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## **Memory and Materiality in the Letters and Gifts Sent By Ansellus “de Turre” from Jerusalem to Paris, ca. 1120**

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This article looks at how the description of existing material elements (environments and objects) could be used to both cultivate past memories and create new memories for the future, with the ultimate goal of generating a sense of community between individuals who lived apart from each other. It will take as case-study two letters sent by Ansellus, then cantor of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, to the cathedral chapter of Notre-Dame in Paris around 1120, which attest in an exceptional way the various means which could be employed to reach this goal, from a skillful use of rhetoric to the sharing of gifts (in this case, of relics) and of knowledge connected, from the circulation of envoys to the establishment of a confraternity of prayer.

Questo articolo analizza come i riferimenti a elementi materiali esistenti (ambienti e oggetti) potessero essere usati a scopo memoriale, sia per coltivare memorie passate, sia per crearne di nuove. Prenderà come caso di studio due lettere inviate da Ansellus, allora cantore del Santo Sepolcro a Gerusalemme, al capitolo della cattedrale di Notre-Dame a Parigi, nel 1120, con l'obiettivo di sottolineare e rafforzare il suo legame con la comunità. Queste lettere attestano la varietà dei mezzi usati a questo scopo: dall'uso sapiente della retorica all'invio di doni preziosi (specificamente, reliquie) e alla condivisione di un patrimonio di conoscenze, fino alla circolazione di inviati e alla creazione di associazioni di preghiera.

Middle Ages, 12<sup>th</sup> century, Jerusalem, Paris, Letter-writing, Rhetoric, Memory, Gift-giving, Relics.

Medioevo, secolo XII, Gerusalemme, Parigi, epistolografia, retorica, memoria, doni, reliquie.

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## 1. Introduction

The Departmental Archives of France contain, in the folder ‘série K Monuments historiques: Cartons des rois’ two original letters which appear to be written in the same hand.<sup>1</sup> These letters were sent from Jerusalem to Paris at the beginning of the twelfth century, probably in 1120, by Ansellus (or Anselmus), sometimes called “de Turre” or “de Turre David”, who was then cantor of the Holy Sepulchre. They are addressed to the bishop of Paris, two archdeacons, the precentor, a deacon and the whole community of canons of Notre-Dame in Paris. The letters have so far been analyzed almost exclusively with the reference to the relic (two fragments believed to have once been part of the Holy Cross) which accompanied the first one,<sup>2</sup> and yet they deserve attention for much more than that, as I hope to demonstrate. In this article, I will look at how, in these letters (and in some others for the purpose of comparison), the description of existing material elements was used for mnemonic purposes, to both cultivate past memories and create new ones, with the ultimate goal of creating a sense of presence and community between individuals separated by a great distance.

This takes on particular significance if considered in the context of the newly founded Crusader states, in whose political, cultural and religious life the relationships with the places of origin of the conquerors obviously played a crucial role. One of the means through which these relationships were maintained was the circulation of men, letters and gifts. Relics associated with the holy Christian sites – especially Passion Relics – were particularly valued and often sent to Europe, contributing to the establishment of permanent devotional links across the Mediterranean. Recent studies which have focused on the theme of memory in the Crusades era have shown its relevance to understand the cultural hinterland of the crusader movement and of its aftermath, and have begun investigating the important role played by material objects in this sense.<sup>3</sup>

This represents a significant innovation in memory studies in the Middle Ages, which had analyzed the use of fictional mental images (for example,

<sup>1</sup> Paris, Archives Départementales de France K 21 A 1<sup>6</sup> and 1<sup>7</sup> (old AE/II/126 and AE/II/126). These two letters are described and transcribed in Giraud, Renault, and Tock, *Chartes originales*, as no. 2162 and no. 2167, available online via <http://www.cn-telma.fr/originaux/charte2162/> and <http://www.cn-telma.fr/originaux/charte2167/> (last accessed 27/5/2022). On the dating of the letter see Bresc-Bautier, *L'envoi de la relique, 387-97*. About Ansellus see Aspesi, “The Cantors,” 280-1.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard, “Quelques textes,” 423-6 for an early mention of the letters, a brief report of their content and a reflection on their significance, and Bresc-Bautier, *L'envoi de la relique, 387-97* for a targeted study which convincingly argued that they should be dated to 1120. Among the publications which mention these letters see Aspesi, “The Cantors,” 280-1; Dondi, *The Liturgy*, 58; Gaposchkin, “The Echoes,” 241; Toussaint, “Großer Schatz,” 284-5; Tessera, “Croce del Legato,” 153-6.

<sup>3</sup> Cassidy-Welch and Lester, “Memory and interpretation,” 225-36; Hahn, *Passion Relics*; Lester, “Remembrance of Things,” 73-94).

the Cherub’s wings) and mental architectures (for example, the mystic ark) for mnemonic purposes.<sup>4</sup> The reference to existing environments and objects for mnemonic purposes has more rarely been analyzed in a targeted way, especially for the Early and High Middle Ages. For the Late Middle Ages, it has for example been pointed out that the popular preacher Bernardino da Siena, while preaching in his hometown, referred to existing artworks (such as a painting of the Virgin Mary and the frescos recently painted by Lorenzetti) and even to material elements of the city, such as the window of the Podestà’s lodgings, the city’s squares or walls, to hold the audience’s attention and help people visualize and remember the things that he said.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, we should not oppose too rigidly the act of seeing an existing object or environment and that of visualizing, with the mind’s eye, a mental image, since existing material elements turned into mental images in the mind of the beholders, and triggered the visualization of other mental images (regardless of their origin); in addition, entirely fictional mental images could inspire the creation of actual works of art.<sup>6</sup> However, in this article I wish to explore how existing material objects and environments, and, more broadly, anything that could be perceived through the senses (for example, a procession, a chant or a smell) could be used as mnemonic cues. In particular, I hope to demonstrate that through his letters and gifts, Ansellus consciously strove to influence and shape the interconnected processes of sensory perception, formation of mental images and cultivation and memory-building for the present and future audiences of the letters and of the precious objects, with the ultimate goal of making himself virtually present in the community and in the church of Notre Dame.

