Disturbing Bones: from Grave-Violation to Exaltation of the Relic

Anthony John Lappin

In March 447, as the Western Roman Empire evaporated around him, Valentinian III (r. 425–55) attempted to reassert some form of order. Civil disturbance had opened the way to tomb robbing. He therefore invoked the long tradition of laws that sought to protect tombs and punish their violators, and thus expressed a traditional understanding of the role of tombs: as houses or dwelling-places of the *manes*, the shades of the dead (a remarkably pagan word for a Christian emperor). The emperor provides the following reasoning: the souls might well have ascended to be with their source and origin, but they still love the places where their bodies have been buried, and rejoice when honour is paid to them. Consequently, tomb-violators disturb the souls' peace and do repugnant violence to their remains, thereby committing a crime which cannot be expiated, an act of barbarous cruelty, whereby the bodies of those who are deprived of daylight (through death) are exposed to the sky above.[1]

That a tomb should remain inviolate had been taken as a given throughout the classical, and a good part of the Christian, past up to that point. Indeed, most Christian practice towards the tombs of the dead was indistinguishable from that of their more traditionally religious neighbours. For those who could afford it, elaborate tombs: Valentinian mentions the labour and expense of bringing stone and precious metals to decorate the dwelling-places of the departed as a further argument that souls are aware of what happens to their bodies. And for almost everyone, rich and poor alike, communal celebration through a ritual meal at the grave. This was true for the celebration of the martyrs, as well, who provided a focus for Christian communities in times of peace or of persecution: the most common arrangement was an altar (or *mensa*) placed above the martyr's grave.[2] The continuing relation of the dead with their tombs guaranteed that the ceremonial banquets prepared for mourners and rememberers would also include the deceased in the communal *refrigerium*.[3]

Whilst the theoretical inviolability of tombs was the norm, on some occasions bones were legitimately moved, and particularly when they belonged to the special dead. Divine, or half-divine, heroes are a case in point: their tombs were exceptional in numerous ways, often located at an

[1] 'Novellae valentinianae, XXIII: De sepulcri violatoribus', in T. Mommsen & P. Meyer eds., *Theodosiani libri XVI cum Constitutionibus sirmondianis et Leges novellae ad Theodosianum pertinentes*, 2 vols., Weidmann: Berlin 1905, II, 114–15. For an English translation, see Clyde Pharr with Theresa Sherrer Davidson & Mary Brown Pharr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions: a Translation*,Lawbook Exchange: Union, NJ 2001, 535. A discussion is provided in Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2009, 66–67.

[2] Such as that of Saint Peter in Rome: John Crook, *English Medieval Shrines*, Boydell: Woodbridge, 2011, 4; more generally, Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400*, Society of Biblical Literature: Atlanta 2009, 110.

[3] Jocelyn Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 1996, 61–62.

important or central point of their city, such as in the agora, within the town hall, by a city-gate; or placed within a sanctuary, such as Pelops, who had been buried on Olympia near the great altar of Zeus.[4] Their bones might be moved, after an instruction from one of the oracles, and such a transfer was effected, on the whole, to solve a political crisis.[5] A more Roman, and imperial, example was provided by Trajan, whose ashes were transferred to a spot beneath his own column by Hadrian.[6] A second category of the special dead were those who brought impurity to a site, as at Delos, when, after instructions from the oracle there, the Athenians cleared the whole island of graves (and, for good measure, forbade dying and being born there, too).[7] We shall have cause to refer back to such traditions in the course of this essay.

And with this background of a normative inviolability of graves, one of the greatest changes within Christianity in its pre- to post-Constantinian stages is not so much the arrival of the cult of relics (since the bodies were already *the* site of veneration), but the *movement* of relics. Martyrs were honoured, celebrated, and venerated at the place of their burial: much of Christianity was built around tomb-cults. Yet at a certain point the honour due to a martyr demanded their exhumation, transfer and enshrinement in some fashion, actions which broke many cultural taboos that continued, as we can see from Valentinian, alive and well into the fifth century.

Looking at matters from even an early medieval point of view, the translation and enshrinement of relics became such a natural and unquestioned part of the sacred universe that the development of its key elements seems inevitable, and has often been summarized through a number of key dates and figures (such as Constantius II for the East, Ambrose for the West). The purpose of this essay will be to look more closely at how the technique of exhumation, transfer, and secondary burial of holy remains was used during this early period, and how these various experiments shaped the later cult of saints. All actions—even innovative and original deeds—require reference to the past, and, to be intelligible and potentially significant, must open a dialogue with the surrounding culture. The care of the dead is no exception, and so our analysis will proceed by paying attention to how behaviour echoed previous attitudes and beliefs whilst those were being subtly or drastically changed. Although one may produce a hierarchy of relics (primary: defleshed bone; secondary:

---

[4] Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*, 1st edn, 1985; 2nd edn, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2001, 88.

[5] See, i.a. Barbara McCauley, 'The Transfer of Hippodameia's Bones: a Historical Context,' *The Classical Journal* 93 (1998), 225–39; eadem, 'Heroes and Power: the Politics of Bone Transferal,' in Robin Hägg ed., *Ancient Greek Hero Cult*, Svenska Institutet i Athen: Stockholm 1999, 85–98.

[6] Amanda Claridge, 'Hadrian's Succession and the Monuments of Trajan', in Thorsten Hopper ed., *Hadrian: Art, Politics and Economy*, British Museum: London 2013, 5–18, at 6.

[7] For the purification in 426 BC of Delos, which held an annual ceremony to celebrate the birth of Apollo: Thucydides, III.104.1; Philippe Bruneau, *Recherches sur les cultes de Délos à l'époque hellénistique et à l'époque impériale*, Boccard: Paris 1970, 48–51; James Longrigg, 'Death and Epidemic Disease in Clasical Athens', in V. M. Hope & E. Marshall eds., *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*, Routledge: London 2000, 55–64, at 62.

everything else produced by contact or decay), the early sources make little attempt to distinguish between them, probably because, 'in texts before the seventh century, "relics" are secondary unless otherwise specified'.[8]

Early martyrs and their burials

The death of a martyr was a grisly business, and, depending upon the mode of execution, would usually require rapid burial. Ignatius of Antioch was probably thrown to the wild beasts in Rome in the first decades of the second century; if one may trust the later *Acts* of his martyrdom, his remaining bones were gathered and taken to Antioch, where he had been bishop, for preservation in a sarcophagus within an extramural cemetery.[9] Rather more certainly, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was executed and cremated, allowing his disciples to gather up the ashes and bone, and aim to deposit them in a suitable place, in order to provide liturgical commemoration.[10] Their description of the martyred bishop's relics as 'more precious to us than gold or jewels' is a concept that will echo down the ages, often physically expressed by enclosing the relics in caskets adorned with precious stones and precious metals, in order to express a significance which surpassed normal calculations of wealth.

Martyrs' remains were taken out of tombs only by the authorities, in times of persecution, with the aim of disrupting Christian worship and preventing veneration of those who were, from an imperial point of view, mere criminals.[11] Thus, during the persecution of Diocletian, tombs in Nicomedia were opened and the remains thrown into the sea, as recorded by Eusebius of Caesarea.[12] Later tomb-desecration of grave-shrines on the part of pagans, imitating imperial sanctions, was a direct cause of the emergency transfer and re-enshrinement of some relics, as we shall see.

---

[8] John Crook, *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of the Saints in the Early Christian West, 300–c. 1200,* Clarendon Press: Oxford 2000, 25.

[9] C. P. Hammond Bammel, 'Ignatian Problems', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 33 (1982), 62–97, at p. 65; J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 4 vols., Macmillan; London 1889, II, 362–63; L. H. Gray, 'The Armenian Acts of the Martyrdom of S. Ignatius of Antioch', *Armenian Quarterly*1 (1946), 47–66; A. Bolhuis, 'Die *Acta romana* des Martyriums des Ignatius Antiochenus', *Vigiliae Christianae* 7 (1953), 143–53.

[10] Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV.15.43. The dating of the account of Polycarp's martyrdom is highly controverted: some have argued for a date for the final redaction of the text up to a century and a half after his demise: Silvia Ronchey, *Indagine sul martirio di San Policarpo*, Istituto storico Italiano per il Medioevo: Rome 1990; Candida R. Moss, 'On the Dating of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in the History of Christianity', *Early Christianity* 1 (2010), 439–74; eadem, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2010, 196–97. Others prefer a date closer to the middle of the second century: Paul Foster, 'Polycarp in the Writings of Ignatius', in *Studies on the Text of the New Testament and Early Christianity*, Brill: Leiden 2015, 411–37, at 412; Paul Hertog, *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text and Commentary*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2013, 322–25; Eliezer Gonzalez, *The Fate of the Dead in Early Third Century North African Christianity: the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas and Tertullian*, Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2014, 57–58. Most recently, Otto Zwierlein, *Die Urfassungen der Martyria Polycarpi et Pionii und das Corpus Polycarpianum*, 2 vols., de Gruyter: Berlin 2014, I, 10 and 65, provides a reconstruction of what he considers an early recension, which maintains the transport of the relics. An important contribution which places the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the *Passio Polycarpi* firmly in the second century is M. den Dulk & A. M. Langford, 'Polycarp & Polemo: Early Christianity at the Center of the Second Sophistic', in C. K. Rothschild ed., *The History of Religions School Today: essays in honor of Hans Dieter Betz*, Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2014, 211–40.

[11] É. Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2009, 97.

[12] Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VIII.6.7.

Constantine

I shall trace the use of translations of relics by Constantine, his family and their supporters, as a means of building up a picture of just what was happening at the very top of the society, before glancing quickly at the more mundane traffic of sacred remains amongst the wider body of believers. I will then consider the arrival of relic-translation and enshrinement in the west, ending with a close look at the attitudes to this in Rome until the first half of the ninth century.

Our story begins with Constantine's building of the Church of the Holy Apostles as his mausoleum. According to Eusebius, Constantine arranged for twelve *thēkai* (or caskets)[13] to be at the centre of the building, and, right in the centre of these, he would have his own sarcophagus set down.[14] It is inevitable to assume that the twelve *thēkai* stood for the twelve apostles, and it has sometimes been suggested that they were meant as cenotaphs, symbolically empty tombs to symbolize the Holy Apostles in whose honour the church, on the highest hill of Constantinople, was named. Yet Constantine's design would seem to have envisaged that at least some of these caskets would be filled, since on 22 June 336, the relics of the Apostle Andrew and the Evangelist Luke were brought into the city.[15] It seems most likely that the original plan was to gather all of the apostles together: Andrew's long association with Constantinople thereafter may just have been down to his ill-luck in being the first that the emperor's relic-harvesters set their hands on. Luke is not an apostle: perhaps there was some confusion over his status in the minds of the bone-gatherers, who were not necessarily Christian, of course.

The unusual nature of the occurrence seems to have left the compilers and illustrators of the *Consularia* or annals that recorded the happening in some confusion: the text records simply that Andrew and Luke (not St. Andrew nor St. Luke) were brought to Constantinople: the illustrators duly depicted two men arriving at the city gates. Other sources on Constantine are silent. The association evoked by the transfer was probably that of ancient heroes, being brought into a shrine dedicated to them within the city walls; Constantine's summoning of Christian 'heroes' to his burial site would clearly have been difficult to stomach for the ecclesiastics that subsequently wrote about this first, Christian emperor. Even more difficult were the implications of the burial arrangement: this was no humble *inhumatio ad sanctos*; the saintly apostles were coming to surround the emperor, potentially all twelve of them. Constantine would be the thirteenth apostle, who received a vision

---

[13] This is the most common understanding of the passage; 'statues' has also been suggested: Cyril Mango, 'Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83 (1990), 51–62. A contrary reading is offered by David Woods, 'Libanius, Bemachius and the Mausoleum of Constantine I', *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* 13 (2006), 428–39, who suggests that one should read, rather, 'columns', taking the model of Constantine's design of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This solution, however, requires too many errors of transmission and identification to be easily accepted.

