ANTHROPOS

109.2014: 103–118

Ineffable Illumination

Early Medieval Church Treasure and the Preservation of Heaven's Light

Mary W. Helms

Abstract. – Sacral kings in traditional societies are responsible for the preservation of cosmic energies that create and support life. In early medieval Europe, they did so by depositing quantities of shining gold, silver, gems in church sanctuaries. These materials are interpreted as "performative things" that, by virtue of association with aristocratic charisma and militancy, derivation from foreign or "distant" locales, and skilled craftsmanship, were empowered in their own right to "generate" light. The brilliant glow of sanctuaries then was added to the cosmological light of the Christian universe, thereby preserving and enhancing the creative energy on which all life depended. *[Europe, medieval church treasure, performative things, precious metal, medieval cosmology, sacral kings]*

Mary W. Helms, cultural anthropologist, Professor emerita at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA. – This study continues her interest in early medieval efforts to connect with creational origins and explores the role of metal in this effort. – Prior work includes "Sacred Landscape and the Early Medieval European Cloister" (*Anthropos* 2002); "Before the Dawn" (*Anthropos* 2004); "Joseph the Smith and the Salvational Transformation of Matter in Early Medieval Europe" (*Anthropos 2006*).

> High circular crowns and lampsteads full of lights!
> All glimmers with gems and glistens with gold.
> Hangings and frontals encircle the Temple all around
>
> (John Erigena describing the monastery chapel of St. Mary at Conpiègne; Riché 1993: 344).

The sanctuaries of the major episcopal and monastic churches of early medieval (Merovingian and Carolingian) Europe (approximately 5th–10th centuries) were breathtaking; veritable storehouses of treasure, where walls aglow with colorful frescoes and mosaics enclosed a sacred space ablaze with standing candelabra and hanging chandeliers, resplendent with shimmering tapestries or lustrous hangings of silk, and refulgent with bright light reflected from abundant quantities of precious metals and sparkling gems seeming to adorn virtually every available surface, the whole further enhanced during ritual by clouds of incense, diverse liturgical objects also of gold and silver and precious stones, and the brilliant silken vestments of the clergy. (Smaller and rural churches were far less endowed and are not the subject of discussion).

Contemporary descriptions routinely collapse into unrestrained superlatives, stressing the "splendor," "radiance," "dazzling glitter," noting that the precious metal is always pure, the precious stones enormous, the liturgical vessels of unsurpassed weight and brilliance. Gaborit-Chopin (1989: 260) raises a cautionary note, seeing such effusive renderings as simply literary conventions, but James (2000: 42) notes that clichés or rhetorical topoi express a kernel of truth pertinent to the thought of the time; that when a writer rhapsodized about manifestations of light it was because light mattered and was worthy of remark, not just an expected comment.

Such extravagant praises emphasized the high visibility that made ecclesiastical "ornament" valuable as a mediation between observers in the darker nave and the spiritual purpose of the sanctuary, for glitter could draw the gaze to the liturgical environ-

ment and make the spiritual more substantial and materially real (Palazzo 2010). At the same time, ecclesiastical treasure mediated between the earthbound and the otherworld, for a brilliantly shining sanctuary illuminated a liminal threshold adjoining heaven, indeed evoked heaven itself (Van Dam 1985: 239). This essay will further explore the nature and significance of this light-producing materiality especially within the context of various early medieval aristocratic and royal mandates to direct and control the relationship of society to wider temporal-spatial realms.

Descriptions of treasure vary with historical period. The "Liber Pontificalis" (Raymond 1989; see also Leader-Newby 2004) provides a detailed picture of some of the wealth in gold and especially silver comprising revetments, fittings and furniture, liturgical vessels, and other objects accumulated by the high basilicas of late antiquity, especially in Rome, which served as archetypical precedent for high-level early medieval European churches. In particular, the astounding quantity (both in number of pieces and weight of metal) of fixed and moveable treasure attributed to donations by Emperor Constantine (especially to the basilicas of St. John Lateran and St. Peter) became the unsurpassable exemplar both for future papal gifts in Rome and for royal and aristocratic patrons of early medieval churches elsewhere in Europe.[1]

Far less is known of the appearance of Merovingian churches (McKitterick 1989: 160) but the Gallican mass used at the time was highly ceremonial and dramatic (Jungmann 1951: 44–48) and sanctuaries with frescoed walls, marble or gold mosaics, richly adorned tapestries, and chandeliers are described.[2] Angenendt (2008: 133 f.) observes in particular that the Merovingian church evidences a growing regard for material objects in the fulfillment of its charge. The extensive number of platters, bowls and dishes, pitchers, and numerous other items, some pure metal and some gilded, some of great weight, given to two churches of Auxerre by Bishop Desiderius in the 7th century would seem to support the point (Davis-Weyer 1971: 66–69).

Holdings of elite Carolingian churches (which followed the Roman-Frankish rite, also performed in spectacular fashion; Jungmann 1951: 74–77, 92–103) are known in considerable detail and indicate that work in gold and silver had become even more extensive, sumptuous, and refined (Riché 1972: 39–44). In the finest churches, columns and capitals were sculpted and walls covered with narrative scenes from the lives of Christ and saints or Old Testament stories (Diebold 2000: 62). In the sanctuary, lamps of precious metal could hang before the altar, joined by standing candelabra and hanging thuribles. Coronas (circular chandeliers of candles or small oil lamps) adorned with gems and precious stones could hang in the nave. Their effulgence was paralleled by numerous additional ecclesiastical implements and objects in gold, silver, and other precious materials. The inventory of 831 of the Saint Riquier Abbey Church at the Monastery of Centula provides a detailed account of splendor and wealth (Davis-Weyer 1971: 95 f.). Considered in part and in summary, it lists three altars made of marble, precious metals, and precious stones, each with a canopy of gold and silver and a corona of gold and costly stones suspended above it; nine gilded censors; fifteen large candlesticks, fourteen coronas, and twelve lamps, all of gold, silver, or gilded copper; thirty reliquaries of gold, silver, or ivory. The shrine of Saint Riquier itself included six larger chalices and thirteen smaller ones, an equal number of patens (patens of the time were large deep bowls for broken bread), seventy-one additional bowls and vessels, and a number of additional implements, all in gold or silver, as well as a gospel book and its silver box set with jewels and gems (see also Diebold 2000; Lasko 1994 for additional descriptions).