This strategy was deployed in multiple ways. First, Ansellus recalled memories of the past which he shared with the addressees of the letter by referring to everyday elements of the life in the church of Notre Dame: more specifically, these references allowed him to imaginatively situate himself within the community during its daily life, past, present and future. Ansellus also claimed that he kept updated about the situation of the community of Notre Dame, and illustrated the various means through which he did so, which served him to further corroborate the idea of his continuous involvement with Notre Dame. Lastly, Ansellus sought to create and manage shared memories

<sup>4</sup> See Yates, *The Art of Memory*; Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*; Bolzoni, *La stanza della memoria*; Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini*; Poirel, *Des symboles et des anges*.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari*, Predica 1, 69, 106: “tutti le [to the Virgin] stanno d’attorno giubilando, cantando, danzando, facendole cerchio, come tu vedi dipinto colà su alla Porta a Camollia,” and *Predica* 12: 9, 364: “O quanto era grande? – Dico che era maggiore che tutto questo Campo – Oh, era quanto di chi alla Porta a Camollia?” Many references to Siena’s artworks or architectural elements at the time of the preaching can be found by consulting the entry “Siena” in the index of the critical edition, vol. 2, 1411-3, which features subentries such as “Siena’s churches,” “Siena’s walls,” “Siena’s streets,” “Siena’s Palazzo Pubblico,” “Siena’s Piazza del Campo” and so on. For a reflection on this tendency of Bernardino’s, see Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini*, 167.

<sup>6</sup> On this theme see Laugerud, “The Sensory Materiality,” 260.

by introducing new material (and immaterial) elements to the church and its daily life; these elements were supposed to ensure his remembrance for present and past generations.

## 2. *Sharing and Shaping Memories of Daily Life*

Although it is now twenty-four years since I am physically far from you and your church where and with whom I was nourished and educated, my love for you remains fervent and in my mind I still live in your church with you. [...] As long as I live, although far from you I shall always love you, and I often dream that I am chanting with you in your rituals and processions, your Feast Day Matins and offices.<sup>7</sup>

This is the opening of the letter, in which Ansellus immediately presented his connection to Notre-Dame. The mention of the twenty-four years suggests that he participated to the First Crusade (as pointed out by Cristina Dondi), and that he was one of the first ecclesiastics to be appointed in the newly founded Latin kingdom of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

Ansellus' declaration that despite being physically away for so many years, he was still present in the church for Notre-Dame in spirit, and often dreamed to take part in its daily liturgy, may strike some readers as moving, and others as over-the-top. Of course, exaggeration is often used in medieval rhetoric, and especially in the part of medieval letters known as *captatio benevolentiae*, which aims at putting the reader into a benevolent frame of mind, thus paving the way for a request (*petitio*).<sup>9</sup> However, it is important to consider that being educated in a religious house was widely acknowledged as creating bonds which could last for a lifetime.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, these statements must be interpreted in the context of medieval (and especially twelfth-century) perceptions of friendship and letter-writing.<sup>11</sup> The themes of the absence

<sup>7</sup> "Cum ab ecclesia vestra et a vobis in qua et cum quibus nutritus et eruditus fui, [iam per] XXIII annos remotus sim corpore, tamen animo fervens in amore vestro et ecclesie vestre [vobiscum] cohabito mente; namque cum his qui per singulos annos a vobis ad nos venerint, qui vos [noverint] et a vobis noti fuerint, semper fuit michi sermo, et est sedule inquisitionis de statu ecclesie vestre et de vobis, quid agatis, et quomodo vos habeatis, de vobis precipue quos vidi et cognovi, et quamdiu vixero, licet absens, semper amabo; sepe quoque per somnia in solemnitatibus et processionibus necnon etiam ferialibus matutinis et officiis vestris videor interesse, et vobiscum psallere." For the English translation I rely on Barber and Bate, *Letters From the East*, 39-42.

<sup>8</sup> Dondi, *The Liturgy*, 58; Gaposchkin, "The Echoes," 237-59 and, more in general, Zöller, *Regularkanoniker*.

<sup>9</sup> On the *captatio benevolentiae* in medieval letter-writing see Murphy, *Rhetoric*, 225; Camargo, *Ars Dictaminis*, 22-3.

<sup>10</sup> See Long, *Shared Learning*, 49-51.

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction, see Leclercq, "Le genre épistolaire," 63-70; Constable, *Letters and Letter-collections*; Murphy, 195-268; Witt, "The Arts of Letter-Writing," 68-83; Hyatte, *The Arts of Friendship*; Haseldine, "Friendship and Rivalry,"; McGuire, *Friendship and Community*; Haseldine, "Friendship in Medieval Europe"; Gowing, Hunter, and Rubin, *Love, Friendship and Faith in Europe*; Classen and Sandidge, *Friendship in the Middle Ages*; more recently Long, "La lettre 'substitut de la personne'," 181-8.

and presence of one’s friends were popular in friendship letters: for example, letters were sometimes defined as “amicorum colloquia absentium” (conversations between absent friends) following Cicero’s definition.<sup>12</sup> This does not only concern particular friendships between individuals, since the vocabulary and rhetoric of friendship were widely used for the creation and management of political, social and religious bonds.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find them used with reference to the relationship between an individual and a community, or between two communities.

