzantine type of reliquary was documented only for St. Martyr Demetrius. It evoked the silver-plated hexagonal ciborium that once stood supposedly over the tomb of St. Demetrius in his basilica in Thessaloniki (Bakirtzis 2002, p. 177; Veneskey 2019, p. 22).[28] Such an example is a well-known silver reliquary in the form of St. Demetrius's ciborium, which dates from 1059 to 1067, from the Moscow Kremlin Museum (Grabar 1950; Hahn 2012, pp. 227–28; Veneskey 2019). By its very form, the reliquary connected the miraculous relics of St. Demetrius with Eucharistic symbolism, an idea developed from Early Christian liturgical practice. The ciborium over his presumed tomb, located in the naos, very likely evoked symbolically the the *oikistos*-martyrion of St. Demetrios, which had been built on the site where the martyr was buried and which had been demolished when the basilica was erected (Bakirtzis 2002, pp. 181–82; Bauer 2013). The Eucharistic symbolism of the tomb of St. Demetrius is alluded to in John Staurakios, the chartophylax of the Church of Thessalonike, in the second half of the thirteenth century. According to him, Demetrius's tomb, which was found at the time in a closed space on the north aisle, was called *kivotos* (κιβωτός), "ark" (Staurakios, *Miscellany of Miracles*, 353.8-10 apud Bakirtzis 2002, p. 182), which was also the usual synonym for the artophorion, the container for the Holy Communion.

Church-form containers used as artophoria, sometimes named "Holy Zion," "Jerusalem," or "ark" (*kivotos*), are attested in Byzantium and Byzantine-related areas, such as Antioch,

Armenia, or Kievan Rus', in the tenth to twelfth centuries. The tenth-century Armenian historian Thomas Artsruni speaks of such sacred objects, donations of King Gagik I (r. 904–937/943), as "notable and splendid vessels, which wonderfully show the Second Jerusalem and also the gate of Zion on high." (Thomas Artsruni, *History of the House of Artsrunik*, ch. 8, apud Angar 2017, p. 58). On the well-known church-shaped container dated to 969–970, originating in Antioch and found today in the Treasury of Aachen Cathedral (Figure 5; Grabar 1957; Saunders 1982; Angar 2017), the Psalms inscriptions that decorate it refer to the Ark, Zion, and the City of God (Angar 2017, p. 26).[29] From Kievan Rus' come the so-called "Small Zion," dated to eleventh–twelfth centuries (Byzantine or Russian) and "Large Zion," twelfth–thirteenth centuries (Russian), from the Treasury of the Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Novgorod (Angar 2017, p. 263, Figure 10). Their domed-rotunda form closely evokes that of the artophorion held by Saint Archdeacon Stephen in twelfth-century frescoes, such as the Nakipari church of St. George in Ipari, Georgia, in 1130 (Angar 2017, p. 278, Figure 27a). Another similar Russian example is the artophorion, or Zion, in the form of a central-plan rotunda church, dating from the twelfth century, preserved in the Armory Palace in the Kremlin (Lidov 2012, p. 7 and Figure 7). A bulbous dome in Russian style was added to it in the late fifteenth century. A twelfth-century eyewitness account speaks of three golden "Jerusalems" in the Bogolyubovo Church and the Assumption Cathedral in Vladimir, both churches built by Prince Andrey Bogolyubsky, knez of Vladimir-Suzdal (r. 1157–1174): "three Jerusalems, very magnificent, made of pure gold with precious stones; and in all their appearance and arrangement, they were like the Holy of Holies, the wonder of Solomon" (Dmitriev and Likhachev 1980, pp. 326–27).[30] Anthony of Novgorod's reference to a shiny "Jerusalem" that he saw in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and which created an atmosphere of the Heavenly Kingdom, has also been interpreted as an artophorion (Sterligova 2005; Angar 2017, p. 59). These rotunda-shaped objects represented more an idealized architectural form symbolizing the Heavenly Jerusalem, Zion, or the Church of the Heavenly Kingdom, rather than actual churches existing at the time. But, given that in Byzantium the line between the literal and the symbolic was often blurred, and that Byzantine artists did not reproduce their subjects in exact detail but rather through a few suggestive forms (see Krautheimer 1942, pp. 5–6), both interpretations appear to have been at play in these objects, and thus they could also have been seen as actual copies of churches from Jerusalem by their contemporaries.

However, the actual existence of reliquaries with a church-like form in Byzantium remains disputed. More recently, Mabi Angar suggested that such containers did exist in Byzantium, particularly for head relics (Angar 2017). However, the book, very rich in worthwhile conjectural discussions, ultimately succeeds only in demonstrating that in Byzantium, architectural-form vessels seemed perfectly plausible as containers for relics from a theological and ritual standpoint, especially for relics of martyr saints (Angar 2017, p. 63)—rather than proving that the Byzantines actually used such architectural containers as reliquaries.

Such small stone structures, shaped as miniature churches with a cross-in-square plan, originating from Asia Minor, Crimea, Georgia, Armenia and even Bulgaria (Figure 6), have been hypothesized as serving a reliquary function (Cuneo 1969, pp. 215–16; Kazaryan 2000; Stachowiak 2018, pp. 248–49; Klenina and Biernacki 2020, pp. 70–72; Biernacki et al. 2021). But various other functions have also been proposed: acroteria, gravestones, consecration stones, spring structures, canopies, icon niche tops, censers, bases of processional crosses, and communion bread stamps (Maranci 2009; Chitishvili 2021). The stone examples seem to reflect a regional feature of the Black Sea area and, more specifically, of the Eastern Byzantine frontiers—Georgia and Armenia—which possessed a developed tradition of stone architecture. The phenomenon was described as South-Caucasian (Ćurčić et al. 2010,

see cat. 3–7, pp. 162–71; Chitishvili 2021, p. 532). These pieces date to the ninth through the thirteenth centuries (Stachowiak 2018, p. 244). But overall, these micro-architectures do not appear to represent a widespread Byzantine practice. It has been claimed that the shape of many (lost) Byzantine reliquaries must have imitated actual churches of their time, perhaps the churches in which the relics of the respective saints were kept (Angar 2017, p. 49–50; Klenina and Biernacki 2020, p. 75). However, the Byzantine examples often cited to support this hypothesis—these stone specimens, the Moscow ciborium reliquary of St. Demetrius, and the two church-shaped pieces from Aachen and San Marco in Venice (Figures 5 and 7)—turn out to be either not reliquaries in their original function or exceptional in their own right. Laura Veneskey remarks that St. Demetrius' reliquary "may in fact be the only extant, purpose-made Byzantine reliquary to take the form of a monumental martyrium" (Veneskey 2019, p. 18). The case of St. Demetrius's cult has a number of peculiarities: the location of his original tomb and relics in the basilica in Thessaloniki was uncertain; his relics could not be moved; and an octagonal ciborium was constructed in the basilica crypt to accommodate the myrrh flow after this miracle became attested (ca. 1040),[31] through the pipes and cisterns that were initially used for collecting a water spring there (Bakirtzis 2002, pp. 184–86).[32] Despite its Early Christian ecclesial symbolism, in many respects, St. Demetrius's tomb remained famously unique. The ciborium that supposedly contained his tomb, imitated in the reliquaries, cannot, in my view, be considered an epitome of a more developed Byzantine phenomenon for which we have lost other examples.[33] The only two extant pieces traditionally presented as evidence for such claims—the artophorion from Antioch, now in Aachen and the late twelfth-century palace incense burner at San Marco in Venice (Trahoulia 2008)—were actually repurposed as reliquaries upon their arrival in the Western milieu.[34]



Figure 5. Middle Byzantine artophorion, Antioch, 969–970 AD, repurposed as a reliquary for the head of St. Anastasius the Persian. The Aachen Cathedral Treasury (Wikimedia Commons).

