A reliquary base
Northern France, Paris (?)
Late 13ᵗʰ century

16.5 x 14.3 x 12.3 cm; gilt-copper

Provenance
Collection of John Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913), New York, inv. P.M. 1463;
Collection of Thomas F. Flannery Jr. (1926-1980), Chicago, until;
His sale, Sotheby's New York, 1-2 December 1983, lot. 27;
Private collection, London

Condition
The centrepiece, likely a reliquary statue or display, has been lost. The gilding has rubbed in places to reveal the copper support beneath.

Description, Meaning, and Context
A gilt-copper base of a reliquary statue or case, of which an hexagonal plinth remains. This is flanked by a kneeling mitred figure in prayer - either a bishop or privileged abbot - and by a stylised architectural ensemble, walled and crenelated, likely signifying a city, fortress or monastery. The rectangular base is surrounded by a running gallery of gothic arches and rests on four couchant lions – a stylistic trope common in late thirteenth and fourteenth century French metalwork.

The piece's overall conception is reminiscent of that of a gold reliquary formerly in the treasury of the Abbey of Jaucourt, now in the Louvre, dated to 1340-60 – where a frame for a relic of the Holy Cross is held by two kneeling archangels (fig. 1). Comparable also is the design of the well-known reliquary of St Romanus, Bishop of Rouen, of Parisian production, dated to the third quarter of the thirteenth century, its monstrance also resting on a plinth erected on a rectangular architectural base (fig. 2). The use of adoring or venerating figures flanking the reliquary statue or case is recurrent in thirteenth and fourteenth century reliquaries of French production, and donor figures are known to take part in these scenographies; an example is the

remarkable Three Towers reliquary of c. 1370-90, in Aachen's Cathedral Treasury, where a donor in diaconal garb is shown kneeling in prayer before the central figure of Christ (fig. 3).

The missing centrepiece was likely a reliquary statue or monstrance-like display; the irregular profile of the subsisting rim appears more consistent with a draped figure, suggesting a display comparable to that of the well-known Virgin of Jeanne d'Evreux, now in the Louvre, which also rests on a rectangular base of architectural design borne by couchant lions (fig. 4). In this remarkable piece, the figure of the Virgin holds a lily-shaped reliquary, and the donor, albeit not visually represented, is commemorated in an inscription running around the base – directing us to the same sphere of individual or personalised relic cult.

The fortress or city iconography, on the other hand, is unparalleled in this context, and it is unclear whether it should be interpreted as the hagiographic attribute of St Barbara (a symbol of her imprisonment by the pagan Dioscorus, possibly signifying that this piece once contained a relic of the saint) or as referring to a foundation associated with the prelate figure on the right. The kneeling figure reveals a fine, if sober, treatment of the drapery folds, and a careful rendition of the hair and facial features, close to both the Parisian and Strasbourg schools. Its pose and the flow of the textile forms are lively, a naturalness reinforced by the gentle motion of the head towards the now-missing object of veneration.