For the purpose of the present article, it is particularly interesting to note that Ansellus made several specific references to elements of the everyday life of the canons, specifically of the liturgy (the chanting, rituals, the processions, the Feast Day Matins, the offices). He was not only demonstrating that he still remembered the key moments of that life, but also suggesting that his participation in spirit made him still part of the community, since he still joined his voice to that of the other canons (in a powerfully sensorial depiction) and his movements and gestures to that of the others in the processions and rituals, helping create a sense of unity (or, at least, of closeness) between him and the addressees.

To better understand this peculiar use of rhetoric in Ansellus’ letters, it is useful to compare it with other letters of the same period which present similarities. The first of these letters was addressed by Basil, then prior of La Grande Chartreuse from 1151 until 1173-4, to Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, in 1151. In this letter, aimed at fostering a good relationship between the letter-writer and the addressee and between their two communities, Basil recalled that he had entered monastic life in Cluny and had been educated there. He still felt thankful for the love and care that he had received there, and in his letter he went as far as declaring: “I am, was and will forever be yours” despite having become a member of a different religious order.<sup>14</sup> Basil praised Cluny and rhetorically wondered whether anyone could take away the discipline of the choir, the cloister, the dormitory, the refectory of Cluny, and of all the other monastic outhouses (the Latin word used is *officina*, which Niermeyer defines as “monastic outhouse for household service”)<sup>15</sup> from a man whose soul was subject to God.<sup>16</sup> By listing these physical environments, Basil was at the same time sharing his memory of these physical environments and

<sup>12</sup> Rauzy, “Les représentations mentales,” 106-7.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the bibliography cited above, see specifically Haseldine, “Understanding the Language,” Haseldine, “Friendship Networks.”

<sup>14</sup> “Vester sum, fui, ero in aeternum,” in Constable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ep. 187, 436.

<sup>15</sup> Niermeyer, “Officina,” 737.

<sup>16</sup> “Nonne enim sum ego ille quem pauperem et inopem non spernebatis, sed amabatis, fovebatis, et ad onus suave religionis piis studiis instruebatis?” and “Potest avelli ab homine cuius anima deo subiecta est, chori, claustrum, dormitorii, refectorii Cluniacensis, ceterarumque nobilium officinarum omni homini emulanda disciplina?” in Constable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ep. 187, 436.

calling to mind the activities that took place in them, based on the knowledge that he shared with his addressee and with the presumably monastic listeners or readers of the letter.

Another source which deserves to be cited for comparison in this context can be found in two letters addressed by the abbot Peter of Celle to his monk of Montier-la-Celle. In both letters, written to exhort his monks to good conduct, he stated that he was absent in body but not in spirit, that his soul was not withdrawn from them, and that his soul's eye was with them day and night.<sup>17</sup> Instead, he would, in spirit, "go now around the oratory, now the cloister, now the chapter house, now the refectory, now the dormitory, now other parts of the monastery," taking note of any irregularity and rejoicing in the case of good behavior of the monks. In a second letter, Peter recounted a dream, where it has seemed to him that he was present in the monastery, with the community in the choir, the high altar prepared as if for mass: there, he saw on the altar cloth, that the Eucharist had fallen out of the pyx and had been nibbled by mice and flies and polluted with fly droppings.<sup>18</sup> Peter interpreted this as an ominous sign that some irregularities had taken place in the monastery. In expressing this, he once again referred to physical environments of the monastery, writing: "what then of the apparitions of vanity heard or seen, that is of clamor from the chapter, of the general or the pittance<sup>19</sup> from the refectory, of sleep from the dormitory, of sign language or laughter from the cloister, of the sight of unseemly dalliance of men and women outside the cloister?"<sup>20</sup> In both letters, the physical environments were the stages of potential irregular behaviors: listing them was a way for the author to review the various possible infractions, helping both him and his addressees to think about them, remembering possible past infractions and preventing future possible infractions.

In the letters of Basil and of Peter, as in Ansellus', the letter-writers referred to the daily life of the communities to recall and emphasize the strong bond which they shared with the addressees. However, the condition of the letter-writers vis-à-vis the community in question was different. While Pe-

<sup>17</sup> "Prorsus, fratres mei karissimi et amantissimi, non est elongata a vobis anima mea. Inter vos, intra vos, vespere, 'mane et meridie' (Ps. 54;18) ingreditur oculus anime mee [...] non die, non nocte, recedit a vobis anima mea, sed modo oratorium, modo claustrum, modo capitulum, modo refectorium, modo dormitorium, modo cetera officia circuibō" in Haseldine, *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, ep. 41, 156-8.

<sup>18</sup> "Quadam nocte videbar adesse vobis in monasterio presens cum quibusdam fratribus et, quantum de sompno dici potest, conventus forte in choro, altareque maius paratum quasi ad missam, et super pallam altaris, nescio quo casu, corpus Domini de pyxide elapsum iacebat. Cum ergo quesitum reperiretur, inventum est a muribus et muscis corrosum et infectum stercorebus muscarum et de rotunditate hostie aliquid detractum," in Haseldine, *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, ep. 41, 163.

