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Preliminary communication
Prethodno priopćenje

UDC / UDK:
27-144:[73:27-526(569.1)]"04/06"

DOI:
10.17685/Peristil.67.3

Received / Primljeno:
2. 2. 2024.

Accepted / Prihvaćeno:
27. 9. 2024.



Unveiling the Holy Trinity: Symbolic Depictions on Syrian Sarcophagi Reliquaries

Otkrivanje Svetog Trojstva: simbolički prikazi na sirijskim sarkofazima-relikvijarima

ABSTRACT

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has long been central to Christian theology, prompting substantial debate and evolving interpretations over the centuries. Early theologians were instrumental in shaping the understanding of the Trinity, emphasizing both the unity and distinctiveness of its divine persons. This article delves into the theological progression of the Trinity, tracing its doctrinal evolution across various church councils. It also explores how early Christian art, particularly sarcophagi reliquaries from Syria adorned with concentric circles, crosses, and other symbols, visually communicated the Trinitarian principles of unity and distinctiveness.

KEYWORDS

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, Holy Trinity, reliquaries, symbolic representations, Divine Essence

APSTRAKT

Doktrina Svetog Trojstva dugo je bila središnje pitanje kršćanske teologije, potičući rasprave i nova tumačenja kroz stoljeća. Rani su teolozi imali ključnu ulogu u oblikovanju njezina razumijevanja, naglašavajući istodobno jedinstvo i posebnost triju božanskih osoba. Ovaj članak istražuje teološki razvoj doktrine Trojstva, prateći njezinu evoluciju kroz različite crkvene sabore. Posebna se pozornost posvećuje ranoj kršćanskoj umjetnosti, osobito sirijskim sarkofazima-relikvijarima ukrašenima koncentričnim krugovima, križevima i drugim simbolima, koji vizualno prenose načela jedinstva i različitosti Svetog Trojstva.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

Nicejsko-carigradsko vjerovanje, Sveto Trojstvo, relikvijari, simbolički prikazi, Božanska bit

Introduction to the Concept of the Trinity

The Holy Trinity is a pivotal Christian doctrinal belief that affirms one eternal God who exists in three coeternal, coequal divine persons, each distinguished by unique characteristics. These hypostases are God the Father, God the Son ‘Jesus Christ’, and God the Holy Spirit, meaning one God in three divine persons ‘hypostases.’ God has one undivided essence, unified in eternal and everlasting oneness. There was never a time when the Father existed without the Son, nor was there ever a moment without the Spirit. Therefore, God has existed eternally with three unified hypostases constituting one God. These three members of the Godhead are individual persons, each is equally and entirely divine. These hypostases have distinct functions and roles, with certain actions traditionally attributed to each: the Father creates, chooses, and calls; the Son redeems; and the Holy Spirit renews and sanctifies.

Theological Debates and the Evolution of the Doctrine of the Trinity

In the early Christian church, significant theological debates arose regarding the nature of God and the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹ Early Christians sought to reconcile their belief in one God with the divine nature attributed to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, leading to various interpretations and conflicting doctrines.

One of the earliest challenges was Modalism, which emerged in the early 3rd century. Modalism taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons but different modes or aspects of one God. This view was intended to preserve the oneness of God but was criticized for denying the distinctiveness of the three persons of the Trinity.² Around the same time, theologian Origen advanced the idea of the subordination of the three divine persons, proposing that the Holy Spirit is less than the Son, and the Son is less than the Father. This view closely resembled Arianism.³ Arianism, named after Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria, claimed that Christ was a created being, distinct and subordinate to God the Father, not coeternal with the Father,⁴ and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.⁵

These debates, which threatened the church’s understanding of the Trinity, highlighted the need for a more coherent and unified theological framework to articulate the Christian understanding of the Trinity, particularly in addressing Arianism, led to the convening of the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

