The Proclamation of the New Covenant: The Pre-Iconoclastic Altar Ciboria in Rome and Constantinople

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The altar ciborium is the piece of the liturgical furniture placed in the Christian sanctuary over the holy table (ἁγία τραπέζα) where the bloodless sacrifice of the New Testament and the presence of Jesus Christ within the Divine Liturgy are manifested. The etymology of the term ciborium (κιθάριον) is not clear especially having in mind that the expression itself has several meanings: cup, cupola, dome, and baldacchino, canopy referring both to the covering seats of royalty and over altar. According to St. Germanus, the eighth century patriarch of Constantinople, the term κιθάριον is derivative of the Greek words κιθήρ, κιθήρος, meaning box, chest, coffer, hence representing tabernacle or ark, and the word ὄρθον meaning the effulgence, or Light of God. Metaphorical language always holds several meanings simultaneously. In this sense, St. Germanus and other theologians connect the ciborium with the Hebrew term keber for the tomb, since the altar and tomb represent the same things in Christian and Jewish eschatology. Others are of the opinion that ciborium is derivative of the Latin term for the holy gifts, cibus, that was held suspended from the tent-like baldacchino. Generally speaking, a ciborium is an open domed or pyramidal roof resting on the same number of columns as the number of corners of the shelter, at least four. The ciborium resembles the tent-like or domed structure, usually connected with both sacred and royal tents, and as such a visual motif it can be traced back several centuries before the Common Era, in numerous representations in almost every ancient Eastern culture with nomadic heritage. Since the focus of this paper is on the ciborium within the Christian church the discussion is narrowed to the Judeo-Christian and Hellenistic tradition.

The earliest archeological remains of the altar ciboria date from the sixth century and are found in the churches of St. Alexander and St. Andrew in Rome, and in the churches of Hagios Polyeuktos and Hagia Euphemia in Constantinople. However, according to the archeological reports and the old representations and descriptions from other sources such as coins or manuscripts, the ciboria were used within the Christian churches at least two centuries prior to that date. Knowledge of the Christian canopy-like architectural structures begins with the Edict of Toleration (313) and development of Christian iconography under Constantine the Great (d. 337). Ciboria commissioned by Constantine and his heirs marked the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul in Rome in the basilica martyrium of St. Peter (after 319) and San Paolo fuori le

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1. This paper is derived from a project in the course Early Christian and Byzantine Art and Architecture, taught by Prof. Ljubica D. Popovich in the fall of 2000. I would like to thank Prof. Popovich once again for her unreserved assistance at every stage of work, as well as for her suggestion that I participate in the Art History Graduate Symposium at Florida State University, which led to the publication of this paper in Athanor. I cordially thank Prof. Svetlana Popović, an architectural historian, who has supported my efforts for years. As many times before I benefited from her suggestions while working on this paper. My thanks also go to the Graduate School of Vanderbilt University that financially supported my participation at the Symposium.


3. Lampe 753.


6. Ciborium is the architectural structure, but it is closely related to the baldacchino. The term is of late medieval derivative from the Italian (baldocci) or Spanish (baldauqin) expression for the elaborately brocaded material imported from Baghdad that was hung as a canopy over an altar or doorway. Later it came to stand for the freestanding canopy over an altar, tomb, or throne, as the ciborium. The terms tegurium, turris, umbraculum, arca etc. in Latin, or κιθήρος, κιθάριον, προθύλλον, πύργος etc. in Greek are the synonymies with the ciborium. More in: The Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. I (1999) under Ciborium; Mirković 103; St. Germanus of Constantinople on the Divine Liturgy 59. The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, vol. I (1991) 462.


mura in Rome (after 384), as well as the tomb of Christ at Jerusalem (326-35), to name but a few.