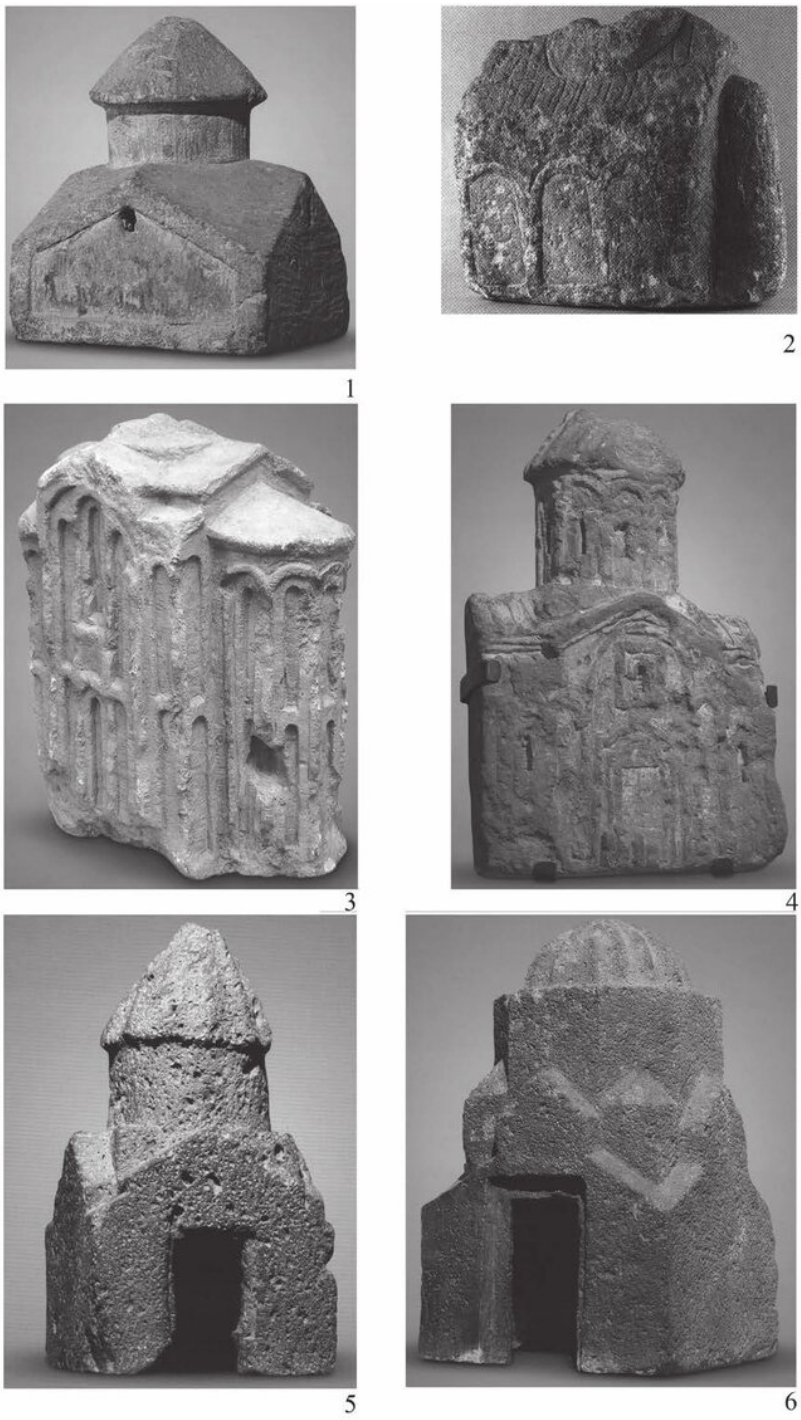


Figure 6. Stone church models: (**1**) Syunik (Armenia, 11th–13th centuries); (**2**) Červen on the Danube (Bulgaria, 12th century); (**3**) Eski-Kermen (Crimea, 12th–13th centuries); (**4**) Ani (Turkey, 11th–13th centuries); (**5**) Angeghakot (Armenia, 7th–8th centuries): (**6**) Spitakavor Monastery (bishopric Syunik, Armenia, 11th–13th centuries). After (Klenina and Biernacki 2020, Figure 6.1).

What seems to be an early twelfth-century hanging reliquary in the form of a three-dome building, among *larnaka* reliquaries and crystal ones, depicted in Thiofrid of Echternach's *Flores epytaphii sanctorum* frontispiece, Ms Memb. 170, fols. 98-v-99r (Ferrari 2005; Hahn 2012, pp. 24–26), ca. 1100, and redrawn as a three-pointed pyramidal-roofed church in ms. from Stadtbibliothek Trier, Hs 1378/103, fol. 88r (Angar 2017, pp. 273–74, Figures 22 and 23) may be a reliquary, a lamp, or even a censer, in the shape of a multi-towered church rather than a Byzantine imported reliquary. It evokes more likely an

object of Western manufacture, comparable to the well-known domed reliquary from Cologne, from the Guelph Treasure, dating from 1175 to 1200 (Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin) (Pape 1998), the similar late twelfth-century Eltenberg Reliquary (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) and, for the case of the pyramidal roofs, to the Darmstadt tower reliquary, Cologne, ca. 1190–1210 (Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt) (Kahsnitz 2018), and even the Hildesheim head reliquary of St. Oswald (c. 1185–1189) (Barnet and Brandt 2013, p. 88).



Figure 7. Byzantine Komnenian palace incense burner, second half of the twelfth century, repurposed as a reliquary for the Holy Blood. Treasury of San Marco, Venice (after Buckton 1984).

The transition from the *larnax* to the church-form reliquary in the West during the Carolingian period was not a difficult one, given the similarity of spatial structure and the Eucharistic symbolism associated with relics. Reliquaries in church-shape are attested in the West by the late ninth century. Emperor Charles the Fat (r. 880–887) donated to Aachen a "shrine of solid gold made in the shape of a chapel, royally studded with gems and filled with the greatest relics, the like of which we had never seen" (Ekkehard, *Casus Sancti Galli*, ch. 10, apud Smith 2010, p. 81), although the chronicler himself evokes it as a rather exceptional piece. Liturgical and other church objects in architectural forms became feasible with the development of more complex openwork cast in metal using the lost-wax technique by the early twelfth century in Germany, Italy, England, and also Byzantium. This is attested by the Gozbert censer from Trier, ca. 1100 (Westermann-Angerhausen 2008); the intricate Gloucester candlestick (1104–1113) (Harris 1964; Borg 1985); and in Byzantium by the San Marco censer, dated to the time of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143–1180). They are preceded by the refinement of metal-cast techniques at Hildesheim, with the outstanding bronze-cast works under bishops Berward (993–1022), Azelin (1044–1054), and Hezilo (1054–1079) (Barnet and Brandt 2013; Weinryb 2016, 2018). The chandeliers that bishops Azelin and Hezilo donated to the cathedral display architectural edicules in openwork; they were copied in the chandelier at Comburg (commissioned by Hartwig, abbot of the Comburg Monastery, around 1130–1140) (Prinz 2019), and the Barbarossa chandelier in Aachen (1165–1170) (Lepie and Schmitt 1998). The "Zions" in architectural form within the Byzantine realm made their appearance at exactly the same time as their Western counterparts—emerging in the tenth century and reaching their peak in the twelfth.

Thus, metalwork shaped in architectural forms became a common fashion in both the West and Byzantium from the late Romanesque to the early Gothic periods, and during the

Komnenian epoch, respectively (1081–1185). However, while Western medieval censers (Gousset 1982), lamps, reliquaries, and tabernacles, or the so-called sacrament houses (Timmermann 2009) adopt forms of churches—such as the twelfth- and thirteenth-century pieces from Cologne (Drake Boehm 2011), or the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century French reliquaries in Aachen/Aix-la-Chapelle fashioned as Gothic churches (Grimme 1957), up to the 1438–1445 processional reliquary of St. John the Baptist in Genoa, cast in the form of a heavily decorated Gothic cathedral (Di Fabio 2020)—the Komnenian palace censer piece from San Marco (Figure 7) indicates that Byzantine artisans from the capital have evolved close to both Oriental proto-Islamic metalwork (Persian, Syrian) (Grabar 1951, pp. 50–53; Buckton 1984, p. 243) and the Romanesque ones.

