**Relics. The Fourth Estate**

**Philippe GEORGE**

Up in the north of Europe, from Belgium to Denmark, as I will demonstrate, relics have formed an international language[[1]](#footnote-1). For many years I have tried to answer the following questions: What is a relic? What is their purpose? How did their veneration develop? What are the greatest cults of relics in Europe?[[2]](#footnote-2) The cult of the saints developed extensively during the Middle Ages and has had a major effect on human thought. Relics therefore played an important role because the saint was considered to be present in their relic and channel holy power through that intermediary. While bones were usually the relic of choice, there are also a number of other types. The Holy Shroud and the Holy Cross are well known and universally recognized, but the ostensions of relics and even secular pilgrimages to relic shrines also enjoy an enduring relevance today thanks to the devotion they elicit. While we are speaking of relics in general, too often the focus is only on the spectacular cult and the traffic of relics that seems so very outrageous and scandalous to us today.

This field of research is huge, however, and offers multiple areas of historical interest. Relics are instruments of exceptional communication and the power of this medium penetrates deep into our society. The cult of relics pervades all periods of history, from late antiquity onwards; it relates to Christ and each saint, or group of saints, through the reverence shown by both religious and non-religious people. Relics have become a veritable new field of historical research. The systematic publication of existing church treasures is bringing to light new documents. Opening caskets with archaeological professionalism makes it possible to rigorously inventory the contents and publish their results. Sometimes the written sources found illuminate and clarify the story of a religious building or a work of art – such as the reliquary and its contents. These writings often mention and clarify the names of saints, places and characters, in addition to their manifest palaeographic importance. The archaeological objects that accompany them are diverse. They are clarifying « the routes of faith »[[3]](#footnote-3) and, more broadly, are revealing traces of human contact; an extraordinary puzzle to be reconstructed and that goes far beyond the field of the strictly hagiological. The movement of goods and people, and the networks these create are revealed by these multifaceted, material vestiges that greatly contribute to our knowledge of the past. That is where the job of the true « historian » begins.

« The Fourth Estate », the title of my 2013 book (« Reliques, le quatrième pouvoir »), generally refers to a means of spreading information and, more broadly, to the means of communication, the media. For its second edition, I now choose the title « Connection to the Divine » (« Reliques. Se connecter à l’au-delà »). We have chosen these terms as a short and incisive adjunct to the word « relic », to emphasize the impregnation exercised by relics on society, in the Middle Ages of course, but also for a long time afterwards, and have dared to compare this with the all-overpowering, ever present, role of information. We are of course aware of the freedom that we have taken with the exact meaning of the term and especially with its historical significance. The more we advance in our research, the more we are amazed at the mediative (medium, « Intermediary ») role of relics, their power as media and their integration into all levels of society, including the role of saints as recognized intercessors. Relics are involved in grandiose ceremonies that color public opinion and they also play a major part in the private lives of people. These sacred objects were instruments of communication, « media » (before the term even meant what it now means), even if, first and foremost, they are also « conduits to the afterlife » (« conducteurs vers l’au-delà », Jean-Luc Deuffic). In fact, interest in relics is not new, it is their interpretation that has changed: the outlook has changed the approach to the subject. As ever, I am advocating, without any spectacular or dramatic angle, for a totally new approach to this new historical object.

Back to my research. Most published research[[4]](#footnote-4) in this field does not make much sense. On the other hand, when one looks at the relics of Odense for example, it seems far more constructive to simply start a dialogue. Thus many specific points retain my attention, ranging from history to history of art, such as the fragmentation and the authentication of relics. The most prized relics consist of the whole body ̶ in its entirety ̶ of the saints. Historians often forget that settlements often start out as cult sites, long before developing as centres for trade or government. In this first instance, the relic is predominantly used for the obliteration of paganism. The establishment of the *« corpus integrum »* of the patron saint, evangelist, or founder or even martyr, is of high importance, and is expressed in impressive shrines and processions at the main events in the city’s calendar. Relics are divided and dispersed: this multiplies the phenomenon of fragmentation. The example was set by Rome. From the eighth century, the break-up of saints’ bodies of the saints began in Western Europe. As these various relics travelled far and wide, this gave rise to a multiplication of plotlines concerning the story of the saint and their relics. An « authentica » is an inscription on various materials (parchment, papyrus, paper, metal, stone ...) identifying a relic, mainly by the saint's name, and/or implicitly or explicitly authorizing its public veneration.   
Most commonly, the word is used to describe a narrow strip of parchment (ranging in length from 5 to 6 millimeters, up to around 10 centimeters). These labels, schedules or vignettes, so tiny they are prone to shrivel up, sometimes have nothing else to tell us but the name of a saint. This is the practical reason that led to the drafting of « authentication letters » in the late seventh century (the date of the oldest known example, discovered in Rome’s Lateran cathedral).

