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Charles Freeman. *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Book Review

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Aida Dias

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Relics played a vitally influential role in the unfolding of events which made up the European Middle Ages. From changing ways of living to establishing major travel routes, they were the instruments of power with which the Church and state leaders gained and maintained control over the masses. Relics of saints and martyrs including whole skeletons, fragments of bone, clothing, personal objects, blood, milk, and objects associated with Jesus Christ—like the True Cross, the Holy Lance, shrouds, stones from the sepulcher and many others—were the currency of the Church, drawing those hoping for salvation of the soul or healing of the earthly body to the opulent shrines which spread all over Europe. In *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*, Charles Freeman, an expert on the ancient world and the history of Christianity, takes the reader on a journey through a time overcast by the shadow of sin and punishment, where relics provided a spiritual relief, and where the Church's power grew to the point of making the Reformation all but inevitable.

In the early days of Christianity, martyrdom came to be an almost desirable way to die for some, since it brought the mortal flesh closer to immortal spirit much quicker than asceticism. Cult-like worship of martyrs' relics often began immediately after their deaths, with reports of numerous miracles happening after contact with body parts, blood, or clothing. Freeman credits Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the fourth century, with essentially beginning the exchange of martyr relics through Europe, creating a network of shrines and Church power, although the practice had pagan origins in hero worship. Constantine had begun the practice of building shrines to honor places from Christ's life; now shrines were being built to house the relics of saints and draw people to them—the more generous the visitors, the more lavish the shrines became. *Holy Bones, Holy Dust* tells a tale of power exchanging hands as the relics themselves were exchanged. For many centuries, the Church held the power, and its associated wealth, but there were many instances of city leaders and men like Charlemagne, Louis IX, and Philip II collecting vast numbers of relics for personal prestige and, in many cases, threatening the authority of the Church. Up to the thirteenth century any bishop could name a new saint; after that, the papacy attempted to take control by requiring that each saint's life and miracles be recorded and investigated, so that they would not lose power to leaders

outside the Vatican. Freeman presents evidence showing this was partly unsuccessful since many saint cults came and went long before the papacy had a chance to even investigate them.

*Holy Bones, Holy Dust* is unique in that it is the only English language, full-length account of the history of relics and their influence in the shaping of the Church. Freeman gathers information from early hagiographies, official papal documents, and a wealth of other sources, many of which mentioned relics only in passing, failing to note the crucial role they played. He provides an unapologetic account of the corruption and pagan-origin practices of the medieval Church, but Catholics need not be offended for no judgment is offered—except perhaps by the repeated use of the word *cult* to refer to saint-and relic-worship, given its negative connotations. Freeman acknowledges the difficulties of entering “the realms of faith” (p. 22) where there are thousands of accounts of illnesses being instantly cured, of the bodies of saints being whole and exuding sweet scents centuries after death, and even of many resurrections taking place in connection with a saint’s relics. He acknowledges the phenomenon of the placebo effect based on faith, but he does not dwell on the improbability of miracles.

Freeman attributes great importance, and perhaps blame, to the doctrines of Augustine of Hippo who, at a time when the Scriptures themselves were not available to the masses in the vernacular, spread the idea of original sin, and cast the world on an eternal search for salvation. Relics were introduced for this purpose; they not only allowed for saints to perform miracles, they were the instruments through which sinners could ask the saints to intercede with God in their favor so that they might be saved. At times when there were great wars and natural disasters, and particularly after the Black Death, this worked against the Church, since people believed that God had given up on them for their sinfulness. Augustine himself was at first critical of the relic exchanges and skeptical of the reported miracles, but eventually he went on to advocate the recording and publishing of all miracles.

Cities like Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Paris, and Compostela in Spain, which accumulated vast collections of relics in sumptuous shrines, drew huge crowds of pilgrims seeking to reduce time spent in purgatory. The crowds were so large that the Church began selling indulgences without requiring the actual pilgrimages. The Church, particularly in Rome, became so wealthy that the number of its critics grew every day. Another element which eventually led to the Reformation was the ever-widening division between clergy and layman. Freeman argues that the consecration of the host—itsself a relic in numerous blood cults—was a main factor in the division which eventually led to the exposure of many false relics and a new tragic iconoclasm in many parts of Europe after the Reformation.

*Holy Bones, Holy Dust*’s engaging narrative with vivid stories and examples

is complemented by beautiful images of bejeweled reliquaries—many of the portable kind, which could be paraded to help convert pagans—and shrines, as well as maps showing the popular routes of mass pilgrimages. Its only fault might be found in the first few chapters where, in order to make a point, Freeman jumps several centuries back and forth, leaving the unwary reader with a distorted idea of the actual sequence of events, but it later settles into a more chronological storyline.

Overall, the book succeeds in its goal of describing how medieval life and preoccupation with the afterlife allowed for the veneration of saints, with their individual personalities and talents, to flourish. Further, it demonstrates the roles played both by the individual relics and by the cults in the rise of power of the Church—and subsequently in the Reformation. And it does so masterfully, leaving one wanting the continuation of the history of relics beyond the Middle Ages.

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The original may be found at:  
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