Mobile Saints

*Mobile Saints* examines the central medieval (ca. 950–1150 CE) practice of removing saints’ relics from rural monasteries in order to take them on out-and-back journeys, particularly within northern France and the Low Countries. Though the permanent displacements of relics—translations—have long been understood as politically and culturally significant activities, these temporary circulations have received relatively little attention. Yet the act of taking a medieval relic from its “home,” even for a short time, had the power to transform the object, the people it encountered, and the landscape it traveled through. Using hagiographical and liturgical texts, this study reveals both the opportunities and tensions associated with these movements: circulating relics extended the power of the saint into the wider world, but could also provoke public displays of competition, mockery, and resistance. By contextualizing these effects within the discourses and practices that surrounded traveling relics, *Mobile Saints* emphasizes the complexities of the central medieval cult of relics and its participants, while speaking to broader questions about the role of movement in negotiating the relationships between sacred objects, space, and people.

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Mobile Saints
Relic Circulation, Devotion, and Conflict in the Central Middle Ages

Kate M. Craig
For my mother, Helen
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All errors are my own.
Abbreviations

AASS  Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur, 69 vols.
AASSOSB  Acta sanctorum ordinis sancti Benedict
BHL  Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina
BM  Bibliothèque municipale
BNF  Bibliothèque nationale de France
CC  Corpus Christianorum
CCCM  Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis
CCH Brussels  *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum… Bibliothecae regiae Bruxellensis*
CCH Paris  *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum… Bibliotheca nationali Parisiensii*
CCM  Corpus consuetudinum monasticarum
KBR  Koninklijke Bibliotheek—Bibliothèque Royale
MGH SS  Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores
MGH SS rer. Merov.  Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum
PL  Patrologia cursus completus, series Latina, ed. J.P.-Migne
Introduction

Around 664, the missionary-saint Amandus created a document that might be considered his will, a final request, or a threat. When he had first started his ecclesiastical career, he had hoped that “the Lord would permit his whole life to be spent in pilgrimage.”¹ This wish had been granted, and he had spent decades traveling, preaching, and founding monasteries.² Despite this professional itinerancy, however, his final demand was for immobility. Nearing the end of his life, he returned to one of his foundations, the monastery of Elnone on the banks of the Escaut (St-Amand-les-Eaux, dép. Nord). In the text now known as his testament, he insisted that his body should remain there forever, and he damned anyone who might try to remove it:

…if God has decided that I leave this world in this place, I ask and I dare to demand, in the presence of Jesus Christ son of God, that none of the bishops or abbots or laymen, or any other power oppose this, so that in that same monastery, which I said above is Elnone, my little body may rest among the brothers, to whom I now commend both body and spirit… If anyone indeed will want to contradict this, or to carry off my body from this monastery by force, or to contest [it] with an audacious spirit, first let him incur the offense of the holy Trinity and let him appear excommunicated from all catholic churches, and let him be made a foreigner to the society of the saints, and let him suffer the damnation which Dathan and Abiron suffered, whom hell devoured alive, and let him be anathema, maranatha, which means perdition at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And let him lack the power to change my desire, but let my stipulation remain firm and inviolate forever…³

This fierce command, sealed with curses borrowed from contemporary charters, suggests that Amandus knew before his death that he would be venerated as a saint and thus that his physical remains would be considered relics: holy, powerful, and highly desirable objects within the medieval world. The testament was created to thwart any rival claims to Amandus’ relics by explicitly prohibiting their relocation—that is, preventing them from being taken away from Elnone and “translated” to a new place. Clearly
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such a document served the interests of Elnone, which of course casts some doubt on whether the testament was authentically composed by Amandus himself or forged later. Yet whether or not Amandus was its true author, the testament expressed a strong anxiety that the relics of saints like Amandus were highly susceptible to being moved by the powerful.

Four centuries after Amandus’ death, his relics were indeed taken away from Elnone, but under very different circumstances and with very different motives than those imagined and feared by the testament. It would be the brothers of Elnone themselves, not encroaching bishops or abbots, who would take Amandus’ body away from its resting place. On February 11, 1066, the entire monastery complex at Elnone burned to the ground in a disastrous fire. In response, the monks carried Amandus’ relics on a circular journey of more than 175 miles, leaving on June 7. They visited the cities of Laon, Noyon, and Douai as well as local churches and properties which belonged to the monastery, before returning on July 4. And Amandus’ posthumous travels were not over; 41 years later in 1107, the monks would take his relics on a second journey, this time heading north through Tournai, Geraardsbergen, and Ghent (Map I.1).