Before examining the councils that shaped the doctrine of the Trinity, it is crucial to recognize the contributions of Tertullian 160–240 AD, one of the earliest theologians

to thoroughly explore this doctrine. Tertullian was the first Latin writer to use the term ‘Trinitas’ to describe the three persons of the Godhead, making a decisive impact on orthodox theology. He articulated a unified divine Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—while emphasizing their unity of essence ‘ousia’. Tertullian explained that the Son is ‘of the essence of the Father’ and the Holy Spirit is ‘from the Father,’ asserting one essence for the three. His significant contribution to Trinitarian doctrine included the use of the terms ‘substance’ (substantia) and ‘person’ (personae) to clarify the biblical presentation of the Godhead and its distinct persons.⁶

He described the ‘Logos’ as distinct from the Father in person but not in essence and referred to the Holy Spirit as ‘the third person.’⁷ These terms had a lasting impact on the language of Christian theology used to define and defend the Trinity. Tertullian’s influence is evident in the Council of Nicaea and the formulation of the Trinitarian doctrine, reflecting his distinctions. The Council of Nicaea in 325 was a crucial turning point in the Trinitarian controversy. It rejected Arianism and declared that the Son is ‘homoousios’ (of the same substance) with the Father, thereby affirming the co-equality and co-eternity of the Son with the Father.⁸ The Nicene Creed, established at this council, became a foundational element of Christian orthodoxy. Nonetheless, this did not completely settle all theological issues or eradicate Arianism, which continued to persist and adapt in various forms.

After the Council of Nicaea, the church continued to confront with Trinitarian and Christological issues. The original Nicene Creed required further elaboration, especially concerning the Holy Spirit, whose divinity was not clearly defined in the initial formulation. The First Council of Constantinople in 381 addressed these concerns, expanding and refining the Nicene Creed. This council affirmed the divinity of the Holy Spirit, declaring that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and is worshiped and glorified alongside the Father and the Son.⁹

The revised creed, commonly known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed due to its origins in these two councils, reflected a more advanced understanding of the Trinity. It incorporated the theological insights of influential figures such as Athanasius of Alexandria, who played a crucial role in the development and defense of Trinitarian doctrine. He dedicated much of his life to defending the Nicene faith against Arianism and other heresies. Athanasius convened the Synod of Alexandria, which explicitly declared that the Holy Spirit is not a created being

and is consubstantial (of the same substance) with the Father and the Son. Additionally, the synod clarified the Christological terms ‘person’ and ‘substance,’ facilitating the formulation of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity as ‘three persons in one substance.’¹⁰ The Cappadocian Fathers: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, also played crucial roles in articulating and defending the doctrine of the Trinity. They clarified the distinctions between the three divine persons of the Trinity and defined their relationships: the Father as the sole unbegotten person, the Son as eternally begotten from the Father, and the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father.¹¹ While Western theologians emphasized the unity of the Trinity, viewing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God possessing a single essence and identical attributes, a notable divergence arose between the Eastern and Western churches, with the Western Church asserting that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.¹²

Despite the progress made by the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, ongoing debates persisted, especially regarding the nature of Christ’s incarnation. The Council of Ephesus in 431 addressed the controversy initiated by Nestorianism, which suggested a separation between Christ’s divine and human natures. The council affirmed the unity of Christ’s person and proclaimed the Virgin Mary as Theotokos, meaning ‘God-bearer,’ thereby reinforcing the belief in Christ’s complete divinity and humanity.¹³

While the Council of Chalcedon in 451 marked a defining moment in the development of Christological and Trinitarian doctrine. Building on the foundations laid by earlier councils, Chalcedon offered a detailed explanation of the relationship between Christ’s divine and human natures. The Chalcedonian Definition declared that Christ is one person in two natures—fully divine and fully human—without confusion, change, division, or separation.¹⁴

This council brought together the theological insights from the Nicene and Constantinopolitan Creeds, along with the Christological clarifications from Ephesus and the contributions of key figures such as Cyril of Alexandria and Leo the Great.¹⁵ The resulting creed, commonly known as the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed, though finalized at Chalcedon, represents the culmination of more than a century of theological development and debate.