Unfortunately, not many examples of metalwork objects survive from the Palaiologan period. This absence is not merely a matter of scarce preservation, although the Ottoman loot of Constantinople and Thessaloniki left the church treasures in Hagia Sophia, Holy Apostles, and other large churches stripped, with precious liturgical objects melted down to extract gold and silver. Rather, it appears that the Byzantine Empire, disrupted by half a century of Crusader occupation (1204–1267), no longer maintained a high-quality tradition of casting complex metalwork, not even after its restoration under the Palaiologoi. Thessaloniki no longer produced its famous reliquaries of St. Demetrius, as in the previous ages (Loverdou-Tsigarida 2003, p. 246). Monumental bronze doors—which had been a hallmark of Middle Byzantine material culture—are also lacking from this period in Byzantium (see Negrău 2024). This is reflected in the coarse quality of the bronze door panels from this period preserved at the Vatopedi katholikon—panels originally crafted for a larger doorway, identified, according to tradition, as that of Hagia Sophia in Thessaloniki (Loverdou-Tsigarida 2003, pp. 51–52). Constantinople also decreased, by this time, its metalwork production, both in quantity and quality (Liakos 2026, pp. 67–68).

Palaiologan masters adopted and used extensively the *opus venetum* technique—an intricate and delicate form of filigree decoration used for small openwork pieces, developed and employed by Venetian jewelers and metalworkers during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Liakos 2026, p. 62). Enamel and champlevé,[35] which had been a hallmark of Byzantine metalwork for centuries, however, reduced its frequency and quality compared to the outstanding creations of the Middle Byzantine and Komnenian periods (Hetherington 2019).[36] It appears that Gothic-influenced silversmithing works entered Southeastern Europe with the Crusader occupation and through the Frankish and Venetian-dominated lands (Kontogiannis and Orfanou 2019). The first and most immediate form of reception is represented by objects of Western manufacture, adopted mostly unchanged for use in the Orthodox liturgy. In the next stage, mostly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Western ornaments, motifs, and goldsmithing techniques were adopted in producing local goldsmiths' works; while the first post-Byzantine decades reveal a fusion of design elements from all three cultures: Byzantine, Latin-Gothic, and Turkish-Ottoman (Kempkens 2019). One may note the increasingly widespread Islamic floral repertoire by the late fifteenth century—a trend also evident in the Dionysiou reliquary.

4. Typology and Function of Niphon's Reliquary

Like church-form censers and some of the Post-Byzantine artophoria, the Dionysiou reliquary is an openwork piece, designed to contain a second, wood container inside. The metal base part of the reliquary is made from three rows of gilded silver plaques mounted in decorated frames. (Figure 8) The first row of panels, crafted from openwork plaques cast in molds, mimics Gothic church windows; however, their arches are circular rather than ogival, and their decoration is a heterogeneous amalgam. Their lower, geminate frames are Gothic, with flamboyant spiral rosettes. Their large rosettes are composed of a lattice of

interlaced tendrils characteristic of Turk-Islamic *rumi* ornament.[37] The geometric interlaces of the windows' frames are inspired by Balkan weaving motifs, which were common in the décor of Serbian Morava architecture and were also adopted in Wallachian monuments, in miniatures and wood sculpture. The bouquets of three leaves and a central flower in the corners are characteristic of fifteenth-century Venetian and Cretan wooden frame sculpture.



Figure 8. The reliquary of St. Niphon, with the portrait of Patriarch Niphon, second row, second from the left (after Kalavrezou 2022).

The next two rows consist of plaques worked in niello[38] and champlevé, engraved with depictions of saints, originally covered with colored enamel. On the short sides, there are eight figures of apostles, in two rows: Peter, Paul, Simon, Andrew, James, Bartholomew, Thomas, Philip; and eight hierarchs and anchorites on the opposite side, among whom is included Niphon II: Spyridon of Trimythous, Cyril of Jerusalem, Onuphrius, Athanasius of Alexandria (twice), Nicholas of Myra, Niphon II of Constantinople, and Euthymius the Great. The erroneous repetition of St. Athanasius of Alexandria accounts for the probable involvement of multiple silversmiths who executed the individual pieces independently. Such inconsistencies arising from poorly coordinated workmanship among several artisans working on the same object are also observable in the revetment of an icon of St. Athanasius the Athonite, donated by Vladislav Vlaicu, Voivode of Wallachia, to the Great Lavra in 1372–1377.[39] On the long sides, there are mid-figures of saints: a Deësis with Christ between the Theotokos with Saint John the Baptist and the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, set against backgrounds decorated with carnations in full bloom and trifoliate leaves. Beneath them are saints who are hymnographers and liturgists: Kosmas the Melode, John of Damascus, Joseph the Hymnographer, John Chrysostom, and Basil the Great. On the opposite long side, there are martyrs: George, Demetrius, Stephen the Archdeacon, Artemius, Menas, Theodore Stratelates, Theodore Tyro, Mercurius, Procopius, Nestor, Nicetas, Eustathius Plachidas, Panteleimon the Unmercenary, Eleazar the teacher of the

Maccabees, accompanied by Saints Emperors Constantine and Helena. All these panels were originally colored with enamel, which has been lost over time. From a photograph from 1902 that shows the enamel coloration still visible to a great extent (Figure 9), it appears that most of the enamel has been lost during the last century. What is still visible today are only traces of the blue background of the panels, whereas the figures were originally completely colored in enamel. The golden inscription also had a blue enamel background, of which parts are still preserved, making it a sumptuous ornament that borders the edifice like an architectural frieze (see Figures 1 and 8).

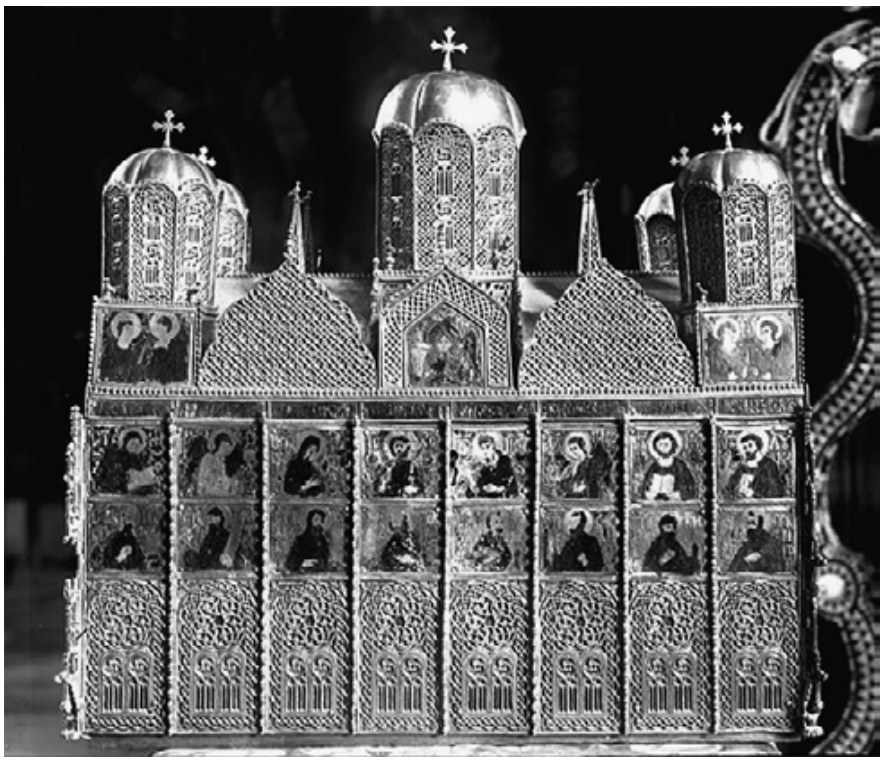


Figure 9. The reliquary of St. Niphon, photograph from Nikolay P. Kondakov, *Pamjatniki histianskogo iskusstvo na Afone*, St. Petersburg, 1902, Figure 85 (after Kalavrezou 2022).

The lid has a central longitudinal cross form with a two-pitched roof, with a decoration that imitates wooden roof tiles (see Figure 4). It is intersected by four transversal vault-like structures and, in the center and at the corners, by five domes of Palaiologan-style proportions, covered with pumpkin-shaped calottes and having bifora windows. They rest on cubic bases bearing the twelve Prophets. On the side tympana, there are depictions of Seraphim and Cherubim shining forth on a deep, jewel-like blue enamel background. The polylobed frontons on the long facades, forming a lattice of geometric weavings, are made of plaques cast from molds. Their geometric entrelacs are typical of Balkan wood sculpture and miniature decor, but here they are unusually encased in accolade forms of polylobed half-medallions in Islamic-style, thus forming a peculiar visual intermingling of both traditions. The faces of the domes, also open-work pieces cast from molds, repeat, at a reduced scale, the motif of the Gothic windows below, with spiraled flamboyant rosettes of Ottoman *rumi* arabesques.