The top surface of the reliquary base is decorated with a scrolling leafy vine on a finely hatched background. This incised decoration may indicate an earlier date than the examples discussed above, as it compares very closely in style to two gilt metal plaques of northern French production dated to the second half of the 13th century (fig. 5). These are particularly comparable to our piece in respect to the depth, irregularity and fluid treatment of the hatching and the thick and rather angular treatment of the foliate forms. Similar foliate forms on a finely hatched background are also present behind the figures of Saints Luke and John on the Saint Denis bookcover in the Bibliotèque Nationale de France (fig. 6), dated to the late 13th century and further suggesting that the present piece is of this date.
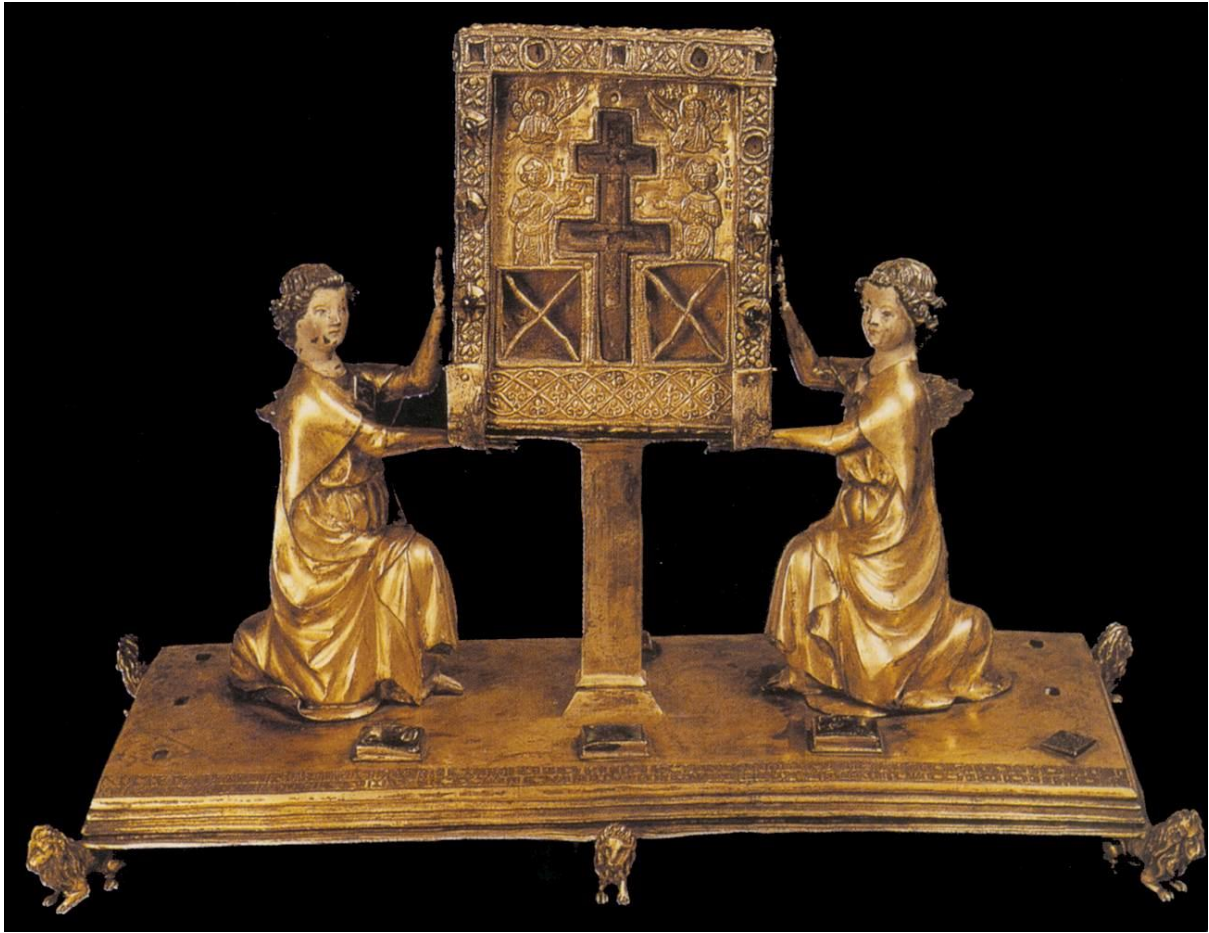
Fig. 1
Reliquary of the True Cross
French
1340-1360 structure, containing 12th century Byzantine reliquary case
Gold; 25 x 38 x 12 cm
Paris, Louvre (OA 6749)

Fig. 2
Reliquary of St Romanus
French
Third quarter of the 14th century
Gilded silver, ivory; 38.5 x 19 x 25 cm
Rouen, Cathedral Treasure

Fig. 3
Three Towers Reliquary
Northern French
1370 - 1390
Chased and gilded silver, enamel and gems, height 94 cm
Cathedral Treasury, Aachen