How should such glittering wealth and such quantity of wealth be interpreted? In this essay, the heart of the matter lies in the relationship between light and life, especially creation. Light is fundamental to creational concerns in several contexts. Sensorily or in nature, light (unlike darkness) is focused and has a distinct source, meaning that it is "made" or "created," be it by fire, the sun, or a creator God. Light then brings into being or "creates" (illuminates) the visible shapes, appearances, and boundaries of physical objects and other forms of matter, some of which, in turn, can manifest light via the creative technological skills of artisans, who can manipulate select natural materials, including precious metals and gemstones, so that they appear to produce (create) light themselves by virtue of physical properties of reflection. In addition, light is essential for the dynamics of life processes. Biologically, light is energy and, as such, enables life; creates life in the sense that life "feeds" on light (De Bruyne 1969: 56–60). Consequently, in cosmological and metaphysical formulations, light can be perceived as the "source" of created things. Early medieval theology, cosmology, and political-ideology explored these familiar light-related verities es-

1 Raymond (1992, 1995); Goodson (2010: 137–149); Janes (1998a: 137 f.).

2 Gregory of Tours (1974: II.16); Panofsky and Panofsky-Soergel (1979: 87); Van Dam (1985: 239).

pecially as they were informed by shining forms of matter, like precious metals and gems. Their perspective, by no means unique, was commensurate with broader metaphysical and cosmological tenets common to many other traditional societies that have also dedicated select assemblages of material valuables to the exclusive service of spiritual and cosmological realms.

Feeding the Cosmos

Traditional peoples have long assumed that they are involved in the preservation and maintenance of the dynamic conditions and processes underlying the all-encompassing cosmological systems that support both everyday survival and the long-term social and political reproduction of their societies. These cosmological orders are further interpreted within a broad organic or "consubstantiality of life" perspective (Goldman 1975: 3, 22, 207) that posits that the elements of the universe are interrelated by a basic energy or vital life force that, in varying degree, imbues all things, beings, and processes that exist, be they man-made or natural, tangible or intangible, animate or inanimate; a potency that defines the essence of things and beings in terms of fundamental energetics rather than by physical or material characteristics per se (Helms 1993: 150, 152). Within a given society, the political-ideological leadership bears primary responsibility to tend, enhance, influence, or master the flow of basic life force through ritual (Oakley 2010: 20 f.). Consequently, maintenance of proper relationships between institutionalized power holders and the supernatural is considered vital for the preservation and repeated renewal of both the wider cosmos and the political order (Derks 1998: 18; Burkert 1996: 137 f.).

It is widely believed that deities, spirits, and ancestors are the original and ultimate sources of life and well-being, but it is also understood that people are obligated to periodically "feed" these supernaturals with the life essence of humans, animals, crops, and/or matter because "only by giving back the divine component can new life be generated" (Derks 1998: 76). The ethnographical and historical literature records a number of practices intended to nourish and vivify the universe by ritually returning appropriate energy-infused substances to the cosmos, thereby helping to assure victory in battle, fertility of people and animals, and an abundance of foodstuffs and other life-supporting resources. Godly feeding can become quite literal; at the temple of Anu at Uruk, where gods were fed daily, the statues were moved to a dining room where tables were set up and incense burners lit (Burkert 1996: 147; priests consumed tangible remains of the meal). Much more common has been the sacrificial offering of consecrated plants, animals, or people to return the vivifying essence in first fruits, blood, fat, or bone marrow (Hubert and Mauss 1964).[3]

The cosmos may also be renewed by proper dispersal of the "remains" of things, following their functional use within society, which assures a future supply, as in the ritual return of the bones of animal or fish to forest, sea, or river.[4] However, the type of "feeding" procedure of most interest here involves the deposition of quantities of energized and fertility-related inert materials at select sacred locations, such as lakes, rivers, springs, constructed pits, shrines and temple, and church sanctuaries. In my opinion, this approach is illustrated by the widespread depositions into earth and water of metal objects during the European Bronze Age and comparable practices utilizing a range of material substances during the succeeding Iron Age and even later (Helms 2012; Hingley 1997). It is also evidenced by consecrated offerings of precious metals and other valuable materials displayed in quantity in temples and sanctuaries of Greek and Roman antiquity and Roman Gaul.[5] This essay argues that the amassing of rich church treasure in early medieval Europe can be understood in the same terms.

In these several approaches to cosmic maintenance a distinction is often made between "sacrifice" of living beings and substances and what are often termed "gifts" or "votive offerings" involving inert objects (artifacts). Following van Baal (1976: 161, 167), I consider any presentation of something to the supernatural to be an offering, whether it be animate or inanimate. I also emphasize that, within a consubstantiality of life philosophy, inanimate offerings, though inert, are still considered to be inherently charged with the energetics of life force such that they, too, can qualify as appropriate sources of sustenance for the supernatural. In addition, to perceive a ubiquitous cosmological life force made tangible in all manner of material things, not only animated beings and plants but also trees, water, bones, rocks, ores, precious stones, all kinds of

3 Aristophanes' comedy "The Birds" (2006) relates the desperate hunger faced by the once proud Olympian gods when the birds blockaded the passage between earth and Olympus, preventing the deities from receiving the nourishing aroma of burnt offerings.

4 Bones are still infused with life force because they are the enduring and, within a consubstantiality of life perspective, still viable portion of an animal after the perishable flesh has been consumed (Helms 2012).

5 Pedley (2005); Orlin (1997: 131–138); Derks (1998: 202–204).

crafted objects and materials, etc., allows all things to be interwoven into existential networks that ultimately connect them all with original creational beginnings, with Genesis (Gellrich 1985: 37 f., 40 f.; Dowden 2000). This metaphysical perspective, long characteristic of Classical Antiquity, Celtic and so-called Germanic peoples of Europe, and Western European Middle Ages (among many other societies; Gellrich 1985: 40, 52–54, 94 f.), also emphasizes the repeated return to conditions of origins by ritual replication of creation manifested by offering a variety of life-giving materials to the cosmos.[6]

The manner in which early medieval church treasure supported the cosmos was influenced by beliefs and practices of Celtic tribes and the diverse peoples, now known collectively as "Germanic" (Goffart 2006), who had come to inhabit Western Europe, and of the Christianity that adapted to them during late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Among the Celtic and Germanic traditions of particular analytical value here is their focus on warfare as a sanctified and "just" activity and the consequent practice of establishing permanent deposits of war booty as offerings to the deities. Raids and battles by a warrior aristocracy had long included sacral components intended to strengthen the victor's gods with energy-filled materiel and the lives of the defeated. Deaths in battle or as sacrificed war captives fed the cosmos because they assured immortality for the deceased, which increased the amount of eternal life existing in the universe overall. In addition, collections of war gear, clothing, slaughtered horses, and human remains from the defeated army typically were permanently deposited at sacred and inviolate locations in nature, such as forested sites and watery locales (rivers, bogs, lakes), where they would be abandoned to energy-releasing decay (Derks 1998: 45–47, 234 f.; Dowden 2000: 182–184).

