

## RESEARCH PAPER

# The Smell of Relics: Authenticating Sainly Bones and the Role of Scent in the Sensory Experience of Medieval Christian Veneration\*

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The archaeology of smell is a burgeoning field in recent scholarship. This paper adds to existing literature by investigating the function of smell in relation to relic sales and veneration in medieval Europe, a hitherto understudied area of research. Collating historical texts concerning the translatio of saintly relics in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire with archaeological sources associated with relic veneration and religious worship (including ampullae, unguentaria, sarcophagi, holy oils, pillow graves, and silk), this paper suggests that (1) smell was used in the medieval world as a means to challenge or confirm a relic's authenticity, and (2) olfactory liquids that imbued or permeated material objects in the context of worship functioned as a means of focusing attention on relic veneration and were an essential part of the cult and/or pilgrimage experience.

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## Introduction

The cult of relics can be traced back as far as ancient Egypt, where the pharaohs were elaborately wrapped and embalmed in scented resins before being interred within pyramids and venerated as gods. For the purposes of this paper, relics will be defined as the corpses of important Christians or artefacts associated with their lives, including well-known figures such as Mary and Jesus together with lesser known evangelists, apostles, saints, and martyrs. According to Roman custom and law, citizens in medieval Europe were typically buried outside city walls. In AD 357, Constantius formalized this practice, passing an edict that forbade anyone to

exhume a body. As is often the case in history, rules are made only to be broken, and a black market for selling bodily relics quickly developed. The staggering size of this trade as well as the wide geographical movement of relics rendered it difficult for buyers to determine whether the products of any given merchant were authentic.

Whilst archaeologists have examined scent in the Byzantine Empire, with a particular focus on icons (Pentcheva 2010), other scholars have investigated smells in the medieval world, concentrating on general sensual perception in a cultural context (Kleindschmidt 2005: 57–92) or arousal (Largier 2007). Although such works have furthered the investigation of experiential smell in the medieval and Byzantine worlds, few works investigate the medieval and Byzantine history of smell within an archaeological theory context. Several monumental works exist on sensory archaeology for the prehistoric period such as Renfrew's (1985)

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The Archaeology of Cult: The Sanctuary of Phylakopi, Skeates' (2010) *An Archaeology of the Senses*, and Hamilton and Whitehouse's (2006) 'The Senses of Dwelling'. Historians have increasingly turned their attention to the body and corporeality, and several authors have furthered our understanding of the culture of scent across various historical epochs, including Meloni's (1975) *Il Profumo dell'Immortalità: l'interpretazione Patristica di Cantico*, Detienne's (1982) *Les Jardins d'Adonis: La Mythologie des Aromates en Grèce*, Faure's (1996) *Parfums et Aromates de l'Antiquité*, and Classon et al. (1994), *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. Few books, however, combine archaeological and historical approaches; even less so for the medieval and Byzantine world. Moreover, Bowes (2008) and Clark (2010), in their respective state of the field articles on early Christian archaeology and Church History, urge scholars to conduct more interdisciplinary research by combining archaeological theories with historic sources.

A few notable exceptions deserve our attention. The seminal work on archaeology and smell in the medieval period is Deonna's (1939) 'EUWDIA: Croyances Antiques et Modernes' in which Deonna examines how the Christian 'odeur de sainteté' was inherited from the ancient world by presenting a number of case studies associating certain smells with gods, sacred spaces, and living ritual. Deonna concludes that spiritual scents were either pleasant or unpleasant, a duality organised around the Manichean notions of good and evil. Albert's (2006) more recent *Odeurs de Sainteté: la Mythologie Chrétienne des Aromates* likewise explores the aroma of sanctity but, like Deonna, Albert falls into the trap of reifying smell across historical epochs without engaging with the uses and functions of smell in different cultural contexts. It is a challenge successfully met by Corbin (1982) in *Le Miasme et la Jonquille: l'odorat et 'imaginaire Social, XVIII<sup>e</sup> – XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècles*. Deonna and Albert should be praised, however, for consulting a wide range of texts despite an atemporal treatment,

though Albert's title is somewhat misleading as he is primarily concerned with embalming and unction oils.

