

## AUTHENTICATING THE RINGS OF THE “NINE HOLY BISHOPS”

### SANTO ESTEVO DE RIBAS DE SIL, FROM MODERN TO MEDIEVAL CONTEXTS

THERESE MARTIN

Dedicated to Luis Manuel Cuña Ramos, archivist extraordinaire

TUCKED AWAY IN the hilly green countryside of the Ribeira Sacra in northwestern Spain, the once powerful monastery of Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil (Ourense Province) has been renovated in recent decades for use since 2004 as a “parador.” This national hotel system was set up in the 1960s to recuperate grand monuments fallen into disuse, especially castles and monasteries, thus encouraging tourism to sites now beyond the beaten track of the modern-day tourist. Yet Santo Estevo, perched in high isolation above the River Sil, had in prior times been a thriving pilgrimage centre. It is to the ongoing restoration of the church’s furnishings that we owe the 2020 redis-

---

\* I am grateful to Verónica Abenza, Ana Cabrera Lafuente, and Xosé-Lois Armada for their input on different aspects of this study, and to Arc Humanities Press’ anonymous reviewer for helpful suggestions. Heartfelt thanks are owed to Luis Manuel Cuña Ramos, former Canónigo-Archivero of the Cathedral of Ourense and Delegado de Patrimonio of the Diocese of Ourense, who generously opened the cathedral treasury for our study, and invited us to add the newly discovered rings to our investigation. His warm welcome made working in Ourense a true pleasure. Finally, my deep gratitude goes to Jitske Jasperse for participating in my project, inviting me to contribute this chapter, and ably shepherding the volume to completion.

**THERESE MARTIN** is Senior Researcher and Head of the Medieval Studies Department at the Instituto de Historia, CSIC, Madrid. Research leading to this chapter was carried out during the project *The Medieval Iberian Treasury in Context: Collections, Connections, and Representations on the Peninsula and Beyond* (Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities, RTI2018-098615-B-100/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/FEDER “Una manera de hacer Europa,” 2019–2022, PI Therese Martin).

covery of the “miracle-working” rings, associated with the nine bishops who were buried at Santo Estevo in the tenth century.

The present study traces the bishops’ rings back through time, centring on both written and material evidence for key moments in their long lives, starting with their scholarly analysis in 2020–2022, reaching back to their heyday in the early modern period as relics of the splendid past, back further to the monastic institution’s medieval commemoration of its episcopal founders, until arriving at the tenth-century context of bishops like those who retired to Santo Estevo, leaving their episcopal rings behind. Representing a thousand years in the history of a monastery, such rings are themselves as much manifestations of memory as historical documents. Looking back across a millennium allows me to cast a critical eye on textual sources and comparative examples that together help to test their authenticity, clarify their connection with the “nine holy bishops,” and situate the rings of Santo Estevo within the context of medieval Iberian bishops’ rings. The “authenticity” of holy objects was a matter of great importance in the Middle Ages, when contact with saintly remains created a tangible link to the unseen beyond. In the twenty-first century, a kindred need for authenticity inspires today’s tourists; it seems that living in an era of fake news drives a yearning for what is perceived to be the more genuine past. This chapter’s title also gives a nod to the “authentics” found with the rings; that is, diminutive parchment or textile labels accompanying relics that name the otherwise anonymous bones or other holy fragments of the saintly past.<sup>1</sup> A pair of authentics from Santo Estevo that date to the early modern period are among the written and material documents, laid out at the end of this chapter in Table 7.1, of the steps taken by the monastery to authenticate their saintly past. Throughout this chapter, I track the footprints left by such steps in order to reveal the evolving place of bishops’ rings in the telling of the past and to perceive its echo in the present.

## The Discovery of the Rings

In late 2020, a remarkable discovery was made during the continuing restoration of the furnishings and wall paintings in the presbytery of the monastic church of St. Stephen—now called Santo Estevo, in the Galician language

---

<sup>1</sup> On authentics and medieval strategies of authentication, see Zchomelidse, “Liminal Phenomena,” 256, who states that these labels, used since the early Middle Ages, were called “authentics” starting in the fifteenth century; Luyster, “Reassembling Textile Networks,” 1054–55, fig. 5, for a twelfth-century example of a tiny textile bundle labelled with a saint’s name.

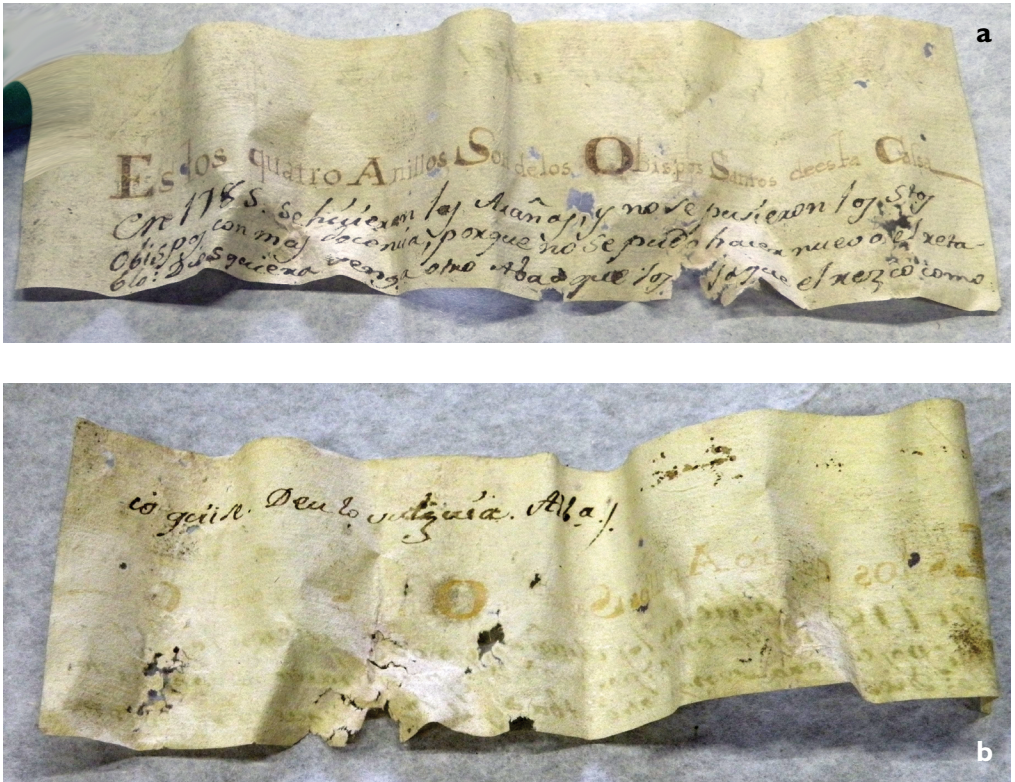


Figure 7.1. Paper authentic, found with rings at Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil. Ourense, Catedral de Ourense (Galicia). Photographs by author.

of northwestern Spain.<sup>2</sup> A polychromed wooden reliquary mounted in a relic cabinet high on the wall was found to contain bones, identified as belonging to four of the nine bishops who had retired to the monastery over the course of the tenth century. These saintly remains had been presumed to have been removed during the nineteenth-century exclausturation of the now-parish church. Even more surprising was the appearance among the bones of a small silk bag, embroidered with metallic threads, holding four silver rings, coinciding with the longstanding tradition that the relics of four bishops had been preserved to one side of the high altar and five to the other (when the

<sup>2</sup> Vania López carried out the restoration at the Centro San Martín de la Diócesis de Ourense under the direction of the Xunta de Galicia. I am grateful for her expert collaboration with the Treasury Project. On the prior restoration of the monastic buildings and their conversion to a “parador,” see Cupeiro López, “Intervenciones y usos.”

latter cabinet was opened, it was found empty).<sup>3</sup> Along with the rings, the delicate drawstring bag held two small documents authenticating the rings as relics: one on paper, which includes the date 1785, and an earlier one on parchment in script that corresponds to seventeenth-century paleography. The paper authentic was written in two different moments by very distinct hands (Figures 7.1a–b).