Several centuries later, significantly Romanized Celtic and "Frankish" peoples and other, less subdued Germanic groups (Goffart 2006; Hummer 1998) began the exceedingly slow process of relocating their sacred depositional locales from sites in nature to Christian churches (or converting them to similar Christian uses).[7] Gregory of Tours famously describes (Dowden 2000: 50 f.) an incident in which a large group of country people, who had annually enjoyed a festival at a mountain lake into which they threw all manner of offerings (food, cloth, wax, etc.), finally capitulated to a disapproving Christian bishop, though not until he built a church in the vicinity to which they then brought the types of thing they previously had thrown into the water. Incidents of this sort suggest a shared tolerance and appreciation of the relevance of feeding the cosmos by deposition of valued things at sacred sites, be they natural or structural (Theuws and Alkemade 2000: 411–413; cf. Janes 1998a: 40 f.).

Theologically speaking, however, nourishing the Christian deity was not so straight forward. In contrast to many traditional societies where the populace has strongly positive roles to play in cosmic procedures, the Judeo-Christian creator God works alone as the supremely self-sufficient and self-energized giver of all good things.[8] Thus the likelihood that his potency and efficacy might be usefully impacted by human efforts seems somewhat problematical. Nonetheless, the Pentateuch suggests several means relevant for this discussion by which human society may be of some assistance.

The "being" of God is definitely strengthened or magnified by construction of a glowing sanctuary (the moveable, gold-encrusted Tabernacle) as a dwelling where God's glory can literally shine and he can live among earthly humankind (Exodus 25–27). In increasing the closeness of his presence among the populace, his "reality" is enlarged for them, and, by making "more" of him in the human perspective, "more" of him automatically exists within the cosmos, too (Lohfink 1994: 15–17, 130–132). God's effectiveness also can be supported by avoiding the disruptions of orderly cosmic processes that result from irresponsible human behaviors (sin) that distance people from God and challenge him (e.g., the flood; natural catastrophes unleashed by kingly wrongdoing; II Samuel 21:1, 24:10–15; Lohfink 1994: 96–115).[9] A related approach involving avoidance of disruptive behavior concerns the deity himself, for his capacity for awe-inspiring outbursts of explosive suprarational anger and retaliation against a fearful humanity threatens turmoil. Thus he must be pacified to prevent cosmic breakdown.[10]

In contrast with the Judaic God of the Pentateuch, however, whose relationship with humanity

6 Dowden (2000: 274–290); Lincoln (1986); Pollard (2001: 317, 322).

7 Fletcher (1997: 254); Flint (1991: 268); MacMullen (1997: 57, 65, 69, 133, 227 no. 66).

8 Psalm 104; Burkert (1996: 135 f.); Jungmann (1951: 22 no. 64). But see also Leviticus 21:6, 8, 21.

9 Non-disruptive, morally responsible human behavior, however, indicates proper concerns for the continued success of God's creation (Lohfink 1994: 120–129, 132 f.).

10 In Judaism, deistic placation is instituted by Noah when he initiates the practice of making burnt offerings to Yahweh, who enjoys the pleasing odor fed to him in the smoke. In the ancient world, sweet-smelling smoke released the vital life force contained especially in animal fat (Segal 2007: 24, 50–53, 81–83; Onians 1954: 280 f.).

reflected a need to be closely involved with earthly affairs (Segal 2007: 113), the Christianity of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages emphasized an infinitely wide spiritual and existential gap between a now distant, transcendental, thoroughly dignified, still energetically self-contained, and totally self-sufficient creator deity on the one hand and fallen earthly living beings on the other. This condition, in turn, necessitated major concern with bridging or reducing that great distance if human beings (especially the royal and ecclesiastical elite) are to assist in supporting the wider Christian cosmos. A majestic Christ was the primary bridging mechanism, but the issue was also addressed theologically and philosophically by trying to reach across the gap to attain a closer understanding of the nature of the original creation of the world, the things created, and especially the creating God, who first regulated the functioning of the universe and imbued all things and beings with life. The parallel drama of the final apocalypse, ultimate salvation, the end of time was also of great concern (Fichtenau 1978: 49 f.; Glacken 1967: 168).

In contrast with these "distant" polar conditions, the management of ongoing cosmological processes affecting healing and security and fertility that constantly impacted everyday earthly affairs (while temporally connecting Alpha and Omega) received far less formal or official theological consideration.[11] However, church leaders did constantly admonish that human failings and misbehaviors could dangerously jeopardize the integrity of the functioning cosmic system as evidenced by catastrophic weather, comets, earthquake, and other indicators of cosmic discord and disturbance.[12] Consequently, the relationship of people to God was heavily rooted in an ideology of sin and atonement and fear of damnation by a vengeful awe-inspiring deity, who was also thought to become upset by insufficient gratitude.[13]

Yet, if sin and ingratitude made people a menace to the cosmos, then responsible moral behavior, contrition, and penance to avert Godly wrath constituted positive means to preserve it. Considered analytically, cosmological preservation is closely comparable to cosmological maintenance but with a subtle shift in emphasis. While maintenance can be understood as emphasizing proper ongoing dynamic cosmic functioning, preservation, while similarly concerned, also basically speaks to efforts to simply keep an ordered and stable cosmos in existence. Sheer existence, simply being, in turn, is essentially another way to address the great early medieval theological preoccupation with original creation. Preservation also acknowledges the accompanying great truth that, since the world and absolutely everything in it is God's, the energizing God and his energized ("living") creation constitute a consubstantial unity. Consequently, theophany, visible and material manifestations of God, can provide means for people to both comprehend an otherwise distant and transcendent deity and energetically interact with the cosmos to preserve and also maintain it (Pelikan 1978: 102; Glacken 1967: 209–212).