The most comprehensive work to date is Roch's (2009) *L'intelligence d'un Sens: Odeurs Miraculeuses et Odorat dans l'Occident du haut Moyen Âge (V<sup>e</sup> - VIII<sup>e</sup> Siècles)*. Expanding on the work of Evans (2002), Roch explores the uses and meaning of scent in the early Christian world, which he sees as a vital point of contact between the temporal and spiritual worlds. As Classen et al. observe, 'to encounter a scent was to encounter proof of a material presence, a trail of existence which could be traced to its source' (1994: 205). Roch traces this 'trail of existence' by drawing on a plethora of sources including scripture, liturgy, and archaeology across visigothic Spain, Italy, Gaul, Germany, England, and Ireland. He concludes that 'the 'aroma of sanctity' does not exist: there are only scents, or better olfactory perceptions and the testimonials that are produced thereof' (original emphasis, 2009: 23). Both Evans and Roch note that, furthermore, religious smells operated as a link between Christian and ancient (pagan) past (i.e. incense and unguents that had been tied to sacrificial rituals). Evans (2002: 196) notes the 'sweet smell of a martyr' in the Islamic tradition also mediates between the quotidian and the divine, since martyrs were seen as an important communication link between the present world and the beyond; an important observation since martyrs were the precursors to saints and many aspects of the martyr tradition were subsumed within subsequent hagiographies. Roch (2009: 646) emphasises that scent was an 'active' symbol or category, carrying a social significance that gave concepts, such as a saint, the divine, or God, a 'presence' and also excluding or re-integrating individuals into the Christian community. The smell of saints, he concludes, 'was not an anecdotal epiphenomenon of medieval religiosity' but a prevalent 'humanisation and socialisation of the experience of divinity'. A saint's scent was not only a sign of his/her divinity, but also that

of his/her proximity to God and 'goodwill' toward the faithful who could share in the olfactory experience, which Roch refers to as a 'language of olfaction' (2009: 2, 645).

The question that arises is whether such sensory descriptions were symbolic or real scent encounters. Harvey's (2006) *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* is a remarkable work that transcends current scholastic limitations and extends the chronology of Roch's analysis vis-à-vis Christian olfactory culture. Harvey argues that early Christians assimilated Greco-Roman scent practices and eventually redefined them for their own purposes. Building upon scholarship from monumental works such as Caseau (1994, 1999), Harvey (1999) demonstrates that the late antique Christian cultural milieu was sensorily rich and self-aware. Given the numerous engagements with scents, such as incense and medicines, in venues including private dwellings, churches, and hospitals, some scents started to be categorized into 'good' and 'bad' smells (following Deonna and Roch), which reflected the cosmos and morality. Thus, according to Harvey, identity through olfactory senses was culturally constructed, and 'provided knowledge – essential knowledge – to which there was no other means of access' (100).

Caseau (1994) shows the continuity of the late antique Christian olfactory engagement into the medieval period. Methodologically, she integrates material culture to support her ancient to early medieval texts; however, no scholarship to date connects material culture to *translatio* accounts, which would imply that different ceramic typologies, burial customs, and dyes could affect the scents described in a medieval and Byzantine *translatio*. Our reading suggests the possibility for material artefacts to be hidden in the discursive *translatio* narratives that remain silent in other sources and scholarly works (see Woolgar 2006, Nichols et al. 2008, Jütte 2005).

Following a brief description of the processes of collecting and displaying relics in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire,

the problem of authenticating relics that were stolen, frequently sold out of context on the black market or sold in small pieces independently of a larger body, will be discussed. In the third section we will address the archaeology of relic smells. First, ceramic typologies, which were known to carry liquids originating from areas in close proximity to relic locations, will be examined. By sharing the same 'air-atmospheric area', the liquid scents and/or smells of holy waters or fragrant oils contained in ampullae or unguentaria may have defined a relic's aroma. Second, the practices of medieval Christian cult worship will be examined with a keen eye for similarities in *translatio*, burials, and reliquaries, discussing the cloth cases, ornamental boxes, and sarcophagus-types used in cult practices. These receptacles not only housed relics but also allowed aromatic liquids to interact directly with the venerated objects, thus imbuing them with a distinctive smell. The paper will conclude with a few tentative remarks on the role of scent in the sensory experience of medieval religious rites before summarizing the key elements of this analysis, drawing attention to fruitful areas for future research.

### Relic Collecting in Medieval Europe

In Medieval and Byzantine Europe, relics were believed to possess healing properties (Brown 1981: 3; Efthymiadis 2011). Thus the closer one was to a relic, the more likely one was to be granted a miracle. To some extent, then, the cult of relics involved a pilgrimage aspect. Not only did wealthy patrons seek out and purchase relics; the proximity required for miraculous encounters encouraged less wealthy citizens to travel to different localities (nearby or far away), participating in a worship experience that involved a holistic use of the senses including sight, sound, and smell.