Written in brown ink, centred down the length of the paper, in a deliberately clear and presentational hand (i.e., with capital letters inked in), probably late seventeenth to early eighteenth century: “Estos quatro Anillos Son de los Obispos Santos de esta Casa” (These four Rings Are from the Holy Bishops of this House) (Figure 7.1a). And added in cursive in a black-brown ink, filling the space below and continuing onto the back of the paper: “En 1785 se hicieron las Arañas y no se pusieron los S[an]tos / Obispos con mas decencia, porque no se pudo hacer nuevo el reta- / blo: Dios quiera venga otro Abad que los saque el rezo como / io quise. Deu lo vulguia. Alb\_a %” ([front]: In 1785 the *arañas*<sup>4</sup> were made, and the Holy Bishops were not placed more decently because a new retable could not be made: may God grant that a new abbot may come who will make them available for prayer as [back] I had wanted. God willing. Alb\_a %) (Figure 7.1b).

As for the older authentic, it was written in brown ink, in a neat but non-display seventeenth-century hand on a narrow strip of parchment that was folded and knotted to form a little pack within which the four rings had been snugly wrapped up. Perhaps they were once looped onto the long tail of the little document to keep them safe while making them visible (Figure 7.2).

Estos quatro anillos son de los q[ue] quedaron de los nueve Santos Obispos. Son los q[ue] han quedado. Los demas desaparecieron. Por ellos se pasa agua para los enfermos y sanan mu[cho]s.

These four rings are from those that were left by the nine Holy Bishops. They are the ones that have remained. The rest disappeared. Through them water is poured for the sick, and many are healed.

---

**3** Even more surprising than the appearance of the rings themselves was that their presence had been predicted just a few months previously in a novel by María Oruña, *El bosque de los cuatro vientos* (Ediciones Destino, 2020). Much has been made of this fortuitously timed publication and the discovery of the rings in local and international press, including the BBC Reel, “The Legendary ‘Miracle Rings’ of Ourense” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPZ2dFFRjHU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPZ2dFFRjHU)).

**4** Probably large, multi-branched hanging chandeliers.

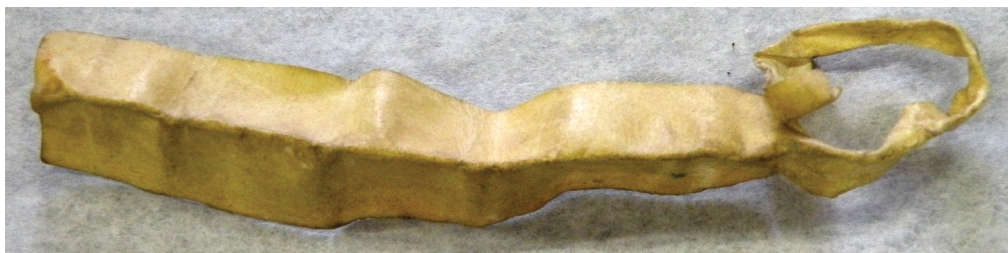


Figure 7.2. Parchment authentic, found with rings at Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil. Catedral de Ourense. Photographs by author.



Figure 7.3. Silk purse, embroidered with metal threads, found holding rings at Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil. Catedral de Ourense. Photograph by author.



Figure 7.4. Micro photo, metal threads embroidered into woven silk, purse found holding rings at Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil. Catedral de Ourense. Photograph by author.

It is significant that this earlier parchment authentic speaks in the present tense, testifying to its writing during the active use of the rings. It also underscores the fact that these four were the only rings known in the monastery during the early modern period. For its part, the slightly later paper testimony refers only to the appropriate storage of the rings, not their use or miraculous nature, at a time when the church was updating its furnishings. Thus, both brief documents offer precious textual evidence for two distinct chapters in the life of the rings.

The drawstring purse in which they were found provides additional material evidence to help flesh out the story of the rings (Figure 7.3). The cream-coloured body of the pouch—silk, by its texture and sheen—is lined with a denser material to give it structure.<sup>5</sup> The exterior is embroidered in a simple pattern that recalls elongated leaves or feathers. These metal-wrapped threads give the purse both a decorative shine and a pleasingly weighty feel. Although the metal has a silvery glimmer, technical analysis revealed that these threads are made of copper (Figure 7.4).<sup>6</sup> The double braided (woollen?) cords of brown and tan, ending in tassels, were made to slide through the pleated and reinforced material at the opening; pulling them tight to cinch the purse would create the 42.5 cm long strings for wrapping around a belt or girdle so that the purse could be carried at the waist. A knot at the bottom of the bag holds its layers together, and the base is reinforced by a stitched arcading of metallic threads that echo the border along the folds of the opening. The circular form of this pouch is typical of purses used by both women and men from the late Middle Ages through the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries; comparable purses are held in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.<sup>7</sup> The bag that guarded the rings of the bishops at Santo Estevo thus pertains to the same broad chronology as the older parchment authentic, adding an important layer to our knowledge about the active use of the rings in that period. The embroidered pouch may have been a gift to the monastic church, whether given as

---

**5** The purse measures approximately 9.5 cm high by 10.5 cm wide. We chose not to stress the fabric by pulling the bag open for exact measurements, nor did we carry out any destructive sampling of the material.

**6** I am grateful to Xosé-Lois Armada, who undertook the X-ray fluorescence testing on the bag and rings. The detailed technical analysis will be published in our forthcoming article.

**7** My thanks go to Ana Cabrera for drawing my attention to these objects: see accession nos. 4062–1856 and T.246–1927 for French and English examples.



Figure 7.5. Silver rings found at Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil. Catedral de Ourense. Photographs by author.

an appropriate holder for the treasured rings or repurposed for that function when the rings were carried to the homes of the sick.

Turning to the material evidence of the four rings themselves, for all their reputation as miracle-working relics of saintly bishops, their appearance may strike a contemporary eye as less than impressive (Figures 7.5). They bear simple round or oval cabochon-cut stones (from top to bottom, left to right): (1) an unidentified whitish stone with damaged but seemingly deliberate (now illegible) incised marks down its length, perhaps an Arabic inscription, or a simple standing figure?<sup>8</sup> (stone 18 × 12 mm, channelled hoop inner diameter 23 mm); (2) a bare bezel from which the stone has been lost (bezel 17 mm, hoop inner diameter 20 mm); (3) white glass paste, indicated by the characteristic surface pitting (“stone” 18 mm, hoop inner diameter 27 mm); (4) a tiny turquoise (stone 5 mm, hoop inner diameter 23 mm). Three rings are constructed by hoops soldered to bezels of differing shapes which bear the stones; the fourth is a complete circle whose upper part has been widened to accommodate a plain setting for the diminutive round turquoise. All four hoops and settings are of silver; the most elaborate one has been decorated with the addition of gold, using the mercury amalgam method, in the channels of the hoop, on the bezel, and across the stone itself (ring 1, upper left; Figures 7.6); such channelling closely parallels a ring at the British Museum dated fifth to seventh century.<sup>9</sup> The hoop of the ring that has lost its stone is decorated with diminutive black crosses and dots in niello (ring 2, lower left, see Figure 7.5a). With hoops ranging in diameter from 20 to 27 mm, these rings could have been worn on a bare finger or over an episcopal glove (one of the massive “papal” type rings, typical of the fifteenth century, has a hoop diameter of just 19 mm),<sup>10</sup> whether in the standard ring-position of today, on finger or thumb, or even between the first and second knuckle, as seen on medieval tomb figures and in early modern paintings.

In sum, these rings are made of the noble metal of silver, decorated with gold or niello and set with precious stones or once-glossy glass paste; if they appear modest in comparison with other surviving rings associated with

**8** For comparisons, see many examples in Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*; Porter, *Arabic and Persian Seals*.

**9** British Museum, inv. no. AF.291. Another example of a channelled hoop from this same period in Visigothic Iberia is Museo Arqueológico Nacional, inv. no. 1955/51/1160, a bronze ring set with a small round cabochon of reddish glass, found in a woman’s burial.