Early medieval church treasure provided a major means of sustaining the basis of creational existence with life energy embodied in theophanic materials. The elaborate accumulations of precious metals and stone, etc. deposited in sanctuaries by royalty and the aristocracy constituted a glittering source of such cosmological support. To more fully appreciate how and why, it is necessary to review the qualitative value, existential "worth," and performative energetics attributed to treasure in general by aristocracy and sacral kings, some of the means by which it was acquired and the contexts of its donation to the church before returning to further consideration of the interrelationship of church treasure, light, and the preservation of creational potencies.

Treasure and *Heil*

Treasure was absolutely fundamental to the identity of royalty and aristocracy in early medieval Europe, at least in part because treasure, though inert, was thought to contain an essential qualitative "energy" within its physical form. Judging by literature (e.g., Beowulf), valuable objects not only provided ostentatious high status display but also were believed to be tangible manifestations of aristocratic qualities (valor, fame, generosity), brave deeds, manly honor, and consequent prosperity. More specifically, wealth objects embodied the dynamic activity, stored up or absorbed the energy, activating aristocratic behavior. As a result, an aristocrat's "life," his worth and quality of being as an elite, was literally equivalent to his treasure and was convertible to preciosities. Conversely, for an elite to be involuntarily deprived of his treasure was equivalent to perishing, for he lost his qualitative identity and

11 It was largely consigned to lower level spiritual personnel working as individuals, including angels, deceased saints and martyrs, miracle-working bishops, and sacral kings (MacMullen 1997: 93–96, see also below).

12 Raymond (1992: 195); Fichtenau (1978: 55); Glacken (1967: 160).

13 Jungmann (1959: 44 f.); Smith (1995: 665, 669); Fichtenau notes that the wrath of the omnipotent and enigmatic creator God expressed his over-powering "otherness" (1978: 52 f.).

thus was reduced existentially to nothing and had no further reason to exist (Bazelmans 1999: 111, 162 f.,189, 191; Gurevich 1992: 157 f.).

The dynamic potency of the aristocratic actions with which precious objects were imbued filled the objects themselves with power and energized them in their own right. In traditional Germanic lore, various types of objects, such as military gear (helmets, spear points, swords) and carved images, are thought to have "lives" (power and volition) of their own and to constitute independent "performative things" (Murphy 1992: 205–210). Swords, for example, are portrayed in legend as liminal, transformative objects full of inherent supernatural ability whose potency is visibly evidenced at times by gleaming light (Gummere 1892: 246–250). In real life, the post-battle depositions of cosmologically energizing spoils of war, such as were noted above, may have employed similarly empowered objects and materials. Linguistic evidence also suggests that material treasure constituted a source of life force. A number of words for treasure in Beowulf have verbal forms that specifically designate creative activities relating either to production of life in nature (including terms for seed and fertility) or to skilled crafting. Etymological associations then conjoin natural life with fashioned artifact, connecting treasure goods with life force and suggesting an overall association of treasure and the winning of treasure with life forms and the creating/sustaining/protection of life (Taylor 1986).

Among Germanic (including Frankish) aristocrats, the energizing of "performative treasure" presumably was informed by an inherited ancestor-associated potency or charisma known in Old High German as *Heil*, apparently attached by blood-right to members of select noble families (Geary 1988: 112; Irsigler 1978: 112). Men who possessed *Heil* were eligible for leadership and deemed capable of achieving great deeds in warfare, raiding, and hunting, seemingly comparable exercises directed towards "prey" in what very likely were regarded as cosmographically "wild" or "untamed" territories outside "proper" society (Van Dam 2005: 211 f.; Helms 1993: 3, 7 f.). These exploits provided much wealth, including treasure that quite possibly was even further enriched and empowered both by its derivation from supernaturally informed domains "out there" (cf. Helms 1993: 149–159) and by the dynamic (the *Heil*) of high elite personal "worth." (Contacts with Romans, another productive foreign resource, also provided enormous amounts of treasure, especially gold.)

A *Heil*-like potency seems to have informed Germanic and Celtic sacral kings, who (like all such rulers) held primary responsibility via ritual and their own lives for the proper cosmic functioning manifested in social order and peace, good weather, and especially nature's fertility (abundance of crops), benefits which the king encapsulated in himself (whereby, if calamity struck, he also could be deposed or killed).[14] In pursuit of these, sacral kings proffered rich offerings, including much gold from a variety of sources, to deities of victory and fertility (Heidinga 1990: 17–19). Broadly considered, peaceful kings provided legitimate political-ideological connections with deities and the well-being they provided and militant aristocracy provided material treasure. Offerings of wealth to deities connected the two, expressing thanks to gods for victories and helping to (re)energize them (Russell 1994: 111 f., 173 f.).

The Merovingian kings possessed both the requisite treasure and the necessary family blood and charisma required of sacral kings, and a distinctly pre-Christian, especially fertility-associated, aura always clung to them,[15] although Old Testament stories of divinely sanctioned rulers encouraged the Merovingians, officially Roman Christians, to feel that their power was in some sense associated with the Judeo-Christian deity, too (Oakley 2010: 157–159). The tangible treasure that constituted an essential component of their high positions was held in strong rooms where chests and coffers were filled with gold, silver, precious stones, jewelry, and all manner of decorative objects and luxurious clothing (Doehaerd 1949–50; Hardt 1998a). However, kings were constantly faced with heavy royal expenditures, but had no regular or really dependable or accruable sources of income to maintain a supply of wealth. Therefore, constant acquisition of fresh treasure was crucially important, too (Doehaerd 1949–50: 35, 37).

Royal treasuries were replenished by forcefully appropriating resources from localities beyond the borders of their own domains and from those aristocratic lords to whom they were not at the moment bound by mutual relations of friendship (Geary 1988: 100). Various forms of wealth, including precious metals, gems, jewelry, and weapons, were obtained by seizing the treasure of conquered or betrayed kings, plundering during military campaigns (including robbing church treasures and seizing the coffers of defeated cities), and as tribute payments from neighboring peoples (to the extent that they

14 Oakley (2010: 1, 18–21, 146–148); Flint (1991: 351); Oosten (1985: 21, 26, 152); Roymans (1990: 34).

15 Irsigler (1978: 114–117); Flint (1991: 381–383, 352–354); Miller (1987: 136).

complied). Valuable objects were also acquired as diplomatic gifts from foreign ambassadors (Rome, Byzantium) and by royal marriages.[16] A portion of that royal treasure, presumably imbued with the *Heil*-informed life energy of elite "worth" and energized performatively by the activities of their former owners and current elite acquirers, would eventually accrue to royal churches, ultimately to enrich the Christian cosmos.

