

Between León and the Levant: The Infanta Sancha's Altar as Material Evidence for Medieval History

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Abstract

In the Museo de la Real Colegiata de San Isidoro in León, Spain, an intriguing portable altar is on display. Its multicolored stone and long inscription detailing the material objects enshrined within invite an analysis of the artwork in terms of materiality and mobility. This article addresses the multiple questions raised by the altar, shifting away from a straightforward interpretation of patronage by Sancha of León-Castilla (ca. 1095–1159), whose name is inscribed on its face. Conceptualizing the altar as a multilayered object that can be placed within Sancha's network of connections facilitates our understanding of this exotic artifact between León and the Levant.

Keywords

Infanta Sancha – portable altar – materiality – exoticism – León – Levant

Supplementary Material



Figure 1 Portable Altar of the Infanta Sancha, 1144, 17.2 × 26.5 × 2.2 cm, silver and gilded silver, engraved with niello, breccia di Aleppo. Leon, Real Colegiata de San Isidoro, Inv. No. IIC-3-089-002-0008
Photo: Therese Martin



Figure 2 Portable Altar of the Infanta Sancha, front edge
Photo: Therese Martin



Figure 3 Portable Altar of the Infanta Sancha, inscription on the edges
 Photo: Therese Martin, design Jitske Jasperse



Figures 4a–b Portable Altar from Hildesheim, 1190–1200, 25.1 × 35.4 cm, engraved with vernis brun, red stone, gilt-copper, ivory, vellum under rock crystal. London, British Museum, museum number 1902,0625.1
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Figure 5 Lid of the Arca Santa, early twelfth century. Camara Santa, Oviedo Cathedral,
 93 × 119.8 × 9.5 cm
 Photo: Cesar Garcia de Castro Valdes



Figure 6 Cross of Fernando and Sancha (reverse), ca. 1063, 54.2 × 34 cm. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, nr. 52340
Photo: Therese Martin



Figures 7a–b Casket of Saints John the Baptist and Pelayo, late eleventh century, 31 × 48 × 26 cm. Leon, Real Colegiata de San Isidoro, Inv. No. IIC-3-089-002-0023
Photos: Therese Martin