**10** Hindman et al., *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings*, 174–77, 231, no. 29.



Figure 7.6. Silver ring embellished with gold, full view and micro photo detail, found at Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil. Catedral de Ourense. Photographs by author.

medieval bishops, perhaps a thorough cleaning by restoration experts might do much to change our perception of their value. The very simplicity of these four rings complicates a search for their origins, as none is inscribed with words or images that might help to narrow down the chronology or culture of origin. However, perhaps we put too much faith in inscriptions to provide all the answers. For example, the incised name on a silver bishop's ring excavated in Cordoba—SAMSON EPSCPS\* in an oval of jet—gives epigraphic evidence only of an early medieval date, ranging from the sixth-century Visigothic era to the ninth- or tenth-century stratigraphy of its find. Although its reversed lettering does testify to the ring's design for use as a signet, this particular Bishop Samson has not been identified in the textual sources.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, these four rings are hardly the splendid adornments we might imagine in the possession of a powerful medieval prelate, such as the rings associated with St. Rudesindus or Rosendo (907–977), who had been bishop of Mondoñedo and Dumio ca. 923–942 until his own retirement to the important monastery of Celanova, founded under the auspices of Rosendo and his family, especially through the rich donation of 938 by his mother Ilduara Eriz (d. 958).<sup>12</sup> Rosendo was both a contemporary and a Galician neighbour of

---

**11** Museo Arqueológico y Etnológico de Córdoba, inv. no. DJ031895. See Moreno and González, “Dos tumbas hispanovisigodas,” fig. 6a; Baena Alcántara, “Anillo del obispo Samson,” 158, cat. no. 86. For a theological-scholastic understanding of bishops' signet rings, see Chapter 6 in this volume.

**12** Donation transcribed by Díaz y Díaz, Pardo Gómez, and Vilariño Pinto, in *Ordoño de Celanova*, 241–46. See also Pallares, *Ilduara*; Bowman, “Record, Chronicle and Oblivion.”



Figure 7.7. Gold ring set with ancient carnelian intaglio from the monastery of Celanova, associated with St. Rosendo. Ourense, Museo Catedralicio de Ourense. Photographs by author.

the bishops who retired to the monastery at Ribas de Sil over the course of the tenth century, and “his” rings were preserved in the monastic treasury at Celanova, together with other objects associated with Rosendo since his *Vita et miracvli* were written two centuries later.<sup>13</sup> The *vita* tells us that Rosendo’s ring “had been taken from his finger at the time of his translation,”<sup>14</sup> that is, in the late twelfth century when the remains of the former bishop were moved from his original tenth-century burial and placed in the monumental tomb that could be visited by those who sought healing. There is no description of the material or appearance of the ring (“annulus”) that effected two cures through direct touch to a suffering young woman’s swollen face or in the clenched and twisted fingers of a cleric,<sup>15</sup> although we are told that it was kept in a small silver receptacle (“capsula argentea”). Curiously, this pair of healings are the only ones said to have been done through the aegis of a ring; the vast majority of Rosendo’s miracles occurred when pilgrims besought the physical presence of the saint by grasping his monumental stone tomb.

Today, three rings associated with St. Rosendo, which served as talismanic objects and as manifestations of the saint’s memory at Celanova, are held by the

<sup>13</sup> *Ordoño de Celanova*, ed. Díaz y Díaz et al.

<sup>14</sup> *Ordoño de Celanova*, ed. Díaz y Díaz et al, 216–17: “annulus, qui in eius translatione ab ipsius digito receptus fuerat.”

<sup>15</sup> On touch, see Chapter 1 in this volume.



Figure 7.8. Rock crystal rings from the monastery of Celanova, associated with St. Rosendo. Museo Catedralicio de Ourense. Photographs by author.

Cathedral of Ourense.<sup>16</sup> First among them is a magnificent gold ring densely ornamented with filigree and granulations, boasting clusters of gold globules soldered in place, interwoven with circlets of gold wires in a bravura display of craftsmanship (Figure 7.7). It bears a carnelian intaglio of Greco-Roman origin displaying the engraving of a seated and helmeted male figure holding a lance (Jupiter?).<sup>17</sup> Also associated with Rosendo are a pair of rings set with massive oval rock crystal cabochons; the larger measures a whopping  $40 \times 32$  mm, and the smaller is  $34 \times 24$  mm (Figure 7.8; compare to the 5 mm round turquoise in Fig. 7.5a above).<sup>18</sup> Of unusual clarity, the larger of the rock crystals rises to a soft peak along its length and has been set on an open bezel, thus acting as a distorting magnifying glass for the glove on which it would have been worn.

Of course, it is unlikely that any of these three rings could actually have been used by Rosendo. The gold one has been dated to the eleventh or twelfth century through the style of the filigree and granulations, the shape of the broad plano-convex section hoop narrowing to the back, and presumably for the reuse of an ancient gem in a magnificent setting that is most typical of the central Middle Ages.<sup>19</sup> As for the rock crystal rings from Celanova, both the larger one's silver hoop with shoulders in the form of miniature animal heads and the smaller's gilded setting—which appears to be made of a brass alloy rather than silver—with plain hoop and leaf-like decoration

**16** During his 1572 travels, Morales, *Viage por orden del Rey*, recorded these three rings at Celanova, and he made note of just a few rings at other institutions, but not at Ribas de Sil; see note 31 below.

**17** Pintos, “Anillo de San Rosendo,” 258–59; measurements given as  $3.3 \times 3.2$  cm. Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 265–66, states that “se ha datado en el siglo XI, pero podría ser romano.” On the working of carnelian in the ancient world, see Lapatin, *Luxus*.

**18** Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 265, with slightly different dimensions. On rock crystal in general, see Hahn and Shalem, eds., *Seeking Transparency*.

**19** Kinney, “Ancient Gems”; Henig, “The Re-Use and Copying of Ancient Intaglios.”

around the solid bezel, speak to their creation at different moments long after Rosendo's death. Nevertheless, these rings' preservation at his monastery gives evidence of what Rosendo's monastic successors understood as appropriate for an important bishop.<sup>20</sup> My reading of the fitting appearance of Rosendo's rings should be kept in mind as we seek to decipher the more modest form of the rings from Ribas de Sil. Might Rosendo's well-known medieval *vita* and his miracle-working ring have inspired the telling of similar tales in the seventeenth century at the nearby monastery of Santo Estevo, at a time long after the memorial tombs of their own bishops had been demolished in favour of a more modern display of sainthood?

To answer this question, we must turn from the physical evidence read in the rings themselves to their textual presence in the Galician monastery. Emilio Duro Peña, the learned canon and archivist of Ourense Cathedral who wrote the essential history of the monastery of Santo Estevo, clarifies why their historical record is so difficult to reconstruct: most documentation from the first three centuries of the monastery's existence has been lost to flame.<sup>21</sup> Let us then follow the trail back from that 2020 discovery of the rings to what we can discern of them in the monastery's history, starting now with the high point of the seventeenth century and moving back further and further in time until the evidence runs out. At that point, we will be left to weigh it up and determine whether the rings we see today could have belonged to nine holy bishops in the tenth century.

## The Early Modern Monastic History of Ribas de Sil

It was in the seventeenth century that the rings featured with greatest prominence in the written record, especially in 1662 when the monastery sought to have their sainted bishops recognized officially, providing testimony of the miraculous cures wrought through their intercession. A judge

---

**20** For other bishop's rings from eleventh- and twelfth-century Iberia, see Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 268–70; Castiñeiras, "San Martiño de Mondoñedo," 1235–61, esp. 1260, for discussion and illustration of the bishop's ring and staff preserved at San Martiño. Found in the tomb of Bishop Gonzalo of Mondoñedo (1070–1108), the gold ring bears "una pieza de cuarzo traslúcido sujeto por cuatro pequeñas cabezas de ave, cuyos ojos poseen incrustaciones de esmalte. En uno de los lados aparece grabada, con incrustaciones de esmalte, la inquietante inscripción: NOLO ESSE DATVS NEQUE VENVM DATVS ('No quiere ser dado ni vendido')." Castiñeiras connects the phrase to the bishop's fight against simony and in favour of his small bishopric against the more powerful see of Santiago de Compostela.

