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Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c.700–1200)

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A TALE FROM twelfth-century Germany introduces this lecture. It concerns, a kindly woman and her neighbour whose son was very ill. In an effort to help save the child, she produced a pebble and recommended to the child's mother that she make a revitalising drink by steeping it in water. There was nothing unusual about this sort of domestic remedy, yet her well-intentioned initiative met with rebuff. This was because the mother who rejected something which might have saved her dying child was Jewish, while her well-wisher was a Christian who had produced a stone from Jesus' grave in Jerusalem as a cure for the child's ailments.¹ How she had acquired it remains unknown: a pilgrim must have picked up a pebble from somewhere in the complex of buildings and courtyards that comprised the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, or from the street right outside, but we have no idea whether that pilgrim was the woman herself, her husband, friend, parents, or more distant ancestor.² The well-wisher's belief in its efficacy typifies the tendency of her religious community to vest

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¹Elisheva Baumgarten, "A separate people"? Some directions for comparative research on medieval women', *Journal of Medieval History*, 34 (2008), 212–28 at 220–1; Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, 'Jews and healing at medieval saints' shrines: participation, polemics and shared cultures', *Harvard Theological Review*, 103 (2010), 111–29 at 114–15. I am grateful to Elisheva Baumgarten for extended discussion of the story's source, the early thirteenth-century *Sefer Hasidim*.

²It is not possible to date this narrative with respect to the major structural alterations made to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre during the Crusader era, which included roofing over the open courtyard between the fourth-century parts of the site; see Martin Biddle, *The Tomb of Christ* (Stroud, 1999) for an overview of its architectural history.

small material objects with importance as points of contact between the divine and the human. This Christian tradition is my subject.

The brief moment of neighbourly interaction is recorded because German rabbis preserved its details as a morality tale of steadfast maternal piety. From a rabbinical perspective, the stone had been defiled because it had been associated with a dead body. Rejection of non-Jewish healing practices was in any case praiseworthy, however tragic the consequences. But the Christian woman had every reason to believe that her little stone might cure a dying child. After all, it came from the tomb from which, according to one thousand years of tradition, backed by the testimony of scripture, the dead Jesus had risen.³ Its origin was the very site where the most fundamental transcendental event of the Christian story was believed to have occurred. This small piece of stone represented the essence of Christian teaching, and the woman to whom it belonged believed that it could cure a sick person—indeed ward off death from Christian and Jew alike.

This stone, and other objects like it, are the focus of this lecture. As the rabbinical tale implies, these little things were so readily portable that they could travel very long distances and cross political borders but, simultaneously, were also capable of delimiting cultural and religious boundaries. They are, then, good to think with in debates about religious and cultural identity. In addition, they encourage hard thinking about processes and representations of religious change and, in particular, about the reception and transformation of a religion which had originated on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean in the Roman era. They also challenge some of the central presumptions of the post-Enlightenment world, assumptions which, until fairly recently, have been hard-wired into scholarship across the humanities. These stones and bones cannot be fitted into a world view which sunders materiality and belief, or enforces a rigid distinction between subject and object, or between object and thing.⁴ They cross political frontiers, but they also throw into sharp focus some of the conceptual boundaries which separate us from our medieval predecessors. Furthermore, they push medievalists beyond comfortable interdisciplinarity, and encourage fruitful dialogue with experts in profoundly

³ Colin Morris, *The Sepulchre of Christ and the Medieval West: from the Beginning to 1600* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 7–15 on whether the site was continuously known AD 135–324.

⁴ Cf. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011).

different religious traditions about the interface between materiality and belief.⁵

Material tokens provide a unique insight into what medieval Christianity meant in everyday life. They allow us to focus upon habits that complemented official doctrine but were not essential to it, being among those aspects of Christianity which Guibert of Nogent characterised as ‘practised but not taught’.⁶ As such, they sometimes supplemented the formal, sacramental powers of the priesthood but often entirely bypassed the role of ecclesiastical personnel and institutions. Hitherto, medievalists have assessed them from that institutional vantage point, via the learned perspective of theologians, canon lawyers or hagiographers.⁷ Instead, this lecture adopts an ‘evidence-based’ approach and derives its interpretation of religious meaning from the contexts in which these items occur. In exploiting them as vital clues to the ways in which Christians lived and experienced their religion in the centuries prior to the IVth Lateran Council of 1215, it argues that they were markers of deeply embedded cultural reflexes. Inasmuch as scholastic and post-Reformation mentalities have tended to sunder belief from practice, approaching the subject as *habitus* (in Bourdieu’s sense) makes it possible to reintegrate the two, and thereby to retrieve early medieval devotion from the grip of inappropriate intellectual dichotomies.

The role of material objects as mediators between the sacred and mundane spheres emerged as a Christian practice in the religious pluralism of the third and fourth centuries. Its origins are to be found in a world preoccupied with commemorating the dead in various different ways but also full of amulets, talismans, charms and other highly portable tokens that linked the natural to the supernatural. Partly because this practice lacked secure biblical foundations, it was contested from time to time without, however, ever coming under fundamental assault in the period under discussion.⁸ For the most part, then, the habit differentiated medieval Christians from their biblical-era predecessors as well as from Jews.

⁵ Elizabeth Robertson and Jennifer Jahner (eds.), *Medieval and Early Modern Devotional Objects in Global Perspective: Translations of the Sacred* (New York, 2010); Alexandra Walsham (ed.), *Relics and Remains* (Past & Present Supplements, Oxford, 2010).

⁶ Guibert of Nogent, *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*, 127 (Turnhout, 1993), pp. 85–7.

⁷ e.g. Arnold Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien. Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 1994); Nicole Herrmann-Mascard, *Les reliques des saints: formation coutumière d’un droit* (Paris, 1975).

⁸ David G. Hunter, ‘Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen: ascetics, relics, and clerics in late Roman Gaul’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 7 (1999), 401–30; David Appleby, ‘Holy

By the Carolingian era, it had become common to describe accumulations of objects of this sort by one of two generic terms: either they were *reliquiae*, left-overs, relics, or *pignora*, pledges given in trust for something else.⁹ But these were not—yet—relics as scholars are familiar with them from the parodies of Boccaccio and Chaucer in the fourteenth century, or as condemned by the reforming visions of Erasmus, Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth. Concerns about relics' authenticity were nothing new—they had first been voiced by Augustine of Hippo—but the figure of the pardoner laden with fake indulgences and spurious relics only emerged as a problem during the thirteenth century, and the venality of indulgences became endemic in the Roman curia after the end of the Avignon papacy.¹⁰ The exuberant material piety of the late Middle Ages was of even more recent development, for relic collections as massive as the 19,000 items belonging to Luther's patron Frederick the Wise were newly assembled.¹¹ The cultural logic which informed relic cults on the eve of the Reformation had evolved greatly since the IVth Lateran Council, the consequence of many centuries of cultural and religious change: its extravagances, implausibilities and strictures lack precedents in the period under discussion here.