Scholars searched for the possible explanation of the canopy structure and its function in the Christian church in the imperial iconography of the time. The repeated tent-like and baldacchino patterns in the visual representations connected with the epiphany and adventus had a long-lived tradition in every part of the Roman Empire. However, it has been pointed out that altar canopy structures differed from one another according to the particular symbolic function they had. The canopies erected over the martyr tombs physically contrasted significantly from the canopies over imperial thrones in royal aulae. Roman tombs for wealthy and influential families were mainly on central plans, sometimes surmounted by a second storey on which was a round canopy-like structure, carried by columns and with a pointed roof. Their visual appearance is similar to the canopy placed over the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem as represented on the sixth century Bobbio and Monza ampullae. According to the Eusebius of Caesarea (fourth century), the chief theological adviser of Constantine, and to the Liber Pontificalis, St. Peter, a member of a mainly poor and neglected “sect” during his life, received the same honors as the Empress Helena and Emperor Constantine: an altar, corona, and four large candlesticks. Constantine was at that time, acclaimed as related to the traditional Roman gods. Having in mind that Constantine the Great viewed himself as God’s vicar on earth, and that the Lord was viewed increasingly as the Emperor of Heaven, it is very plausible to connect the imperial ceremonial rites with the rudimentary rites of the liturgy. However, the influence of Jewish liturgy should not be underestimated in spite of the Roman intolerance towards the Jews.

No other element in Jewish faith has such central and long-lived theological importance as does the Ark of the Covenant, since it symbolizes the presence of God (1 Sam. 4:3) and the connection between God and the nation of Israel. Great significance is accorded to the tent-like structure called the “Tent of Meeting” or Tabernacle where the Ark was placed (2 Sam. 7:6). The Tabernacle represents the portable sanctuary constructed by Moses as a place of worship for the Hebrew tribes during the period of wandering that preceded their arrival in the Promised Land. The earliest sanctuary was a simple tent within which, it was believed, the Lord himself manifested his presence and communicated his will. The Tabernacle was constructed with tapestry curtains decorated with cherubim (Exod. 25:9ff). The interior was divided into two rooms, differing in their sanctity: “the holy place” and “the most holy place” (Holy of Holies, Heb. Debir). The room that represented “the holy place” contained the table on which the bread of the Presence (showbread), the altar of incense, and the seven-branched candelabrum (menorah) were placed. “The Holy of Holies” was thought to be an actual dwelling place of the God of Israel, who invisibly sat enthroned above the solid slab of gold that rested on the Ark of the Covenant and had

11 The tent-like and baldacchino structures as represented in the second and fourth Styles of the Pompeian wall painting present the evidence that a ciborium was an important feature of the palace ceremonies and palace architecture of the Hellenistic East predominantly, later adopted by the other parts of Roman Empire. Nero’s ambition to be recognized as a Second Alexander the Great and to be identified with the Sun-god could be found documented in his interest in the skene symbolism and the domical banquetting hall he had built for the reception of his guests like a Kosmokrator beneath a domical heaven. The original meaning of the canopy structure in this context should be searched in Egypt. The papyrus of the Middle Kingdom, which shows how Senwosret made his public appearance as the living Horus under a heb-sed canopy, recalls the later epiphany and adventus reception of the Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors. Symbolism of the sacred tent spread the idea of the throne tabernacle when the ruler was identified with heaven and presented to his people as a god. Moreover, during the short period of the New Kingdom Amenhoph IV (reign 1348-1336/5 BCE) proclaimed his faith in a single god, the sun disk Aten and changed his name to Akhenaten (“Effective for the Aten”) introducing thus one of the earliest references to monotheism and the idea of the messenger of God among humans. For the reference to Akhenaten I thank once again Dr. Svetlana Popović.


15 “Hic est qui nomen acceptum a Deo, principe generis sui, dedit vobis, qui se progeniam esse Herculis, non fabulosis, sed aequatis virtutibus comprobavit.” (Inceri Panegyricus Maximiano et Constantino - 307 CE, cap. VIII, 2); “Ut enim ipsos immortales Deos, quamquam universos animo colamus, interdum tamen in suo quemque templo ac sede veneramus...” (Panegyricus VII: Eumeni Constantino Aug., cap. L. 5) according to: Molly Teasdale Smith, “The Lateran Fastigium: A Gift of Constantine the Great,” Rivista archeologia cristiana 46 (1970) 149-75. Domitian (first century) was the first among the Roman emperors who succeeded in elevating himself to the stature of a Dominus et Deus. He became known as a builder of at least two domical halls, in which he as the “Lord of the Oecumen” feasted with his guests in the center of the cosmos under the stars, continuing thus the tradition of Alexander’s “tent of Heaven” and Nero’s banquetting tholos. More in: Baldwin E. Smith 126.


golden cherubim at each side. The Ark was a gold-covered wooden coffer containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments. In the time of the First Temple (before 586 BCE) which was erected by god-appointed King David in Jerusalem, the permanent place of the Ark and the Tabernacle “in the Holy of Holies of the Temple, under the cherubim’s wings” (1 Kg. 8:6ff) was established.