**21** Duro Peña, *El monasterio de San Esteban*.

and notary were sent to Santo Estevo to examine the relics, and they opened the reliquary cabinets on the north and south walls of the main apse, reporting the existence of long bones wrapped in cloths, knotted textiles, and a “very old silver pyx” (“muy antigua custodia de plata”), as well as ancient silver bells (none of these artifacts has been preserved).<sup>22</sup> Testimony was given by three priests, eight lay men, and four lay women of the parishes pertaining to Santo Estevo concerning the miracles worked by the rings “that they say had belonged to the holy bishops” (“que dicen haber sido de los santos obispos”) and that were kept in “a little box that was in the silver chest” (“una caxilla que estaba en el caxón de la plata”). The witnesses reported that the rings were taken to the sick, who put them on, touched them, or washed with water poured through them, and thus they were cured. Among those healed were a girl born blind in 1594, a man with a goiter, and a young woman with a dangerous fever. However, the evidence was deemed insufficient, and in 1670 the case toward canonization was closed. Yet the lack of official approval did not diminish the local cult, according to Duro Peña, who notes that the bishops’ reputation for sanctity continued without interruption until the exclausturation of the 1830s, at which point he wonders, “what was done with the rings? Possibly the monks took them with them, as they were theirs.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the ultimate rejection of official recognition for their holy bishops, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the heyday of Santo Estevo. From the archival evidence of the monastery’s bid to promote their holy bishops, it is clear that before the official acts of 1662 these rings had already been removed from the saintly bones. The rings were likely being taken to the sick in the embroidered purse in which they would eventually be found in 2020, together with their authenticics; as we have seen, the little pouch and parchment authentic can be dated to approximately that same period. But if the rings had originally been buried with their individual owners, how did four of them come to be stored together in this drawstring bag? To answer this question, we must move further back in the history of the monastery, tracing the changes in the church’s furnishings that were documented at the end of the sixteenth century, along with their descriptions by visitors to Santo Estevo over the course of the following century.

---

**22** Duro Peña, *El monasterio de San Esteban*, 30–32, citing Archivo Catedralicio de Ourense, Papeles de San Esteban, 1662, April 29, May 1, May 5–7.

**23** Duro Peña, *El monasterio de San Esteban*, 32: “Por cierto, ¿qué se ha hecho de los anillos? Posiblemente los llevaron los monjes, pues eran suyos.” On the exclausturation in general, see Rueda Hernanz, *La desamortización en España*.

In 1593–1594 Abbot Víctor of Nájera commissioned the sculptor Juan de Angés to make a new retable, followed by a pair of repositories for the bishops' relics to be located on the presbytery's north and south walls.<sup>24</sup> These were designed to display the relics in a more visible location and underline their nine-fold saintliness in the form of two oak reliquary cabinets with gilded iron grills and doors that locked. The interior divisions made room for five bishops in one cabinet and four in the other. The new set-up was witnessed less than three decades later in 1621 by Antonio de Yepes, chronicler of the Benedictine Order in Spain, who explains the reason for moving the relics from their previous location:

seeing that the holy bodies of the bishops, although they were in an elevated position, were not adorned as nobly as they deserved, each one was placed in a shrine, five to one side of the high altar and four to the other, very well worked, where now they are seen and enjoyed and praised for the good will and the devotion to the bones of the saints, as incorrupt and as healthy as if no time at all had passed.<sup>25</sup>

That “elevated position” from which they were removed was the interior of the retable behind the high altar itself, within which they had been installed in 1463 during an earlier updating of the furnishings of the old church. Thus, prior to having been separated into two sets of four and five bishops, 1463 was the moment when the bones of all nine had been brought together from their earlier individual tombs. Might that move also have responded to a particularly poor moment in the history of the monastery, when it was in need of a way to publicize its set of saints and encourage pilgrimage? In the early and central Middle Ages, the community had grown from some eight monks to twenty, but with the plague in the mid fourteenth century that number began to reduce until there were just six monks left in the second half of the fifteenth century, when the bishops' relics were gathered together and elevated to the retable behind the high altar. Their situation improved after 1506 when Santo Estevo joined the Benedictine Congregation of Valladolid, and by the late sixteenth century the number of monks had grown to forty, ushering in the monastery's

---

**24** Duro Peña, *El monasterio de San Esteban*, 30, 92.

**25** Yepes, *Coronica general*, 7, fols. 323v–324r: “viendo que los santos cuerpos de los obispos, si bien estaban elevados, no se veían con el adorno y grandeza que merecían, colocó a cada uno en su arca, poniendo al lado del altar mayor cinco a una parte y cuatro a otra, muy bien labradas, donde ahora se ven y se gozan y loan el buen ánimo y devoción de los huesos de sus santos tan incorruptos [sic] y tan sanos como si no hubiese pasado tiempo por ellos.”

period of greatest splendour and leading to the aforementioned bid for official recognition of its nine saintly bishops.<sup>26</sup>

As we shall see below, no mention was made of the rings' existence until the mid-sixteenth century, perhaps because it was simply taken for granted that all bishops have a ring of office.<sup>27</sup> Nor did the individual identities of the nine matter as much as their collective sanctity.<sup>28</sup> It was Ansuri, the first of the bishops to retire to Santo Estevo, who was singled out by Juan Tamayo Salazar in the middle of the seventeenth century as still having had rings “sticking to” (“haerentes”) his fingers when his bones were placed together with those of his saintly colleagues in the retable behind the high altar in 1463:

And the bones, mixed together and enclosed in one shrine, were placed behind the high altar of that church, where even now they are kept ... The fingers of Saint Ansuri were found with precious rings still sticking to them, with which even today many cures are effected, both by the virtue of the stones inserted in them and especially by their own holy merits.<sup>29</sup>

Tamayo's seventeenth-century reference to the healing power of Ansuri's rings was a new addition to the chain of written sources, perhaps testifying to their removal from the rest of the relics for use among those who sought the saints' touch. Ambrosio de Morales, in the course of his 1572 visits to relic collections across Spain, had not made note of any rings at Santo Estevo, although he did sum up the translation of the bishops' relics to the retable:

This house has an ancient holiness because it has the bodies of the nine bishops which are locally understood to be saints. They were in high stone

---

**26** Duro Peña, *El monasterio de San Esteban*, 29 and 137–38; Valle Pérez, “Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil,” 893–94, 904.

**27** Méhu, “L'ordination de l'évêque.”

**28** Duro Peña, *El monasterio de San Esteban*, 28–29, seeks to clarify what can be known about their names, dates, and dioceses: they were Asuri/Ansuri of Ourense (909–922); Vimarasio/Vimara (937–942) and Viliulfo (952–988) of Tuy; Gonzalo Osorio (ca. 915–922) and Froarengo (905–918) of Coimbra; Servando (diocese unknown); Pelayo (in the tenth century there were bishops of this name at Lugo, Coimbra, and Santiago); Alfonso (diocese unknown); and Pedro (of Braga?). For a slightly different list and extensive prior bibliography on these bishops, see Carrero, “Paraliturgia, ajuar hagiográfico,” 13.

**29** Tamayo Salazar, *Anamnesis sive Commemoratio*, 1:305–8, January 25, SS. Ansurius et Socii: “atque ossa commixta, una in arca inclusa, post maius altare illius ecclesiae reposuit, ubi etiam nunc adservantur. ... Reperit idem digitis SS. Antistitum haerentes pretiosos annulos, quibus multae etiam hodie fiunt curationes, tum insertorum lapidum virtute, tum praecipue ipsorum sanctorum meritis.” On stones of virtue, see Buettner, *The Mineral and the Visual*, and Chapter 3 in this volume.

tombs, all with epitaphs, throughout the whole cloister; but a solemn elevation was carried out, placing them in a rich retable that was made for the high altar, with nine well adorned compartments, and the stone of their tombs was used for rebuilding without saving any of the epitaphs except one [that of Ansuri ...] This monastery has been burned twice, and relics, books, and documents were consumed in the flames.<sup>30</sup>

Morales's lack of reference to the rings at Santo Estevo is curious, both because he did make note of rings at three other locations<sup>31</sup> and because just two decades earlier Juan de Molina had written about the same movement of the saints from their stone tombs to the new location within the retable, providing the oldest reference I have found to the bishops' rings. Molina gets the number of saints wrong, but his substitution of seven for nine reinforces our understanding of their holiness augmented by accumulation, with a symbolically significant number:

In the monastery of Santistevan de Ribas de Sil ... are the seven holy bodies who were all bishops of well-known churches and some forty years ago a reformer came there, who did not appreciate the excellent memory and authority of their tombs and he destroyed them all. They had been separate, but, gathering together the bones of one and all within a single shrine, he put them behind the high altar, where they are now, and on the fingers of those blessed bodies he found very rich rings, in which now is found great virtue, which comes as much from the stones as from their owners.<sup>32</sup>

---

**30** Morales, *Viage por orden del Rey*, 161–63, at 162: “Tiene esta Casa una santa antigüedad, por tener los Cuerpos de nueve Obispos que en la tierra son tenidos por Santos ... Estaban en tumbas altas de piedra, por todo el Claustro, y tenian sus Epitafios, mas hicieron elevación solemne de ellos, poniendolos encima de un retablo rico que han hecho en el Altar Mayor en nueve repartimientos bien adornados, y las tumbas de piedra gastaron en edificios sin sacar los Epitafios, mas que uno ... Este Monesterio se ha quemado dos veces, y alli se consumieron Reliquias, Libros, y Escrituras.”