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In Christian Latin, as in earlier usage, the semantic range of the word *reliquiae* included the remains of a deceased person, especially after cremation. Some relics certainly did comprise burned organic material, such as the lead canister of charred fragments identified as the relics of the martyr Pontianus of Spoleto which Balderic, Bishop of Utrecht, had

relic and holy image: saints' relics in the western controversy over images in the eighth and ninth centuries', *Word & Image*, 8 (1992), 333–43.

⁹ For the slow formulation of a standardised class of objects termed 'relics' and the emergence of a formalised definition in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, see my 'Relics: the making of a tradition in Latin Christianity', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Nikolaus Paulus, *Geschichte des Ablasses im Mittelalter vom Ursprünge bis zur Mitte des 14. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (2nd edn., Darmstadt, 2000), vol. 2 pp. 206–27; *idem*, *Geschichte des Ablasses am Ausgang des Mittelalters* (2nd edn., Darmstadt, 2000), pp. 379–420.

¹¹ Stefan Laube, 'Zwischen Hubris und Hybridität. Kurfürst Friedrich der Weise und seine Reliquiensammlung', and Hartmut Kühne, "'die do lauffen hyn und her, zum heiligen Creutz zu Dorgaw und tzu Dresen ...". Luthers Kritik an Heiligenkult und Wallfahrten im historischen Kontext Mitteldeutschlands', both in Andreas Tacke (ed.), *'Ich armer sundiger mensch'. Heiligen und Reliquienkult am Übergang zum konfessionellen Zeitalter* (Göttingen, 2006), pp. 170–207, 499–522.

acquired in 966 and which remains in Utrecht.¹² Others consisted of fragments of bone, chips of stone, handfuls of dust and the like. These were commonly wrapped in scraps of linen or brightly patterned silks, probably cut from discarded church hangings or liturgical vestments, and tied firm. Sometimes, the fabric was stitched into small pouches, which helped keep friable matter together. From the seventh century, if not earlier, labels on scraps of parchment (and, in the very early Middle Ages, papyrus) identified the contents of each package, but might be replaced when they tore, became detached or were no longer legible. The surviving contents of the portable altar commissioned by Gertrude, Countess of Brunswick (d. 1117) are characteristic (Fig. 1): there are several tiny bundles wrapped in



Figure 1. Portable Altar of Countess Gertrude. Germany, Lower Saxony(?), Romanesque period, shortly after 1038. Gold, cloisonné enamel, porphyry, gems, pearls, niello, wood core; 10.5 × 27.5 × 21.0 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust 1931.462.

¹² Anique de Kruijf, *Stof zijt gij... Een deel inventarisatie van de relikeschat van de Oud-Katholieke Gertrudiskathedraal te Utrecht* (Utrecht, 2008), pp. 64–6. Some particles from this were returned to Spoleto in 1994: *eadem, miraculeus bewaard. Middeleeuwse Utrechtse relikien op reis: de schat van de Oud-Katholieke Gertrudiskathedraal* (Zutphen, 2011), p. 167.

coloured silk and labelled in a fifteenth-century script; a small parcel containing multiple tiny relics; a flake of stone from Golgotha wrapped in fifteenth-century paper; two unidentified pieces of bone, and a tube-like pouch of patterned silk containing severely decomposed bone fragments.¹³

Detached from the objects they formerly accompanied, relic labels survive in large numbers. Proxy evidence for the contents of treasuries, reliquaries and altars, they can be supplemented by the abundant evidence of inventories made for medieval bishops and abbots keen to keep track of the relic collections. Taken together, these reveal a world of material holiness which ignored or subverted learned attempts to impose meaning and order on it. They suggest a much more imaginative and intuitive response to the problem of giving tangible form to the sacred than the formulations of canonists and theologians.

This sacred stuff can be divided into two main types, which remained remarkably stable throughout the long period under discussion here. The first comprises items associated with the Bible. Many of them relate to Christ's death, such as the sponge soaked with vinegar offered to him on the cross, or the wood of the cross itself. A subset epitomises events prior to the central redemptive moment of Christian teaching, including episodes in Jesus's life, while others relate to the activities of the patriarchs and prophets of Hebrew scripture. Another subgroup represents memorable places in Jewish and Christian biblical tradition, ranging from Mount Sinai to the River Jordan, Golgotha and the Mount of Olives.¹⁴ Many of these must have been brought home from pilgrimages to the Holy Land, but in all likelihood a proportion derived from visits to the churches of Rome and Constantinople where major relics of Christ and his mother attracted visitors.¹⁵ They offer indirect evidence for the journeys made, frontiers crossed, and travel challenges overcome by undocumented medieval men and women.

Relics can also suggest how early medieval visitors experienced the Holy Land on their own terms. Twigs from 'the tree which the Lord him-

¹³Martina Bagnoli *et al.* (eds.), *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (New Haven, CT, 2010), pp. 43–4; Patrick M. de Winter, 'The sacral treasure of the Guelphs', *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 72/1 (1985), 2–160 at 37.

¹⁴The relic collection of Sens cathedral offers plentiful examples of all these common types of relic. See Maurice Prou and E. Chartraire, 'Authentiques de reliques conservées au trésor de la cathédrale de Sens', *Mémoires de la Société nationale des antiquaires de France*, ser. 6, 59 (1900), 129–72.

¹⁵Sible de Blaauw, *Cultus et Decor*, 2 vols. (Vatican City, 1994); Paul Magdalino, 'L'église du Phare et les reliques de la Passion à Constantinople', in Jannic Durand and Bernard Flusin (eds.), *Byzance et les reliques du Christ* (Paris, 2004), pp. 15–30.

self planted' and from 'the tree under which the shepherds were [watching their flocks] when the angel appeared to them' evoke ways in which generations of pilgrims and their local guides had amplified the sparse gospel narrative and shaped the biblical landscape accordingly.¹⁶ Some objects betray a determination to find something that encapsulated Old Testament stories of heroism and sacrifice, such as the 'blood of Abel', or relics of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the Jewish boys who remained unscathed in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace.¹⁷ Still others render New Testament eschatology into material form, such as the relics 'of the three wooden tabernacles' which the disciples wanted to build at the site of Christ's transfiguration on Mount Tabor.¹⁸ Collectively, these relics point to a powerful impulse to turn biblical story into tangible object, to materialise myth and reify prophecy. They also represent one of the ways in which Christians appropriated Jewish history, turning it into an undifferentiated part of the Christian story, as easily transformed into material form as the narrative of Christ's life and death. Above all, by relocating the biblical narrative into medieval homes, palaces, chapels and churches, they collapsed the distinction between past, present and future into the persistently here-and-now.

