RELICARY: A BOX FOR A RELIC

Lucy Razzall

**Origin**: in religious cultures and practices since ancient times, especially Christianity, as containers for relics – body parts and other earthly remains from holy persons, saints, and martyrs. **Function**: to protect human remains considered sacred, for display and veneration, and to provide a focal point for individual and communal acts of devotion to the dead saint. **Appearance**: reliquaries can be made from many possible materials, including wood, marble, ivory, alabaster, stone, glass, and crystal. They are often richly decorated with precious metals, precious stones, and other materials which might point to their sanctity. They might have glass panels so that the relic can be viewed from outside, and they may be labelled or inscribed with the name of the person whose relics they purportedly contain. **Shape**: any box can become a reliquary, by virtue of containing a relic, but reliquaries are usually specially made. They might take the form of a simple box or a much more elaborate container in the shape of a locket, a body part, or a building. **Size**: very wide-ranging, from tiny boxes that might be held in one hand, or worn as a piece of jewellery, to huge shrines the size of a building. **Habitat**: holy places across the world, especially Catholic shrines, chapels, churches, cathedrals, which often become pilgrimage destinations, attracting visitors seeking physical or spiritual succour from the relics. **Interaction**: reliquaries are the focus of devotional activities to the dead saint and to God. They might be static or moved around in religious processions and ceremonies. Pilgrims to relics might touch or kiss the reliquary or pray in front of it. The reliquary might be within reach or kept at a distance. **Age**: reliquaries and relics survive from ancient times to the present day. Reliquaries challenge earthly temporalities, resisting material decay and enshrining the relic as part of the timeless glories of heaven.

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In the autumn of 2009, some remains of St Thérèse of Lisieux were brought to the UK for the first time, where they were taken on a tour of cathedrals, churches, convents, schools, hospitals, a university, a hospice, and a prison. St Thérèse, often referred to as ‘the Little Flower of Jesus’, was a nineteenth-century French Carmelite nun, who died from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four. She was canonised in 1925 and has since become one of the most popular modern Catholic saints, honoured for the deep commitment to her Christian faith that she showed in the face of intense physical suffering. Her earthly remains undertake a perpetual journey around the world, travelling in an alabaster box. The alabaster box is locked inside a wooden casket elaborately decorated with gold and marble, which is in turn displayed in a large glass case.

Each of these concentrically-arranged receptacles signifies something about what is within. The innermost box entombs the bodily remains, whereas the next box, a wooden casket with an elaborate architectural structure, encloses them in a basilica-like form, a symbolic representation of the universal Church to which the saint brings blessings. The final layer, the glass case, is completely transparent (tarnished only by the ghostly marks left by pious hands and lips as they touch and kiss the case), allowing the inner container to be seen with clarity. The transparency of this outermost container suggests the ready access to the holy that the object provides, while at the same time separating off and protecting its sacred contents from the outside world.

These three containers are reliquaries: they exist to enclose their contents, which are considered holy relics. A relic is an object associated with a dead holy person; it is usually a bodily fragment, such as a piece of bone or flesh, or a tooth, hair, or fingernail. Other material remains, like garments, or personal belongings, can become relics too. The earthly traces of a dead person, however, do not assume relic status automatically. The transformation of material remains into holy relics worthy of veneration has to be brought about by the beliefs and practices that surround them, that is, by the particular social and cultural contexts in which they exist. Enclosure inside a reliquary is often a crucial part of this process of imbuing sacred status upon something otherwise very ordinary. A bare bone is anonymous, silent, and possibly even repellent, but when placed inside a reliquary it becomes a holy fragment, which is believed to have inherent supernatural, salvific, or magical power. A reliquary is therefore one of
the most tangible and formal manifestations of the convictions that determine where the sacred can be found.