[14] Jonathan Bardill, *Constantine: Divine Emperor of the Golden Age*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012, 381. Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981, 259.

[15] Richard W. Burgess & Jitse H. F. Dijkstra, 'The Berlin "Chronicle" (P. Berol. inv. 13296): a New Edition of the Earliest Extant Late Antique *Consularia*', *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 52 (2012), 273–301, at 278; and Richard W. Burgess, 'The *Passio S. Artemii*, Philostorgios, and the Dates of the Invention and Translations of the Relics of Sts Andrew and Luke', *Analecta Bollandiana* 121 (2003), 5–36, at 29.

from heaven like St. Paul;[16] Constantine could be a Christ like the Christ, adopted from on high, and divinely worthy of inhumation within the city, just like Trajan.[17] Indeed, the re-appearance of the antiquated *DIVVS*[18] on his coins should probably be understood with just that inflexion, that he possessed enough divinity to justify intramural entombment. Constantine died, however, before any further translations could take place, and was lain, as he had established, in the church of the Holy Apostles.

After Constantine

The translation of relics became thus possible, by imperial fiat. The next translation involved neither apostle nor evangelist, nor, directly, the emperor. However, it shows one manner in which Constantine's dynasty experimented with the tool of translation during the rule of Constantius II.

Gallus was appointed as Caesar in March 331 by Constantius II to be the imperial presence in the east. He had the sarcophagus of Babylas, bishop-martyr of Antioch, transferred in 332 or 333 to within the precincts of the renowned temple dedicated to Apollo in the Antiochene suburb of Daphne.[19] Looking back from later practice, the action is surprising: the temple did not cease to offer a cult to Apollo as it was not turned into a uniquely Christian site. Further burials took place around the martyr's sarcophagus, but that seems to be as far as a physical expression of the cult of the martyr went, with neither church nor memoria built around the newly-sited tomb. Gallus's transfer of Babylus's remains offered, purely, an offensive gesture towards an iconic pagan sanctuary; the placement of the tomb was, in pagan eyes, designed to desecrate the sanctuary with a corpse. In the light of Constantine's accommodation of Christianity and paganism, Gallus was perhaps proclaiming Babylas as a true hero, worthy of burial within a temple, as Pelops had been under a different dispensation. But to uncompromising Christian eyes, Gallus was striking a mortal blow against a pagan temple, a haunt of demons, purifying it by the martyr's presence, and certainly not desecrating it.

The Temple of Apollo at Daphne had a further, vividly historical, association: it was one of the oracles consulted by Diocletian before he unleashed his unforgiving attempt to expunge Christianity from the empire and re-establish traditional religious norms. Babylas had suffered and died in Diocletian's persecution.[20] The transfer may then have been an accusation, punishment and threat of future vengeance against the temple in one. A public significance and then public support could thus be ensured; Gallus had his own difficulties in Antioch, and a gesture which took aim at a site

---

[16] Cf. Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, IV.6.

[17] Harold Drake, 'The Emperor as a "Man of God": The impact of Constantine the Great's Conversion on Roman ideas of kingship', *História* 35 (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1980-43692016000000008318

[18] Michael Grant, *The Emperor Constantine*, Weidenfield and Nicholson: London 1993, 215.

[19] Edina Bozoky, *La Politique des reliques de Constantin à Saint Louis: protection collective et légitimation du pouvoir*, Beauchesne: Paris 2006,84–85; for Babylas, see Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VI.29.4; VI.39.4.

[20] Elizabeth Digeser, 'An Oracle of Apollo at Daphne and the Great Persecution', *Classical Philology* 99 (2004), 57–77.

which was patronised not by locals, but by foreign pilgrims, was an excellent means of shoring up his precarious popularity amongst the city elite.[21]

Gallus's insecurity, his fears for his own position, and his dangerous ambition, also explain his radical choice. Imitation of Constantine was not to be spurned, and moving the tomb was one way of doing so. Gallus was also imitating Hadrian, who had blocked up the spring at the temple after it had foretold that he would become emperor, lest it do the same for another. Fear of plots and coups ran constantly through Gallus's short period in office, even leading him to wander about the city in disguise to listen to gossip; desecrating the temple would remove it as a possible source of rebellion.[22]

Due to the concentration on the imperial dynasty in the historical record, we gain a good view of Gallus's actions. Nevertheless, the movement against pagan shrines may not have been limited to Antioch; another oracular shrine of Apollo, Didyma, whose instructions were also implicated in Diocletian's decision to begin the persecution, was surrounded by Christian sites at just this moment.[23] Other temples were simply attacked.[24]

Roughly three years after Babylas had been moved, and two years after Gallus's own execution by Constantius, the latter turned his attention to his father's unfinished plan for the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. But neither apostle's nor evangelist's relics were now translated; rather the remains of a disciple of St. Paul, Timothy, were brought from Ephesus.[25] Timothy's remains were not placed in one of the *thēkai*, but rather reburied beneath the altar of the church of the Apostles. The act of translation was still unusual, but the situation, beneath an altar (wherever it may have been placed in the church), was at least the usual means of marking the grave of a martyr. In an attempt to make some sense of this translation, it is often pointed out that Timothy was a disciple of St. Paul; but the *Chronicon paschale*, which relates the transfer, also refers to him as the first bishop, from Ephesus.[26] Constantius's plan may have been to render the church of the Holy Apostles into a much more ecclesial building, celebrating the bishops as the followers of the apostles. Certainly he saw bishops, or at least his own type of bishops, as an important element in the political functioning of the empire. Here, then, we see yet another type of translation, and one

---

[21] For Gallus's difficulties with the Antioch town council, and his (eventually riscinded) condemnation of the senatorial class of Antioch to death: Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, XIV.7.2.

[22] The gesture may have had a connexion to Gallus's plans for a Persian campaign: on the (probably abortive) exercise, see Ammianus, *Res gestae*, XIV.7.5; Julian later required the re-activation of the oracle for just that reason.

[23] Christine Shepherdson, *Controlling Contested Places: Late Antique Antioch and the Spatial Politics of Religious Controversy*, University of California Press: Berkeley 2014, 61.

[24] For accounts of individual and imperially-sponsored destruction of temples, see: Helen Saradi, 'The Christianization of Pagan Temples in the Greek Hagiographical Texts', in Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel and Ulrich Gotter eds., *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, Brill: Leiden 2008, 113–35, at 115–22; Stephen Emmel, 'Shenoute of Atripe and the Christian Destruction of Temples in Egypt: Rhetoric and Reality', in ibid., 161–202, at 162–65

[25] Timothy's possibly fourth-century *Life* indicates that there was a *memoria* to the saint at his burial-place on Mount Pion, above the theatre; but, by the early twelfth century, Ephesus was laying claim to still possess Timothy's relics, placed in an ancient sarcophagus: Clive Foss, *Ephesus after Antiquity: a Late Antique, Byzantine and Turkish city* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1979, 33, 128.

[26] *Chronicon paschale: exemplar vaticanum*, Ludovicus Dindorfius ed., 2 vols., Weber: Bonn 1832, I, 542, ll. 6–8.

which might even seem normal, were the translation occurring to a church which would be dedicated to the saint in question.

Nevertheless, within eight months, something decidedly unusual did occur: the relics of St. Andrew and St. Luke were brought by Constantius to the capital.[27] This translation effectively blotted out Constantine's translation of the relics of the same Andrew and Luke in all later writers other than Paulinus of Nola, who garbled things in his own way.[28] Inhumation in the floor of the church was the means chosen: Constantine's *thēkai* were probably destroyed at this point, as they are neither mentioned specifically regarding this translation, nor ever again.[29] The remains of the apostle, evangelist and bishop stayed under the floor of the church, in wooden *thēkai* with inscriptions duly identifying each one, until they were uncovered in the sixth century by Justinian's workmen as they began that emperor's rebuilding of the church.[30]

Constantine, again

The church of the Holy Apostles continued to be the locus of corporeal transfer: Macedonius, bishop of Constantinople, no doubt heeding Constantius's rearrangement of his father's disposition of his own tomb, took the opportunity afforded him by the earthquake of 358, after which the church became unsafe. He had Constantine's sarcophagus moved in the following year to the safer (and distinctly more Arian surroundings) of his own church, that of St. Acacius. Unfortunately, he ignored the vigorous opposition that his plans had aroused, and the transfer degenerated into a murderous riot.[31] Constantius was not best pleased, Macedonius was eventually deposed, and Constantine's sarcophagus was returned to the Holy Apostles, although not to its original situation: this time the great *Alter Christus*'s remains became part of the imperial family's masoleum, neither more nor

---

[27] David Woods, 'The Date of the Translation of the Relics of SS. Luke and Andrew to Constantinople', *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991), 286–92. Between 356 and 357, Constantius issued two constitutions re-affirming the ban on the robbing of tombs for building materials and on the disturbing the dead: *Codex theodosianus,* 9.17.3–4 (Pharr, *The Theodosian Code*, 239).

[28] Paulinus Nolensis, *Carmina*, XIX.321–24, 329–42; Holger A. Klein, 'Sacred Relics and Imperial Ceremonies at the Great Palace in Constantinople', BYZAS 5 (2006), 79–99, at 81–82. A summary of the poem may be found in François Heim, *Le Théologie de la Victoire: de Constantin à Théodose, Beauchesne*: Paris 1992, 313–15.

[29] Bardill 2012, 356.

[30] Procopius, *Aedificia*, I.iv.21. There seems to have been, by the sixth century, then, no visible sign in the church as to where the relics were buried, nor any trusted oral tradition: an indication, perhaps, that the position of the altar had been moved, presumably to assure it a more usual location. Work to secure the church after the earthquake (see below) must have erased the position of the saints' sepulchre, possibly as a means of dampening down the sort of disquiet that surrounded the highly-contested removal of Constantine's own sarcophagus from the church. The type of wooden coffin for the saints used is suggested by Holger A. Klein, 'Materiality and the Sacred: Byzantine Reliquaries and the Rhetoric of Enshrinement', in Cynthia Hahn & Holger A. Klein eds., *Saints and Sacred Matter: the Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond,* Dumbarton Oaks: Washington DC 2015, 231–52, at 237–38.

[31] Bardill 2012, 381; Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV.21.

less, and two years later, in 361, Constantius could be laid to rest beside his father in dynastic continuity and imperial equality.[32]

Babylas, again

Constantius's action of returning transferred relics to (almost) their original resting place is found again with his successor, but with very different implications. Gallus's half-brother Julian, only slightly less impetuous but disastrously bookish, gained the purple and set about enacting his own inflexion of the Constantinian legacy: no longer attempting to infuse Christianity with traditional Roman religion, but rather to inoculate traditional Roman religion with Christian structures. This was very much the last gasp for the espousing of ancient religious ways as an explicit policy of the emperor, and in less ambitious hands might have started a reformed pagan revival, but Julian's decision to launch a campaign against Persia — and his manner of engaging the trappings of ancient religion to do so — ensured that paganism was discredited as a potential political tool for running the empire.