Constantine the Great was the first main collector of relics. In 337 AD, he called for the *translatio* (the transfer of a relic) of Saints Luke, Timothy, and Andrew to Constantinople for his newly built Church of the Holy

Apostles (Wortley 2009: 359). His mother Saint Helena was also an avid collector, seizing sections of the True Cross during her travels in Jerusalem and bringing them, and others, back to Constantinople. By 1204 AD, the city was the world leader in relic-collecting, boasting a hoard so impressive that some scholars even suggest that the fourth crusade was conceived as a means to loot it (Wortley 2009: 6–7). Constantine was not the only monarch to be obsessed with relics: a continent away, Charlemagne brought the cult of relics to its acme in Western Europe. The Frankish king required that all church altars have a relic and he himself wore a crown that displayed a fragment of the True Cross. Charlemagne's avid interest stimulated a demand amongst clerical circles for relics. Royal courts, too, sought the prized pieces, and the French king Louis IX, paid 135,000 livres for the Crown of Thorns (Freeman 2011: 70).

Given the high demand for relics and the generosity of wealthy patrons, a black market developed, peaking between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. It helped that relics were easily transferable: a full corpse was not required, as any small piece – a finger, tooth, tibia, or skull, and so forth – could become the object of adoration. Such was the case with Saint Andrew, for whom three fingers from his right hand as well as 'the upper bone of an arm, one kneecap and one of his teeth', were said to have been transferred to Saint Andrews, Scotland, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Freeman 2011: 87). The *translatio* of Saint Andrew highlights a key feature of the relic trade: rather than size or a particular body part determining authenticity, a relic became the focus of veneration if the saint's remains were accepted by the local community.

The acquisition of a relic frequently created a strong cultural affinity with a particular city. In other words, a relic was only as powerful or as meaningful as the emotions townspeople ascribed to it. In this symbiotic process of appropriation and veneration, adopted relics often came to function as a town's image or icon (Mecklin 1941: 17). Rel-



**Figure 1:** Venice lion insignia. Photo © Paul A. Brazinski, 2011

ics moreover marked time's passage or life transitions, as Mecklin observes: 'The flight of time was measured by the feasts of saints. The important events were not battles or the fall of dynasties but the discovery of the relics of a saint, the healing of a demoniac, or pious pilgrimages to the shrines of saints' (1941: 28).

Given the importance of relics to quotidian life, the saint represented by a given relic often became the patron saint of that particular city. Such was the case with Saint John the Baptist in Florence and Saint Mark the Evangelist in Venice. Saint Mark's symbol can be seen on medieval Venetian insignia while an evangelical lion denotes Mark (fig. 1). Before Mark's *translatio* in 828 AD, however, the Byzantine warrior Saint Theodore was the patron of Venice. From 828 AD onwards, Mark replaced Theodore in all city spaces (Brown 1991: 518). Venetians had consciously and actively chosen Saint Mark as a symbol of their identity and there are few, if any, traces of Saint Theodore in Venice today.

Another example of a relic's association with a city's identity is seen in the patronage rivalry between Siena and Florence. In the early medieval period, Florence's patron saint was Saint John the Baptist. Medieval florins depicted Saint John on one side of each coin (fig. 2). When Pope John XXII announced that relics of Saint John the Baptist were for sale, the most notable being



**Figure 2:** Medieval Florentine *florin* (BM No.1870, 1101.1). © Trustees of the British Museum

John's head, Florence naturally placed a bid. However, the sum Florence offered the Pope was insufficient, and the city found it could only afford one of the saint's fingers. In an unfortunate turn of events, Pope Pius II (a native of Siena and successor to John XXII) later gifted one of John the Baptist's arms to Siena – leaving the citizens of Florence furious (Brown 1991: 518).

### **Authenticity and the Relic Black Market**

The rivalry between Siena and Florence underscores both the competitive and lucrative dimensions of relic acquisition. The black market for relics was a booming business in the Middle Ages, a feature that is unsurprising when one takes into account the interest kings, nobles, cities, and clerics showed in the trade – and the fact that bones, given their composition, are relatively light items that can be easily dispersed. Most relic thieves were not quotidian criminals; many were clerics who were familiar with or had

access to a nearby saintly catacomb or graveyard. As a result, the earliest prominent relic thieves were generally Italian clerics (Geary 1978: 51). Medieval authors like Guibert of Nogent, who scathingly referred to this illegal market in his treatise *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, frequently attacked 'wicked' clerics for selling fraudulent relics (de Nogent CCCM 127: 79–175).