<sup>19</sup> *Generalis* and *pitantie* are, in this context, the name of dishes served to the monks.

<sup>20</sup> "Quid tunc phantasmata vanitatis audite vel vise, clamoris scilicet de capitulo, generalis vel pitantie de refectorio, sompni de dormitorio, signi vel risus de claustro, speciei male blandimentis viri vel femine de foro," in Haseldine, *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, 170.



ter was the abbot of Montier-la-Celle and simply wanted to stress that he remained strongly connected to his flock during his absences, Basil was striving to cultivate a good relationship with the powerful Cluny as head of another religious institution. As for Ansellus, his task was perhaps the most challenging, and this helps understand the considerable lengths to which he resorted in order to reach his goal of creating a shared sense of community between him and the addressees.

### 3. *Keeping Memories Alive Through the Exchange of Men and of Prayers*

At the beginning of his first letter, Ansellus explained how he kept informed about the community of Notre-Dame: “over the years, I have always held conversations with those who have come here from you, those that know you or are known to you, asking for details of you and your church, what you are doing, how you are keeping, particularly those of you I have seen and known.” Clearly, he wanted to show not only that he kept the memory of his time in Notre-Dame alive, but also how. There is a tangible and concrete dimension to his statements, as shown by both the mention of the different order of people who represented for him sources of information about Notre-Dame, and the mention of the people whom Ansellus had seen and met in the flesh (five of which are identified by name in the *intitulatio* of the letter).

This passage also offers us a glimpse into the circulation of men between Jerusalem and Paris, presumably on a variety of different businesses, and at the same time acted as carriers of letters and gifts, including relics. In the first letter, Ansellus mention that he had entrusted his gift to “your faithful Anselm who brought me your letter,” whereas the gift which accompanied the second letter was given to another man, Bernard, Precentor of St Geneviève, whom Ansellus declared to be a honest and devoted man according to their community’s own testimony. This suggests that Bernard may have originally traveled to Jerusalem with a recommendation from Notre-Dame; In turn, Ansellus asked the community of Notre-Dame to honor the man as he deserved, thus continuing the exchange of recommendations which was yet another way to entertain and strengthen a relation between two people or two communities.<sup>21</sup> To understand the importance of the role of the carrier of precious gifts and relics, it should be considered that messages and objects could be lost or stolen: this explains why, in both letters, Ansellus asked his addressees to let him know whether the bearer of the treasures had reached Notre-Dame.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, Ansellus aimed to create an institutional connection, which would rely on, and at the same time stimulate, the exchange of men between

<sup>21</sup> On this theme see Long, “Il est jeune,” 287-98.

<sup>22</sup> On the general theme of the theft of relics, the classic reference is Geary, *Furta Sacra*.



the two religious houses. In the first letter, he declared that he had taken action so that his previous and current community may be joined in a “congregation of prayer and benefits” (“ut orationibus et beneficiis nostrae congregationis fratres et participes iungeremini”). This is not a generic request for mutual prayers, of the kind which can be found at the end of many letters of this period (this very letter contains two more generic requests of prayers, one at the beginning and one at the end). Instead, what is in question here is the creation of an association of prayer – or ‘confraternity’, one of the most important ways to create institutional relations between medieval religious houses, at least before the emergence of institutionalized networks of ‘religious orders’.<sup>23</sup> In theory, the goal of such a goal was the reciprocal liturgical commemoration of the dead, but as recent researches have demonstrated, their scope was often broader, and included the exchange of members and of goods, such as relics and books.<sup>24</sup> This case is no exception: as mentioned previously, the two communities were already united by the circulation and the exchange of men (including Ansellus himself and some of the individuals cited in the letters), and with the letters in question Ansellus was sending precious gifts of great spiritual value.

The fact that this letter attests, if not the creation of an association of prayer between the Holy Sepulchre and Notre-Dame, at least that in 1120 steps had been taken in the direction of the creation of such an association, deserves attention because it may offer insight into the little known confraternal relations between religious communities in the Holy Land and in the West.

While we know of similar undertakings in the same period (for example, Nikolaus Jaspert has study confraternal relations established by the canons of the cathedral chapter of Santiago de Compostela with religious communities of the Holy Land), the logistics are largely unknown.<sup>25</sup> Ansellus’ letter is particularly precious because it offers information about the procedure which was to be followed to establish such confraternal relation: in it, Ansellus explained that he has asked the Patriarch and the canons of the community of the Holy Sepulchre for approval, and that they have agreed on condition that the association was mutual.

Normally a written agreement was not sufficient for their institution, which required the performance of an association ritual through which representatives of both communities formally recognized the other congregation. In normal circumstances, this ritual would have taken place in the chapter room of one of the communities in the presence of representatives, but in

<sup>23</sup> See Wollasch, “Die mittelalterliche Lebensform,” 215-32; Berlière, “Les fraternités monastiques,” 3-26; Berlière, “Les confraternités monastiques,” 134-42; Lemaître, *Mourir à Saint-Martial*. I am very grateful to Johan Belaen for sharing with me his expertise on the matter.

<sup>24</sup> Belaen, “Abbots, Confraternities,” 125-50; Lecouteux, “La lettre,” 347-63.

<sup>25</sup> Jaspert, “Pro nobis,” 187-212.

case of a great distance, the ritual may have been executed differently, if at all. Great distances posed logistical problems also for the exchange of names of departed religious to be commemorated by the associated communities. And yet, Ansellus’ description of how he kept informed about the community of Notre-Dame shows to both medieval and modern readers that news could – and did – circulate even between Europe and the Holy Land.