The roof also features four Gothic pinnacles, each topped by a small bird. These types of pinnacles with birds, or domes having a bird on top of their cross, are conspicuously found in all the Wallachian and Transylvanian artophoria of the period, such as the pieces from Bistriţa (Wallachian, ca. 1492–1507; Figure 10), St. Catherine on Mount Sinai (Wallachian?, 1539–1545; Figure 11), Šišatovac (Transylvanian, 1551; Figure 12). The

earliest preserved pieces in architectural forms from the Post-Byzantine period are Wallachian products of the rapidly adopted models from the Central European and Italian Gothic workshops that used openwork and metal casting in church-form containers.[40] Wallachia was influenced by Transylvanian silversmithing (Nicolescu 1968). The origin of this bird decoration in Wallachian artophoria is intricate. Such metal doves (peristerium), displayed hanging above the altar tables, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, date back to the Early Christian centuries and were in use in Byzantium in the ninth century (*Vita Sancti Basilii*, in *PL* 73, col. 301b–c, apud Paolicchi 2021b, p. 330). Persian bird-shaped incense burners or vessels are attested from the eighth to the twelfth century. Medieval examples of dove-form pieces, serving as artophoria, are preserved mostly in the West (the Limoges ones; Gauthier 1973), with one atypical presence from the thirteenth century in the Balkans (Ohrid) (Paolicchi 2021b). The bird motif on artophoria appeared in the Wallachian Principality by 1500. It was reiterated in the sixteenth-century Wallachian and Transylvanian examples of Sinai and Sišatovac, and then in the artophoria from Cotroceni Monastery in Bucharest, 1685—see Figure 18; Hurezi Monastery in Romania, 1691–1692; Ravanica in Serbia, 1705; Bačkovo in Bulgaria, nineteenth century; Nicolescu 1968, cat. 200–202; Radojković 1979; Paolicchi 2014, pp. 14, 21, 56).



Figure 10. Artophorion of Bistriţa Monastery, Wallachia, ca. 1492–1507, donated by the ktetors, the Craiovescu brothers, relatives of Neagoe Basarab. (photo: The National Museum of Art in Romania, Bucharest).



Figure 11. Artophorion donated by two Wallachian grand boyars at St. Catherine on Mount Sinai (1539–45) (after Manafis 1990).

The continuity between the dove motif in Early Christian artophoria and in the early Post-Byzantine period remains an open issue. It is not out of the question that the motif had some cultural resurgence in relation to Ottoman Islamic culture and its bird pavilions and other anthropo-avian settings (Gruber 2021). By that later time, the dove representations on artophoria seemed to have carried a different symbolism than that of the Holy Spirit. The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the Messianic cedar in whose branches the birds dwell (Ezekiel 17:22–23), prefiguring the Kingdom of Heaven. Likewise, in the Gospel, the mustard seed grows through faith and becomes a tree in which the birds of the heavens find their rest (Matthew 13:31–32; cf. Mark 4:31–32; Luke 13:18–19). In the same way, the House of the Lord—the Temple at Jerusalem—is described in Psalm 84:3 (Psalm 83:3–4 in

the Septuagint/Vulgate numbering) as a house in which the bird finds its home and the turtledove its nest.



Figure 12. Master Dmitar of Lipova (Arad County, Transylvania), reliquary of Sišatovac, donation of monks Theophil and Ilarion, 1550–1551. Museum of Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade (after Paolicchi 2024).

Although it is well documented that Voivode Neagoe Basarab was a keen admirer of Gothic architecture and Gothic metalwork, as evidenced by his correspondence with Transylvanian Saxon goldsmiths, in which he asked specifically for metal pieces evoking Transylvanian Gothic architecture (Paolicchi 2021a), in the case of Niphon's reliquary nonetheless, what apparently inspired Neagoe were not Gothic church-shaped reliquaries per se. Rather, the piece appears to consciously imitate an artophorion, in the form currently used in Wallachia and the Balkan region at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

The origin of the craftsmen who wrought the Dionysiou shrine was highly debated, with a Transylvanian workshop being suggested, in particular from the town of Sibiu (Iorga 1933, p. 27). Scholars have also proposed that Bulgarian craftsmen settled in Târgoviște executed it (Paolicchi 2014, pp. 37–38), or, more broadly, that it was manufactured in Wallachia (Cândea 2011, cat. 828, p. 433; Liakos 2018, p. 433; Kalavrezou 2022, p. 248), although none has adduced detailed arguments in support of this attribution.

Romanian art historians have consistently hesitated to include this object among the pieces produced in Wallachia in the early 1500s. I maintain that the object was crafted in Wallachia under the specific instructions of Voivode Neagoe. I base my assumption on its close resemblance in stylistic and decorative details to a Wallachian panagiarion donated by Neagoe to the Vatopedi Monastery in 1510 (Figure 13), before becoming voivode, when he held the rank of great *comis* (comes, steward)—a work produced by Wallachian craftsmen (Liakos 2018, p. 433, who also compares it with the Dionysiou reliquary and an engolpion donated by Neagoe at Vatopedi; cf. Oikonomaki-Papadopoulou et al. 2000, no. 66, pp. 174–76). The carnations and trifoliate leaves colored in green enamel, the Virgin's maphorion decorated all over with stars, and the checkered stylization of the feathers on the archangels' and seraphs' wings are identical on the Vatopedi panagiarion and the Dionysiou reliquary (Figure 14), suggesting a shared workshop or environment that used the same working techniques in niello and enamel and the same decorative repertoire for the pieces. The elegant, elongated font of the letters in the inscriptions on the Dionysiou piece is characteristic of the Slavic calligraphy used in Wallachia in the sixteenth century. It was used even in the Greek donor inscription of the reliquary (instead of a standard Greek uncial; see Figure 14), which is written with orthographical errors typical of someone with some knowledge of Greek learned mostly orally (Kalavrezou 2022, p. 246). The rest of the inscriptions on the figurative panels are in Slavonic. The reliquary was made during the months when Metropolitan Neophytos of Anchialos—who had come with the Wallachian envoy and the relics from Dionysiou —was waiting in Wallachia; once finished, he brought the reliquary to Dionysiou, according to the *vitae*.



Figure 13. Panagiarion donated by Neagoe to the Vatopedi Monastery, 1510 (after Liakos 2021).

A contemporary parallel to the reliquary is the artophorion from the Bistrița Monastery in Wallachia, donated sometime between 1492 and 1507 by the *ktetors* of the monastery—Neagoe's father and his uncles, the Craiovescu brothers (see Figure 10). This piece is the earliest Post-Byzantine artophorion preserved from Southeastern Europe and is stylistically similar with two incense burners (*katsion*), one for Bistriţa and one for Tismana monasteries, both donated by the Craiovescu boyars (Nicolescu 1968, cat. 197, 243, 244). All pieces seem to be produced by the same workshop (Figure 15). The church-shaped artophorion and the incense burners incorporate Gothic architectural motifs, yet their engraved panels depicting figures of saints bear a striking resemblance to those of the Dionysiou reliquary, as does he form of the artophorion itself—a Greek-cross plan with five domes, each surmounted

by small doves and Gothic pinnacles. A silversmith's Slavonic letter mark on the Bistrița artophorion indicates that the craftsman used the Slavonic language,[41] suggesting that the workshop responsible for the Bistrița pieces was not necessarily Transylvanian Saxon, despite the Gothic details.[42] While the workshop that produced the Bistrița objects does not appear to be the same as the one that executed Niphon's reliquary, their shared artistic vision and use of Gothic elements point toward a common environment.



Figure 14. Detail from the reliquary of St. Niphon, showing the niello and enamel details of the Deësis group.



Figure 15. Incense burner, 1508–1512, Wallachia, donated to Tismana Monastery, by the Craiovescu boyars, relatives of Neagoe. (photo: The National Museum of Art in Romania, Bucharest).

