

Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond

Dumbarton Oaks Spring Symposium 2011
with the Walters Museum of Art

ABSTRACTS

Salvation on Display before the Eye of God
Relics, Reliquaries and the Politics of Treasure in Medieval Papal Rome

Lucas Burkart

Medieval Rome was sacred in a double sense. First, the city was the historical site where thousands of early Christians suffered their martyrdom. Second, as the official residence of the papacy Rome was the center of medieval Latin Christendom. During the Middle Ages the Roman Curia had developed an understanding of the apostolic office and its political significance that claimed spiritual leadership over all other church dignitaries; moreover, from the end of the twelfth century the popes strengthened their call for the supremacy of spiritual power over secular rule.

To enforce this claim the papacy invoked the sanctity of both the city and the office. Among other things it increasingly began to display the collection of holy relics under its custody. One can distinguish between two aspects in the staging of this holy claim. On the one hand, the veneration of selected saints in the meticulously composed collection of their relics aligned the local traditions of Rome to the dignity of the apostolic office. On the other hand, the mode of presentation kept a precise balance between magic and power in order to maintain and stage the paradox of visualizing the invisible. This double strategy allowed centuries-old legal patterns of papal rule to operate within new forms of representation. Additionally, the prelates succeeded in transferring the esteem and dignity of their sacred office to the person and the body of the elected pope.

This paper connects the history of ideas and the culture of symbolic representation by taking a close look at the oldest collection of holy relics in the custody of the Roman bishops as they are put to political use in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The Relics of Scholarship

Anthony Cutler

Where do we stand on relics today? Although many intelligent people have long abandoned the view that their cult is an exotic and irrational superstition there is still lacking any understanding that they offer a form of cognition that transcended the sensible. Historians still agonize positivistically over the meaning and reliability of the texts they employ and the information these offer about the circumstances in which relics were cultivated. Art historians dwell either on the characteristics of individual reliquaries or groups of them which they seek to classify, thereby supposedly allowing their broader significance to be assessed.

Both procedures are necessary; neither is sufficient. Even when we bring together these two sets of discourse, our perspectives are tormented by variations in practice over time and space. In this paper, I look chronologically at continuity and change—tropes that are trite but still necessary for analytical purposes—in the design of reliquaries between late antiquity and the late medieval world (with sideways glances at early modern and more recent examples). Geographically, I consider Byzantine, early Islamic and western medieval expressions, and the ways in which these suggest both cultural difference and resemblance. Just as one cannot distinguish entirely the reliquary from that which it contained—the changing relation between the box and its content are one of the topics I consider—so it makes little sense to separate observations on the material bases of our study from the ideologies they imply. Once this has been grasped we shall be on our way to understanding what William James called the search for an “unseen order” as the object of religious thought and experience and to grasping this pragmatist’s concept that ideas do not reproduce objects but prepare for, and lead the way to, them.

À propos des reliques de l'Enfance du Christ

Jannic Durand

Si les reliques de la Passion et, en particulier, la relique et les reliquaires de la Vraie Croix ont suscité depuis longtemps d'importantes et substantielles études, les reliques de l'Enfance ont, en revanche, beaucoup moins retenu l'attention, tant pour l'Occident médiéval que pour l'Orient byzantin. À l'exception notable des Langes, les reliques de l'Incarnation paraissent au premier regard presque inexistantes à Byzance et caractériser surtout une dévotion occidentale liée aux pèlerinages aux Lieux Saints et aux croisades.

Pourtant, plusieurs indices et le contenu de quelques reliquaires permettent de se demander si, sans atteindre à l'extraordinaire moisson de l'Occident latin en la matière, la réalité byzantine n'a pas été un peu plus nuancée et la nature des reliques liées à l'Incarnation un peu plus variée que celle de l'image un peu trop parfaite qui semble s'imposer. On peut même se demander si, comme pour la relique de la Vraie Croix, Constantinople n'a pas pu jouer un rôle dans leur diffusion universelle au Moyen Age.

*Decoration and Concealment: The Dynamics of the Early Christian and
Byzantine Reliquary*

Jaś Elsner

This paper will explore the rise of the Byzantine reliquary as a container for matter, whose value and identity is confirmed by the decoration applied to the box. Although the contents of the reliquary are in principle valueless by contrast with the great monetary cost of materials and workmanship, of course holy bones and sacred matter are invaluable and priceless. Yet their value as a spiritual good beyond value is affirmed through the most costly and precious means. This contrast of value and that which is beyond value plays against questions of secrecy, concealment and revelation in the Byzantine reliquary as an object to be opened and closed, whose precious inner core is usually hidden but may be revealed. My argument will be that the reliquary aesthetic of concealment combined with the decorative and visual announcement of the importance of the material concealed – borrowed arguably from pre-Christian and early Christian sarcophagi – is central to the development of Byzantine aesthetics more broadly, and especially to the complex icon as a triptych or polyptych to be opened and closed and the iconostasis as a wall with doors that open to reveal the Eucharistic Real Presence.