A second category consists of things associated with the martyrs and saints of post-biblical Christian history, and took a wide variety of forms. Clothing, including liturgical vestments, is particularly common; but a range of other items associated with holy figures can also be found.¹⁹

¹⁶Bruno Galland, *Les authentiques de reliques du Sancta Sanctorum* (Vatican City, 2004), no. 65, p. 117: 'de arbore qui ipsi Dominus plantauit'. At Winchester, New Minster possessed a similar relic, 'de ligno quod salvator suis manibus plantauit': see Walter de Gray Birch, *Liber Vitae: Register and Martyrology of New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester* (London, 1892), p. 160, line 13. The relic 'de arbore sub qua pastores erant quando apparuit illis angelus', is mentioned by Gundekar of Eichstätt; see Andreas Bauch and Ernst Reiter, *Das 'Pontifikale Gundekarianum': Faksimile-Ausgabe des Codex B4 in Diözesanarchiv Eichstätt* (Wiesbaden, 1987), at fol. 58r.

¹⁷For the relic 'de sanguine Abel' at Reichenau in 1172, see *Historiae Augienses*, 1: *Fundatio et dedicationes*, MGH Scriptores, XXIV, p. 648, line 39; for relics 'de Sanctis Sidrac, Misac et Abdenago', see William Hunt, *Two Chartularies of the Priory of St Peter at Bath* (London, 1893), appendix 1, p. lxxv. Cf. Genesis 4: 8–10, Daniel 3:22–100.

¹⁸For the relic 'de lignis trium tabernaculorum', see Angilbert of Saint-Riquier, *De ecclesia Centulensi libellus*, MGH Scriptores, XV/i, p. 176; John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster, 2002), p. 356 for the early medieval churches on Mt Tabor.

¹⁹See, for example, the twelfth-century list of relics believed to have been the gift to Jouarre of abbess Ermentrude in the mid-ninth century: André Wilmart, 'Liste des reliques réunies à Jouarre au IXe siècle', *Analecta Reginensia. Extraits des manuscrits latins de la Reine Christine conservés au Vatican* (Vatican City, 1933), pp. 9–17, and the list of relics deposited in the high altar at Anagni in the last quarter of the twelfth century: Joseph Braun, *Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Munich, 1924), pp. 609–10.

Corporeal remains begin to be explicitly identified as such from c.800—commonly bones, hair, teeth, or dust—although they are sometimes recorded in narrative sources very much earlier.²⁰ Often, however, their precise nature remains unspecified.

Whatever their material substance, relics gave palpable form to the holy. All shared three further characteristics that derived from the circumstances of their creation. Although some may have been removed from the body of a saint within a shrine, they were not the body itself.²¹ Many more derived from the lamps that burned above a tomb, or from the dust that accumulated around its base. Others were picked up from a street or the bed of a river, snapped off a tree or ripped from a cloak, robe or altar-cloth. All were fragments of larger wholes, detached particles that came into existence by being removed, torn, cut, poured or even bitten off in deliberate acts of selection. They were *reliquiae*, left-overs: tangibility combined with incompleteness. Furthermore, that very incompleteness reduced substances to indeterminacy. By violating the completeness of an object—whether corpse, garment, tree, or riverbed—the act of detachment or selection deprived the retrieved substance of any self-evident identity or obvious context. And it rendered some of them completely amorphous, such as the handfuls of ash, pinches of dust and drops of oil or water which were dependent on their packet or phial for any form and coherence. Finally, their creation by an act of dislocation rendered all these small particles capable of being easily carried from one place to another.

Incompleteness, indeterminacy and portability are thus their primary features, and each of these three qualities needs to be reviewed separately. In their fragmentary, incomplete nature they worked by metaphor or synecdoche, for they were a token of the original place or integral object itself. But, as the anecdote of the Jewish woman and her Christian neighbour reminds us, what they signified over and above that was conditional

²⁰ Explicit mentions of corporeal relics are extremely rare in the surviving corpus of pre-800 relic labels. See, for example, the collections from Saint-Maurice d'Agaune and Chelles: *Chartae latinae antiquiores. Facsimile-edition of the Latin Charters prior to the ninth century*, ed. Albert Bruckner and Robert Marichal, 49 vols. (Olten/Dietikon-Zurich, 1954–98), vol. 1. nos. 14–39 (Saint-Maurice d'Agaune) and vol. 18, no. 669 (Chelles). References to body parts occur in lists and labels from the ninth century onwards. Examples include S. Berger, 'Les reliques de l'abbaye de Saint-Riquier au IXe siècle', *Revue de l'Orient Latin*, 1 (1893), 467–74 and Philippe George, *Les reliques de Stavelot-Malmedy: nouveaux documents* (Malmedy, 1989), *passim*.

²¹Cf. Arnold Angenendt, 'Corpus incorruptum: ein Leitidee der mittelalterlichen Reliquienverehrung', *Saeculum*, 42 (1991), 320–48.

upon prior acceptance of a particular set of beliefs. So, from the perspective of the Christian Middle Ages, these objects also carried an intrinsic religious meaning. Their very tangibility referenced the immateriality of scriptural teachings. In Christian tradition, a relic was material stuff that was not (just) what it was.

Usually this was implicit, an aspect of relics as practice or *habitus*. Towards the end of the period under discussion, however, it drew occasional comment. Two inventories, both of Exeter cathedral's relics in the third quarter of the eleventh century, offer a case in point. One is in Latin and the other in Old English. The relic described in Latin as 'From the head of St Nicholas, bishop' was, in Old English, 'From the relics of St Nicholas, the pious and esteemed bishop, who, through God's power makes known many good things on land and sea to those who call on him in the name of God with inward faith.'²² Such a full statement of the circumstances in which a piece of sacred stuff might work miracles is unusual, but it conveniently makes explicit what the dry format of labels and lists generally took for granted. Late in the twelfth century, the chronicler of Waltham Abbey offered a more learned perspective. In noting that his community had lost its ornate reliquaries to royal greed but had managed to hang on to their contents, he commented that the relics were 'far more valuable than gold or precious stones and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb'.²³ His words echo those of the Psalmist who explained that there is a great reward for the servant who kept the judgements of the Lord. Relics, in other words, participated in the cycle of sin, prayer and redemption at the heart of the relationship of the baptised Christian with the divinity. In mediating between earth and heaven, they were that pledge, that *pignus*, of the compact which the Christian divinity had made with humankind. In the early medieval economy of salvation, relics were the tangible tokens of exchange: treasure on earth that was simultaneously treasure in heaven.

Collectively, then, these material symbols referred *both* backwards *and* forwards. On the one hand, they were labelled and inventoried in a way which referenced the historical details of Christ's passion, other biblical events and the deaths of martyrs. On the other, they anticipated the End

²² Patrick W. Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: a Tenth-century Cultural History* (Woodbridge, 1992), Old English list no. 95, p. 182, cf. Latin recension no. 127, p. 197.

²³ Leslie Watkiss and Marjorie Chibnall, *The Waltham Chronicle: an Account of the Discovery of Our Holy Cross at Montacute and its Conveyance to Waltham* (Oxford, 1994), chaps. 17, 22, pp. 34–6, 56–60. Cf. Ps. 18:10–12.

