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10 Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics



Any consideration of sacred relics as commodities in the Middle Ages may seem to be pushing to the extreme the definition of commodities as “goods destined for circulation and exchange.”¹ Can we reasonably describe a human body or portions thereof as *destined* for circulation? Can we really compare the production and circulation of saints’ remains to that of gold in prehistoric Europe, cloth in prerevolutionary France, or qat in northeastern Africa? The differences are of course great. Nevertheless, although relics were almost universally understood to be important sources of personal supernatural power and formed the primary focus of religious devotion throughout Europe from the eighth through the twelfth centuries, they *were* bought and sold, stolen or divided, much like any other commodity. The world of relics may thus prove an ideal if somewhat unusual microcosm in which to examine the creation, evaluation, and circulation of commodities in traditional Europe. Like slaves, relics belong to that category, unusual in Western society, of objects that are both persons and things.² Reflecting on their production, exchange, sale, and even theft can help us understand the cultural boundaries of commodity flow in medieval civilization. An analysis of relics as commodities

1. This chapter has benefited from the advice and criticisms of participants in the University of Pennsylvania Ethnohistory Seminar. I particularly thank James Amelang, Arjun Appadurai, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown.
2. Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), 64–91. On the process by which bodies or portions of bodies might be prepared for this transformed role, see the examples of Saint Helen and the alleged remains of the Magi in Chaps. 11 and 12 below.

requires the investigation of two complexes of cultural activity: the production and circulation of commodities in general, particularly the relative significance and values assigned to the modes of transfer (sale, exchange, gift, and theft) and the place of relics within this transactional culture, that is, the cultural context within which they moved.

Commodities in Medieval Society

A century ago medievalists looked upon the emerging society of feudal Europe as one based on a “natural economy,” in which barter and payments in kind were the normal means of exchange. According to this view, Western Europe gradually began to develop a money economy only with the growth of towns, increasing long-distance communication, and the development of first Italian and later northern European trade, phenomena largely credited to the crusades, which began in 1095. This concept of medieval commerce owed more to the ideologies of nineteenth-century colonialism than to the evidence of medieval economy and trade in the West, and by the end of the last century economic historians were emphasizing the very real evidence that pointed to the important roles of money, coinage, and commerce in the eighth through eleventh centuries.

At no time in the Middle Ages was the European economy strictly speaking a “natural economy,” in which barter and self-sufficiency characterized the production, exchange, and consumption of commodities.³ Nor was it a “peasant economy” in the classical sense of the term. Peasants presumably use not capital but cash; profit and the accumulation of capital on an ever-increasing scale are not supposed to be a part of peasant strategies. In the West, even by the ninth century this image can be applied only with some difficulty. Since about 1960, scholars have been investigating the role of great monastic estates in the complex economy of Carolingian Europe. J.-P. Devroy has examined the intricate network by which food surpluses

3. On commerce in the early Middle Ages, see Dietrich Claude, “Aspekte des Binnenhandels im Merowingerreich auf Grund der Schriftquellen,” in *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, 3, *Der Handel des frühen Mittelalters* (Göttingen, 1985), 9–99. See Peter Spufford, *Money and Its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1988), esp. 7–105, on coinage in northern Europe before the so-called commercial revolution of the twelfth century.

(principally grain and wine) from these estates were circulated in a flourishing local and regional trade.⁴ Although Deveroy does not directly address the question of how much of this distribution was effected by barter as opposed to sale, the sources he examines clearly indicate the importance of both regional and international markets.⁵

Nor did the transformation of the Carolingian empire in the tenth century result in the creation or return of a “classic” peasant economy. Pierre Bonnassie has presented one example of the complexity of medieval peasant society from Catalonia, a region particularly rich in documentation on peasant families.⁶ He describes the family of one Llorenç (died before 987) and his sons and grandsons. Llorenç was quite well off: he owned several houses, a freeholding, livestock, military equipment, and a reserve of grain and wine produced from his fields. Bonnassie describes him as typical of a peasant elite that was “enterprising, free, and capable of self-defense when necessary.”⁷ Within twenty-five years, the more enterprising of Llorenç’s sons, Vivas, entered into forty-five land transactions, up to six a year. Land was no sooner bought than it was resold. Other types of property, too, were constantly sold: crops, horses, mules, armor. Vivas and his descendants improved their position in society considerably by the first half of the eleventh century. Their world included a fairly lively market and abundant specie as means of payment. These peasants were clearly moving up socially and economically, and they were using commodities produced from their increasingly specialized agricultural operations as the capital base of their move. Bonnassie considers this family “neither very typical nor very exceptional” and attributes its rise to the breakdown, already in the tenth century, of early medieval social relations, which he characterizes as “on the whole kindly, relatively undifferentiated as to status, still patriarchal in type.”⁸ To be sure, Barcelona is a unique place, but then so is every location. The forces at work in this region, which also appear in

4. J.-P. Deveroy, “Un monastère dans l’économie d’échanges: Les services de transport à l’abbaye Saint-Germain-des-Prés au IX^e siècle,” *Annales: ESC* 39 (1984): 570–589.
5. *Ibid.*, 581–584.
6. Pierre Bonnassie, “A Family of the Barcelona Countryside and Its Economic Activities around the Year 1000,” *Early Medieval Society*, ed. Sylvia L. Thrupp (New York, 1967), 103–123.
7. *Ibid.*, 104.
8. *Ibid.*, 116.

