

## **Liturgical objects**

The Diocesan Museum of Urgell conserves an important collection of objects related to worship, such as censers, crosses and chalices. However, the most noteworthy items are the exceptional set of different types of lipsanotocas made of different materials, all dating from between the ninth and the twelfth centuries and from different places within the bishopric. Some of them were made locally, like the ones crafted of wood, while others were imported from distant lands, such as those made of ivory, bronze or glass.

**What is a lipsanoteca?** The word 'lipsanoteca' comes from the Greek words *leipsanon*, which means 'remains', and *theca*, which means 'box'. Therefore, they are small boxes used to store relics or material testimonies of saints, the Virgin Mary or, more seldom, Jesus Christ himself. These relics may be fragments of their bodies, clothing or personal objects, or they may be pieces of clothing or other objects that have been in contact with their grave. In the Middle Ages and later centuries, it became imperative to place relics inside altars when they were being consecrated; in fact, the majority of lipsanotocas have been found inside old altars. In the mediaeval mindset, the physical proximity to a saint afforded by relics provided believers with greater spiritual proximity and the belief that they could benefit from their miraculous power.

### **The lipsanotocas of the cathedral of Urgell**

During the restoration of the cathedral in 1960, the main altar was taken apart in order to rebuild it. An exceptional discovery was made inside the structure: a series of small receptacles, fragments of cloth and parchments were found inside a chest.

The receptacles, made of such varied materials as ivory, glass and metal, were originally luxurious containers for perfumes and unguents. The three containers and the spherical metal knob (MDU 38, 39, 40 and 18), which were probably crafted in Al-Andalus, must have reached Urgell as prized acquisitions or gifts as part of diplomatic contacts. Given their prestige, these objects were turned into lipsanotocas for the cathedral's consecration. The fabrics wrapped around the relics and the parchments must have been added at that time. According to the ritual of that period, they must have explained which saints the remains came from and provided information on the consecration ceremony.