

Note

EUCCHARISTIC ALLUSION IN THE FRANKS CASKET?

On the right-hand side of the front panel of the eighth-century Franks Casket (Figure 1), three Magi process before the Theotokos and the Christ Child. Each Magus bears a gift in hand: the far-right figure, a branch (of myrrh); the middle, a cup of smoking frankincense; and, closest to Mary and Jesus, a cup of gold nuggets.¹ In case we were left in any doubt as to who these three men represent, a superscript is written in Old English runes: MFXXI , *Mæggi*. Next to the inscription rises a medallion enclosing a thirteen-petalled rosette and central boss. Descriptions of the visual programme of the panel have tended to forego discussion of the symbol, with the more adventurous suggesting that it was the Star of Bethlehem which brought the Magi to their veneration.² Yet the medallion may hold another meaning also, serving as an invocation of the Eucharist.

The medallion's positioning over the cup of gold directly recalls the position of the host over the chalice, an image used in the iconography of the Western church for the Holy Eucharist as the body and blood of Christ. Depictions of the host held aloft are most usually found from the eleventh century onwards, following debates over the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist and the ensuing cult of Corpus Christi, so the Franks Casket would certainly be a precocious example, but it is not the only one. An earlier witness is found in the sixth-century St Augustine Gospels in

scenes from the life of Christ. At the top of the page, in the middle tableau, Christ himself holds a round wafer over a cup during the Last Supper; the very institution of the Eucharist.³ In the same time period, in Merovingian Vienna, another example is found incised on a gravestone: a jug-like cup surmounted by an encircled hexafoil rosette, identified by Catherine Karkov as an example of a chalice and host.⁴

There are two other stylistic aspects that suggest that the medallion could be read as Eucharistic iconography. Firstly, the cup of gold, a suitably precious material for a Eucharistic vessel, appears very much in nature to painted examples of the communion chalice found on the continent: deep bowl, long stem, knop, and flayed feet.⁵ Moreover, it is different from the cup of frankincense, which has a shallower bowl and, although it is long-stemmed, has no feet. A second aspect of style worth considering is the thirteen petals on the rosette. In his study on the iconography of the Magi from early Christian times, Richard Trexler remarks that the star which leads the Magi is almost always found as a sexfoil in early art, sometimes incorporating a chi or chi-rho.⁶ Other examples show the occasional octofoil star, but none with as many as thirteen. I would like to suggest that the Franks Casket rosette was designed to invoke the thirteen members of the Last Supper, Christ and his twelve apostles, thereby making the Eucharistic link clear in the viewer's mind.⁷

References to the Last Supper and to the Eucharist are not out of place in a Nativity scene. At least since the fifth century, links have been

¹ On the dating of the Franks Casket, see Leslie Webster, 'A. The Dating and Provenance of the Franks Casket: An Art-Historical Perspective', in Gaby Waxenberger, Kerstin Kazzazi and John Hines (eds), *Old English Runes: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Approaches and Methodologies with a Concise and Selected Guide to Terminologies* (Berlin and Boston, 2023), 225–52.

² Carol Neuman de Vegvar, *The Northumbrian Renaissance* (Selinsgrove, 1987), 261; Richard Abels, 'What Has Weland to Do with Christ? The Franks Casket and the Acculturation of Christianity in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Speculum*, cxxxiv.iii (2009), 549–81, 558; Leslie Webster, *The Franks Casket* (London, 2012), 15. Thomas Klein calls it a 'rayed sun' but offers no further analysis, 'The Non-Coherence of the Franks Casket: Reading Text, Image, and Design on an Early Anglo-Saxon Artifact', *Viator*, xcvi.ii, (2014), 17–54, 33.

³ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 286, f. 125r. Although the book was made in Italy, it arrived in England shortly after its creation.

⁴ Catherine Karkov, 'The Chalice and Cross in Insular Art', in R. Michael Spearman and John Higgitt (eds), *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1993), 237–44, 237.

⁵ Sharon E. J. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary* (Seattle, Washington, 1999), 52.

⁶ Richard C. Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi* (Princeton, 1997), 25–6.

⁷ Strikingly patens in the medieval period are almost always engraved with a multifoil rosette and central circle, W. H. St John Hope and T. M. Fallow, *English Medieval Chalice and Patens* (Exeter, 1887), reprinted from the *Archaeological Journal*, xliii, 15–17. The earliest example of a paten given by the authors, however, is from 1180 and thus far later than our Casket.