France and Germany in the twelfth century, may differ not so much in their nature as in their frequency, and these Catalan peasants may differ from those elsewhere in their success in achieving their goals more than in the goals themselves. The evidence of sale of land in Anglo Saxon England, on the other hand, suggests that land and land rights across England circulated through sale and purchase in the seventh through tenth centuries.⁹

The evidence of peasant involvement in markets and what might anachronistically be described as capitalist strategies seems to be paralleled by the evidence of long-distance commerce. Not only do mentions of cash sums to be imposed as fines or forfeits abound in charters and laws, but archaeologists have discovered coin hoards spread across Europe that contain moneys minted at places thousands of kilometers distant. Moreover, isolated but tantalizing references to merchants, to trading expeditions, to “eunuch factories,” and the like seem to suggest that even during the darkest of the dark ages, commerce continued to play an important role, at both the local and the international levels. A generation of historians thus began to revise the image of the commercial world of the early Middle Ages and to present a picture of a rudimentary but nonetheless important commercial structure tying together the lands between the Mediterranean and the North Sea, a structure that differed from that of later medieval trade more in organization than in volume or nature.¹⁰

Yet even in the midst of this enthusiasm for commercial history, England’s leading medieval numismatist, Philip Grierson, sounded an important warning.¹¹ He argued that the view of a largely monetized commercial economy was incorrect and had resulted from a failure to distinguish between three sorts of evidence: evidence of persons making their living by commerce; evidence of the sale of specialized or surplus goods directly by producer to consumer; and evidence of the distribution of luxury goods and money by unspecified means.¹² Too often, he warned, historians suppose that the

9. James Campbell, “The Sale of Land and the Economics of Power in Early England: Problems and Possibilities,” *Haskins Society Journal* 1 (1989): 23–37, esp. 26–29.
10. Especially Alfons Dopsch, *Naturalwirtschaft und Geldwirtschaft in der Weltgeschichte* (Vienna, 1930); Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris, 1937); and Robert Latouche, *Les origines de l'économie occidentale, IV^e–XI^e siècle* (Paris, 1956).
11. Philip Grierson, “Commerce in the Dark Ages: A Critique of the Evidence,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, ser. 5, 9 (1959): 123–140.
12. *Ibid.*, 124.

existence of trade means the existence of traders, whereas most buying and selling of agricultural products seems to have taken place without middlemen. Likewise, historians tend to suppose that luxury goods were normally distributed by commerce and that specie was primarily a tool of commerce and its discovery prima facie evidence of commercial exchange. Grierson suggests, by contrast, that trade is by no means the only or even the usual means by which commodities change hands. Much of the exchange network connecting the monasteries of the ninth century probably operated by barter rather than sale (a view with which Deveroy would no doubt agree). The Catalan example of Llorenç, Grierson probably would argue, might represent the future, but it would remain a marked exception in Western Europe well into the twelfth century. In the early Middle Ages, Grierson argued, gift and theft were more important than trade in distributing commodities. Under gifts, he included all transfers that take place with the consent of the donor not for material and tangible profit but for social prestige. Under theft he included "all unilateral transfers of property which take place involuntarily," including simple larceny but, more important, plundering in warfare.¹³ Of course, he pointed out, payments and exchanges such as ransoms and compensations might fall between the two.

Grierson strongly suggested, and Georges Duby later affirmed,¹⁴ that gift giving and theft were probably the most important means of property transfers among the elite. Plunder, extortions from neighboring peoples or kingdoms, and ransoms demanded for the return of enemies taken in war formed the major means by which both luxury goods and money circulated in the medieval world. Certainly the circulation of gold seems less connected with commerce than with the payment of tribute, and gold acquired through such payments was often put into circulation again when the recipients were conquered by their neighbors.

Property exchanged through mutual consent was often less the material of trade than of gift and countergift.¹⁵ Ritual exchanges of goods and services formed the normal means of distributing wealth acquired either through plunder or from agriculture. The dynamics of gift giving were quite different from those of commerce, even

13. *Ibid.*, 131.

14. Georges Duby, *The Early Growth*, 48–72.

15. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*.

though both involved exchanges of material goods. The goal of gift giving was not the acquisition of commodities but the establishment of bonds between giver and receiver, bonds that had to be reaffirmed at some point by a counter-gift. As Grierson puts it, "The 'profit' consists in placing other people morally in one's debt."¹⁶

Not only were theft and gift more basic forms of property circulation than trade in the early Middle Ages, but they enjoyed higher prestige. Between equals or near-equals, cordial relationships were created and affirmed by the exchange of gifts. Between individuals or groups of differing status, the disparity of the exchanges both articulated and defined the direction and degree of subordination. Similarly, hostile relationships were characterized by violent seizures of property or persons under the control of an enemy. In both situations, the relationship of relative honor and status was at stake, and the property that changed hands functioned symbolically to affirm or deny that relationship. Commerce suggests neutrality, a relationship that, though not unknown, was the weakest of the three alternatives; between the status of *amicus* (friend) and that of *inimicus* (literally, nonfriend, enemy), there was little middle ground. A stranger, someone not tied to the local community by a bond both formed and manifested in gift exchange, was dangerous and suspect. And conversely, he was himself in danger; for unless he could form such a bond with one of the powerful figures in the community, there was no one to guarantee his safety. From this perspective, it is little wonder that purchase was suspect: if one's goal was the realization of a profit, then such a transaction, if carried on with one's friends, was base, and if with one's enemies, cowardly. In fact, trade and piracy were often closely associated. Vikings, and no doubt others, engaged in both on the same expeditions as the opportunities presented themselves and social and cultural bonds dictated.¹⁷ Only in the late twelfth century did the cultural perceptions of Europeans change sufficiently to allow for the possibility of a just price and the morality of mercantile activity.¹⁸

16. Grierson, 137.

17. See William Ian Miller, "Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid: Case Studies in the Negotiation and Classification of Exchange in Medieval Iceland," *Speculum* 61 (1986): 18–50.

18. John W. Baldwin, *The Medieval Theories of the Just Price* (Philadelphia, 1959); Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978).

