

Case Study 3.5: A Decorated Charter Ark from Xanten, 1460

Ann-Sophie Hellmich-Schwan

This small wooden box, which is now on display in the Stiftsmuseum Xanten, can be considered a very special filing device, as it was constructed exclusively for the storage of one specific document. It has contained a charter of high importance for the abbey for over five hundred years.

Medieval European charters belong to the group of most valued and well-protected documents one can find. Their production was subject to specific regulations to make them legally valid and authentic. This did not only relate to their content but especially also to their materiality.¹ In this case, the elaborately decorated ark contains a rather unadorned charter. The document testifies to the prayer brotherhood between the Cistercians of the monastery of Kamp and the canons of the city of Xanten (north-western Germany). Both sides assure each other to pray for their living and dead members and benefactors. These kinds of agreements were a common practice during the European Middle Ages.

The ark itself is made of oak wood and is a rather small size (H 37.9 cm × W 33.2 cm × D 3.2 cm). It is outfitted with a hook at the top to be hung on the wall. The lid opens to the front and is richly painted. The topic of the painting relates to the content of the charter kept inside. Bernard of Clairvaux is depicted in the centre. He was the most important co-founder of the Cistercian order. Canons of Xanten pray in their choir dress on the left-hand side and, to the right, we see Cistercian monks in their habits.

The charter and ark, in this case, form a unit. The document contains the text, but its significance is expressed by the ark. This further provides the appropriate space for the charter. Without it, it would have to be kept similar to any regular document, which would mean that its special feature would be lost.

References

- Grote, Udo (1998), *Der Schatz von St. Viktor: Mittelalterliche Kostbarkeiten aus dem Xantener Dom*, Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner.
- Stieldorf, Andrea (2019), 'Die Urkunde: Text – Bild – Objekt, Eine Einführung', in Andrea Stieldorf (ed.), *Die Urkunde: Text – Bild – Objekt*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1–16.

¹ Stieldorf 2019, 2.



Fig. 1: Stiftsmuseum Xanten; image from Grote 1998, 162; public domain, via Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Xanten_verbruederung_kamp.jpg (accessed on 30 June 2025).

