

Relics of Saints

WHEN relics of saints were first introduced, the reliquomania was universal: they bought and they sold, and, like other collectors, made no scruple to *steal* them. It is entertaining to observe the singular ardour and grasping avidity of some, to enrich themselves with these religious morsels; their little discernment, the curious impositions of the vendor, and the good faith and sincerity of the purchaser. The prelate of the place sometimes ordained a fast to implore God that they might not be cheated with the relics of saints, which he sometimes purchased for the holy benefit of the village or town.

Guibert de Nogen wrote a treatise on the relics of saints, acknowledging that there were many false ones, as well as false legends; he reprobates the inventors of these lying miracles. He wrote his treatise on the occasion of a *tooth* of our Lord's, by which the monks of St. Medard de Soissons pretended to operate miracles. He asserts that this pretension is as chimerical as that of several persons, who believed they possessed the navel, and other parts less decent, of—the body of Christ!

A monk of Bergsvinck has given a history of the translation of St. Lewin, a virgin and a martyr: her relics were brought from England to Bergs. He collected

with religious care the facts from his brethren, especially from the conductor of these relics from England. After the history of the translation, and a panegyric of the saint, he relates the miracles performed in Flanders since the arrival of her relics. The prevailing passion of the times to possess fragments of saints is well marked, when the author particularizes with a certain complacency all the knavish modes they used to carry off those in question. None then objected to this sort of robbery; because the gratification of the reigning passion had made it worth while to supply the demand.

A monk of Cluny has given a history of the translation of the body of St. Indalece, one of the earliest Spanish bishops; written by order of the Abbot of St. Juan de la Penna. He protests he advances nothing but facts; having himself seen, or learnt from other witnesses, all he relates. It was not difficult for him to be well informed, since it was to the monastery of St. Juan de la Penna that the holy relics were transported, and those who brought them were two monks of that house. He has authenticated his minute detail of circumstances by giving the names of persons and places. His account was written for the great festival immediately instituted in honour of this translation. He informs us of the mi-

raculous manner by which they were so fortunate as to discover the body of this bishop, and the different plans they concerted to carry it off. He gives the itinerary of the two monks who accompanied the holy remains. They were not a little cheered in their long journey by visions and miracles.

Another has written a history of what he calls the translation of the relics of Saint Majeau to the monastery of Villemagne. *Translation* is in fact only a softened expression for the robbery of the relics of the saint committed by two monks, who carried them off secretly to enrich their monastery; and they did not hesitate at any artifice, or lie, to complete their design. They thought everything was permitted to acquire these fragments of mortality, which had now become a branch of commerce. They even regarded their possessors with an hostile eye. Such was the religious opinion from the ninth to the twelfth century. Our Canute commissioned his agent at Rome to purchase *Saint Augustine's arm* for one hundred talents of silver and one of gold! a much greater sum, observes Granger, than the finest statue of antiquity would have then sold for.

Another monk describes a strange act of devotion attested by several contemporary writers. When the saints did not readily comply with the prayers of their

votaries, they flogged their relics with rods, in a spirit of impatience which they conceived was necessary to make them bend into compliance.

Theofroy, abbot of Epternac, to raise our admiration, relates the daily miracles performed by the relics of saints, their ashes, their clothes, or other mortal spoils, and even by the instruments of their martyrdom. He inveighs against that luxury of ornaments which was indulged under a religious pretext: "It is not to be supposed that the saints are desirous of such a profusion of gold and silver. They wish not that we should raise to them such magnificent churches, to exhibit that ingenious order of pillars which shine with gold; nor those rich ceilings, nor those altars sparkling with jewels. They desire not the purple parchment of price for their writings, the liquid gold to embellish the letters, nor the precious stones to decorate their covers; while you have such little care for the ministers of the altar." The pious writer has not forgotten *himself* in this partnership-account with *the saints*.

The Roman church not being able to deny, says Bayle, that there have been false relics, which have operated miracles, they reply that the good intentions of those believers who have recourse to them obtained from God this reward for their good faith! In the same spirit,

when it was shown that two or three bodies of the same saint are said to exist in different places, and that therefore they all could not be authentic; it was answered, that they were all genuine! for God had multiplied and miraculously reproduced them for the comfort of the faithful! A curious specimen of the intolerance of good sense.

