

The ENID-Jubilee on Relics and Reliquaries in Rome, 11–13 October 2023

On 11–13 October, 2023, the University of Bergen-based European Network on the Instruments of Devotion (ENID, enid.w.uib.no) marked its twentieth anniversary with an international seminar entitled *Relics and Reliquaries – Seeing is Believing*, that was held at The Norwegian Institute in Rome. ENID’s research interests include the instrumental aspects of Christian piety and devotional practices from the fourteenth to the twentieth century. The main focus is on how piety was lived and practiced, and particularly on the material objects that shape, intensify and express both individual and collective piety, such as books, images, devotional objects, music, liturgical ritual and actions. Through an interchange of ideas, sharing of knowledge and critical discourse, this cross-disciplinary research network aims at gaining a deeper insight into the mechanisms of piety and devotion, in order to understand the phenomena and their instruments as essential features in the religious and cultural development of Europe. Since its foundation, ENID has organized eleven seminars in eight different countries, from which, so far, four edited volumes have grown.

Relics and reliquaries have been at the core of European art and devotional cultures over the centuries. Recent decades have seen a wide scholarly interest in the subject, as was expressed through several ground-breaking exhibitions and book publications. Examples of medieval exhibitions (with catalogues) held since the turn of the century are *The Way to Heaven. Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam and Utrecht, 2000–2001), *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (Cleveland, Baltimore and London, 2010–2011) and, more recently, *Magie Bergkristall* (Cologne, 2022–2023). Recent publications include Cynthia Hahn, *The Reliquary Effect: Enshrining the Sacred Object*, London 2017; Anna Pawlik, *Das Bildwerk als Reliquiar? Funktionen früher Großplastik im 9. bis 11. Jahrhundert*, Petersberg 2013; Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400–circa 1204*, University Park 2012; and Bruno Reudenbach (ed.), *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, Berlin 2011. Lena Liepe’s *Reliker och relikbruk*



Fig. 1. Reliquary shrine from Filefjell (Norway), 1230–1250, now in the University Museum of Bergen. Photo Svein Skare.

i det medeltida Norden, Stockholm 2020, offers an overview of the same topic in the Nordic countries.

The focus of the ENID jubilee seminar 2023 was on Medieval and Early Modern Western Christianity, but without losing sight of later, and even contemporary developments. Topics included the nature and definition of relics, the mysterious agency that is attributed to them, the treatment and practices that have surrounded them through the ages and, concerning reliquaries, the relationship between the relics and their containers. In the call to the seminar, several research questions were formulated, such as: What media and strategies were chosen by commissioners and craftsmen to express and substantiate the authenticity of the relic that was kept inside? What shapes, materials, images etc. were employed to convey the idea that the contents were real and sacred, in other words: what is the relationship between the in- and outside of reliquaries? And how was their credibility enhanced by spatial settings, ritual practices and written documents? What is the relationship between text, such as inscriptions, and image in the forging of this credibility? How did the power of relics animate images and devotional objects into which they were inserted? And what is the added value of relic collections, does this create a “condensed sanctity”?

The first day was filled with eight lectures, starting with Henning Laugerud, professor of Art History at the University of Bergen and one of the founders of ENID who, in his lecture “False Relics? A Medieval Paradox”, discussed a story related by Caesarius of Heisterbach in his *Dialogus Miraculorum* from c. 1220 in which a pious knight purchases false relics of St Thomas Becket from a fraudulent priest. Despite the fraud, the relics proved miraculous because of the piety of the knight since, as Caesarius concludes, *pietas meretur gratiam* (piety always deserves grace). Another example of swindlers making money with fraudulent relics is “The Pardoners Tale” from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Laugerud argued that medieval believers were not gullible ignorants but, quite to the contrary, always wary of the possibility of fraud, and the veracity of relics and miracles was constantly questioned. At the same time, there was a firm belief that God works wonders the way he pleases, and sometimes even through false relics, as the final test is always the piety of the devout person. Laugerud concluded by advocating a “post-colonial” approach by taking medieval piety seriously by accepting what the medievals held to be true as rational.



Fig. 2. Cynthia Hahn presenting at The Norwegian Institute in Rome on Wednesday, 11 October 2023. Photo Aintzane Erkizia Martikorena.