During the so-called “Second Temple period” (586 BCE-70 CE) which was partly intertwined with the “New Testament period,” Jewish eschatology evolved with the concept of the Messiah presented in the prophecy of Isaiah (esp. Isa. 9, 11, 42).19 Isaiah’s prophecy emphasized that the future ruler (Messiah) should be: a king, a priest, and a prophet. Jesus appeared as the one who united these three functions in His persona (hypothesis). As a King of the universe (Mt. 22; Lk. 1, 32f; 2 Sam. 7,12), He received from the very beginning the imperial characteristics that “record His righteous acts and His victories over the impious.”19 Jesus is the great High Priest imperial characteristics that “record His righteous acts and His victories over the impious.”19 Jesus is the great High Priest

21 By the eighth century these events became crucial points of the later development of the liturgical symbolism and mysticism.  
25 About different aspects of the union among the Ark, the Temple, and Jerusalem, very elaborate in: Kühnel 17-28.  
26 Kühnel 49-59.  
28 For the altar and the altar ciborium are the very place where heavenly and earthly realm are mixed but not dissolved.  
29 Branham 375-94.  
30 The oldest archeological evidence about altars in Constantinopolitan churches from the fourth and fifth centuries locate them in the nave area in front of the apse. See: Mathews Early Churches 11-41.  
31 S. J. Saller according to: Branham 375-94. For photo reproduction of the apse floor see Bianca Kühnel From the Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem (Harder, 1987).
Holies is evident. The first portable altars might have been in the nave of the churches. In the Old St. Peter’s basilica, the tomb of the Apostle was in the apse in the former place of the Holy of Holies, and the Christian altar was somewhere in the nave since there was not enough space for the altar in the apse. The symmetrical union of two distinct segments of the Jerusalem Temple—the altar area with a Torah shrine and the Holy of Holies, within the Christian edifice—might be interpreted both spatially and liturgically. The transfer of the Temple attributes to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre might be schematically presented so that “the Tomb of Christ takes the place of the Holy of Holies,” the place of Divine Presence, “the ever-burning lamp in the Tomb is like menorah in the Temple, while the Rock of the Crucifixion,” where the Lord sacrificed His only-begotten son, “assumes the role of the altar on Mt. Moriah,” where Abraham offered the sacrifice of Isaac.32 Holy places and history that marked the topology of earthly Jerusalem appear to be transferred to the other Constantian churches, including the Old St. Peter’s basilica.

According to the surviving documents, excavations, and the representation on the early fifth century ivory casket from Pola (Figure 1),33 St. Peter’s grave was sheltered by a canopy. It rested on four spiral vine scroll columns, columnae vititae that Constantine brought de Grecias.34 Two more architraved spiral columns linked the backside of the baldacchino to the corners of the apse,35 forming together with the baldacchino the continuous curtained screen. The jeweled “tower,”36 a ciborium that housed the Blessed Sacrament, as it was mentioned in the Liber Pontificalis, had a pointed roof with diagonal arching ribs surmounted by an orb, as it is represented on the Pola Casket. At the point of the intersection of ribs, a golden lamp was suspended in the form of a golden corona of lights. Below the canopy a rectangular enclosure was railed off and slightly raised above the floor level. Ciborium stood directly over the Apostle’s tomb. The altar was very probably movable, separated from the shrine, positioned somewhere in front of the shrine or near it (Figure 2).37 On the Pola Casket two figures are turned toward the Apostle’s tomb in a gesture of worship, and a pair of female and male frontal orant figures are represented on either side of the shrine.