With the establishment of these foundational theological principles, early Christians sought various means to communicate and teach these profound truths. Since its inception, early Christians have employed

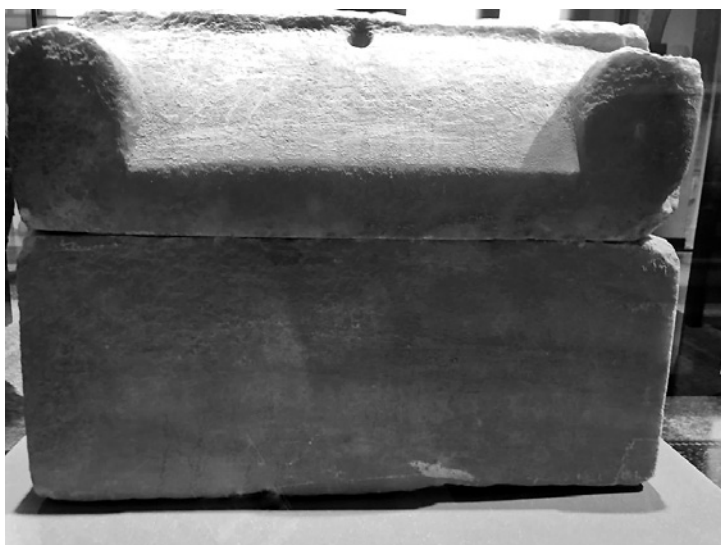
art as a means to teach people about the faith and inspire them. Christian artists were profoundly influenced by the Trinity, symbolizing it in various ways over the centuries. Initial representations of the Trinity often included the portrayal known as the ‘Old Testament Trinity,’ depicting the three angels who visited Abraham.¹⁶ Nevertheless, notable examples from the 4th century, found in the Dogmatic Sarcophagus, preserved in the Vatican Museum, are considered to be the earliest depictions of the three divine persons in human form.

Definition of Sarcophagus Reliquary and Its Iconography

When considering the depiction of the Holy Trinity on reliquaries, particularly on sarcophagi reliquaries—the focal point of our discussion—we must explore how early Christians conveyed their belief in the Trinity through artistic representation. Prior to exploring this, it is crucial to understand the concept of a reliquary, particularly a sarcophagus reliquary, akin to the one being examined.

A reliquary serves as a container for sacred relics of holy figures, safeguarding and sometimes displaying them to believers.¹⁷ These revered remains belong to saints and martyrs, individuals believed to have ascended directly to heaven.¹⁸ This connection allowed individuals to engage with the divine by touching, smelling, or visually encountering fragments of saints.¹⁹

Reliquaries in the form of sarcophagi stand out as one of the most significant and recognizable types. They typically feature a rectangular structure with a lid, crafted from various materials, prominently stone, and varying in size from small boxes around 20 cm to larger coffins. These reliquaries share a common feature: a shallow internal cavity designed to house relics, complemented by a movable lid. The lids come in diverse shapes, including barrel-shaped, gabled-pitched roof designs, and flat lids, with some featuring acroteria and others not. This distinction is especially evident with flat lids, where acroteria are often absent.²⁰ Several of these reliquaries are designed with conduits that enable the flow of liquids, typically oil, though water is also possible. The process begins by pouring these liquids into the compartment through a specific opening in the lid called the libation aperture. This design ensures that the liquids flow over the saint’s remains housed within the compartment. Eventually, the collected liquids exit through an outlet positioned below, known as the exit aperture. The resulting oil, termed contact relics, was used by believers for healing and protection purposes.²¹



1a

Reliquary adorned with Greek crosses and concentric circles, 5th–6th c., gypsum, Neues Museum, Berlin (Inv. No. 10/87).

Relikvijar ukrašen grčkim križevima i koncentričnim krugovima, 5. – 6. st., gips, Neues Museum–Berlin (inv. br. 10/87) (photo / foto: Dana Khouli)

1b

The lid's reverse side displays the libation opening

Stražnja strana poklopca s otvorom za lijevanje tekućine (libaciju)

(photo / foto: D. Khouli)

These reliquaries typically date from the late 4th to the 7th century, aligning with the widespread acceptance and practice of relic veneration during this period. Specifically in Syria, they are generally dated from the 5th to the early 7th century.²² Although some studies suggested that a few Syrian reliquaries may predate the 5th century, for example, the Palmyra reliquary (Fig. 2), previously dated to the late 4th and early 5th century,²³ more recent research and contextual evidence indicate that it is contextually dated to the 6th century based on its findspot within a martyrium church of that period (the supporting reference appears later in the article).

