ABSTRACT

BONES OF CONTENTION:
THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR RELIC THEFTS IN THE MIDDLE AGES
by Gina Kathleen Burke

The purpose of this paper is to examine the popular religious phenomena of relic thefts during the Middle Ages. The hagiographic accounts, where monks and nuns record many of these thefts, reflect some ambivalence over these actions. Questions arise on how then the thefts were justified and moralized, and why certain members of society, especially clerics and royalty, were able to not only participate, but also to have their deeds labeled as sacred. Applying the sociological approach to this study of the thefts within hagiographic texts reveals that the divine authority of clerics and kings, which allowed them to participate in these acts, enabled these members of the medieval church to justify their involvement in theft because the sacredness of the theft, and the person committing it, trumped the situation’s ethical concern.
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THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR RELIC THEFTS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Comparative Religion
by
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Oxford, Ohio
2004

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To my family
Patrick, Cindy, and Pat Jr.
INTRODUCTION

During the Middle Ages, the cult of saints and the veneration of the saints’ relics became a central feature of theology, religious expression, and devotion for the Western Christian Church. Saints were those of the church community who, through their pious words and deeds, were believed to have had a special relationship with God that often manifested itself through miracles and, based on this relationship, were believed to reside in Heaven with God after their death. Since they had gained the reward of Heaven, they were deemed as exemplary figures to be copied as well as worthy of veneration by the rest of the Christian community. Although the saint’s soul was in Heaven, the saint’s body, and objects associated with the saint, remained on earth. These relics were seen as pledges and sources of power and thus were venerated by the rest of the community.

As the devotion to relics grew, so did the theft of these prized relics. The popularity of relic thefts peaked in Western Europe during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries. Although many clerics and members of royalty desired relics for their own, monks and nuns usually performed the relic thefts. The monks and nuns often recorded the sacred thefts in artwork, manuscripts, and hagiographies. Interestingly enough, these recorded thefts were usually considered pious and justifications were given by the hagiographers to defend the deed. Relic thefts were not unusual and random events. Patrick Geary states that there “are in fact over 100 such thefts and far from condemning these relic thefts as aberrations or as sins against the fellow Christians from whom the saints were stolen, most people apparently praised them as true works of Christian virtue, and communities…boasted of their successful thefts.”¹ It does seem strange that clerics, and indirectly royalty, were not only involved in theft, since it goes against one of the commandments of the church and some monastic rules, but they also praised their thefts as virtuous and sacred. Questions arise on how the clerics and the church got around the moral issue of obtaining a holy relic through theft and the

seemingly social acceptance of theft as a legitimate way of acquiring a relic. Why were clerics and royalty permitted to participate in relic theft and have the theft considered sacred?

The justifications given within the hagiographic accounts at first seem to be the answer to how the thefts were legalized and placed within the realm of the sacred. However, the justifications do not completely deflect all the questions of moral impropriety and, in fact, seem to reflect some of the hagiographer’s own tension over the matter. This paper adopts the stance of the historian Patrick Geary, who sees some ambivalence within the given justifications about the nature of sacred theft within the hagiographic accounts. This ambivalence casts doubt upon the validity of the supplied justifications and thus prompts the scholar to look for alternative answers for why clerics and royalty were able to participate in relic theft and have the theft considered sacred.

The paper’s approach in the study of relic thefts and their justifications in the hagiographic accounts will be a sociological one in which some of the theories of the sociologist of religion Emile Durkheim will be applied. The paper will also draw heavily upon the work of Patrick Geary; however, much of his work will be viewed through the lenses of religious studies, which will allow this paper to examine in greater detail the use of relics in religion and the moral justifications supplied by the participants in relic thefts.2 Overall, the accounts of relic thefts can be interpreted better through religious lenses to give an alternate explanation for the involvement in relic thefts. Members of the medieval church, specifically the clerics and the kings, were able to justify their involvement in relic thefts not only because, in these cases, the sacredness of the theft trumped the ethical situations, but also because of the divine authority of the clerics and kings involved in the actions allowed them to maintain their power.

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2 Patrick Geary, although also using a sociological approach, states in his work, *Furta Sacra*, that the purpose of his work is not to examine in detail the motivations or justifications of the thieves. “What we are really examining is the cultural and social context that gave the relic its symbolic function after the theft, and in particular we are examining the mentality within that context which accorded importance to the theft narrative as a ‘history’ of the transition form old community to new.” P.8
Lastly, the hagiographies, especially the *translatio* and the *De reliquiariun furto* texts and readings on the saints, are the sources used to support the theories presented in this paper. These sources presented in the paper draw from the ninth through the twelfth centuries. The specifically selected accounts hail from several different countries in order to present a fuller picture of the commonalities found in the given justifications and the hagiographic tradition.

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3 Geary deals only with theft accounts in the ninth through eleventh centuries in *Furta Sacra*. This paper includes accounts from the British Isles during the twelfth century because they offer solid support for the paper’s argument.
CHAPTER I
THE NATURE AND BENEFITS OF RELICS

Since this paper proposes to discuss an alternate way in which to view the theft of relics, it is pertinent to address first what relics are and how the community of faithful perceives them. Relics are important because they ensure the saint’s active participation in the community and provide the faithful with access to divine power. In fact, relics are seen as the group’s sacred emblem, one that gives the group’s members identity, strength, and protection. However, these powers could be harnessed to support another community if the relics were transferred to that new place. It was because of the nature and benefits of relics that others (including bishops, monks, and kings) wanted access to this power and resorted, in some cases, to theft.

The veneration of saints’ relics, which began as early as the second century, grew in conjunction with the practice of venerating saints. Relics were defined as “first of all bones of saints; secondly, they could be other remains of the saints’ existence; and thirdly they could be any object that had come in contact with items in the either of the first two classes.” However, relics encompassed more than just body parts of the saints; they also included various personal items of the saints, certain gospel books, and icons. Not all relics were held in the same esteem, and a class system developed to label relics according to their exact association with the saint or Christ, perhaps to imply the importance or the strength of the relic based on its closeness with the holy figure. A first class relic was any body part of the saint and any relic associated with Christ (e.g., the Holy Foreskin, Crown of Thorns, True Cross). A second class relic included an object associated with the saint, like St. Martin’s cloak or St. Andrew’s sandal. A third class relic could be a piece of cloth (or something similar) that had come into physical contact with either a first...


or second-class relic. A third class relic did not have to be associated with the time period of the saint, for a third class relic may be created at any time. While the first class relic actually embodied the holiness of the saint, the second and third class relics were worthy of veneration due to the intimate contact with the saint and the saint’s holiness.

Just as there was a class system to differentiate between saints and their relics, there was also a hierarchy within the ranking of saints and their relics. Although all saints were believed to be of a pious nature, to be in Heaven, to have had special blessings from God, and to act as intercessors on the behalf of the community, not all saints were considered equal. Some saints and their relics were better to have than others, for some were considered more powerful or more connected to the divine will and power. Within this established hierarchy Christ’s relics were always considered the highest, then those of Mary, the twelve apostles, the apostle Paul, and then the rest of the saints.6 This hierarchy was based upon the saint’s personal and direct connection or interaction with Christ. The closer the saint was to Christ, the closer the saint was to the source of holiness and divine power. Thus, the saint also seemed to acquire more authority in the community because of this connection.

Due to the saints’ piety and the closeness to the divine, the saints were often presented as examples of how to live the ideal Christian life for that particular time period and community. If one wanted to enter the kingdom of Heaven, it was best to strive to follow the example of someone who was acknowledged by the community and the church as being one of the residents of Heaven. Besides serving as Christian ideals, saints were powerful intercessors for the entire community of faithful. More to the point, the saints were completely human, and the community perhaps felt at times more comfortable requesting intercession and favors from them instead of from Christ. After all, the “Lord of the heavens was not to be burdened with the requests of the ordinary people. They trusted more in the

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saints, whose remains were close by.”7 The community was able to forge relationships with the saints while still maintaining a proper fear of the Lord. The connection with the saints and their communities was beneficial for both parties and tied all the community members closer together. This relationship with the saints as intercessors carried over to the saints’ relics as well, for the relics were considered to be the saints and were thus able to act as intercessors to divine power and assistance.8

The practice of venerating relics was rooted in the Christian beliefs of the communion of saints and the final resurrection. The first doctrine, the communion of saints, “presupposes that souls may help one another, by praying to God on each other’s behalf. Members of the Church Triumphant, being themselves saints in heaven, are the most effective intercessors.”9 All members, whether living or dead, were active members of the church community and all drew upon each other for prayers and intercession. The church members on earth looked to the members in Heaven for guidance and intercession since those blessed members had successfully gained the ultimate goal of residing in Heaven.

The second doctrine, that of the final resurrection, stated that, on the Last Day, the body would be resurrected and united with the soul in Heaven. Patrick Geary explains that the “Early Christians took literally Christ’s promise of the resurrection and thus expected that on the last day the martyrs’ physical bodies would be taken up again by their owners. The earthly presence of such a sacred body is thus a pledge or deposit left as physical reminder of salvation to the faithful.”10 The relics were seen not only as a pledge of the final resurrection but also as an affirmation of an active relationship with the community of faithful.

8 Geary, *Furta Sacra*, xiii and 34.
These saintly bodies, these relics, were seen as “the pignora, literally, the security deposits left by the saints upon their deaths as guarantees of their continuing interest in the earthly community. At the end of the world, the saint’s body would rise and be glorified; in the meantime, the saint continued to live in and to work through it.”\(^\text{11}\) The saints, through their earthly remains, were able to pledge and promise that they and the rest of the community of faithful would experience the final resurrection and entrance into the heavenly city of Jerusalem. Until that time, the saints would be the community’s intercessors, patrons, and means of access to divine power and blessings.

The veneration of relics was affected as well by the dual natures of saints and their relics. On the one hand, relics were often mundane items such as bones, sandals, and beards. As such, they were objects and not much to look upon and were often placed in gold or jeweled-covered reliquaries. As bones, relics had a connection with death, a connection that some in the early Christian world found polluting.\(^\text{12}\) Relics were also treated as goods that were bought and sold, traded, and stolen. They “remained things [that] distinguished themselves by extraordinary effects.”\(^\text{13}\) The commercial way in which relics were treated and the polluting connection with death would place the relics squarely in the realm of the profane and mundane objects.

On the other hand, relics were more than just bones, icons, and materials. Relics were often placed in gold or jeweled-covered reliquaries to reflect their sacred nature and to symbolize that the saints belonged to both the kingdom of Heaven and Earth. They were active members of the church community. Relics, as the “body of the saint, or a part of it, represented the heavenly patron and ‘were’ the person himself.”\(^\text{14}\) Thus they were still in communion with the rest of the church

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\(^{\text{13}}\) Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century*, 328.

\(^{\text{14}}\) Ibid.
body. It was through them and their sanctity that the community had access to divine power on a regular basis. Relics were the saint’s pledge of patronage and of a personal and even familial relationship with the community of faithful. They performed their roles as intercessors and took part in the church liturgy and the affairs of the community.

