

*Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*, by Charles Freeman. Yale University Press, 2011. 306pp., 16pp B&W illus., Hb. \$35.00. ISBN-13: 9780300125719.

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From June to October 2011 the British Museum in London hosted an exhibition on medieval relics, *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*. It was a spectacular success, with large numbers of visitors.

In the exhibition the formal religious practices and beliefs of medieval Christian Europe met the implicit, the informal and the curious. The visitors to the exhibition came to view the artefacts of religion, art, daily life and belief. In the crowds viewing the eclectic collection of “relics,” interest in the explicit in religious practice stood alongside a fascination with the implied.

Charles Freeman’s well written, comprehensive and highly readable book offers students of both explicit and implicit religious practice a similar journey. He writes at a time when an interest in, and the practice of, pilgrimage across faiths and cultures, is growing. His book appears at a time when objects of devotion can take a traditional religious or secular form; for example, in Memphis Tennessee, at the grave of “the King of Rock and Roll,” Elvis Presley. Sacred or secular, we are interested in relics, and in what they might mean for people’s lives.

This book guides us through the intricate world of medieval saints and the relics of their bones and other holy objects, with skill and authority. We read of the partition of Thomas Becket’s body, to form a journey for pilgrims around Canterbury Cathedral. We read of the relics of Christ, such as phials of “Holy Blood,” and of shrines to the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. We learn how each generation of shrines and relics both speaks to and reflects the changing world-view of each generation. We follow the story of their origin and the growth and practice of devotion, through Luther and the iconoclasm of Protestantism, to the resurrection of a belief in the miraculous at the time of the Counter Reformation.

Some of the stories of relics, nicely told, thus have the mark of an award-

winning work of fiction. We follow the Crusaders in the plunder of the east, and the orderly return of their spoils to form new places of devotion in Europe. We hear how in the fourteenth century, with the papacy in exile and rampant disease and growing social unrest, new places of worship were associated with the emergence or revival of “rescuer” saints and protective images of the Virgin Mary.

This is a history not just of relics and holy objects but of the place they had, not just in the religious but in the whole life of medieval Europe; in war, in peace, in trade, in politics and in the small details of daily living. Fascinating in itself, this book offers a perspective not only on questions about the past but also on questions about the sacred and the profane, both explicit and the implicit.