Sarcophagi reliquaries can showcase diverse iconography, ranging from intricate and symbolically profound representations that mirror the religious convictions and practices of the communities that produced them, to simpler motifs. The choice of iconography depends on the era, geographical location, and the religious and cultural influences on these communities. One significant symbol found on sarcophagi reliquaries can be interpreted as representative of the Holy Trinity.

As we delve into the representation of the Holy Trinity among early Christians, particularly in Syria, through sarcophagi reliquaries, the circle emerges as a significant symbol. Widely acknowledged as a symbol of eternity and perpetual unity,²⁴ the circle carries deep meaning in Christian iconography. It embodied the concept of eternity, symbolizing something without a distinct beginning or end—akin to the divine essence of God as the Alpha (Α) and Omega (Ω) letters. These first and last letters of the Greek alphabet signify that Jesus is the beginning and the end.²⁵ The early Christians embraced the circle as a powerful representation of the divine.²⁶

When considering the concurrent use of multiple circles, particularly when there are three, it becomes evident that these circles are not merely decorative. The consistent use of three circles, rather than any other number, indicates intentionality.

In Christian theology, the number three holds profound significance, particularly in the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, the deliberate choice to use three concentric circles likely symbolizes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If the circles were purely decorative, we would expect variations in their number, as seen in other artistic patterns. Furthermore, the repeated use of three circles across various artifacts suggests a symbolic meaning rather than random decoration. This choice aligns with the era's emphasis on Trinitarian doctrine.

Thus, the three concentric circles can symbolize the Holy Trinity, with each enclosing a smaller area to represent a distinct hypostasis: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This arrangement highlights their unity and interconnectedness while emphasizing the distinct identities of each person, reflecting the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. The varying sizes signify the unique aspects of each person while still maintaining their essential unity and equality in divinity. This arrangement suggests a hierarchical relationship based on function rather than essence, with all sharing the same center to emphasize unified divine nature.

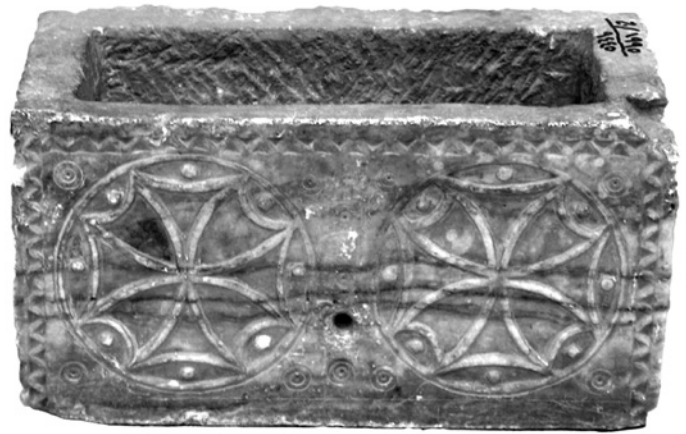
This concept connects to Tertullian, whose focus on the unity and distinction within the Trinity,²⁷ can be symbolized by these circles. Each circle represents one person of the Trinity, with their common center highlighting their unity in substance. Similarly, as mentioned, the Cappadocian Fathers, advanced Trinitarian doctrine by defining the three persons sharing one essence and stressing the relational nature of the Trinity.²⁸ Their teachings on the interconnected and unified nature of the Trinity align well with the imagery of concentric circles, which visually represent the relational unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This aligns with the Nicene Creed, which was formulated to counter Arianism and affirm the divinity and coeternity of Jesus with the Father.

Arianism, however, would be less likely to use a motif that strongly suggests unity and equality within the Trinity, as Arian theology emphasizes a hierarchical relationship with the Son subordinate to the Father. Consequently, the imagery of concentric circles aligns with orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, not Arianism, which undermines the unity and equality represented by the circles.