Some scholars argue that the Pope implicitly overlooked such activities since the presence of Italian relics in France reinforced the notion that the holiest seat in the Catholic Church remained in Rome and not in the power-hungry Carolingian Empire (Geary 1978: 64). Moreover, major saints buried in the Vatican were protected: only 'secondary' saintly remains were stolen. In Rome, for example, relics associated with Saints Marcellinus, Alexander, Sebastian, Urban, Felicesimus, Felicity, Cornelius, and Bartholomew were stolen (Geary 178: 48). The most notorious relic thief, infamous for selling relics to Charlemagne's personal historian Einhard, was Deusdona, a cleric who worked and served in Rome near the Basilica of Saint Peter in Chains. Capitalizing on his access to an array of relics, and the vibrant market demand, Deusdona frequented Roman catacombs collecting relics. With the aid of his brother, he would then ride out to visit monasteries, discreetly selling his goods along the way.

Demographically, the majority of those who purchased relics were Carolingian bishops and abbots. This changed dramatically in the 10<sup>th</sup> century when the Anglo-Saxon kings became major patrons of the trade. To meet the demands of their monarchs, Englishmen began to steal and sell relics at a higher rate on the black market. We know of at least one attempted relic theft by an Englishman as far away as Cologne (Geary 1978: 62). However, it seems that when a thief was apprehended, the local clergy simply demanded the return of the relics. To our knowledge there are no accounts of severe punishment, banishment, or death following a relic theft gone awry; being caught in

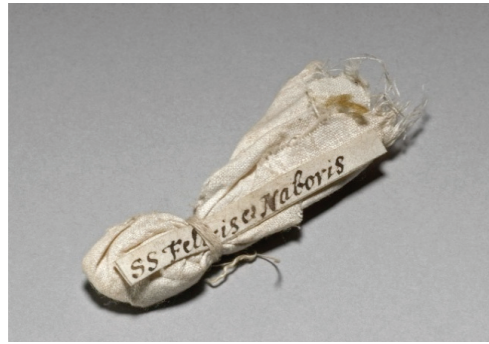


the act merely entailed a slap on the wrist. This may be due to the fact that, like earlier Viking raids in England from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, thieves preyed on undermanaged and ill-guarded ecclesiastic buildings.

### Validating Relics: Authenticity Tags

Although thieves might go unpunished, the necessity of authenticating relics nevertheless arose – particularly as the majority of relic sales were conducted separately or out of context, whereby body parts were sold independent of the body as a whole or by dubious characters operating within the black market. For archaeological evidence of the processes by which relics were authenticated we turn to two French cities not far from Paris. In the central Middle Ages, Sens and Chelles were both regions known for their avid interest in relic collecting. Combined, the two cities possessed approximately 700 relics. Between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD alone, 144 relic tags were written at Sens (McCormick 2001: 285). It is unclear whether each relic received its own individual tag or whether a collection or grouping of relics, such as two arms of the same saint, required only one tag. Nevertheless, most legitimate relic sales were accompanied with an authenticity tag similar to modern antiquities practice (see fig. 3 for an example of a relic tag).

It was relatively easy to forge a tag since authenticity labels were rudimentary slips of paper. Moreover, they were not written on a standardized or special type of paper, and thieves often travelled to locations where real relics were located to produce a false authenticity for their fake products. This was not very difficult to accomplish, and as McCormick (2001: 300) notes, most relic cults were located in late Roman ports, leading one to wonder if relics ‘actually cross[ed] the sea’ at any point in their geographic transfer. Another means of authentication was a relic’s accompanying vesicle – a reliquary. Ornate reliquaries, often decorated with precious jewels, validated the relics within, based on the assumption that only reliquar-



**Figure 3:** Relic tag with accompanying relic textile bundle (BM No.1902,0625.1.ab). © Trustees of the British Museum

ies decorated with incorruptible jewels and precious stones were worthy of holding relics whose associated saints were similarly incorruptible (Bagnoli 2011: 138). These repositories frequently became objects of veneration in their own right, and their saturation with relic scents or the permeation of relics by scented fluids contained within, or circulating through, the receptacles is a feature to which we will return.

### Scented Relics: The Thefts of St Mark and St Nicholas

Arguably the most famous relic theft is that of Saint Mark the Evangelist, whose remains were translated from Alexandria to Venice in 828 AD (Clayton 1988: 138). Legend has it that when Venetian merchants stole the body of Saint Mark the Evangelist from Alexandria at night, they hid the remains in a cargo box (Brown 1991:511f). When Islamic customs officials asked what was in the box the following morning, the Venetian merchants wittily responded that they were carrying pork products. The Alexandrians consequently let the Christians go, unwisely trusting their words. Central to this analysis is the fact that historical accounts of this-translatio, as well as that of Saint Nicholas from Myra, indicate that there was a particular smell attached to the saintly relics – a smell that might have been disguised by the accompanying scent of pork. Geary notes

that these relics were 'miraculous, giving off pleasant odours when touched, healing the sick' (Geary 1978: 4, emphasis added)