Even as we acknowledge the validity of this image of exchange in medieval society in general, however, we must also consider the exceptions. One can easily take the notion of gift exchange too far, assuming that it was the exclusive or normal means by which property circulated. Although early medieval Europe was a traditional society, it was by no means either simple or homogeneous. Goods exchanged may have served to create bonds between giver and recipient, but they were also desired for themselves. They could be, and at times were, converted into cash or even capital, so that both a system of objectified, alienable commodity exchanges and a system of subjective, inalienable gift exchanges coexisted. Rather than positing a developmental model of transition from a gift-based economy to a commodity-based economy, we should examine the specific social and political circumstances that might favor circulation of goods by the one or the other means.

This general examination of the nature of early medieval commerce is necessary for understanding the specific structure within which we find the production, sale, exchange, gift, and theft of sacred relics. The circulation of high-prestige articles in general, of which relics were but one sort (others were luxury imported cloth and illuminated manuscripts), did not occur primarily within a commercial structure. Moreover, even when a purchase lay at the heart of such exchanges, contemporaries were likely to look askance at such transactions or to understand them in the context of one or another of the two more significant forms of circulation of goods, theft and gift. Nevertheless, such purchases did take place, and at times a real production and marketing system did exist for the creation and distribution of prestigious commodities.

The Social Construction of Relics' Value

Relics of saints, whether particles of clothing or objects associated with them during their lives, particles of dust or vials of oil collected at the site of their tombs, or actual portions of their bodies, had no obvious value apart from a very specific set of shared beliefs. Such relics were of no practical use. Once removed from their elaborate reliquaries or containers, they were not even decorative. The most eagerly sought after relics of the medieval period—bodies or portions of bodies—were superficially similar to thousands of other corpses

and skeletons universally available. Not only were they omnipresent and without intrinsic economic value, they were normally undesirable: an ordinary body was a source of contamination, and opening graves or handling remains of the dead was considered abhorrent. This was true even though the cult of the saints and the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead had, by the eighth century, altered in some essentials the strict taboo of Roman society, which considered the dead a source of pollution and forbade burial within the confines of the city. Nor had the late medieval preoccupation with death and decay yet produced the image of the macabre that, in the fifteenth century, would permeate artistic and literary reflections on death. Nevertheless, remains of the ordinary dead were normally disposed of quickly and definitively through burial.¹⁹

The value attached to the special corpses that would be venerated as relics required the communal acceptance of three interrelated beliefs: first, that a person had been, during life and—more important—after death, a special friend of God, that is, a saint; second, that the remains of such a saint were to be prized and treated in a special way; and third, and for our purposes more important, that the particular corpse or portion thereof was indeed the remains of that particular saint.

The first aspect, that is, the belief that a person enjoyed special favor with God, was based on a received tradition of Christian veneration that originated in the Judaic cult of martyrs in the Maccabean period.²⁰ In Christian antiquity, martyrs, through their passion and death, were seen to have a special relationship with Christ, and the celebration of their *memoria* came to involve not simply a remembrance of the dead, but the petitioning of these special dead to continue to intercede before God for their friends in this world.

With the toleration and support of Christianity in the Roman Empire beginning in the early fourth century, the production of martyrs ended; henceforth, with rare exceptions, only opponents of Christianity died for their faith. Almost all the holy persons of the following centuries were those who lived heroic lives as friends of God rather than those who died heroic deaths. These confessors became the objects of the devotions previously reserved for martyrs, and both

19. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York, 1981), 110–139.

20. Lionel Rothkrug, "The Cult of Relics in Antiquity."

during their lives and after their deaths, Christians came to them for assistance of all sorts: cures, protection from oppression, finding lost objects, settling disputes, and the like. In return for this assistance, the faithful offered them veneration in the form of pilgrimages, vigils, prayers, and offerings—either symbolic (candles or votive offerings of wax or wood, for example) or material (property or money).

The determination of just who these friends of God were remained well into the twelfth century a largely spontaneous and pragmatic evaluation, based on the efficacy of a holy person's miracles and the strength of his or her cult. Although it was the responsibility of local bishops and increasingly, from the twelfth century on, of the pope to recognize the feast of a holy person and include it among the official feasts of the Church, the ecclesiastical official was recognizing an already established cult, not creating it. Thus canonization did not determine sainthood. If a dead person worked miracles that attracted an enthusiastic following, then that person was a saint with or without formal recognition. Conversely, without a cult, without a following, a person, regardless of the holiness of his or her life, would not be considered one of those special companions of God through whom he chose to act in the world.

In the West, the preferred medium through which God used his saints was their bodies. Their corpses were seen as the *pignora*, literally, the security deposits left by the saints upon their deaths as guarantees of their continuing interest in the earthly community. At the end of the world, the saint's body would rise and be glorified; in the meantime, the saint continued to live in and to work through it. This of course was the learned theory of educated churchmen. The perception of the operation of relics on the part of most people, lay and clerical, seems to have been much more immediate: relics *were* the saints, continuing to live among men. They were available sources of supernatural power for good or ill, and close contact with them or possession of them was a means of participating in that power. To the community fortunate enough to have a saint's remains in its church, the benefits in revenue and status were enormous, and competition to acquire relics and to promote the local saint's virtues over those of neighboring communities was keen.

Relics, then, were highly desirable—even essential, given that every church altar was supposed to contain the remains of a saint. We cannot quantify the demand for relics, but we can identify two par-

ticularly critical periods of demand. The first was roughly from 750 to 850. It resulted both from an aggressive Carolingian expansion in northern and eastern Europe—an expansion in which conversion to Romano-Frankish Christianity and specifically the cult of Roman saints was an essential feature—and from the development everywhere of rural parishes with their churches. The second period of high demand occurred in the eleventh century. It resulted in part from the growth of population across Western Europe with its concomitant need for new churches, in part from the competition between cult centers for the enormously increasing pilgrimage traffic.