The aspect of empiricist rationality also characterizes a category of relics that was discussed by Kristin Bliksrud Aavitsland, professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Oslo and director of The Norwegian Institute, and which she called “metrical relics”. Her talk entitled “Metrical Relics. Displays and Interactions” discussed objects that claim to reproduce the measure of holy bodies or body parts. Measures believed to represent the physical length of the body, feet, and hands of Jesus Christ, the Virgin, other saints, and even holy objects, occur in various media in the medieval West from the tenth century until well into the Early Modern era. A discussion of several of such items, including the *Mensura Christi* baldachin preserved in the cloister at St John of Lateran in Rome, marks in the outer wall of Trondheim Cathedral that may indicate the length of St Olav and several representations found in illustrated manuscripts induced Aavitsland to raise questions about representation, agency, and authority.

In their lecture entitled “Migrating Relics in the Seventeenth Century between Germany, Flanders and Spain”, Aintzane Erkizia Martikorena, art historian at the University of the Basque Country, and Justin Kroesen, ENID secretary and professor of Cultural History at the University Museum of Bergen, discussed a historical phenomenon that occurred during the Thirty Years’ War in which relics were confiscated from convents in the German Rhineland by Spanish military under the pretext of rescuing them from Protestant sacrilege by bringing them to safety in Catholic Spain. They were usually redecorated in Flanders before they were shipped south, where they often ended up in female convents and – particularly also – private oratories of noble families. Erkizia and Kroesen concluded that the relics, apart from their religious and spiritual value, possessed a clear social dimension, as they expressed and legitimized the prestige of their owners and helped them navigating the societal echelons in the Spain of the Habsburgs and of the Counter-Reformation.

Marianne Ritsema van Eck, a post-doc researcher at the Norwegian Institute in Rome, went on to present her project on the material and topographical



Fig. 3. Decorated skull relic of a Theban Martyr from Martioda, Álava, the Basque Country (Spain), early seventeenth century, now in the Museum of Fine Arts of Vitoria-Gasteiz. Photo Diputación Foral de Álava, Gert Voor in't Holt.

Fig. 4. The Titulus from the Cross of Christ kept in the treasury at the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome. Photo Aintzane Erkizia Martikorena.



traces of St Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, in Rome. In her talk entitled “Containing the *Titulus Crucis* at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome, from Medieval to Early Modern Times” she discussed how the *Titulus* – the inscribed panel showing the letters INRI that was attached to the Cross of Christ – kept in the treasury at the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome was stored, venerated and exposed during the late Medieval and Early Modern period. The church became a focal point of the cult of Helena, whose image was revived and re-signified during the late medieval and early modern period in order to reinforce the position of the city of Rome at the head of universal Christendom in the era of the Counter-Reformation and to promote the values and piety of this historical figure who had been central to the transition from paganism to Christianity.

In his lecture “The In- and Outsides of Reliquaries. Reflections on Ruusbroec’s *Geestelijke Tabernakel*”, Rob Faesen, ENID member and professor of

Church History at the Universities of Louvain, Antwerp and Tilburg, discussed how the mystic Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381) employed the metaphor of the Old Testament tabernacle holding the Ark of the Covenant, as the prototype to medieval Christian reliquaries, in order to understand the treasures of the soul in the context of Christian spirituality. The treatise *De Geestelijke Tabernakel* (The Spiritual Tabernacle), which was one of Ruusbroec's most widely read writings, contains a remarkably visual idiom describing a protective receptacle with a clearly differentiated interior and exterior that deliberately seems to evoke the empirical qualities of medieval reliquaries. In a spiritual sense, this is where the divine may nestle in the body of the human being who follows the mystical path aimed at unification with his or her divine creator.