**31** Morales, *Viage por orden del Rey*: Santo Toribio de Liébana (“Dos Anillos del Santo,” 59), the Cathedral of Ourense (“También está allí el anillo por donde se halló el Cuerpo Santo [of Eufemia]: es grande y de oro bajo con una gran piedra redonda y parece Amatista. No se puede ver bien por estar el anillo encerrado en una cagita de plata con redetica por donde se ve pendiente en una cadena de plata con que se lo ponen al cuello los enfermos, y se tiene con esto gran devoción,” 149), and at Celanova, associated with Rosendo (“También están tres Anillos suyos, dos de plata dorados, con cristales grandes, y uno de oro con Corniola grabada,” 154–55).

**32** Molina, *Descripcion del Reyno de Galizia*, fol. 10r: “En el monesterio de Santistevan de Ribas de Sil ... Están siete cuerpos sanctos que fueron todos obispos de yglesias bien conocidas ... y aura [sic, hará] quarenta y tantos años que un reformador que alli vino, no preciandose de la excelente memoria y auctoridad de tales sepulchros, los deshizo todos siete, que apartados estaban, y juntando todos los huessos de los

This phrase about their virtue would be copied by Tamayo a century later when he attributed all the rings to Ansuri, the first of the holy bishops to be buried at Santo Estevo and the only one whose medieval epitaph was preserved. It seems that the reforming abbot may thus have been the one who took at least some of the rings from the bishops' fingers, recognizing their “virtue,” when their medieval tombs were destroyed.

## Ribas de Sil and Medieval Construction

Like the multiple rings that came to be attributed to Ansuri in the early modern period, it is possible that rings had still been on the other episcopal owners' fingers before the remains of the nine bishops were removed from their previous individual stone tombs in the thirteenth-century cloister and placed within the retable behind the main altar, then moved again to the more visible location of the lateral reliquary cabinets. But those individual monumental tombs, designed to attract pilgrims to the monastery, had themselves been created two centuries after the bishops' decease: nothing is known of the original tenth-century burials. Augmented by reconstruction of both the monastic church and a splendid cloister with nine commemorative sepulchres in the decades around the turn of the thirteenth century, the joint fame of the holy bishops had been growing during the central Middle Ages. By the early thirteenth century, among the many donations and privileges granted to Santo Estevo by King Alfonso IX (r. 1188–1230) is a grand concession in 1220 of privileges throughout his royal lands. Calling himself king of León and Galicia, Alfonso makes his gift to the monastery and to the “nine bodies of the holy bishops who are buried there, for whom God makes infinite miracles.”<sup>33</sup> Scholarship has generally underscored that this early thirteenth-century donation is the first written testimony to the relics of nine saintly personages and their miracle-working capacity, but it must be emphasized that the reference is to their corporeal remains, not to any accessory relics, rings or otherwise.

---

unos y los otros en una arca, los puso de tras del altar mayor; donde agora estan, y en los dedos de los benditos cuerpos hallo muy ricos anillos, en los cuales agora se halla mucha virtud que procede ansi de las piedras como de sus dueños.” Available at <http://biblioteca.galiciiana.gal/es/consulta/registro.do?id=560555>; the catalogue notes that Molina figures under other names than Juan, including Bartolomé Sagarrio, Francisco, and Luis.

**33** Duro Peña, *El monasterio de San Esteban*, 264, no. 20: “novem corporibus sanctis episcopis qui ibi sunt tumulata pro quibus Deus infinita miracula facit”; González, *Alfonso IX*, 2, no. 386.

The institution's written history had begun some three centuries earlier during a previous period of reformation of local monastic traditions in accordance with transnational currents, in which private monasteries and hermitages were brought under ruling hierarchies and into line with regular monasticism. Santo Estevo had initially been formed by King Ordoño II of Galicia (r. 910–914) and Astur-León (r. 914–924), who donated lands to Abbot Franquila in 921 to create a monastery for the community of hermits who were living under his charge in the area. The monastery and its royal sponsorship proved attractive to a number of bishops, who sought retirement and burial there over the course of the tenth century.

Although most of the documentation of Santo Estevo from that period and its growth through the thirteenth century has been lost, its built environment allows us to continue tracing the medieval story of the saintly bishops and their presence at Ribas de Sil. The inscribed date of 1183 on a pier in the east end of the church locates the commencement of construction or its consecration date, confirming the stylistic evidence of the late Romanesque architecture and ornamentation.<sup>34</sup> The early thirteenth-century cloister, with its nine “high stone tombs, all with epitaphs, throughout the whole cloister,” in the words of Morales, had been designed to monumentalize the saintly remains in a space removed from the hurly-burly of daily life yet made accessible to pilgrims seeking cures, similar to the monumentalization we saw above for St. Rosendo at the monastery of Celanova.<sup>35</sup>

But here the trail of direct evidence ends. So, if we have neither material nor written evidence for the tenth-century existence of the four extant rings of Santo Estevo, how can we continue to pursue the question of their authenticity? For this we must open out beyond Ribas de Sil to trace other bishop's rings in Iberia during the central Middle Ages. The rare surviving rings, together with ample documentary sources, allow our search to go on along a parallel trail.

---

**34** Valle Pérez, “Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil,” 903; Castiñeiras, “San Estevo de Ribas de Sil revisitado.”

**35** Castiñeiras, “San Estevo de Ribas de Sil revisitado,” 58, understands the “high stone tombs” seen by Morales as the original tenth-century monuments. I think that they are more likely to have been created at the same time as the early thirteenth-century “Bishops’ Cloister.”

## The Rings in Comparative Context

The most extensive written documentation from medieval Iberia comes from the opposite extreme of the Peninsula, the region of Catalunya, which preserves many testaments and inventories that refer to rings, owned by individuals<sup>36</sup> or institutions.<sup>37</sup> These textual sources underline how relatively common the possession of rings would have been: as ornaments made of precious metals, they of course belonged to the elite, yet simple silver rings would not have been beyond the reach of many medieval women and men. In wills from the central Middle Ages, we read only the most succinct of descriptions, ones that document a ring’s existence without giving any sense of its aspect or materiality beyond a reference to gold, silver, and sometimes the stones. Lourdes Sanjosé i Llongueras has gathered multiple tenth-century examples of gifts from elite men and women to churches, such as in 917, from Count Gausbert for the consecration of the Cathedral of Santa Eulalia: “a superb gold ring with its precious stones” (“anulum aureum optimum cum suis preciosis lapidibus”).<sup>38</sup> The 1068 testament of the noblewoman Arsenda de Fluvià, wife of Arnau Mir de Tost, includes golden rings with gemstones (“anulos de auro cum iemas et gegonciis”).<sup>39</sup> Such rings—also discussed in this volume by Mariah Proctor-Tiffany and Inés Calderón—whether sold, passed down in wills to family and friends, or donated to favourite churches, rarely survive. Their most likely fate was to be melted down with other metalworks for conversion to new (or renovated) secular ornaments or liturgical objects, or indeed for many other economic ends, such as the financing of church construction. Joan Duran-Porta offers the example of Pere, a canon from the Cathedral of Vic, who in 1148 left twenty-two gold coins and six rings with precious stones for the restoration and embellishment (“restaurandam et augendam”) of the cross on his institution’s main altar.<sup>40</sup>

**36** Duran-Porta, “Relinquo ad ipsa tabula.”

**37** Sanjosé i Llongueras, *Esments d’orfebreria*, 23–33, 45–46.

**38** Sanjosé i Llongueras, *Esments d’orfebreria*, 63, doc. 10.

**39** Duran-Porta, “Relinquo ad ipsa tabula,” 122; cit. Chesé, *Col·lecció diplomàtica*, 1:326–31, doc. 87. On Arsenda, see recently Abenza Soria, “Arnau Mir de Tost y Arsenda de Fluvià.”