Gratia Dei Rex

Carolingian rule was rooted in Merovingian enterprises and attitudes, including sacral kingship, but Carolingian kings lacked the inherent blood-right of the Merovingians and, therefore, sought legitimation in the Christian Church. Consequently, it was the Old Testament ritual of royal anointing with chrism that made these rulers ideologically throneworthy (*gratia Dei rex*), although St. Peter was said to have also personally "adopted" the Carolingians, implying a lineage sanctified by blood-right, too (Miller 1987: 131, 136–139; Flint 1991: 384 f., no. 72), and the charismatic sanctity of two family saints allegedly transferred a degree of true blood-charisma to their line.[17]

Like preceding sacral kings, a Carolingian ruler was expected to promote peace, proper moral behavior, and lawful order within the realm by appeasing the Godly wrath that periodically inflicted natural disasters and social discords (Fichtenau 1978: 55–57, 81; Duby 1974: 170, 248 f.) and, by his own suprahuman status and virtue, to encourage the mild climate, fertility of the land, and good health that derived from proper cosmic functioning (Alcuin in Oakley 2010: 156). His personal "cosmic" significance was also very impressively displayed on occasions of state, when the kingly person was clothed so resplendently with luminous metals and gems that he appeared as if garbed with light, the shining center of the realm/cosmos (Fichtenau 1978: 51 f.).

His cosmological capabilities and responsibilities were further recognized at the annual or semiannual general assemblies of the nobility, when magnates of the realm officially presented him with gifts in kind (e.g., weapons, horses) and in precious metals, gems, and luxury clothing as public reaffirmation of their submission and in confirmation of the propriety of the overall political-ideological hierarchical structure.[18] It can be argued that they also supported the role of the king as provider of well-being in that these gifts of wealth energized and strengthened his own life-affirming powers by allotting him a portion of aristocratic "worth" and quality of life, i.e., of the lords' own success and good fortune, as embodied in the treasure they relinquished to him. A parallel and comparable process underlay the gifting (offering) of treasure by kings to the church that would enhance the creational potency of God.

Places and societies geographically outside the borders of the realm continued to provide large amounts of wealth, too. The expansive Carolinian "just" wars and raids against pagans in frontiers to north and east (Nelson 1995: 384; Fichtenau 1978: 21–23), intended to assist the literal establishment of the kingdom of God in the earthly world ("political Augustinianism"; Oakley 2010: 140–143, 163; Ganshof 1971: 25), targeted peoples who, because they were not Christian, were thought to lack full existential worth and, therefore, as in the Merovingian world, were essentially prey.[19]

This militancy provided quantities of material treasure and baptized souls, both of which strengthened the Christian cosmos. In general, the sacrament of baptism enriched and enlarged the Christian realm by increasing the number of persons formally recognizing the Christian God, thereby creating "more" of him, and since their now "saved" souls were immortal, baptism also automatically provided new infusions of eternal life energy for the Christian cosmos overall. The Carolingian wars provided both of these attributes in large amounts, for baptisms were forced upon captive non-Christians (notably the Saxons) on an immense scale (McKitterick 1983: 61 f.). The populace herded into baptismal rivers at spear point (cf. Murphy 1989: 77 f.) can also be regarded as a kind of *spolia* suggestive of the sacrifices of war captives to the victor's gods practiced by Celtic and Germanic tribes centuries earlier. In both cases, the life energy of the conquered was returned to the cosmos, in former centuries by expropriating and ritually transforming (by killing) their physical, animating energy and in Charlemagne's wars by expropriating and ritually transforming (by formal acts of baptism) their spiritual energy; both endeavors ritually crafting a power-filled "natural" resource from outside "wilds" into everlasting strengthening "food" for deity and universe.

16 Gregory of Tours (1974); Gerberding (1987: 34–36); Hardt (1998a).

17 The ideal of the Christian aristocratic saint was influenced by the concept of *Heil* (Irsigler 1978: 112–114; Geary 1988: 173, 175).

18 Reuter (1985: 85 f.; Curta (2006: 687 f., 698); Nelson (2010: 140–143).

19 When Carolingians engaged other Christian peoples (e.g., Bavarians) the difference was considered one of degree, with Carolingians emphasizing their self-identity as superior chosen people of God (Garrison 2000: 151).

The huge amounts of material wealth also confiscated by war presumably came to incorporate the positive "worth" and life force of the energetic Carolingian warriors who seized it. These riches included (in addition to ordinary plunder) the considerable treasure of enemy rulers, pagan religious sanctuaries, and fortified political centers.[20] Such booty was reserved for magnates and especially the conquering king, and through him some of it eventually reached Christian churches (Fichtenau 1978: 79 f.; Reuter 1985). Additional ecclesiastical valuables were derived from the spiritual and political centers of the Mediterranean (Byzantium, Rome) that peacefully furnished the churches of Carolingian Europe with quantities of silk textiles, incense, and Arab gold coins (a source of precious metal for church artisans).[21]

Early medieval Christian sanctuaries not only received material treasure but also kept and accumulated it, seemingly a dubious practice theologically since both the Old and New Testaments and church fathers considered material treasure rather negatively, earthly gold, silver, luxury fabrics, etc. being the trivial and transitory products of human wickedness and vanity (Reuter 2000: 11 f.). In marked contrast, however, as we have seen, traditional Celtic-Germanic culture accorded material treasure strongly positive significance as indicative of an aristocratic individual's quality of being and honorable "worth", though Germanic culture also viewed personal material treasure as something that generally should not only be amassed but also used and dispersed, especially by generous gifting to retainers, protectors, hosts, peers, and ecclesiastical houses (Reuter 2000: 13–15; Curta 2006). Concurrently, the accumulated moveable (and landed) "earthly" material wealth of a church was accorded positive connotations, too, and, in the Carolingian era, was explicitly recognized as its "treasure" (*thesaurus*) with a designated treasurer (*thesaurius*) in charge of it (Reuter 2000: 12 f. no. 4). Unlike individuals, however, the church as an institution could only accumulate material wealth, not literally disperse it. It did, however, "disperse" its growing moveable wealth in a different way by transforming metal, gems, and luxury fabrics metaphysically into heavenly treasure in the form of visible shining light. By so doing, the church was also in accord with the frequent Old Testament (and ancient Mediterranean) association of divinity with precious materials as evidenced in the composition of the Tabernacle, the Temple of Solomon, the heavens and the throne and "quality" of God himself (Janes 1998a: 61–66, 74; Frerichs 1969).