Certain reliquaries, the specialized containers that housed relics, reinforced the idea of the relics’ active nature. These body-part or ‘speaking’ reliquaries were shaped in the likeness of the saint or the specific body-part of the saint from which the bone came in order to reinforce the idea that the relics were the saints and thus the saint was still present and active in the community.15 Cynthia Hahn states that because “many body-part reliquaries do not hold the body part implied,” the body-part reliquaries were probably meant to express ideas of function and activity rather than content.16 She argues that arm reliquaries, like the one for St. Gereon, were compelling because they represented the “status of an active ‘limb’ of the saintly body and its potential for touch and gesture in the form of the arm reliquary.”17 This idea of function and active limbs reinforced the idea that the saint and the relics were still an active member in the community.

Other reliquaries promoted the message of the active nature of relics but in a slightly different manner than that of the body-shaped reliquaries. Some, like St. Foy, were shaped like a statue and made in the saint’s likeness. Instead of representing an ‘active limb,’ these reliquaries represented the human figure. St. Foy sits on a throne and wears a crown; both the chair and the figure’s clothing are covered in jewels.18 Due to the design, when the venerator looked at her reliquary, the venerator saw St. Foy looking back at him or her. The human figure of the reliquary served to heighten the awareness that, like the statue, the saint was in the

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15 Interestingly enough, these types of reliquaries existed in the late ninth century, but they do not gain popularity until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See Caroline Walker Bynum and Paula Gerson, “Body-Part Reliquaries and Body Parts in the Middle Ages,” Gesta XXXVI/1 (1997), 4.


17 Ibid., 22.
18 See Sheingorn, The Book of Sainte Foy, 16. The relic itself would have been placed within the statue’s head. The head itself depicts a male.
community’s presence. Like the figure, the relics and the saint were seen as a person who could take action like the other community members. The fact that the statue as an image served to connect the relics and the saint was important, because “between the image and the saint there exists a moral identity, or an identity of interest. What concerns the statue concerns the saint.”\textsuperscript{19} If the proper respect was not given to the relics (and thus to the saint’s statue) then the saint was quite prepared to take action. However, the statue itself was presented not as an object of worship for “in itself, the statue is the work of human artists and is made up of inanimate materials. It is never worshipped for its own sake. Nor is it ever identified with the saint, in the sense that the statue is considered \textit{to be} St. Foy.”\textsuperscript{20} Thus, reliquaries served to uphold the active element of the relics’ dual nature.

Other aspects of the dual nature of relics are better understood when examined through the application of Emile Durkheim’s theories on the realms of the sacred and the profane, and on the use of emblems and totems in the community. Durkheim states that religion was itself an “eminently social thing.”\textsuperscript{21} Religion reflected society’s beliefs and practices, and the religious beliefs involved the classification of all things into two distinct classes, the sacred and the profane. Durkheim argued that the “division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane—such is the distinctive trait of religious thought.”\textsuperscript{22} Anything could be considered sacred if society placed this classification upon the item. The realm of the sacred included that which was social, pure, and transcendent, while the realm of the profane included that which was the individual, impure, and mundane. Durkheim argued these two realms were


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 34.
“conceived of not only as separate but also as hostile and jealous rivals.” The two realms were separate and were to remain so at all costs. Regulations and prohibitions to keep them from being contaminated by the profane protected things that were deemed sacred. Relics can be members of both realms based on their dual nature. As bones or clothing, relics belonged to the realm of the profane. Although the profane and the sacred were separated, one could pass from one realm into the other through certain rituals. Through the rites of translation and consecration, for example, the community of the faithful moved relics into the realm of the sacred. These objects adopted their other nature and became sacred in a variety of ways, including the infusion of the saint’s own holiness, a bishop’s consecration, and the blessing of God.

Durkheim’s theories on totems or emblems can be used to attain insights into the nature and perception of relics. He states “the totem is a source of the clan’s moral life.” The totem is “an emblem, a true coat of arms,” which gives the community identity and a moral center. The emblem is a thing of “great religious value, and its loss would tragically injure the group and the individuals.” To take away a community’s totemic emblem would then serve to lessen the group’s sense of identity, shake the group’s moral and religious life, and allow the group who stole the emblem to gain access to the power and patronage of the totemic emblem. The totemic emblem is a sacred object, and as such, some members of the community are prohibited from interacting with the emblem. However, some members are allowed access to the emblem because of their special status and nature. In one specific field example, Durkheim explains that the “old men, and others who have attained high religious status, are not bound by the prohibitions as are ordinary men. They may eat of the holy thing because they are holy

23 Ibid., 37.
24 Ibid., 192.
25 Ibid., 111.
26 Ibid., 120. In Durkheim’s example he is discussing the churinga as an emblem.
It is interesting that the old men are exempt from the prohibitions because they share the same religious holiness as the emblem. They are placed outside the normal laws regarding the emblem because of their nature and thus they can engage in activities that would otherwise be condemned by the community. In other cases, prohibitions regarding the totemic emblem are pushed aside for certain individuals and “sacredness is ascribed to princes, nobles, and political leaders in order to account for the special regard they enjoy.” In these cases, both religious figures and kings are equated with the attributes of sacredness and holiness. These elements of their nature allow them to abandon the normal societal laws and participate in the sacred. The relationship between the emblem and these figures is important for this study because it supplies an explanation for the sacredness ascribed to some relic thefts and the community acceptance of relic thefts by certain individuals.

Based on this information, relics fit into the category of a totemic emblem. Relics bring patronage and power to the community and give the people an identity associated with the saint. If the relics were lost to the community, the person who took the relics would gain those benefits the previous community enjoyed. The saints and their relics do not necessarily serve as a moral center since many times saints perform actions for their venerators because of correctly conducted rituals, not pristine moral behavior. They do, however, connect the community with divine power and serve as a pledge of the final resurrection. While relics are for everyone in the community, they too are usually protected (in the forms of reliquaries) to ensure the continuation of their sacredness. Relics are often brought out for the public to view on the saints’ feats days and placed on side church altars for the view of pilgrims but, like the examples Durkheim cites, there are certain categories of people who tend to have more access to the relics. Such categories include the kings, who are considered sacred by notion of divine right, and the clerics, who are considered sacred by the dedication of their life to God. Members within these categories.

27 Ibid., 192.

28 Ibid., 215.
categories are able to bypass some of the prohibitions associated with relics because of their sacred status.

However, an important matter to discuss is Durkheim’s claim that the realms of the sacred and the profane do not intersect and have nothing in common. Relics, and hence saints, encompass elements from both realms. They are liminal figures and these figures “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”

Saints, through their relics and interaction with the community of faithful, bridged both the realm of the sacred and the realm of the profane. On the one hand, they resided in the heavenly Jerusalem but, on the other, they resided in part on earth through their relics. They belonged to both worlds and were able to work and move between them with no problems and few repercussions. As liminal figures and thus between normal codes of conduct, holy figures could “perform acts which by human norms would be unacceptable.” For example, when an “evil bishop” attempted to steal St. Foy’s treasures for a second time to ransom a nephew, St. Foy appeared to a faithful guardsman and stated that she had killed the nephew to stop the bishop from stealing from her and from her monastery. As a liminal figure, St. Foy was able to circumnavigate the normal codes of law and, through murder, settle matters as she saw fit without any blemish to herself or her monastery.

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31 Ibid., 37.

32 Interestingly enough, there are many accounts in which saints take matters into their own hands and perform seemingly unholy actions to safeguard their property and communities. The authors who recorded these actions do not condemn the saint’s behavior but instead were usually proud of the saint’s protection. Another such example involves St. Æthelthryth, a mid-seventh century queen of Northumbria and abbess of Ely. When a Norman sheriff seized parts of her abbey’s land, St. Æthelthryth protected her lands by performing murder. In a dream, she appeared to the sheriff’s henchman, who had often given her monks a “hard time,” and “stabbed him through the heart with her staff.” The sheriff’s henchman had enough time to wake up and announce he was being attacked before St. Æthelthryth came to finish what she started. After that incident many were inclined not to take any part of the saint’s lands.

As with the liminal character of saints and relics, the phenomenon of relic thefts also complicates the matter of the profane and the sacred being entirely separate. Thefts are usually not considered sacred acts and the thieves may be punished by the community for breaking the societal laws and disobeying prohibitions. Yet there are many accounts in which the theft of relics is labeled sacred and seen as a legitimate way of acquiring relics. Relic thefts cannot be placed entirely within the realm of the sacred because of the nature of the acquisition. Since many of the thieves in these sacred thefts are in fact clerics and many of the thefts are instigated by royalty, it is assumed for this paper that the sacredness attributed to their persons somehow affects how the theft is viewed. Thus, the liminal characters of saints and their relics and the phenomenon of relic thefts must be placed in a separate realm in order to help explain why relic thefts were justified by the church community.

Turning back to the nature of relics, one finds that the saints were by no means tied down or limited to their relics and the place in which they were housed. The saints were able to channel the divine power without their relics, which were considered to be the saint; however, the use of the relics was important in its own right. Although the saints did not need the relics to be active in the community, the saints “were understood to be actually present in their bodily remains, and thus able to act as powerful mediators in human affairs on a continuing basis...”33 Since the relics were the saints, they served as a physical connection for the saint and the community and were pledges of an active and personal relationship with the community that housed them. As liminal figures, the saints were in Heaven and their physical remains were on earth; they bridged the gap between the heavenly and earthly worlds, making divine power accessible on earth, with themselves as mediatory figures.

Since relics were channels of power that granted access to the divine, there were many benefits if a community possessed one. Relics were not just for clerics but for laymen and royalty as well. If venerated properly, the saint would work

through the relics and give divine assistance. Relics were tested to ensure that they were in fact associated with or part of a holy person and a legitimate access to divine power, and thus authentic in the eyes of the community and the church. Once the relics passed such tests as ordeals and had demonstrated the ability to produce miracles, they were validated within the community. However, relics were not responsible for the miraculous; they did not serve as a direct conduit of some mysterious thaumaturgic radiation. Rather, personal relationships formed between the living and the dead, relationships which were balanced on the delicate fulcrum of the saint’s pledges or relics, allowed the saint to exercise his *virtus* on behalf of his living servants.34

Relics did not come with a switch that, once turned on, would allow the divine power to come through it. Just because the relics had access to divine power did not mean that the possessor of the relics could always activate this power.35 The divine power associated with the relic and the saint depended on proper veneration, the pledge and relationship the saint had with the community, and the saint’s own will in the matter.

Besides their theological aspects, relics supplied their communities with two types of power. The first type or category was miraculous power concerning healing miracles. In the recorded miracles of St. Foy, a twelve-year old girl martyred in the Gallo-Roman city of Agen during the time of the Roman emperors Diocletian and Maximian, the saint produced many miracles of healing in the village of Conques, the place to which her relics were translated in the late ninth century.36 One such example was that of Guibert and how St. Foy restored his eyes to him after they had been torn out of their sockets. After he had visited St. Foy’s shrine on her feast day, Guibert, clothed in his pilgrim garb, was on his way back


35 Ashley and Sheingorn, *Writing Faith*, 5.

home when he ran into his master, who was not only a priest but Guibert’s blood relative as well. This master was jealous of Guibert and decided to punish him for a contrived crime by removing Guibert’s eyes. Guibert protested his innocence and begged that he be spared for the love of St. Foy, but the master did not listen. However, St. Foy had heard her venerator’s cry and eventually placed his eyes back in his head and restored his sight.