The cultural assumptions about relics, their value and utility, were broadly shared. The few dissenters and critics such as Claudius of Turin in the ninth century and Guibert of Nogent in the twelfth (see Chap. 9), were the rare exceptions. From the twelfth century on, some heterodox groups denied the efficacy of relics, but often even these groups had their own versions of saints and even of relics. What was frequently at issue, however, was the identification of a corpse or grave with a saint: how could one be certain that a bone was not simply that of an ordinary sinner? Even those who had no doubts about the efficacy and value of relics could entertain great doubt as to the identity of any particular bones.

For remains to be valuable, they had to undergo a social and cultural transition from ordinary human remains to venerated remains of a saint—thus the aptness of Igor Kopytoff's suggestion that we examine the career or biography of objects as they pass from ordinary remains to treasured relics, and then perhaps back again.²¹ With few exceptions, the career of relics was not one of unbroken veneration from the time of the saint's death through the Middle Ages. Some recently dead saints achieved such status. Indeed the remains of Simeon Stylites and Francis of Assisi were eagerly sought after even before they were dead—the danger of someone murdering an aging holy man to acquire his relics, or at least stealing his remains as soon as he was dead, was ever present. Much more common, whether for saints long dead (if indeed they had ever lived), or for more recently living persons, was the necessity of identifying a particular set of remains with a particular saint, using either extrinsic or intrinsic criteria. To the former category belong the tomb or reli-

21. Kopytoff, 64–91.

quary, documents called *authenticae* found either in the tomb or reliquary itself, and descriptions of the burial of saints in hagiographic texts. Formal examinations were usually carried out by the local bishop in public, solemn sessions attended by lay and clerical magnates. After the positive recognition of the relics' authenticity came a public ritual known as the "elevation," in which the relics were formally offered to the public for veneration.

These examinations of external evidence, although quite common, did not constitute the only, or indeed the most important, aspect of the recognition of relics in many cases. The most telling evidence usually came from the supernatural intervention of the saint, who indicated where his or her remains were to be found. Then, during the process of determining the relics' authenticity, the saint often showed by miraculous intervention that the relics were indeed genuine. Thus the initial impetus for the consideration of a possible relic often came in the form of a vision in which the saint appeared to a holy person and revealed where her or his remains were to be found. Often this person was a revered member of the local religious community, one who commanded respect and authority, by virtue of office or saintliness. When the vision came to a person of more humble status, its interpretation was often the responsibility of someone of superior status.²² The vision led to a search by the community at large—often an entire monastery or village—for the relics, which, when found, exhibited their authenticity by working wonders. This need for relics to prove themselves efficacious was reinforced by the custom, in existence by the ninth century, of submitting relics to an ordeal by fire to determine if they were genuine.

These processes were essential to the creation of relics' value. The public, ritual discovery or invention (*inventio*) and examination of the relics publicized their existence and created or strengthened their cult. So important were these ceremonies that relics long recognized and venerated were periodically "lost" and "rediscovered." An excellent example is that of the remains of Saint Mark, who had been a major patron of Venice since the ninth century. His remains were rediscovered in the eleventh century in the course of restoration of

22. Klaus Schreiner, "'Discrimen veri ac falsi' Ansätze und Formen der Kritik in der Heiligen- und Reliquienverehrung des Mittelalters," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 48 (1966): 1–53.

the basilica of Saint Mark—an orchestrated revitalization ritual that enhanced the value and importance of the saint in the community.

Thus corpses passed from the status of mere human remains to that of sacred relics through a public ritual emphasizing both the identity of the remains with those of a saint and the actual miraculous power exercised by that saint through those particular remains. This actual power was most important because communities often disagreed, even violently, over which one possessed the genuine relics of a particular saint. The identification of false relics and the determination of genuine claims ultimately rested on very pragmatic, functional evidence: if the relics worked—that is, if they were channels for supernatural intervention—then they were genuine. If they did not, they were not authentic, regardless of the strength of external evidence. Once relics had achieved recognition—had come to be perceived as genuine and efficacious—their continuing significance and value depended on their continued performance of miracles and on their relative value compared with other relics and other sources of power. Studies of relics' value indicate considerable fluctuations in both the short and the long term.

The long-term, Europe-wide fluctuation is most obvious and easily documented. Even though in antiquity, martyrs' remains were those most eagerly sought after, in time, the remains of hermits and bishops came to offer these earlier saints considerable competition. In the eighth and ninth centuries, Roman saints were the most eagerly sought after, to the relative detriment of local ones (see Chap. 9). In the eleventh century, apostolic saints such as James, Mary Magdalene, Dionysius, Lazarus, and Marcial, who were reputed to have had direct connections with the West during their lifetimes, became more popular, eclipsing Roman saints who had lived and died in Italy. During the crusades, biblical and Eastern relics became much sought after as booty carried back from Palestine and Constantinople.

Not only did the taste in specific relics change appreciably over the centuries, but relics' relative importance measured against that of other sorts of human and supernatural powers likewise changed. During periods of relatively weak central government, for example, in the later sixth and again in the eleventh centuries, relics were prized not simply for their thaumaturgic power but also for their ability to substitute for public authority, protect and secure the community, determine the relative status of individuals and churches, and

provide for the community's economic prosperity. When new political, social, religious, and economic systems began to develop in the twelfth century, the relative significance of relics in providing these services lessened: churches attacked by local laymen could appeal to the king rather than to their saint for protection; a monastery able to rationalize its budget and exploit its agricultural holdings was less dependent on the income brought in by pilgrims.²³ Thus, although saints' relics continued to be valued as sources of supernatural power, particularly by pilgrims seeking miraculous cures, in other areas of life they were effectively supplanted by new and more effective forms of power and authority.

Even at the local, individual level, the saints' relative value underwent considerable change. The fluctuation seems directly related, first, to the impetus of the clerics responsible for promoting the cult—their efforts at elevations or translations, the erection of new shrines, the celebration of feasts, and the like—and, second, to a rhythm of popular enthusiasm in which miracles seem to have led to more miracles, only to die out again in the course of the year. New efforts on the part of the clergy, or the celebration of the next feast, could begin them anew.