Part of the preparations for the Persian campaign involved (in imitation of his beloved Hellenistic past) the assiduous consultation of the oracles, which required in several cases that they be returned to activity. Daphne was no exception. In Ammianus Marcellinus' hieratic account, Julian removed the defiling corpses from the sanctuary, in strict imitation of the methods of the Athenians at Delos (thus giving an impeccable traditionalist justification for the disturbance of tombs).[33] No mention was made of the Christian involvement in the matter, although Julian's sumptuous ceremonies and sacrifices in the temples were certainly aggravating to the majority-Christian citizenry.[34]

If Ammianus keeps the folds of Julian's robe unruffled by events, and presents the rite as an untroubled success, Sozomen in his *Ecclesiastical History* makes it clear that, although the oracle insisted that the bodies (plural) should be moved, Julian himself was much more focused on the transfer of Babylas from the temple precincts. Sozomen was undoubtedly following Julian's own words in his later witty letter of complaint to the Antiochenes, which Sozomen had read and appreciated.[35] Julian's focus may well have been initially that described by Ammianus, and aimed for flawless imitation of the ancient Greek rites; but his memory of what actually happened was dominated by the events during the pufication of the temple: the transfer of Babylas's sarcophagus was effectively hi-jacked by the Christians, who produced an impressive show of solidarity, processing alongside the martyr's sarcophagus and singing psalms, turning a pagan rite into a Chris-

---

[32] Bardill 2012, 383. Given evident political reasons for reducing Constantine's stature, there is no need to suppose Constantius was acting in deference to episcopal pressure in his re-arrangement of the family mausoleum.

[33] Our source for the information about Delos is Thucydides (see above, n. 7), whence came Julian's information as well, since Delos had been long abandoned as an oracular site, Auguste Bouché-Leclerq, *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*, 4 vols, Leroux: Paris 1879–82, III, 561–62.

[34] Ammianus, *Res gestae*, XXII.12.7; for Christianity in Antioch, see A. J. Festugière, *Antioche païenne et chrétienne: Libanius, Chrysostome et les moines de Syrie*, E. de Boccard: Paris 1959, 83.

[35] Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.19; Julian, *Misopogon* (§361B–C), in Wilmer Cave Wright ed., *The Works of the Emperor Julian with an English Translation*, 3 vols., (William Heinemann: London; Macmillan: New York 1913–23), II, 421–511, at 485.

tian celebration.[36] The temple then had the misfortune to burn down, providing a polemical gift to the Christians.[37]

Translation: an ultra-Arian activity?

Julian's response was to order the closure of Antioch's main church and to demand the confiscation of its wealth. This action targetted the Arians, rather than other Christian groupings, since the Great Church was in their hands. Indeed, opposition to Julian in Antioch seems to have mainly come from the Arians, who compared him unfavourably with Constantius. Gallus's transfer of Babylas in the first place involved the Arian bishop of Antioch, Leontius (whose successor, Euzoius, would perform Constantius' death-bed baptism).[38] Conclusive evidence is difficult to assemble, because of the occlusion of the role of Arians by later orthodox writers and the disappearance of much of the Arian sources themselves. Nevertheless, it would seem that, up to the end of Julian's reign, the translation of holy remains was an Arian affair, and understood as such. If the late-fourth- or early-fifth-century *Passio Artemii* is to be believed, the relics of Saints Luke and Andrew were brought to Constantinople by Artemios, a noted Arian with close connexions to Constantius.[39] Furthermore, St. Timothy arrived in Constantinople from Ephesus, an Arian stronghold,[40] and that transfer occurred at exactly the same time as an alteration in the tone of Constantius's legislation towards paganism: the restoration of the *status quo ante* that followed his defeat of Magnentius in 353 gave way to targeted attacks on pagan practice and other forms of *superstitio* in various points of the empire.[41]

---

[36] Such a thwarting of an action intended by the authorities is also seen in the dismantling and transfer of a Novatian church in Constantinople by the opponents of the Arian bishop, Macedonius, before his officers could begin the demolition, Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica*, II.28.

[37] For fire as the means of purifying a site from demons, see Emmel 2008, 164.

[38] Susanna Elm, S*ons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Vision of Rome*, University of California Press: Berkeley 2012, 279–80.

[39] Virgil S. Crisafulli & John W. Nesbitt, *The Miracles of St. Artemios: a Collection of Miracle Stories by an Anonymous Author of Seventh-century Byzantium*, Brill: Leiden 1997, 4; H. C. Teitler, *The Last Pagan Emperor: Julian the Apostate and the War against Christianity*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2017, 42–48, esp. at 44, is rather too dismissive of the dependence of the *Passio Artemii* upon Philostorgios's lost *History*, for which see *The Emperor Julian, Panegyric and Polemic: Claudius Mamertinus, John Chrysostom, Ephrem the Syrian*, Samuel N. C. Lieu ed., 1st edn, 1986; 2nd edn, Liverpool University Press: Liverpool 1989, 82. The relics of Sts. Luke and Andrew reached Constantinople on 3 March 357. Even if the *Passio* is rather novelistic here (the *Chronicon paschale* does not mention Artemios's involvement in the transfer of the relics, although it does note his execution: I, 549, ll. 12–16), it shows that Arians did want to claim the translation as their own. Bardill 2012, 381, supposes that Constantius simply moved the relics from the *thēkai* to under the altar.

[40] Menophantes of Ephesus came third in the list of those condemned for Arianism at the Council of Serdica in 342, see Manlio Simonetti, *La crisi arriana del IV secolo,* Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum: Roma 1975, 169, 175; Gonzalo Fernández, 'Partito ecclesiae y partito imperii en el concilio de Sárdica', *Historia antigua* 11 (1998), 523–27, at 526; Victor C. de Clerq, *Ossius of Córdoba: a Contribution to the History of the Constantinian Period* (Catholic University of America Press: Washington DC 1954, 292, 363; he had previously attended Nicaea in 325, see Sara Parvis, 'The Strange Disappearance of the Moderate Origenists: the Arian Controversy, 326–41", in F. M. Young, M. J. Edwards & P. Parvis eds., *Studia Patristica*, vol. 39, Peeters: Leuven 2006, 97–102, at 102. As he gains no mention at the Council of Seleucia in 359, he was presumably dead by then; Timothy's relics were brought to Constantinople by 1 July 356.

[41] Michèle Renée Salzman, *On Roman Time: the Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1990, 208–9; see also n. 23, above.

Constantius could use Arianism as an excellent political tool for domesticating the bishops, who had previously had at least two hundred years of steeling themselves to oppose the emperors; his campaign against Athanasius of Alexandria overflowed into councils at Arles and Milan (353 and 355), which saw multiple depositions of bishops, followed by the appointment of Arians who owed their allegiance to the emperor.[42] And so Athanasius was replaced as bishop of Alexandria by Georgios, who relied on the authorities for protection, oppressed Nicene and pagan alike, and had Artemios sack the Serapeum.[43] Georgios was eventually killed by a pagan mob, who also dragged two other leading men from Constantius's régime in the city to their deaths; Artemios was beheaded, 'through the immeasurable hatred Julian bore him'.[44]

The translation of Constantine to St. Acacius by Macedonius is perhaps most indicative of the issues at play. Both Sozomen and Socrates Scholasticus describe not just the transfer of the sarcophagus, but also the debates preceding it which rocked the city.[45] Macedonius proposed moving the sarcophagus in order to protect it; this plan of action was resisted — violently — because of the proposal's impiety: the bones should not be disturbed, that is, they should be left in the place of their original deposition, even if the building were falling down around them. Macedonius's supporters argued that the removal would not, could not, affect the bones within. The removal of the dead from their primitive resting places was here opposed mainly by the orthodox. Yet this Nicene position was also maintained by some of the Arians, all of whom shared, despite differing Christologies, long-attested forms of traditional piety.

We might conclude from the dispute that there was a more progressive wing of the Arian party, in part characterized by the group around Constantius, who were prepared to use the translation of bodies precisely because it offended pagan superstition, basing themselves upon a radical understanding that the bones, as such, could take no harm.[46] As a politico-religious weapon, the translation of bodies marked a strong distinction between Arian beliefs and preceding paganism; it rekindled memories of the epoch of the martyrs by expressing their new triumph through the new,

---

[42] Timothy David Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire,* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA 1993, 116–19.

[43] Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social conflict*, The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 1997, 287–89.

[44] *Chronicon paschale*, p. 549: 'immenso Juliani in illum odio'. Vehement dislike was something that Constantine's men seemed to have evoked consistently: Ammianus observed, wryly, that the Christian hatred of Georgios led them to refrain from interfering in his and the others' lynching, Ammianus, *Res gestae*, XXII.11.10–11; Haas 1997, 291–94. Georgios had previously been ushered out of the city for three years after he was almost killed by a Christian mob: Barnes 1993, 119.

[45] Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV.21; Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica*, II.38; the latter is the more detailed account.

[46] A similar thought in relation to the cremated bones of martyrs is found in Lactantius, *Divinarum institutionum*, V.11.6.

Christian leaders of the empire; and it mobilized popular devotion through new ritual activity. It was a decidedly imperial venture, and strongly marked by the Arian creed.[47]

And so it seemed to Julian. The opposition he received in Antioch was identified as Christian and Constantian, as shown in his response to the suspected arson that put paid to the oracle at Daphne. At the less-populated shrine of Didyma, however, he resorted to traditional means of expressing his displeasure with the encroaching Christian buildings: destruction and conflagration (of *martyria* and *basilicae* respectively).[48] And as we have seen, Julian's accession emboldened the Alexandrian pagans to dispatch the key members of the former Arian political elite within the city. They did not, however, limit their attention to depriving them of life: they were executed on the beach, their bodies burnt to ashes, and the ashes thown into the sea, in order to prevent a cult of 'martyrs' developing.[49] What seems to be a form of ritual humiliation of the corpses was an important political element in the events, and follows on from earlier sanctions taken by the authorities at the beginning of the fourth century.

The violation of tombs was another means of expressing pagan opposition to an ever-encroaching Christianity: thus in 365 a mob broke open John the Baptist's tomb in Sebaste, scattered his remains, brought them together again, burnt them, mixed them with dirt, and broadcast them in the fields; pilgrim monks managed to gather up some of the relics, which were sent (probably as a gesture of support) by their abbot to Athanasius, who, in turn, hid them in the walls of his church.[50] His actions were nothing to do with opposition to the veneration of holy graves, but with avoiding the potential for an unorthodox and very Arian translation ceremony; such rituals had started to be

---

[47] It is perhaps otiose to mention that Pope Damasus, although he took a hand in shaping and embellishing the cult of martyrs in Rome, did not attempt to move them: see, for example, Marianne Sághy, 'Martyr Cult and Collective Identity in Fourth-Century Rome', in Ana Marinkovic and Trpimir Vedriš eds., *Identity and Alterity in Hagiography and the Cult of the Saints*, Bibliotheca hagiotheca: Zagreb 2010, 17–35, at 18–22. In contrast, one strand of the accounts regarding the translation of St. Stephen the Protomartyr specify it was organized by an Arian bishop, who was subsequently written out of the tradition: François Bovon & Bertrand Bouvier, 'La translation des reliques de saint Étienne le premier martyr', *Analecta Bollandiana* 131 (2013), 5–50 at 9–10.

[48] J. E. Fontenrose, Didyma: *Apollo's Oracle, Cult, and Companions*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1988, 25; Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.20. Didyma fell within the bishopric of Miletus, itself dependent upon Ephesus.

[49] Ammianus, *Res gestae*, XXII.11.11.