The symbolization of the golden lamp as the ever-burning lamp is familiar: “out from the tomb comes the risen Christ, the light that illuminates, i.e. saves.”38 The lamp was suspended from the intersection of the ribs that formed the ciborium roof. Thus, the sparkling lamplight came not from the outside, but from the inner space of the ciborium. The sensation of the participants in the service in St. Peter’s basilica has to be very similar to the pilgrim Egeria’s (381-384 CE) description of the congregation in the Holy Sepulchre:

...and the lamps and candles are all lit, which makes it [Anastasis] very bright. The fire is brought not from outside, but from the cave, inside the screen where a lamp is always burning night and day.39

A golden lamp was suspended from the ciborium in the form of a golden crown, aurum corona, above the body of lights.40 Besides the similarities to the ever-burning light of Jesus’ tomb, prefigured in the ever burning light of the menorah lamp, aurum corona can be related also to the Roman ceremony of the aurum coronarium. The rite was named after the gold diadem that the citizens of the Roman Empire and representatives of the provinces presented to the emperor as a symbolic sign of his imperial supremacy over them. This imperial iconographical motif can be transferred to the religious image of Christ as the Heavenly King, the Source of Light.41 The Acts of the Apostles that were depicted on four large candlesticks wrought in silver (now lost),42 refer to the spiritual identity of the Apostles with the self-giving person, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, defining liturgical mysteries as the mysteries of Christ’s life enacted during the cycle of the church year. To express this spiritual identity St. Peter and eleven Apostles state that all who believe in Christ are together and hold everything in common, including the mystery of divine life (Acts. 2:44). Moreover, St. Peter was the first Apostle who

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34 Ward-Perkins 469-89.

35 The imprints of the two rear column bases of the canopy show that the screen separated the apse from the transept, from shoulder to shoulder, with the canopy projecting forward into the crossing, thus over the tomb. More in: Ward-Perkins 469-89.

36 In Greek ζώρος, fn. 7. above.


40 “Coronam auream ante corpus qui est farus cantharus” Liber Pontificalis (ed. Duchesne) 176, according to: Molly Teasdale Smith, “Development” 379-414.


42 Beckwith 27.
baptized non-Jews, clearly announcing the replacement of the Old Covenant between the God and people of Israel with the New Covenant between the God and people of God, those baptized in Christ (Acts.10:9ff).43

The six twisted columns, four that formed canopy over St. Peter’s grave and two more at the corners of the apse, were made of a single block of fine-grained, translucent, Greek marble.44 Each of them was divided into four zones, separated by a cable molding, of which the first and third were spirally fluted, and the second and fourth carved in high relief with vine scrolls and naked, winged putti. The composite capitals and the bases of the columns are also rich in leaves and ornaments (Figure 3).45 The columns, as mentioned in the Liber Pontificalis and depicted on the Pola Casket,46 could be connected with the pagan tradition and the cult of Dionysius,47 since there are references that canopies made of or with vine scrolls, sometimes inhabited by birds, beasts, and vintage figures, were used in the cult (Figure 4).48 Dyonisius, a god of vine, was also known as a funerary god who delivered souls of the dead due to his association with the return of spring and vegetation each year.49 The historical events of the Last Supper, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, firmly connected with liturgical mysteries of life in Christ, all happened in the springtime. Once again, pagan funerary celebrations of emperors and reception of a divine ruler could be connected with worshipping Christ, King of the Universe, and the Apostles and martyrs to whom He delegated His power and authority, just as Roman emperors delegated their power to consuls, magistrates, and other officials. In Jewish eschatology the scrolls of the Tree of Life are connected with the Torah scrolls. The Tree of Life signifies the Torah in its fulfillment, both as the instrument of God’s creation and the norm of life of the Jewish people,50 and as the representative of the Torah it also depicts the heavenly Paradise.51 Visual representations of the Tree of Life are rare, but the fresco over the Torah niche in Dura Europos synagogue (before 256) with the “tree of life for all who holds fast to her [Tree of Life]” employs almost the same iconographical vocabulary as the ciborium over the Apostle’s tomb in St. Peter’s church (Figure 5). On the fresco the Torah shrine is enclosed by the aedicula very similar to the ideal reconstruction of St. Peter’s tomb. The columns of the Torah aedicula are twisted and resemble the twisted columns of the ciborium over St. Peter’s grave. The branches of the Tree of Life surmount the niche with the Torah shrine emphasizing the eschatological dimension of the image. The ciborium columns wrapped in vine-scrolls could be seen as the eschatological image of the New Testament. The motif of intertwined scrolls was a very popular decorative motif with the meaning of everlasting life during the whole of the Roman Empire, both in the areas in North Africa52 and Syro-Palestine. Therefore it seems reasonable that the motif was adapted to express fundamental Christian themes such as the vintage of the Lord in the Church both in the East and West, which was used at least until the sixth century. It might be that the Jewish iconographical meaning was perhaps modified for the specific visual media,53 and coupled with the adapted imperial imagery that affirmed the triumph of Christ.

