

# Relics

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“Relics” (*reliqua*, literally “remains”) are the venerated remains of a human being. Typically, these remains were bodily (the most durable remains being bones, but also ashes, hair, or teeth); relics may also refer to the former possessions of the dead human being, such as clothes or books. In the Christian context, this material veneration would expand to include personal items brought into contact with human remains or fabricated copies of original relics. It was believed that special power (variously defined and manifest) clustered around these remains, due to the special qualities of the dead person who left them.

Relics served multiple religious, social, and even political functions from the Archaic Greek period through to the Islamic era. On the one hand, venerated human remains provided a locus for the articulation of horizontal relations, among contemporary human societies and their (often idealized, constructed) past. Narratives surrounding the dead humans and their remains determined the contours of these horizontal relationships: an ancient Greek hero might reinforce ethnic and cultural bonds of Hellenism; the bones of a biblical prophet might materialize the bonds of scriptural identity (uniting or dividing communities of Jews and Christians); the tomb of a martyr might mobilize communal piety, devotion, or even violence.

Vertical relations were also established at the site of relic veneration: that is, the degree to which this (human, material, mortal) world might intersect with and draw on another (divine, spiritual, deathless) realm. Often the dead human was believed to have enjoyed a special relationship with the divine during his or her life, and this connection persisted even after death. People approached the remains, or acquired a piece of them, in order to reactivate that vertical relationship: to gain favor, seek

protection, or heal physical and spiritual illnesses.

The devotion to special human remains may have existed as early as the Homeric period (Nagy 1979; Rohde 2000). Fully developed “hero cults” emerged by the fifth century BCE, often focusing the political authority of powerful city-states (see HERO CULT). Herodotus, for instance, ascribed the rise of Sparta’s power in part to its acquisition of the bones of Orestes (*Hist.* 1.66–8; Boedeker 1993). Attention to the venerable bones of Greek heroes persisted through the Hellenistic period, becoming a potential site to resist Roman power during the so-called Second Sophistic (see Pausanias’ *Graeciae Descriptio* and Philostratus’ *Heroikos*, discussed in Maclean and Aiken 2004). Interestingly, the Romans themselves showed little interest in venerating human remains, but did attach religious and cultural significance to the material spoils of their conquered populations (see *EVOCATIO*). Debate remains as to whether ancient Jews practiced any form of relic veneration, or whether special attention to the tombs of biblical patriarchs and prophets postdates Christian practice (see *HEBRON*; *LIVES OF THE PROPHETS*). Certainly by the Roman period, Jews had taken to venerating the scrolls of the Torah in local communities as a kind of sacred relic (see *BIBLE*, *HEBREW*; *SYNAGOGUES*, *JEWISH*).

Christian relic veneration may have started very early: the second century *Martyrdom of Polycarp* mentions the sacredness of the martyr’s remains (*Mart. Poly.* 18). The widespread “cult of saints” took hold primarily in the post-Constantinian period (Brown 1980). The bones (and, later, possessions) of holy figures – martyrs, apostles, biblical prophets, Christian wonder-workers – were “discovered” under often miraculous circumstances (see *INVENTIO*). Either shrines were established at the site of discovery or the remains were transported to urban centers; these shrines drew visitors seeking miraculous intervention and added to the prestige of the local monks

and clergy. The discovery of relics might even provide political cover during times of ecclesiastical struggle (such as the discovery of saints Protasius and Gervasius in fourth century Milan, or the discovery of the bones of Stephen the Protomartyr near Jerusalem in the fifth century). Likewise, relic veneration might become the focus of ritual contention between laity and clergy (Optatus *Contra Donat.* 1.16; Augustine *Conf.* 6.2; see *REFRIGERIA, CHRISTIAN*).

The Christian holy land rose to prominence throughout the late Roman period, continually producing new and venerable remains of holy men and women. The most celebrated of these relics was the wood of the True Cross, supposedly discovered by Helena, mother of Constantine the Great. By the end of the fourth century the Cross had been integrated into the Jerusalem Easter liturgy; the western pilgrim Egeria noted that it was carefully guarded after an earlier pilgrim attempted to bite off a piece to sneak out. Pieces of the cross circulated throughout the Christian world, as did other relics through official and unofficial channels, despite imperial laws that forbade the sale of relics (*CT* 9.17.7). This reliquary economy cemented networks between bishops and emperors and even empowered acts of Christian violence, as when the arrival of the bones of Stephen on the island of Minorca gave rise to the forced conversion of the Jewish community there (Bradbury 1996).

The rise of the cult of the saints and Christian relic veneration was not without challenges: the Gallic monk Vigilantius viewed the practice as little more than pagan “idolatry,” and was sharply rebuked by Jerome in a scathing treatise. Relics were also not without sophisticated intellectual defenders: Vincentius of Rouen wrote a treatise *In Praise of the Saints*, articulating in Neoplatonic terms the links between divine and human natures, concentrated at the site of the saint’s remains.

By the early medieval period, relics had become deeply embedded in the material and spiritual lives of Christians from the Near East to western Europe: pilgrims took measurements of Christ’s footprints, collected water from the Jordan River, and carried infused dirt and oil from saints’ shrines in flasks called “blessings” (*eulogia*). The girdle of the Virgin Mary was believed to protect Constantinople from barbarian invasion, and the city of Rome was reimagined as a constellation of sacred graves and shrines (see *CATACOMBS, CHRISTIAN*). As symbols and enactments of the paradoxes of Christian belief (immortality and death; materiality and spirit; divine and human, intersecting), relics remained a force in religious and political life well past the ancient period.

SEE ALSO: Icon; Martyrdom and martyrs, Christian; Pilgrimage.

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