



## RELIQUARY OF THE HOLY NAIL

Essen, ca. 1040–45,

Reworked in the 12th and 14th centuries

Wood, gold, gilt silver, gilt bronze, filigree, gemstones,  
pearls, quartz, enamel

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The Reliquary of the Holy Nail is among the most enigmatic works of 11th century goldsmithery. Here, one of the most precious relics of all – a nail said to be from the cross used at the Crucifixion – is held between two layers of polished quartz.

The reliquary is a display reliquary, one the earliest known in the European Middle Ages. The golden frame dates to the reign of Abbess Theophanu, who held office between 1039 1058.

Both sides of the object bear enamels, and are further decorated with a variety of gemstones and pearls.

One of the gems, a polished grey-blue cabochon, bears an inscription in Kufic (Old Arabic) script. The stone was probably originally used held in a signet ring. The lettering has been cut in mirror-image, so that the word is legible in the impression made on a seal. During one of the later reworkings of the reliquary, the stone seems to have been replaced upside-down in its socket.

The text on the stone reads “Mhmd-bnMwsj”, Mohammad the son of Musa. It may have arrived as a donation to Essen Abbey, and was undoubtedly regarded as particularly valuable, since it was used to decorate one of Christianity’s most precious relics, a nail from the True Cross. Istanbul, which also holds a relic of Abraham.