The orant figures54 from the Pola Casket emerging through
the curtains can be visually and compositionally compared with the figures from the Old Testament theme represented in the Ashburnham or Tours Pentateuch, the seventh century Latin Vulgate manuscript (Figure 6). On the lower half of the illumination in the center of the composition, the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting is depicted. Priests, Moses and Joshua, from one side, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, from the other, enter the Tabernacle, after experiencing the epiphany on the Mount Sinai represented in the upper part of the illumination (Exod. 24). The Tent of Meeting is made of curtains (Exod. 26) with a wooden altar embellished with precious metals and equipped with necessary accessories (Exod. 27). The Ark and Tabernacle symbolize the very moment of Shekina, the Divine Presence since they are depicted after the event on Mount Sinai when Moses has been given the tablets of the law by the hand of the Lord. From the fourth century writings of the nun Egeria it is obvious that the tomb of Christ, not the sanctuary of the martyrium basilica where the Eucharist was celebrated, was the focal point of the vespers and the resurrection vigil. This practice is concurrent with the period when St. Peter’s shrine as depicted on the Pola Casket was also venerated. Since the mouths of the celebrants from the Pola Casket are open, it can be assumed that the evening liturgical service full of symbolism of the Divine Presence connected with the presence of the martyr’s relics is represented.

The liturgical service in the early years of Christianity remains obscure. Until the end of the fourth century two ceremonies might have been performed at venerated Christian tombs: first the offerings of food and wine provided by the faithful for funerary banquets, the refrigerium, following pagan practices of the Parentalia; and the second, the celebration of the Eucharist, symbolizing the sacrifice of Christ for whom the martyr died. Melchizedek’s giving bread and wine to Abraham (Gen. 14:18-20) can be interpreted in Jewish context referring to bread as showbread, and wine as the libation offering, and in Christian sense as the prefiguration of the Eucharist. The two figures below the altar ciborium represented on the Pola Casket, might refer to the ceremony of offering bread and wine. This idea may be supported by the sixth century representation from the Vienna Genesis, where the meeting of Melchizedek and Abraham is depicted behind the domical curtained ciborium. If so, there was no better place in Rome to represent the spiritual unity in Christ than on St. Peter’s tomb.

Some pagan altars were also surmounted by canopies to shelter a sacrifice and offerings placed on or below the altar, making the refrigerium at a venerated and sheltered martyr’s tomb very inconvenient for Christian service. In time the refrigerium rite was eliminated from Christian practice according to the late fourth and fifth century writings of the Church Fathers such as St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan and St. John Chrysostom, the patriarch of Constantinople. They also clarified the meaning of the liturgical furnishing, including the altar and altar ciborium. St. Ambrose wrote that souls and symbolic remains of the martyrs, including branded from the actual martyr’s tomb, should be placed beneath the altar, to become the true spiritual sacrifice offered to Christ. He based his writing on the Revelation of John as the only book of the New Testament in which Heavenly Jerusalem and sanctuaries are “visualized” as the symbol of the New Covenant and in a way as the extension of the Holy of Holies. St. John Chrysostom emphasized the aspect of mystery during the liturgical service, presenting the sacramental reality of the anaphora within the overall symbolic form of the liturgy, basing his writing mainly on John 3:16: “You so loved your world that You gave Your only-begotten Son, in order that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have everlasting life.” For St. John Chrysostom, bread and wine, body and blood of our Lord, are the sacraments that He gave to “His Apostles” and to “all who have been perfected in faith,” representing thus the visual images of the symbolism of death and resurrection in the Eucharist. Therefore, the focus of the service, both in the West and in the East, was shifted from the veneration of the sepulchre to the rite of the Eucharist. This shift was followed by the New Testament interpretation of the death of Jesus in terms of Old Testament

55 All the figures are inscribed in Latin as such.
56 More in: Taft 45-75, with further references.
57 Molly Teasdale Smith, “Development” 379-414, with references.
58 Schreckenberg and Schubert 215-7.
59 Moreover, St. Peter is in a way prefigured in Abraham, since he also was the one to leave the country to spread the Word of God (compare Gen. 14 and Acts. 10).
60 Brandea refers to the pieces of martyrs’ cloths.
...not permitted to anyone among the laity to enter the sacred altar, with the exception that the imperial power and authority is in no way or manner excluded therefrom whenever it wishes to offer gifts to the creator, in accordance with a certain most ancient tradition.  