The second type or category was miraculous power that addressed political, ecclesiastical, and economic issues. Two benefits associated with this type of relic power were found in the form of intercession and patronage. The relic was the saint’s pledge or contract of patronage to the individual or community and the faithful had to live up to their end of the contract through proper veneration of the relics. The patronage and intercession of the saint did not always depend on the moral state of the venerator but instead often depended upon the appropriate ritual actions of the venerator. In the earlier example of St. Foy and Guibert, St. Foy acted as an intercessor and a patron for Guibert. After he had unsuccessfully begged for mercy from his master because of the love of St. Foy, she had “raised an immense outcry on account of the injury inflicted on [him], and with it [she] swayed the goodness of the Heavenly Judge to mercy.” Here she interceded on Guibert’s behalf and received permission from God to fix the injustice done to him and heal him. With her relics as pledge, Guibert followed all the proper steps when he had venerated St. Foy’s relics on her feast day and when he begged for mercy in her name. Thus St. Foy continued with her part of the pledge when she became his successful intercessor in front of God. The intercession of a saint was a very powerful asset indeed.

The benefit of patronage went hand in hand with intercession, for just as the saint interceded with God on behalf of the venerating individual, the saint and saint’s relics were also in charge of the community’s physical protection. Royalty,

37 Ibid., 44.
38 Ashley and Sheingorn, Writing Faith, 47.
clerics, and laymen all benefited from saintly patronage. In fact, “monasteries, monarchs and towns used saints, and hence relics, in order to establish both authority and boundaries.” This saintly protection was a much needed defense for those communities with little or no other means of protection from dangers such as invading barbarians and armies, disease, land disputes, and unjust nobles. In some instances the power of the relics was used to convert attackers; however, in many instances a physical display of power was needed to ensure the community’s protection. St. Martin of Tours, a fourth century soldier turned bishop, performed his role as patron of Tours when he protected his town from the invading Vikings. When the walled cathedral town of Tours, the place where St. Martin’s relics were kept, was under siege by the Vikings in 903, the townsfolk cried out to their patron and asked why he had not yet acted in their defense for “he had worked miracles for foreigners but now, in their hour of peril, he seemed to have forgotten the men and women of his town.” When the saint did not react the “people then turned from admonishments to passive threats, warning that if Martin did not help them they would perish,” and if they perished no one would be there to venerate the saint’s relics. Then, after the townspeople had prayed, the clergy picked up the relics and carried them up to the armed townsmen on the ramparts. When the relics arrived, the men were revived in both spirit and physical strength and the town was saved from the invading Vikings.

While this example served to show a form of protection the patron saint could provide, it also provided another important element with the relationship between the saint and the community. The saint’s relics thus served as a pledge to the community of the saint’s patronage. This relationship, however, was dependent on two parties, the saint and the community. Just as the saint could withhold healing, intercession, and protection based upon the community’s behavior or lack of veneration, so too could the community either withhold veneration or chastise


42 Ibid., 33.
(both verbally and physically) the saint if the saint failed to uphold his or her part of the contract. This incident implied that the saint and the community needed each other equally if the pledge were to remain functional.

Patronage also helped kings protect their thrones and lands. The Merovingian dynasty took St. Martin as their patron saint and even “possessed the saint’s cape, which protected the kings in battle and served as a divine guarantor of their solemn oaths.” 43 The Merovingian kings ensured their relationship with St. Martin by performing such deeds as donating money to the church that housed the relics and even commissioning a grander reliquary for the saint’s relics. In return for these deeds, the kings appropriated “Martin’s basilica as a major political asylum, and they invoked the saint’s vengeance as a means of enforcing legal documents.” 44 Saintly patronage and access to relics were benefits that even royalty hoped to enjoy.

Another benefit of relics was that of peacemaking and judicial support. Relics were needed not only for protection against attacks, but also for keeping the peace and maintaining law and order within the community. One aspect of peacekeeping in which relics were involved was oath taking. The monastery of St. Peter at Lobbes was hurt badly during the war over Lotharingia. In 1060, shortly after the war, the monks went on a fundraising tour through Flanders with their relics of St. Ursmer, their patron, who had participated in the original conversion of the Flemish to Christianity. 45 When they arrived at the town of Oostburg they stumbled into a feud between two families who were demanding vengeance for a slain kinsman. The monks stopped the families from fighting by placing the relics of St. Ursmer between the two families. The relics suddenly brought about peace and harmony among the people and the families “gave pledges and oaths, swore peace on the body of the saint, and casting aside their weapons embraced and

43 Farmer, Communities of Saint Martin, 26.
44 Ibid.
In this way, the relics of St. Ursmer kept the peace and healed the families of their hatred.

Around the 990s, these peacekeeping abilities of relics were extremely relevant and necessary because, at this time, the fighting of the knights was becoming the source of many problems. The church contributed to the curbing of the knights with the *Peace of God*. This *Peace of God* “required castellans and knights to swear on the relics that if they absolutely had to fight wars and feuds, they would restrict their attacks to other warriors and refrain entirely from attacking churchmen and church lands, pilgrims, merchants—the unarmed of any sort.” An important point here was that while the kings and bishops should have had the power to keep the knights under control, the relics were the ones that actually had the power to keep the unruly in line; if one broke a sworn vow made on the relics, the saint would know and inflict divine punishment upon the person who committed perjury on the sacred relics. When the centers of earthly powers cannot protect the community, then the community looked to the saints and their relics for the needed assistance and stability.

Saints and their relics also took part in judicial matters as arbiters to keep order and uphold justice within their communities. Péan Gatineau, in his vernacular *Life*, supplied one such example of St. Martin in the role of the upholder of justice. After serving the king far away from home, a baron returned home and heard that his wife had had an affair during his absence. In order to find out whether or not the rumors were true, the baron traveled to Reims with his wife and made her swear in every church that the rumors about her were false. Nothing happened to the wife as they moved from one church to another until the baron sighted a small, old church dedicated to St. Martin. As the two walked in and the wife, calling upon God and St. Martin to verify her innocence, gave her oath, “divine vengeance stepped in to expose her lie. God and Saint Martin caused her to

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46 Ibid., 351.
47 Ibid., 342.
48 Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin*, 280.
give birth…” to the child she had conceived from her affair.49 God and St. Martin must have judged her guilty of infidelity and perjury, for both the wife and the baby were struck dead. Instead of bringing the matter up before the king or any other form of court, the baron and his wife used St. Martin as a judge who came to the truth of the matter and passed judgment.

Another benefit of relics was economic support. As the miracles and the power of relics continued, the fame of the saint grew. Fame and renown in areas outside of the local neighbors gave the community, like a monastery, a sense of identity connected with its powerful patron saint. The attraction of pilgrims and their donations was a social necessity for “relics formed such an integral part of a monastic community’s identity that no foundation was effectively complete without them.”50 The power of the miracles brought pilgrims to the monastery or town where the relics were housed and the pilgrims often made donations to the saint as a sign of their reverence and veneration. As the custodians of the saint’s relics, the monastery or church took the donations and applied them to what was the best for the saint and the community. The money could be used to add decoration to the reliquary or, if the particular relics were very popular, the donations would certainly be used to enlarge the church to accommodate all the pilgrims. Pilgrims were influenced by the saint’s reputation and the power of the miracles. The fame of the monastery or church increased with the continued arrival of devoted pilgrims.

If the pilgrims could not come to the church to see the relics and leave donations, it was possible instead for the relics to come to the faithful. The earlier example of the monks of the monastery of St. Peter at Lobbes, who went on tour with the relics of St. Ursmer, was one such fund-raising expedition. With the monastery in dire need of help and the surrounding areas devastated by the recent war, the monks needed outside assistance to acquire funds. The way to accomplish this task was to pack the relics in their portable reliquaries and bring miracle-

49 Ibid., 282.

working relics to the people. Traveling from town to town, the relics performed many miracles that inspired the people with religious awe and caused them to provide the economic support the monastery needed. While relics definitely brought in economic support and fame to the community in which the relics were housed, just having a relic did not guarantee this support. Regardless of the miracles performed within the community, relics from a saint about whom no one else outside of their community knew or cared would not bring in the needed fame, pilgrims, or funds.

The last benefit of relics to be discussed here lay in political and ecclesiastical power. The power of relics was not always only religious but secular and political as well. Relics often served to legitimize rule and connect the kingship with divine right or approval. For the Ottonian kings, the Holy Lance was the symbol that validated the king’s right to rule. 51 If a contender for the throne managed to seize the crown, he was not considered the true king until he was properly invested with the Holy Lance.

Relics also helped clerics acquire ecclesiastical power and prestige. Egbert, Bishop of Trier circa 980, was in political contest with the sees of Mainz and Cologne “for the primacy among the metropolitan sees of the east Frankish kingdom.” 52 This primacy, or the right to sit before other archbishops at synods and other gatherings, would place the selected closer to the king; the closer one sat to the king, the greater was one’s importance. Along with sitting in a more exalted position, such a bishop gained the privilege of anointing the east Frankish king, “a right which had been secured along with the primacy by the archbishops of Reims in the west Frankish kingdom.” 53 Egbert knew that if he had a stronger connection with antiquity and the beginnings of the church, it would put him at the head of the race. He brought out two powerful relics which he said had been in his see: the staff of the apostle Peter commissioned by Eucharius, the first bishop of Trier, and a


53 Ibid.
reliquary which contained the beard of Peter and the sandal of the apostle Andrew. Egbert said that the relics were from the time of the apostles and the fact that Peter, considered to be the first bishop of Rome and a close associate of Christ, gave Eucharius an episcopal staff as a sign of authority in founding a see in Trier long ago, gave Egbert the edge he needed for his claim for primacy. He was then able to claim apostolic succession, patronage, and authority for his see and, with this newly reestablished connection, he and his see should receive their just reverence and respect. Now that Egbert had the more ancient apostolic connection in the concrete form of the relics, he was able to ascend in the courtly-political ranks while still remaining privy to the divine power found in the relics. Political and ecclesiastical power often was thus intertwined together during the Middle Ages. The divine power of relics was still power and could be wielded in a variety of ways, many of which were mentioned above. In hope of gaining more power and prestige for himself and his see, Egbert used the reverence for relics and the hierarchical order of relics and the church to acquire political advantages.

By examining some of the benefits and powers to which relics gave the faithful access, it is easy to see why someone would want to acquire one or at least to be on good terms with the local saint and his or her relics during the Middle Ages. So far this examination has revealed only the nature and benefits of relics and not why relic thefts became popular and socially acceptable, especially within the hagiographic accounts. The next course of action will be to enter an examination on the laws that inspired the need for relic thefts, the accounts of the recorded thefts, and the reasons supplied by the hagiographers to justify the deed.
CHAPTER II
LAWS, THEFTS, AND REASONS

A community surely benefited in a variety of ways from having a saint’s relic. None of the topics discussed in the earlier chapter, however, explain why theft became such a popular and seemingly socially acceptable way of acquiring one. In many cases, the hagiographic texts served as a record of the theft and the authors did not try to hide the deed in their works, but instead presented the acts as moral and sacred. Questions arise on why theft became such a popular avenue for relic acquisition and how the authors justified the thefts within their works. The hagiographers in part justified the deeds through the use of select justifications. However, these justifications revealed some of the authors’ own ambivalence over how the relics were acquired. This feeling of ambivalence then points one to look elsewhere for another explanation on how relic theft was justified and how the members of the clergy and the aristocracy were permitted to participate in relic thefts and have their thefts considered sacred. In order to uncover this alternate explanation, it is important to examine first the laws that inspired the need for relic theft, the hagiographic accounts of the relic thefts, and the reasons supplied by the hagiographers to justify the thefts as sacred and moral.