From as early as the third century AD, relics of Christ and the saints provided essential points of contact between earth and heaven, breaking down the barriers that separated the worlds of the living and the dead. As the Christian faith took over from antique pagan beliefs, the remains of holy men and women had the potential to become conduits of divine power, bringing spiritual succour and miracles to the faithful. By the early medieval period, relics were integral to religious practice: the consecration of a medieval church required holy remains to be installed inside it, usually in the altar (Brown 1981). The entire building was sanctified by the relic it contained, and so the church itself became a kind of macrocosmic reliquary. While the relic served as a bridge between the material and the spiritual, and concentrated the two together within the enclosed space of the reliquary, it also transcended the bounds of the reliquary to sanctify the whole building. The architectural structure of the church pointed outwards and upwards to heaven as well as inwards to what the building contained, acknowledging the ultimate source of the sacred but also inscribing sacred presence within itself.

In medieval Europe, relics were the focus of individual devotion as well as elaborate public liturgies, rituals, and ceremonies. Pilgrimage to places honouring significant relics was essential to the Christian life. While Jerusalem was the most important pilgrimage destination, the faithful were also drawn to many other locations associated with the relics of particular saints and martyrs, where they sought physical or spiritual relief or other divine favours. At these sites, the relic was usually located at the heart of various concentric layers – enclosed inside a richly jewelled reliquary, which might be protected by another container such as a chest, which in turn was contained in a sanctuary, shrine, or chapel, which was part of the larger architectural structure of a church or cathedral. At the end of a long journey, the pilgrim's gradual progression through these increasingly hidden spaces increased the momentousness of his or her eventual encounter with the relic (Turner and Turner 1978: 22–23).

The functions of the reliquary are many, and their theological and material significance are closely interwoven. The hundreds of examples extant in Catholic churches across continental Europe (especially in Italy and Spain),
and in museum collections, reveal the ways in which these containers were required to ‘protect, hide, temporarily reveal, draw attention to, explain, assert ownership of, or make more visually exciting their often desiccated contents’ (Cannon 2005: 240). Only a few medieval English reliquaries survive today, but from written sources we can gain a sense of the richness of the treasures that embellished religious institutions across much of Europe until the Reformation. At Durham Cathedral, according to a late sixteenth-century description of the monastic foundation before its dissolution in 1538, the glorious shrine of the Anglo-Saxon bishop Cuthbert, one of England’s northern patron saints, contained ‘almeryes [boxes] of fine wenscote [wainscot, or superior oak imported from northern Europe], being uarnished and fineyle painted and gilted finely ouer with little images uerye seemly and beautifull to behould, for the reliques belonginge to St Cuthbert to lye in’ (Anon. 1903: 17).

While the reliquaries for St Cuthbert’s remains were made from ‘fine wenscote’, a wide variety of other materials could be used in the construction of receptacles for relics, including bone, ivory, metal, glass, crystal, and marble. Many of these substances had scriptural associations with the heavenly realm, as in the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, and they also signalled the spiritual purity and divine value of the box’s contents. As well as being ‘uarnished and fineyle painted and gilted’, as above, reliquaries could also be encrusted with enamelled images, metalwork, and precious stones, and thus were some of the most valuable religious objects in monetary as well as spiritual terms.

In 2010, an exhibition at the British Museum, Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe, brought together many different medieval relics and their reliquaries, a range which demonstrated the astonishing richness of the materials and the impressive technical skill involved in making these objects (for the exhibition catalogue see Bagnoli and Klein 2010). Many medieval reliquaries were simple, box-shaped receptacles, but they could also take the form of a locket or pendant, a Eucharistic monstrance, a folding diptych or triptych, or a container for multiple relics, each enclosed in its own tiny box-like compartment. They were also often elaborate architectural forms which emphasised their own identity as a shrine – a cathedral in miniature (Walker Bynum 1995: 202–03).
By the later Middle Ages, reliquaries increasingly exposed and explored materiality in complicated ways. The relationship between the container and its content could be more explicitly one of physical correspondence. This period saw the rise of a distinctive type of reliquary, sometimes called a ‘speaking reliquary’, which took the shape of a human body part, such as a head, arm, or foot, constructed to glorify the corporeal portion it purported to contain by reconstructing it in the finest possible materials, while still recognising its fragmentary nature (Hahn 1997: 20–31; Walker Bynum and Gerson 1997: 3–7).