Time and betokened that central tenet of Christian teaching, the promise of redemption for all believers and entry to a heaven already populated by saints. Each fragment, in other words, encapsulated the essence of Christian cosmology.²⁴

Their second property was a lack of individuality, often exacerbated by amorphousness. This could jeopardise religious significance. Only careful labelling will distinguish one stone, scrap of fabric or particle of dirt from another.²⁵ Yet when those labels fell off, or became torn or illegible, the objects' primary identity might be forgotten. Papyrus labels may have been especially prone to rapid abrasion and deterioration, but parchment tags too could become illegible. Whether on papyrus or parchment, labels in pre-Carolingian cursive script must have taxed the palaeographical skills of later clerics: in 1396, the author of an inventory of relics at Mont-Saint-Michel complained repeatedly that some labels were too old or too blackened to read.²⁶ Just as they existed at the intersection of matter and belief, so relics were prone to slide into the interstices of identity and anonymity. Shorn of their labels, these objects became merely 'things', indeterminate, ambiguous, unspecified, and devoid of relationship to those who encountered them.²⁷

Those who cared for relic collections could not ignore the unknown items in their care. Sometimes, the impulse to write a label became an end in itself, despite the lack of adequate information. Faced with two unidentified relic bundles, a Carolingian cleric at Sens compromised by noting that one contained hairs, and the other a bone 'of a certain saint'; another Sens label simply states 'here are relics, we do not know what they are'²⁸ (Fig. 2). Unidentified relics such as these caused problems when relics were inventoried, or when an inscription listed the contents of an altar deposit.

²⁴Cf. Thiofrid of Echternach, *Flores epytaphii sanctorum*, II.7, ed. Michele Camillo Ferrari, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*, 133 (Turnhout, 1996), p. 53.

²⁵'De duodecim lapides quos portaverunt filii Israhel in Jordanem', cf. 'lapidem de spelunca ubi Elisaiuet cum Johanni fugiens'. Prou and Chartraire, 'Authentiques de reliques de la cathédrale de Sens', nos. 1 and 2, p. 141; cf. Galland, *Authentiques de reliques du Sancta Sanctorum*, no. 99, p. 131.

²⁶Philippe Cordez, 'Gestion et médiation des collections de reliques au Moyen Age. Le témoignage des authentiques et des inventaires', in Jean-Luc Deuffic (ed.), *Reliques et sainteté dans l'espace médiéval* (Saint-Denis, 2006), pp. 33–63 at 43.

²⁷Cf. Bill Brown, 'Thing theory', in Bill Brown (ed.), *Things* (Chicago, IL, 2004), pp. 1–16 at 4–5.

²⁸Prou and Chartraire, 'Authentiques de reliques de la cathédrale de Sens', nos. 154, 155, 156, pp. 165–6.

The eleventh-century Latin list from Exeter ends with a note of ‘very many other relics of saints, which we do not know what they are because we cannot find their names written down’.²⁹ From the pontificate of Paul I (757–67) onwards, when relics were moved from Rome’s catacombs into intramural churches in increasing numbers, Roman inscriptional records

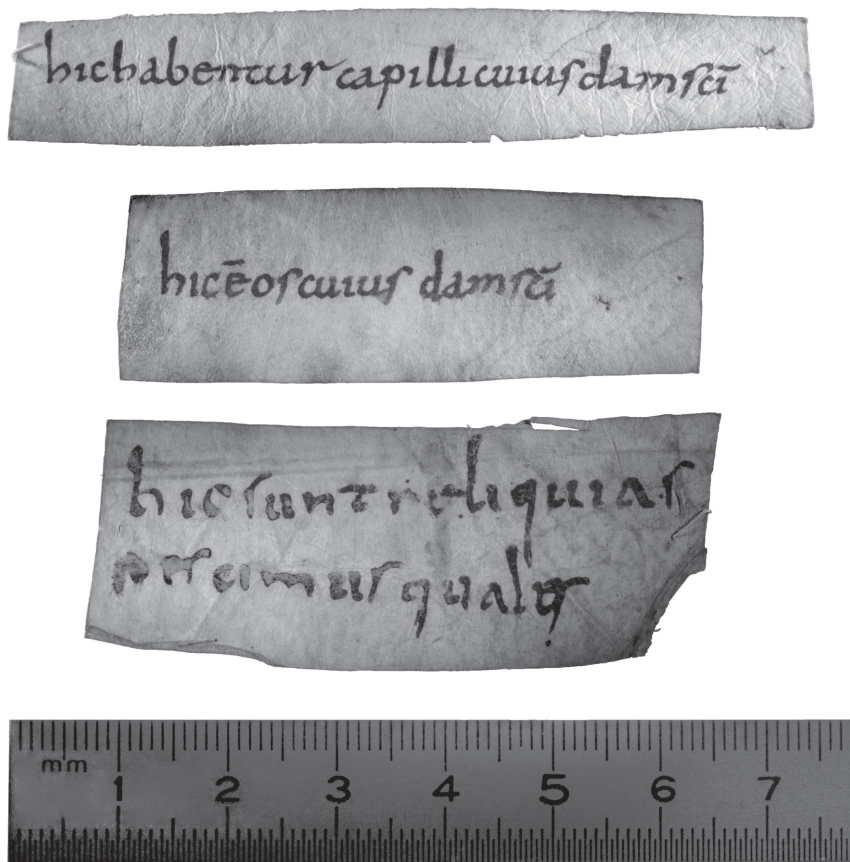


Figure 2. Early medieval relic labels from Sens. The size and format of these labels is typical, but their careful documentation of unidentified relics is unusual. Top to bottom: *Hic habentur capilli cuiusdam sc̄i* (7.5 × 1.2 mm); *hic ē os cuiusdam sc̄i* (5.4 × 1.8 mm); *hic sunt reliquias sc̄i cuius qualis nescimus* (5.5 × 2.2 mm). © Geneva Kornbluth. Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale Saint-Etienne, Archives J 81, J 80, and J 36.

²⁹ Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, p. 198.

of relic deposits sometimes concluded the list of named saints with a note of numerous others ‘whose names God knows’, a formulation sometimes adopted in inventories north of the Alps.³⁰

There were, then, sound theological reasons for preserving these anonymous fragments. Unidentified relics might as easily belong to a major miracle-worker or powerful intercessor as to a minor saint, and so, as a twelfth-century abbot of Muri wryly noted when he itemised the contents of his church’s reliquaries, they should be preserved with especial care.³¹ As an inscription of 1110 in San Matteo in Merulana declared, apropos unidentified relics, ‘although their names are unknown to us, they are nevertheless written in the book of life’.³² Failure of mere human knowledge did not compromise sanctity in God’s sight, for, as Thiofrid of Echternach emphasised c.1100, the circumstances in which saints’ relics were preserved did not affect the honour and glory owed to them.³³ Divine omniscience preserved the identity and personhood of these fragmentary things.