The furta sacra, or sacred theft, accounts cited are from hagiographies, especially from the texts of the translatio, the account on how the relics are officially and ritually translated or moved from one place to another, and from a De reliquiarum furto, an account on the actual theft of a community’s relic. In terms of theft, only limited thefts done in a specific manner and tradition, such as those mentioned in the texts above, will be examined in this paper. Also, the discussed relics will be treated as authentic in this paper. The arguments on how historically correct hagiographies were are not relevant to this discussion; I shall treat hagiographies as myths and use them in an attempt to understand the medieval

54 Based on this definition, events such as the sack of Constantinople in 1204, and the relic thefts associated with it, will not be examined here.
worldview and how relic thefts were regarded by society.\footnote{A myth is defined as “an expression of the sacred in words…[that] functions as a model for human activity, society, wisdom, and knowledge.” In terms of the expression of myths, often a myth “is recited in a special, archaic language, different from the vernacular.” This serves to “underline its significance, preserved by experts of the community.” See The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 10, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillian Publishing Company, 1987), 261.} The study of myth is important in its own right because it is through the examination of myths and “trying to find out what [myths] mean to the people who have created and sustained them,” that the scholar can get a better glimpse into the medieval worldview.\footnote{Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, Other People’s Myths: The Cave of Echoes (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1988), 16.} Myths are narratives and “are not merely the medium through which knowledge about others is transmitted. Myths themselves are objects to be known; the medium of myths is in one sense the message.”\footnote{Ibid., 1.} With hagiography identified as myths, it is more relevant here to look at what was actually recorded by the medieval hagiographers and to discover how they saw and felt about acquiring relics through theft than to evaluate historical particulars.

It is through the earlier examination of a number of benefits and powers to which relics gave the faithful access it is easy to see why someone would want to acquire one or at least to be on good terms with the local saint and his or her relics during the Middle Ages. The popularity of relics reached its height during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, but relics had been used and sought after even before the medieval period. An interest in relics had had a keen following with the Early Christian and it was during their time that many of the relics gathered were those of the Roman martyrs and the “preservation and veneration of the physical remains of martyrs…was a Christian innovation….”\footnote{Joyce E. Salisbury, Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman (New York: Routledge, 1997), 166.} While the rest of the Roman non-Christian world saw the practice of the gathering and venerating of bones as polluting, the early Christians venerated the bones of martyrs in part to keep their memory alive and also to be close to those who, in their eyes, had entered the
kingdom of Heaven (as the miracles associated with the relics gave proof) with the glorious crown of martyrdom.

Although St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, certainly did not introduce the veneration of martyrs’ relics, he did open up a new avenue for their veneration. When, in 385, the relics of Sts. Gervasius and Protasius were discovered in Milan, Ambrose quickly moved the relics from their burial site and placed them under the altar in his new basilica. By Ambrose’s action, “Gervasius and Protasius were inseparably linked to the communal liturgy, in a church built by the bishop, in which the bishop would frequently preside. In that way, they would be available to the community as a whole.”

In this way Ambrose connected relics with church altars and bishops, and the celebration of the martyrdom of Christ and the Eucharist with that of the saint’s martyrdom. As the church and its doctrines developed over time, so too did the attitude towards and treatment of relics. In 401, the Fifth Council of Carthage convened and one of the issues discussed was that of relics and their connection with altars. The canon Item placuit of the Council of Carthage “declared that the local bishops should destroy all altars set up as memorials to martyrs and not permit any new shrines to be built unless they contained relics or were established sites known to be hallowed by the saint’s life or death.” In this way, the church enforced and strengthened the relationship between the altars and the relics of martyrs by linking these two elements of the sacred.

During the Carolingian Reform in the early Middle Ages, the medieval aristocracy’s and the church’s enthusiasm for relics, especially those of the Roman martyrs, was at a high point. The Carolingians, as newly converted Christians and leaders of a newly formed empire, wished to carve out a Christian identity and to lay claim to a heritage that would grant the empire more credibility, identity, and power. Seated on the periphery of Christendom, they looked to Rome, as the authoritative seat and center of Western Christianity and of Western Europe itself,


for guidance, support, and for rituals or trappings of the new faith that would bind the members of their empire together. Relics fitted this needed role and the church in Rome was happy to supply the desired objects to the new and enthusiastic converted leaders, since in the end they served to strengthen the authority of the bishop of Rome and the centrality of the city.

As the church continued to grow during the medieval period, more councils were called to determine doctrines and, in the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, the use and relationship of relics and altars came up once again. This council decided that “relics were required for the consecration of altars.”61 This demand for relics within altars did not cause a problem at first. The Pope, as the bishop of Rome, was happy to share some of the relics of the numerous martyrs within Roman tombs. But the new Christians also wanted their own local saints and relics instead of just those imported from Rome. The new local saints who quickly sprung up gave the people a new identity and local pride. With the new supply of saints and undiscovered relics in the northern lands the supply and demand of relics for altars and other uses was fairly equal.

The Synod of Frankfurt in 794, however, caused a problem with the supply of relics when it ordered “that no new saints might be venerated or invoked… but only those who were chosen by the authority of their passion or by the merit of their life are to be venerated in church.”62 It was nothing new that the law demanded that each monastery and church have a relic in their altar; the new twist was that the relic had to be officially recognized by the church and no new saint cults or relics could be legally authorized without the official review of the saint’s written life by the church. While the church had to regulate the situation in which new saints were appearing daily, the new doctrine caused a problem in the supply of now needed official relics. The demand for them multiplied when Charlemagne, crowned the first Holy Roman Emperor in 800 by the Pope, reinstated the decisions regarding relics of the Councils of Carthage and Second Nicaea. The northern

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monasteries and the churches under Carolingian rule now had to scramble to come up with ways to gain access to supplies of relics in order to fulfill the laws of the church and the emperor. Since no new regional saints could be created on the spot to fulfill the church’s demands, the people had to look elsewhere for their supply of church certified saints’ relics.

One solution, the focus of this paper, to the problem of the supply shortage of relics was theft, a practice which reached popularity with over one hundred recorded thefts during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries. Some scholars, such as Georges Duby and Philip Grierson, claimed theft as a means of commodity distribution in the Middle Ages was not as unusual as one might think. In fact, some of these scholars affirmed that in the early medieval period theft and gift giving were probably more prestigious and “more important than trade in distributing commodities,” especially among the medieval elite. Since theft was not an unusual form of commodity distribution in the Middle Ages, it would then follow that the theft of a commodity such as a relic would also be seen as not unusual and even more prestigious than other forms of acquiring one. However, no matter how common or prestigious relic theft was during the Middle Ages, the hagiographers felt some sort of ambivalence towards these acts. The monks and nuns, who recorded the thefts, showed this tension over the nature of the relic acquisition, for they supplied within their hagiographies justifications for the thefts.

Before the accounts may be examined, it is important to look first at the nature and variety of texts within the hagiographic tradition. The term hagiography encompassed a variety of texts which included among others: readings on the saints such as the Golden Legend; the vita, the recorded life of the saint, which was

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63 Geary, Furta Sacra, xii.


65 Ibid.
essential for the cult of saints because “…no cult was or is sanctioned by the Church without a vita;” the passio, the account of the martyr’s suffering and death; a book of miracles associated with the saint; the inventio, the account of the discovery or finding of relics usually through a divine vision; the de reliquiarum furto, and the translatio.66 The translation, as the central event within the translatio, was an important event to record because “the closest thing to a canonization was the solemn liturgical celebration of a translation, or relocation, of a saint’s body by a bishop.”67 The actual liturgical celebration of a translation of relics, along with the vita, made the saint official in the eyes of the church and also an official member of the new community to which they were translated. A relic theft was not a requirement for a translatio but, if there was a theft involved in the acquirement and translation of the relics, this was one of the main texts in which it was recorded. Although not every theft account followed exactly the same structure, a typical format of the translatio unfolded in the following way:

A monk or other cleric goes on a pilgrimage; he stops in a town or village where rests the body of a saint. Impressed with what he has heard of the saint’s life, virtue, and miracles, he determines to steal the body for his own community. The thief waits until the dead of night, then enters the church and exhorts the saint to come with him. He then breaks open the tomb, takes the relics, and hurries home where the new saint is greeted by a joyful throng of the faithful.68

The hagiographic texts were written to prove the main figure was holy, to increase the fame of the declared saint, and to show what was considered to be the ideal Christian behavior at that time and location. Since the texts were supposed to show an ideal behavior in some way, the question arises on how relic theft fit into that worldview.


67 Ibid.

68 Geary, Furta Sacra, xi-xii.
The participants in the hagiographic relic thefts varied by region. In Italy, relic thefts were usually urban thefts committed by merchants in search of a patron for their town. Relic thefts outside of Italy were usually done by either clerics or by a hired professional who actually did the deed for the clerics, who wanted the relics for their monasteries. In both cases monks and nuns wrote the accounts, but it was in the non-Italian accounts that the monks and nuns also stole or helped plan the theft of relics. While this paper focuses mainly on the northern monastic thefts, the same questions regarding relic thefts apply to both types of participants and the authors of these accounts. It does seem a bit strange that clergy were involved not only with stealing, since it goes against one of the commandments of their church and many of the monastic laws, but also in praising their thefts as truly acceptable and virtuous. How did these monks and nuns justify their relic thefts and the thefts of others?

There were several major justifications that authors used to explain and even to moralize the theft. These justifications were not mutually exclusive and often the authors used a combination of these reasons within their works to reinforce their point. Some of the most common ones used to excuse the theft of relics stated that these acts were justified when they were done: to bring relics to a place of proper veneration; to secure the safety of the relics and to take them out of the hands of non-believers; to bring the faithful people back to their community; to enable the saint to finish his or her work; to punish a community for their sins; to help a thief of good moral behavior; and to follow the will of the saint.

Relic theft was justified when it was intended to bring the relics from a place where they were not properly venerated to a place of proper veneration. The account that exemplified this type of justification was the monks of Shrewsbury’s translatio on St. Winefrith. The Norman earl Roger built the monks of

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69 Ibid., 87.