Gifts to God

Early medieval aristocratic and royal families tendered gifts (offerings) to the supernatural at select episcopal and monastic locations in a variety of circumstances. Preciosities (and also land and money) could subsidize new churches, accompany pilgrimage and penance, seek cures, or pay for prayers for a deceased donor's soul. Kings, who provided much of the finest treasure accumulating in sanctuaries, supplied a steady stream of valuable spoils of war in token of victories.[22] Given the basic themes of sacral kingship, church treasure, and illumination that inform this essay, it is particularly interesting to note that kings also had much (though not all) of the responsibility for maintaining church lighting by providing income for lamp oil (scarce and expensive) or candles that could keep the sanctuary lit even throughout the night (Fouracre 1995: 72–75, 77).

Elite donations often were designated as gifts for specific saints who, though deceased physically, were eternally alive supernaturally, had a continuing material presence in their relics, and were considered to be active and powerful agents in the on-going affairs of earthly communities (Fichtenau 1978: 170–173; Geary 1994). Consequently, gifts to saints constituted an extension of the extremely important and highly nuanced circulation of moveable gifts among living aristocrats, which was conducted on a reciprocal basis, meaning something was given in order to receive something in return (*do ut des*); a gift to the shrine of a saint's power-filled relics in return for a specified favor or service from the saint for the donor (Curta 2006; Burkert 1996: 129–136). In this form of gifting, though the donor lost personal possession of the gift, it remained tied to him and was still under his control (i.e., was inalienable) in the sense that, being qualitatively imbued with and "activated" by his worth, the gift would be expected to encourage and strengthen the saint so as to induce the desired response (cf. Gregory 1980: 640, 644–647). However, this reciprocal condition did not apply when offerings were made to God (though generally proffered through saints as intermediaries with God). Gifts to God were still imbued with their

20 Reuter (1985); Riché (1993: 103, 108 f.); Fletcher (1997: 218).

21 Goodson (2010: 73–75); McCormick (1995: 374 f., 379 f.; 2001: 258, 333 f., 697–711, 716–725).

22 E.g., Gregory of Tours (1974); Janes (1998b: 364, 369–372); Fichtenau (1978: 185).

donors' aristocratic potency, but donors now relinquished not only possession but also all further control over them, surrendering them fully to the deity and then withdrawing, no longer directing the outcome. The awesome deity "accepted" the donor's remembrance and intention, but was not thought to be under any obligation to comply (though a donor generally hoped for some future benefit, such as salvation for his soul). Conceptually, such alienable offerings had passed out of the manipulative world of reciprocal societal gifting to belong solely to the supernatural realm of God.[23]

Regardless of context, preciosities offered to supernaturals came under the permanent *de facto* care of the religious houses that had received them in the name of the saint or deity and became part of their church treasure.[24] Because objects in church collections had reached a distributional endpoint, they can be understood as a variant of what scholars have termed the "sacred kept" (Cowell 2007: 87–90). The term is often applied to the practice whereby a corporate entity, in the early Middle Ages a royal or aristocratic house, would withhold select objects from the general flow of circulating gifts because they embodied aspects of the legitimating origins and past history and qualitative "worth" of the family line that had to be preserved and protected for the continued survival, identity, and well-being of the house (Hardt 1998b: 322–326). Ecclesiastical treasures held a broadly comparable significance in that individual pieces provided a visual history and remembrance of original founders and supporting donors of specific houses (Remensnyder 1995: 20–29) and, as collections of shining, "energizing" materials, realized the mandate of high churches to assist in the on-going production of life-giving cosmological light.

The treasure comprising the ecclesiastical sacred kept also supported the cosmological centrality of high churches by interrelating them with, and thereby combining, the several dimensions of spatial-temporal "distance" that represented different venues that preexisted medieval society and thus represented various contexts of power-charged origins that had influenced ("created") the medieval world (Helms 1998). That is to say, the diverse objects found in church treasure included things and materials that originated as military *spolia* from pagan frontier territories, as diplomatic gifts and merchandise from sophisticated centers of Mediterranean empire, and also as antiques from the Classical world and late Antiquity, which early medieval aristocrats and rulers had a passion for collecting and which at times were copied or reused in various ecclesiastical objects (Gaborit-Chopin 1989: 267, 275–277; Riché 1972: 43 f.). In addition, since material products of the earth also were considered theophanic manifestations of the power of the transcendent Christian creator deity, who preexisted all space and time, offerings of preciosities included a portion of the divine creation itself, imbued with God's own creative energy (Wilks 1986: xlviii; Janes 1998a: 93).

The qualitatively charged resources of all these "distant" worlds could be put to the service of the early medieval church if they were brought "inward" to that center and amassed there in collections that combined the qualitative worth of their various contexts of origins. Church treasure, gifted by aristocrats, and especially sacral kings, and preserved as permanent sacred kept, concentrated this great wealth and its energizing potential into collections of superlative power at ecclesiastical *axes mundi* that articulated all cosmological dimensions at consecrated sacred centers (Moreland 2004: 146–148; cf. Theuws 2004).

Sacred Matter

In wealthy episcopal and monastic sanctuaries, the fearsome pervasion of the holy, the numinous, was given great presence and tangibility by the colors and energy of light emitted by lamp and candle flame and greatly enlarged and profoundly intensified by precious objects and other visually arresting surroundings composed of material resources that, as we have seen, were enriched (energized) by a variety of qualitative valuations.[25] Several additional natural and notably Christian cosmological characteristics of gold, silver, and gems also were fundamental to the privileged role they played as tangible purveyors of light. Gold was a unique form of shining matter by virtue of its color, its exceptionally enduring (since it does not oxidize) luminosity, and its unalloyed purity in nature, which identified it in numerous societies as the royal metal, the metal of the sun, and (as in the early Middle Ages) the ultimate "holy" metal whose color evidenced the pres-

23 Gregory (1980: 641, 644–645); Angenandt (2008); Curta (2006: 674). The saint as intermediary was not part of the transaction.