#### 4. *Creating New Memories By Sharing Gifts and Knowledge*

The exchange of men, books and relics often occurred against the background of existing prayer associations in the West, or could be the reason why individuals were admitted in the *societas* of a monastery. It is thus not surprising that this letter accompanies the sending of a relic, a wooden cross which contains two fragments of the Holy Cross, which Ansellus described in some detail:

The crucifix of Christ was made from four pieces of wood, Pilate wrote the inscription on one, Christ’s arms were stretched out and the palms of his hands nailed to the second, His body was suspended on the third, while the fourth supported the Cross. This last piece is made holy by the stains of the blood from His side and feet. The cross I have sent you is made from two of the pieces, because a cross is inserted into another. The one inserted is from the wood His body was supported on, the one it is inserted in is from the support the cross was fixed on. They are of equal dignity and holiness.<sup>26</sup>

This description is rather suggestive, and the mention of the four wooden pieces of the cross allows the author to figuratively paint, stroke by stroke, a complete portrait of the Christ in cross, from the inscription to the drops of blood which fall toward the ground, for the audience to visualize, remember and meditate. Ansellus referred to the material characteristics of the object which he sent: a wooden cross made with the wood of the Holy Cross. He then specified that it was made of two different woods, corresponding to two different pieces, one inserted into another. Both pieces appear to have been cross-shaped, since Ansellus mention that “a cross is inserted into a cross;” considering that the resulting object is also described as a cross, we can imagine a smaller cross embedded in a bigger one (although there is no reference to one of the pieces being smaller),<sup>27</sup> or two crosses of more similar shape juxtaposed one above the other along the central vertical bar, so as to create a two-barred ‘patriarchal cross’ or ‘orthodox cross’, which was a common shape

<sup>26</sup> “Patibulum crucis Christi, de quatuor lignis fuit, unum in quo Pilatus titulum scripsit, aliud in quo brachia ejus extenta, et palmae affixae fuerunt, tertium in quo corpus ejus appensum est, quartum in quo crux affixa fuit, quod etiam aspersione sanguinis lateris, et pedum intinctum, et sanctificatum est; et crux ista, quam vobis misi, de duobus est lignis, quia crux inserta est cruci. Inserta est de eo in quo pependit, in qua inseritur, de suppedaneo in quo crux affixa fuit, utrumque dignum, utrumque sanctum,” in Giraud, Renault and Tock, *Chartes originales*, no. 2162, transl. in Barber and Bate, *Letters from the East*, 39-42 (which I adapt slightly).

<sup>27</sup> As deduced by Frolow, *La relique*, 310.

for reliquaries of the Holy Cross (but also the fragments of wood themselves were often arranged in the shape of a cross).<sup>28</sup> It is, of course, possible that some of the omnipresent references to a ‘cross’ had more to do with how the objects were perceived than with their actual material features. After all, the fragments of the Holy Cross have long been believed to have the special power of standing for the entire Cross, as famously argued by Paulinus of Nola in the letter which accompanied the sending of a fragment of the Cross as a gift:

Let not your faith shrink because the eyes of the body behold evidence so small; let it look with the inner eye on the whole power of the cross in this tiny segment. Once you think that you behold the wood on which our Salvation, the Lord of majesty, was hanged with nails whilst the world trembled, you, too, must tremble, but you must also rejoice.<sup>29</sup>

While the fact that a tiny piece could harness the power of the saint to which it once belonged is well known, this description is relevant for the present research because it attests the importance, for medieval devotion, of the transition from the sensory perception of material objects (in this case, a relic) to the creation of mental images through the inner senses (in this case, visualizing the entire Holy Cross and the Crucifixion itself) which triggered powerful emotional reactions.

In the case of Ansellus, the declaration that the two different pieces of the relic came one from the piece of wood on which Jesus had been suspended, and the other from the *suppedaneum* of the cross, ‘anchors’ them, so to say, in the explanation of the composition of the Holy Cross and in the story of the Crucifixion itself. Thanks to this, they become visible symbols of it, ready to trigger the imagination and the emotions of the faithful. The cultural and religious implications of this can best be understood if one considers that the outpouring of relics, especially of those associated with the Passion, from the Holy Land to Europe as a consequence of the Crusades stimulated a particular devotion toward the blood of Christ and the Holy Wounds and the Eucharist and toward the Cross, leading for example to debates about its shape and on the origin of the wood with which it was built.<sup>30</sup>

Ansellus subsequently explained that David, king of Georgia, venerated and held it in greatest affection (“in summa veneratione et dilectione habuit”) for all of his life – a statement which emphasizes the value of the relic. After

<sup>28</sup> See Frolow, *Les Reliquaires*, 124-36 and Toussaint, Jaspert, “Die Kreuzreliquie,” esp. 38-40; Klein, *Byzanz*; Klein, “Eastern Objects,” 283-314, and Folda, *Crusader Art*, 290-4 (section “Reliquaries of the True Cross”) and Hahn, *Passion Relics*, 7-50.

<sup>29</sup> “Non angustetur fides vestra carnalibus oculis parva cernentibus, sed interna acie totam in hoc minimo vim crucis videat. Dum videre vos cogitatis lignum illud, quo salus nostra, quo dominus maiestatis adfixus tremente mundo pependerit, exultetis cum tremore,” in Hartel, *Sancti Pontii Meropii Paulini Epistulae*, ep. 31, 268, English translation in Walsh, *Letters of St. Paulinus*, vol 2, 126.