**40** Duran-Porta, “Relinquo ad ipsa tabula,” 125; citing Llop, *Col·lecció diplomàtica*, 1:437–39, doc. 449.

And what of the aforementioned testimony to the finding of multiple rings on the fingers of one of our Galician bishops? Here again the Catalan wills document the parallel possession of more than just a single “episcopal” ring, such as those of Bishop Eriball of Urgell, who in 1040 left his five rings to the heads of five different Catalan dioceses. He distinguishes his rings by the nobleman from whom he had received it, or by the colour of the stone, or both (“another ring, which belong to Arnau Mir [de Tost...]” “another ring, with a white stone, which belonged to Count Ermengaud,” or “another ring, with a man’s head in signet”).<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, Eriball makes no mention of whether his rings were silver or gold.

For the metals of Iberian bishops’ rings, we can turn to both hagiographic testimonies and the few surviving rings of the tenth through twelfth centuries; most are said to have been found in the bishops’ tombs when many were opened in the early modern period.<sup>42</sup> The best comparison for our nine Galician bishops is Atilano, Bishop of Zamora, whose life was written ca. 910–920 together with that of his companion Froilán.<sup>43</sup> They were monastic founders whose fame led to each being named bishop in the year 900 by the Astur-Leonese king Alfonso III (r. 866–910), Froilán in the diocese of León and Atilano as the first bishop of Zamora. His confirmation in various charters attests to Atilano’s activities at the royal court in León or travelling with rulers to Galicia from 907 until 919, the probable year of his death. The central chapter of Atilano’s saintly story has him throwing his episcopal ring into a river as he begins a penitential pilgrimage, saying to it, “[w]hen I see you again, I will know for certain that all

---

**41** Fité Llevot, “Arte y poder,” 198, citing Villanueva, *Viage literario*, 10: appendix 34, 330: “Annulum quidem, qui fuit comitis Ermengaudi, iussit dare episcopo suo successore, ut remuneret orationi...eius, vel comitis Ermengaudi. Annulus autem, qui fuit Arnalli Mironis [de Tost], iussit dare Olivae episcopo sedis Ausonensis. Annulum namque cum petra alba, qui fuit comitis Ermengaudi, dimissit episcopo Gerundae. (Annulus) habens petram rubeam, episcopo Barchinonensi. Annulus insuper, in quo est capud hominis signatum, episcopo Ripacurcensi.” See also Duran-Porta, “Relinquo ad ipsa tabula,” 122; cit. Llop, *Col·lecció diplomàtica*, 1:181–85, doc. 160.

**42** On the finding of bishops’ rings in their tombs, see overall the catalogue in Sanke, *Die Gräber geistlicher Eliten*; for Spain, Carrero, “Paraliturgia, ajuar hagiográfico”; for France, Meunier, “Bague dite de Maurice de Sully”; and Dervieu, “La bague au Moyen Âge,” 67, 73–77; for England, Oman, *Victoria and Albert*, 30–31; for Italy (a twelfth-century “silver bishop’s ring from Murano”), Taylor and Scarisbrick, *Finger Rings*, 58–59, no. 429.

**43** Martín Iglesias, “La Vita Froilanis”; García, “Atilano de Zamora”; Luis Corral, “En busca de hombres santos.”

my sins have been forgiven.”<sup>44</sup> Returning to Zamora after two years and a series of tribulations, Atilano, dressed in rags, finds himself in a refuge for pilgrims and the poor outside the city. Upon gutting the fish to be served at the beggars’ table, Atilano discovered his very ring and knew that God had forgiven him.<sup>45</sup> At that moment, all the bells in the city began to peal, and the townspeople streamed out to receive their erstwhile bishop, suddenly magnificently dressed in glorious vestments, his episcopal ring restored to his hand, and they returned him in procession to his rightful place at the episcopal palace.

Atilano’s ring was described in 1621 by the Benedictine chronicler Yepes:

Beyond the body of this saintly prelate, preserved by the Zamorans, they hold in great esteem his precious objects, which help them to keep his memory fresh: in the church of San Pedro, which is now called of San Ildefonso, is kept the ring that Saint Atilano threw into the Duero and that was later found in the belly of the fish. The ring is very slim, and it must be no more than one *real* of silver in weight (how humble were the bishops at that time!), and set within it is a turquoise stone, somewhat larger than a chickpea. The Zamorans also preserve a bone comb, which they say was used by Saint Atilano, and the staff on which he leaned, which is of wood, and even the basin in which the fish was cleaned.<sup>46</sup>

That original silver ring with its humble turquoise stone is now almost completely hidden from sight, encased in gold and topped by a deep blue cabochon, which appears to be glass paste intended to evoke sapphire, a sort of ring-shaped reliquary to protect and magnify the remains of Atilano’s ring

---

**44** Flórez, “Vita Sancti Attilani,” 463–65, at 464: “Quando te revidero, omnium delictorum meorum veniae certus ero.”

**45** On the topos of a ring rediscovered in a fish, see Martínez Ángel, “Reflexiones sobre las culturas oral y escrita.”

**46** Yepes, *Coronica general*, 5, fol. 205r, “El anillo es muy delgado, y terna [tendrá] no mas que un real de plata de peso (que tan humildes eran los Obispos de aquel tiempo!) y está engastada en el una piedra Turquesa, algo mayor que un garbanço. Aliende del cuerpo que conservan los Zamoranos deste santo Prelado, tienen en mucha estima otras alhajas suyas, que les ayudan a refrescar su memoria: porque en la Iglesia de San Pedro, que ya se llama de San Ildefonso, se guarda el anillo que San Atilano arrojó en el Duero, y despues se halló en el buche del pez. Tambien guardan los Zamoranos un peyne de hueso, que dizen servia a San Atilano, y el baculo a que se arrimava, que es de palo, y hasta la pila en que se lavó el pez.” Yepes expands on the brief 1596 testimony of Fray Atanasio de Lobera, *Historia de las grandezas*, fols. 409v–410r: “el anillo es tan delgado que me parece tendrá poco más de un real de plata. Está engastada en él una piedra turquesa, no muy fina, algo mayor que un garbanço.”

inside it (Figure 7.9).<sup>47</sup> The ring-reliquary, placed at the heart of a cross-shaped reliquary in the late sixteenth century by the silversmith Antonio Rodríguez de Carbajal, can be viewed in its magnificence today in the Zamoran parish church of San Pedro y San Ildefonso.<sup>48</sup> Set behind glass, the ring is impossible to access fully without dismantling part of the cross reliquary. However, it is clearly evident that a metal artifact, which appears to be of silver, has been carefully preserved within the splendidly displayed gold ring. In the early modern period, it seems that a simple silver circlet set with turquoise—just like one of the rings found at Ribas de Sil—was not considered adequate for the commemoration of a saintly bishop, even if it had been appropriate for him to wear in the tenth century. Yet it was indeed very appropriate to preserve and honour the holy relics, maintaining their memory and authority while contributing to the aura of authenticity through the splendour of the new setting.

## Conclusion

Now that our journey back in time has concluded in Zamora with the remains of a tenth-century silver ring, encased within a golden framework at the crux of a sixteenth-century reliquary, can we make a scholarly pronouncement about the four silver rings that were so fortuitously found in 2020 at Santo Estevo? I confess that I began this study in a decidedly sceptical mindset, but the deeper I have dug through medieval and early modern written and material evidence, the more inclined I am to accept the authority of the parchment authentic found in the purse with them: “These four Rings Are from the Holy Bishops of this House.” For the community at Santo Estevo, the rings were certainly authentic, whether as memory objects that

---

**47** Rivera de las Heras, “Relicario del anillo,” 254, describes Atilano’s ring as being “made of silver, with a little filigree work” and he identifies the stone as a sapphire (“El cuadrón central, circular, alberga un anillo de oro – 24 × 21 mm – con un zafiro – 11 × 8 mm – engastado en un receptáculo oval decorado con un fino sogueado. El interior del aro envuelve parcialmente lo que parece ser otro anillo realizado en plata con pequeñas labores de filigrana”). See also Labarta, *Anillos de la península ibérica*, 267–68.

