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Early Christian Relics, Commodity Culture

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The following Research Reflection is part of CSWR's ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

Beginning in the third and fourth centuries, while physical vulnerability and uncertainty intensified for most of those living in the Roman Empire, Christians became increasingly attracted to relic veneration. Relics are objects that belong to or are associated with martyrs and saints, the holy dead. The fourth-century Christian saint Macrina wore a ring containing a splinter of the cross of Jesus. Other Christians kissed the dirt of a burial site or kept a little box of martyr bones. Egeria, the fourth-century Christian traveler, describes one worshipper taking a physical bite of the cross of Jesus, literally taking the cross into their body.

Relics, as objects of devotion, offered healing and protection, but they also held more. Relics emerged in relationship to this historical period of escalating precarity. They were not simply a naturally evolving Christian practice but a response to imperial Roman social and colonial practices that objectified human beings and thus effaced the line between life and death.

Relics were portable and often disjoined or fragmentary: a piece of cloth, a finger bone. According to early church writers like Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea, no matter where they were, relics carried the presence and vitality of the luminaries associated with them. Relics may have been inanimate, at least to some, but they were paradoxically alive with a saint's presence and power in the imagination of those who venerated them. So, too, relics were important beyond Christians' experience of God. They lent dignity and import to churches, cities, or high-status individuals who could acquire them. Relics were, among other things, property, and each property had an uncanny life of its own.

Relics held meaning and power by being symbolically tied to contemporary social practices around death, dislocation, mobility, and the objectifying of bodies. Ancient literature and inscriptions document the transportation of bones or ashes of the dead, taken to the land of their ancestors, whether or not the deceased had been born in that place. The desire for repatriation was due to widespread migration and displacement under Roman imperial and colonial rule. One of the earliest references to relic collection in Christian literature is found in the second-century *Martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna*, which mentions the collection of Polycarp's bones after cremation to then "put them in an appropriate place," presumably Smyrna.

Relics usually traveled far from their origins, however. CSWR Senior Fellow Andrew Jacobs describes Roman Palestine, especially Jerusalem, as a primary source for the mining and dissemination of relics across the empire. This was part of Christians' larger pattern in this period of appropriating and exoticizing anything Jewish.

Relics were passionately sought and hoarded, just like any other wealth in antiquity. One wealthy, fifth-century woman had the remains of forty martyrs secretly buried with her. Sometimes, the corpses of saints were barely cold before crowds sought to take pieces of their bodies for relics. In the fifth-century *Life of Daniel the Stylite*, Daniel is placed in a lead sarcophagus after he dies so people would not dismember him.

Relics were not only themselves trafficked and commodified. They held poignance for devotees because these living objects resonated with Roman social practices that objectified and commodified human beings. The colonial culture of the Roman Empire embraced plunder, appropriating and moving artifacts and human bodies across the empire. Enslavement and indentured servitude were forms of death-dealing labor that kept the Roman Empire alive. Bodies were commodities to be traded or used up.

Asterius of Amasea's fourth- or fifth-century homily on the martyr Phokas concretizes associations between relic fragments and colonialism. Phokas' body was dispersed across the Mediterranean: his head in Rome and his body in different places across Asia Minor. Scholar Efthymios Rizos translates, "But if, by means of small relics, the martyr has established elsewhere a colony, as it were, of his metropolis, that place is admired and most sought after by all Christians." Asterius clarifies that relics "even if divided over many places, preserve the glory of the thrice-blessed one intact everywhere."

Relics wore the mark of violence and dismemberment, which is why many early Christian writers like Asterius defended their intactness, straining against the obvious brokenness and partiality of relics. Although Christian writers emphasize healing and vitality, we should not ignore the rawness of the fact that Christians were trafficking in the dead. Nor should we ignore the pathos of Christians holding death in their hands.

Relics condensed and symbolically recapitulated the dynamics of imperium, especially its forms of objectification and dislocation and its practice of life-making through the stealing and draining of life. Relics reflected back the conditions of their devotees' existence. Endowing human remains and whatever touches them with luminous power, Christian relic veneration dramatized how, under imperialism, life and death are hard to tell apart.

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Bio: Maia Kotrosits is a scholar of first- through fourth-century Christianity and the larger social and cultural world of the ancient Mediterranean. Her research stretches across biblical studies, religious studies, cultural studies, and classics, contributing to long histories of colonialism and race, as well as to nondominant modes of historiography. She has made significant contributions across fields in the humanities in theorizing material culture, affect/emotion, constructions of the body and sexuality, and alternative approaches to writing ancient history.

Her most recent monograph, *The Lives of Objects: Material Culture, Experience, and the Real in the History of Early Christianity*, places pressure on the humanities-wide fascination with objects and material culture through questions of objectification and what matters (what's real, what counts as a life) as richly expressed in critical race, feminist, queer, and psychoanalytic theories. Her first book, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging*, was a post-identity re-examination of the emergence of the designation "Christian" in antiquity and was the first to bring affect and diaspora theories to the ancient social world. Maia has also written two other mini-monographs: *Theory, History, and the Study of Religion in Late Antiquity*, and *How Things Feel: Affect Theory, Biblical Studies, and the (Im)Personal*.

Maia received her PhD in New Testament from Union Theological Seminary in 2013. She has taught at Union College, Amherst College, and Denison University, and she is the corecipient of a generous grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.