<sup>30</sup> See Klein, *Byzanz*; Jaspert, “The True Cross,” 207-22; Freeman, *Holy Bones*, 238; Geary, 24; Morris, *The Sepulchre*, 223; Baert, *A Heritage*.

his death, the relic is said to have passed to his wife and to the congregation of Georgian nuns which she founded and from which it was eventually sold. As it is well known, painting a story of the tradition of a relic was crucial to guarantee its authenticity, and it has been acknowledged that noble and religious women played a peculiar role in the transmission of relics in the Holy Land<sup>31</sup>. The importance attributed to this reconstruction is attested also by the second letter, from which we learn that the community of Notre-Dame had inquired about how and why these pieces of Christ’s Cross had been removed.<sup>32</sup> Ansellus replied by explaining that the original Cross was first sawn in two and later “cut into up into several pieces to be shared among the churches of the faithful so that if one piece should be taken and burnt the other pieces would survive.”<sup>33</sup> He added:

That is why there are three crosses in Constantinople as well as the one belonging to the emperor, two in Cyprus, one in Crete, three in Antioch, one in Edessa, one in Alexandria, one in Ascalon, one in Damascus, four in Jerusalem, one in Syria, one in the Greek Saint Sabas, one in the possession of the monks of the valley of Josaphat. We Latins have one in the Holy Sepulcher, a palm and a half in length and the width and thickness of a thumb, which is four-sided. The patriarch of the Georgians has one and the king of the Georgians had one that now is in your possession, thanks to God.<sup>34</sup>

It can be noted that the relics of the Cross are identified by their current locations, except for the one in the Holy Sepulchre, of which a brief description is given. This description attests the letter-writer’s acquaintance with it and may have served a purpose of identifying this particular relic among other similar ones which someone in the audience could have seen or may see in the future. The list situated the relic sent alongside the letter – and the community of Notre-Dame, who became its owner – in the context of an existing narrative, as well as in a geographical map of sacred treasures.

Ansellus’ obviously considered himself as part of the Latin group, as shown by his statement “We, the Latins,” in the context of an explanation of which groups possessed a piece of the Holy Cross. This allowed him to put

<sup>31</sup> See Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 5-6. About the stories told in the Middle Ages about the origin of the relics of the Holy Cross, a fundamental reference is still Frolov, *La relique*, to which the more recent publications listed in the previous footnote must be added. About the role played by women in the *translatio* of relics from the Holy Land, see Tessera, “Le donne e la traslazione.”

<sup>32</sup> Ansellus’ reply begins with: “Quesistis qua ratione, qua necessitate portio ista de dominica cruce assumpta fuerit”, see Giraud, Renault and Tock, *Chartes originales*, no. 2167, accessible at <http://telma.irht.cnrs.fr/outils/originaux/charte2167/> (last accessed 31/5/2022).

<sup>33</sup> “Christiani habito consilio secatam in multas portiones dividerunt, et per ecclesias fidelium distribuerunt, quatenus si eis una pars ad comburendum auferretur, tali modo aliae partes reservarentur.”

<sup>34</sup> “Itaque in Constantinopolitana urbe preter imperatoris crucem, sunt inde III cruces, in Cypro due, in Crete una, in Antiocha III, in Edessa una, in Alexandria una, in Aschalone una, in Damascho una, in Jherusalem IIII; Suriani habent unam, Greci de Sancto Sabba unam, monachi de valle Josaphat unam. Nos latini ad Sanctum Sepulcrum habemus unam, que habet palmum et dimidium longitudinis, et pollicem unum latitudinis, et grossitudinis in quadro; patriarcha quoque Georgianorum habet unam; rex etiam Georgianorum habuit unam, quam modo Deo gratias vos habetis.”

himself and the addressee of this letter in the same group, as opposed to other groups. Another contraposition which appears in Ansellus' letters is between the Latins and the Greeks with reference to the access to knowledge. In the first letter, Ansellus had introduced his explanation of the various parts which composed the Holy Cross with the words: 'as we have learnt from the writings of the Greeks and Syrians' ("sicut a Graecorum et Syriacorum scripturis didicimus").<sup>35</sup> In the second letter he told his correspondents: "you read many things, but not everything, as the Greeks have many things the Latins do not."<sup>36</sup> Ansellus represented himself as mediator between Eastern knowledge and the West through statements such as: "You ask how and why these pieces of Christ's Cross were removed. I will tell you what I have learnt from conversation with Syrian elders and read in writings" ("quid inde ex litteris et relatione seniorum Surianorum audivi et didici vobis manifestabo").<sup>37</sup> Offering details about the acquisition of knowledge is a known strategy to confer reliability to it, but considering the rather vague nature of the reference (with no mention of specific individuals or texts) it seems likely that an oriental origin of the knowledge conferred by itself a flavor of authority even in the absence of specific references. Furthermore, Ansellus was once more representing himself as taking from the East (in this case, knowledge) to supply the West.

To the second letter, Ansellus joined another gift which was also the expression of a peculiar devotion towards the physical signs of the Passion and death of Christ, namely a cross made from the stone from the Lord's sepulcher ("cruce[m] unam de lapide dominici Sepulcri").<sup>38</sup> As Robert Ousterhout has illustrated, stones of the Holy Sepulchre were "valued and either reused in the later rebuilding or disseminated throughout Europe by pilgrims as sacred relics".<sup>39</sup> More in general, Caroline Walker Bynum has observed that earth, sand, or stone from particularly holy places was perceived to "not only absorbed holiness through contact with holy figures or bodies; it also conveyed presence to other earth" or to other things, including water that could be drunk as a healing remedy.<sup>40</sup> This helps to understand the symbolic nature of this

<sup>35</sup> In Giraud, Renault and Tock, *Chartes originales*, no. 2162.