**48** I am very grateful to D. Juan Carlos López Hernández, Episcopal Delegate to the Delegación Episcopal de Cultura, Patrimonio y Sociedad of Zamora, and to D. Juan Luis Martín Barrios, Dean of Zamora Cathedral and Pastor of the Church of San Pedro y San Ildefonso, who generously granted permission to study the relics of St. Atilano (ring, ivory comb, and remains of the wooden episcopal staff—the basin mentioned by Yepes is no longer extant). Thanks also go to my colleague Esperanza Alfonso for her kind assistance during on-site research.



Figure 7.9. Reliquary of the ring of St. Atilano. Zamora, Church of San Pedro y San Ildefonso. Photographs by author.

Table 7.1. Key moments and material or written evidence for the history of the rings from Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil.

<b>10th century</b>	Retirement of multiple bishops to Santo Estevo; no surviving written or material evidence for initial burials.
<b>1183</b>	Inscription in church. Beginning of thirteenth-century cloister construction, with individual memorial tombs accessible to pilgrims.
<b>1220</b>	Donation by Alfonso IX to Santo Estevo in honour of the “nine bodies of the holy bishops who are buried there.”
<b>1463</b>	Collection and elevation of bishops’ bodies to retable behind high altar; destruction of memorial tombs in cloister.
<b>1551</b>	First mention of rings? Molina confirms changes of 1463: “behind the high altar, where they are now, and on the fingers of those blessed bodies he found very rich rings.”
<b>1572</b>	Morales further confirms that 1463 changes took place: “a rich retable that was made for the high altar, with nine well adorned compartments.”
<b>1593–1594</b>	Commission by Abbot Víctor of new retable plus new repositories for the bishops’ bodies on north and south walls of presbytery; bodies now split into two groups (five on one side; four on the other).
<b>1621</b>	Yepes confirms that 1594 commission was carried out; now two cabinets holding relics of saintly bones (no mention of rings).
<b>1650s</b>	Tamayo cites rings seen on the hand of bishop with sole surviving epitaph from memorial cloister: “The fingers of Saint Ansuri were found with precious rings still sticking to them.”
<b>16th/17th century?</b>	Purse of silk embroidered with metallic threads (see Figure 7.3).
<b>1662</b>	Petition for official recognition of saints, including testimonies of miracles wrought by rings “that they say had belonged to the holy bishops.”
<b>17th century</b>	Parchment authentic (see Figure 7.2); present tense indicates active use: “These four rings ... Through them water is poured for the sick.”
<b>1785</b>	Paper authentic identifying “four rings,” late 17th / early 18th century, with additional note referencing changes of 1785 to church furnishings (see Figure 7.1).
<b>2020</b>	Four rings (see Figure 7.5) and two authentics found in silk purse during restoration of church furnishings.
<b>2021–2022</b>	Art/historical investigation, technical analysis (XRF), as part of Treasury Project.

acted metonymically in the place of the bishops, or as the original artifacts that had been physically removed from their decayed fingers.

From the perspective of a twenty-first-century art historian, the very fact that these rings are *not* magnificent, like those from Celanova associated with St. Rosendo, has become for me an unexpected point in their favour. Although I might have assumed that bishops from the tenth century would possess more impressive rings, like many of those that survive from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, I found that it was the surprise in Yepes’s written voice—“how humble were the bishops at that time!”—which ended up convincing me that these four rings could truly be from the tenth century. The Benedictine chronicler was speaking of the Zamoran example, but his words could just as well have described one of our rings at Ribas de Sil: “the ring is very slim, and it must be no more than one *real* of silver in weight ... and set within it is a turquoise stone.”

Finally, in considering the complexities of dating these silver rings, we would do well to recall the scholar’s dilemma as summed up neatly by O. M. Dalton in his magisterial cataloguing of the rings of the British Museum:

The precise dating of rings in the Middle Ages is often a matter of great difficulty; sometimes it is impossible ... The more precise sources of information on which we have to rely may be divided into two main classes—first, the archaeological and artistic; second, the documentary and literary.<sup>49</sup>

Let us rehearse then what can be determined about the rings at Santo Estevo according to these two main classes. Archaeologically speaking, there is nothing in the silver, gold, or niello that rejects a tenth-century date. Nor do the styles suggest modern manufacture: as noted above, the channelled hoop of one ring closely parallels an early medieval example at the British Museum. As for the documentary and literary sources, we can trace the Santo Estevo rings only as far back as 1551, yet references to other silver bishops’ rings are a commonplace in tenth-century Iberian documentation. If these rings’ simple designs and lack of either inscriptions or extraordinary gemstones leave us little room for a definitive answer, all evidence suggests that they are indeed the rings that were removed from at least one episcopal owner’s fingers when the bones of the nine were taken out of their individual tombs in 1463 and moved to a retable behind the high altar at Ribas de Sil.

---

**49** Dalton, *Franks Bequest*, xvii. See also the British Museum’s extensive online catalogue, [www.britishmuseum.org/collection/](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/), where a search for “finger-ring” yielded over 9,000 holdings.

The rings seem not to have been activated in their silk sack for another century, yet that they were considered precious is evidenced especially by the ring that has lost its stone: clearly, this contact relic still retained its saintly virtue, even in an incomplete and unprepossessing state.

And like the silver ring hidden at the heart of St. Atilano's reliquary, that is the crux of this research tale: their humble aspect may not fulfill our expectations today, even if Molina in the sixteenth century perceived them as "very rich rings." It may be that our expectation of what is *appropriate* for a medieval saint has been formed by viewing the more splendid rings of later medieval moments; however, tracing the trail of the rings from Santo Estevo (Table 7.1) has led me to conclude that they do indeed appear to be authentic.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- Chesé, Ramón. *Col·lecció diplomàtica de Sant Pere d'Àger fins 1198*. Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 2011.
- Flórez, Enrique. "Vita Sancti Attilani episcopi zamorensis." *España Sagrada*, vol. 14, *Iglesias sufragáneas de Mérida*. Madrid: Oficina de Antonio Marin, 1758 (reprint Madrid: Editorial revista agustiniana, 2004).
- González, Julio. *Alfonso IX*, 2 vols. Madrid: Instituto Jerónimo Zurita, 1944.
- Llop, Irene. *Col·lecció diplomàtica de Sant Pere de Casseres*, 2 vols. Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 2009.
- Lobera, Atanasio de. *Historia de las grandezas de la muy antigua, e insigne ciudad y Iglesia de León, y de su Obispo, y Patrón sant Froylan, con las del glorioso San Atilano Obispo de Çamora*. Valladolid: Diego Fernández de Cordova, 1596.
- Martín Iglesias, José Carlos. "La Vita Froilanis episcopi Legionensis (BHL 3180) (s. X): Introducción, edición crítica y particularidades lingüísticas." In *Parva pro magnis munera: Études de littérature tardo-antique et médiévale offertes à François Dolbeau par ses élèves*, edited by Monique Goulet, 561–84. Turnhout: Brepols, 2009.
- Molina, Juan de. *Descripcion del Reyno de Galizia y de las cosas notables del*. Mondoñedo: Augustin de Paz, 1551.
- Morales, Ambrosio de. *Viage por orden del Rey d. Phelipe II. a los Reynos de Leon y Galicia y Principado de Asturias, para reconocer las Reliquias de Santos, Sepulcros Reales, y Libros Manuscritos de las Cathedrales, y Monasterios*. Córdoba, 1572, edited by Enrique Flórez. Madrid: Antonio Marín, 1765.
- Ordoño de Celanova: *Vida y milagros de San Rosendo*. Edited by Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, M<sup>a</sup> Virtudes Pardo Gómez, and Daría Vilariño Pintos. Coruña: Fundación Pedro Barrié de la Maza, 1990.
- Tamayo Salazar, Juan. *Anamnesis sive Commemoratio Omnium Sanctorum Hispanorum*. Lugduni [Lyon]: Phil. Borde, Laur. Arnaud, and Cl. Rigaud, 1651–1659.
- Villanueva, Jaime. *Viage literario a las iglesias de España*. Valencia: Imprenta de Oliveres, 1821.
- Yepes, Antonio de. *Coronica general de la orden de San Benito*, vol. 7. Valladolid: Viuda de Francisco Fernandez de Cordoua, 1621.