Reliquaries could visually engage with the relationship between their own form and their contents in other striking ways. A twelfth-century casket containing some of Thomas Becket’s blood, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see illustration above), is inscribed with the words INTUS SANGUIS EST SANCTE TOME SANCTUS TOMAS ACCIDITUR (‘within is the blood of St Thomas, St Thomas is killed’). The large imitation ruby on top of the box reinforces the reflexive dynamic between container and content, its glowing redness reminding the viewer visually of the precious substance hidden inside. Like this one, many reliquaries bear engraved text with the name of the saint whose remains they purportedly contain, and such inscriptions work as further enshrining and enclosing techniques. Another kind of reliquary, the ‘ostensory’, emphasises its displaying function, often featuring hosts of angels thrusting the relic towards the viewer (Schmidt 2007: 202–03). Other reliquaries feature glass panels through which the enclosed relics can be seen or at least partially glimpsed. These examples illustrate just a few of the many variations that can be played upon the reliquary’s basic box form.

The reliquary, and other multiple layers surrounding the medieval relic, have an essential theological function, articulating the relic’s identity as a material fragment of the sacred. The material features of the reliquary often say something about the dynamic between container and contained: a reliquary might frame, conceal, and reveal its contents all at once. This theological function is inextricably bound up with the other purposes of these containers. As a sealed box, the reliquary protects the relic from decay and damage by human touch or exposure to the elements, and both the relic and the reliquary may have to be further protected against theft or desecration.
The material layers enclosing the relic are thus implicated in the complicated issue of access to the holy. Medieval pilgrims embarked on their journey to a shrine with the hope that they would be able to gaze upon or possibly even make direct bodily contact with the relic it contained. While physical proximity to the relic was desirable, the relationship between the individual pilgrim and the relic was typically defined by a tension between closeness and distance, or a ‘strategy of material occlusion’ (Malo 2008: 88). The displaying of a relic was paradoxically often as much about emphatic enclosure and concealment, keeping the faithful at a distance, as it was about exposure. The reliquary sanctified and protected the relic, but also enabled access to the relic to be carefully controlled. This ‘occlusion’ of the relic was not only material, as the relic could also be surrounded by powerfully obfuscating social rituals, which reinforced the boundaries of access and control. Rather than direct contact with the relic, pilgrims may well have had to be satisfied with just a glimpse of the reliquary held aloft to a huge crowd during a procession.

When St Thérèse’s reliquary was taken to a church in Taunton, Somerset, in 2009, journalists reported that ‘people queued patiently to approach the relics, some kneeling on the floor beside the case, others resting their foreheads on it. One woman was tentative about touching the glass, as though it was a precious object; others rubbed the case with both hands as though it was warm like a radiator’ (de Bertodano and Lamb 2009: 13). People were ‘tentative’ in their approach to this imposing object, but they desired physical contact, touching different parts of their bodies against it. Their caresses inspire a simile – it was as if the glass ‘was warm like a radiator’ – which offers an interpretation of the way in which the reliquary operates in relation to its contents. The glass case assumes a kind of porosity, suggested by its transparency, whereby the holiness of its contents is emitted invisibly, to be absorbed through the power of touch. Historically, the spiritual bounteousness of relics was sometimes manifested in even more tangible, physical ways, through generous outpourings of blood, water, oil, or scent. According to the thirteenth-century hagiographer Jacobus de Voragine, St Nicholas ‘was buried in a marble tomb, and a fountain of oil began to flow from his head and a fountain of water from his feet. Even today a holy oil issues from his members and brings health to many’ (1993: 25). There is a specific term, ‘myroblyte’, for a saint whose remains exude miracle-working
liquids – in these cases, the porosity of the reliquary is part of its miraculous potential.