<sup>36</sup> "Legitur in Evangelio, multa quidem, et alia signa fecit Jesus in conspectum discipulorum suorum, quae non sunt scripta in libro hoc, et vos multa legistis, sed non omnia: multa enim habent Graeci, quae non habent Latini" (which quotes Gv 20, 30-1), in Giraud, Renault, and Tock, no. 2167, trans. in Barber, and Bate, *Letters from the East*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Giraud, Renault and Tock, *Chartes originales*, no. 2167, trans. in Barber and Bate, *Letters From the East*, 41.

<sup>38</sup> "Nunc vero ad supplendum gaudium vestrum, et ad gloriam et honorem ecclesiae vestrae et regiae dignitatis, et civitatis vestrae et vestrum donum maximum et thesaurum incomparabilem, nec inferiorem priore, videlicet cruce[m] unam de lapide dominici Sepulcri per Bernardum, Sancte Genovefe precentorem, testimonio vestro virum honestum, vobis devotus transmissi, quam obnixe imploro ut honorifice sicut dignum est habeatis," in Giraud, Renault, and Tock, *Chartes originales*, no. 2167.

<sup>39</sup> Ousterhout, "Architecture as Relic," 21.

<sup>40</sup> Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 412. The fact that a pebble was used to produce a healing water is mentioned in a twelfth century source, on which see Baumgarten, "A Separate People?," 220.

second gift and how it was meant to further the connection between Ansellus’ current location and community (which was precisely named after the Holy Sepulcher) and that of Notre-Dame, to which part of the sacred nature (and power) of Jerusalem was transferred.<sup>41</sup>

### 5. *Ansellus’ Aims and Legacy*

To understand Ansellus’ motives in trying to maintain and renew his connection to Notre-Dame, the political and religious context must be considered. While Ansellus did not make any reference to this in the letters, other sources attest to us that not everything was smooth for him in Jerusalem: in 1121, in a letter to the Patriarch Garmundus of Jerusalem, pope Calixtus II threatened to excommunicate Ansellus if he did not abandon his secular way of life.<sup>42</sup> Apparently Ansellus lived in his own home (which was probably in the Tower of David, in the north-west corner of Jerusalem, hence the name “Ansellus de Turre” or “de Turre David”), whereas since 1114 the canons of the Holy Sepulcher were supposed to live together according to the Augustinian rule.<sup>43</sup> In addition, he did not celebrate his office but sent others to do it in his stead. It seems likely that Ansellus ultimately complied with what was requested of him, considering that he is still listed as a canon of the Holy Sepulcher in a charter of 1124.<sup>44</sup> Considering the contrasts between Ansellus and the Patriarch helps us to understand why the cantor felt longing for the simpler and probably happier time which he had spent in Notre-Dame, and wished to feel connected with his ancient community. He might have considered the possibility of going back to Paris and to Notre-Dame, but in my opinion the letters show that the connection that he sought was not solely – and not predominantly – a practical one.

Ansellus asked the addressees to remember him in their prayers then and after his death three times in the two letters: despite the fact that this is a rather common request in this kind of letters, the repetition already suggests a particular preoccupation of Ansellus. Moreover, he had a specific demand concerning where and how he hoped to be remembered in Notre-Dame: “as a record for our successors in the future, write in your books how and where it [the relic] came into your possession: «our cleric Ansell sent this cross made from the wood of the Holy Cross from Jerusalem to us and our church»”.<sup>45</sup> Ansellus wanted his name to be physically inscribed in the books and was

<sup>41</sup> On the transfer of ‘sacred places’ from Jerusalem to Europe thanks to fragments of the Holy Cross and the *Staurothekai* which contained them see Jaspert, “The True Cross’.”

<sup>42</sup> Bresc-Bautier, *Le Cartulaire* no. 3, 36-7.

<sup>43</sup> Bresc-Bautier, *Le Cartulaire*, no. 20, 74-5.

<sup>44</sup> Bresc-Bautier, *Le Cartulaire*, no. 94, 211. “Anselmus de turre David” had subscribed another charter in 1114, see *Regesta*, no. 76a, 5.

<sup>45</sup> “Verumtamen, ut memoriale sit posteris, et successoribus nostris, unde et quomodo illud habuistis, scribite in libris vestris: ‘Ansellus clericus noster hanc crucem de ligno Sanctę Cru-



attempting to dictate precisely how he was to be represented in the community's memory: as a cleric of Notre-Dame and as the donor of the relic of the Holy Cross. Considering that the sentence refers to the relic as "this cross," he may have expected the text to be copied (perhaps engraved) and kept close to the cross and/or read in occasions where the relic was displayed, which would confirm the tight link between materiality and memory.