The Memory of Objects – Spolia in Reliquaries

Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen

Relics are objects of memorial devotion. Mostly they are perceived through their receptacles, the reliquaries, in which they are at once hidden and presented to the faithful. The types, forms and ornaments of reliquaries can be—and have been—variously classified. Since the early middle ages, spolia turn up in significant frequency in the physical substance of almost all types of reliquaries. Here they often occupy positions which may be at once central to the understanding of the relic itself or to the message the reliquary was meant to convey. Examples from the period between the ninth and fifteenth centuries will enable this paper to explore some of the questions concerning spolia in reliquaries: their physical substance, their value, their rarity and possible means of supply, their historicity and their possible symbolism or superimposed meaning at the time they were being re-used, and finally also their essential analogy to the theological concept of “vestigia”.

*In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Mimetic Bodies, and the Ecology of
Mediation in Medieval Islam*

F.B. Flood

One of the few alleged images of the Taliban leader, Mullah Umar, in circulation is a blurry still from a video shot in 1996. This apparently shows a watershed moment in the Taliban's rise to power, when the Taliban leader removed a relic believed to be the robe of the Prophet Muhammad from a shrine in Kandahar, and donned it publicly on a rooftop in front of a large audience.

Apart from demonstrating the ways in which relics may be instrumentalized for political ends, the episode raises interesting questions about the function of material relics as mediators between the living and the dead, and their capability to animate the former with the *baraka* (blessing) that emanates from the sanctified body even after death. Rather than a relation of mimesis, the anthropologist Saba Mahmood has suggested that this relationship between prototypes and the pious, producers and consumers of sanctity, should be characterized as one of schesis, a "living relation" characterized by an identification that not only collapses tempero-spatial distance, but affects the very stuff of personal identity.

This paper aims to explore the nature of this living relation by considering the mediating role of material relics in Sunni Islam before 1400. Focusing on relics possessed of an indexical or synecdochic relation to the body—clothing, exuviae, imprints—and bodily practices of consumption—ingestion, touching, viewing—it will consider both auratic and mimetic aspects of Islamic relics, especially those relating to the Prophet Muhammad. It will also discuss the capacity of mass-produced artifacts and images to transmit the *baraka* associated with particular individuals and sites, raising the possibility of continuities in Byzantine and early Islamic pilgrimage practices.

*The Sainte-Chapelle in Paris: Relics, Reliquaries, and the
“Poetics of Enshrinement”*

Alyce A. Jordan

Robert Branner famously described the Sainte-Chapelle as “a monumental reliquary,” its elaborately decorated interior offering an appropriately lavish “container” for the precious objects it protected. Willibald Sauerlander recently challenged this characterization, arguing that to construe the Sainte-Chapelle as a reliquary encourages an inappropriately “static” image of a venue that, in actuality, composed a vibrantly active and activated space.

This paper engages Sauerlander’s invocation of the Sainte-Chapelle as “activated space” to probe the ways in which images, inscriptions, liturgical texts and ceremonies composed a resonant field of interactive sign systems focused within and upon the chapel. I take as a starting point the stained glass panels depicting the ceremonies and processions surrounding the translations of the Crown of Thorns and True Cross that fill the so-called Relics Window. Employing Seeta Chaganti’s recent study, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary*, I explore the installation, imaging, and veneration of the Passion relics within the Sainte-Chapelle as recursive, self-referential acts of envelopment that served simultaneously to expand and subvert the boundaries between relic and reliquary, container and contained.

Such multidimensional enshrinement extended the sanctity of the relics beyond the sacred objects themselves to include the French people, whose import was foregrounded not only in the processions depicted in the glass, but in a rare textual inscription—the word *populus*—found in the Joshua window. Meredith Cohen’s study of the many indulgences issued to encourage visitation of the Sainte-Chapelle and liturgies specifying the explicit participation of the *populus* underscores a dynamic interaction between sacred presence, representation, performance and constitutive sanctity. The sacral aura these multivalent sign-systems realized proved powerfully long-lived, not only enabling the Sainte-Chapelle to survive the vicissitudes of the French Revolution but also fueling its own incarnation as a venerated relic of French culture.