70 Einhard, (770-840), a monk on familiar terms with Charlemagne and his son Louis the Pious, needed a relic for the consecration of his altar within in new basilica. He heard that in “Rome there was a huge number of neglected burial places of the martyrs.” Einhard then approached a Roman deacon named Deusdona, a relic professional, and hired him to show Einhard’s servants the available relics in Rome. When his servants arrived in Rome, they broke into the tomb of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus and stole the remains of these saints. Einhard explained that since the relics of Sts.
Shrewsbury, England a monastery; it flourished, but over time they became discontented since they lacked relics. They began to look around for a suitable saint for they knew that “they could be protected more by God through the patronage of that one whose honour they might foster on earth by their daily devotion, they tried diligently to be provided with one who might thus be a patron to them.” The monks heard that Wales was full of the bodies of saints and wished to travel there. However, they were unsure which saint to seek until it happened that one of their brothers became very sick. The monks prayed for their brother and one night a young and beautiful maiden appeared to the sub-prior in a vision. The maiden told the sub-prior that if one of monks traveled to St. Winefride’s holy spring, which had miraculously formed in the place where St. Winefride’s head had fallen to the ground, and said a mass, the sick brother would be healed. The sub-prior knew that the maiden was St. Winefride herself and some monks were sent to the spring to say mass. The sick brother was healed the moment the mass was said. Since St. Winefride had blessed the community with her healing powers the monks decided that they wished to obtain a relic of hers for veneration. Prior Robert was thus sent with a small party into Wales to search for the resting place of St. Winefride.

Interestingly, after the Shrewsbury monks had located the burial place of St. Winefride in the district of Guitherin, Wales, they contacted some of the bishops and nobles of the land and asked for their support in the matter. The monks then, “with the bishop of Bangor (whose diocese was in that province) agreeing with them and promising his help, …brought it about that the leaders and nobles of the country agreed with them and protected them.” When the monks asked the prince for support in the acquisition of the relics, he gave it with the explanation that

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72 Ibid., 80.
“…perhaps, seeing that the respect owed her is not rendered by her own people, she desires to be taken elsewhere so that she might receive from strangers the honour which either her own people disdain to give her or neglect to give.”\textsuperscript{73} Although the Shrewsbury monks received permission and support from the bishop and the prince they did not have the permission of the people of Guitherin, who felt that they had been entrusted with St. Winefride’s relics. Faced with this local opposition, the monks prayed and planned what to do next.

That night the prior received two visions in which he was told that their mission was the will of St. Winefride and that they would be victorious over their opposition. After the prior shared this with the rest of the party, they “secretly summoned the priest of that place alone, strenuously entreating him to be a help to them.”\textsuperscript{74} The priest confessed that he, too, had received a vision in which he had been told that someone would come to this very place and if “he wants to carry off the maiden’s bones, do not fight against him, but lend a hand, offering help to him in every way you can.”\textsuperscript{75} Accompanied by the local priest, the Shrewsbury monks addressed the local people and convinced a majority of them to let the monks take the saint’s relics. When one soldier still cried out in opposition, the Shrewsbury monks sent a mediator to the soldier and gave him some money, which changed his attitude. The monks then ritually unearthed St. Winefride’s bones and performed a proper translation of the relics back to their monastery.

While at first this account may not seem to fit with the category of theft, there were some dubious actions performed by the monks in the acquisition of the relics. The monks made sure they had official support and permission from the bishop and the nobility because their claims based upon the visions might meet with resistance. Once at Guitherin the monks did meet with opposition and so met with the local priest at night to try to win him over without the presence of the dissenting members of the community. It seems a bit strange that the monks

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 85.
planned a secret midnight rendezvous and even stranger that the monks eventually paid off a dissenter in order to leave with St. Winefride’s relics. The manner in which the relics were acquired clearly needed some sort of justification. Prior Robert, as the author of the *vita* and *translatio* and as a member of the group that acquired the bones, reported that it was the prince himself who had put forth the needed justification in that perhaps the locals had not been properly venerating St. Winefride, and that she thus decided not only to leave her burial site but her birth-country as well. Even though the prince supplied an explanation for the relics’ departure in public, the author was sure to include it in the account to serve as a solid justification for the translation of St. Winefride’s relics. The author also supported this justification with accounts of the saintly visions received by the monks, which solidified the monks’ claim to the relics. Since St. Winefride had already showed her willingness to be the monastery’s patron when she healed the sick brother, the monks needed to fulfill their part of the contract through the acquisition of her relics, which would serve as St. Winefride’s pledge, and then through proper veneration.

Relic theft was justified when it was intended to rescue relics from non-Christians and non-Roman rite Christians and to secure the relics’ safety. An account which exemplified this type of justification was that involving St. Mary Magdalene’s relics. The theft account of Mary Magdalene’s relics involved the taking of relics from non-Christians and a connection with royalty. The author of the account reported that in 769 Gerard, duke of Burgundy, built a monastery at Vézelay when he discovered that his wife was unable to bear him a son.76 The monastery needed some relics, so the duke and the monastery’s abbot sent a monk, “with a suitable company,” to the city of Aix, where Mary Magdalene’s relics were reported to be entombed.77 When the monk and his suitable company arrived at Aix, they discovered that the city had been “razed to the ground by the pagans.”78

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
The group searched the area and miraculously found Mary Magdalene’s marble sarcophagus, which was completely intact and even had her life story inscribed upon it to offer proof for the identity of the bones. Once the tomb had been successfully identified, the monk “broke into the sarcophagus by night, gathered the relics, and carried them to his inn. That same night blessed Mary appeared to him and told him not to be afraid but to go on with the work he had begun. On their way back to Vézelay the company, when they were half a league from their monastery, could not move the relics another step until the abbot and his monks came in solemn procession to receive them.”⁷⁹ After the procession, the relics were installed within the monastery.

This account definitely included some curious activities that occurred in Mary Magdalene’s relic theft. The duke and the abbot had sent the monk and the suitable party specifically in search of Mary Magdalene’s relics. The only person in the retrieval party who had anything close to an individual identity was the monk. The author of the account never mentioned anyone in the suitable company sent with the monk by name and in fact did not seem to give the company any contribution to the operation other than their accompaniment of the monk. The author of the text downplayed the suitable company either because its members were truly unremarkable or perhaps because it included a hired professional to help the monk achieve his goal. Although the city of Aix had been razed to the ground, the fact that the monk had to break into the sarcophagus at night implied that there were people still in the city who would have noticed and objected to the monk and company in their attempted theft of the relics. The people there could have been the same pagans who razed the city in the first place. No matter who was there, the monk did break into the sarcophagus and stole the relics. After the monk had broken into the sarcophagus and fled the area, he received a vision in which he was told not to be afraid. Again, the monk would not have had reason to be afraid if there had been no one to gainsay his claim to the relics. In any case, if the pagans were still in the city, the monk’s actions would have been justified since there was

⁷⁹ Ibid., 382.
no one to properly venerate the relics and the relics needed to be rescued from the pagans’ treatment of the city. The author also supported the theft with the recorded divine vision and with the mention of the relics’ refusal to enter the monastery until an official translation occurred. This last touch meant that the relics were now legitimately part of the new community.

Relic theft was justified when it was intended to bring back the faithful and revive the status of the local church. In the translatio account of St. Foy, the monks from the monastery at Conques used this explanation as one of their many justifications. The monastery at Conques was in a feud with the nearby monastery at Figeac. Because Figeac was in a more accessible location for pilgrims and also because of its close proximity to Conques, it was being groomed as the “New Conques”. Figeac was becoming very prosperous and gaining many members from Conques while Conques was losing its resources. So the monks of Conques had to do something to bring back the faithful and revive their church. While they did not originally start off wanting St. Foy in particular, they decided finally on this young martyr from Agen. The monks at Conques decided they needed her relics and considered together “how they could bring it about that the most holy martyr’s body would come into their possession for the salvation of the country and the redemption of many people.” They saw the possession of relics as the only way to bring back the local people to Conques and thus ensure the locals’ salvation.

The monks at Conques sent one monk to Agen to live there undercover as a pilgrim in order to gain the trust of the townspeople. After he had been there for years, he was finally allowed into the monastery to guard the holy relics on a high feast day. While everyone was feasting, the monk Arinisdus “summoned his companion” and the two broke into the tomb and stole the relics. When the town finally discovered the theft, they pursued Arinisdus but by the “grace and mercy of God” went in the opposite direction of Arinisdus. When the pursuers finally caught up with him they did not recognize him even though they spoke face to face. The

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81 Ibid., 266.
fact that the pursuers did not actually catch the thieving monk was taken as a sign of divine favor. After this incident Arinisdus left his traveling companion and continued on his way to Conques. Once Arinisdus made it back to the monastery, crowds of the faithful greeted him and rituals were performed to complete the relics’ translation.

In order to compete with the monastery at Figeac, and to draw the pilgrims back to their monastery, Conques “needed a power base of its own in order to maintain its independent existence, and the appropriate power base in the ninth century was a miracle-working saint. Not having such a saint, the monks determined to acquire one through theft, and eventually set their sights on Foy.”82

The author portrayed the theft as extremely premeditated and the theft involved a high level of deception on the part of the monk Arinisdus. The monk stole from another neighboring Christian community in which the relics were an important part in the town’s identity.

The author made certain that the relics underwent a ritual translation into the monastery after their arrival at Conques. This addition cemented the new relationship between Conques and St. Foy. The author justified the theft first with a reminder of the monastery’s situation. He wrote that “her relics were carried from another place, desirous of possession a home specially assigned to her own name, so that this place should not be without a sacred mystery.”83 Finally, the theft of St. Foy’s relics was justified because the community at Conques needed them to revive the status of the monastery and to bring the people back to salvation, which could only be found by attending the monastery at Conques.

Relic theft was justified when it was intended to enable the saint to accomplish his unfinished work. The theft account of St. Martin by the people of Tours exemplified this type of justification. St. Martin began his career as a soldier, but soon left that profession and converted to Christianity under the guidance of

82 Ibid., 8.
83 Ibid., 273.
Hilary, bishop of Poitiers. 84 Martin then established a monastery near the city of Poitiers. Soon the town of Tours was without a bishop and the people, because they had heard of his pious nature and his many miracles, asked Martin to be their bishop. At first Martin declined, for he wished to remain in the solitude of his monastery. The people of Tours were persistent, however, and eventually he agreed to become their bishop in 371.

In 397, Martin, as the bishop of Tours, traveled to the village of Candes, which was in his own diocese. While he was there he became seriously ill. As Martin continued to lie on his sickbed, the men of Poitiers and Tours came to Candes to await the outcome. Martin died in Candes and, at the announcement of his death, there erupted a great argument between the men of Poitiers and Tours. Each claimed that Martin’s body belonged to them. The men of Poitiers argued that they should receive his body because “as a monk he is ours. He became an abbot in our town. We entrusted him to you, but we demand him back. It is sufficient for you that, while he was Bishop on this earth, you enjoyed his company, …[and] were cheered by his miracles.”85 The men of Tours responded that, since Martin had performed more miracles for the men of Poitiers than he had for the men of Tours, he should return to Tours to finish his duty. After all, Martin had said that “his miraculous power was greater before he was made Bishop than it was afterwards. It is therefore necessary that what he did not achieve with us when he was alive he should complete now that he is dead. God took him away from you, but only so that He might give him to us.”86 The two groups continued their arguments until evening. When evening descended, they placed Martin’s body in the middle of a locked room and watched over the body. Neither group, however, was satisfied with simply watching over the body, and both planned to seize it when the time was right.