24 Royal and papal prohibition forbade the diminishing or removal of any of the precious objects and other material or property that had been given to the church (Rosenwein 1999: 42, 46, 51, 76, 99–101, 104, 112), though high churchmen sometimes interpreted this stricture as they saw fit at times of exceptional worldly need (Aston 1987: 191).

25 Davies (1971/72); Palazzo (2010); Nees (1995: 811).

ence of divine energy (light) and, in Christianity, the supremacy of the Christian God; the metal that signified not just light and life but also moral integrity and purity, permanence and immortality, as well as divinity and the soul (Janes 1998a: 75 f., 91, 140, 148; Noble 2001: 86 no. 131). Its permanently unblemished surface that reflects light efficiently also makes gold perpetually, inextinguishably bright (unlike lamps that can run dry and candles that self-destruct as they create light).

High churches also gleamed with cool white tones of flashing silver, used in large quantities for revetments as well as for liturgical vessels (Leader-Newby 2004: 61–122). Silver was especially prominent in both secular and ecclesiastical society as tableware, which, in turn, associates it with abundance as displayed in the fine feasting enjoyed by (and politically required of) early medieval lay aristocrats, high churchmen, and royalty alike and that helped to associate churches and monasteries (and Christianity) with material plenty (Effros 2002: 6, 11, 12). Leader-Newby (2004: 67–69, 110) further observes that, in ecclesiastical context, silver can also encode a somewhat anxious theme of transformation from the secular to the sacred, from a context of worldly pollution to sacrality and purity.

When, in ecclesiastical settings, glowing gold and silver reflected the light from innumerable lamps or candles, they reinforced the presentation of the sanctuary itself as a generator of light and thus of life (Janes 1998a: 151). In addition, the amassing of gold, silver, and other reflective substances (gems, silk textiles) allowed not only the presentation but also the production of a quantitatively increasing abundance of light (which light per se as an existential essence cannot itself do). Consequently, as Janes remarked (1998a: 78, 151, 94), the church with it golden (and silver) treasure was "permeated with a moral light that is intensely metallic."

Precious gems were also appreciated for their brilliance and color which, like gold, does not fade or tarnish, as well as for their imperishable "eternal" durability (Kornbluth 1995: 7). In addition, gems evoked spatial-temporal distance related to Judeo-Christian cosmic beginnings and endings. The Bible relates gems both to Eden/Paradise (it being inferred that gems were originally washed out by the four rivers) and to last days and the new Jerusalem (Frerichs 1969). Early medieval Christianity emphasized that gemstones were specially created by God either before the earthly world was created or as part of Paradise before the Fall, thereby identifying gems as pure, untainted carryovers from Paradise and implying, it would seem, that their flashing light derived from or embodied paradisiacal light (Murphy 2006: 43–48). Indeed, rock crystal, valued qualitatively above all other stones for its pure transparency (i.e., transcendence), was thought to preserve undefiled the eternal light of the empyrean (Schwarzenberg 2000: 28–30). The colorful luminosity "released" by the polished surfaces of other gems and stones similarly bespoke an inherent otherworldliness associated with the glory of God, his heavenly dwelling, and the higher world of divinity in general. In church treasuries and mosaics, gemstones, like shining gold, conveyed to the senses the nature of things as they were thought to be in the ineffable realm of God (Frerichs 1969: 42, 98).[26]

In consequence of their virtues and unique otherworldly/preworldly origins, gemstones, like precious metals, also were believed to be imbued with supernatural potency and energy that made them instrumental "living stones," filled with "invisible powers" that helped to render the ecclesiastical objects and fittings that incorporated them (e.g., sacred books, reliquaries, liturgical vessels, etc.) as "performative things" in their own right with alleged agency as sources of light, healing, and other spiritualizing benefits.[27]

The expected efficacy of precious metals and gems and the ecclesiastical fittings and ritual articles that incorporated them was further supported by the fact that a church treasure was not just an assortment of individual objects but a collection with integrity as a whole; a unified and coherent entity that constituted more than the sum of its parts, just as each bead on a multicolored strand is unique, but the stringing together of their polychromatic diversity creates a new and ordered whole. Although some individually donated objects might be kept intact, creating an integrated and organized collection and otherwise embellishing the sanctuary with precious material required the services of highly skilled craftsmen employed in palace and especially monastic workshops, who could rework select donations into new pieces as needed (Riché 1993: 339 f.; Janes 1998b: 371).

26 Colors of individual stones were also accorded a wide variety of specific qualities and virtues such that, for example, the green of jasper could represent faith or youth while sapphire's blue might signify heavenly hope or angels, etc. (Janes 1998a: 79, 82–88; Ladner 1995: 116, 132–134).

27 Indeed, early medieval Europe recognized a considerable range of power-filled and instrumentally effective "holy things" also including church lamp oil, baptismal water, altar cloths, etc. (Murphy 2006: 14, 56, 60–63, 1992: 208–210; Kessler 2008: 312, 318; Bloch 1973: 41–43; cf. Palazzo 2010). Note, however, an unfortunate Merovingian count of Brittany who, seeking relief from severe foot pains, washed his feet in a silver paten that had been used on the altar, only to become totally crippled instead (Leader-Newby 2004: 97 f.).

Skillfully crafted ecclesiastical objects were especially important since, in the early medieval world, as in traditional Celtic and Germanic societies, the unseen could be strongly revealed and made substantially real through senses stimulated by material things that were especially beautiful by virtue of quality of materials and skill of craftsmanship (Pelikan 1978: 27). Skillfully crafted church treasure epitomized this aesthetic theophany and, when amassed in collections, heightened the qualitative effect by enriching it quantitatively (by abundance, as it were), as skilled craftsmen produced more of the exceptionally beautiful "performative" objects that in turn could also reveal the presence of cosmic energy when artisanry shaped them and released the "invisible power" that made them shine.

