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Caskets of Silver and Ivory from Diverse Parts of the World: Strategic Collecting for an Iberian Treasury

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Abstract

By focusing on San Isidoro de León in the central Middle Ages, this study investigates the multiple meanings behind the presence of objects from other cultures in a royal-monastic treasury, suggesting a reconsideration of the paths by which such pieces arrived. The development of the Isidoran collection is reexamined through a close analysis of a charter recording the 1063 donation together with early thirteenth-century writings by Lucas of Tuy. Documentary evidence is further weighed against visual analysis and technical studies of several key pieces from the medieval collection. In particular, the Beatitudes Casket (now at the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid) is singled out to demonstrate how art historical, epigraphic, and historical research come together with carbon-14 testing, revealing that this object was assembled in a very different moment from those traditionally assumed.

Keywords

treasury – San Isidoro de León – 1063 donation – Lucas of Tuy – royal patronage – visual evidence – technical analysis

Supplementary Material



Figures 1a, b Scandinavian container for perfume (?), antler, Mammen style, c. 960–1000/
1025 [NB: the projecting element represents the bird's head, but the object is
displayed upside down for reasons of stability; ring included for scale]
photos: Therese Martin



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Figure 2 Silver Fatimid casket, 1044–1047
Museo de la Real Colegiata de San Isidoro de Leon,
photo: Therese Martin



Figure 3 Sicilian ivory set, 1120s?
Museo de la Real Colegiata de San Isidoro de Leon,
photo: Therese Martin



Figures 4a, b Crucifix of Fernando and Sancha, 1063?
Museo Arqueologico Nacional, photo: Therese Martin



Figure 5
Chalice of Urraca, c. 1067–1101
Museo de la Real Colegiata de San
Isidoro de Leon, photo: Therese Martin



Figure 6 Beatitudes Casket, oblique view, ivories from the late eleventh century (?)
Museo Arqueologico Nacional, photo: Therese Martin



Figure 7 Beatitudes Casket, Christian imagery, late eleventh century?
Museo Arqueologico Nacional, photo: Therese Martin



Figure 8 Beatitudes Casket, Arabic plaques, late eleventh century?
Museo Arqueologico Nacional, photo: Therese Martin



Figure 9 Silver Andalusí casket, turn of the twelfth century?
Museo Arqueológico Nacional, photo: Therese Martin