[50] Rufinus Aquilensis, *Historia ecclesiastica*, II.28, PL 21, 467–540, at col. 536AC. Bede thought they were subsequently used in the Christianization of the site of the Serapeum in Alexandria by Bishop Theophilus (who would have been active some time in the last decade of the fourth century): Beda, *Chronicon sive de sex aetatibus saeculi*, sub anno 4316/365, in Josephus Stevenson ed., *Venerabilis Bedae Opera historica*, 2 vols., English Historical Society: London 1838–41), II, 163–206, at 183.

used as a means of building networks of churches and affiliations of presbyters.[51] In any case, pagan desecration just made the remains so desecrated even holier.[52]

Babylas, yet again

After Julian bled to death on the edge of the Syrian desert, the Christians lost no time in regrouping. Unlike those in Didyma, however, the Christians in Antioch did not recolonize the sacred precincts of Daphne:[53] Julian, almost certainly, on the model of the Athenians at Delos, had banned both giving birth and giving up the ghost in the shrine; the fire-blackened structures were a more eloquent expression of victorious unconcern than a basilica could ever be; and, finally, inter-Christian rivalry in the city may well have made any claim on the site too moot to be moved upon. The Nicenes were expelled from the Great Church, and their bishop was forced to perform open-air liturgies on the *campus martius*, a site which continued to be used by the orthodox during their bishop's periods of exile under Valens. In the two years after that emperor's death in 378, Bishop Melitios returned to Antioch and constructed a church on this site. In 381, as a expression of his new-found importance under Theodosius, he oversaw the council of Constantinople, although the effort killed him while it was still underway. Even in death, though, the emperor found a way of honouring him, by sending his corpse immediately back to Ephesus for burial next to his episcopal predecessor, Babylas, in his new church.[54] There was thus a translation and a *depositio ad sanctos* at the same time; and both nullified a figure who conjured up memories of a vivid Arian victory over Julian and Apollo. John Chrysostom, in describing the joint burial-site, went out of his way to stress how Melitios was just as holy as (and perhaps a little more than) Babylas.[55] The Nicene emphasis is clear: Melitios goes back to his own, new church, built on a site only ever used by the orthodox; even though the Great Church had come back into their hands, this had been Arian for most of its existence. Given Babylas had been moved twice before, this, his first orthodox translation, did not break the still-strong

---

[51] Athanasius held contact relics that belonged to Antony with evident veneration. On Antony's grave and contact relics, see Rebillard 2009, 109. For Athanasius's condemnation of the transfer of martyrs' relics as connected to Arianism and other heresy, see David Brakke, '"Outside the Place, within the Truth": Athanasius of Alexandria and the Localization of the Holy', in David Frankfurter ed., *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, Brill: Leiden 1998, 446–81, at 466. Athanasius's opposition to the practice is likely, however, to have been more on principle than policy; it offended his sense of propriety more than it impeded his control. Jerome, writing around 390, accounted for Antony's wish for a secret burial as a means of preventing one of the local potentates from transferring his remains to a specially-built *martyrium* in his own villa: Hieronymus, *Vita Hilarionis*, §31, in PL 23, 29–54, at col. 47A.

[52] A statue supposed to be of Christ was destroyed by pagans and reconstructed as a form of relic within a special shine attached to a basilica, Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.21; John Francis Wilson, *Caesarea Philippi: Banias, the Lost City of Pan*, IB Taurus: London 2004, 91–99.

[53] For the Christian basilica built at Didyma, see Fontenrose 1988, 26.

[54] Wendy Mayer, 'The Late Antique Church of Quausi-yeh Reconsidered: Memory and Martyr-burial in Syrian Antioch', in J. Leemans ed., *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity: Festschrift Boudewiin Dehandschutter*, Peeters: Leuven 2010, 161–72; Shepherdson 2014, 59, 79–84.

[55] Iohannes Chrysostomos, 'De sancto Babyla', in Philip Schaff ed., *St Chrisostom* (A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 1, vol. 9), T&T Clark: Edinburgh 1889, 141–43.

reticence over the disturbance of graves. We are not quite at a simple translation and re-burial, more a dual burial of acclaimed saints: as Melitios's corpse made its way from Constantinople to Antioch, cloths and napkins were pressed to the skin and taken away as relics.[56]

Cloth, oil, dust, and earth, in circulation

Such secondary relics had also gained in popularity, and had themselves begun to circulate in greater and greater numbers, usually sealed into an *ampulla* and decorated with religious symbols or images, designed to be worn on the person as talismans or visible objects of devotion; of particular importance were drops of oil from shrine-lamps.[57] Although this essay is fundamentally about the sanctity of persons, one should note the fundamental sanctity of *places* which is affirmed by these reliquaries, and by other indications, such as the North African *mensa* dated AD 359 from the late Antique Tixter (now Kherbet Oum el-Ahdam) which places a relic of the soil from the Holy Land (probably Bethlehem) before what was probably dust from Rome (Peter and Paul), followed only then by the names of six local martyrs.[58]

During or possibly slightly after Constantine's rehabilitation of Christianity into something useful for imperial rule, a crucial relic was unearthed, and its finding attributed to the building work which recovered the tomb of Christ. The wood of the True Cross would have a decided impact upon the transmission of relics, although the first witness to its existence, Cyril of Jerusalem, only notes that, during the reign of Constantius, fragments had been spread throughout the world.[59] A fragment reached the church in Tixter, and an addition was made to the inscription on the *mensa* to record the relic's deposition underneath it. Despite later legend, it is not clear if Constantine, or his moth-

[56] Shepherdson 2014, 83.

[57] Kimberley Bowes, 'Personal Devotions and Private Chapels', in Virginia Burrus ed., *Late Ancient Christianity*, Fortress: Minneapolis 2005 88–210, at 196; Daniel F. Caner, 'Alms, Blessings and Offerings: the Repetoire of Christian gifts in Early Byzantium', in M. Satlow ed., *The Gift in Antiquity*, Wiley–Blackwell: Chichester 2013, 30–37; Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*, Pennsylvania State University Press: Pennsylvania 2010, 20–21; Diana Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West*, IB Tauris, London 2001, 25; Yamit Rachman-Schire, 'Sinai Stones on Mount Zion: Mary's Pilgrimage in Jerusalem', in Renana Bartal and Hanna Vorholt eds, *Between Jerusalem and Europe: Essays in Honour of Bianca Kühnel*, Brill: Leiden 2015, 57–73, at 65; Robert Leslie Pollington Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1988, 263–64.

[58] Shira L. Lander, *Ritual Sites and Religious Rivalries in Late Roman North Africa*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2017, 97–99; Alison E. Cooley, *The Cambridge Manual of Epigraphy*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012, 246–48, with the important proviso that the date may have been the date of martyrdom, not the dedication of the *mensa*; if that is the case, then AD 452, the date of an inscription covering the *loculus* of what were probably secondary relics of St. Laurence from Sétif, may be closer to the mark for the actual date.

[59] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catacheses*, IV.10, X.19, XIII.4, in PG 33, 331–1180, at coll. 470, 685–87, 777.

er, had much, if anything, to do with this discovery.[60] Nevertheless, later stories that depicted their activity as relic collectors in the Holy Land exerted both a fascination on, and provided a model for, many others.[61]

Turning to the West

Ambrose's *inventio* of the relics of Saints Gervasius and Protasius has often been mentioned in the development of the cult of saints in the West; but it is important to place it into an eastern context, and particularly the peripicies of Babylas, in order to make sense of his actions.[62] Nevertheless, at this point, in an orthodox setting, the transfer of still-interred or undisturbed relics was rarely practiced;[63] Ambrose would justify his actions by appealing to a vision granted him by the martyrs themselves, and which could act much like an oracular instruction of old: directed by the vision, Ambrose unearthed the bones of Gervasius and Protasius in close proximity to the gated grave of

---

[60] On the origin of Helena's role in the discovery of the Cross, see Jan Willelm Drijjvers, *Helena Augusta: the Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of her Finding of the True Cross*, Brill: Leiden 1992, 81–82; and idem, 'A Bishop and His City: Cyril of Jerusalem', in F. Young, M. J. Edwards & P. Parvis eds., *Studia Patristica*, vol. XLII, Peeters: Leuven 2006, 113–25. Frances Young, 'Prelude: Jesus Christ, Foundation of Christianity', in Margaret M. Mitchell & Frances M. Young with K. Scott Bowie eds., *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. I: *Origins to Constantine*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2006, 1–36, at 2–7, attempts to show how Helena *might* have searched for the Cross, given a number of assumptions about her Christology, thereby confusing historical novelization (either of the fourth or twenty-first centuries) with history: 'Even if legendary, her story is a kind of quest for the Jesus of history' (p. 7). One potential nugget displaying Constantine's attitude (the use of the Holy Nails to make a bridle and diadem) was damned as a story too silly to be given credence by Jerome, G. W. Bowersock, 'Helen's Bridle and the Chariot of Ethiopia', in Gregg Gardner & Kevin L. Osterloh eds., *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World*, Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2008, 383–93, at 387; Drijjvers 1992, 112, n. 62.

[61] Later Byzantine tradition would claim various neo- and vetero-testamentary contact relics were in, on, or under, Constantine's porphyry column in Constantinople, including the True Cross encased in his statue as a prophylactic for the city (Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica*, I.17, who takes the story with a pinch of salt); and, at a later point, the Cross was joined by the baskets of bread from the feeding of the five thousand, Noah's axe and various other sacred or magic bits-and-bobs, Sławomir Bralewski, 'The Porphyry Column in Constantinople and the Relics of the True Cross', *Studia Ceranea* 1 (2001), 87–100, 93; Liz James, 'Bearing Gifts from the East: Imperial Relic-Hunters Abroad', in Antony Eastmond ed., *Eastern Approaches to Byzantium*, Ashgate: Aldershot 2000, 119–32; George P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, Dumbarton Oaks: Washington DC 1984, 260–63.

[62] Given that Miletios's demise took place at a church council at Constantinople, news of the transfer of his body and its burial with Babylas would have reached Milan quickly.

[63] Space does not allow the discussion of the development of the cult of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, whose relics were distributed amongst well-connected families to be enshrined over family tombs. Yet the Martyrs were an exceptional case: they had been cremated and their remains both mixed together and only partially reclaimed by the local bishop; an individually unidentifiable fragment would have to represent them all, and corporeal integrity in the tomb could not be envisaged. See Vasiliki Limberis, 'The Cult of the Martyrs and the Cappadocian Fathers', in Derek Kreuger ed., *Byzantine Christianity*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2010, 39–58; such distribution did not go without contestation, Raymond Van Dam, *Becoming Christian: the Conversion of Roman Cappadocia*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 2003, 136.

another pair of martyrs, Nabor and Felix.[64] The most orthodox reaction to such a find would have been the construction of a suitable basilica. And a suitable basilica was built, eventually, but only dedicated to and housing Nabor and Felix.