In a social perspective, meaning was nevertheless liable to be undermined by a loss of identity and relegation to anonymity. The failure of collective memory, the loss of documentation, or a change of storage receptacle might also obliterate any lingering association with the person(s) who first acquired them, or the donor(s) whose generosity they commemorated. As a consequence, these tiny objects had fluid social, political and historical meanings—or none at all.

Furthermore, they risked disappearing into oblivion. So-called *bursa*- or ‘purse’-reliquaries were characteristic of the seventh to tenth centuries. They typically consisted of a shaped block of wood of modest size, into which a cavity was gouged to contain relics. This was subsequently closed with a plug or sliding panel and then effectively sealed when the reliquary was covered with gilded metal decorated with inset gemstones or stamped ornament. Attachments for straps or chains on both sides enabled a purse-

³⁰ Robert Favreau, ‘Épigraphie médiévale et hagiographie’, in *idem* (ed.), *Le culte des saints aux IXe–XIIIe siècles* (Poitiers, 1995), pp. 63–83 at 72 with additional examples at 81–2. See Cordez, ‘Gestion et médiation’, p. 42 with an example in an inventory of 1185. The formula can be traced back to inscriptions placed in the catacombs by Damasus I (366–84): Alan Thacker, ‘Rome of the martyrs: saints, cults and relics, fourth to seventh centuries’, in Éamonn Ó Carragáin and Carol Neuman de Vegvar (eds.), *Roma Felix—Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 13–49 at 35–6.

³¹ Bernhard Bischoff, *Mittelalterliche Schatzverzeichnisse. Erster Teil, von der Zeit Karls des Grossen bis zur Mitte des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1967), no. 57, p. 65.

³² Favreau, ‘Épigraphie médiévale’, p. 82, n. 127.

³³ Thiofrid of Echternach, *Flores epytaphii sanctorum*, II.7, ed. Ferrari, pp. 50–5.

reliquary to be suspended from a beam, slung around the neck, or carried in procession (Fig. 3).³⁴ The only way to access the relics inside reliquaries of this type is to dismantle them: excavations at Winchester in 1976 uncovered an example which has never been disassembled and whose contents are only visible via X-ray and cannot therefore be identified.³⁵ Similarly, all trace of relics sealed into altars was likely to be lost unless they had been itemised in an external inscription or a documentary inventory at the time the altar was consecrated.³⁶ By the same token, even when the box in which relics were placed inside the altar cavity included details of its contents, that information was inside, invisible to human eyes—until revealed



Figure 3. Purse reliquary. Provenance province of Namur, probably Beauraing, 7th/8th-century. Copper-alloy repoussé panels on oak core; 12.5 × 7.5 × 2.5 cm. © Genevra Kornbluth. Musée du Cinquantenaire, Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Bruxelles B005717-001.

³⁴ Cynthia Hahn, 'Metaphor and meaning in early medieval reliquaries', in Giselle de Nie, Karl F. Morrison, and Marco Mostert (eds.), *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2005), pp. 239–63 at 243–51.

³⁵ David A. Hinton, Suzanne Keene, and Kenneth E. Qualmann, 'The Winchester reliquary', *Medieval Archaeology*, 25 (1981), 45–77.

³⁶ The Romano-German Pontifical (compiled at Mainz c.950) expected a bishop to announce the names of the saints whose relics he deposited when he consecrated an altar: see Cordez, 'Gestion et médiation', p. 39. Itemized notices of relic deposits occur in Germany from the second half of the tenth century, becoming more common from the eleventh century.

by archaeologists.³⁷ Since regularly updated relic inventories only became standard practice in the thirteenth century, earlier altar deposits frequently lacked any exterior trace.³⁸ Their disappearance from accessible historical record thus affected their social meaning but not their religious one: relics' sacralising effect did not rely on knowledge of their identity or whereabouts.³⁹

Relics' third key quality was their portable nature, and deserves discussion at some length. They turned the events of Christian history and legend into tiny movable objects that could be touched, kissed, carried around, possessed, stolen, bequeathed, and counted. They might also be collected—or subdivided for sharing. Their small size and ease of transportation differentiated them from the holy bodies of saints, enshrined in elaborate, fixed tombs under watchful clerical guard. Whereas the graves of saints joined the landscape of Christendom into a network of holy places controlled by the church at which the clergy choreographed elaborate rituals, relics offered the opportunity for individual ownership and informal, extemporised devotions. In addition, they might either bring added value to old religious sites, or add new sites of significance to the topography of Christendom. Whereas the saints in their graves were patrons to whom donations were made, and from whom protection was sought, relics were property that could be donated, or even bought and sold.⁴⁰

They also needed protecting. Reliquaries safeguarded their contents and, at the same time, transformed these nondescript items into eye-catching works of beauty and great prestige by encasing them in containers made from valuable, rare substances—gold and silver, gemstones, ivory, silk. From a learned perspective, as Thiofrid of Echternach explained, they gave allegorical form to the purity of mind and body of the denizens

³⁷ For examples of lead altar capsules with contents listed inside, see Christoph Stiegemann and Martin Kroker, *Für Königtum und Himmelreich. 1000 Jahre Bischof Meinwerk von Paderborn* (Regensburg, 2009), pp. 450–3. See also Hedwig Röckelein, ‘“1 alter hölzerner Kasten voller Reliquien als alten schmutzigen Zeugflicken jeder Farbe und alte Knochen”’: über unansehnliche und verborgene Reliquienschatze des Mittelalters’, in Sabine Arend *et al.* (eds.), *Vielfalt und Aktualität des Mittelalters. Festschrift für Wolfgang Petke zum 65. Geburtstag* (Bielefeld, 2006), pp. 383–402.

³⁸ Cordez, ‘Gestion et médiation’ for the evolution of relic documentation.

³⁹ Cf. Kirk Ambrose, ‘“Cunningly hidden”: invisible and forgotten relics in the Romanesque work of art’, in Robertson and Jahner (eds.), *Medieval and Early Modern Devotional Objects*, pp. 79–96.

⁴⁰ For the purchase of relics in the ninth century, see Liutolf, *Translatio S. Severi*, chaps. 1–2 (MGH *Scriptores*, XV/i, p. 292); also Odo of Cluny, *Vita Geraldi*, III.1 (*PL* 133, col. 691). Emma of Normandy's relic-buying is summarised by Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), p. 144.

of heaven.⁴¹ In so doing, they enhanced their contents' portability precisely because they were made to be carried around.

It follows that reliquaries could be stored, displayed and paraded in many different ways and in various settings. We find tiny ones worn about the person, slung around the neck in capsules, set into brooches or belt buckles.⁴² A variety of records report their presence in private houses, hung on bedposts, resting on personal altars, enshrined in family oratories on ancestral lands or in tented travelling chapels.⁴³ They could be equally at home in royal and aristocratic palaces or in much more modest establishments, on military campaign and even taken into battle.⁴⁴

We know most about the ones which ended up in churches. Ecclesiastical collections of reliquaries seem commonly to have been stored in church crypts and sacristies but, by the end of the Middle Ages, purpose-built treasuries were becoming common.⁴⁵ Even so, reliquaries were intended to be moved around. They were integral to the performative aspect of

⁴¹ Thiofrid of Echternach, *Flores epytaphii sanctorum*, II.1, ed. Ferrari, pp. 31–2.