One of the most telling and detailed accounts of this process is the study by Pierre-André Sigal of the cult of Saint Gibrian at Reims in the twelfth century.²⁴ Gibrian was an obscure Irish hermit, long recognized but hardly venerated at Reims, until Abbot Odo of Saint-Remi in Reims decided to develop the cult, to the profit of the newly established monastery of Chartreux in Champagne. In 1145 the abbot commissioned a new reliquary shrine for the saint, and on April 16 the saint was solemnly translated into the new shrine in the presence of the archbishop of Reims. A careful record of miracles was kept between that date and August 24 of the same year. Of a total of 102 miracles, only 20 occurred in isolation. Generally they occurred in groups of at least four on the same day: 39 took place on Sundays and feast days, for example, 24 on Monday, but only 1 on Tuesday. Moreover, the miracles, which began with one on April 6, gradually increased in frequency as the renown of the saint spread, until they reached a peak of 10 on May 13, thereafter gradually receding across

23. Geary, *Furta Sacra*.

24. Pierre-André Sigal, "Maladie, pèlerinage et guérison au XII^e siècle."

the months of June, July, and August. Unfortunately the record breaks off in August, possibly because the miracles had by then become so infrequent. One hears little of Gibrian for almost two centuries, until 1325, when again his relics were placed in a more worthy and impressive reliquary, and once more his cult began to attract pilgrims.²⁵

The career of Gibrian's relics is similar to that of many more famous saints' relics. Thomas Becket, for example, began to attract miracles at the time of his martyrdom, but these soon fell off; they started up again years later, after the erection of a new and impressive shrine.²⁶ The career of a relic seems usually to begin with its elevation and continue with its exposure in a worthy and impressive shrine and with encouragement of the laity by the responsible clerics to make pilgrimages and seek cures (see Chap. 11). When cures ensue, they develop their own momentum, only to die out gradually until the cult receives another impetus.

These fluctuations were also influenced by competition between cult centers for the devotion of the faithful. It was not sufficient that a relic be merely efficacious—it had to be more attractive than other relics to which people might turn for assistance. A graphic example of the dilemma posed by competing shrines was that occasioned by pilgrimages to the body of Saint Sebastian, brought from Rome to Soissons in the ninth century, and Bishop Ostroldus of Laon's distressed plea to his congregation to patronize the cathedral rather than distant shrines (see Chap. 9). Competition between saints is seen most clearly in the devotional and propaganda literature produced at shrines, in particular the books of miracles such as that of Saint Gibrian, in many of which one reads that a cure took place only after the petitioner had tried and failed to find help from a long list of other saints. Sometimes these ineffectual saints themselves instructed the pilgrim to go to the saint who finally effected the cure.

This description of the process by which relics' values were constructed may seem to imply a certain cynicism on the part of the clerics responsible. Such was hardly the case. Clerics were among the most fervent pilgrims and often the recipients of miracles themselves; their desire to promote their cult over those of competing neighbor-

25. AASS, May 7, 651.

26. Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*. Ward does not note the pattern.

ing shrines in no way indicates cynicism toward the cult of saints in general. Categories such as “popular” and “elite” have little meaning in terms of relic cults. Moreover, the existence of purely popular cults, such as the cult of the dog venerated in southeastern France from the twelfth through the nineteenth centuries as Saint Guinefort in the face of clerical and official condemnation, indicates the value laity attached to saints.²⁷ In promoting particular saints, the clergy were only attempting to win for their own patron a significant market share.

Circulation Mechanisms

We have seen the social and cultural structures within which some privileged remains of the dead acquired value. Given this value and the need to have such objects in every church across Europe, some sort of circulation mechanisms were necessary to supply churches far from the “production centers” (Rome, the Near East, the areas of Gaul and Spain that had formed part of the Roman Empire in late antiquity), and these mechanisms for the circulation of relics shared characteristics with those for the circulation of other valued commodities in the Latin West. But unlike the transfer of other valued goods, the transfer of relics necessarily breached the cultural context that created value. When a relic moved from one community to another, whether by gift, purchase, or theft, it was impossible simultaneously or reliably to transfer the function or meaning it had enjoyed in its old location. The relic had to undergo a cultural transformation to acquire status and meaning in its new context. Mere circulation was not enough; a newly acquired relic had to prove itself. Its authenticity, which the very fact that it had been transferred cast into doubt, had to be demonstrated, and in ways consistent with “authenticity”’s greater dependence on efficacy than on identification with a particular saint’s body.

Gift. The normal means of acquiring relics was to receive them as gifts.²⁸ As Grierson points out, this is exactly how members of the elite went about acquiring other valuable objects in the early Middle Ages.

27. Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound*.

28. Roman Michalowski, “Le don d’amitié.”

He mentions, among others, the example of Servatus Lupus, who wrote to King Aethelwulf of Wessex and to his agent to ask for lead for the roof of his church, promising prayers in return. The transaction would be accomplished entirely without recourse to merchants, as the lead would be collected at the mouth of the Canche by serfs of Servatus Lupus.²⁹

Exactly the same sort of request lay behind the acquisition of many relics. Alcuin of York (ca. 730–804), the head of Charlemagne's palace school and abbot of several important monasteries, was particularly eager to obtain relics, as his correspondence indicates. He requested gifts of relics from such persons as Paulinus, the patriarch of Aquileia; Angilbertus, chancellor of King Pepin of Italy; Bishop Agino of Konstanz; and Abbot Angilbertus of Centula.³⁰ Such requests differ not at all from requests for other precious objects and can occur in the same breath as a request for gifts of other "objects of ecclesiastical beauty."³¹ As in the case of Lupus, such transactions would normally take place without the assistance of merchants. The journey of Alcuin's messenger Angilbertus was the occasion for a request that Bishop Agino send Alcuin relics.³² The trip of Angilbertus to Rome gave Alcuin the opportunity to ask him to acquire saintly relics there.³³ Again, as in the case of Lupus's request for roofing lead, the promising counter-gift was the daily prayers to be offered for the donor.³⁴