Gervasius and Protasius were dug up, moved into Ambrose's own basilica, and placed under the altar, in the place originally destined for Ambrose alone. In a concious echo of Babylas and the good bishop Melitios, he had them buried in one half of the spot earmarked for himself, as he remarked in a letter full of playful yet deadly-serious allusion to his sister.[65] The translation was highly politicized, and followed a nail-biting confrontation with the Arian ruling party in Milan, who had attempted to force Ambrose to cede control of a number of basilicas in the city to allow the Arians at the court an opportunity to attend their own liturgies. Such a demand came as part of a wider competitive struggle through episcopal and imperial sponsorship of buildings and building projects which sought to impress the city of Milan with their builders' importance.[66] Ambrose could use the non-Nicene practice of direct disinterment as a way of parking his tanks on the Arian emperors' lawn. Yet his independence also expressed an administrative vision, which returned the episcopate to the insubmission of pre-Constantinian days, giving him a freedom to act without imperial permission in such a delicate, and potentially offensive, area.[67]

Ambrose did not look to the *beneplacitum* of the imperial powers; the lessons from Athanasius's travails had been learnt. The ritual he instantiated allowed those elements of the populace in the city who wished to show their opposition to the emperors to do so. Ambrose was able to both express and manage a communal will. The transfer of the martyrs' bodies, their installation in Ambrose's own church, the confirmation of their sanctity via a miracle (the restoration of sight to a blind man, an event rich with symbolism): these made a political and an administrative point. They also demonstrated what could be done with the cult of the special dead, but only by breaking with the traditional attachments of the cult of that dead, which saw the place of burial as the 'home' of

---

[64] Nabor and Felix's translation by Ambrose's predecessor, Maternus (bishop 316–28), is a later legend, probably constructed around his building a memorial chapel for them: for the development of the legendary superstructure, see Paolo Tomea, 'Le suggestioni dell'antico: qualche riflessione sull'epistola proemiale del *De situ civitatis Mediolani* e sulle sue fonti', *Aevum* 63 (1989), 172–85; Jean-Charles Picard, *Le souvenir des évêques: sépultures, liste épiscopales et culte des évêques en Italie du Nord des origines au Xe siècle*, École française de Rome: Rome 1988, 38–41; within this debate, the interpretation of Ambrose's hymn in the martyrs' honour is crucial: see Arthur Sumner Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns: with Introduction and Notes*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1922, 86, n. to l. 31. Similarly, the transfer by Basil of Caesarea of the relics of Milan's sometime bishop, Dionysius, into Ambrose's keeping is also now considered a later forgery: Craig Alan Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, The Liturgical Press: Collegevill 2002, 52, n. 89; Robert Pouchet, *Basile le Grand et son univers d'amis d'après sa correspondance*, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum: Rome 1992, 517–19; Picard, 1988, 20–21; Silvia Lusuardi Siena, Elisabetta Neri & Paola Greppi, 'Le chiese di Ambrogio e Milano: ambito topografico ed evoluzione costruttiva dal punto di vista archeologico', in *La mémoire italienne d'Ambroise* (V–XVIII siècle), École française de Rome: Rome 2015, 31–86, at 68, n. 156.

[65] Ambrosius, *Epistola* XXII, in PL 16, 1019–25, at §13, col. 1023B.

[66] M. Sannazaro, 'Lo sviluppo urbanistico di Milano in età paleocristiana', *LANX: Rivista della Scuola di Specializzazione in Archeologia dell'Università degli Studi di Milano* 19 (2014), 79–94, at 85–86.

[67] Peter Brown's description of Ambrose's actions using the homely image of it being like a little bit of DIY rewiring (*The Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1981, 37) overlooks the considerable risks being taken—both in usurping imperial dignity and in looking for support from the populace—and relies upon the trope of the blind acquiescence of the superstitious masses, manipulated through sacral prestidigitation.

the deceased. The basilicas which had only recently been protected from Arian deprivation could be reinforced with a sacral presence, now co-opted as Catholic saints, their true 'home' being the church. Popular support for this course of action could be demonstrated through urban processions, carefully controlled and ritualized manifestations of massed support (for the bishop, against the emperor), which were easily distinguishable from a riot. A corporate, urban identity could be formed – even called into being – through the movement, enshrinement and protection of relics. The brutal power of the military was of little use in such a confrontation.

The response from the emperors was probably a constitution preserved in the Theodosian Code (9.17.7),[68] which effectively banned disinterment and reburial, whilst conceding that the traditional practice of building or re-building a structure over a martyr's grave was perfectly legitimate.[69] Despite (or because of) this ban, Ambrose subsequently performed two more translations. Nazarius was taken from an orchard already containing the *memoria* of the martyr Celsus;[70] the remains of Vitalis and Agricola were moved from Bologna to a new basilica in Florence, neatly demonstrating Ambrose's control over his diocese.[71] He, furthermore, also used another *inventio* and translation for political ends: it is with him that the legend of the finding of the True Cross included the activity of St. Helena, good mother of a truly Christian emperor, in a pointed comparison with Justina, Arian mother of Valentinian.[72]

All three actual *inventiones* follow on from a vision received by the bishop, and the bishop himself authenticates the relics. Like-minded bishops could come together in a network established by the giving of secondary relics (such as the earth mixed with blood from the grave), all authenticated through their origins with other bishops. Paulinus gives a good summary of the relics which were being distributed along this network to reach Nola, and which he had enclosed in a casket beneath the altar of his church: Andrew and Luke;[73] Nazarius, Protasius and Gervasius. All probably came from Ambrose. Gaudentius, whilst on pilgrimage in the east towards the end of the fourth century, received ashes of the Forty Martyrs from the family of Basil of Caesarea, and also gained some relics of John the Baptist (which had been in circulation for nearly twenty years).[74] His church in Brescia also gloried in relics of St. Andrew. Victricius of Rouen brought back secondary relics of Protasius and Gervasius from his visit to Milan in 386, and received, ten years later, relics of St. Nazarius.[75]

---

[68] As suggested by Jill Harries, 'Death and the Dead in the Late Roman West', in Steven Basset ed., *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100–1600*, Leicester University Press: Leicester 1992, 56–67, at 63.

[69] Pharr, *The Theodosian Code*, 240. They had previously (in 381: 9.17.6, p. 240) banned any interments or the collocation of urns or sarcophagi within the city of Constantinople, specifically including burials *ad sanctos.*

[70] Paulinus Nolensis, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, §32, in PL 14, 29–50, at col. 40CD.

[71] Paulinus Nolensis, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, §29, at col. 39C.

[72] Drijjvers 1992, 95.

[73] See Paulinus Nolensis, *Vita Ambrosii*, §33 at col. 41B; idem, Carmina, XIX.353–59 (explaining the separation of relics during transit to Constantinople).

[74] Van Dam 2003, 150.

[75] Victricius Rothomagensis, *De laude sanctorum*, §11 in PL 20, 443–58, at col. 452.

Augustine received a portion of dust from the tomb of Stephen which had come through at least four hands, all important churchmen. With each, a portion was kept, a portion passed on.[76] Episcopal identification and transmission of relics was sure; other cults necessarily hung by a thread of uncertainty: so Martin of Tours could decide (after, of course, a vision) that a 'martyr' was in fact an executed thief, and so suppress local devotion at the tomb.[77] Augustine could be withering about monks who wandered around, bigging up their relics of the martyrs ('if they really are martyrs', he added).[78] Thus the bishop might control the growing movement of the enshrinement of relics within churches, directing them to the major church, emphasising the bishop's role within the community of worshippers; or sending them out to subordinate churches.[79]

But it would be wholly mistaken to think that the Ambrosian network had become suddenly dominant, and their model was that adopted or even accepted by all. Prudentius made clear how unhappy he was at the building programmes of bishops such as Ambrose and Paulinus, which were altering the nature of the cults he loved.[80] Around the turn of the fifth century, Alexander, bishop of Tipasa in North Africa, had the sarcophagi of his nine predecessors placed on a raised platform at the east end of the apse of his church, with space left for himself; the martyrs were assigned to a smaller, attached structure; all the tombs, bishops' and martyrs', were equipped, as was *de rigueur*, with funerary tables for ritual banqueting.[81] Alexander's actions recall Chrysostom's praise for the holiness of his bishop, hinting that it even exceeded that of the martyr buried at his side. The presence of individual *mensae*, however, suggest that Alexander was even further distant from Ambrose, Augustine and Paulinus, who opposed 'pagan' ritual meals at the martyrs' shrines, and sought a clearer distinction of the Christian celebration of the departed from that of their traditionalist neighbours.[82] The mensae, of course, may have functioned as eucharistic altars, when feasting was set aside; certainly Ambrose is explicit that Gervasius and Protasius are placed beneath the altar

---

[76] E. D. Hunt, 'The Traffic in Relics: Some Late Roman Evidence', in Sergei Hackel ed., *The Byzantine Saint*, University of Birmingham Press: Birmingham 1981, 171–80, at 171–72; Gillian Clarke, 'Translating Relics: Victricius of Rouen and fourth-century debate', *Early Medieval Europe* 10 (2001), 161–76, at 168. For the 'value' of these gifts, see Filippo Carlà, "Exchange and the Saints: Gift-Giving and the Commerce of Relics', in Filippo Carlà and Maria Gori eds., *Gift-Giving and the "Embedded" Economy in the Ancient World*, Winter: Heidelberg 2014, 403–437. For the originally Arian translation of the saint, see above, n. 47.

[77] Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, §11, in PL 20, 159–76, at coll. 166D–167A.

[78] Augustinus, *De opere monachorum*, XXVIII.36, in CSEL 41, 585–6, at 585. His *De cura mortuis gerenda* is, of course a major source for the treatment and cult of the dead—from the point of view of this restricted number of bishops.

[79] As detailed around the beginning of the fifth century by the Cappadocian prelate, Asterius of Amasea, *Sermo* IX: *in S. Phocam*, in PG 40, 300–13, at coll. 307D–09A.

[80] Cillian O'Hogan, *Prudentius and the Landscapes of Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2016, 159–60.

[81] J. Patout Burns, Jr. & Robin M. Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa: the Development of its Practices and Beliefs*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2014, 126; Y. Duval, *Loca sanctorum Africae*, 2 vols., École française de Rome: Rome 1982, I, 357–80; on the *mensae* in the cemetary, Éric Rebillard, 'Commemorating the Dead in North Africa: Continuity and Change from the Second to the Fifth Century CE', in J. Rasmus Brandt, Håkon Ingvaldsen & Marina Prusac eds., *Death and Changing Rituals: Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practice*, Oxbow: Oxford 2015, 269–86, at 274–78.

[82] Robin M. Jensen, 'Dining with the Dead: from the mensa to the Altar in Christian Late Antiquity', in Laurie Brink & Deborah Green, *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context*, de Gruyter: Berlin 2008, 107–44, at 134–38.

where he was wont to offer the sacrifice of the mass, and thus the possibility of moving relics from grave to church allowed levels of (and emphases in) sacrality to be channelled into or built within the ever-expanding numbers of churches.[83] Subsequent differences in practices surely descend from these already differing attitudes, rather than represent a later divergence from an Ambrosian–Augustinian unity. Such episcopal pressure towards establishing a differentiated Christian reverence for the special dead probably had an effect, though: the libations of the grave-side feast were, by the fifth century, simply inverted: rather than wine being poured onto the bones for their refreshment, oil could be poured into numerous shrines and collected after infusing with the holy bones.[84] The 'offering' to the dead thus provided a secondary relic, which could be subsequently distributed, and used in various forms of religious and therapeutic action.

It would also be wrong to give the impression that, after Ambrose, the floodgates had opened and translations became common. Constantinople registered a few long-distance translations. Theodosius retrieved the head of John the Baptist (whose relics, we have seen, were dispersed after a riot) in 391; a decade and a half later, the bones of the vetero-testamental prophet, Samuel, were brought; and after another decade, the mortal remains of Saints Joseph and Zacharias.[85] That all four 'saints' died as Jews suggests that, apart from advertising their control of Palestine, the emperors were establishing a particular and rather niche design for the sacred landscape of Constantinople. Certainly relics of contemporary martyrs which were then on the move from Gothia were simply ignored, and when genuine Italian relics (of Sisinius, Martyr and Alexander, burnt to death in their own church in Sanzeno) were sent to John Chrysostom, they were ostentatiously laid to rest in a church some thirteen kilometres from the city itself.[86] Constantinople in the spiritual, if it was a second anything, was an *Altera Hierosolyma*, and not a *Νέα Ῥώμη*.