⁴² Worn around the neck: by Armentaria: Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum*, 83 (MGH *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, I/ii, 94–5); by Iberian bishops: Council of Braga III (675), cl. 5, cited José Orlandis and Domingo Ramos-Lisson, *Die Synoden auf der Iberischen Halbinsel bis zum Einbruch des Islam (711)* (Paderborn, 1981), p. 242, n. 88; by Wilfred of Ripon: *The Life of Bishop Wilfred by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927), chap. 39, pp. 78–9; by Jacques de Vitry: cited by G. J. C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: a Process of Mutual Interaction* (Leiden, 1995), pp. 74–5. Among the bequests of Blanche of Navarre, widow of Philip VI of France, were a belt of gold and pearls containing relics which her husband had worn into battle and a golden clasp containing relics which he had worn on his chest: see Léopold Delisle, 'Testament of Blanche de Navarre, reine de France', *Mémoires de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris et de l'Île de France*, 12 (1885), 1–64 at 28, 30 clauses 192, 201. For surviving examples of reliquary brooches, pendants and rings, see David A. Hinton, *Gold and Gilt, Pots and Pins: Possessions and People in Medieval Britain* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 61, 165, 244–5 and Bagnoli et al. (eds.), *Treasures of Heaven*, pp. 131–3, nos. 72–6.

⁴³ For late antique examples, see Blake Leyerle, 'Pilgrim eulogiae and domestic rituals', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, 10 (2008), 223–37; Snoek, *Medieval Piety*, 72–4. Ninth-century examples include the relics which Gerald of Aurillac kept in his tent while travelling, and which he then deposited in his own religious foundation: Odo of Cluny, *Vita Geraldi*, I.25, II.23, III.3 (*PL* 133, cols 657, 683, 691), and the relics which King Alfred carried with him at all times: *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, chap. 104, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), p. 90.

⁴⁴ For clergy carrying relics into battle, see *Concilium Germanicum* (742), cl. 2, MGH *Concilia*, II/1, p. 3; for the battle-relic of Columba in twelfth-century Scotland, see Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Columba, Adomnán and the cult of saints in Scotland', in Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy (eds.), *Spes Scotorum, Hope of the Scots: Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 3–33 at 25–8.

⁴⁵ Anton Legner, *Reliquien in Kunst und Kult: zwischen Antike und Aufklärung* (Darmstadt, 1995), pp. 214–15; F. J. R., 'Trésors et chambres de reliques', *Rhein-Meuse. Art et Civilisation 800–1400/ Rhein und Maas. Kunst und Kultur 800–1400*, 2 vols. (Cologne, 1972–3), I:134–41.

medieval Christianity, for they would be brought out and placed on or hung above the altar on special feast days, carried in ritual processions from one altar to another inside the church, and moved outside into the open air for a wide variety of purposes.⁴⁶ Monks and clerics sometimes carried relics far and wide to raise revenue; to take them to the tenants on church estates; to face down warring factions and pressurise them into suing for peace in the presence of the holy; to bring healing to the sick; to seek intercession at times of famine or epidemic. Nor should we forget that from the days of the Merovingians onwards, rulers kept relics in their courts: in addition to enhancing the sacral aura of the palace, their presence could transform tense political negotiations into sacred obligations, whether as gifts from one party to another or in the swearing of solemn oaths.⁴⁷

* * *

In a literal sense, then, these objects were ‘portable Christianity’. Whereas pilgrimage helped to define a network of Christian *lieux de mémoire* by making journeying and arrival at these locations a spiritual experience, relics abrogated that fixity of place.⁴⁸ In substituting possession for travel, they mediated the religious associations of specific places through material, highly moveable objects. In reconfiguring the relationship of place to social memory in Christian tradition, relics helped to domesticate and ‘naturalise’ distant holy places.

Conversion and pilgrimage account for some of that redistribution of sacred stuff, for relics were frequently part of the luggage of preachers and ecclesiastical missions. But other forms of communication and contact demand equal attention for, singly or in clusters, relics travelled along various ‘pathways of portability’.⁴⁹ The social and geographical coordinates of these pathways generally replicated existing arterial networks of communication and contact, whether within or between families and polities, or along the roads, rivers and sea-lanes frequented by merchants,

⁴⁶ Examples in Snoek, *Medieval Piety*, pp. 254–60.

⁴⁷ Julia M. H. Smith, ‘Rulers and relics, c.750–950: “treasure on earth, treasure in heaven”’, in Walsham (ed.), *Relics and Remains*, pp. 73–96.

⁴⁸ Cf. Pierre Nora, ‘Between memory and history: les lieux de mémoire’, *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–25.

⁴⁹ For the expression, see Eva R. Hoffman, ‘Pathways of portability: Islamic and Christian interchange from the tenth to the twelfth century’, *Art History*, 24/1 (2001), 17–50.

envoys, pilgrims and other travellers.⁵⁰ In geographical terms, relics circulated in ways that are well charted for many other types of material goods, for they were easily stowed in the pockets, saddlebags or cargo of men and women on the move.

There were, nevertheless, some constraints upon their movement. On the one hand, gendered preferences underlying the inheritance of movable goods affected their significance as familial heirlooms, with the result that relics are especially notable among women's bequests.⁵¹ On the other, a calculus of scarcity and prestige influenced distribution within shifting networks of diplomacy and mission, alliance and rivalry, patronage and influence.⁵² And when raiders and brigands disrupted the geopolitics of trade and diplomacy, or when mission and crusade encouraged travel to outlying places, so relics ebbed and flowed along different routes and in fluctuating numbers.⁵³

Graphic demonstration of exceptional portability comes from the tiny Scottish island of Inchmarnock (Argyll and Bute). Excavations in 2001–2 on the site of an early medieval monastery unearthed an incised picture-slate which depicts seaborne warriors clad in chain mail taking prisoner an unarmed person carrying something suspended from his wrists (Fig. 4). The captive is generally agreed to be a cleric, and the object slung from his hands a reliquary.⁵⁴ House- or tomb-shaped reliquaries were as common as purse-reliquaries in the early Middle Ages; one which survives with its

⁵⁰For examples of relics moving via networks of friendship and political contact, see Alcuin, *Epistolae*, nos. 11, 28, 75, 97, 146, MGH *Epistolae*, IV.37, 69–71, 117–18, 141–2, 235–6. For relic-collecting in the context of political mediation, see *Vita Audoini episcopi Rotomagensis*, chap. 13, MGH *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, V.562. For an example of a reliquary transmitted via inheritance, see Aelred of Rievaulx, *De genealogia regum anglorum*, PL CXCIV, col. 715, on the reliquary Queen Margaret brought to Scotland upon her marriage to Malcolm Canmore and then bequeathed to David I.