A similar narrative describes the translation of Saint Nicholas. Townspeople in Myra were alerted to the attempted theft by Bari merchants of the tomb of Saint Nicholas in 1087 AD when the would-be thieves inadvertently released the sacred oil attached to the relic: 'When it was opened, the body released a fragrance that reached the centre of the town [Myra] and alerted the townspeople who gathered to try and stop the theft' (Freeman 2011: 110). Descriptions of the event from the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century *Ottoboniano-Vaticanus* 393 and the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Cryptensis GR BB IV* manuscripts, suggest that this fragrance was pleasing to the nose: 'And immediately such an odour was wafted up to them that they seemed to be standing in Paradise. And not to them alone was the odour vouchsafed, but it pervaded even to the harbour to those in the ships' (Anrich 1913: 435–49; McGinley and Mursurillo 1980: 3–17). Most pertinent to this paper's discussion are Freeman's observations about the scent of the relic of Saint Nicholas, which Geary's account also describes as a 'wonderful fragrance spread throughout the area, reaching even into the town of Myra several miles distant' (1978: 119). McCormick, who consulted contemporary accounts in relation to historical sources of commercial trade, adds that 'the miraculous perfume of the relic ship could be smelled abroad by the ships sailing behind it and to either side, up to three Roman miles away' (2001: 401). Although we cannot accept historical sources as objective fact, almost every well-documented relic theft, like that of Saint Nicholas, mentions the relic's unique fragrance.

Geary (1978: 4) observes, as is evident in period accounts of Saint Nicholas' *translatio*, that the notion of an olfactory function or feature of relics is accepted by historians 'without question'. Yet this apparent consensus deserves further study. Why did relics smell, or why were they applied with specific

scents? What role did scent play in ritual and remembrance of relic veneration and/or pilgrimage? In this paper we attempt to justify the claims of contemporary historians by using a theoretical approach that combines textual and archaeological evidence. Our analysis will suggest that smell was a primary feature used in the medieval world as a means to challenge or confirm a relic's authenticity, as well as rendering the act of encounter a multi-sensory experience that would have characterized religious worship including relic pilgrimage.

### **Relic Smells: Ceramic Typologies and a Relic's Air-atmosphere Area**

First and foremost, relics shared several common features which could have contributed to their common unique smell. The first commonality were ampullae or pilgrim flasks that 'were produced in or near several holy places to serve as a portable container for sanctified liquids' (Hayes 1997: 89). Most ampullae have a semi-flat sided body, with a depiction of a symbol or a scene relevant to the site's saint (Bloomfield 1904: 7; see fig. 4). The flasks usually have two handles from the body to the vessel's neck. Some ampullae were multi-functional: not only did they serve the practical task of retaining holy waters or oils from a pilgrim site, they could also be worn as souvenirs, hanging around the neck as a pendant 'souvenir relic' (Vikan 2010: 70). In archaeological sites where ampullae are found, we can hazard that an unknown oil and/or water container, which might have contributed to a relic's unique fragrance, was probably located within the vicinity of the relic.

A second type of ceramic evidence which suggests the creation and prevalence of relic-specific smells are unguentaria (fig. 5). Small, 'narrow-necked flasks to contain perfumed oils or unguents', unguentaria 'were frequently deposited in burials, presumably to create sweet smells' (Hayes 1997: 85). Although the shape of unguentaria changed from Hellenistic to Roman times, from a spindle whorl to a rounded body that



**Figure 4:** *ampulla*: Saint Menas (BM No.1876,0520.4). © Trustees of the British Museum



**Figure 5:** *Unguentaria* (ASCSA #BW 1976 029 28). © American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Corinth Excavations

could stand, this evolution may be directly attributed to the custom of Christian burials whereby a standing unguentarium was more practical (Hübner 2007: 27–40). Ceramic types were eventually replaced with glass versions, of which few remain. As with ampullae, archaeologists continue to be uncertain as to the exact elements held within these vessels, a mystery that remains all the more obscure because unguentaria and ampullae stoppers were usually organic. Although a

few artefacts have been uncovered with their stoppers intact, extensive residue analysis is still needed to address this lacuna in the archaeological record.