A third piece exhibiting all of the aforementioned characteristics is a slightly later work: an artophorion donated between 1539 and 1545 to the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai by two Wallachian grand boyars—the Great *Comis* Badea Zălbău and the Great *Dvornik* Coadă, together with his sons (see Figure 11). This piece is made of gilded silver, though the quality of its execution is inferior to that of the Bistrița artophorion and the reliquary of Saint Niphon. It has again the form of a cross-in-square church with five domes executed in openwork, whose crosses are topped by birds, and a gable roof decorated with a motif imitating wooden shingles, as in the Bistrița and the Dionysiou pieces. The piece shares many traits with the artophoria commissioned by Wallachian patrons in the first half of the sixteenth century and is of the same type as the Šišatovac artophorion, produced in Transylvania (Lipova). The dedicatory inscription runs below

the domes, bordering the architectural forms like a frieze, in a manner similar to that of the Dionysiou reliquary. The figurative decoration of the piece includes half-length figures of saints that differ from the Bistrița artophorion and Saint Niphon's reliquary solely in their working technique: the Sinai object employs bas-relief, like the Transylvanian one from Sišatovac, whereas the others use metal engraving. However, the design conception, overall iconography, and the selection of decorative elements point to a common environment shared by their workshops (Manafis 1990, pp. 268–69).

5. *Sacerdotium* Expressed in the Reliquary Form of St. Niphon

As I have argued, the choice of the ambitious katholikon-church form for the Dionysiou reliquary is uncommon in the Byzantine cult of relics. Such a form is more typical of artophoria, which were vertical containers. The reliquary box, placed horizontally, needed to remain open for the majority of the time in order to expose the interior relics (partially covered by metal cladding or by a cloth) for veneration by touching and kissing, which would have made such a top-heavy lid impractical. While the West replaced the practice of touching the relics themselves with that of touching the reliquary or seeing the relics through upright containers of clear crystal (ostensoria), following the looting of Byzantine relics in the Fourth Crusade and their wide trade on the market, which prompted the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) to expressly forbid laypeople from touching relics directly (see Hahn 2012, pp. 24, 230, 233; Pentcheva 2012, p. 69), in Byzantium, touching the relics remained permitted and desirable over the centuries (Hahn 2012, pp. 225, 230). Whereas in the West the sense of sight became increasingly dominant in the veneration of saints, enhancing the importance of the visual qualities of reliquaries, in Byzantium the sense of touch was understood as what offered direct contact with the divine energy infused in the relic. This led Cynthia Hahn to conclude that "ultimately, it was above all the Byzantine access to relics and the imposing ceremonies of veneration on feast days, rather than relic containers" that shaped the Eastern cult tradition (Hahn 2012, p. 22).

In the case of the Dionysiou reliquary, keeping it perpetually open would have rendered the elaborate church-shaped lid invisible (see Figure 3). Moreover, the lid's largeness and heaviness (increased by the votive panel inside it) would have made the entire object fragile to keep open for long periods. It seems that, considering its form, for most of the time, the reliquary was not kept open for regular veneration. Instead, it was stored in the church's sanctuary as a treasure, and it was probably occasionally opened in church or carried in processions only on certain feast days. But even when the reliquary was displayed closed, it still presented an unconventional and even confusing solution, given its form identical to an artophorion. This is why I contend that such an impractical and functionally questionable design must have had a serious reason for being chosen—namely, its highly symbolic value.

While the Dionysiou reliquary's concept derives from the types of artophoria employed in Wallachia around 1500, its stylistic appearance finds parallels in Wallachian church architecture from the same period. Much of this container's decoration, including the interlaces on its domes and tympana, draws from contemporaneous Wallachian architectural sculpture and manuscript or print decoration. These interlaces correspond to the sculptures adorning the façades of Dealu Monastery (1501–1502) and, above all, the monastery church at Curtea de Argeș (see Moldovan 2019; Moldovan 2026, pp. 219–30).

Voivode Neagoe Basarab built his necropolis monastery at Curtea de Argeș between 1512 and 1517 on the site that originally housed the country's Metropolitan cathedral. Advised by Patriarch Niphon, Neagoe moved the Metropolitan see from Curtea de Argeș to Târgoviște—the main capital of the country—where he finished in 1520 a new katholikon: a great church with a cross-in-square plan and eight domes (Moisescu 1974; Figure 16).

Another, mixed triconch and cross-in-square church with tall domes in Wallachia is the Snagov Monastery, rebuilt by the voivode in 1517–1519. Both latter churches were rather unusual choices for the Wallachian architectural tradition, which massively favored the triconch plan[43] rather than the cross-in-square one. For Neagoe, this choice seems to have been a statement and a homage paid to the Byzantine architecture of the capital of the Byzantine Empire and Mount Athos, and revealed a preference for Palaiologan models that he also manifested on other occasions.[44]



Figure 16. The Metropolitan Cathedral of Curtea de Argeş, 1518–1520. A fantasy drawing by Carol Popp de Szathmáry, 1859 (photo: Romanian Academy Library).

At Curtea de Argeș, however, Neagoe designed an original monastery church for himself to serve as his mausoleum (Figure 17). Its decoration is markedly eclectic: multiple Byzantine interlaces originating from manuscript decoration and wood sculpture; open-work rosettes developed from Serbian models that had been adopted in Wallachian architecture in the late fourteenth century; Ottoman sculptural motifs with lilies, tulips, *saz* leaves,[45] *rumi* patterns, and hatāyī flowers[46] that had entered Islamic repertoire; a segmented Ottoman portal with friezes of Islamic lilies and stalactites; and a color treatment of sculpture in blue, turquoise, and ochre that recalls Timurid monumental ceramics from Central Asia (Moldovan 2019; Negrău and Sullivan 2019a).

The connection of the Monastery church at Curtea de Argeş with the Dionysiou reliquary is not merely stylistic. The golden birds perched on the pinnacles of the reliquary correspond to similar bronze birds originally mounted on the façades of the monastery church. The existing ones are replacements from the monument's restoration at the end of the nineteenth century (Figure 18), but Deacon Paul of Aleppo's 1657 description of the church confirms that these birds originally adorned the façades and carried small bells suspended from their spread wings, which sang in the wind (Feodorov 2014, p. 327). The bird motif had been introduced at the time in the décor of the Wallachian artophorion of Bistrița, commissioned by the relatives of Neagoe. In these cases, birds found on architectural shapes seem to be drawn from Psalm 84:3/83:3–4: "How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts [. . .]. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young—even your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God" (Negrău and Sullivan 2019a). In 1515, when Niphon's reliquary was

being executed, the decoration of the church at Curtea de Argeș was most likely not yet finalized, since the consecration of the church took place later in 1517. This may indicate that the bronze birds on the church façades of the Curtea de Argeş church were inspired by the decoration of the artophoria and the reliquary, and not the other way around. But in all such cases, the overall concept seems to be related to an early sixteenth-century Wallachian environment linked to the commissions of Neagoe and his family.

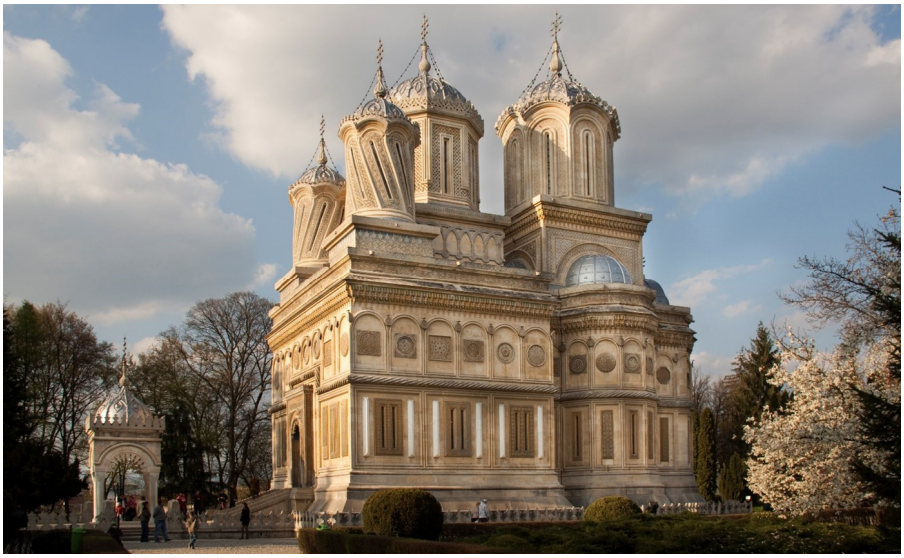


Figure 17. Curtea de Argeş former Monastery, 1512–17 (Wikimedia Commons).



Figure 18. Curtea de Argeş. Mixed sculptures on the façades and the bronze birds on the stone disks, replacing the original ones (photo: Andrei Dumitrescu).