86 Ibid.
The men of Poitiers planned to carry off the body as soon as morning came, but Almighty God would not allow the town of Tours to be deprived of its patron. In the end all the men of Poitiers fell asleep in the middle of the night, and there was not one who remained on guard. When the men of Tours saw that all the Poitevins had fallen asleep, they took the mortal clay of that most holy body and some passed it out through the window while others stood outside to receive it. They placed it in a boat and all those present rowed down the River Vienne. As soon as they reached the River Loire, they set their course for the city of Tours, praising God and chanting psalms.87

With the successful theft the men of Tours raced back to their city and completed the translation of St. Martin’s relics.

Gregory of Tours, as the author, justified the theft of St. Martin’s relics because St. Martin had not completely finished his duty in the role of the bishop of Tours. Tours was pictured as having the stronger need and thus had the stronger claim to the relics. If God and St. Martin had not agreed as well, the entire party from Tours would have been put to sleep instead of the men from Poitiers. Since St. Martin could continue in his role even after death, the author wanted to make the point that St. Martin was and still remained an active member of the community of Tours. The relationship that St. Martin had with Poitiers had been terminated while the relationship with Tours continued with the relics as the pledge.

Relic theft was also justified when it was seen as punishment for the community’s sins. The De reliquiarum furto for St. Petroc exemplified this type of justification. Petroc, an early medieval Cornish saint, was the patron of Bodmin priory. Within the priory there was a brother named Martin who was “indifferent to the religious life” and had been disciplined before by the priory for this continued indifference.88 Martin wanted vengeance upon the priory, so he stole the relics of St. Petroc and fled with the relics to the abbey of Saint-Meén in Brittany in 1177.

87 Ibid.

The author of the account recorded that the reason Martin stole the relics was that “deprived of its patron saint, [Bodmin] should be entirely destroyed.”89 The rest of the priory, however, did not even notice that the relics were gone until they heard miracle accounts attributed to St. Petroc from Brittany. When the theft was discovered, the author reported that the members of the priory believed that “Martin’s actions, although conceived and performed by him, are a punishment of the sins of the Bodmin foundation.”90 The relics did not leave because St. Petroc wished to be with Martin, who is portrayed as a bad and vengeful man, but to give punishment to his priory.

The prior of Bodmin was at the time at court with King Henry II and, when he heard about the theft, he enlisted the aid of the Bishop of Exeter and other high-ranking nobles. Together they went to the king and asked for his intervention in the matter. The king agreed and wrote a letter demanding that the new owners of the relics return them to Bodmin’s prior. Then the prior met up with his retrieval party from Bodmin and together they traveled to Saint-Meén. After they arrived there were arguments over the issue, but eventually the Bodmin party obtained St. Petroc again. After a small detour in which the prior and the retrieval party went back to the king and gave him some of the relics, they then returned to Bodmin. When they arrived with the remains of St. Petroc there was a joyous throng gathered and the relics completed their translation back into the church at Bodmin.

Although this account is still about a relic theft, it differs from the others presented here for it is from the point of view of the community from which the relics were stolen. In order to explain why the relics had been stolen and then successfully returned, the author of this theft account used the justification that it must have been because of the community’s sins. The community had to have done something wrong for the saint’s relics to want to leave in the hands of a vengeful man. Once the members of the community realized their errors and perhaps did penance for their sins, then the holy bones would be returned. Later on


in the text the author added another justification: that St. Petroc had allowed himself to be stolen and taken to Brittany because he had wanted his fame to spread to that area. Through the theft, St. Petroc traveled to Brittany and, through the miracles he performed there, his fame grew. Although the author portrayed Martin as vengeful and therefore an unworthy person to keep the relics, St. Petroc nevertheless used Martin to accomplish his own goals. According to the hagiographer, being used by the saint in this case does not make Martin sacred or holy because he committed the theft for the wrong reasons. Petroc was able to take advantage of the situation and used Martin’s flight to further his own ends. The relics could not remain in the possession of Martin because of his evil intentions. Once St. Petroc accomplished everything he had set out to do, his bones were successfully taken away from the ‘evil’ thief and returned to the faithful community.

Reinic theif was also justified through the moral behavior of the thief. If the thief was a pious and good person, then the thief’s actions were pious and good actions and the theft was justified. If the thief was an unscrupulous and unholy person, then so were the thief’s actions. Most of the accounts that were examined here use this justification to some degree. Arinisdus, the thief of St. Foy’s relics, was pictured as a man who “displayed every kind of virtue and …[was a] lover of divine law.”91 If the thief was good and motivated by piety, then the relics deserved to go with this thief. However, in the case of St. Petroc, the thief was certainly marked as an evil man who wanted nothing but vengeance on the monastery. While St. Petroc allowed the theft to occur for his own reasons, the authors of the account would like to claim that the theft was not entirely sacred because of the thief’s impure motives. While the relics did not remain with Martin, nevertheless, they did allow him to steal them away. The hagiographers liked to emphasize the motivation and the behavior of the thief, and then used them to justify within the texts whether the theft was viewed as pious or impious, and to determine whether the theft was justified or not.

Lastly, relic theft was justified when it was the will of the saint. This justification appeared frequently within the accounts that have already been examined here. The relics were the saint and thus had the abilities and power of the living saint. If the saint did not will an action, then she was perfectly able to defend herself and make known her will. In the *translatio* of St. Winefride, the will of the saint was also an important justification for the monks of Shrewsbury. When the monks approached the prince for his permission, the prince replied that he supported them not only because the saint perhaps wanted a place of better veneration but also that he had not “thought that you and your companions have taken up so great a labour without the approval of God and the willingness of the blessed maiden.”92 Also, when the prior experienced his vision with a maiden, the maiden told him not to worry about failing in his mission because “she for whose love and honour [the prior] was sent to this province will bring about her own wish, and she will put him in possession of his desire.”93 The prince and the maiden in the divine vision both affirmed that this relic theft was the will of the saint.

Besides St. Winefride’s desire for the relic theft as a sign of the saint’s will, both the prince and the Guitherin priest affirmed other ways for the saint to reveal her will. They admitted that they assisted the Shrewsbury monks in their endeavor because they did not want to be punished for going against St. Winefride’s will. If people went against the saint’s will, the saint was quite capable of punishing them through such means as illnesses and even death.94

With a high demand for relics and a limited supply of them in the northern lands, monasteries, churches, and even royalty had to come up with other means to acquire the needed relics. As we have seen, one popular solution to this problem was theft. Many of the thefts were not only recorded by monks and nuns but

93 Ibid., 83.
94 Another such example is found in the *translatio* of St. Foy. When the Agen townspeople were not able to find St. Foy’s relics, they hoped that she had hidden her remains in another local spot in order to protect them from theft. They believed that the “virgin’s powers prevented any departure from [Agen], for people believe she would not allow herself to be carried away from [the people of Agen] and transferred to another place.” Sheingorn, *The Book of Sainte Foy*, 269.
committed by them as well. Although relic theft seemed to be a legitimate way of acquiring relics, these hagiographers were aware of the moral issues of such theft and thus sought to moralize the thefts through the given justifications. The justifications given within the hagiographic accounts at first seem to answer how the thefts were moralized and legalized; However, the justifications did not deflect all questions of moral impropriety.

It was this sacred nature of relics and the human characteristics assigned to relics that placed these theft accounts within the tradition of the *furta sacra*. However, the sacred nature of relics and the justification of the saint’s will opened up another dimension to the nature of relic thefts. The relics were the saints and actively made their will known throughout their communities. When the saint gave the thief permission to move his or her relics somewhere else and was perfectly able to stop the thief if the saint changed his or her mind, was this in actuality a theft?

Perhaps a solution to the problems of relic thefts and how the clerics and aristocrats justified their actions is that the relic thefts were not actually considered to be thefts. The sacred thefts were already justified and moralized to prove that they did not fit under the normal category of theft. After all, theft implied that the object or person had no choice in the matter, that something was stolen or done against someone’s will. While the relics were taken against the owner’s will, it was

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95 Relic theft and this response/theory are not exclusive to Christianity. Kevin Trainor focuses his work on the Theravāda tradition of Buddhism and has studied parallel theft accounts of the Buddha’s relics. When he asked how the relic thefts were justified he came to the conclusion that, “under the proper conditions, the Theravāda tradition has found it possible to affirm that ‘a relic theft is not a theft’.” The Buddhist theft accounts did not present the exact same situations and formats found within the Christian accounts and one main difference was that the “Buddhist accounts emphasize the participation of nonhuman actors, and are marked by supranormal occurrences.” Despite these and other theological differences, both groups expressed similar tension within their texts over relic thefts. Surprisingly, many of the justifications used within the Buddhist relic theft sources to rationalize the theft went hand in hand with those used in the Christian hagiographic texts. In the accounts, theft was justified when it was done in the following ways: when it was motivated by compassion and by “the desire to make the relics accessible to other individuals who can benefit from their presence; when it was motivated by carrying out the explicit instructions of the community of monks; and when it was motivated to be done in conformity with a prediction of the Buddha received in a past life.” These justifications placed the thefts outside of the normal classifications of theft and made it possible to claim that a relic theft was not a theft. Kevin Trainor, *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravādan tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 135, 118, 133-34.
the saint’s will and permission that were important in the attempted theft. If the saint had wished it otherwise, the power of the saint would have certainly manifested itself in such a way that the saint’s will would be made known and the thief could face no other outcome but failure in his or her mission. Hence, the relic thefts, as categorized within the furta sacra tradition and justified in the hagiographic accounts, were not really thefts.

In response to this proposed solution, theft may have been a popular way of distributing commodities like relics, but it was not universally accepted as legal and moral behavior. The action of theft and particularly the theft of relics was a crime in which one could be punished. In the case of St. Foy’s relics, Arinisdus himself feared that if the Agen townspeople caught him before he made it back to Conques that he would be greatly punished by the Agen townspeople.96 Arinisdus had a reason to be concerned because, through all the doctrines defined by the church councils, by the “beginning of the ninth century there was a right and a wrong way to acquire relics. When the hagiographer reported that a relic had been removed in the dead of night from a neighboring church or had been purchased from a custodian, the author was quite aware that such action was condemned by ecclesiastical law.”97 Those who committed the theft and the hagiographers who recorded the thefts knew there was an established right and wrong way to obtain relics and theft was not officially an appropriate manner of acquisition approved by ecclesiastical law.

Monks and nuns, however, continued not only to steal the relics but to record the account of the thefts as well. If a community obtained its relic through theft it was taken in part as a socially acceptable means of acquisition. As we have seen, many communities publicly advertised in their hagiographic texts that they had committed relic theft in the acquisition of their desired relics. In fact, having a relic that was stolen became such a popular social tradition that some communities,

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96 Sheingorn, The Book of Sainte Foy, 270.

97 Geary, Furta Sacra, 111.
such as the one at Vézelay, claimed their relic was stolen when in truth it had not. The claim to theft made the reputation of the relics and the community seem more important. After all, if the community had resorted to theft to acquire the desired relics, then the relics must be quite powerful and valuable (since the original community of the relics had no intention of the letting the relics leave). One might have expected that more legal force would have been present to enforce the ecclesiastical laws and in some cases, like that of Martin and St. Petroc, this did occur. The bishop and the king stepped in to handle the theft situation and restored the stolen relics to the distraught owners. But in many others, like that of the Shrewsbury monks and St. Winefride, the bishop and the prince supported the theft and approved the theft as a virtuous act. Over all this seemed like strange behavior: monks and nuns committing theft and then recording the event in the hagiographic texts, which were usually presented an ideal model of sanctity for that community.