Nevertheless, there is some evidence of relics being exposed to aromatic fluids in this way. The famous pilgrim flasks of Saint Menas, for example, come from the saint's cult site of Abu Mina near Alexandria, Egypt. Abu Mina functioned as a place of veneration and healing from around 363 AD to 619, when the complex was largely destroyed by Sassanian Persians and subsequently declined in importance. Saint Menas' cult had a healing dimension in which ampullae played a crucial part. According to Bagnall and Rathbone (2004: 119), 'The flasks [ampullae] were used by pilgrims to carry home drops of oil from the lamps in the holiest places of the shrine'. In addition, a vessel below the main altar at Abu Mina collected run-off holy water which was sold to pilgrims. A chemical analysis, performed near the crypt where holy oils were known to have been found, discovered that the oil used during worship contained a 'high percentage of suspended incense' (Grossman 1998: 285). It seems that at Abu Mina at least, oil drops were one odorous substance that probably contributed to the shrine's, and by association the relic's, distinctive scent.

Several other sites show similar evidence of fragrant ampullae or unguentaria, including Saint John's shrine at Ephesus, where ceramics were used to collect manna or dust that miraculously accumulated in the saint's crypt (Duncan-Flowers 1990:125f). Saint Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury featured a mixture of the saint's 'holy blood' and water, sold in popular ampullae in the late medieval period (Spencer 1998:75ff). Finally, Saint William's cult site at York Minster also distributed holy water, which had supposedly emanated from the saint's body, to English pilgrims (Norton 2006). Spigots were added to William's sarcophagus in order to dispense the liquid, as seen in the original stained glass at York Minster (fig. 6), presumably into vessels such as ampullae. The liquid contin-





**Figure 6:** Spigots on Saint William's sarcophagus at York Minster. *Photo © Paul A. Brazinski, 2011*

ued to be collected by pilgrims until the Reformation. Chemical analysis conducted on one flask found at York revealed that it still contained 'a pleasant-smelling liquid, which from preliminary investigations, seems likely to be a compound of aromatic, and presumably medicinal, herbs and spices, mixed in water' (Spencer 1966: 139). Other sarcophagi similar to the York example show small holes below the space where the body was held to allow for the accumulation of holy dust – like John the Baptist's manna – which pilgrims collected on a daily basis (Cambridge UL MS Ee.3.59 f.33r; Freeman 2011: 142). Archaeological evidence of contraptions for dispensing or carrying liquids, in addition to recent chemical analysis, therefore suggests that relics did have a uniquely marked smell in the medieval world.

A third possible contributor to a relic's smell relates to a specific form of reliquary sarcophagi in which pungent solutions were directly applied to the relic. For example, a

5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century AD reliquary sarcophagus from the region of Apamen, Syria was plied with water or oil at the cult site in healing rituals (Krueger 2011: 9; see fig. 7–8). At Apamen, as at other sites like Abu Mina and York Minster, archaeologists have uncovered evidence of liquids in direct contact with the relic – thereby defining its smell. Further examples of similar reliquaries from Asia Minor and the Balkans functioned in the same way, allowing liquids to materially infuse a relic. One particular example comes from a church near Varna, Bulgaria. It is comprised of two smaller reliquary boxes from a much larger set. The inner box contained the relics and the outer box had a central hole on top, allowing pilgrims to pour offerings of oil or water onto the inner box. Upon receiving a miracle, the pilgrim would leave a votive offering to the church (Kruger 2011: 10). Like the sarcophagi at York Minster, pilgrims could therefore collect fragrant holy substances that would have infused the



**Figure 7:** Reliquary sarcophagus (Berlin No.10/87). © *Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*



**Figure 8:** Early Byzantine reliquary sarcophagus. © *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Image source: Art Resource, NY*

olfactory character of the relic in situ. Other accounts of holy substances being secreted from saints' bodies are found throughout medieval Europe, such as the remains of Saint Thecla and Saint Demetrios in Thessaloniki, which reputedly exuded myrrh (Bakirtzis 1990: 140; Bakirtzis 2002: 175).

Of course, archaeologists cannot assume that all relics were graced with ampullae, unguentaria, or purpose-built sarcophagi. A cult site might refresh or refill their saint's accompanying unguentaria more frequently than usual if that saint was of a high status –

for example Thomas Becket or John the Baptist. Such a practice would have constituted an investment in maintaining the site's tourism, since relics were high profile artefacts that brought many pilgrims to otherwise distant places. We cannot discount such a possibility: the 'grand opening' of Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury brought in roughly 28 per cent of the Church's total annual revenue in 1220 AD (Nilson 1998: 147f).