Heaven's Light

Church treasure was part of a conceptual world that allowed it to be understood as not just passively reflective of light but as capable of actively generating and magnifying light. More specifically, church treasure allowed the concentrated production of cosmological light that literally augmented and extended the creative light of the Christian empyrean, the "true" light of heaven. The sanctuaries where church treasure gleamed were consecrated liminal spaces, cosmological interfaces where earthly humanity encountered the realm of heaven. In comparable fashion, the light that lamps and precious metals and gems produced there was both sensorily visible to humans as luminous color and part of the inaccessible cosmological light, believed to exist beyond human sensibility that illuminated and energized the universe as a whole. In Judeo-Christian theology and Neoplatonic metaphysics, especially works by Ambrose, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, influential in medieval thought (De Bruyne 1969: 16–18), the cosmological light or *lux* that originally filled the universe originated from the creator deity who was himself pure light, the "Father of light" (James 1:17) who was "wrapped in light as with a garment" (Psalm 104:2; cf. McEvoy 1979). This heavenly light, which is energy and life, opposes an overwhelming primordial darkness which has always stood ready to return if and when light fails (as it does every night; cf. van Rad 1972: 52 f.). Thus light must be constantly and attentively generated and preserved. This same divine light also constitutes the pure clear radiance that defines paradise, where a great, ineffable illumination prevails and the majesty of God shines in unimaginable light (Cassian in Stewart 1998: 95 f., 118; McDannell and Lang 1988: 82–84).

Back on earth, the vast universal field of light is present to some degree in all created things and physically evidenced for human beings especially by things that glow, that is, evidence as humanly visible light or *lumen* (Zajonc 1993: 97 f.). Multicolored and luminous church treasure manifests this fully and in abundance; indeed, Janes (1998a: 149) suggests that materials and objects that shine – silks, jewels, precious metals, etc. – were all developed in Christianity primarily as receptacles and images of light.

In the early medieval experience, however, activity was as important as emanations. The Judeo-Christian and Neoplatonic philosophies that proclaimed the fact and significance of the existence of brilliant otherworldly light were combined with an equally intense Germanic concern with the fundamental cosmological dynamics contained in this-worldly activity, specifically with human energetics (especially aristocratic and royal militancy) and the resulting potencies of performative forms of matter, which is to say, with the means by which earthly precious metals and gems are energized so as to actively "generate" light.[28] In the early medieval world, these two cosmological designs were interrelated, not as extremes or polar opposites or alternatives but as a conjunction of separate and independent worldviews that met at a creative liminal midpoint wherever gleaming church treasure was deposited and displayed in church sanctuaries (cf. the two "light-worlds" of the ninth-century Saxon-Christian poem, the "Heliand" [Murphy 1997]).

The glowing early medieval church sanctuary has often been interpreted as being in some manner itself "heavenly," described as (for example) a "likeness," "symbol," "presentiment," "impression," "facsimile" of and/or metaphor for heaven. It is noteworthy, however, that these terms identify the brilliance of the sanctuary as similar to but separate from and not identical with the true light of heaven. In contrast, I find it compelling to think of the splendor of the sanctuary as intending a more literal expansion beyond a terrestrially situated building into a wider cosmos (heaven) such that its atmosphere and rituals were considered to be truly integrated within that wider whole. An instructive parallel can be found in Peterson's analysis (1964: 21 f.) of early Christian liturgical praise singing in which the chanting of the angelic *sanctus* is understood not

28 See also Lincoln (1986: 1–40) regarding basic Indo-European creation myths in which violently energetic human acts, including militancy, are essential for universal life processes.

as merely an earthly temple ceremony but as a truly heavenly one in which human praise, like that of the angels, resounds in heaven as part of its eternity and the cosmic whole. Peterson further notes, that the worship of the church overall is not the liturgy of a particular human religious society, connected with a particular house of worship, but reverence that joins with all other cosmic elements to reach beyond and pervade the entire universe as the whole cosmos, centered on the ceaseless angelic chant, enters into praise of God (Peterson 1964: 18, 21–24).

In early medieval society, this perspective was given concrete form by literal incorporation of monastic chanting into the angelic praise, for it was understood that the choirs of monastic houses augmented the nine established orders of the angelic hierarchy to become the tenth (and lowest) order of angels. Monks, and priests, therefore, joined directly with immaterial angels when singing the psalms and praying and "true" angels were believed to be actually present, though invisible, at such times (Peterson 1964: 24–28, 37).

I suggest a comparable interpretation of church treasure and its sanctuary light. Janes (1998a: 132, 94) has opined that the church with its solemn liturgy and blaze of light from multiple sources offers a glimpse of the majesty of paradise and Fichtenau (1978: 47) reiterates the fundamental political-ideological tenet that the earth mirrors the orderly heavens. I would extend these observations to suggest that, like monastic angelic chant, the blazing sanctuary light, as visible *lumen*, basically constituted an extension or augmentation of true heavenly light or *lux* (recognizing that where there is visible *lumen*, invisible *lux* is present, too) that was thought to be actually integrated, as a lower edge or zone of the empyrean, into the flood of universal creative light infusing the cosmic whole. In this conceptualization, the materiality of the light-producing sanctuary is not erased or ignored but deliberately elevated qualitatively as part of the unified cosmos. That is to say, sanctuary light as an earthly production of heavenly *lux* did not escape its physical setting to mystically float away from material reality. Rather, the material gems and metals, silks, and lamps that generated energizing heavenly light were qualitatively part of the wider creative universe in the same sense that the living monks who generated angelic praise felt themselves to be part of the angelic hierarchy. Stated otherwise, just as that praise was no less angelic by virtue of an earthly setting, so sanctuary light was no less cosmic by virtue of its material source.

During the ritual of the mass, when the celebration of the liturgy enacted celestial behavior, the distant God drew nearer to earth, great numbers of angels congregated, the choir sang as part of the heavenly host, and the brilliant light of the sanctuary erased the boundary of celestial space (Theodulf of Orléans in Dutton 1993: 96; Van Dam 1985: 277–280, 283). Being part of the empyrean, even though tangible, the precious materials, lamps, and other shining ecclesiastical accoutrements embodied "an ontological reflection of, and participation in, the being and power of God" (Eco 1986: 15). In addition, however, church treasure directly contributed to the preservation of that cosmic potency by producing more of the light that manifested it. Fichtenau points out that early medieval people showed an "ineradicable tendency to think as concretely as possible of heavenly matters" (1978: 47, 48). A similar proclivity appears in the gifting to high churches by aristocracy and royalty of great quantities of sensorily commanding earthly materials, believed to be redolent with universal life force by virtue of general consubstantiality of life perspectives and theophany, accrual of the inherent "worth" and energy of their elite owners, qualities associated with their places of cosmological origin, and natural characteristics as precious metals and gemstones enhanced by artisanry.

By so doing, the elite actively engaged the energy thought to be contained in this rich treasure in the service of the heavens and expressed the mandate held especially by sacral kings to actively energize, and thereby preserve and maintain, essential universal processes so that the well-being and continuity of human society might be assured.

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