When the Reformation was spread in Lithuania, Prince Radzivil was so affected by it, that he went in person to pay the pope all possible honours. His holiness on this occasion presented him with a precious box of relics. The prince having returned home, some monks entreated permission to try the effects of these relics on a demoniac, who had hitherto resisted every kind of exorcism. They were brought into the church with solemn pomp, and deposited on the altar, accompanied by an innumerable crowd. After the usual conjurations, which were unsuccessful, they applied the relics. The demoniac instantly recovered. The people called out *a miracle!* and the prince, lifting his hands and eyes to heaven, felt his faith confirmed. In this transport of pious joy, he observed that a young gentleman, who was keeper of this treasure of relics, smiled, and by his motions ridiculed the miracle. The prince, indignantly, took our young keeper of the relics to task; who, on promise of

pardon, gave the following *secret intelligence* concerning them. In travelling from Rome he had lost the box of relics; and not daring to mention it, he had procured a similar one, which he had filled with the small bones of dogs and cats, and other trifles similar to what were lost. He hoped he might be forgiven for smiling, when he found that such a collection of rubbish was idolized with such pomp, and had even the virtue of expelling demons. It was by the assistance of this box that the prince discovered the gross impositions of the monks and the demoniacs, and Radzivil afterwards became a zealous Lutheran.

The elector Frederic, surnamed *the wise*, was an indefatigable collector of relics. After his death, one of the monks employed by him solicited payment for several parcels he had purchased for our *wise* elector; but the times had changed! He was advised to give over this business; the relics for which he desired payment they were willing *to return*; that the price had fallen considerably since the reformation of Luther; and that they would be more esteemed, and find a *better market*, in Italy than in Germany!

Stephens, in his *Traité préparatif à l'Apologie pour Herodote*, c. 39, says, "A monk of St. Anthony having been at Jerusalem, saw there several relics, among

which were a bit of the finger of the Holy Ghost, as sound and entire as it had ever been; the snout of the seraphim that appeared to St. Francis; one of the nails of a cherubim; one of the ribs of the *verbum caro factum* (the word made flesh); some rays of the star which appeared to the three kings in the east; a phial of St. Michael's sweat when he was fighting against the devil; a hem of Joseph's garment, which he wore when he cleaved wood, &c.: "all which things, observes our treasurer of relics, I have brought very devoutly with me home. Our Henry III., who was deeply tainted with the superstition of the age, summoned all the great in the kingdom to meet in London. This summons excited the most general curiosity, and multitudes appeared. The king then acquainted them that the great master of the Knights Templars had sent him a phial containing *a small portion of the precious blood of Christ* which he had shed upon the *cross!* and *attested to be genuine* by the seals of the patriarch of Jerusalem and others. He commanded a procession the following day, and the historian adds, that though the road between St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey was very deep and miry, the king kept his eyes constantly fixed on the phial. Two monks received it, and deposited the phial in the ab-

bey, "which made all England shine with glory, dedicating it to God and St. Edward."

Lord Herbert, in his *Life of Henry VIII.*, notices the *great fall of the price of relics* at the dissolution of the monasteries. "The respect given to relics, and some pretended miracles, fell; insomuch as I find by our records, that *a piece of St. Andrew's finger* (covered only with an ounce of silver), being laid to pledge by a monastery for forty pounds, was left unredeemed at the dissolution of the house; the king's commissioners, who upon surrender of any foundation undertook to pay the debts, refusing to return the price again." That is, they did not choose to repay the *forty pounds* to receive *a piece of the finger of St. Andrew*.

About this time the property of relics suddenly sunk to a South-Sea bubble; for, shortly after, the artifice of the Rood of Grace, at Boxley, in Kent, was fully opened to the eye of the populace; and a far-famed relic in Gloucestershire, of the blood of Christ, was at the same time exhibited. It was shown in a phial, and it was believed that none could see it who were in mortal sin; and after many trials usually repeated to the same person, the deluded pilgrims at length went away fully-satisfied. This relic was *the blood of a duck*, renewed

every week, and put in a phial; One side was *opaque*, and the other *transparent*; the monk turned either side to the pilgrim as he thought proper. The success of the pilgrim depended on the oblations he made; those who were scant in their offerings were the longest to get a sight of the blood: when a man was in despair, he usually became generous!