⁵¹Julia Crick, 'Women, wills and moveable wealth in pre-Conquest England', in Moira Donald and Linda Hurcombe (eds.), *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 17–37 at 25.

⁵²Holger Klein, 'Eastern objects and western desires: relics and reliquaries between Byzantium and the West', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 58 (2004), 283–314; Peter Schreiner, 'Diplomatische Geschenke zwischen Byzanz und dem Westen ca. 800–1200. Eine Analyse der Texte mit Quellenanhang', *ibid.*, 251–82; Smith, 'Rulers and relics'.

⁵³Cf. Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001), at pp. 283–318.

⁵⁴Christopher Lowe, 'Image and imagination: the Inchmarnock "Hostage Stone"', in Beverley Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor, and Gareth Williams (eds.), *West over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement before 1300. A Festschrift in Honour of Barbara E. Crawford* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 53–67.



Figure 4. Inchmarnock 'hostage' stone. St Marnock's church, Inchmarnock (Argyll and Bute). Flat beach pebble, recovered in two parts, 180 × 120 × 12 mm in its extant, incomplete state. Reverse has short sequence of letters and cruciform design; c. 800–c. 1300. © Headland Archaeology (UK) Ltd. Reproduced by permission from Christopher Lowe (ed.), *Inchmarnock: An Early Historic Island Monastery and its Archaeological Landscape* (Edinburgh, 2008).



Figure 5. Portable reliquary with carrying strap. Late 8th century. Gilded copper panels with cabochons of coloured glass and possibly amber on wood core; 15.1 × 5.2 × 9.2 cm; with leather strap. © Genevra Kornbluth. Musées de Sens, Trésor de la cathédrale Saint-Etienne F.63.70.

carrying strap intact at Sens (Fig. 5) may give an idea of what the unfortunate Inchmarnock priest was carrying. Perhaps an event that started as a liturgical procession ended in a hostage-taking when raiders suddenly attacked: a reliquary was equally portable in both contexts.

Despite the caveats noted above, there must have been far more relics in circulation in 1200 than there had been in 700. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, new churches commonly received an initial endowment of relics. These either originated as the subdivision of existing ones or were newly created: cloth and bone could be fractioned into ever smaller fragments and more dust, water or oil could be scooped up.⁵⁵ Secondly, the proliferation of altars within important monastic churches

⁵⁵ For example, when Odilo of Cluny established a monastery on his family's lands at Lavoûte-Chilhac in 1024/25, he exploited his imperial and ecclesiastical contacts to endow it with many relics. Donors included the Empress Kunigunde together with the churches of Saint-Denis, Cluny, Saint-Maurice, Sens, among others. P.-F. Fournier, 'Histoire anonyme de la fondation du Prieuré de Lavoûte-Chilhac par Odilon de Cluny', *Bulletin philologique et historique du Comité des Travaux*, (1958), 103–15; Edina Bozoky, 'Les reliques de La Voûte', *Odilon de Mercoeur, L'Auvergne et Cluny. La 'Paix de Dieu' et l'Europe de l'an mil. Actes du colloque de Lavoûte-Chilhac des 10, 11 et 12 mai 2000* (Nonette, 2002), pp. 175–91.

further stimulated this multiplication.⁵⁶ Moreover, at the turn of the millennium, the Burgundian monk Ralph Glaber observed that the ‘white mantle of churches’ which sprang up across Christendom was accompanied by new discoveries of ancient relics, an upsurge in pilgrimage—and also the proliferation of spurious relics.⁵⁷ Whatever the truth of Ralph Glaber’s perception, his comments point towards a more general phenomenon, that, as Europe’s churches, shrines and holy places became more numerous, so both the demand for and the supply of relics increased. This dynamic did not change fundamentally until after 1204, when the sack of Constantinople released a flood of relics into western Europe and precipitated their rapid commodification.⁵⁸

* * *

To summarise: the intersection of matter and belief gave relics their meaning, and their tiny size rendered them efficient at detaching memory from place and mobilising it elsewhere. Their indeterminate, commonplace physical form, however, threatened their individuality, and their identity occupied the margins of both memory and written record. Furthermore, relics travelled, rather like red blood cells, through the arterial networks of contact, communication and exchange which bound Christendom together. And, although western Europe was far more relic-rich in 1200 than in 700, the practices of gathering, labelling, distributing, collecting and concealing relics persisted with only modest qualitative changes over this long period. Relics thus typify the characteristic dynamic of medieval Christianity—a repeated refreshing and renewing of an ancient tradition that was endlessly culturally creative.

A single specimen of ‘portable Christianity’ encapsulates this argument: the life-size reliquary head of St Candidus, from Saint-Maurice d’Agaune (Fig. 6). Remarkably, it remains in the church at which and for which it was made in the third quarter of the twelfth century. Founded in 515 at the northern foot of the main Alpine pass from present-day France into Italy, the abbey derived its wealth and influence from its strategic location combined with the possession of the relics of St Maurice and the martyrs of the Theban legion. Candidus was Maurice’s lieutenant: he is

⁵⁶ Carol Heitz, ‘Autels et fêtes de saints (VIII–XI siècle)’, *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa*, 13 (1982), 75–98.

⁵⁷ Rodulfus Glaber, *The Five Books of the Histories*, III.vi.19 cf. IV.iii.6–8; ed. John France, (Oxford, 1989), pp. 126–9, 180–5.

⁵⁸ Klein, ‘Eastern objects and western desires’, pp. 306–10.



Figure 6. Reliquary-head of St Candidus. Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, third quarter of the twelfth century, 575 × 247 mm. Silver repoussé with gold filigree and cabochons, on wood core. © Abbaye de Saint-Maurice. With permission.

named in the couplet which accompanies the relief depiction of his martyrdom on the reliquary's plinth.⁵⁹ The head is, however, a double memorialisation, for it also commemorated Amadeus III, Count of Savoy and lay abbot of Saint-Maurice, who fought on the Second Crusade and died in 1148 on Cyprus, en route to the Holy Land. Amadeus had financed his crusading venture by borrowing from the abbey a gold table worth 66 marks of gold against the surety of specific revenues.⁶⁰ In 1150, his successor, Humbert III, honoured his father's memory and negotiated a complex deal to reclaim the rights to the income by suitably compensating the abbot and community of Saint-Maurice.⁶¹ As well as discharging the debt, his payment of one hundred marks of silver and two marks of gold appears to have provided the means for constructing the reliquary, and it is even possible that Candidus's facial features were modelled on those of the deceased count who, like the saint, gave his life for his faith.⁶²

In 1961, the reliquary-head was carefully dismantled and its contents examined before being painstakingly reassembled.⁶³ It was found to comprise a hollow wooden core sheathed in silver plating; Candidus's beard and moustache are gilded, as are his jewelled diadem and collar. Despite evidence of disturbance in 1659 when the reliquary had been opened for inspection, tidying and inventorying, its contents were still essentially those of the second half of the twelfth century.⁶⁴ Situated immediately underneath the crown of the head lay the largest single item, a large piece of a human cranium, inside which there nestled a silk cap of the kind which denoted office-holding. At the very bottom was a coin of Amadeus III. In between, in the main part of the cavity, lay about 50 relics, some still neatly wrapped, tied and labelled with their original tags, but others untied, repackaged and/or relabelled in 1659 (Table 1). Those original labels which were legible ranged from the seventh to the twelfth centuries

⁵⁹ *Candidus exempto dum sic mucrone litatur,
Spiritus astra petit pro nece vita datur.*

⁶⁰ Laurent Ripart, 'La croisade du comte Amadée III de Maurienne: un potlach sans contrepartie?', in Benoît Grévin, Anneliese Nef, and Emanuelle Tixier (eds.), *Chrétiens, Juifs et Musulmans dans la Méditerranée médiévale. Etudes en hommage à Henri Bresc* (Paris, 2008), pp. 149–65.

