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Bones of Contention

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In fact, in medieval Christianity, the cult of the relics--parts of saints' bodies, fragments of their clothing, and even objects that they had touched or had touched their corpses--was one of the most popular ways of venerating these holy men and women. People believed that "the saints in their glory...were not forgetful of those still struggling on earth: between them there was a fellowship or communion linking the living with the dead," wrote Newsweek religion writer Kenneth Woodward in his 1990 book, *Making Saints*. Early Christians prayed to the saints for everything from protection on long journeys to healings and other miracles. By the eighth century, venerating the saints was such an intrinsic part of Christian belief that a church council held in Nicea in present-day Turkey in 767 decreed that every church altar must contain a stone bearing the relics of a saint. By the 10th century, the cult of relics exploded. In the early days most saints were venerated only in their own localities, where their relics--usually parts of their buried bodies--were easily accessible. As the centuries passed, devotions to the more popular saints, and the ones who worked the most miracles, began spreading by word of mouth from their own regions to other parts of the Christian world.

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"Then others wanted the saint, so they'd take pieces of the body and send them around," says R. Bruce Miller, director of the philosophy library at The Catholic University of America. "Soon they were sending off expeditions to steal relics."

Reliquary-riffling was only part of the story. Having the relics of a popular saint in one's possession was a medieval status symbol that signified political power and high social standing. For example, in 1392 King Charles IV of France handed out to his guests--as royal party favors, so to speak--pieces of the ribs of his holy ancestor, St. Louis. When St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican friar, died in a Cistercian monastery in 1323, the monks there were said to have decapitated his body to make sure they got to keep at least part of his remains. This started a battle between the two orders that lasted for decades over which one was entitled claim it held St. Thomas's corpse.

Such abuses, together with a medieval proliferation of clearly fake relics, such as supposed thorns from Jesus' crown or drops of Mary's breast-milk, triggered a strong reaction against relics among the 16th-century Protestant Reformers, and so the cult of relics ended in Protestant countries. But in the Eastern Orthodox Church the cult of relics has never died, and it remained vibrant in the Roman Catholic Church up until the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s.

poll

What is your stance on venerating relics of the saints?

It's an appropriate way to honor and connect with them

It verges on superstition and interferes with our worship of God alone

It's a symbolic way of expressing our need to find meaning in death, but shouldn't be taken literally

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"The practice became less common after that," says Miller. "There was a shying away. Churches became much simpler inside. The statues disappeared and along them, the veneration of the relics."

But all that has changed of late. Just as in the Middle Ages, the development of new trading links to the Byzantine East opened up new markets relics, the Internet has opened up new markets relics at the turn of the millennium. At online auction sites there is a brisk--and somewhat dubious--trade in the objects, sometimes at astronomical prices.

"People will buy a relic at an online auction for \$125, then turn around and sell it to some poor Catholic for \$5,000," says Tom Serafin, a relics enthusiast who monitors what he calls "e-simony," or trafficking in relics through online auction houses. The item whose price was bid up to \$5,000 was a wood fragment allegedly from Jesus' True Cross.

Less prestigious relics command less stratospheric prices: \$76 for prayer card that has touched a relic of St. Thérèse, for example, or a reliquary containing effects of St. Catherine Labouré that goes on the block at eBay for \$5.99 and is quickly bid up to \$150.

Worlds Apart



Thomas Moore advises a couple working on opposite ends of the earth

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