The general practice of pilgrimage was financially lucrative for the Church: in 1392 AD Munich, which had a population of 10,000, averaged 40,000 pilgrims a day, and historians similarly estimate that over one million pilgrims entered the gates of Rome in 1450 AD (Spencer 1990: 8). Some pilgrim sites sold over 100,000 pilgrim badges and other souvenirs each year, substantially contributing to Church coffers (Spencer 1990: 14). In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of travelling with relics in order to raise money for church construction programs became common; another way in which the Church exploited reliquaries to its pecuniary advantage. Some cathedrals, such as Glastonbury, even lied about the relics they possessed; Glastonbury claiming at different intervals to shelter the remains of King Arthur, the Holy Grail, Saint Joseph of Arimathea, Saint Dunstan, and various Anglo-Saxon Kings (Stean 1985: 77). Historians have shown how the Church capitalized on the tradition of relic pilgrimage, producing souvenirs such as ampullae and badges (usually made of iron or pewter) exclusively marketed for pilgrims. Examples of these and similar artefacts have been traced to centres spanning from Canterbury in England to Constantinople in Turkey. A small investment in maintaining a relic's unique smell would have promoted a site's attraction. In the medieval West, we know that feretarians maintained their medieval shrines: daily cleaning, guarding the relics, and replenishing the shrine with new candles (Nilson 1998: 152). In sum, it also seems valid to posit that refilling or selling unguentaria would have been one way to reap a significant financial reward.

Ceramic vessels were not the only material that might have infused a relic's fragrance. Another common material accessory for many relic displays was silk. Most relics were placed on a silk pillow or resided in reliquaries lined with silk (McCormick 2001: 720). Saint's bodily relics were usually covered in silk and each *translatio* required a new layer of the same material (Muthesius 2008: 42). Although silk, like cloth and wool, is generally scentless, the dyes used to colour it had a potent smell. Taking the tightly controlled Constantinople silk industry as an example, archaeologists have discovered that silk-dyeing industries operated outside the city walls near a water source because the dyes were so putrid (Lopez 1945: 35; Muthesius 2004: 50). For example, in order to produce a mere 1.4 grams of murex purple dye – just enough to dye the trim on a garment – 12,000 murex brandaris mollusks were required because the secretion for the pure purple colour came from the murex's small hypobranchial gland (Jacoby 1997: 455). Given the great quantity of mollusks required to yield a minute amount of dye, not to mention the smell of the dye itself, purple silks would have had a strong mollusk aroma during the dying process that abated over time, yet continued to retain traces of its original scent.

If traces of ephemeral material matter which might have imbued relics with particular scents remain speculative, medieval burial traditions also hint at the importance of scent in religious rites more generally. In pillow grave burials, for example, flowers, moss, or other fragrant plants placed around the body of the deceased would have altered the smell of the remains (Parker Pearson 2001: 1). Pillow grave rites were reserved for royalty and higher elites, and most likely included saints. A modern parallel is the offering of cut flowers on a grave or coffin. Such flowers serve two functions: first, they visually ornament a gravesite, and second, they enhance the olfactory atmosphere of the deceased and/or icon of the deceased. Like the smells associated with relic resting places and pilgrimage sites, the flowers or organic mate-

rial adorning pillow graves provided both a pleasant sight and smell, pointing to the multifaceted nature of religious experience, employing sight, hearing, smell, and touch, that Roch asserts characterised early Christian worship (2009: 647).

Similar to pillow graves, the final common denominator affecting a relic's scent was its physical context: its placement within a church or ecclesiastical edifice. With this setting comes the full potential of church practices and their concomitant scents, ranging from incense and holy oil to candle wax, piscinia, and so forth. The aforementioned features might have come in direct contact with relics or simply surrounded reliquaries. The *piscinia*, for instance, was 'a shallow bowl in an arched recess through which drained away water at mass and for cleansing the sacred vessels after communion' (Steane 1985: 69). Reliquaries required occasional cleaning, of course, and the *piscinia* seems to be the most likely candidate for such a function. Incense, candles, and other ceremonial scents would have constituted a reliquary or relic's 'air-atmosphere area', thereby forming a uniquely fragrant environment that pilgrims entered in order to approach the site and object of veneration.

Operating on at least three sensual levels (sight, smell, and touch), fragrant offerings thus created a holistic sensory experience, rendering the act of burial a multivalent sacred encounter in which material remains were imbued with aromas that subsequently permeated – even characterized – the memory and nature of worship itself. Pleasurable smells, as opposed to eliciting thoughts or feelings of death and despair, also made veneration a positive experience (Parker Pearson 2001: 11). This concept applies equally to the other smells associated with relic cults previously discussed. Pilgrims journeyed to visit dead people, often individuals who had been laid to rest long ago. Even if a saint was not buried according to the pillow grave tradition, the pleasing scent of oils or silks found at the site and/or infusing the relic's receptacle might have ameliorated remorse

and sorrow, making veneration a profoundly physiological, and indeed psychologically positive, experience.