The most important donor of relics was, of course, the pope, who had at his disposal the vast treasury of the Roman catacombs, containing the remains of the early Roman martyrs. Before the mid-eighth century, popes steadfastly refused to distribute these relics, preferring instead to distribute secondary relics, or *brandia*, objects that had come into contact with the martyrs' tombs.³⁵ As we saw in the previous chapter, from the mid-eighth century on, however, the Roman pon-

29. Grierson, 129.

30. To Angilbertus, no. 11, *MGH Ep.* 4:37; to Paulinus, no. 28, *ibid.*, 70; to Agino, no. 75, *ibid.*, 117–118; to Abbot Angilbertus, no. 97, *ibid.*, 141–142; to Volucrus and Vera, nobles of Aquileia, no. 146, *ibid.*, 235–236.

31. E.g., no. 97, *ibid.*, 141.

32. No. 75, *ibid.*, 117–118.

33. No. 97, *ibid.*, 141–142.

34. No. 75, *ibid.*, 118: "Et ubicumque sanctorum patrocina preferuntur, ibi cotidie orationes pro vobis aguntur."

35. Michael J. McCulloh, "The Cult of Relics."

tiffs began to exploit their inexhaustible supply of relics in order to build closer relationships with the increasingly powerful Frankish church to the north.³⁶ The distribution of relics placed tangible evidence of papal importance in every region that received these gifts, either directly or through subsequent redivision of the relics. Moreover, as gifts, the relics were not alienated as they would have been had they been sold or traded. They thus remained the pope's, and their recipients remained subordinate to the pope by the ties created in the distribution.

Others who possessed illustrious relics could use them to develop similar patronage networks. Thus, for example, bishops distributed portions of important saints to the churches in their dioceses and even beyond. Rather than diffusing the importance of the central sanctuary, these gifts increased both its prestige, as the central location of a now-more-widely-known cult, and the prestige of the ecclesiastic who had exercised the patronage. A prime example is the case of the relics of Saint Vanne, distributed throughout the diocese of Verdun in the eleventh century.³⁷ Such parceling of remains could only enhance their value because that value lay not in the bones themselves, as alienable objects, but in the relationships they could create as subjects.

An obvious and extremely significant aspect of the exchange of relics by means of gift was the establishment of personal bonds between giver and receiver, the creation of "fraternal love" between the two *amici*, as Roman Michalowski has emphasized.³⁸ Where such a bond did not exist, the parties were not *amici* but *inimici*, and for a transferral to take place, either such a bond had to be formed or, when one party, particularly the subordinate, would not establish a relationship of dependency, the transferral mechanism had to be purchase or theft.

Theft. Relic thefts covered the same broad spectrum of coerced transferrals as did other forms of theft discussed by Grierson:³⁹ In the ninth through eleventh centuries, the most frequent forms were isolated thefts of individual relics or the theft of the relics from an

36. Heinrich Fichtenau, "Zum Reliquienwesen im früheren Mittelalter," and in general see above, Chap. 9.

37. Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 65–74.

38. Michalowski, 404.

39. Grierson, 131.

enemy's church during a raid.⁴⁰ But theft could also take the form of the systematic extortion of Italian churches under the Ottonians,⁴¹ or that of the ultimate theft, the pillage of Constantinople's relics after the sack of that city by the wayward Fourth Crusade in 1204.⁴²

The usual target of the isolated theft was a distant monastery or church visited by a cleric who, judging that the saints whose relics were there were not receiving proper veneration, entered the church at night, broke open the shrine, and fled with the remains. One example will suffice. In 1058 a monk of the monastery of Bergues-Saint-Winnoc in Flanders was traveling to England in the company of merchants when the ship was blown off course and landed on the Sussex coast. The monk, Balgerus, explored the neighborhood and came upon a monastery in which were venerated the remains of Saint Lewinna. Impressed by the account of her life and miracles, which he heard from the local monks, he decided to steal the relics. He entered the church at night and attempted to take the relics but was thwarted by the miraculous resistance of the saint. Finally, after much prayer and effort, the saint agreed to accompany him, and he stole off to the ship with his prize.⁴³

When, in the course of raids on neighboring nobles, an enemy's property was pillaged, relics were normally included in the spoils. Thus, for example, when Count Odo of Champagne in 1033 sacked and burned Commercy, amid the booty was the arm of Saint Pantalón.⁴⁴ Likewise, Count Arlulf the Old of Flanders (919–964) took the relics of saints Valerius and Richerius when he sacked the towns of Saint-Valery and Saint-Riquier.⁴⁵ Such appropriations of an enemy's sacred protectors to the benefit of the victor's community belong to an ancient tradition that could no doubt be traced to antiquity and the tradition of appropriating of the city gods of enemies. This sacred

40. Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 69.

41. E. Dupré-Theseider, "La 'granda rapina dei corpi santi' dall'Italia al tempo di Ottone," *Festschrift Percy Ernst Schramm* 1 (Weisbaden, 1964), 420–432.

42. Paul Edouard Didier, comte de Riant, "Dépouilles religieuses à Constantinople au XIII^e siècle," *Mémoires de la Société nationale des antiquaires de France*, 4th ser., 6 (1875): 1–241; Giles Constable, "Troyes, Constantinople, and the Relics of Saint Helen in the Thirteenth Century," in *Mélanges offerts à René Crozet* 2, ed. Pierre Gallais and Yves-Jean Rion (Poitiers, 1966), 1035–1042; and below, Chap. 11.

43. Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 63–65.

44. *Ibid.*, 69.

45. Nicole Herrmann-Mascard, *Les reliques des saints*, 380.

booty could, however, be treated exactly like other spoils: the arm of Pantalon, for example, was subsequently sold to Abbot Richard of Saint-Vanne in Verdun for one silver mark.