Thus, using three concentric circles as a representation of the Trinity is fitting and reflects early Christian theological ideas about God being three distinct persons yet sharing one essence.

Examples and Symbolism

Several reliquaries adorned with three concentric circles have been revealed in Syria, one notable example being discovered in Apamea, dates back to the 5th – 6th century (Fig. 1a). This particular reliquary takes the form of a small box-like sarcophagus made of gypsum, with a two-sided sloping movable lid, featuring four small triangular acroteria positioned at the corners. On the backside of the lid, there is a high filling opening (Fig. 1b), while on the decorated front of the box, there is an outflow opening in the lower area. On the edges of the lid and basin of the reliquary, there



2

Reliquary adorned with two crosses in the form of Maltese crosses and concentric circles, 6th century (previously dated to the late 4th – early 5th century), alabaster, formerly displayed at the Palmyra Museum

Relikvijar s malteškim križevima i koncentričnim krugovima, 6. st., alabaster, nekada izložen u Muzeju u Palmiri (source / izvor: Michel, "Un coffret-reliquaire provenant de la nécropole Saint-Seurin de Bordeaux," 288, fig. 12)

3

Reliquary adorned with a cross in the shape of Maltese cross, concentric circles, and various other symbols, 6th – 7th c., limestone, Tartous Museum (Inv. No: 602) Relikvijar s malteškim križem, koncentričnim krugovima i drugim simbolima, 6. – 7. st., vapnenac, Muzej u Tartusu (inv. br. 602), (photo / foto: D. Khouli)



4
Cippus reliquary adorned with architectural elements, featuring three arches and accompanied with crosses, 5th – 7th c., limestone, Latakia Museum
Relikvijar tipa *cippus* ukrašen arhitektonskim elementima s tri luka i križevima, 5. – 7. st., vapnenac, Muzej u Latakiji (photo / foto: D. Khouli)

5
Reliquary adorned with architectural features such as arches, complemented by a depiction of an hourglass, 5th – 6th c., basalt, Hama Museum (Inv. No: 419)
Relikvijar s arhitektonskim elementima poput lukova, s prikazom pješanog sata, 5. – 6. st., bazalt, Muzej u Hami (inv. br. 419) (photo / foto: D. Khouli)

is a decorative band adorned with small rectangular shapes that have been engraved with tiny stripes inside. On the front side of the basin, positioned centrally, two Greek crosses with open ends are enclosed within medallions. One of these medallions displays a sequence of triangular shapes alternating between pointing inward and outward. Concentric circles fill the negative spaces at the angles of each cross. With one next to the lower edge of the two front acroteria. The second reliquary resembles a miniature sarcophagus made of alabaster, though its lid is missing. A decorative band adorned with small rectangular shapes engraved with tiny stripes frames the front's elements, which include two crosses in the shape of Maltese cross, each enclosed within its own medallion. The Maltese cross, identified by its eight-pointed star shape, symbolizes the eight beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12). This symbol is a variation of the Greek cross, with additional arms forming eight points that narrow towards the center.²⁹ Often encircled,³⁰ the Maltese cross is closely associated with the Knights Hospitaller,³¹ and is widely recognized as a variation of the Christian cross. An outflow opening is positioned in the lower area between the two medallions. Surrounding the medallions and the central outflow, there are several sets of three concentric circles (Fig. 2). The reliquary is likely dated to the 6th century and was found in the martyrion of a 6th century church.³² The third reliquary showcases a distinctive design with three concentric circles, differing from the small circles seen in previous examples (Fig. 3). Shaped like a rectangular sarcophagus of limestone missing its lid, this reliquary has an outflow opening on one of its short sides, designed to resemble the Holy Chalice with handles for collecting sacred liquids.³³ The front wall features a cross in the shape of Maltese cross within a larger double circle in relief. Each corner of the main wall includes an additional circle, with decorative elements resembling small bundles positioned between these orthogonal circles.