Fig. 4
Virgin of Jeanne d'Evreux
Paris
First half of the fourteenth century
Gilded silver, basse-taille enamel on gilded silver, stones and pearls, height 68 cm
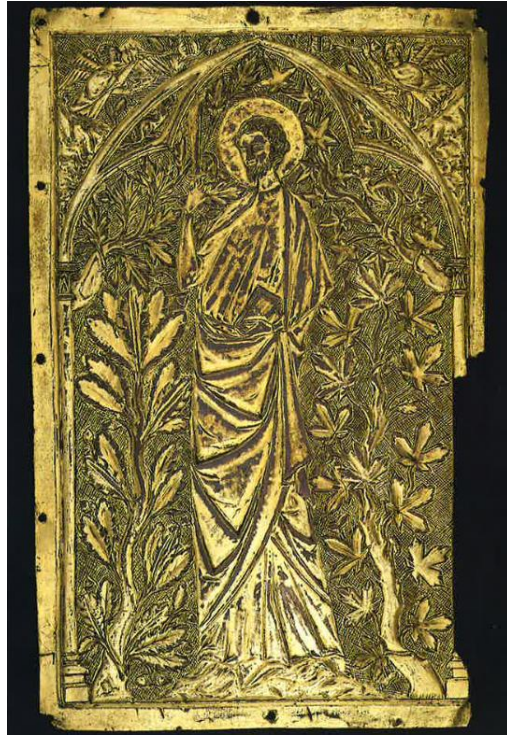Paris, Louvre (MR 342, MR 419)

Fig. 5 a-b
The Crucifixion and St. Bartholomew
Northern French
Second half 13th century
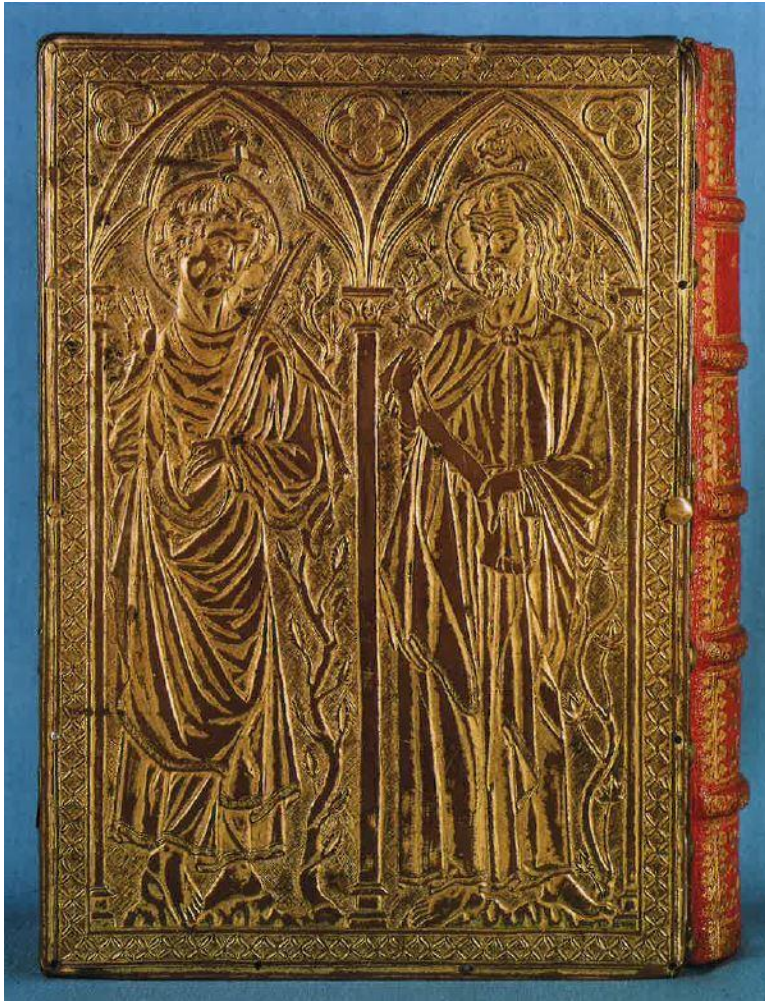London, British Museum (MLA 1906, 7-17 1 and 2)

Fig. 6
Bookcover with the Evangelists
Luke and John
Paris
Third quarter 13th century
Bibliotèque Nationale de
France, Ms. Lat. 9387