The creation of a sanctuary also underwent changes from the sixth century on. After the Council in Trullo (692 CE) it was

The earliest recorded translations of relics to Constantinople were those of Timothy in 356 and of Andrew and Luke in 357, and deposited in the church of the Holy Apostles. Unfortunately, relics from the Holy Apostles were destroyed under Crusaders in 1204. About the veneration of relics: Walter 156, with references.

About the liturgical evolutionary sequences of the procession, since the development is not quite clear, the most accurate: Taft 45-75, with further references.

The canopies erected by order of Constantine the Great over the Tomb of Christ at the Holy Sepulchre complex in Jerusalem. According to the pilgrim Etheria, in the 380s, the liturgy was celebrated on many occasions in front of the Holy Sepulchre, where the altar and Christ’s tomb were. Molly Teasdale Smith, “Development” 379-414, with references.

67 Wybrew 17. The image of the Last Supper within anaphora in Byzantine Liturgy was especially emphasized during the eleventh century under influence of Byzantine theologian Nicholas of Andida. It was also a period when crucial shifts in liturgical interpretation evolved different visual representations connected with liturgical service, that could be seen predominantly in Slavic Orthodox churches due to the preservation of the large painted cycles in them. See: Wybrew 129-44, Walter passim.

68 Krautheimer 35.

69 Krautheimer 35.

70 The canopy at St. Peter’s shrine might have been the model for the hexagonal canopy erected by order of Constantine the Great over the Tomb of Christ at the Holy Sepulchre complex in Jerusalem. According to the pilgrim Etheria, in the 380s, the liturgy was celebrated on many occasions in front of the Holy Sepulchre, where the altar and Christ’s tomb were. Molly Teasdale Smith, “Development” 379-414, with references.


72 Martyr’s relics were not allowed to be removed from their final resting place at the very beginning of Christianity. It is the practice of the sixth century, perhaps slightly earlier. St. John Chrysostom spoke of the high prophylactic value of the relics of saints, so the practice of their translation might be connected also with “pragmatic” reasons. See: Walter 181-2, with references.

73 The earliest recorded translations of relics to Constantinople were those of Timothy in 356 and of Andrew and Luke in 357, and deposited in the church of the Holy Apostles. Unfortunately, relics from the Holy Apostles were destroyed under Crusaders in 1204. About the veneration of relics: Walter 156, with references.

74 About the liturgical evolutionary sequences of the procession, since the development is not quite clear, the most accurate: Taft 45-75, with further references.

75 Wybrew 47-66.

76 Wybrew 47-66, St. Germanus 16-23, Schulz 142-158.

77 Quotation of St. John Chrysostom’s words according to: Wybrew 47-66.


79 The chancel barrier in the Hagia Sophia was about waist-high. St. Germanus 17.

80 Wybrew 47-66.

81 St. Germanus 61.
tomb of Christ where He was placed.

The holy table is also the throne of God, on which, borne by the Cherubim, He rested His body. At that table, at His mystical supper, Christ sat among His disciples and, taking bread and wine, said to His disciples and apostles: “Take, eat, and drink of it: this is my body and my blood” (Mt. 26:26-28).82

According to St. Germanus the domical ciborium remained in the eighth century the representation of the memoria and place where Christ was crucified, “for the two places of burial and crucifixion in Jerusalem were near by.”83 Having all these evolution sequences in mind, it seems that by the eighth century, the liturgical furnishing, the rite, and the participants united to reveal both Christ’s earthly ministry and eschaton. Meeting of the earthly and heavenly in their dynamic tension made the liturgy more than the mere ceremonial procession, but a prayer (since a prayer in a theological sense is a passage of human souls to eternal life). In this context, the altar ciborium evolved in time into the liturgical furnishing, distinct from the ciboria over the venerated tombs or reliquaries, with a complex meaning: the Golgotha, the Crucifixion, the Burial, and the Resurrection of Christ.