In these works patronized by Neagoe Basarab, we can see an integrated concept concerning the container/space of the sacred, encompassing artophoria, church architecture, and reliquaries. In the case of the Curtea de Argeș Church and the Dionysiou reliquary, they seem to form almost a set, sharing the same concept, the same symbolic forms, and corresponding meanings. I believe that this set of similar containers, in which only the scale and primary function differ, once included another object. Very probably, the Curtea de Argeș Monastery received on that occasion an object almost identical to Niphon's reliquary box, intended for use as an artophorion for the church. An artophorion from 1685 in Bucharest, made by Voivode Șerban Cantacuzino (r. 1678–1688)—the restorer of

Curtea de Argeș Monastery in 1682—displays a similar design to the Dionysiou reliquary (Figure 19), except for some decorative details reworked in the Baroque style of the late seventeenth century and saints' figures replaced with Great Feasts. Even the donation inscription is similarly conceived as an architectural frieze bordering the object and written on blue enamel, as in the Dionysiou piece. Such a degree of resemblance would not have been possible without the silversmiths knowing the object at Dionysiou or having it at hand—a probability that seems unlikely. But it could have been very possible if a closely resembling object had existed in Wallachia at the time. One such candidate may have been an artophorion for Curtea de Argeș Monastery, probably made together with the reliquary box for Dionysiou by the same workshop, and seen by Șerban Cantacuzino during the restoration works of 1682. Unfortunately, none of the Argeş monastery's liturgical silverworks have been preserved. We know that such precious objects existed because they are mentioned in one of the dedicatory inscriptions on the façade of Neagoe's foundation.[47] These pieces should have formed a sumptuous set, designed to complete the endowment of this voivodal foundation, which had been richly gifted by Neagoe with precious icons in gilded cladding and with lavish embroideries.



Figure 19. The artophorion of Cotroceni Monastery, donated by Prince Şerban Cantacuzino, 1685 (photo: The National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest).

The Curtea de Argeș Monastery was the product of an eclectic environment of collaboration among artisans of different backgrounds, in which a share of influence was exerted by Neagoe himself. His direct involvement in construction, as well as the mixed composition of the team of workers—with their diverse backgrounds and religious faiths—is recorded in the dedicatory inscriptions of the church.[48] The presence of Ottoman workers is nearly certain, given that the technical proficiency of the Argeș stone-cutting and sculpting surpassed the capabilities of local or Balkan workshops at the time. In the case of the Dionysiou reliquary, we encounter the same conceptual framework of interweaving motifs drawn from different cultural areas. The background of the silversmiths remains uncertain as to whether the workshop was multiethnic. What is certain, however, is that it used a multicultural approach comparable to that of the designers of the Curtea de Argeș Monastery. Moreover, Neagoe's approach of creating architectural structures to house relics was not limited to the Dionisiou reliquary. The *Life of St. Niphon* mentions that "in the

monastery of Oreškovica (in Serbia), where the relics of St. Gregory the Miracle-Worker (of Sinai) are kept, he (Neagoe) [. . .] made a beautiful stone edicule for the throne with the relics and adorned it with paintings and gilded it" (Simedrea 1937, p. 25).[49]

The interior murals of the Curtea de Argeş Monastery church—now lost after a late nineteenth-century restoration but documented beforehand (Reissenberger [1860] 1867)—constituted an iconographic program rivaling that of a Metropolitan katholikon (cathedral), centered on grand sacerdotal themes such as the Celestial Liturgy, Christ Emperor and High Priest, the Synaxis of the Apostles, and the Seven Ecumenical Councils. The hagiographical chronicle text of the *Life of St. Niphon* compared the Curtea de Argeș Church to the Temple of Solomon and to Hagia Sophia of Emperor Justinian, yet judged its beauty to surpass theirs (Simedrea 1937, pp. 27–28). He stressed its imposing Metropolitan katholikon-like aspect and symbolism, which is unusual for a monastery. This same symbolism appears materialized in the reliquary of Dionysiou. The piece's iconography links the Old Testament Tabernacle of Testimony and the Temple—represented through their clerical figures of Aaron and Zechariah—with the katholikon church of the New Testament through apostles and holy hierarchs, among whom stands the image of Saint Patriarch Niphon II, as their worthy successor in an unbroken sacerdotal lineage. In this sense, it recalls through its theological message the "Zion," or "Jerusalem," symbolism of artophoria.

During the consecration ceremony of the Curtea de Argeș Church, the chronicle text notes that Neagoe installed twelve two-faced icons in the narthex, depicting saints and martyrs on one side and holy monks and hierarchs on the other (Simedrea 1937, p. 29; cf. Feodorov 2014, p. 328). Among them was an icon of Saint Niphon, all gilded and richly decorated. Most of these icons are now lost, including the Niphon icon, but the selection of icons and their original arrangement inside the church, as described by old sources prior to the modern restorations, corresponds to the categories of saints painted on the enameled plaques of the reliquary. In a similar manner, the figure of Saint Niphon appears there among holy hierarchs and ascetics.

I conclude this section by recalling the vision that Neagoe had during the vigil for the remission of the sins of the deceased voivode Radu. In it, Niphon appears as the holy priest who binds and loosens sins (cf. Matthew 18:18), the administrator of the divine liturgical mysteries, and a miracle-worker. Performing a baptismal-like rite, Saint Niphon cleansed Radu of his sins and made his soul luminous and pure, thus demonstrating the great sacerdotal power of a hierarch, given by God, in absolving souls of their sins and saving them from eternal damnation. The holy remains of such a saintly hierarch merited, in Neagoe's view, being placed in a precious container whose form would convey Niphon's distinct pastoral quality. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople remained, at the time, the sole ecclesiastical leader of the former Byzantine Church after the abolition of the Bulgarian Patriarchate of Tărnovo (1393) and the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć (1463) under Ottoman rule.

6. *Imperium* and *Oikoumene* in Material Form

The distinctive character of both creations—the Curtea de Argeș Monastery and the Dionysiou reliquary—is characterized by a mixed fusion of Byzantine, Gothic, and Islamic elements. These multicultural visual sources mirrored the condition of the Ecumenical Patriarchate under Ottoman rule and also the voivode's own ambitions at the time. The Byzantine idiom of the reliquary responds to liturgical requirements and to particular theological ideas concerning the sacred matter infused with divine energy that it contains, as well as to a broader reappropriation of the ecclesiastical past. Its Ottoman features reflect the new imperial standard: the sultan, now *Kayser-i Rûm*, sets the visual tone, and emulation of his court constitutes the contemporary language of power and wealth. The

Gothic elements were most likely introduced by the goldsmiths themselves as a mark of refined craftsmanship and material preciousness, without any specific religious or confessional connotation. Neagoe placed his own portrait, dressed in a sumptuous *granatsa*, an Oriental robe also adopted in the Byzantine court, alongside that of Patriarch Niphon in prayer on the interior of the lid, so it would always be visible when the reliquary is open for veneration. With its lid closed, the object testified to the *sacerdotium* through its church-shaped, artophorion-like form. When open, it also addressed the *imperium* and the *oikoumene*, as the votive panel offered a visual "commentary" on the power figures connected to the reliquary.

Although it is hotly debated to what extent the imperial idea actually functioned in the politics of the Wallachian and Moldavian principalities in the Middle Ages (Năstase 1981; Andreescu 2019), I believe the key to understanding these rulers' claims to imperial attributes is theological. Neagoe's diminished territory, as ruler of a smaller state, did not prevent him from acting as a representative of the *imperium*, especially since no Christian emperor or Balkan kingdom remained to protect the Orthodox *oikoumene*. It is worth recalling here that Neagoe, during the consecration service of the Monastery at Curtea de Argeș—where Saint Niphon was also canonized—insisted on personally installing the holy icons in the church with his own hands (Simedrea 1937, p. 29). These included the revered icon of the Mother of God Eleousa and that of Christ the Stabbed, both originating in Constantinople, together with the icon of Saint Patriarch Niphon commissioned by him on this occasion. All were sumptuously adorned. The performative, even tactile, dimension of Neagoe's involvement in the church's consecration and Niphon's canonization goes beyond his duty as a donor who merely provided the financial means for these pieces. In this sense, Neagoe participated in the consecration rituals as if seeking to enter physically into their material reality and to imbue his ephemeral body and transient life ever more fully with the permanent grace of these God-given ruling powers.