## Secondary Works

- Abenza Soria, Verónica Carla. “Arnau Mir de Tost y Arsenda de Fluvià: El deseo y la acción de peregrinar a Compostela.” *Compostellanum* 63, nos. 3–4 (2018): 363–81.
- Baena Alcántara, María Dolores. “Anillo del obispo Samson.” In *Las artes del metal en al-Andalus*, exh. cat., edited by Sergio Vidal Álvarez, 158, cat. 86. Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2019.
- Bowman, Jeffrey. “Record, Chronicle and Oblivion: Remembering and Forgetting Elite Women in Medieval Iberia.” In *Beyond the Reconquista: New Directions in the History of Medieval Iberia (711–1085)*, edited by Simon Barton and Robert Portass, 201–31. Leiden: Brill, 2020.
- Buettner, Brigitte. *The Mineral and the Visual: Precious Stones in Medieval Secular Culture*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2022.
- Carrero Santamaría, Eduardo. “Paraliturgia, ajuar hagiográfico y lugares de enterramiento en torno a los obispos santos de Galicia y de León entre los siglos IX y XI.” *Porta da Aira: Revista de historia del arte Orensano* 10 (2004): 8–54.
- Castiñeiras González, Manuel Antonio. “San Estevo de Ribas de Sil revisitado: Nuevos hallazgos e hipótesis sobre el monasterio medieval.” *Porta da Aira: Revista de historia del arte Orensano* 11 (2006): 53–90.
- . “San Martiño de Mondoñedo.” In *Enciclopedia del Románico: Lugo*, edited by José María Pérez González and José Carlos Valle Pérez, 1235–61. Aguilar de Campoo: Fundación Santa María la Real, 2018.
- Cupeirol López, Patricia. “Intervenciones y usos: Un capítulo en la historia de Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil.” In *Entre el agua y el cielo: El patrimonio monástico de la Ribeira Sacra*, edited by Juan Manuel Monterroso Montero and Enrique Fernández Castiñeiras, 303–21. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2012.
- Dalton, O. M. *Franks Bequest: Catalogue of the Finger Rings. Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later, Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wallaston Franks, K.C.B.* London: British Museum, 1912.
- Dervieu, Lieutenant-Colonel. “La bague au Moyen Âge.” *Revue archéologique* 19 (1924): 55–78.
- Duran-Porta, Joan. “Relinquo ad ipsa tabula de argento ... La orfebrería en los testamentos catalanes de los siglos XI–XIII.” *Anales de historia del arte* 24 (2014): 119–31.
- Duro Peña, Emilio. *El monasterio de San Esteban de Ribas de Sil*. Orense: Instituto de Estudios Orensanos “Padre Feijoo” de la Diputación Provincial, 1977.
- Fité Llevot, Francesc. “Arte y poder: Obras de ‘prestigio’ y símbolos de poder. Algunos ejemplos catalano-ribagorzanos.” In *Imágenes del poder en la Edad Media: Estudios in memoriam del Prof. Dr. Fernando Galván Freile*, edited by Etelvina Fernández González, 2:195–211. León: Universidad de León, 2011.
- García, Charles. “Atilano de Zamora: Santo, obispo y profeta (ss. IX–X).” *Hispania sacra* 71, no. 144 (2019): 389–98.
- Hahn, Cynthia, and Avinoam Shalem, eds. *Seeking Transparency: Rock Crystals Across the Medieval Mediterranean*. Berlin: Mann, 2020.
- Henig, Martin. “The Re-Use and Copying of Ancient Intaglios Set in Medieval Personal Seals, Mainly Found in England: An Aspect of the Renaissance of the 12th Century.” In *Good Impressions: Image and Authority in Medieval Seals*, edited by Noël Adams, John Cherry, and James Robinson, 25–34. Research Publications of the British Museum 168. London: British Museum, 2008.

- Hindman, Sandra, with Ilaria Fatone, and Angélique Laurent-di Mantova. *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings: A Private Collection*. London: Holberton, 2007.
- Kinney, Dale. "Ancient Gems in the Middle Ages: Riches and Ready-Mades." In *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, edited by Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney, 97–120. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.
- Labarta, Ana, with Carmen Barceló. *Anillos de la península ibérica, 711–1611*. Valencia: Alhorí, 2017.
- Lapatin, Kenneth. *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome*. Los Angeles: Getty, 2015.
- Luis Corral, Fernando. "En busca de hombres santos: Atila, Ildefonso y el obispado de Zamora." In *¿Tiempos oscuros? Territorio y sociedad en el centro de la península ibérica (siglos VV–X)*, edited by Iñaki Martín Viso, 203–27. Madrid: Sílex, 2009.
- Luyster, Amanda R. "Reassembling Textile Networks: Treasuries and Re-collecting Practices in Thirteenth-Century England." *Speculum* 96, no. 4 (2021): 1039–78.
- Martínez Ángel, Lorenzo. "Reflexiones sobre las culturas oral y escrita, a propósito de una leyenda zamorana sobre San Atilano." *Revista de Folklore* 25, no. 294 (2005): 208–11.
- Méhu, Didier. "L'ordination de l'évêque au début du XIe siècle à partir des pontificaux de Roda et de Vic." *Miscel·lània litúrgica Catalana* 26 (2018): 51–96.
- Meunier, Florian. "Bague dite de Maurice de Sully." *Dossiers de l'Art: Trésor de Notre-Dame* 312 (2023): 20.
- Moreno, Maudilio, and Marina González. "Dos tumbas hispanovisigodas del Teatro de la Axerquía de Córdoba." *Anales de arqueología Cordobesa* 16 (2005): 193–206.
- Oman, C. C. *Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue of Rings 1930*. London: Victoria & Albert, 1930 (reprint Ipswich: Anglia, 1993).
- Pallares, María del Carmen. *Ilduara, una aristócrata del siglo X*. Sada: Seminario de Estudos Galegos, 1998.
- Pintos Barreiro, Mercedes. "Anillo de san Rosendo." In *En olor de santidad: Relicarios de Galicia*, edited by José Manuel García Iglesias, 258–59. Santiago de Compostela: Xunta de Galicia, 2004.
- Porter, Venetia. *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum*. London: British Museum, 2017.
- Rivera de las Heras, José Ángel. "Relicario del anillo de san Atilano." In *En olor de santidad: Relicarios de Galicia*, edited by José Manuel García Iglesias, 252–54. Santiago de Compostela: Xunta de Galicia, 2004.
- Rueda Hernanz, Germán. *La desamortización en España: Un balance (1766–1924)*. Madrid: Arco Libros, 1997.
- Sanjosé i Llongueras, Lourdes de. *Esments d'orfebreria litúrgica en la documentació catalana (segles IX–XIV): Recull provisional*. Vic: L'Arxiu Biblioteca Episcopal de Vic, 2019.
- Sanke, Marcus. *Die Gräber geistlicher Eliten Europas von der Spätantike bis zur Neuzeit: archäologische Studien zur materiellen Reflexion von Jenseitsvorstellungen und ihrem Wandel*, vol. 2, *Katalog der archäologisch beobachteten Bischofsgräber in Europa*. Bonn: Habelt, 2012.
- Taylor, Gerald, and Diana Scarisbrick. *Finger Rings from Ancient Egypt to the Present Day*. London: Lund Humphries, 1978.
- Valle Pérez, José Carlos. "Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil." In *Enciclopedia del Románico: Ourense*, edited by José María Pérez González and José Carlos Valle Pérez, 893–910. Aguilar de Campoo: Centro de Estudios del Románico, 2015.
- Zchomelidse, Nino. "Liminal Phenomena: Framing Medieval Cult Images with Relics and Words." *Viator* 47, no. 3 (2016): 243–96.