

Phylacteries or portable reliquaries were among the most important pieces of medieval jewelry. These jewels span the entire range of the medieval period. One phylactery in the Rheims cathedral treasury is said to have come from the tomb of Charlemagne when it was opened in 1165 by Frederick Barbarosa. Their popularity continued throughout the period and were valued gifts to important persons. In 1023 Robert I of France gave "a phylactery of similar materials [gold and gems] containing a tooth of St. Vincent, deacon and martyr" to Holy Roman Emperor Henry II. The tradition of wearing phylacteries around the neck was well established by the late 12th century. In the thirteenth century St. Thomas Aquinas wrote about whether it was lawful to wear holy relics around the neck. The answer was that "if they are worn from sincere faith in God and the Saints, it is not unlawful, but if from any vain and superstitious reason, for instance because their container is triangular, [to ward off the evil eye], then this would be superstitious and unlawful. In the 14th century, Blanche of Aragon, Prioress of Sigena, owned "a little barrel of silver... and gilt hanging by its cord of red silk and within are relics of the robe of Jesus Christ and of the cloth in which he was wrapped when they laid him in the tomb and of the True Cloth, and of St Bartholomew's skin and other relics of many other saints." Reliquary pendants continued to be worn until the end of the middle ages, and into modern times in Catholic countries. Silver-gilt phylacteries were commonly worn even by the greatest personages in 15th century Spain.

Doubtless many of the holy relics contained in these phylacteries, especially those associated with lesser saints, were genuine. However the business of faking holy relics was well established in the middle ages. It is estimated, for example, that if all the all the fragments of the "True Cross" were put together they would be the size of a giant redwood. Readers of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are well acquainted with the Pardoner who had a pillow case that he said was Our Lady's veil, a piece of cloth which he claimed had come from the sail St. Peter had when Christ walked on the water, a brass cross full of stones, and a glass full of pigs bones which he claimed had come from saints. He would earn money with these by showing the, for a price, to peasants and others who were swayed by his deceitful oratory.

Phylacteries themselves existed in three major styles. The first, and cheapest, was to mount the object and suspend it from a chain. The author owns a relic of this sort. It is a small piece of wood with a silver cap and suspension loop. It is presumably a fragment of the True Cross. The second type is to contain the relic in a crystal or glass container. The container is then mounted in metal. The container would have either been a simple vial or an elaborately carved and hollowed rock crystal. The third, and most elaborate type would have been a silver or gold container with crystal, or moonstone cabochons through which the holy relic would have been viewed.