Liturgical Time and the Religion of Relics in Early Byzantium

Derek Krueger

The archeological record of the eastern Mediterranean witnesses a sudden flourishing of pilgrims' reliquaries in the last third of the sixth century and the first decades of the seventh. Together with such items as those in the Monza treasure and the Vatican collections, these tokens of sacred travel contribute to a history of pilgrimage and document the emergence and dissemination of visual representations of the saints, scenes from the life of Christ and the veneration of his holy places. But where did this new interest come from? The rise of pilgrimage and confidence in relics accompanied broader developments in the practice of Christianity at the end of antiquity. The interest in shrines and in their tangible mnemonics reflected operative theories not only of sacred place but also of sacred time. By turning to liturgical sources, including the hymns of Romanos the Melodist for the night vigil and newly composed troparia for the Divine Liturgy, this paper situates the rise of pilgrimage and the religion of relics among emergent conceptions of liturgical time. Additions to the liturgy emphasized the immediacy of biblical events in liturgical celebration. The Bible came to life in the "here" and the "now," and congregants were encouraged to imagine themselves as participants in the biblical narratives. The celebrations of the saints also stressed the liturgical present. Long before pilgrims set out on the road, they had visited the saints and the events of scripture in their ritual practices. Early reliquaries thus present evidence for the effects of liturgical change in the course of the sixth century.

Figuring Relics: A Poetics of Enshrinement

Patricia Cox Miller

The focus of my discussion will be on the collections of sixth-century Palestinian *ampullae* now housed in the treasury of the church dedicated to St John the Baptist in Monza and the monastery of Saint Columbanus in Bobbio. These metal flasks, embossed with images primarily from New Testament accounts of events in the life of Christ, have been considered to be “contact” relics because of their contents, namely, oil that had been blessed by contact with the True Cross. It is understandable that it has been the contents of the flasks that define their status as relics, given the description of the Piacenza Pilgrim regarding the oil’s effervescence: “They offer oil to be blessed in little flasks. When the mouth of one of the little flasks touches the wood of the cross, the oil instantly bubbles over, and unless it is closed very quickly it all spills out.” Transformed by touch, the oil is indeed impressive as a material locus of the holy.

I will argue, however, that the entire flask is a relic, and not just its contents. That is, the art on the outside has a necessary relationship with its bubbly insides. In this I will be relying on Seeta Chaganti’s definition of enshrinement as referring not simply to acts of enclosure “but instead to the more complex effect whereby contained and containing are interchangeable, and the borders between them are indeterminate...” Enshrinement is “a principle of complex closure, an integration of container and contained that provides aesthetic and even epistemological structure” (*The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary*, 15, 19). To give just one example of this coincidence of inside and outside: just as the oil is “liberated” from its natural properties due to its transcendent excess, so also are many of the artistic images liberated from referential delimitation by the art’s transgressive sense of both history and topography. I will conclude that the flasks-as-relics partake of a Christian “rhetoric of paradox” wherein pleromatic infinity and finite materiality coincide without being collapsed into each other.

“Grant us to share a place and lot with them”
The Architectural Setting of Relics (10th-14th centuries)

Robert Ousterhout and Vasileios Marinis

Byzantine Constantinople possessed more than 3600 relics representing at least 467 different saints, but we have only a vague idea where and how they were housed, as both the archaeological and textual records provide few specifics. This paper examines the evidence for the setting of relics within churches of the middle and late Byzantine periods. We begin by determining standard practices, such as the placement of relics in the consecration of altars and the possible use of the diakonikon or subsidiary chapels to house relics. We examine a few rare instances in which the architectural setting is designed or reconfigured to provide a special setting for venerated relics, such as at the katholikon of Hosios Loukas in Boeotia or the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople. In general, we find little that might be regarded as an architectural response to the presence of relics – that is, their position within the church was neither fixed nor highlighted formally. Byzantine masons created nothing comparable to the reliquary chapels of the late medieval west. Often, it seems, relics were kept in a secure location, such as an iron chest, and brought out for ad hoc veneration on special occasions. Yet, the materiality of the saints’ presence inside the church, combined with their invocation during corporate acts of worship, such as the Divine Liturgy, contributed to the construction of sacred space in Byzantium.

Making the Invisible Visible: Commemorating the Cult of Shi'i Imams in Safavid Iran

Kishwar Rizvi

In 1501 the Sufi leader Ismā'īl Safavi conquered Iran and established Shi'ism as the imperial religion. The history of his two hundred year-old order was redacted such that the ancestry of the Safavids led back to the prophet, Muhammad, bestowing on their already charismatic authority another layer of sanctity. The transformations in religious ideology were most powerfully enacted during the reign of Shāh 'Abbās I (d. 1629), when Safavid Iran was at its apogee. Pamphlets dictating the correct ways to perform prayer were circulated in the capital, Isfahan, and historians chronicled Shāh 'Abbās' barefoot pilgrimages to holy sites. Architecture, painting, and ritual objects were key media for the dissemination of a new vision of Iranian kingship, one in which the Shah was viewed as a semi-divine leader and a pious supplicant.

