

Wax Embedding as a Method for Preservation of Body Relics Used by the Orthodox Church

Nikola Tomov^{1}, Januarius (Yanko) Dzhangozov^{2, 3}*

1 Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

2 Archimandrite, Bulgarian Orthodox Church – Patriarchate of Bulgaria

*3 Department of Historical and Practical Theology, Faculty of Orthodox Theology,
St. Cyril and St. Methodius University, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria*

* Corresponding author email: tomovmd@gmail.com

Body relics of saints are important objects of veneration in the Orthodox Church. Regardless if they are considered incorrupt, practical reasons dictate that they should be protected from external influence, which may lead to their damage or destruction. This is especially true in cases when small fragments from a body are displayed to the faithful in a reliquary. The practice of the Orthodox Church has adopted the placement of such fragments in blocks of pure wax or wax-containing mixture. Per se this constitutes an impregnation, the last stage of a mummification/plastination process, following after dehydration and fixation. Herein we analyze the practice of wax embedding as a final step of preservation, known since antiquity, and remaining principally unchanged due to its efficacy.

Keywords: embedding, wax, relics, body preservation

Introduction

Holy relics occupy a special place in Christian ritual. Ever since the birth of the Church remains of martyrs and saints were venerated by the faithful, and valued more than treasures, as documented in the writings of St John Damascene [2]. Since the Second council of Nicaea (787 AD) relics were no longer just objects of veneration, but also a necessity for consecrating an altar to celebrate the Eucharist on [6].

The growing number of churches and the requirement to use a piece of the relics of a saint for the altar table gave rise to a practice of preservation of such relics by embedding them in a wax medium. This method has been widespread ever since, and is used for preservation of various relics in altars and reliquaries.

The use of wax embedding

Relics in altars

Canon VII of the Second council of Nicaea requires that a relic of a martyr be built in any altar table used for consecration of the Eucharist [6]. Whole bodies, regardless of their state of preservation, have been subsequently divided into pieces and distributed throughout the Christian world. The sacred texts call for the relic used for consecration to be enclosed in the altar table itself [5]. Usually, a mixture of beeswax and other ingredients would be used for that. This mixture is called wax-mastic, ceromasticum, or, in the Slavic tradition, voskomastik. Apart from wax and mastic, this cement-like substance includes myrrh, aloes, frankincense, rose oil, and perhaps marble dust, which are boiled together before being poured over the relics. Wax-mastic is used not only for sealing of relics, but historically also as glue, fixing the top of the altar table to its stipes [4].

Although relics would normally be built in the altar table itself, pieces of cloth with relics sewn in them are also used. Those cloth pieces are called Antimensia (from the Greek: ἀντιμῆσιον, „instead of the table“). The Eucharist is then celebrated on top of the antimension, which itself contains a relic, embedded in a small piece of wax. The procedure of relic embedding is similar to the one used in altar consecration and involves pouring of hot wax (or wax-mastic, fragrant gum, oil) over them [4, 6].

Relics in reliquaries

Pieces of relics are not used exclusively in the altars. Many of them are available for veneration of the faithful in reliquaries. Particles of various sizes are enclosed in boxes and containers, often adorned with precious materials. Commonly the relic pieces, small enough to be lost or being prone to disintegration, are pressed in small disks of wax or wax-mastic. Examples of relics kept in this fashion can be seen in thousand churches, as we show on Fig. 1 and 2. Often no additional protection is placed on top of the wax disks.

Wax-mastic is particularly useful for preparation of relics for display. According to the proportion of the ingredients, it should remain flexible and adhesive, easily workable with the heat of the hands [4]. The soft texture allows the relic to be pressed easily in the small disk. Furthermore, wax-mastic should have constant properties in different ambient temperatures. It is supposed not to melt in the heat of the summer or to crack with the cold of the winter [4].



Fig. 1. Wooden box reliquary with relics of multiple saints, kept at the Monastery of the Seven Altars, Bulgaria. Relic pieces of different size, shape, and condition are seen, but all are preserved by embedding in wax disks, without further protection.



Fig. 2. Bronze reliquary with relics of St. Charalambos (left), Sts. Cosmas and Damian (middle) and St. Simeon of Samokov (right), kept at Gigintsi Monastery, Bulgaria. The relic pieces are embedded in wax, and placed in slots in the bronze inlay, without being covered.

Discussion and conclusions

The century-long practice of the Church to keep relics inside containers or pieces, filled with wax and/or other resinous media, is a fine example of impregnation. Impregnation, or the soaking of the tissue with different chemical compounds, is the final stage of the process of mummification [8]. Together with impregnation, the aetheric oils and plant resins, included in the recipe for wax-mastic, might also act as fixatives. Combined, those two properties of the embedding medium grant that the tissue piece can remain unchanged over a long period of time, as it is shown uncountable times. Although it was previously noted, that enclosing relics in wax or wax-mastic serves the purpose to protect them from turning into dust and being lost [1, 3], herein we originally interpret this practice as a form of intentional preservation.

The essence of the process of wax embedding is no different from the one of the final stage of mummification or modern day plastination. The steps are closely followed: fixation and dehydration (in the single stage of desiccation), followed by impregnation with a polymer. Despite that the materials used slightly differ, the process is just one of the many variants of a well-known protocol for preservation of biological tissues [7].

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