Reliquaries of Charlemagne

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Five reliquaries were made during the Middle Ages to hold the corporeal remains of Charlemagne. Apparently, at the time of his death on 28 of January 814, the emperor was placed in the antique (second-century) sarcophagus of Proserpine, reputed to have been brought by Charles from Rome for use as his tomb. It still exists at Aachen Cathedral Treasury. Around the year 1000, Otto III opened it and removed several objects (an evangelary, a sword and his crown). One hundred and sixty-five years later, Frederick I Barbarossa, when he canonized Charlemagne, exhumed his body. This 'canonization,' which took place during the schism of 1159 to 1170 and was officially announced only by the anti-pope Pascal III, was a reassertion of imperial authority and motivated by the desire to reunite the political and ecclesiastical powers of the Empire. Frederick I ordered a hagiography of Charlemagne to be written: the \textit{Vita Karoli Magni}, and commissioned the first reliquary about 1170. This arm-reliquary which is conserved at the Louvre, apparently comes from a Mosan workshop. In the form of a portable altar/coffer, it is decorated with a twelve-niche arcade framing the busts of important figures, including Frederick I and his wife Beatrice. In 1481, the bones of Charlemagne's arm were translated into another arm reliquary, also conserved in Aachen, which has the shape of the contents.

Frederick II had Charlemagne's body placed in a gold and silver shrine, which he had commissioned, and finally completed when he climbed on a scaffold and hammered the last nail into place on July 25, 1215. This châsse-type shrine has the shape of a basilica/coffin, with repoussé figures seated in an arcade around its lower level. Charlemagne, enthroned, crowned and haloed, is represented on one of the gable ends, flanked by Pope Leo III and the archbishop of Reims, Turpin. They both bow their heads towards the Emperor. Most of the other figures are kings who were crowned at Aachen. Scenes from the legend of Charlemagne, taken from the \textit{Vita Karoli Magni} are represented on the roof in low-relief. In particular, this text emphasizes the legendary crusades of Charles to Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela.
and Aachen appears as his third place of pilgrimage. Fredrick II's motivations, like those of Barbarossa, were political in nature and this deposition took place after his victory at the battle of Bouvines in 1214 over the Guelphs, rivals of the Staufen dynasty.

Another emperor, Charles IV (1316-1378), who became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1355, especially venerated Charlemagne. Several years before his coronation as king of Germany on the July 25 1349, he gave to the cathedral in Aachen a bust reliquary containing Charlemagne's skull. The face is very expressive and the head is adorned with an older Bohemian crown decorated with precious stones and antique cameos. Eagles and fleurs-de-lis, symbols of the Holy Roman Empire and of the French kingdom, appear on the lower part of the bust. This reliquary is in the tradition of representations of royalty since the thirteenth century and the artist appears to have been French.

Several years later, another reliquary, apparently from the same workshop, was created; it's also conserved in Aachen. Shaped like a chapel with three towers, it has a triple-niched arcade with three statues: the Virgin with Child flanked by Charlemagne holding a model of Aachen's cathedral and St Catherine holding a reliquary. These statues recall Charlemagne's role as a founder of churches, as did the reliquary of 1215. This shrine contains relics: a piece of the cross, a piece of the crown of thorns, a bone from Charlemagne's arm (which is actually a leg bone), three of Charlemagne's teeth, a tooth of St Catherine and other saint's remains, each accompanied by inscription. The whole reliquary is supported by eight figures: four angels, Leo III, the archbishop Turpin, Roland and Oliver.

All these reliquaries come from Aachen and were commissioned by imperial figures who wanted to legitimize their own power by associating themselves with Charlemagne and making him a holy emperor. Aachen thus became the most important pilgrimage and worship place for the cult of Charlemagne. Through texts and golden works, Aachen did everything possible to attract more pilgrims. Images and words were brought together to increase Charlemagne's renown and the economic, religious and political power of his capital.

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