Map I.1 Known stops and routes for the 1066 and 1107 journeys of St. Amandus’ relics from Elnone. Map by David H. Holt.
By the central Middle Ages, roughly 950–1150 CE, the cult of saints and the veneration of relics were longstanding features of belief and practice throughout the Christian world, and the portability of relics had been central to that success. The translation of relics had begun during the earliest days of the development of saints’ cults, exemplified by Ambrose of Milan’s acquisition and importation of the bodies of Gervasius and Protasius in the fourth century. Without this initial revolution in relic portability, Peter Brown speculated, “the holy might have been permanently localized in a few privileged areas.” Instead, relic translation transformed the relationships between the cult of saints and geographical place, enabling their social and cultural prominence throughout the medieval Christian world. The large-scale relic-moving programs of the early Middle Ages relied on the idea that the translation of relics could also symbolically transfer broad cultural ideas of authority, legitimacy, and empire: thus, relics were actively imported into early medieval Rome, exported from Rome to Carolingian Francia, and sent into conquered Saxon territory.

Acquiring relics brought the distant near, making possessable objects into place-signifiers. Yet the two trips of Amandus’ relics in 1066 and 1107 were not translations, but a new and more fluid form of relic movement. Beginning in the mid-tenth century, rural monasteries and some collegiate churches, particularly in what is today France and the Low Countries, increasingly engaged in removing their relics and circulating them on a temporary basis. In some respects, these events resembled translations—as with a translation, the bond between the relics and their resting places was broken and reestablished. Yet unlike translations, they did not have the goal of permanent relocation; departure and travel were matched with the expectation of return. Rather than fitting neatly into earlier, established patterns of relic movement, relic journeys turned the saints into posthumous pilgrims, leaving “home” in order to travel through the outside world.

In this book, I argue that by transforming relics temporarily into liminal objects, relic circulation created situations that placed stress on the social and cultural tensions inherent in the medieval cult of relics, and in so doing, created opportunities for both devotion and conflict. Relics lay at the heart of many central medieval “webs of significance”—not only were they perceived as focal points for the supernatural power of the saint to heal or harm the living, they could also embody the economic, spiritual, and legal authority of the religious institution (whether monastery or cathedral chapter) that curated that saint’s cult. By connecting the material to the immaterial, relics linked the living to the dead, the earthly to the heavenly, and the sacred to the secular. As a result, different groups—the monks or canons themselves, bishops, other religious figures, powerful secular families, and communities of laypeople—all brought their own interests and ideas to the spaces surrounding these objects. To move a relic was to trigger conversations about the saint as a powerful presence on earth, their relics as a
material locus of that presence, and the relationship of the saint/relics to the
groups organizing and engaging with their movement. This book is about
those conversations. The claims and counterclaims regarding traveling rel-
ics’ identities, meanings, and value demonstrate once again that the central
medieval cult of saints was fundamentally multivocal and negotiated, even
in its most universal aspects.

By focusing on these effects of movement rather than its goals, I am pro-
posing that the significance of a relic journey transcended its justifications.
My interest lies in the consequences, not the causes, of travel. The houses
that sent their relics out did so for a number of reasons: to attend peace
councils and church dedications, to intimidate or negotiate with lay oppo-
nents, or simply to collect donations. Yet as recent scholarship on modern
pilgrimage has emphasized, the impulse to categorize travel based solely on
its stated motivations reduces its complexities to simplistic and morally in-
flected comparisons: for example, the false dichotomy between “frivolous,
materialistic tourists” and “serious, ascetic ethnographers and pilgrims.”
Premodern travel was multifaceted, and the travel of a relic encompassed
more than a line on a map from point A to point B. Regardless of the ra-
tionales for that movement, relic circulation opened up multiple spaces of
interpretation: a result that Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn called
“the possibilities of procession” in their study of the travels of St. Faith’s
reliquary at Conques. These potential effects were open-ended: whether
a relic was being moved hundreds of miles or hundreds of feet, that travel
could introduce the saint to new and appreciative audiences, provide op-
portunities for miracles, or inscribe their power onto the landscape, but
it could also expose them to apathy, mockery, or competition. They might
also be disruptive: relic travel could inflame old friendships and rivalries,
provoke contests over power and authority, or incite intense expressions of
both veneration and resistance. Thus, the story of central medieval relic
circulation I wish to tell is fundamentally one of experimentation and
variation.

Relics as mobile objects

Understanding the ways in which the circular movement of relics opened
these possibilities requires appreciating relics as objects that had long been
contested and constructed in ways that made their transportation signifi-
cant. The implications of moving relics ultimately stemmed from ideas,
often conflicting ones, about the relationship between the saint, the mate-
rial objects of relics themselves, and geographical place. These connections
dated back to the earliest theological developments around the supernatural
character of relics as objects. Robert Wiśniewski has attributed the initial
development of beliefs in the divinatory and thaumaturgical properties of
martyrs’ bodies to the attraction of the buildings constructed as their maus-
soleums, beginning in the mid-fourth century. The martyrdom drew people in,
providing both potential candidates for miracles and audiences to witness them. The places, in a sense, initially created the relics, or at least the impression that the bodies of the martyrs might contain special power.