⁶¹ Daniel Thurre, *L'atelier roman d'orfèvrerie de l'abbaye de Saint-Maurice* (Sierre, 1992), pp. 365–6; Maurice Zufferey, *Die Abtei Saint-Maurice d'Agaune im Hochmittelalter (830–1258)* (Göttingen, 1988), pp. 275–7.

⁶² Rudolf Schnyder, 'Das Kopfreliquiar des heiligen Candidus in Saint-Maurice', *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte*, 24 (1965–6), 65–127 at 99, 113–15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, for all details in this and the following paragraphs.

⁶⁴ It also transpired that it had been briefly reopened on at least two other occasions, evidenced by a thirteenth-century coin and a slip of paper from c.1800.

Table 1. Dates of relic labels inside St Candidus' reliquary-head

Merovingian	6
Carolingian	15
Late Carolingian	1
Tenth/eleventh-century	12
First half of twelfth century	1
c.1150	7
Seventeenth-century	7

in date and, since most of them predate the Second Crusade, these relics must have been transferred from other reliquaries in the abbey's possession. As a snapshot of the community's relic-collecting activities, the contents suggest a peak of activity in the Carolingian era, with another around the turn of the millennium.⁶⁵

As befits a memorial to a count who had taken a crusading vow, more than one half of the labelled relics had been brought back from pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Table 2). Indeed, all the mid-twelfth-century ones originated from the Holy Land; perhaps they are a mute testimony to the Savoyard presence on the Second Crusade. The remainder comprises relics of martyrs from the city of Rome, together with some of the most famous saints of early medieval France, including Martin of Tours, Anianus of Orleans, Desiderius of Vienne and Sulpicius of Bourges. The most unusual is a relic of Scotland's St Columba, which must have been brought from Iona or Dunkeld. The assemblage is thus an index of the political links which the abbey's location facilitated, and a reflection of its role as a vitally important way-station on the thoroughfare from France to Rome and, beyond that, to Jerusalem.

Table 2. Ascertainable origins of labelled relics inside St Candidus' reliquary head

Holy Land	22
France	10
Rome	4
Other Mediterranean	1
Other (Scotland)	1

⁶⁵ My figures are derived from Schnyder's detailed inventory of the reliquary's contents: Schnyder, 'Das Kopfreliquiar', pp. 121–7. Some of the medieval labels are fragmentary and/or the relics unidentifiable; in conjunction with the seventeenth-century re-labelling this renders my calculations necessarily approximate.

When all the bags, pouches and bundles holding the relics were emptied in 1961, their contents turned out to be an array of stones and pebbles, scraps of linen or woollen cloth, pieces of patterned silk fabric or thread, bits of sponge, splinters of wood, bark, dried laurel leaves, lumps of resin and incense, a piece of rusty iron, soil, sand, and one intact glass phial. Besides the large piece of skull, there were other body parts: hair, teeth and finger-bones, and over sixty fragments of bone of varying sizes—along with the coins and the silk cap.

This, then, was portable Christianity: tiny items of value and meaning to the men and women who had acquired them on pilgrimage and then donated them to St-Maurice d'Agaune, or who had brought tokens of friendship from their own religious community when they journeyed through Europe. Once at the abbey, the relics' movement came to an end. They nevertheless remained portable inasmuch as the reliquary itself could be carried in procession or displayed on feast days. Moreover, although their presence inside St Candidus's head was not recorded in any external inventory or inscription, the container alluded to the spiritual meaning of its hidden contents. Its socket depicts the very moment of Candidus's martyrdom: the Latin couplet records that, as his head is struck off, his soul ascends to heaven and he exchanges eternal life for death.⁶⁶ The reliquary thus stands as a token of the promise which was offered to all Christians through the martyr whose remains it was believed to contain.

As an artefact, the circumstances of its manufacture imbued St Candidus's reliquary-head with a precise meaning for the canons who commissioned it to commemorate their deceased lay abbot, and for the new count whose benefaction made it possible. Once those circumstances could no longer be recalled, it became just another prestigious piece in the abbey's collection of sacred treasures. As a portable reliquary, its forgotten contents are the material traces of individual men and women's passage over the Alps. Those who had made the long journey to Jerusalem in the ninth century had most certainly crossed from Christendom into Islam and back; Crusaders had travelled in the face of different dangers and political obstacles: every relic betokens a prayer uttered, a journey made, an act of pilgrimage, a political gesture, an act of friendship—pious actions of gathering, transporting and donating.

Although we cannot now recover the specific acts which brought each relic to Saint-Maurice d'Agaune in the first place and informed its social

⁶⁶ See above, n. 59.

meaning, the whole assemblage nevertheless provides a coherent statement of medieval Christian belief. It epitomises the dynamism that had transformed the cult of martyrs into something distinct from its origins in the age of persecution, and speaks to the creativity of Christianity in different ages and cultures. For all its universality, the Church of the twelfth century thus remained as much a vehicle for local identities as in the earlier Middle Ages. Furthermore, St Candidus's head resolves the paradox of materiality and belief: its intensely human form conceals fragments of human bone, while in its inscription Candidus's soul ascends to heaven in the eternal present tense. Finally, in blurring the distinction between person and body-part, the reliquary and its relics are simultaneously agent and object, subject and thing, for they resist being confined to a single conceptual category.⁶⁷ In transforming Christianity into portable fragments devoid of coherent form or self-evident identity, relics translated it into something tangible that could be grasped as part of everyday life.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Cf. Steven Shapin, 'What's your dust worth?', *London Review of Books*, 14 April 2011, 10–12.

⁶⁸ Much of the research on which I draw here was conducted at the Institute for Advanced Study in 2008–9 and I am very grateful for the privilege of being appointed a Member there and for being able to work in such ideal conditions. Subsequent opportunities to present my work have substantially contributed to shaping my ideas. In particular, I am grateful to the Princeton History Department for inviting me to contribute a paper to the 2009–10 Davies Center seminar on 'Cultures and Institutions in Motion', and to the President and Fellows of the Medieval Academy of America for the invitation to deliver a plenary address to their 2011 annual meeting.