In Shi'i Islam reverence is bestowed on the first twelve imams, descendants of Muhammad through his daughter, Fatima. In the absence of relics (the bodies were not meant to be desecrated or dismembered), their shrines serve as sites of mediation between devotees and the *baraka*, or divine aura, of the holy person buried within. During the reign of Shāh 'Abbās these shrines, many of them under control of his Ottoman rivals, became the focus of patronage and served as models for the building and reconstruction of commemorative architecture. In this paper, I analyze first the manner in which the cult of Shi'i imams was resurrected in the sixteenth century, through media as diverse as painting and prayer seals. I then turn to the way in which shrines of the imams were implicated in creating an expanded sacred landscape in Iran, one in which the cult of both Sufi and Shi'i figures was monumentalized in order to augment Shāh 'Abbās's legitimacy to rule.

Relics: the Making of a Tradition in Latin Christianity

Julia M. H. Smith

Scholarship on relics in Christian tradition commonly groups them into 'primary' and 'secondary' relics, the body-parts as distinct from other objects intimately associated with saints during their lifetime (such as clothing). This paper rejects this excessively reductive classification. By addressing the circumstances in which 'relics' emerged as a common shorthand expression for tiny material objects of devotion, it argues that this term of art is a constructed category whose slow evolution can be tracked in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

The first part of the analysis will follow two seams of evidence: (i) the wide range of words used to describe non-sacramental Christian tokens in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages and (ii) extant labels formerly attached to relics, plus inventories of the collections of labeled relics that were deposited in altars and reliquaries. Together, these reveal a rich and varied range of objects.

The second part of the paper turns to Latin legislative prescriptions concerning relics. Although meager in content and slow in evolution, canon law betrayed (and continues to betray) a persistent anxiety about authenticity. By tracing the circumstances in which this concern first surfaced and was subsequently reiterated, it extends the analysis of the way in which 'relics' evolved as a classificatory term during the early Middle Ages and suggests that an emphasis on 'authenticity' differentiates Christianity from other world religions in which relics occur (notably Islam and Buddhism). Finally, it points to the reasons why it is misleading to derive a definition of 'relics' from normative sources.

The Relics of New Saints: Deposition, Translation and Veneration in Middle and Late Byzantium

Alice-Mary Talbot

Byzantine hagiography provides significant information about the relics of newly created saints, although it rarely describes their reliquaries or sarcophagi. It does, however, illuminate the process whereby the bodies of individuals deemed holy in their lifetime were proved to be saintly, either on the deathbed, or once in the tomb. Often the translation of a holy person's remains from an underground burial to an above-ground tomb (where pilgrims could have access to the relics) was a key step in the sanctification of an individual.

Pilgrims venerated relics in many ways both direct and indirect. Most desirable, of course, but rarely permitted was actual contact with the relics; more common was touching or kissing of the sarcophagus that housed the saint's remains. The healing power of the saint's body could be transmitted to a variety of materials, known as secondary relics (*brandea* in Latin), such as oil in the lamp burning before the tomb, oil or water poured over the relics or coffin, and clothing or personal possessions that had come into contact with the saint. Other rituals of veneration might include providing a change of clothes for the saint's body, combing his/her hair or cutting his/her finger and toenails. Miraculous exudations of bodily fluids such as blood, tears and perfumed oil (*myron*) were also in demand as substances that could be carried away from the shrine.

At the end of the paper I will briefly describe some instances of opposition to the cult of relics, mostly on the part of the saints themselves who deliberately sought burial in obscure places where their remains would not attract pilgrims.

Embedded Fragments: Spatial and Material Rhetorics of Relics in Late Antique Churches

Ann Marie Yasin

Relics played an increasingly important role in churches of the fourth to seventh centuries. They were called on with ever greater frequency to sanctify altars, consecrate structures, and provide a direct, local link to the chronologically and cosmically distant figures of Christ, Mary and the saints. At the same time, the relationship between holy relics and their institutional and architectural ecclesiastical settings cut in both directions. Not only did the presence of relics affect church spaces and devotional patterns, but the spatial and material framework of late antique churches signaled the special status of the relics and circumscribed visitors' experience and understanding of them.

This paper investigates several strategies—including embedding, burying, sealing, mediating access, and commemorating deposition—that late antique churches employed to place, frame and package the sacred fragments they possessed. To do so, I examine relics and reliquaries not as stand-alone objects, but as materials that directly contributed to and were conditioned by their “staging.” Within the larger church program, inscriptions, containers and architectural installations made palpable the holy remains' antiquity, authenticity and “place-ness.” At the same time, the multiple nested containers in which the relics were placed and the burial of these boxes underground, kept the holy remains from direct view. Such spatial and material mechanisms of packaging relics, I suggest, played a critical role in defining their sacred status.