Translations, then, were hardly held to be beyond the bounds of possibility or decency; yet, in the sources we have, caution reigned. The bishop of Toulouse, Silvius, around 400, gathered funds and began building a new 'beautiful and spacious' basilica to replace the ancient shrine erected over the grave of Saturninus after it had become choked by burials. He died before completing the work, and his successor, Exuperius, despite completing the chuch building, hesitated to translate the saint's relics; even after a vision of the saint instructing him to get on with it, he tarried until he could get the emperors' *beneplacitum*.[87] Bishop John I brought the bones of St. Januarius to Naples

[83] Claire Sotinel, 'Les lieux de culte chrétiens et le sacré dans l'Antiquité tardive', *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 222 (2005), 411–34.

[84] See, for example, the sarcophagus-shaped reliquary-shrine reproduced in Klein 2015, 240, fig. 12.7.

[85] Brian Ward-Perkins, 'Old and New Rome Compared: the rise of Constantinople', in Lucy Grig & Gavin Kelly eds., *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012, 53–78, at 61.

[86] Vigilius, *Epistolae duae de martyrio SS. Sisiniani, Martyrii et Alexandri*, in PL 13, 549–58; J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: the Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1995, 140; Rudolf Brändle, *John Chrysostom: Bishop, Reformer, Martyr*, St Paul's: London 2004, 61. For other relics from the Gothic persecutions, see Jerzy Strzelczyk, 'Visigothic Society of the Fourth Century in the Light of the Passion of Saint Saba the Goth', *Eos* 100 (2003), 367–86, at 379 (Saba; Inna, Rimma and Pinna: executed by drowning), and p. 383 (Bathouses and twenty-three others, burnt in their church); the latter's ashes were gathered and eventually made their way to Cyzicus, a metropolitan see not far from Constantinople.

[87] 'Passio Sancti Saturnini', §6, in Patrice Cabau, '*Opusculum de passione ac translatione Sancti Saturnini, episcopi tolosanae ciuitatis et martyris: édition et traduction provisoires*', *Mémoires de la Société Archéologique du Midi de la France* 61 (2001), 59–77, at 72.

from the place of their discovery and placed them not in a church, but in the catacombs, mimicking an archaism in burial practice fitting for the martyr.[88] Further north, too, late fifth-century churches in Paris and Brioude were built without disturbing either St. Denis or St. Julianus; in St. Denis's case, St. Geneviève probably kept the original *memoria* intact as well.[89] Where a translation was inevitable—as when the popularity of St. Martin of Tours demanded a larger church—the intermediate solution of moving the intact sarcophagus without internal disturbance of the bones might be preferred. Such a 'conservative' transfer prevented any distribution of relics, primary or secondary, a consideration that the inscription of Martin's sarcophagus alluded to: 'anima est in manu dei sed hic totus est praesens manifestus omni gratia virtutum' (his soul is in God's hand but here he is complete, shown forth through all the blessings of works of power),[90] echoing the ideas that we found in the Emperor Valentinian's novel at the beginning of our article.

Transfers maintaining the integrity of a sarcophagus could prevent fragmentation of the relics; but with simple exhumation, subtraction of bone-fragments and their preservation apart from the rest of the subsequently-deposited remains could and did occur. Paulinus of Nola did this himself,[91] and the practice as done by others was the source of at least some of his own relics. Some fragments, such as those Paulinus acquired, were subsequently interred within an altar; but some slivers would certainly have been enclosed in *ampullae*, phylacteries and bursae for personal use. Although at times such prophylactic use could attract condemnation, even Gregory the Great in the last quarter of the sixth century mandated the use of secondary relics worn around the neck.[92] The packaging of tomb-dust could also have semi-liturgical uses, where the relic was honoured with candles and devoutly kissed.[93] Primary relics in such circumstances attracted two different types of anxiety: the private possession of what should be a public good for the Church as a whole; and the propriety of sacred bones being kept unburied, and not placed in a receptacle in the ground or

---

[88] Galit Noga-Banai, *The Trophies of the Martyrs: an Art Historical Study of Early Christian Silver Reliquaries*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2008, 95; if it happened at all: see Maurizio Ponticello, Un giorno a Napoli con san Gennaro, Newton Compton: Rome 2016, 17–20.

[89] Werner Jacobsen, 'Saints' Tombs in Frankish Church Architecture', *Speculum* 72 (1997), 1107–143, at 1109–10.

[90] The original shrine building, described as a 'cellula … parvula' (a small oratory) by Gregory of Tours (*Libri historiarum*, II.14), dating from the time of Martin's successor as bishop, Brictius; the translation itself is described by Gregorius Turonensis, *De virtutibus Sancti Martini*, I.6. For the inscription, E. F. Le Blant, *Les inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule anterieur du VIIIe siècle*, 2 vols., L'Imprimerie Impériale: Paris 1856, I, 240. Similar 'sarcophagus translations' may be found with those of Hidulphus, Clemens and Lothbertus, see Warren Sanderson, 'Maximinus of Trier: The Early Mediaeval Crypts of Saint Maximin at Trier', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24 (1965), 303–10, at 308; and that of Gregory of Langres, buried in a sarcophagus in a corner of the Church of St John (Dijon), until his successor, Tetricus, moved the sarcophagus to a place behind the altar, see Jacobsen 1997, 1131.

[91] Cynthia Hahn, *The Reliquary Effect: Enshrining the Sacred Object*, Reaktion Books: London 2017, 71.

[92] For the forgiveness of sins, see *Collectio canonum ecclesiae Hispaniae*, Typographia Regia: Madrid 1808, 162. For later mentions of the practice, with primary relics: Janneke Raaijmakers, "I, Claudius: Self-Styling in Early Medieval Debate', *Early Medieval Europe* 25 (2017), 70–84; Julia M. H. Smith, 'Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c.700–1200)', Ron Johston ed., *2010-2011 Lectures* (Proceedings of the British Academy, 181), London: British Academy 2012, 143–67, at 157.

[93] Hieronymus, *Contra Vigilantium*, §4, in PL 23, 342–43; D. 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.

at least in a fixed structure. Monks and nuns may have been more confident of approaching relics and maintaining them accessible, given their own state of dedication to God. The first exhumation and translation in monastic circles would seem to have been that carried out by Hesychios, who tracked down the body of his monastery's founder, Hilarion, to an orchard in Cyprus, remained there ten months as a hermit to lull the locals, and then escaped with the incorrupt body back to Maiuma.[94] Roughly a hundred years later, in 488, St. Severinus's six-year old coffin was dug up by his own monks, and carried around with them until a permanent home near Naples was established, at which point he was re-interred.[95] And not a century later, in Jerusalem, some saintly relics were not being buried or enclosed at all: at the convent of Mount Sion visiting pilgrims were invited to drink water, as a blessing, from the bejewelled skull of St. Theodota.[96]

Things on the move

The increasingly movable presence of the saints' relics amongst the living is found particularly with one different set of relics – or perhaps set of secondary relics. These were the relics of the True Cross, which had begun to be distributed as gifts from both Jerusalem and Constantinople from the fourth century on, and were sometimes subsequently sub-divided and so more widely shared. Thus Melania the Elder received a fragment of the True Cross from John, bishop of Jerusalem; she passed some on to Therasia, Paulinus's wife, who passed some of it to her husband: one part Paulinus kept, and wore around his neck; the other part he enshrined beneath an altar in his church of St. Felix. Therasia also sent a fragment to Sulpicius Severus's mother-in-law, Bassula, who presented it to him; he also chose, like Paulinus, a part to wear, a part to place in an altar, suitably encased in gold.[97]

When it came to the emperors's share of the True Cross in Constantinople, however, the gift would by necessity have political strings attached.[98] Thus the cross-relic sent to Radegund around 569 formed part of an elaborate negotiation to create a strong Byzantine ally in the west, probably with the accompanying translation of a saint from Byzantium to Gaul as an expression of the firmness of the bond.[99] According to Baudovinia, Radegund received the relic of the Cross decorated with gold and gems (presumably, then, within a reliquary, although the shape is not described).

---

[94] This would have taken place around 371–72, and was recorded by Jerome two decades later: Hieronymus, *Vita Hilarionis*, §46, at col. 54B (and thereafter Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, III.14.26). Egyptian mores were distinct from Roman (John Wortley, 'The origins of Christian Veneration of Body-Parts', *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 1 (2006), 5–28). Jerome also surmises, in line with traditional thought, that the place of first deposition of the saint in Cyprus remained dearer to him (§47, at col. 54D).

[95] Crook 2000, 19.

[96] J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, Ashgate: Warminster 2002, 140.

[97] A. Frolow, *La relique de la vraie Croix: recherches sur le développement d'un culte*, Institut français d'études byzantines: Paris 1961, 169. Paulinus Nolensis, *Epistolae*, XXXI.1–2, XXXII.7–8.

[98] Lynn Jones, 'Perceptions of Byzantium: Radegund of Poitiers and Relics of the True Cross', in Lynn Jones ed., *Byzantine Images and their Afterlives: Essays in Honor of Annemarie Wayl Carr*, Ashgate: Farnham 2014, 105–24, at 105.

[99] Stefan Esders, '"Avenger of All Perjury" in Constantinople, Ravenna and Metz: Saint Polyeuctus, Sigibert I, and the Division of Charibert's Kingdom in 568', in Andreas Fischer & Ian Wood eds., *Western Perspectives on the Mediterranean: Cultural Transfer in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 400–800 AD*, Bloomsbury: London 2014, 17–40.

Baudovinia goes on to say that Radegund's large number of other relics from the east also came as part of the imperial gift, probably because the truth of the matter – Radegund had her own agents sent eastwards to assemble the collection – jarred with her presentation of the queen as a humble abbess reliant only on prayers for her success.[100] The reliquary was placed, together with the other oriental relics, in a silver box, a corner of Poitiers, as it were, that would forever be Jerusalem. The inclusion of the relic and its reliquary in the box (itself a reliquary), rather than permanently enshrining it in an altar, or as we have seen in North Africa, under a *mensa*, allowed Radegund to imitate the sacred liturgy of Jerusalem, and bring out the relic for adoration on Wednesdays and Fridays.[101] Reliquaries containing reliquaries of increasing holiness yet decreasing size is a phenomenon seen within earlier fifth-century depositions of *capsellae* too,[102] and is an important feature of how these holy objects were perceived.[103] Yet Radegund, in her convent – much like the nuns of Mount Sion – could keep her relics unburied, enclosed (mostly) within a reliquary, regularly displayed, kept together as a unit around the relic of the True Cross.

The fragments of the True Cross held by the popes, too, could be used to cement alliances. In the case of Gregory the Great, despite his opposition to moving saintly bodies, the fragment of the Cross – sent in a reliquary in the shape of a cross to Reccared, the Visigothic king who had overseen the conversion of Hispania to Catholicism – was accompanied by hair from the head of John the Baptist: the relic was destined for personal use.[104] Seventh- and eighth-century philacteries and relic-crosses have survived, usually contained within altars, and would have provided a means for a wearable reliquary on the person.[105] The papal relics of the True Cross would seem, like Radegund's, to have been enclosed within a silver *capsa*, and forgotten for some time, until they were rediscovered by Pope Sergius at the very end of the seventh century: covered by a decorated, probably silk, cushion, enclosed within a cross embedded with jewels.[106] The cross was then used for adoration each year at the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.

