

Breathing Matter. Early Christian Ivory Pyxides between Scholarly Traditions and Premodern Sensory Technologies

Abstract

While recent scholarship has begun to question the long-held assumption that early Christian ivory pyxides served primarily as Eucharistic vessels, their alternative functions remain underexplored. This study reassesses their use by combining material, technological, and cross-cultural analyses, offering a methodological framework applicable beyond late antique Christian art. By examining evidence ranging from Egyptian cosmetic boxes to Islamic containers, we highlight a long-standing tradition of using ivory to hold medicinal and cosmetic substances, particularly unguents and semi-liquids. The inscribed Treviglio pyxis in Berlin provides crucial material proof of this non-Eucharistic function in Christian contexts. Furthermore, to address structural doubts regarding the material's porosity and the composite bases of most pyxides, we demonstrate how these vessels were effectively made watertight using internal linings and beeswax seals. Ultimately, we argue that some late antique Christian pyxides were designed to contain and dispense oils and unguents at key ritual thresholds: baptism, healing, and funerary rites. By reframing these objects as functional containers within a broader economy of cosmetic packaging, this article connects art history with material science and sensory studies, issuing a call for future empirical verification through targeted residue analysis.