The sixth century archeological records from Constantinople and Rome confirm the development of the altar ciboria. Constantinopolitan churches under Justinian such as Hagios Polyuektos (524-7) and Hagia Euphemia84 are the two with archeological remains of the altar ciboria. There are abundant written references to the altar ciborium that once existed in Hagia Sophia (532-7). The original sanctuary furnishings, according to Procopios, Justinian’s court historian, were embellished with 40,000 lbs. of silver.85 The altar itself was composed of gold trapeza, gold columns, and a gold base, ornamented with precious stones, and covered by a cloth with rich silk and gold embroidery. On the altar cloth, Christ was represented standing between Sts. Peter and Paul, along with a number of representations of divine miracles. Over the altar rose a silver ciborium. According to the images found in chronologically later miniatures, the four columns of the ciborium were spanned by the arches supporting an eight-sided pyramidal roof with a silver orb surmounted by a cross.86 One can only imagine the light sparkling and reflecting from the gold mosaics and silver-decked furnishing, giving an impression that it originated from the inner light within the church edifice itself. The majestic space and decoration of the Hagia Sophia, consistently adapted to the liturgy, created an impression of “heaven on earth, the heavenly sanctuary...image of the cosmos, throne of the very glory of God.”87 Later structures of the post-iconoclastic age revealed this atmosphere in mosaic and fresco decoration, in accord with the more literal spirit. However, physical remains of the smaller Justinian’s foundations extend the picture of richness and form of liturgical furnishing. The glass-inlaid marble columns of the altar ciborium of Hagios Polyuektos, and of Hagia Euphemia are very instructive examples (Figure 7). The ciborium in the church of Hagia Euphemia was massive, monolithic, with a shallow dome, and there is record that the relics of St. Euphemia were placed within a box-type altar with a confessio, directly beneath the altar table, into which one could put one’s hand to touch the relics (Figure 8). This is an example of a new variation in the relationship of the relics deposited under the altar since they were not buried in the crypt, as was common for the period.88

In the West, from the sixth century on the development of the altar canopy can be followed through an example of ciborium in the church of St. Andrew the Apostle built under Pope Symmachus (598-614). It is indicative that the ciborium (riburium) of pure silver and a confessio89 weighing 120 lbs. were jointly constructed and there is a legend that the body of the Apostle Andrew at the time was in Constantinople, and that no relic of his was brought to Rome until the time of Gregory the Great.90 This kind of a ciborium represents the new trend in the use of altar canopy structures, since it introduced a “symbolic confession” which held no actual relic of the Apostle but which might have contained brandea from his tomb, representing his spiritual presence and potency. In some cases, such as in the example of St. Martin of Tours in the early sixth century, instead of brandea, ampoulae containing oil, which were available at the martyr’s tomb represented a symbolic confession, sheltered jointly with the altar by silver ciborium.91

In the case of the St. Peter’s church, the raising platform

82 St. Germanus 59.
83 St. Germanus 59.
84 Hagia Euphemia was the fifth century secular triclinium converted into the church in the sixth century. Relics of St. Euphemia were translated from Chalcedon in the early seventh century and deposited in the church. More in: Mathews Early Churches 61-7.
85 “And as for the treasure of this church-the [vessels of] gold and silver and precious stones which the Emperor Justinian has dedicated here—it is impossible to give an exact account of all of them. I shall allow my readers to form an estimate by means of a single example. That part of the church which is especially sacred and accessible to priests only—it is called sanctuary—exhibits forty thousand pounds of silver.” Procopious, Buildings I, 1, 65, 28-9.
87 Taft 45-75, with further references.
88 The burying of the relics in the crypt in the churches of the period and in the area of Constantinopolitan influence is recorded in cases of the churches of St. John in the Studios monastery (mid-fifth century), Chalkoprateia, and the Hebdom, to name but a few. More in: Mathews Early Churches 67.
89 Confessio is the term for the resting place of martyrs as confessors of the Faith.
90 Gregory the Great probably brought the arm of St. Andrew. Molly Teasdale Smith, “Development” 379-414, with references.
of the apse and the area in front of it, which incorporated the Apostle’s tomb, were radically re-arranged at the end of the sixth century to fit both liturgical practice and the purpose of veneration of the relics (Figures 2, 9). The altar with its ciborium on four porphyry columns was placed over the tomb, while the six vine-scroll columns from previous ciborium were moved to form an iconostasis-like screen across the front of the chancel, following the Byzantine sanctuary furnishing employed earlier in Constantinople. The Eucharist rite was done according to clerical and laity rank. The Pope received communion himself in his cathedra in the apse (presbyterium), and then the bishops and priests according to their dignity, approached the Pope from sanctuary to receive from him the Eucharistic bread, while the archdeacon was distributing the Wine. The Communion for the laity was performed in the areas adjacent to the sanctuary (senatorium and matroneum). In front of those spaces was the solea-schola which principally figured as processional area. The whole liturgical rite as it was rendered in Constantinople was a visual representation of the idea that the Saviour comes to save us. The veneration of relics was also very important and it was “reachable” to everyone, clergy or laity alike.