And indeed, his wish to be remembered in association with his gift was granted. To this day, Ansellus' letters are preserved together with the document through which the pontifical legate Cuno of Praeneste, in 1120, instituted a solemn feast on the first Sunday of August – supposedly the day in which the relic arrived at Notre-Dame.<sup>46</sup> While this specific document does not mention Ansellus by name and only states that the relics were sent from Jerusalem to Paris "per auctenticas personas," a thirteenth-century obituary of the church of Notre-Dame mentions the feast and the fact that Ansellus was the one who donated the precious relic and the day of the celebration of his anniversary.<sup>47</sup> Readings for the feast in a fourteenth-century Breviary of Notre-Dame in Paris give Ansellus' name and mention that he was native of Paris, that he participated in the conquest of Jerusalem, where he became cantor, and that he sent back to Paris the relic of the Cross.<sup>48</sup> It also offers precious additional information about the community of Notre-Dame's reaction to the letter and to the gift, including the organization of a solemn procession to bring the relic to Notre-Dame on Sunday, the first of August, at the presence of three bishops (of Paris, Meaux and Senlis) and the institution of the annual feast for the *translatio* of the relic.<sup>49</sup>

cis ecclesie nostre, et nobis, de Jherusalem transmisit," in Giraud, Renault, and Tock, *Chartes originales*, no. 2162, trans. in Barber, Bate, *Letters from the East*, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Paris, Archives Départementales de France K 21 A 18, transcribed in Giraud, Renault and Tock, *Chartes originales*, as no. 2164, available online at <http://www.cn-telma.fr/originaux/charte2164/> (last accessed 27/5/2022) on which see Tessera, *La croce del legato*, 139-60.

<sup>47</sup> BNF Latin 5185CC 254v, available through Gallica <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bt-v1b10035334g> (last accessed 11/11/2022) and transcribed in Molinier, *Obituaires*, 164: "Obiit Ansellus, precentor Jerosolimitanus, qui dedit nobis pretiosissimam partem dominice crucis, cuius anniversarium debet fieri prima dominica augusti, quam in honore eiusdem crucis, tunc ad nos transmissis, sollempniter celebramus."

<sup>48</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 1026, ff. 223v-225r: "Clericus enim Ansellus nomine natus Parisiis, genere commendabilis sed mores commendabilior cum caeteris Christi militonibus ad liberationem Ierusalem perrexit. Qui capta urbe, et a sordidibus idolatrie per Dei misericordiam liberata in Ecclesia gloriosi sepulchri Domini praecentor constitutus, ibidem Domino serviturus remansit: ubi crucem quamdam celeberrimam de pretioso dominicae crucis ligno invenit et habuit. Non immemor itaque natalis soli, immo animae suae et Parisiensi ecclesiae qui eum sanctae eruditionis suae lacte nutrierat, per aliquot viros qui inde revertebantur mandavit episcopo eiusdem ecclesiae et canonicis quibusdam quos familiares habebat: quoniam si aliquem boni testimonii virum ex parte eorum et cum certis litteris videret, pro certo munus pretiosissimum Parisiensi ecclesiae matri suae et ipsis, domino adiuvante transmitteret." The document, which seems to be dependent on Ansellus letter as well as on other sources, has not been edited but there is partial transcription in LeBeuf, *Dissertations*, vol. 3, V-VII.

<sup>49</sup> "In praedicto namque die et festo beati Petri ad vincula episcopo iam dictae civitatis, Meldensis quoque atque Silvanectensis adiunctis omnibus processionibus eiusdem loci cum magnis laudibus occurrentes dominicae crucis, flentes prae gaudio in ecclesia Beatae Mariae eam



A fifteenth-century Breviary for the use of Paris contains, next to the offices for the feast in question, an illumination which shows a reliquary in the form of a cross being carried into the church of Notre-Dame in a procession by three bishops, at the presence of several canons (Fig. 1). The illumination represents in a very detailed way the famous Portal of the Last Judgment of the Church of Notre-Dame, and may portray the golden reliquary in which the fragments sent by Ansellus had been placed, according to the inventories of the treasure of Notre-Dame of 1343 and 1416.<sup>50</sup> Once again, the material dimension appears to be crucial in the construction of memory, both with regard to the environment and to the donated object. The latter especially was the center of attention: carried around, watched, touched, and even kissed. Centuries after the sending of the relic, it still served as a reminder of Ansellus and as proof of his connection with Notre-Dame.

In conclusion, I believe that Ansellus's letters and gifts did represent a conscious attempt to cultivate, shape and create memories of him. This is not unique, and was a rather common motivation for the gifting of relics – or of material goods of various kinds – to an ecclesiastical institution. However, Ansellus' case is significant in many ways. Beside the great importance attributed by him and by many others to the relic of the holy Cross, these letters attest to us the variety of means which could be employed to entertain and strengthen relations between the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and Europe. Last but not least, the peculiar attention granted by Ansellus to the material dimension of the objects and environments cited or implied in his letters may be interpreted as an example of the attention often granted to the material world in the spirituality of twelfth-century regular (and especially Augustinian) canons. From Hugh of Saint Victor's optimism in the possibility of using sensory perception as starting point of a path which would eventually lead individuals “per visibilia ad invisibilia” to Hugh of Fouilly's attention to the natural and architectural world and to Achard of Arrouaise's attention to the spatial dimension of in his poem on the *Templum Domini* of Jerusalem, Ansellus more modest intellectual endeavour may find a new contextualization.

locaverant. Deinde vero ab episcopo et a canonicis eisdem constitutus est ut singulis annis in prima dominica die Augusti huius translationis solemnitas per totum episcopatum celebretur.”  
<sup>50</sup> See Hubert, *Quelques vues*, 32-5; Skupien, *La cathédrale transfigurée*; Fagniez, *Inventaires*, 12 and 30.



Fig. 1. *Bréviaire à l'usage de Paris*, Ms 2 Médiathèque Équinoxe, Châteauroux, f. 265 V. Cliché: IRHT-CNRS.

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Micol Long  
Università degli Studi di Padova  
micol.long@unipd.it