Małgorzata Krasnodebska-D'Aughton, who specializes in the cultural and religious history of the later Middle Ages at the University of Cork, presented her talk "A Highway to Heaven: Relics of the Millennial Blessed Carlo Acutis" discussing her recent encounter, in Umbria and elsewhere, with the cult of the blessed Carlo Acutis (1991–2006), a devout Italian web designer who died of leukaemia at the age of fifteen, and who was beatified on 10 October 2020. Acutis is remembered for his deep devotion to the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary and promoted by the Roman Catholic church in an attempt to address a young audience. Calendars and other Acutis-merchandise have become widespread, and his relics recently travelled to various locations in the Catholic world. D'Aughton shared her observations on the developing Acutis-cult and by adapting a medievalist lens she proposed how the rise and spread of his cult can be understood in light of devotions to the saints and their relics in Medieval Europe, particularly the cult of St Francis of Assisi.

The afternoon session was filled with lectures by two invited speakers. Cynthia Hahn, professor of Medieval Art at Hunter College of The City University of New York, in her talk "Passion Relics as Crusader Treasure and the Arma Christi: Power and Devotion" examined triptychs, diptychs and tablet reliquaries that display Passion relics, usually around a fragment of the True Cross. Inspired by Byzantine art, these reliquaries display the fragments that were distributed to the Crusaders and reified the ability to move, both in their translation from East to West and in relation to the devotee. The reliquaries document a new presence of the sacred brought from the Holy East, but they also perform a series of revelations of presentation, and perform an invitation



Fig. 5. *The Three Mothers* (St Anne with the Virgin Mary, the Virgin Mary with Christ, and Elisabeth with St John the Baptist), mural in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, c. 760. Photo Aintzane Erkizia Martikorena.

to intimacy to the believer. They became associated with newly written liturgies and prayers, and with indulgences that promised salvation through their presence. What began as an aristocratic display of power in Passion relics thus led to a set of devotions that eventually spread through the practices of all the faithful. The striking intermediality of these devotions, passing from relic to reliquary, from manuscript to amulet, from cross to pendant, illustrates the power of relics circulating through space, time, and imagination.

Finally, David Morgan, professor of Religious Studies at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, in his presentation entitled "Magic in the Web of It: Rags, Relics, and McGuffins", argued that Othello's scarf and Emile Durkheim's discussion of flags as totems may offer some help in understanding the nature of relics. Each of these is an artifact capable of generating charisma



Fig. 6. Padre Pietro guiding ENID's visit of the monastery at Grottaferrata on Friday, 13 October 2013. Photo Aintzane Erkizia Martikorena.

and intense emotion. They drive plots, compel sacrifice, and generate communities. They are amulet, totem, and relic – material artifacts, on the one hand, and symbolic devices, on the other, whose power does not rest singularly within them but relies on an array of various components to produce the effects for which they are revered. Morgan discussed how relics operate as so-called McGuffins, black boxes that are known for their effects rather than for their actual contents. A favourite device in cinema and literature, the McGuffin is an object or person who drives the plot without disclosing much if anything about itself, yet its agency is considerable.

The two days following the conference at The Norwegian Institute were filled with study visits of several sites in Rome and surroundings. The programme on Thursday, October 12, started with a visit of the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme and its treasury guided by Marianne Ritsema van Eck, who referred back to her lecture on the day before. In the afternoon, Kristin Bliksrud Aavitsland gave a short introduction before the visit of the church of Santa Maria Antiqua at the Forum Romanum whose painted interior decorations

have been recovered and restored in recent decades. On Friday, October 13, a field trip ventured out into the outskirts of Rome to visit the medieval abbey at Grottaferrata, founded by St Nilus of Rossano in 1004, which is the only surviving example of what was once a landscape of Italo-Greek monasteries in Southern Italy. A guided tour offered by Padre Pietro included an explanation of the church, its narthex and side chapels, and of the monastery complex and library, after which the adjoining museum was visited.

During the conference, the speakers expressed their intention to publish the proceedings of this ENID jubilee seminar in an illustrated book, that will become the fifth edited volume produced by ENID over the past two decades. This way, after earlier monographs on *Instruments of Devotion. The Practices and Objects of Religious Piety from the Late Middle Ages to the 20th Century* (2007), *Devotional Cultures of European Christianity, 1790–1960* (2012), *The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe. Images, Objects and Practices* (2016) and *Material Cultures of Devotion in the Age of Reformations* (2022), the focus now shifts to one of Christianity's most fascinating phenomena, namely the materiality of the sacred as it is made tangible through relics and their containers.

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