The cult of relics at this point had begun to assume a fundamentally familiar pattern. Brought out of the altars and the personal philactery, they are opened, shown, and in some cases, used in liturgy. They are gathered together, to provide a sacral focus. They are contained in a reliquary made of precious material. The manner in which this came to be accepted was not, however, constant;

---

[100] Baudovinia, 'Vita sanctae Radegundis', B. Krusch ed. (MGH SS rer. Merov. 2), Hahn: Hannover 1888, 377–95, at 388, ll. 17–20; Gregorius Turonensis, 'Libri miraculorum', I.5, in Bruno Krusch ed., *Gregorii episcopi turonensis Miracula et opera minora* (MGH SS rer. Merov. 1,2), Hahn: Hannover 1885, 34–109, at 39, l. 31 – 40, l. 4.

[101] Jones 2014, 12–13. For the silver casket also being an imitation of the Jerusalem practice, Frolow 1961, 161–62.

[102] Noga-Banai 2008, 64; Irina Achim, 'Churches and Graves of the Early Byzantine Period in Sythia Minor and Moesia Secunda: the Development of a Christian Topography at the Periphery of the Roman Empire', in J. Rasmus Brandt, Håkon Ingvaldsen & Marina Prusac eds., *Death and Changing Rituals: Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practice*, Oxbow: Oxford 2015, 287–342, at 317.

[103] Klein 2015, 236–40.

[104] Karl-Georg Schon ed., 'Papst Gregorius I. an König Reccaredus', Projekt Pseudoisidor, 2005, http://www.pseudoisidor.mgh.de/html/305.htm (27 January 2018).

[105] Marc Sureda i Jubany, 'L'uomo d'armi', in Benedetta Chiesi, Ilaria Ciseri & Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi eds., *Il medioevo in viaggio*, Giunti: Firenze 2015, 166–87, at 183.

[106] Erik Thunø, *Image and Relic: Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome*, L'Erma di Bretschneider: Rome 2002, 21.

how acceptance of their translation, their manipulation and the increasingly mobile status of relics became dominant can best be show by focusing upon Rome, which is generally thought of as being highly conservative in its outlook.

Rome and Christendom

Leaving the saints undisturbed was a crucial element in Roman policy. Pope Hormisdas in 520 demurred from providing Emperor Justinian with bones of Peter and Paul which would otherwise have graced the new basilica dedicated to them in Constantinople.[107] In 594, Gregory the Great refused a request from the empress, Constantina, by stressing how dangerous it was to tamper with the tombs, even with the best of intentions. As he told the tale, sometime in the 580s, his predecessor, Pelagius II, had received terrifying warning signs when he tried to move just the silver plate over St. Peter's tomb not even four yards to one side; the same Pelagius's attempt to improve St. Laurence's basilica led his workmen to accidentally uncover the saint's bones, and although none dared disturb them further, all died within ten days; and, on Gregory's own instructions, a workman excavating next to the sarcophagus of St. Paul dug up some bones, moved them to one side, and died on the spot.[108] These scary tales segue neatly into Gregory's effortless observation (to the Empress of the Romans) that correct Roman decorum is to leave the bones of the saints alone, whatever the 'Greek' practices were (practices which leave western listeners shocked when they hear what they are).[109]

This is often taken as an absolute ban on the touching or movement of relics, but this is not the case: Gregory explicitly forbids their disturbance only after enshrinement in a *buxis*, or reliquary casket lined with silk, within the church dedicated to them.[110] The relics (within a reliquary and within a church) now functioned as much as a home for the soul of the departed as the tomb did in the classical imagination. The casket need not be buried, could remain visible, but the casket-and-wrapping itself formed a new body for the saint's bones which argued against further disturbance: thus Gregory tells the otherwise unrecorded tale of Pope Leo I (440–60), who, to quell the doubts of a number of Greeks over the authenticity of certain relics, cut into the silk wrapping of the bones, with the result that blood flowed out from the material.[111]

The archaeological record bears out Gregory's statement of the *mores* to be followed: he could be speaking for the two centuries before he wrote. Beginning in the late fourth century, the relics of martyrs and saints were being moved into churches, where they could be fittingly housed, provided with the architecture they deserved, and included in a daily or weekly cult that it behoved their

---

[107] Crook 2000, 23.

[108] Gregorius I, *Gregorii I Papae Registrum epistolae* vol. 1, Paulus Ewald & Ludovicus M. Hartmann eds. (MGH Epp. 1), Weidmann: Berlin 1891, 264, ll. 11–22.

[109] Gregorius I, *Registrum*, 264, ll. 23–24, 265, ll. 9–11.

[110] Gregorius I, *Registrum*, 265, ll. 1–4.

[111] Gregorius I, *Registrum*, 265, ll. 4–7.

local devotees to provide.[112] Throughout the empire, relics are found reburied in the apse,[113] in close contiguity if not directly below the altar, the ideological and sacral centre of the church building.[114] Undoubtedly, in settlements lacking episcopal largesse, the transfer of martyrial remains was a simple matter of economic use of resources, a shift in cultic emphasis,[115] an abandonment of familial shrines in favour of the ecclesial community, or even the expansion and re-orientation of a family shrine into a fully-staffed church.[116]

Thus the honour offered as due to the saints takes in not simply cultic remembrance but both exhumation and re-interment or enshrinement. Similarities of reburial technique in the fifth and sixth centuries from Moesia via Italy to North Africa suggest a common preoccupation. Relics were buried in the floor of the churches – often under the altar, but also to a side, providing a semi-independent shrine within the church building. Yet the honour is not simply limited to position. The relics are enclosed within a reliquary, usually itself enclosed within a containting marble or stone reliquary placed in the ground. In the earliest period, the burial-reliquaries, although of evidently expensive materials and workmanship, were in many cases repurposed from being a deluxe display item;[117] similarly the marble container in which the first reliquary was placed has often also been repurposed from another use. The deposition (and perhaps surrender) of the relics was accompanied by a ritual destruction of highly-prized materials which were themselves sacrificed to express the preciousness of the martyr's relics they contained; the disappearance of such precious goods, their *de facto* destruction in front of the community, continued and amplified the destruction of

[112] Brakke 1998, 465, 467–68; see David Frankfurter, "Beyond Magic and Superstition", in Virginia Burrus ed., *Late Antique Christianity*, Fortress: Minneapolis 2005, 255–82, at 263, for condemnations of the practice by Shenute and Athanasius.

[113] Achim 2015, 315–17.

[114] Here I make little distinction between burial beneath the altar and tomb-chambers where the church has been built above and suitably aligned with the tomb: see Jacobsen 1997, 1127–28. A later development, particularly in the Frankish Church, was the placement of the tomb further eastwards than the altar: Sanderson 1965, 9.

[115] For the conversion of the baptistry at Sufetula in North Africe into the shrine of the martyr Jucundus, see Robin Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Brill: Leiden 2011, 211.

[116] For the inevitable conflicts that these churches outside the control of the bishop could produce, see Lisa Kaaren Bailey, *Religious Worlds of the Laity in Late Antique Gaul*, Bloomsbury: London 2016, 69–70; Bowes 2005.

[117] Ruth E. Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity: Functions and Meanings of Silver Plate in the Fourth to the Seventh Centuries*, Ashgate: Aldershot 2004; Jutta Dresken-Weiland, 'Transformation and Transition in the Art of Late Antiquity', in Rita Lizzi Testa ed., *Late Antiquity in Contemporary Debate*, Cambridge Scholars: Newcastle upon Tyne 2017, 38–55, at 51; Carolyn Joslin Watson, 'The Program of the Brescia Casket', Gesta 20 (1981), 238–98, at 290; Jas Elsner, 'Closure and Penetration: Reflections on the Pola Casket', *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 26 (2013), 183–227, at 183. For the later Franks casket of elaborately carved whalebone which ended as a reliquary, see Catherine E. Karkov, *The Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, Boydell: Woodbridge 2011, 146–53.

the original articulation of the martyr's body.[118] With the advance of the fifth century, however, specially commissioned relic-containers were provided as an expression of a devotee's obligation, oftentimes to multiple saints.[119] The enclosure of these relics under ground was a means of ensuring that they would no longer be disturbed; if, however, they were kept above ground, only a strong sense of veneration could keep them from being tampered with.

Roman architecture expressed this type of conservatism, and balanced a desire to allow pilgrims or devotees close proximity to the saint with the necessity of as little interference with the tomb as possible. Crypts, built as part of the original structures to some churches when they were constructed over the pre-existent graves of saints, were introduced later to others – as at St. Peter's in Rome in around 600 – to improve access for veneration of the relics whilst maintaining the body *in situ* and undisturbed.[120] One important set of translations did occur in Rome, under John IV (640–42), where relics whose tombs had been disturbed during the Avar invasions of Dalmatia and Istria were brought *en masse* to the chapel of San Venanzio.[121] Rather than being a sign of things to come, and a break in Roman fashion, this was a transfer of desecrated relics in the most austere tradition of the fourth century.

Rome did not really require any more relics: it had a huge network of extra-mural sacred sites which lasted well into the eighth century; caution as to interfering with the relics of the martyrs was perhaps the only safe policy to take to avoid widespread looting. By the pontificate of Paul I (757–67), however, the condition of the catacombs and the *martyria* were in such a pitiful state (at least according to the *Liber pontificalis*),[122] that he began to bring the relics within the city, distributing them amongst the churches and deaconries.

Far from being revolutionary, it offered only an intensification of the practice that had been found acceptable by Gregory himself: exhumation, enshrinement, stasis. Few relics seem to have made their way north, to feed the ever-growing Carolingian thirst for Roman or other sanctities.[123] The process continued under Adrian I, whose extension of Santa Maria in Cosmedin included a crypt which, in part mimicking the catacombs, allowed the collocation of an impressive number of

---

[118] See, for example, Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1997, 112; Ithamar Gruenwald, *Rituals and Ritual Theory in Ancient Israel*, Brill: Leiden 2003, 205; for ritual burial of objects: Ingrid E. M. Edlund-Berry, 'Ritual Destruction of Cities and Sanctuaries: the "Un-Founding" of the Archaic Monumental Building at Poggio Civitate (Murlo)', in Richard Daniel De Puma & Jocelyn Penny Small eds., *Murlo and the Etruscans: Art and Society in Ancient Etruria*, University of Wisconsin Press: Madison 1994, 16–28, at 22–23; for secondary burial as conscious destruction: Simona Todaro & Luca Girella, 'Living through Destructions: Deliberate vs. Accidental Manipulation of Human Remains and Grave Goods in Western Mediterranean Rock-Cut Chamber Tombs of the the Fourth and Third Millennium BC', in Jan Driessen ed., *Destruction: Archaeological, Philological and Historical Perspectives*, UCL Presses Universitaires de Louvain: Louvain 2013, 133–52, at 133.

[119] Noga-Banai 2008, 97.

[120] Jacobsen 1997, 1134.

[121] Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Portrait of a City*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 1980, 90; see also Éamonn Ó Carragáin, Roma Felix: Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome, Routledge: London 2016.

[122] John Osborne, 'The Roman Catacombs in the Middle Ages', *Publications of the British School at Rome* 53 (1985), 279–328.

[123] Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: the Formation of a European Identity*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2008, 329, n. 137; Julia M. H. Smith, 'Old Saints, New Cults: Roman Relics in Carolingian Francia', in *Early Medieval Rome and the Christian West: Essays in Honour of Donald A. Bullough*, Brill: Leiden 2000, 317–29.

relics.[124] The interest in architectural renewal connected to a redeveloped cult of Roman martyrs has long been held as a concerted campaign against Byzantine iconoclasm:[125] we might also observe that Paul preferred to redirect his money on ideological decoration within the city rather than on continuing to maintain the catacombs outside. Relic transfers to favoured individuals outside Rome were not shunned: Saint-Denys, in the second half of the eighth century, could fill its new annular crypt (an innovation in France, and a direct allusion to the form of the crypt in Saint Peter's church in Rome) with relics specifically from the city.[126] The Roman conservatism of the architectural form may have played a part in allowing the transfer, from Rome to something that was, in a way, still Rome.