Due to these conflicting attitudes, the hagiographers’ ambivalence or tension over the action of their communities’ participation in relic thefts was revealed in their texts. The hagiographers realized that the theft had to be explained in such a way to make it moral, since theft itself was not an entirely moral action. But how does one justify and moralize the crime of theft even when the thieves were often monastics who stole not ordinary objects but holy ones? Instead of just omitting the theft from the accounts, the hagiographers moralized and explained the thefts through certain justifications that stressed not only the moral behavior and motivations of the thief but as well as the active participation of the saint in the theft. The ambivalence was present in the fact that there were justifications in the first place, revealing that the action needed to be clarified for some reason. These justifications were strewn and often repeated many times throughout the text to remind the reader that this particular theft was actually moral or belonged to the category of sacred theft, *furta sacra*.

The hagiographers used justifications to prove the relic theft was a moral and sacred theft, a category that was different from that of normal theft and its

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98 Ibid., 74,108,199,214. The community at Vézelay claimed that the relics of Mary Magdalene had been acquired through theft when, in truth, the theft of the relics never occurred.
regulations. However, an important clarification was that just because the object of
the theft was a holy object did not mean the theft and the thief were holy as well.
The hagiographer was clear in his message that Martin, the thief of St. Petroc’s
relics, did not commit a sacred theft. But thefts like those of St. Foy and St. Martin
were recorded and justified as sacred and thus believed to be of a different caliber.
CHAPTER III
HAGIOGRAPHY GENRE, RITUAL KIDNAPPING, AND DUAL NATURES

The justifications within the hagiographic texts show the authors’ ambivalence over the nature of the relic thefts, and it is this ambivalence that causes one to continue looking to discover how else relic thefts could be justified. The examination of the hagiography genre leads to a closer inspection of the figures within the text and the roles that they play in the acquisition of the relics. The hagiographic accounts reveal that there is sacredness attached to these figures of clergy and royalty and that this sacredness is what allows certain people to participate morally in relic theft and have their deeds ranked among holy deeds.

The hagiographic texts were written to prove the main figure was holy, to increase the fame of the declared saint, to show what was considered to be the ideal Christian behavior at that time and location, and to encourage others to adopt the saint’s lifestyle. These written lives of the saints were also required for official canonization and recognition by the church. As mentioned before, many of the translatio accounts seem similar.99 These sacred thefts were not committed out of spite for a specific community or out of boredom, but because the saint was needed elsewhere in another community. These acts were different because

thefts were, however, more than random acts or good stories appearing from time to time across Europe. They were perpetrated (or, more frequently, alleged) at particular moments of crisis by members of religious or secular communities as calculated means of crisis intervention. Further, not only were thefts similar to each other in the types of crises that gave them birth, but in many cases contemporary descriptions of them betray their authors’ awareness that in describing thefts they were writing in a particular hagiographic tradition, that of furta sacra, which had its own limitations, topoi, and forms.100

99 The typical format of a translatio is found on page 34.

100 Geary, Furta Sacra, xiii.
The fact that these authors were writing within an established hagiographic genre and tradition is important in establishing the medieval worldview and in gaining insight into the category of sacred theft. The hagiographers were aware of what had been done within the tradition before them and what others were writing in their own time. Familiar with the forms and topoi of the established tradition, the authors were not only able to incorporate them into their own works but to build upon them as well. It may be assumed that most hagiographers knew the main justifications examined in Chapter II, since the authors were writing not only within the established hagiographic tradition but also within the tradition of the furta sacra genre. This awareness of a furta sacra tradition and genre was why so many of the theft accounts followed a similar format.

Working within this tradition was important to the hagiographers for the acceptance of their saints, and they “were careful to identify a particular theft with a type, so that its peculiar aberrations could be overlooked; its acquisition could then be assimilated into an ancient and therefore more venerable Christian tradition. If a relic had been stolen, then it was necessary to show that the theft was not unique.”101 The hagiographers were able to link their thefts to a venerable Christian tradition which legalized relic theft. This tradition allowed the authors, in part, to legitimize the acquisition of their particular relic as long as the written account of the deed followed closely the officially established format of the furta sacra tradition. The importance of this genre becomes more pronounced when it is seen in conjunction with the knowledge that some communities claimed in their hagiographic accounts that their relics were obtained by theft, even when, in truth, the relics were acquired through more normal means. The writing of the account within the format and style of the furta sacra tradition actually serves to create a type of ritual. While the theft of the relics is portrayed as being sacred and ritualistic, the writing of the account itself is also a form of ritual involving the sacredness of the relics.

101 Ibid., 123.
The fact that the hagiographers were familiar with and used the main justifications for relic theft meant that the justifications themselves were part of the *furta sacra* tradition and standardized for the authors’ convenience. It was the “moral hesitations…[that] account for the standardization of the *translationes.*”\(^{102}\)

The writers of the hagiographies knew the relic thefts needed to be seen in a moral light, and so certain justifications were added into the tradition and then standardized because they moralized relic thefts and turned them into sacred deeds. Since these given justifications were standardized and part of a literary tradition, and thus used as a safety device to excuse the recorded deeds, it is hard to claim that they are the sole means through which the members of the church justified and moralized the relic thefts. The ritual use of the given justifications point beyond to other motivations and explanations to explain how clerics and royalty were permitted to participate in theft and have their acts deemed sacred and moral.

Since these sacred relic thefts seem to be placed outside the normal category of theft, then a question arises as to how else could such thefts be identified. Since the relic was considered to be the saint, this paper incorporates the theory of Patrick Geary, who claimed that with such a situation, the practice of sacred theft fit better with the idea of ritual kidnapping than with an actual, ordinary theft. Geary mentioned that in the “most extreme of these accounts, the transfer was often presented as a theft, or more aptly as a kidnapping, which, like the contemporary practice of bride stealing, was carried out with the active assistance of the ‘victim’.”\(^{103}\) In these presented cases it would apply to a specific ritual kidnapping and not be defined simply as a kidnapping, which would also imply that the ‘victim’ was taken against his or her will. But the notion of bride stealing in connection with relic theft was an intriguing one. In the ninth and tenth centuries bride stealing, one of the oldest forms of Germanic marriage, was still common…. As in traditional European societies today, this form of ritual kidnapping could function in a variety of ways: it could make possible a

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\(^{102}\) Ibid., 132.

\(^{103}\) Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 173.
marriage opposed by the family of the wife (for after the fact, the woman’s virtue was lost and her chances of another marriage were nil), but it could also be a way for families to avoid the scandal of a voluntary marriage considered too far below the woman’s status.104

The idea of marriage fitted well with the purpose and manner of relic theft. In the case of monastic thefts, the monks or nuns who went on a mission to acquire a relic usually did so because their community, or ‘family,’ needed a powerful patron. Once the patron was brought to the new community, there were ritual translations and rites performed that officially made the saint a familial member of the community. The monks and nuns needed the saint’s relics to reaffirm this pledge of a personal relationship between the two parties. In this light, the taking of relics was parallel to bride stealing. The relic, as the bride figure, and the patronless community both desired that the relic join their family. However, it was unlikely that the saint’s current community would allow the departure of its ‘family member’. Since it was against the current family’s wishes, the patronless community had to resort to kidnapping to make their family complete and to fulfill the desires of both parties. This concept fits well with Geary’s first definition of ritual kidnapping/bride stealing, except for the points on the bride’s loss of virtue and the unlikely change of another marriage. The saint as the ‘bride’ was not a powerless figure; the relics belonged not to an ordinary person but to a saint who had access to divine power. Unlike the woman’s virtue, which was lost upon the kidnapping, the saint’s virtue remained and, because of this intact virtue, still retained chances for another ‘marriage’.

Geary’s second definition of ritual kidnapping/bride stealing involving the marriage of the ‘bride’ to a family of lower social status also fits with relic theft. If by chance the saint’s current community wanted to ‘marry’ the saint off for their own reasons, it was much more prestigious to have the ‘bride’ carried away. After all, if a community was willing to give up its patron so easily, then the saint would be perceived as not that powerful of a patron and no other community would desire

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104 Ibid. 173. See footnote 36.
the relics. To have the relics kidnapped solved the problem of the patronless community’s social status and the other town’s willingness to adopt another patron. This way both communities and the saint could still maintain their reputation through the ritual kidnapping.

Geary’s theory of connecting relic thefts with bride kidnapping helps to address the question on how the relic thefts were perceived but it does not answer all the morality concerns. It is in conjunction with Richard Davis’ theories on morality and motivation during wartime looting that the issue of morality in relic thefts can be examined in a better light. Davis explained that during warfare, when chaos reigned and the normal rules of society did not apply, victorious kings could boast of items that were acquired during looting and have it not perceived as a theft because it was the king who did the act and he was seen as the moral center of the kingdom.105 Some communities who had their relics stolen might not have seen the theft as a form of bride kidnapping and marriage but as a form of looting.106 The idea of the suspension of some parts of the law during war can parallel the theft of relics and how they were considered sacred. At first consideration, the church can replace the king’s role in Davis’s outline. If the church was the moral center and it was the clerics who were either stealing the relics or hiring professionals to do it for them, then perhaps the normal laws against stealing were suspended as well during this time. This suspension would enable the relic thefts to be considered sacred

105 Although Richard Davis’ theories on morality and motivation during wartime looting are based in the context of Indian images and kingship, some of his conclusions can be adapted to help explain the morality and motivation for sacred relic theft. Like the relic theft accounts, medieval Indian rulers, after victory in war, made use of their inscriptions to “proudly and repeatedly proclaim their expropriation of objects from other kings.” The victorious kings advertised that they had acquired these objects through looting. However, the “Indians of the medieval period, by contrast, did not consider such seizure as theft…” These actions were not considered theft because of when and who did the looting. Davis explained that even though there were explicit laws condemning theft, looting was expected because during war, as opposed to the normal orderly status of the kingdom, chaos reigned and the normal laws of society did not apply. Among other things, the king was the one who was needed to restore this order during warfare. During war, the king fulfilled the role of Indra, the king of the gods, in the primordial battle against the demon Vrtra. When the king defeated the demon he restored order. The king was able to do this and have his looting seen as something other than theft because the king was the moral center of the kingdom. See Richard H. Davis, Lives of Indian Images (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 59, 60, 61.

106 Relics were in fact stolen and taken as loot during wartimes.
since members of the religious communities and representatives of the moral center committed them. Any relics taken and recorded using the proper format of the *furta sacra* genre would be considered legal and moral since the relics were being taken either back to the moral center, the church, by its representatives and thus order was being restored.

Davis, however, specifically uses the figure of the king in his discussion on looting and the moral center. This too finds merit in explaining morality in relic thefts. A medieval Christian king could be seen as the enforcer of morality, and thus part or the representative of the moral center, in terms of military and other secular matters. The king could enforce the teachings of the church and, in this role, be the restorer of order. Based on the application of this theory, any relics taken by the king would not only prove that the saints wanted to go with the king but that this victorious king was representing the moral center and that his actions were moral and considered socially acceptable.