The development of translation practices across the fourth century sparked increased conflict over questions about the physical locations of relics, their movement, and the presence and power of the saint. What did the exhumation and movement of martyrs’ bodies accomplish, and was the power of the saint something that could be gained, lost, or concentrated by the physical presence of their relics? The fourth-century Gallic bishop of Rouen, Victricius, famously argued for the saints’ omnipresence regardless of the exact location of their relics. Addressing the saints whose relics he translated to Rouen, he apologized for being late to their adventus, writing that he knew that they were in all places at once. Yet Victricius was also an eager collector of relic fragments, and promoted the argument that the saints’ power was just as strong in a particle of their bodies as in the undivided whole. Though sometimes taken as a representative work, Victricius’ sermon should be read as the controversial argument it was rather than a statement of shared ecclesiastical beliefs. Some sense of those contemporary theological disagreements was preserved in the work of Victricius’ Gallic colleague, Vigilantus, known only through Jerome’s hostile critique. Vigilantus expressed disgust at the idea that the souls of saints were somehow attached to their mortal remains, such that the location of their relics restricted where the saints “were” on earth.

Vigilantus’ arguments had little theological traction in the long term, but his comments struck at the heart of one of the issues inherent in moving a relic: the action itself presupposed that some part of the saint’s powers and presence were linked to the object, which would deny that power to the place being abandoned and bestow it on the new location. In this sense, the movement of a relic was an embodied argument for the spatial limitation of the saint’s power. Jerome had acknowledged this problem in his response, insisting that since it was unimaginable that the saints could be locked up in altars, they must not be physically constrained by the location of their relics. These issues could not be fully laid to rest because of the fundamental contradiction between the theological omnipresence of the saints and the ongoing medieval conviction that “matter carries presence.” Relics were both locatable objects and non-locatable subjects, and relic movement inherently challenged the balance between those identities.

These theological concerns about the implications of relic movement were generally overshadowed by the practical utility of acquiring, gifting, and translating relics for rulers and other elites. As noted above, translations had long been used to communicate ideas of authority and legitimacy, because relics were both powerful objects and markers of power. And to be sure, translations certainly continued to be performed alongside the relic circulations discussed in this book. Yet by the central Middle Ages, for many monasteries it was the geographical stability of their relics (and
thus, their saints) that was the key to their cultural power. While some relics (e.g., rocks chipped from the Holy Sepulcher) continued to be prized and curated for their identities as place-signifiers, monastic patron saints such as Amandus were perceived to be geographically “centered” on their relics, defining a vague territory of protection and influence often referred to as the *limina sancti*. What made the new culture of relic mobility powerful was the contrast it provided to the intensive investment in the framing of relics “at home.”

Almost all of the relics discussed in this book were, like those of Amandus at Elnone, kept in rural Benedictine monasteries. These houses devoted significant time and energy to developing the cults of their saints through the production of hagiographical texts, image programs, and architecture. Relics were carefully embedded in a series of controlled spaces, designed to guide the experiences of devotees: a relic was surrounded and shielded first by its relicarium, which might also contain documents of authentication and other relics as well as exterior decoration and inscription; by its placement within a larger architectural context in a shrine, on an altar, within a side chapel, alongside other relicaria, or on columns; and by the human curators who controlled access to these spaces and produced or collected stories and texts about it. These nested frames were carefully erected not only to shield relics from doubt and critique, but also to encourage particular modes of viewing, interacting with, and thinking about them. They were physical, oral, and textual arguments rather than passive reflections of the uncontested status of all relics, and they were designed to control the spatial and spiritual experiences of these objects.

**Economic and moral visions of relic circulation**

Given this intense interest in contextualizing relics for their viewers and guiding or limiting access to them, it is surprising that so many central medieval monasteries (and some cathedrals) would choose to remove their relics from those contexts and send them out into the world. Our sense of the importance of relic stability, and the hazards of relic travel, is perhaps why many studies of relic circulation have focused on what these events were “for”—that is, to explain what goals were compelling enough to induce houses to send their treasures out into the world. The first major study addressing the circulation of relics as a distinct practice is the pair of now-classic articles written by Pierre Héliot and Marie-Laure Chastang. They framed central medieval relic journeys as the beginnings of a long-standing practice of circular fundraising trips (with or without relics) to collect donations, particularly after the destruction of important buildings by fire. The 1066 journey of Amandus’ relics, for example, was included in their extensive lists of sources (continuing to the fifteenth century), demonstrating the use of relic movement as a tactic to appeal for funds in extraordinary circumstances.