At the same time, such a piece assured the recognition of Niphon's authority in the Church, which had been contested by the Ottoman power and trampled by Voivode Radu, and that Neagoe now restored in the name of the Wallachian state. This was also meant to undo the erroneous violation of ecclesiastical authority that Radu had perpetrated, which, in Protos Gabriel's words, had aroused God's wrath and brought dire consequences upon Wallachia (Simedrea 1937, pp. 14–19).[50] Neagoe's devout and reverent gesture of donating such a symbolically charged reliquary thus served a dual purpose: on one hand, to reconcile Wallachia with Mount Athos and the Church of Constantinople by recognizing Niphon's authority as patriarch; on the other, to proclaim the patriarch's personal sanctity and associate it with Voivode Neagoe as his spiritual son. The object's iconographic articulation of spiritual filiation and intercession was also intended to secure the intercessory prayers of the saint and the monastic community of Dionysiou for the donor and for Wallachia.

Saint Niphon II was not the first Post-Byzantine ecumenical patriarch to be canonized, but he was certainly the first to have an international cult that enjoyed the patronage of a political figure. Nevertheless, his cult remained limited to almost exclusively Athonite and Wallachian monastic environments. Briefly, his cult also transgressed the borders of Wallachia into nearby Moldavia, with Niphon II being portrayed in the 1547 outer frescoes of the Voroneț Monastery under Moldavian Metropolitan Grigorie Roşca (in office 1546–1551), on the south-western buttress flanking the entrance, joining the Metropolitan Grigorie's portrait, represented alongside two Moldavian saints, Daniel the Hermit of Putna and John the New of Suceava. By contrast, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, left without the financial, political, and monastic support of the former Byzantine capital, no longer had the resources or leverage to develop an international cult of its canonized patriarchs. We do not know how—or if—his cult was observed at the Ecumenical Patriarchate in

Constantinople. At Dionysiou, it underwent various transformations and was tailored to the monastic needs of the community there. In Wallachia, after Neagoe's death, the cult of Niphon declined and was almost forgotten in the following centuries. It would not be revitalized—neither on Mount Athos nor in Wallachia—until the liturgical reforms and hagiographic syntheses conceived by the hieromonk Nicodemos the Hagiorite (1749–1809) at Dionysiou, in 1775–1804 (Kakouros 2008, pp. 293–302).

Reliquaries such as that of St. Niphon II were produced to teach viewers how to understand relics—specifically, that the saints continue to exercise, in multiplied form, the power of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon them by God during their earthly lives. Through artistic craftsmanship, the otherwise invisible divine energies emanating from the relics become perceptible and intelligible to the viewer (Betancourt 2024, pp. 220–24). These objects were conceived to enhance the experience of worship through their mesmerizing visual qualities, their symbolic shape, shiny materials, and exquisite craftsmanship. The relics constitute a treasure for the Church and the state, conferring both legitimacy and salvation through access to divine energies (Smith 2010), and their sumptuous reliquaries reveal these messages visually. Ultimately, such reliquaries invite viewers to take delight in the fullness of their strange beauty (Hahn 2012)—concealing and displaying human relics at once—as visual embodiments of a complex architecture of theological ideas of redeeming divine potency.

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Notes

1 On his life and legacy, see the volume of collected works published in 2008 by the Dionysiou Monastery, *Ο Άγιος Νήφων, Πατριάρχης Κωνσταντινουπόλεως (1508–2008), Τόμος επετειακός επί τη συμπληρώσει πεντακοσίων ετών από της κοιμήσεως αυτού* (Mount Athos: Monastery of Dionysiou, 2008). On Niphon's life and the textual sources concerning his relations with Wallachia, see also Panou (2007, pp. 61–85).

2 Originally a Slavic title for a military commander or provincial governor, voivode came to designate the princes who ruled the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia.

3 On the problems of eclecticism in Southeastern Europe in the Late Middle Ages, see Rossi and Sullivan (2022).

4 On the recent emergence of materiality as a key term in medieval art history, studying the role of and the ideas about materials in the art of the Middle Ages, see Kumler (2019).

5 For the imperial idea as expressed in architectural form, see Brubaker (1999) on the Chalke Gate of the Great Palace in Constantinople.

6 These are shorter versions of hagiographies of saints, tailored to be read during Matins (Orthros) for the day of the saint in the Byzantine/Orthodox tradition, specifically after the sixth ode of the Canon of the respective saint.

7 Kakouros assigns the dating of the original (lost) synaxarial *vita* and the reworked version by Dekadios to 1514–1516. However, the earliest likely year for the relics' unearthing would be August 1515, given the seven-year interval customary for commemorating the dead in the Orthodox tradition, after which the exhumation can be performed. This makes dating the texts to 1515–1516 more plausible.

[8] In fact, during his first mandate as patriarch, Niphon struggled to save the treasury left by the former patriarch Symeon from Ottoman confiscation, and to that end he resorted to false witnesses—a transgression which the Ottoman state sanctioned with his removal from the patriarchal see in 1488. He was reelected to the throne and deposed once again after his rigorous attitude in church affairs sparked conflict with other hierarchs (Philippides 1990, pp. 102–5, 18–21).

[9] All translations from the Greek original are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[10] This situation arose from the troublesome circumstances that followed the fall of Constantinople, which placed Wallachia in a state of quasi-vassalage to the Ottoman sultan. The Metropolitan Church of Wallachia found itself in a complex position as a result of the opposition of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, a key ecclesial authority in the Balkans, to the Church of Constantinople for the latter's acceptance of the union with Rome at the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438). The hesitating relations of the Wallachian Metropolitanate with the Patriarchate of Constantinople were further destabilized by the frequent changes in rulers in Wallachia, each of whom appointed his own metropolitan.

[11] Term of Slavic origin, designating a member of the highest rank of feudal lords in medieval and early modern Southeastern and Eastern Europe, ranking just below the ruling princes.

[12] Many flocked to him, and "like images from an archetype, striving to imprint his virtue, many also became monastics through his guidance" (Kakouros 2008, pp. 343–44, 4A).

[13] On his lineage controversies, see Negrău (2025, esp. pp. 241–45).

[14] Although no chrysobulls issued by Voivode Neagoe providing financial support for Dionysiou are preserved, his quality as a benefactor of the monastery is recognized in the synaxarial lives of St. Niphon and is confirmed by the defensive buildings which he erected there and by the relics of saints which he donated to Dionysiou, of St. John the Baptist, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Apostle Peter (a reliquary that is kept today in Topkapı Museum, Istanbul) (Cândea 2011, II, cat. 430–432, cat. 828; Liakos 2017, pp. 169–70 and cat. 22; Cândea 2014, cat. 669). The recognition of the Voivode of Wallachia as the main benefactor of the Dionysiou Monastery by the monks might also be attributed to the substantial financial donation that Radu the Great had sent to Niphon approximately a decade earlier. These funds enabled Niphon to restore both the monastery church and its surrounding complex. It is plausible that a votive mural portrait of Radu was painted within the church at that time. Unfortunately, the murals commissioned by Niphon between 1505 and 1508 did not survive the fire that damaged the monastery in 1538.

[15] As for the relics of Niphon kept in Wallachia, we do not know what type of container Neagoe used for them, or whether he commissioned a splendid reliquary for them as well. The relics came from Mount Athos in a wooden coffin, as noted in the hagiographic texts. It is likely that they were placed in a kind of precious casket at Curtea de Argeș, which has not survived. These relics are displayed today in the Metropolitan Cathedral of St. Demetrius in Craiova, in a modern reliquary.

[16] See the discussion in note 14 above. Even if the chronicle *Vita* concentrates on the canonical aspects of the dispute with Radu, the voivode's breach of canons and the unshakable virtue of Niphon, both the chronicle *vita* and the synaxarial *vitae* seem to confirm that Voivode Radu endowed Niphon with a substantial financial gift, through which the former patriarch subsequently carried out restorations and constructions at Dionysiou Monastery and secured the monks' subsistence.

[17] This chapel functions today as *osteofylakio* (ossuary).

[18] Icon screen separating the altar area from the naos in the Byzantine/Orthodox church.