In the bottom left corner is a simple empty circle, symbolizing the initial state of emptiness and void before God's creative work begins, reflecting the pre-creation state (Genesis 1:2). This concept transitions into (Genesis 1:3–5), where God creates light on the first day, separating light from darkness. The upper circles further illustrate this progression: one featuring a sun and another a crescent moon, symbolizing light and darkness respectively. The fourth circle portrays three large circles, the middle adorned with small sunken circles, symbolizing the Holy Trinity. Together, these symbols reflect God's creative power and reveal His

triune nature as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, the progression from the empty circle to the representation of light and the Trinity emphasizes God's transformative creative act and His revelation in creation. It is noteworthy that the appearance of three concentric circles is not limited to Syrian reliquaries. Similar patterns can be found in other reliquaries, such as those from Hammam Dalaa (Aïn Beida, Algeria), where the use of three circles is also observed. The repeated use of three circles across different regions and artifacts emphasizes their intentional and symbolic representation.³⁴

The other sarcophagi reliquaries to be discussed in the article present an alternative depiction of the Holy Trinity. Instead of employing three concentric circles, these reliquaries use architectural elements that collectively serve as iconography symbolizing the Holy Trinity within a layout that mirrors the structure of Syrian three-aisled churches. These churches are characterized by a central nave and two side aisles, represented by three rectangles. They also feature three apses: a central apse at the end of the main nave and two smaller apses at the ends of the side aisles, depicted by three arches which emphasize the unity and coequality of the Trinity.

Interpreted differently, these images could be seen as representations of three church doors, a symbolic tradition in Syrian churches that embodies the Holy Trinity. The central door, usually the largest, is often associated with God the Father,³⁵ echoing Jesus' words, "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). This architectural tradition profoundly shaped the iconography of sarcophagi reliquaries, where the Trinity is depicted through such symbolic representations. This influence can be observed in two specific reliquaries.

The first is a limestone reliquary from Latakia (Fig. 4), designed in the shape of a cippus reliquary, although it is missing its lid. Cippus reliquaries resemble sarcophagi reliquaries in shape but are distinct due to their narrower width and considerably greater height compared to their length, with some even lacking acroteria.³⁶ This architectural layout is depicted on the front wall of the basin in this reliquary, with each arch adorned with a cross—one on the central arch and one on each flanking arch to the right and left. At the center of this design, the central rectangle features a niche adorned with a cross, which functions as the exit aperture for the oil to flow out. This oil was poured from the top of the reliquary, passing through the compartment that housed the relics directly to the exit aperture. Additionally, two crosses are engraved to the left and right of this niche.



6a

Reliquary adorned with three crosses and tiny concentric circles, 5th – 7th c., gypsum, Tartous Museum
Relikvijar s tri križa i sitnim koncentričnim krugovima, 5. – 7. st., gips, Muzej u Tartusu
(photo / foto: Balázs Major)

6b

The lid's reverse side displays a depiction of a church door, symbolizing the boundary between the sacred relics within and those who interact with the reliquary
Stražnja strana poklopca prikazuje vrata crkve, koja simboliziraju granicu između svetih relikvija u unutrašnjosti i onih koji s relikvijarom stupaju u kontakt
(photo / foto: B. Major)