The veneration of the relics and objects intimately associated with them before a shrine, a reliquary, or a tomb, remain intense; very often they were placed for display on the ciborium-like structures, located somewhere in the church independently of the altar space. The custom was especially intense in the Byzantine sphere. Before the eighth century the perception of the Eucharist was predominantly anagogically focused on the contemplation of the realities behind the visible realm. With the advent of Iconoclasm denying the possibility of any pictorial rendering of Christ, and understanding the cult of icons and relics as idolatry, the Eucharist was proclaimed as the only true “icon” of Christ. The commentaries of St. Germanus re-evaluated and equilibrated the outer forms of the liturgy with the spiritual dimensions of the rite. Moreover, the liturgy remained the memorial of Christ’s sacrifice, including the accomplishment of the old Law, the anticipation of the celestial liturgy. After the Iconoclastic controversy and the triumph of Iconophiles, the realistic images and representations of sacred mysteries were very often employed, replacing the idealized, symbolical images from the pre-Iconoclastic period. By the ninth and tenth centuries, the post-Iconoclastic shift marked the entry of the liturgical themes in the painting program of the apse and subsidiary chapels usually dedicated to the saints. Besides the actual altar ciborium as the liturgical furnishing, painted representations of the altar ciborium within Eucharistic themes became very common by the eleventh century. Therefore, the visual symbols of the Old Covenant remained the essential elements in the proclamation of the New Covenant during the Middle Ages.

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92 Ward-Perkins 469-89.
93 Ward-Perkins 469-89.
94 Ward-Perkins 469-89.
96 It is possible that members of the ruling class and clergy might be able to enter the shrine with the saint’s relics while the public might only come into the “presence” of the saint in front of the shrine as was a custom in Constantinople and Thessaloniki. However, in common everyone could take the shrine as a proof of the regular supernatural presence of the Saint in the city. More about the different levels of being in “touch” with the saint’s relics see: Robin Cormack, “The Making of a Patron Saint: The Powers of Art and Ritual in Byzantine Thessaloniki,” Themes of Unity in Diversity, Acts of the XXVIth International Congress of the History of Art, ed. Irvin Lavin (1986): 547-55.
97 With the exception of the relics of Demetrios which were deposited in the shrine under the ciborium in the St. Demetrios church in Thessaloniki, and of Nicholas which remained in Myra until they were taken to Bari and deposited in the church ciborium of St. Nicholas in Bari, all important relics of the Eastern saints were translated to Constantinople. Walter 145, with references. About the silver ciborium for St. Demetrios cult see: Cormack 547-55.
98 St. Germanus 48-52.
99 St. Germanus 48-52.
[above] Figure 1. Pola casket, front panel, ivory, 5th century, Gabineto Fotografico Nazionale, Rome. Reprinted with the permission of Yale University Press.

[right] Figure 2. St. Peter's Shrine, Reconstruction drawing of the 5th century shrine, reproduced from J.B. Ward-Perkins, Studies in Roman and Early Christian Architecture (Pindar Press, 1994).


Figure 6. Ashburnham Pentateuch, M.S nouv.acq.lat. 2334 fol 76 recto, late 6th or 7th century, probably Italy. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale. Reprinted with permission of Yale University Press.

Figure 7. Inlaid column, 6th century, Hagia Euphemia, Istanbul Archaeological Museum, no. 5078. Reproduced with the kind permission of Professor Thomas Mathews.