In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation changed the religious landscape of Europe forever. During its most violent periods, many traditional receptacles for the sacred – including shrines, instruments of the Mass, contentious books, and reliquaries – were systematically destroyed across northern Europe. This literal desecration was matched by a rhetorical offensive against traditional ideologies and practices – including the veneration of relics – in an attempt to empty and expose as false the ‘vessels’ of Catholic doctrine. Some reliquaries, along with other confiscated items from church treasuries, were turned into secular objects, while others became fugitive objects, lovingly preserved by recusant Catholics in secret.

The reliquary not only offers the physical protection and transportation of a relic, but also works as a crucial boundary of belief. For those who believe in the inherent qualities of the relic as a sacred object, the reliquary enshrines the relic, setting it apart from the profane world. Yet critiques of relics written by sixteenth-century Protestants, including those by Jean Calvin in 1543, sought to shatter the reliquary in ideological terms – to destroy any notion that the reliquary could enclose a fragment of the sacred. Reformers saw the veneration of relics as idolatrous and superstitious, and their arguments reveal the ways in which they turned the material form of the reliquary to their own rhetorical ends. Such denouncements express suspicion of the reliquary as a dark, secretive box that contains merely rotting animal bones, while deceiving the faithful into believing that it contains the remains of a holy person – and furthermore, making the outrageous suggestion that these bones offer access to divine power.

The multiple enclosures in reliquaries and shrines were evidence, according to reformers, of the inherent falsehood of all relics, the darkness of the reliquary betraying the metaphorical darkness of unreformed religious doctrine and practices. For the Counter-Reformation, however, relics became more important than ever as tools of evangelism, and despite the polemical surge against them, many relics retained the status of mementoes or historical curiosities. Some relics irrevocably transformed their reliquaries, so that their presence was felt even when they were long gone: in the words of historian Alexandra Walsham, when
‘the relics in question have been lost, destroyed, or confiscated, the containers themselves have a tendency to become surrogate foci of devotion and reverence’ (2010: 12). The emptiness of the reliquary might speak to the faithful just as powerfully as the relic itself.

The reliquary may ultimately be seen as less precious than its contents, but it employs the splendour of earthly riches to signal what the inscrutable fragment it contains cannot say on its own. The relic is a metonym – a part of a body standing in for the whole body, and an earthly fragment standing in for the greater glory of the divine – but the reliquary itself is ‘both a metaphor for its means of conveying meaning, and the instrument that makes this possible’. The relic-reliquary dynamic produces a ‘complex effect whereby contained and containing are interchangeable, and the borders between them are indeterminate even as the containing act continues to articulate itself in the object’s physical features’ (Chaganti 2008: 15).

As boxes with multiple material possibilities, reliquaries engage intensely with their contents. The relic itself is inherently paradoxical, being fragmentary and yet also complete, a full manifestation of divine presence in a small scrap of profane material. While a relic is usually something very humble, the beauty of the reliquary that encloses it insists that it is something beyond earthly value. The reliquary may enable a dead saint to move across great distances, as opposed to being permanently immured at one site, and also to be present in several places simultaneously. The temporal aspect of the relic is crucial too; preserved inside the reliquary, the fragment of the saint is set in motion, potentially perpetually so, resisting decay and the sense of loss in a journey through time. In this material denial of putrefaction, the reliquary offers a more complicated picture of temporality, and plays a crucial role in establishing the relic as part of the timeless glory of heaven.

Relics are objects around which many important questions about devotion, cult, and art coalesce. Although the focus here has been on the Christian tradition, relics are also important in the Islamic and Buddhist faiths. They are often congruent with or closely related to other holy objects, such as images, statues, and tombs – and they can reveal much about religious and cultural beliefs surrounding the dead. The ever-popular devotion to St Thérèse of Lisieux is just one example of the enduring significance of relics for Catholic
Christians today, and her travelling reliquary vividly illustrates the transformative potential of all such holy boxes, to turn their profane contents into eternal sources of the sacred.

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Fig. 39.1 Research Box, on display

Fig. 39.2 Research Box, in closed form