The second reliquary is crafted as an elongated rectangular basalt, with a two-sided sloping lid, bearing a distinct design akin to the aforementioned one (Fig. 5). This design incorporates a representation of three arches and columns, which may symbolize various interpretations such as the central nave and side aisles, or as previously noted, symbolically representing the three doors, each symbolizing the Holy Trinity, emphasizing the unity and interconnectedness of the three persons in one Godhead. The central area contains an exit aperture beneath its arch, flanked by two arrows on either side. Additionally, the reliquary features an hourglass, with the arrows possibly emphasizing the themes of time and death associated with the hourglass.³⁷ A Greek inscription is visible near the lower edge of the lid and the upper rim of the basin. The inclusion of the three crosses alone may also carry symbolic meaning related to the Holy Trinity. For instance, a reliquary of unknown origin takes the form of a gabled stone sarcophagus carved from a single piece of gypsum stone, resembling a hidden lid concealing the relic compartment within (Fig. 6a). The front wall of the basin is decorated with three crosses featuring open ends, and each angle of the cross is adorned with a tiny circle. The central cross is surrounded by a dotted circle, a motif likely inspired by the symbol of the sun, often representative of God the Father.³⁸ The four acroteria of the reliquary are adorned using the same technique of tiny circles, creating a distinct separation between the lid and the basin. The front wall of the lid is adorned with engraved circles containing crosses, featuring three such circles on each side. In the middle is the libation aperture, nearly at the center of the cross formed by the convergence of tiny circles. Adjacent to the aperture, there may have once been an omega symbol. On the opposite side of the lid, similar circle-and-cross decorations are found. In the center, a shape resembling a church door is carved using the same technique involving tiny circles. This symbolism of the church door signifies the boundary between the sacred and the profane, representing the division between the interior of the church and the outside world. It signifies the divide between the sacred relics within and the people who touch the reliquary, seeking purity (Fig. 6b).

Conclusion

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity evolved through intense theological debates and was solidified by significant contributions from early theologians and ecumenical councils. The concept of three coeternal, coequal persons in one God was crucial to maintaining Christian

orthodoxy. Early Christians communicated these profound truths through art, using symbols like concentric circles to represent the Trinity's unity and distinctiveness, as well as crosses and architectural elements. These representations, particularly on sarcophagi reliquaries, not only conveyed theological concepts but also served as a means of veneration and connection to the divine. The Trinity, as both a theological and artistic motif, remains a cornerstone of Christian belief, illustrating the faith's depth and complexity.

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SAŽETAK

Otkrivanje Svetog Trojstva: simbolički prikazi
na sirijskim sarkofazima–relikvijarima

Doktrina o Svetom Trojstvu zauzima ključno mjesto u kršćanskoj teologiji, potvrđujući vjerovanje u jednoga vječnog Boga u tri suvječne i istobitne božanske osobe: Boga Oca, Boga Sina i Boga Duha Svetoga. Svaka osoba, odnosno hipostaza, ima različitu ulogu, ali dijeli jednu božansku bit. Rana kršćanska Crkva suočila se s brojnim teološkim raspravama o naravi Trojstva, tako je modalizam Trojstvo tumačio kao različite načine očitovanja jednoga Boga, a arijanizam je Sina i Duha Svetoga smatrao podređenima Ocu. Ovi su sporovi kulminirali na Prvom nicejskom saboru 325. godine, na kojem je potvrđena jednakost Sina i Oca. Ranokršćanski teolozi, poput Tertulijana koji je skovao izraz *Trinitas*, te kapadokijski crkveni pisci i apologeti imali su presudnu ulogu u oblikovanju učenja o Trojstvu. Naglašavali su jedinstvo božanske biti i posebnost triju božanskih osoba, potvrđujući božanstvo Duha Svetoga uz Oca i Sina. Time su učvrstili temeljne postavke trojstvene doktrine. Nicejsko vjerovanje, formulirano na Nicejskom saboru, a kasnije dopunjeno na Prvom carigradskom saboru 381. godine, postalo je temelj ortodoksije, proglašavajući jednakost i božanstvo sve tri osobe Trojstva. Umjetnički prikazi, poput triju koncentričnih krugova i arhitektonskih elemenata u rasporedu crkava, pronađeni na sarkofazima–relikvijarima, služili su kao vizualni izrazi trojstvene doktrine, odražavajući njezina temeljna teološka načela. Takvi prikazi ne samo da ilustriraju ranokršćanske spoznaje o Bogu, već naglašavaju i ulogu umjetnosti u poučavanju i učvršćivanju vjerskih istina. Simbolična umjetnost na relikvijarima ističe duboku povezanost između teologije i vizualne kulture, nudeći vjernicima opipljivu vezu s božanskim. Stoga doktrina o Svetom Trojstvu opstaje kao vitalni i trajni aspekt kršćanske vjere, neprestano tumačen i izražavan kako kroz teološki diskurs, tako i kroz umjetnički prikaz.

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