[19] Two days after the ceremony, on 17 August 1517, the text recounts that a synodal meeting was held in Wallachia by Ecumenical Patriarch Theoleptos and the abbots of Mount Athos, where, among other decisions concerning the Wallachian Church, the Dionysian *akolouthia* with vespers, matins, and liturgy with special canons was settled for St. Niphon's day on 11 August (Simedrea 1937, p. 30). For the liturgical office of St. Niphon, see Sofianos (2008).

[20] I prepare the English translation and commentary of this fragment, together with Mihail-George Hâncu, for publication in the fourth volume of the collection Sources for Byzantine Art History, edited by Justin Willson, which is scheduled for release in 2027.

[21] There is one more object bearing a portrait of Neagoe and his family, painted on the inside of its lid—a feature that appears to have been a fashion of Neagoe's: a sacristy chest donated by the voivode to Sinai Monastery. That chest, however, seems to have been painted by Wallachian artists (Sullivan 2024, pp. 164–65).

[22] Byzantine γρανάτζα was a prestigious court robe worn by high-ranking nobility and dignitaries across the Byzantine Empire. It was a long caftan gown with large sleeves, considered to have Assyrian origins. (Macrides et al. 2013, pp. 165, 345).

[23] The narthex is the vestibule or entrance hall leading into the nave in the Byzantine/Orthodox church.

[24] For the coined term of micro-architecture, see Bucher (1976).

[25] An architectural ornament mounted on the peak or the lower outer angles of a temple roof.

[26] Pilgrim Anthony of Novgorod described in 1200 how the relics were exposed in the churches of Constantinople: the bones and skulls of saints, decorated with metal and gems, were kept in silver boxes or "coffins" (*sĭrebrjanŭ grobŭ*) (apud Pentcheva 2012, p. 68). In the early 1430s, Bertrandon de la Broquière in his Voyages d'Outremer (apud Angar 2017, p. 200), noted how the Byzantines kept the relics in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople: "This is a beautiful church, where you can see the whole bodies of Greek saints. They are in raised wooden coffins. One had his head cut off, and they put the head of another saint in its place. They are intact and have been there for a long time (. . .)."

[27] Alternatively, containers for the relic of the Holy Cross (*staurotheka*) also developed their own typology and iconography by the Middle Byzantine Period, related to the Evangelical events in the Holy Land (Klein 2004; Elsner 2015, pp. 22–25).

[28] Small hanging reliquaries (engolpia) imitating the *krabation*-tomb of St. Demetrios and its setting in the basilica of Thessaloniki survived from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries (Loverdou-Tsigarida 2003, pp. 243–45; Elsner 2015, pp. 25–31).

[29] Ps. 86: 2 (Ps. 87: 3 in the Septuagint/Vulgate numbering): "Glorious things are said of you, O city of God; Ps. 131: 8 (Ps. 132: 8): "Arise, Lord, and come to Your resting place, You and the ark of Your might;" Ps. 131: 13 (Ps. 132: 13), "For the Lord has chosen Zion, He has desired it for His dwelling."

[30] Researchers suggest that part of one of these "Jerusalems" from Vladimir-Suzdal may be the one preserved in the Armory Palace Museum in the Kremlin (see Lidov 2012, note 61).

[31] In Laura Veneskey's words, "Demetrios, who has been called 'the most intensely local' of Byzantine saints, was also intensely locational, " because "with the site of the body obscured, the location of his martyrdom—contiguous with his bones and suffused with his blood—was itself elevated to relic status." (Veneskey 2019, p. 17).

[32] Ampules containing this myrrh mixed with water were sold to pilgrims and were even incorporated into the icons of St. Demetrius as relics, as can be seen in the icon of St. Demetrius in Sassoferrato, possibly commissioned by Demetrios Angelos Doukas Palaiologos, despot of Thessaloniki between 1322 and 1328 (Dennert 2019).

[33] As Robert Ousterhout and Vasileios Marinis pointed out, "it is perhaps noteworthy how few Byzantine reliquaries take the form of churches." (Ousterhout and Marinis 2015, p. 172).

[34] The considerations in Mabi Angar's book that the Aachen container was used as a reliquary for the head of St. Martyr Anastasius the Persian from the very beginning, along with the possible use of architectural containers for head relics in Byzantium, remain entirely hypothetical, even to the author (Angar 2017, pp. 61–63 et pass.). In my view, Grabar's and Saunders's considerations appear far more sound—namely, that the Antioch/Aachen object was designed as an artophorion, as is alluded to in its lengthy inscriptions drawn from the Psalms, which refer to it as "Zion" and "Ark" (*kibotos*) (see note 29 above). Conversely, if it had been designed from the outset as a reliquary for the head of St. Anastasius, it would be inexplicable why the inscriptions on it and its decoration do not record the saint's name or figure, as they do in all the other cases.

[35] Enameling technique in which drawing areas are carved, etched, or gouged into a metal surface and filled with colored glass powder and fired.

[36] Dimitris Liakos considers the enameled icons on the metal revetments of some of the Palaiologan icons and crosses to be sixteenth-century additions of pieces of Wallachian manufacture (Liakos 2026, pp. 65, 68).

[37] A stylized pattern in Turk-Islamic decorative art characterized by a rounded, interlaced shape of comma-like or wing-like bodies.

[38] Black metallic alloy used as a high-contrast inlay to decorate engraved or etched metal objects, especially silver and gold.

[39] I discuss this example in more detail in an article that is forthcoming in the volume of the International Conference *Art of Byzantium, Medieval Russia and the Balkan Countries of the Late Fourteenth to Early Fifteenth Century. Problems of the Evolution of the Late Palaiologan and Post-Palaiologan Style*, edited by Georgi Gerov and Aleksandr Preobrazhensky.

[40] See such a Wallachian fourteenth-century censer in church form in Coman (2025), fig. 34.1. Wallachia's mixed political and economic orientation between the Byzantine sphere and the Hungarian Kingdom in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries further shaped its cultural specificity. See Cristea and Curta (2026). Conversely, no artophoria have been preserved from the Palaiologan period, except for two wood fragments—one from the Walters Museum in Baltimore, and the other from the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg—both sculpted with Great Feasts and figures of holy prophets and hierarchs. They originally belonged to a single hexagonal object, most probably an artophorion. The pieces are discussed by Parpulov (forthcoming) in the essay Fragments from a Late-Byzantine Artophorion.

[41] There is a Slavonic letter (a Cyrillic Б) incised in the spot where one of the four small steeples once stood—which is now lost. Since the letter was not visible—being covered by the missing steeple—it was most likely a workshop notation, an assemblage mark meant to guide the piecing together of the artophorion's components. I thank Dr. Dragoș Gh. Năstăsoiu (former research fellow at the National Museum of Art in Bucharest) for this valuable information.

[42] Transylvania was a Catholic province of the Hungarian Kingdom and, from 1541, an autonomous principality under Ottoman suzerainty, ruled by a Hungarian governor. Due to its proximity to Orthodox lands, its craftsmen frequently produced Orthodox liturgical objects for commissions from Wallachia and Serbia (see Nicolescu 1968).

[43] A church ground plan featuring a central rectangular space with three semicircular or polygonal apses (conches) attached to three of its eastern sides.

[44] I develop this topic in an article titled "Devotion to the Mother of God Protectress and the Question of 'Post-Palaiologan' Imagery in Early Sixteenth-Century Wallachia," forthcoming in *Scrinium* 22, 2026.

[45] Long, feathery, and serrated-edged ornamental leaf motifs popular in sixteenth-century Ottoman art.

[46] From the Persian adjective khatā'ī, meaning "from China." The term refers to the floral motifs symbolizing a blossoming lotus flower, copied from Chinese blue-and-white ceramics.

[47] "objects of gold and silver and pearls and priceless stones", "the aforementioned vessels and objects." (Bălan 1994, cat. I 232).

[48] Together with M.-G. Hâncu, I am preparing the English translation and discussion of these inscriptions for the fourth volume of Sources for Byzantine Art History, edited by J. Willson.

[49] This edicule no longer exists, as this hermitage (known as Gornjak Monastery) was destroyed and reconstructed several times since then.

[50] The comparison Protos Gabriel draws between Emperor Theodosius II, who brought the relics of St. John Chrysostom to Constantinople in order to obtain posthumous forgiveness for his mother Eudoxia, and Neagoe, who brings the relics of St. Niphon to Wallachia so that Radu and the Wallachian state itself might be forgiven, is suggestive in this regard (Simedrea 1937, p. 20).

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