The greatest theft of relics in the Middle Ages was the sack of Constantinople. Here the appropriation of saints was systematic and thorough, lasting several months. All relics were placed in the hands of Garnier de Traînel, bishop of Troyes, who saw to their distribution: three-eighths each for the Venetians and the new Byzantine emperor, the former count Baldwin of Flanders, and two-eighths for the Westerners. The bishop and then, after his death, Nivelon de Cherizy saw to the distribution of relics that eventually found their way into churches across France and what is now Belgium.⁴⁶

Commerce. The third means by which relics circulated was by sale. Commerce in saints' remains took place not only simultaneously with the more regular systems of gift and theft but even between the same groups. Here one finds professional merchants, price negotiation, efforts at quality control, and established patterns of transportation and marketing existing side by side with the other, presumably more archaic, systems of gift, counter-gift, and theft.

The best documented regular trade in relics was that between Frankish churchmen and Italian merchants in the ninth century. The most famous merchant was Deusdona, the Roman deacon we met in the previous chapter, who negotiated to provide some of Alcuin's associates, among them Einhard and Abbot Hilduin of Soissons, with the remains of Roman martyrs in the 820s and 830s. Deusdona represents the most highly organized and independent sort of relic merchant. Others might be itinerant peddlers who traveled about obtaining relics at random as the opportunity presented itself and then hawking them in other dioceses. Still others, such as the Englishman Electus who operated along the Norman coast, sought primarily relics to sell to a particular patron, in his case King Athelstan.⁴⁷

The official and quasi-official involvement of central authorities, ecclesiastical and royal, in the circulation of relics was part of a careful program of centralized control over the sacred, as explained in Chapter 9. Carolingian control over the distribution of relics was in particular a means of orchestrating access to the sacred. Unlike living holy

46. *Ibid.*, 370.

47. *Ibid.*, 49, 115.

men in the Near East or the occasional Celtic pilgrim or local wonder-worker who appeared on the Continent, dead saints could be controlled by the episcopal hierarchy. The churches in which they were to be found were supposed to have regular clergy attached to them; the decision to move them about was reserved to the local count and bishop; and Carolingian synods sought to limit the proliferation of shrines containing relics of saints not recognized by the Church.

Similarly, one can see the frequently tolerated or even (as in the case of Athelstan) encouraged tradition of thefts as a deliberate attempt to acquire these important prestige objects in a way that would destroy the inalienable relationship between gift and gift giver that characterized the regular distribution of relics by popes and prelates. Carolingians needed important Roman relics for the control of their populations, but the price for relics acquired by gift was subordination to the pope. The theft or purchase of relics objectified these sacred objects; turned them, at least temporarily, into commodities; and allowed the new owner to escape being placed in the debt of the Roman church. The same process might be seen in the means by which the Anglo-Saxon Athelstan sought relics from the Continent.

Reconstruction of value. However it happened, the very act of transfer removed the relic, as I have said, from the cultural structure in which it had originally acquired value. It thus arrived in the new community as an unproven object, the target of considerable skepticism. Was the object really an efficacious relic? If it had been acquired by gift, why would the donor have parted with it if it were really worth having? If acquired by purchase, how could one trust a merchant not to be a fraud selling the “pigges bones” of Chaucer’s Pardoner? Just like the oriental carpets entering the West, discussed by Brian Spooner, newly acquired relics had to undergo a process of social negotiation within the new community.⁴⁸ To allay suspicions, relics thus had once more to be subjected to the process of authentication described above. They had to be tested, and tested in such a way that the test itself would add to their fame. Thus transferrals of relics, referred to as “translations,” were concluded with exactly the same rituals as “inventions.”

Moreover, the account of the relics’ translation had itself to become

48. Brian Spooner, “Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet,” in Appadurai, 195–235.

part of the myth of production: the story of how they had come to their new community was part of the explanation of who they were and what their power was. In this context, accounts of thefts, as opposed to gifts or purchases, were particularly appropriate and satisfactory. Between the eighth and twelfth centuries a traditional literary subgenre of hagiography developed in which translations were presented as thefts. The saints were clearly too precious to their communities to be parted with willingly. Thus they had to be stolen, or rather kidnapped. Moreover, the saints were too powerful to allow themselves to be taken unwillingly. A saint unable to prevent the sacking of his or her community or his or her own removal would hardly have been a desirable acquisition. Thus the thief had to have succeeded only by convincing the saint that he or she would receive more satisfactory veneration in the new location—a promise the flattered local community would have to keep.

A significant number of translations thus presented involve saints previously unknown. Whether this reflects missing documentation or saints who did not exist before someone took anonymous remains from a deserted churchyard is impossible to say. In either case, from the perspective of the community in which the remains came to be venerated, the construction of value and the mode of circulation reflected the same assumptions as the production context: acquiring the relic gave it value because it was worth acquiring, and this acquisition (often in the face of grave natural and supernatural dangers) was itself evidence that the relics were genuine. Circulation thus created the commodity being circulated, although to survive as a commodity it had to continue to meet the high expectations raised by the mode of its creation.

Value: Reflections and Questions

We have seen the creation and circulation of a particular type of sacred prestige commodity, saints' relics, within a complex traditional society. Although the existence and efficacy of such person-objects as relics were almost universally accepted, every individual case posed the problem of skepticism both because of the ubiquity of similar objects devoid of value (normal mortal remains), the recognition of widespread fraud, and the intense competition of different religious centers, each eager to discredit the main attractions of their neigh-

bors. In addition we have seen that these commodities circulated in the broader context of an exchange system involving a variety of mechanisms, none of which were the exclusive domain of any social, economic, or educational group.