One such example of a king, through the medium of his royal mother, seizing relics from another land is that of the finding of the True Cross. In the discovery account of the True Cross, Helena, the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine, was described as a “woman of unparalleled faith and religion, and of extraordinary greatness of soul.”

Due to her pious nature she received divine visions that told her to travel to Jerusalem and recover Christ’s cross. She traveled to Jerusalem and, although she was portrayed as a pious lady, she could not find the location of the cross without the help of the wisest Jewish scholars in the area. She called them together and asked them to reveal the location of the Christ’s cross. Helena thought they should know the location because the crucifixion happened in their homeland. The Jewish scholars had no idea what she was talking about. Although one named Judas confessed to his fellow scholars that his father and grandfather had been witnesses to the ‘truth’ of Christ’s crucifixion, he told the other scholars not to say anything for, if the cross were found, it would destroy the

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Jewish religion. Helena proceeded to get angry over the lack of helpful information and threatened the scholars until they finally handed Judas over to her. The two debated theology, and when Judas still did not reveal to her the location of the cross, he was starved for seven days as punishment. Finally, Judas was set free when he promised to reveal the location to her. He prayed to God, and the location of the True Cross was revealed to him. Upon this discovery, Judas converted to Christianity and Helena was rewarded with the precious relics. She took parts of the cross and the nails with her and used some of the relics in the armor and the horse’s bridle of her son Constantine in order to create “an invincible weapon against all adversaries, (ensuring) victory for the kings and peace instead of war.”

While this *inventio*, or account of the discovery of relics, was primarily about the ‘victory’ or ‘truth’ of Christianity over Judaism and not technically about a theft in the middle of the night, it still served the same function. Helena, motivated by divine visions, still traveled to a distant land and searched for relics to acquire. She also wished to bring them to a place of proper veneration. The difference between this account and those of the Shrewsbury monks lay in the fact that, instead of taking the relics from fellow Christians, Helena seized them from the Jews and the city of Jerusalem instead. She in a sense committed a theft, for she took the relics from their original resting grounds. Her acquisition of the relics was justified because she took them to a place of proper veneration and respect and out of the hands of non-believers who did not understand their significance and power. Her claim to the relics was also reinforced when the cross performed healing miracles upon its discovery. These conditions all served to justify the removal of the relics from Jerusalem. The important point that affirms part of Davis’s theory in Helena’s account lay in the identity of the person for whom she was claiming the relics. Helena was labeled a pious woman, but she was also the first Christian emperor’s mother. When she claimed the relics, she did not entrust them to a church but to her son. In this way Helena brought one of the most powerful relics to

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the man she thought was the most important or powerful person in the Christian empire; Constantine had already claimed victory in the name of the Christian God over his adversaries at the battle of Milvian Bridge and had become the emperor. This situation certainly presents Constantine as the moral center for his empire as he both spreads his religion through his empire and becomes the keeper of some of Christ’s sacred relics. In this way, the victorious king was able to seize the relics from another group and have his deeds seem sacred and moral.

This discussion leads into the final examination of the importance of the characters within the hagiographic texts. It was interesting to discover who the majority of the participants in sacred relic theft were. While the monks and nuns were the ones who actually recorded the thefts and used the format of the *furta sacra* tradition, because of the limited number of sources, it seems that it was mostly the elite and upper classes, the members of the religious communities and the royalty, who were involved with sacred relic theft. Helena, the emperor’s mother, seized the relics for her emperor son. The monks of Shrewsbury asked the local bishops, nobles of the land, and even a prince for their support when they went to take St. Winefrid’s relics. In the case of St. Mary Magdalene’s relics, the text records that it was the duke of Burgundy who wanted the relics for his new monastery and so sent his own abbot to do the deed. The monks at Conques not only planned the theft of St. Foy’s relics, but also sent one of their own to perform the theft. Lastly, the men of Bodmin priory had to ask for intervention from the bishop of Exeter and King Henry II in order to get back St. Petroc’s relics. The king’s involvement in this matter did not “infringe on the rights of ecclesiastical justice in this matter. Henry’s invocation of his secular administration for the retrieval of the stolen relics…were in no way hostile to the interest of the Church: Henry was entitled, or even obligated to intervene in this matter.”¹⁰⁹ In return for his help, the king was given some of St. Petroc’s relics by Bodmin’s prior. In these cases, the main participants in the sacred relic theft accounts are the monks, bishops, princes, and kings. How did these members of society justify their

participation in relic theft and why were they permitted to adopt the role of thief and have the theft morally justified? What is it about these characters that make them and their actions sacred?

These members of the elite, especially the bishops and kings, were able to participate in sacred relic theft because of their dual natures and the dual nature of Christ. The reference to the dual nature of Christ was not to his being both human and divine but to his fulfilling the role of both priest and king. While there are a variety of theories on how kingship was viewed over time in the Middle Ages, this paper will focus on one theory that revolves around the notion that when Christ ascended, he left behind the bishops and the kings as his representations on Earth to fulfill his dual roles. The care of the community of faithful had been “providentially placed in the hands of ‘two twinned persons,’ associated as were body and soul, as were the two natures in Christ: the sacerdotal person and the royal person.”110 These two roles were believed to have a type of divine mandate in which they were required to maintain order and minister to the faithful. The two heads or centers of medieval Christianity were thus the “pope and the king (or king-emperor), or better, as the contemporary formula puts it, Sacerdotium and Imperium, the spiritual and the temporal powers, the priest and the warrior.”111

The bishop “presided over the celebration of the mysteries on behalf of the entire populace. His hands dispensed the sacred.”112 The bishop was able to dispense the sacred because his anointing as bishop “had placed the bishop right at the point where heaven and earth were joined….113 Through a rite of initiation, the bishop was placed at the center and had power to channel and explain the sacred mysteries to the community of faithful. The bishop, however, as the presider over the domain of the sacred, could not minister to all the needs of the faithful by

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111 LeGoff, Medieval Civilization 400-1500, 267.

112 Duby, The Three Orders, 14.

113 Ibid., 15.
himself and needed the other half of Christ’s nature to fulfill the divine mandate. The bishop’s role was that he “enlightened and he admonished—and to do so he called upon a second personage for aid. Like the bishop, this personage was **prelates**, designated by God because of the virtue in this blood. God had sent him over the rest of mankind as their leader. But, in this case, their leader in the domain of the earthy, the material, the carnal.”114 This other figure was that of the king and, together with the bishop, they were believed to be the chosen representatives of Christ on earth and thus they led the community of faithful.

Because of the dual natures of the bishops and the kings, they were in a unique situation when it came to relics. Connecting back to his work on totemic emblems, Durkheim stated that some members of the community, because of their special nature and position, were placed outside the normal laws regarding interaction with the community’s emblem.115 As divinely mandated leaders, these bishops and kings represented the realms of the sacred and the earth. They were the centers of their communities and they were the link between the ordinary members of the community and that of the divine. Because of these special roles and the sacredness attached to them, the figures filling these positions were able to access the totemic emblem, the relics, and to engage in activities, such as theft, that would otherwise be condemned by the community. If the roles of the bishops and kings were extended to include those of the monastic communities and the royalty, one can see how they could do what they willed with sacred objects.

It is the sacredness attributed to these persons that affected how the relic thefts were viewed. Because of the divine authority of clerics and kings, which allowed them to participate in these acts, these members of the medieval church were able to justify their involvement in theft since the sacredness of the theft, and the person committing it, trumped the situation’s ethical concern.

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114 Ibid.

115 See pages 12 and 13 on the discussion on Durkheim and totemic emblems.
CONCLUSION

This paper opened with the questions on how relic thefts were justified and moralized, and why certain members of society were able not only to participate in these thefts, but also to have their deeds labeled as moral and sacred. These questions arose from studying certain hagiographic accounts and noticing within them the ambivalence that Patrick Geary talks about over the category of sacred theft. While the medieval authors had supplied justifications for these proposed questions, their answers left room for doubt that they were, in fact, the only answers to the query on legitimate justifications.

This examination adopts the sociological approach in the study of the religious phenomena of relic thefts. What the authors of the accounts say about the thefts is important in order to gain insight into the medieval worldview. After all, if the hagiographers and the society accept certain thefts as sacred, then it is crucial to look at how certain issues and figures were seen in the Middle Ages and how this affects the category of sacred relic theft. Modern theories belonging to Emile Durkheim, Patrick Geary, and Richard Davis help to illuminate this practice. The application of certain aspects of their theories serves to supply the scholar with insight into the questions asked in this paper.

Durkheim’s categories of the sacred and the profane give a better understanding of the status and nature of relics. Society deems relics as holy, and thus part of the realm of the sacred. Since relics belong mainly to this sphere, regulations are placed on interaction with them to keep the profane realm from contaminating them. These bones and other objects belonging to the saints are set apart from the mundane world and serve as a community’s totemic emblem, that which gives the community a moral bearing and an identity. Only certain members are allowed to have interaction with the emblem. These figures must also belong in part to the realm of the sacred and society must attribute holiness to them and their positions. By examining the theft accounts, one sees that the clergy and royalty are the figures that have the most interaction with relics and that they are usually the ones instigating, performing, or recording the accounts of sacred theft. Georges
Duby’s work explains that these select figures were able to participate in this way with relics, the sacred, because of their dual natures. The positions of the bishops and the kings were deemed sacred for, at some point in the medieval worldview, these positions were seen as representatives of Christ and divinely mandated. Because of their natures, the normal societal laws were pushed aside and these members of the community were able to interact with the sacred in ways prohibited to the other community members.

These theories explain how relics were viewed and how the natures of select figures permitted the practice of relic theft, but they do not yet explain how certain members in society viewed these sacred thefts. While Kevin Trainor’s theory that these thefts were not considered to be true thefts is very seductive, this idea must be rejected because the thieves could be punished and there were established in law right and wrong ways to acquire a relic. The two theories that best explain how the sacred thefts were viewed belong to Patrick Geary and Richard Davis. Geary introduces the idea that seizing of the saint’s relics is equivalent to bride stealing/ritual kidnapping. One main virtue of this theory is that it allows the power and will of the saint to be recognized and accounted for in these thefts. Nothing could be done against the saint’s will and so the thieves must have had the cooperation of the saint in order to be successful in their theft. The morality of the situation does not seem so problematic once the saint has given his or her permission. Another important aspect is the familial connection between the saint, the relics, and the community. Once the relics of the saint have been moved to another location, they become an integral member, the patron, of the new community. Because of social distinction and class, the acquisition of relics, as likened to bride stealing, had to be done through theft.

Geary’s theory definitely helps to address the question on how relic thefts were perceived, but it does not answer all the moral concerns. After all, not all communities would see the seizure of their emblem as a form of bride kidnapping, but instead as a type of looting. It is at last that the theory of Richard Davis is applied. Davis explains that in connecting relic theft with looting, the deed can be moralized based on who did the deed. If it is the king who partakes in the deed,
then the normal laws on theft and looting do not apply because of the king’s sacred nature, and his role as the enforcer of the law and the kingdom’s moral center. Whether or not the theft of relics is viewed as a kidnapping or a looting, the morality question of theft has an answer.

It is this combination of theories that helps to provide an alternate, working explanation to the questions on how relic thefts were justified and moralized, and why certain members of society were able to participate in these deeds and have their actions labeled as moral and sacred.
WORKS CITED