Figure 1. Franks Casket, c. eighth century. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

drawn between the Incarnation of the Christ child and his embodied presence in the Eucharist. As a manifestation of God in flesh and blood, the incarnation was a source of inspiration for the contemplation and veneration of Christ at the Mass, and the Magi's adoration served as an example for the laity to follow.⁸ As John Chrysostom (d. 407) writes:

This Body, even lying in a manger, the Magi revered ... let us now at least imitate these Barbarians ... For they indeed when they saw Him but in a manger, and in a shed and no such thing was in sight, as though beholdest now, drew nigh with great awe; but thou beholdest Him not in the manger but on the altar, not a woman holding Him in her arms, but the priest standing by, and the Spirit with exceeding bounty hovering over the gifts set before us.⁹

The gifts that the Holy Spirit 'hovers' over are the human-made bread and wine, which will be transformed into a 'perfect sacrifice' and returned a

thousandfold by Christ's superior gift of himself, his death and resurrection, and the gift of salvation.¹⁰ Such offertory gifts are also 'imitative' of those the Magi brought to honour the Christ Child. Indeed, the Magi's gifts developed a tradition of their own, as vatic instruments that anticipated and reflected elements of Christ's life: incense for divinity, gold for kingship, and myrrh as a token of death and humanity.¹¹ The collapse of the past, present, and future of Christ's life in a way that centralises his sacrificial mission has much in common with narratives of the Proleptic Passion, or the Child of Sorrows, in which anachronistic imagery of Christ's death is presented within portrayals of his infancy. These anachronisms include the instruments of Christ's torture—the *Arma Christi*—as well as reposes of sleep, wounds of the crucifixion, stylized altar cloths, and the bread and cup/body and blood of the Eucharist. The affective impact is not to be understated: an innocent, vulnerable baby marred by the painful reminder of his future suffering and crucifixion. It is likely, however, that it was the relationship between life and death that appealed to the maker of Frank's Casket. On the left panel, the she-wolf saves Romulus and Remus though the townspeople thought them dead; on the back of the casket, the Old Jerusalem is destroyed and a new order built; the ambiguous right-hand panel appears to depict boundaries between life and death; beside the Magi-scene, Wayland the Smith kills the sons of his captor-king in order that he might escape with his own life; and, surrounding the whole front panel, the bone riddle tells the swansong of the whale who ultimately finds new life in the materiality of the casket itself.¹² Among these scenes, the link between Christ's birth and death finds a suitable home. By setting a visual

¹⁰ Saxon, 'Carolingian, Ottonian and Romanesque Art and the Eucharist', 296.

¹¹ Elizabeth Saxon, 'Art and the Eucharist: Early Christian to CA. 800' in Ian Christopher Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall (eds), *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2012), 93–159, 129.

¹² Similar points on the relationship between life and death on the Casket are made by, for example, Marijane Osborn and Terry Gunnell, 'Swedish Iconography of Drink-Bearer and Horse on the Northumbrian Franks Casket', *Early Medieval England and its Neighbours*, li (2025), 1–27; Catherine E. Karkov, 'The Franks Casket Speaks Back: The Bones of the Past, the Becoming of England', in Eva Frojmovic and Catherine E. Karkov (eds), *Postcolonising the Medieval Image* (Oxford, 2017), 69–100, 71; and James Paz, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Material Culture* (Manchester, 2017), 129.

⁸ On the child-as-host motif in later medieval writings, see Leah S. Marcus, 'The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the English Cycle Plays' in Mary Dzon and Theresa M. Kenney (eds), *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha Es et O!* (Toronto, 2012), 3–28.

⁹ *Homily XXIV: 1 Corinthians. X. 13*, translated by John Henry Parker, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, Part I. Hom. I. – XXIV* (Oxford, 1839). The passage was drawn to my attention by Elizabeth Saxon, 'Carolingian, Ottonian and Romanesque Art and the Eucharist' in Ian Christopher Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall (eds), *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2012), 251–324, 297.

sign of the Eucharist over the scene, the creator of the Franks Casket invites viewers to step into a moment of contemplation, to see manger and altar; Christ's final sacrifice within his own nativity.¹³

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¹³ Elina Gertsman, 'Signs of Death: The Sacrificial Christ Child in Late Medieval Art' in Mary Dzon and Theresa M Kenney (eds) *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha Es et O!* (Toronto, 2012), 66–91, 68.