### Conclusion

Historians cannot base a theory of relic smells on a single medieval source describing a *translatio* during which a fragrance was released by the relic theft of Saint Nicholas. It is nevertheless tempting to consider that Venetian merchants might have placed pork products in the coffin of Saint Mark the Evangelist to mask the smell of the stolen relics. Could this have been meant as a double entendre; masking the relic's scent whilst creating a religious dilemma for the Islamic customs officers? Even if reports of a specific fragrance are exaggerated (as is probably the case with the aroma of Saint Nicholas, which supposedly spread throughout the town to the sea), smell nonetheless operated as a means of authenticating or characterizing prominent saintly relics. As in the modern world, where certain objects have a distinctive smell that becomes associated with that item (for example a new car, a burning fireplace, or the smell of your grandmother's cooking) or the smells of objects that are only 'known' through direct experience or hearsay (for example the smell of burning flesh during war), relic smells would have evoked a certain object, a specific site or a particular religious experience.

Historical records of *translatio* that cite a relic's 'unmarked' smell serve only to reinforce those relics that fit with the more predominant smell-type model, as the unmarked trace suggests even more strongly that a unique fragrance would disperse when an individual relic's reliquary or sarcophagus was opened. The lack of an olfactory-specific atmosphere thus becomes the strange, the 'unmarked'. Indeed, the use of fragrance in religious rituals would have created a uniquely sensory environment, perhaps inducing a 'sense of awe' so key to transcending the boundaries of daily life and bringing spectators into closer communion with God and his pantheon of saints (Renfrew 1985:

16). Nonetheless, cult archaeology, and the archaeology of religion in general – perhaps due to its very ephemerality, like its scent – remains an under-researched field (Insoll 2001: 3; Wesler 2012: ix). The smell of relics, be it associated with or derived from holy oils, holy waters, holy dirt, manna, pillow graves, silks, or other substances, likely functioned as an 'attention focusing device', the first criterion of cults noted by Renfrew (1985: 18–19) in his well-known primer on cult archaeology.

By applying archaeological theory to artefacts that can be linked to written historical sources hinting at relic smells, this paper has demonstrated that the smell of relics did, de facto, have a perceivably marked smell to a medieval Christian in Western Europe. We build upon Harvey's (2006) theory of good, bad, and ambiguous smells as identity in Christianity, expanding her thesis to include authenticity in the medieval period and suggesting how certain ceramic typologies, burials, and dyes could affect the smell of relics. Scent, acting as a cult-focusing device, also functioned as a psychological mechanism to relieve the sorrow-laden or death component of cult sites, thus rendering pilgrimage more enjoyable. Finally, a relic's unique fragrance likely operated as an anticipated, expected, and memorable part of the pilgrim experience. Did the widespread use of ampullae answer a demand for secondary relics, as is currently assumed in academic scholarship about pilgrim souvenirs and healing powers? Or, in light of the olfactory dimension discussed in this paper, were some ampullae also bought simply as a souvenir of the unique smell of certain relics, tokens that could also be carried home and shared with others?

Exploring answers to these questions naturally entails further collaboration and investigation between chemists, archaeologists, and historians. Where historical analysis and theoretical archaeology fail to provide answers, quantitative data from scientific archaeology and chemical laboratory methods may prove fruitful. In conclusion,



it seems valid to suggest that in thefts of major saintly relics across Medieval Europe, a relic's particular scent was known and used as a means of both evaluating authenticity and shaping the experience of relic worship in general.

## Notes

\* An initial version of this paper was presented by Paul A. Brazinski at the June 2012 Early Medieval Archaeology Student Symposium at University College London. A later edition won the Robert F. Streetman graduate paper prize at the AAR-MAR Baltimore 2013 conference. We are grateful for the insightful comments from EMAS and AAR-MAR as well as professors at the University of Cambridge, University of California-Berkeley, and the Catholic University of America. We also received helpful comments from friends too numerous to mention, although special thanks go to Dr. Emanuele Vaccaro, Dr. Susan Wessel, Mary Anne and Joseph Brazinski, and John Fryxell and Sue Pennant.

\*\* Originally published as Deonna, W 1939 'EUWDIA: Croyances Antiques et Modernes: l'odeur Suave des Dieux et des Élus,' *Genava* 17: 167–263. Deonna's account has recently been republished (2003) with an added introduction and epilogue by Carlo Ossola, as *Evodia: Croyances Antiques et Modernes; l'odeurs Suaves des Dieux et des Élus*, Torino.

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**How to cite this article:** Brazinski, P and Fryxell, A 2013 The Smell of Relics: Authenticating Sainly Bones and the Role of Scent in the Sensory Experience of Medieval Christian Veneration. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 23(1): 11, pp. 1-15, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/pia.430>

**Published:** 2 September 2013

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