Human remains could go through a life cycle closely related to the wider production-circulation context: A human bone, given by the pope as a sacred relic, thereby became a sacred relic if the receiver were also willing to consider it as such. Likewise, a corpse once stolen (or said to have been stolen) was valuable because it had been worth stealing. Solemn recognition, by means of ritual authentication normally involving the miraculous intervention of the saint, provided assurance that the value assigned by the transfer was genuine. This value endured so long as the community responded by recognizing miraculous cures and wonders and ascribing them to the intervention of the saint. Enthusiasm tended to wane over time, and the value of the relic had to be renewed periodically through a repetition of transferral or discovery, which would then begin the cycle anew. So long as the relic continued to perform as a miracle worker, it maintained its value as a potential commodity and could be used to acquire status, force acknowledgment of dependency, and secure wealth through its whole or partial distribution.

These specific conclusions concerning relics as commodities suggest more general reflections on the theoretical problems of value and commodity exchange in medieval society. First, when discussing demand formed by need, taste, and fashion, the life history of relics suggests that we must be very careful to distinguish between demand in traditional societies and demand in industrialized (or industrializing) societies. Although the traffic in relics, like that of such commodities as textiles, pottery, and religious icons, was deeply affected by cultural values and collectively shared tastes,⁴⁹ the needs generated by the political economy of the Carolingian empire (and, at a later date, the Venetian empire) are no less relevant.

Second, the transformations of relics from persons to commodities and in some cases back to persons through a process of social and cultural transition suggests that we should examine the biographies of other sorts of objects that may have been both persons and com-

49. Jane Schneider, "Peacocks and Penguins: The Political Economy of European Cloth and Colors," *American Ethnologist* 5 (1966): 413-447.

modities. Along with slaves and relics, these might include sacred images, which in Byzantium and from the fourteenth century on in the West began to compete successfully with relics as sources of personal religious power, and other extremely important prestige objects such as royal and imperial regalia, art, and entailed estates. Under certain circumstances, all these might be the objects of commerce, but under other circumstances they more closely resemble persons. The boundaries between object and subject are culturally induced and semipermeable.

Third, as vital as cultural boundaries are for the social construction of value, the problem of the authenticity of relics indicates that there need not be consensus within a society on the value, equivalence, or even identity of specific commodities. On the contrary, high-prestige objects such as relics can play an important role in deeply divided communities. Disagreements and conflicts within society may be expressed and even conducted through disputes over the identity and value of such objects.⁵⁰

If the foregoing examination of these “personal commodities” has elucidated something of the complex values of medieval society, we are still left with intriguing and ultimately perhaps unanswerable questions, which, for want of sources, I have been unable to address here. First, we must wonder whether it is possible to speak of value equivalences of relics and other commodities, or whether we ought to talk of rank. Much theoretical literature would suggest that a conversion between relics and, say, livestock ought to be impossible to establish—that in gift exchange, the emphasis is on quality, subjects, and superiority, rather than on the quantity, objects, and equivalence emphasized in commodity exchange.⁵¹ And yet we know that relics were in fact dealt with both as gifts and as commodities, even though a price list could never be established. During the periods of their careers when relics were objectified, how was value equivalency determined? Did it cease to have any meaning once a relic had again become subjectified in a new social context?

Related to this first question is the second, that of the relative value of different relics: why was one relic more prized than another? In some instances—a local saint or a famous apostle—the answer is ob-

50. Peter Brown, “Relics and Social Status.”

51. Chris A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London, 1982).

vious. Usually, however, it is impossible to determine why, for example, Saints Peter and Marcellinus would be sought by the Franks, or why one would steal the remains of Saint Maianus or Saint Fides rather than those of some other saint. Were these merely targets of opportunity, or was there a process of comparison and selection?

Third, one would like to be able to establish the relative importance of gift exchange as opposed to the theft or sale of relics. Here again we have no idea. In the cases discussed of Carolingian ecclesiastics who were active in stealing relics as well as in purchasing them and receiving others from the pope, we see all three mechanisms. I have suggested above that the mechanism selected depended on the type of relationship the recipient desired to establish with the previous owner. Perhaps here the concept of kin distance (in the sense of artificial kin groups within the Christian community) might be helpful in determining the boundaries within which gift, sale, and theft were acceptable.

Fourth, one would like to know more about the acceptance of these objects as valuable within the broader, lay society of the regions into which they were introduced. We have seen that in the eighth and ninth centuries, much of the flow of relics was into the recently Christianized areas of northern Germany. Here they became the objects of officially sanctioned cults. In a controversial but fascinating study of pilgrimage sites in Germany in the later Middle Ages, Lionel Rothkrug has argued, however, that pilgrimages to saints' shrines are almost totally nonexistent in such areas as Saxony, which had been the major focus of these translations.⁵² Could it be that despite the official propaganda attesting to the popularity of these relics, the native populations were never really drawn into the system of values within which they had meaning? Since Rothkrug shows, on both micro and macro levels, a startling coincidence between areas lacking pilgrimages and areas where the Reformation succeeded, it is tempting to argue that these regions never accepted the hagiocentric religion that was medieval Catholicism.

52. Lionel Rothkrug, "Popular Religion and Holy Shrines: Their Influence on the Origins of the German Reformation and Their Role in German Cultural Development," in *Religion and the People*, ed. J. Obelkevich (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), 20–86; "Religious Practices and Collective Perceptions: Hidden Homologies in the Renaissance and Reformation," special issue, *Historical Reflections/Reflexions historiques* 7 (1980).

Finally, we need more comparative studies and theoretical models of commodities that might elucidate some of the processes I have discussed. Most anthropologists tend to look either at industrialized societies in which the production and distribution of commodities operate in a very different context, or at traditional societies undergoing rapid transformation owing to colonization or at least increasing participation in alien markets and production systems. Neither model is appropriate for medieval Europe. Change was disjointed and internally generated and was not directed toward a colonial, capitalist, or industrialized economy imposed from without. It is within this very different economy that sacred relics as commodities must be understood.