Paul's techniques of opposing iconoclasm, however, look rather tame when compared with Paschal II's response to the rekindled iconoclastic fervour in Byzantium at the beginning of the ninth century. Numerous magnificent mosaics were completed to solemnize the translation of martyrs' relics, such as San Zeno, Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, and Santa Prassede, which became home to Greek monks fleeing persecution and the resting place of more than two thousand two hundred saints taken from the catacombs and crypts, martyrs and clerics alike. The anti-iconoclast tone of the massive number of translations and their setting is impossible to mistake. The translations, though, reaffirmed a conservative preoccupation: both Cecilia and the saints at Santa Prassede were placed under the altar, whereas the Byzantine iconoclasts were leaving relics aside in their newly built churches.[127] Distribution of relics abroad was one with his other manifestations of papal presence, such as ransoming captives and bringing back exiles.[128] Paschal's actions provide a superb example of the projection of soft power, of cultural leadership and the creation of a unitary centre

---

[124] Richard Krautheimer, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae. Le basiliche paleocristiane di Roma (Sec. IV-IX)*, Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana: Città del Vaticano 1964, 309.

[125] Charles B. McClendon, 'Old Saint Peter's and the Iconoclastic Controversy', in R. McKitterick, J. Osborne, C. M. Richardson & J. Story eds., *Old Saint Peter's, Rome*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2013, 214–28, at 225. For a study of the little remaining iconographic programme of Paul I, see Eileen Rubery, 'Christ and the Angelic Tetramorphs: the Meaning of the Eighth-Century Apsidal Conch at Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome", in Savvas Neocleous ed., *Papers from the First and Second Postgraduate Forums in Byzantine Studies: Sailing to Byzantium*, Cambridge Scholars: Newcastle upon Tyne 2009, 183–220.

[126] Judson J. Emerick, 'Building *More Romano* in Francia during the Third Quarter of the Eighth Century: the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis and its Model', in Claudia Bolgia, Rosamond McKitterick & John Osborne, *Rome across Time and Space: Cultural Transmission and the Exchange of Ideas c. 500–1400*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2011, 127–50, at 137.

[127] *Liber pontificalis*, C.9, 17, L. Duchesne ed., *Le Liber pontificalis: texte, introduction et commentaire*, 2 vols., Thorin, Paris 1892, II, 54, ll. 21–29; 56, ll. 29–31; for the numbers involved, taken from an inscription in the church: II, 64, ll. 5–8; for the iconoclasts, see Leslie Brubaker, '"In the Beginning Was the Word": Art and Orthodoxy at the Councils of Trullo (692) and Nicaea II (787)', in A. Louth & A. M. Casiday eds., *Byzantine Orthodoxies*, Ashgate: Aldershot 2006, 95–101, at 100.

[128] *Liber pontificalis*, C.3, Duchesne ed., II, 52 ll. 30–53, l. 3.

for Christianity (east and west), which even the iconoclast Byzantine emperors, one suspects, could look upon with grudging respect.[129]

Paschal's iconic concerns also took in the relics of the True Cross. The pre-existing reliquary was now to be housed in a cruciform casket lined with decorated silk; an enamelled cross which was contained in a silk-lined rectangular casket was also commissioned.[130] We should probably also link the Fieschi-Morgan reliquary (which contained a cross-shaped reliquary containing a relic of the Cross) to this period in Rome, and to papal sponsorship, as a means of both continuing and laying claim to Byzantine imagistic traditions.[131]

Just as the fragments of the Cross were housed within a cross-shaped reliquary and used for display, so the containers of the relics of the saints had started to become more visible. This might have simply involved raising the sarcophagus, so that it could be seen as part of the altar, or placed in a self-standing shrine, such as St. Gallus in the late seventh century and St. Willibrord at Echternach in the middle of the eighth;[132] or there might be a return to the *capsella* that was originally used for re-burial. Now, though, reburial did not allow the symbolic imagery of the container to be appreciated for long, or by new pilgrims, or by the staff of clerics or monks, and so the iconographically-rich *capsella* was preserved above ground. Like Radegund's box, *capsellae* were made of precious metals; they could be opened; yet the earliest models offer a definite conservatism in their form: they are shaped as miniature sarcophagi with sloping roofs, a design that remained the most popular throughout the Middle Ages. A very early example is that made for St. Maurice in the seventh century.[133] The subsequent development of figural reliquaries lies, regrettably, beyond the bounds of the present study.

In conclusion

The process described has been an initial acceptance and only slight alteration of social norms regarding burial and commemoration amongst Christians in the first three centuries.[134] In the fourth,

[129] Leo V, who returned Byzantium to iconoclasm on his accession in 815, had sent a handful of relics to Venice, see Brubaker 2006, 100; John Osborne, 'Politics, Diplomacy and the Cult of Relics in Venice and the Northern Adriatic in the First Half of the Ninth Century', *Early Medieval Europe* 8 (1999), 369–86, at 377–78. For the Carolingian distribution of relics as a more concrete expression of hard power and territorial domination, which could nevertheless also accommodate local preferences, see H. Röckelein, *Reliquientranslationen nach Sachsen im 9. Jahrhundert. Über Kommunikation, Mobilität und Öffentlichkeit im Frühmittelalter*, Jan Thorbecke: Stuttgart 2002; and W. Hotzelt, 'Translationen von Martyrerreliquien aus Rom nach Bayern im 8. Jh.', *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktiner-Ordens* 53 (1935), 286–343.

[130] Thunø 2002, 18.

[131] David Buckton, 'Byzantine Enamels in the Twentieth Century', in Elizabeth Jeffries ed., *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization: in Honour of Sir Steven Runciman* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2006, 25–37, at 30. See, further, Annabelle Warton, *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 2006, 34–38.

[132] Jacobsen 1997, 1131.

[133] Robert C. Calkins, *Monuments of Medieval Art*, Cornell: Ithaca 1979, 116–17. The monastery of St-Maurice-d'Augaune had been founded in the early sixth century by the Burgundian king, Sigismund, as his own burial place: Frederick S. Paxton, 'Power and the Power to Heal: the Cult of St. Sigismund of Burgundy', *Early Medieval Europe* 2 (1993), 95–110.

[134] Regina Gee, 'From Corpse to Ancestor: the role of tombside dining in the transformation of the body in Ancient Rome', in ed. Fredrik Fahlander and Torje Oestigaard: *The Materiality of Death: bodies, burials, beliefs*, Berlin: Archaeopress, 2008, pp. 59–68, esp. at p. 65.

as Christianity became an official political force, this seamless co-existence was violently questioned, as to the requirement that the grave and its situation remain inviolate, as to the propriety of ritual feasting around the shrine, and as to what authority allowed one to carry out the extraction of relics. My focus has, undeniably, been more political than spiritual; but then, even in local microcosm, these were political acts, forming alliances and communities around the veneration of the dead; communities that, rather like the reliquaries in which the relics were concentrated, expanded outwards, in overlapping circles, with lesser degrees of holiness, or grace, or connexion, or belonging, as they moved further from the direct cult of the relics. The genre of the sources that survive concentrate upon the marvellous, on the moments of dramatic human and divine intervention; what they do not dwell upon is the hum-drum ticking-over of relics, the central position they played in a cycle of liturgy and life-cycles of individuals and the maintenance of communities. The re-organization of the cult of the dead in western Europe, which begins in the third century with the general preference for inhumation over cremation throughout the empire (and which may, or may not, be connected to Christian preferences),[135] is a slow process, affected by top-down political decisions and imperatives as well as by common practices and the evolution of shared symbolisms. The reliquary, its position, the modes of its display, the materials from which it is made, the sacrality inherent in it: these all change over time, whilst a certain conservatism, a constant looking back, remains of the essence.

The interest, even fixation, with bones, bloody earth, dust and ashes might strike a modern reader as primitive, even prehistoric. And so, I would argue, it is. A large number of the various responses to the saints and the martyrs we have considered have analogues in the behaviours evidenced in the Palaeolithic. The separation out of special dead, treated in particular ways in complex rituals aimed at building, creating or reinforcing social relationships;[136] the production and circulation of relics, which are accorded some form of social agency, and used as such, either as a powerful form of adornment or protection, or to achieve a ritual purpose, with adornment of the relics (such as the plastering of skulls) representing a means of physically modifying the remains but also rendering them socially usable;[137] fragmentation of individual skeletons and their distribution to different sites or the mixing of various relics from individuals (some recently deceased, some much more ancient) to produce a symbolic collective identity;[138] in short, the saints fulfil the function of the ancestor, offering not just an immediate point of reference, but a lineage of memory.[139] Yet I would not wish to dismiss these parallels, or the practices, as yet another recrudescence of foolish superstition from which either the Enlightenment or the Science has delivered humanity. Rather I would see it as inevitable, as the re-alignment of society also required the re-alignment of the dead; indeed, the re-alignment of society could become visible through a changed responsibility towards its dead. The origins of new treatments of the corpse in the Palaeolithic has been argued to be a

---

[135] Rebillard 2015, 279.

[136] P. Metcalf, 'Meaning and Materiality: the Ritual Economy of Death', *Man* 16 (1981), 563–78.

[137] I. Kuijt, 'The Regeneration of Life: Neolithic Structures of Symbolic Rememberting and Forgetting', *Current Anthropology* 49 (2008), 171–97.

[138] Todaro & Girella 2013, 133.

[139] Kuijt 2008, 175–76.

response to a new demand for territoriality, the need to stake a claim that 'our ancestors lie here'.[140] Such a claim would necessarily produce a new treatment of the dead, new rituals and new ritual behaviours towards burial, exhumation and re-burial or enshrinement; and a new concretization of the unseen, the numinous, and the spirits of the land.

The cult of the martyrs, the innovative treatment of their graves, is also a feature of a new type of territoriality, based on a new type of ancestor, and a new understanding of territory: communities not necessarily based on family ties; newly unified in localities but connected out and across the known world, both in the imagination and in the concrete expression of personal contacts, administrative reliance, material presences; and a shared, learnt culture which relied on both families and celibates for its functioning and transmission, a culture which could stake its claim to territory because of its long-lasting, even eternal, existence. An existence guaranteed by the close, physical presence of the sacred mediated in part by the relics that lay at the centre of the many foci that made up the whole. The cult of the dead was constantly turning towards the future. And those Christians that made up the future similarly turned back with their focus on the dead; when they considered the remarkable changes that had occurred in the empire, its apparatus of government and mechanisms of repression that were originally turned against the Christian dissidents and yet eventually fell into the hands of their bishops, they saw the witness of the martyrs as being the crucial element, the driver of the change, and confected martyrs' acts accordingly.[141] And they were not wrong. The martyrs provided the focal points around which communities of Christians could form; that is, communities were formed which could form Christians; wherever there was persecution, there was subsequently the possibility of ritual remembrance and organization. And when the emperors attempted to re-order these ecclesial groupings around their own distribution of relics and under their own control, it was the martyrs' relics which allowed the bishops to snatch that power back out of imperial hands.

Anthony John Lappin
National University of Ireland Maynooth
gundisalbus@gmail.com

[140] João Zilhão, 'Lower and Middle Palaeolithic Mortuary Behaviours and the Origins of Ritual Burial', in Colin Renfrew, Michael J. Boyd & Iain Morley eds., *Death Rituals and Social Order in the Ancient World: Death Shall Have no Dominion*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2015, 27–52, at 43.

[141] See above, nn. 9–10.