A real « policy » undertaken by the papacy in the late eighth and early ninth century was to exhume many bodies of saints lying outside the city walls and transport them to within the city, where they were then divided into fragments, which then went to enrich the altars and church treasuries in the various parts of Christendom that lacked them. As of the ninth century, vast quantities of enterprising bishops and abbots came flocking to Rome, to procure precious remains, through purchase or what was deemed sacred theft (*furta sacra*), especially in the city’s catacombs, to bring them to France or Germany. This systematic looting, during which a vast amount of false relics were put into circulation, did not stop before the eleventh century and was even encouraged by the development of their liturgical uses, since as of the Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787, it became necessary to insert relics into all altars upon which the Eucharist was celebrated. As a result, even the smallest modest village church had to possess a relic, which contributed to the acceleration of the process of the dismemberment and dispersal of the bodies of the saints.

From the Middle Ages, a significant number of relics also arrived from the Holy Land with the Crusades, which went as far as reclaiming Christ’s Holy Sepulchre. This only served to exacerbate the situation, as did the sacking and pillage of Constantinople in 1204 which brought to the West many works of art and many relics. The major pilgrimage centers, such as Aachen, Saint Martin of Tours, Santiago..., also strove to present real or representative relics. After this evolution, around the year one thousand, relics were present everywhere and played a central role in the religious life of the faithful, as shown clearly in the writings of Raoul Glaber. The Church could but rejoice to the extent that the distribution of the relics had become a powerful instrument for Christianization in Western society. In particular, the cult of relics helped to spread among the laity a strong and concrete sense of communion with the saints, that is to say of this mysterious communication between the living and the dead by which men and women down on earth could benefit from the merits of the saints in heaven, whose intercession could help them – and if not themselves, then their families and their deceased - to face the difficulties of life or the perils of what lay beyond.

To conclude, a word about some connections between Belgium and Denmark through the cult of relics[[5]](#footnote-5). In his wonderful book, *Les saints rois du Moyen Âge en Occident (VIe-XIIIe siècle* (1984), the late Robert Folz quotes Cnut 19 times. Married to Adele of Flanders, who was of Carolingian ancestry (hence the name of their son « Charles »), Cnut was the brother-in-law of Robert I the Frisian, Count of Flanders[[6]](#footnote-6). After his martyrdom, his *sanctitas post mortem*, composed by Aelnoth towards 1120, aimed to give the royal house a saintly ancestor. Cnut frees two Danes held hostage by Count Baldwin of Flanders. The cult is essentially local and I find no relic of Cnut in Flanders, although perhaps we may find a mention of one in Belgium through the systematic publication of relic inventories. So as I set forth in the introduction: the relics, as the saints that they perpetuate, are an international language.

1. Communication in Odense 6 novembre 2017.

   I would like to warmly thank my colleague Lars Bisgaard and all the team of Odense for his kind welcome.

   Lars and I met in Turku in Finland three years ago, and we are together convincted that the study of relics is a new way for approaching History. My thanks also to Ignace Goethals and Georges Kazan who kindly reread my translation.

   It is a pleasure to dedicate this contribution to Jacques Paul whose works have always fascinated me. He has studied the journey of St. Dominic in Denmark : Jacques PAUL, *Du monde et des hommes : Essais sur la perception médiévale*, Aix-en-Provence , 2003 (généré le 30 juillet 2018 sur Internet : <http://books.openedition.org/pup/7025>

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Philippe GEORGE, *Reliques. Se connecter à l’au-delà*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marie-Madeleine GAUTHIER, *Les routes de la foi. Reliques et reliquaires de Jérusalem à Compostelle*, Fribourg-Paris, 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://orbi.uliege.be/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We also note with interest (but referring especially to Norway) *Les saints face aux barbares au haut Moyen Âge. Réalités et légendes*, ed. Edina BOZÓKY, Rennes, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In Kim ESMARK, *Spinning the Revolt. The Assassination and Sanctification of an 11th-Century Danish King* : [*http://www.medievalists.net/2010/01/spinning-the-revolt-the-assassination-and-sanctification-of-an-11th-century-danish-king*](http://www.medievalists.net/2010/01/spinning-the-revolt-the-assassination-and-sanctification-of-an-11th-century-danish-king) : « In Flanders Knud’s son proudly designated himself “Karl, son of Holy Knud, King of the Danes” (*Karolus sancti Cnutonis Danorum regis filius*) in official documents » (*Actes des comtes de Flandre 1071-1128*, ed. Fernand VERCAUTEREN, Brussels, 1938, 58 (19 October 1112).

   Knud’s wife and son Karl fled to Flanders, where the latter ruled as count 1119-1127. Like his father he was assasinated by rebels in a church (in Bruges) : Jeroen DEPLOIGE, *Political Assasination and Sanctification. Transforming discursive Customs after the Murder of the Flemish Count Charles the Good (1127)*, in Jeroen DEPLOIGE & Gita DENECKERE (eds), *Mystifying the Monarch. Studies on Discourse, Power, and History*, Amsterdam 2006, p. 35-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)