

Marcus Bingenheimer: “*Roushen pusa* and *Corpus integrum* –Whole-body relics in Buddhism and Christianity.” Version 2 (2005).

***Roushen pusa* and *Corpus integrum* – Whole-body relics in Buddhism and Christianity¹**

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Among the major religions only Buddhism and Catholicism accept the veneration of relics as part of their practice. It is virtually absent in Hinduism, Judaism and Protestantism, and though a cult of saints and relics does exist in Islam, orthodox interpreters have generally rejected it. In both Buddhism and Catholicism, there are cases where the relic happens to be a mummy – a relatively complete, undecayed body. These whole-body relics are the focus of the present paper, although some of the findings are true for other types of relics as well.

Next to whole-body relics there are fragmentary body relics, and “secondary” relics, i.e. things that came into contact with the saint.² The discussion presumes that “sainthood” is a useful notion for the comparative study of religion and the term will be used here as a general category.

Seen from an imagined orthodox center whole-body relics are a phenomenon on the fringes of “folk-practice”, and limited to relatively few cases. Very different from the practice of mummification in ancient Egypt and pre-Hispanic Peru, mummification in Christianity and Buddhism was not an ideal form of burial, but the privilege of saints. In fact, it was not a form of burial at all; the whole-body relics were (and are) on public display.

This article is an attempt to compare the role of whole-body relics in Buddhism and Christianity in order to clarify the structure of the phenomenon.

The relic cult has been a widespread practice in the devotional life of Buddhists and Catholics from soon after the founding of the religions until our time. Christian body relics are usually thought of as body parts rather than a whole body, but there also was a tradition that considered the *corpus integrum/corpus incorruptus* the “whole, undecayed body” to be the form most desirable for a relic.³ Early Christian writers often mention that the body of the saint was found undecayed before it was transferred to a church. The language used is similar to that found in the Buddhist texts. Wholeness, the absence of decay, was seen as miraculous proof of the purity of the saints. After the 9th century it became customary to divide the bodies of Christian saints and a massive and widespread trade with all sorts of relics began that continued throughout the Middle Ages. Earlier the

¹ This paper was originally published in: Kalpakam Sankarnarayan (Ed.): Proceedings of *The Contribution of Buddhism to World Culture*. Mumbai: Somaiya Publications, 2005.

² Since we will concentrate on whole-body relics, we will only consider relics derived from the saints, not those of the founders, Gautama Shakyamuni and Jesus of Nazareth. Also outside the scope of this paper are the large collections of Christian mummies in Italy, e.g. the several thousand mummies in the Capuchins Catacombs in Palermo. Most of the Italian mummies cannot be considered relics. Mummification in Italy after the Renaissance is better to be treated in a discussion of funeral practices. Still, the number of whole-body relics is especially high in Italy; Fornaciari speaks of “315 preserved bodies of saints, including at least 25 mummies.” (Ascenzi et.al. (1998), 266).

³ See Angenendt (1991), (1992) and (1997) for the history of whole-body relics in early Christianity; and Cruz (1977) for hagiographies of 102 Christian whole-body relics in Europe.

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exchange of fragmentary relics between communities was an important factor in the spread of Christianity.⁴ Most mummified whole-body relics that are displayed in European churches today were enshrined after 1500 CE.⁵

In the Buddhist world the relic cult was generally centered on the relics of Shakyamuni and their unique repository, the stūpa. At least in Chinese Buddhism, however, the retrieval of hard, shining *shelizi* 舍利子 (*śarīra*) from the bone of high-ranking masters after their cremation became customary.⁶ Next to these small, crystalline pellets or bone fragments, whole-body relics can be found in almost all Buddhist cultures, wherever there are exceptions to the rule that the remains of monks and nuns are to be cremated. It is clearly a pan-Buddhist phenomenon. Gilded whole-body relics exist in China, Taiwan and Vietnam; ungilded mummies are found in Japan, Tibet, Mongolia and Thailand.

Buddhist “high discourse” in exegesis and commentary mentions whole-body relics only in passing. Few texts in the Chinese Buddhist canon discuss stūpa and relic worship in a scholastic way, and the literal term “whole-body relic” (*quanshen sheli* 全身舍利) generally refers only to the mystical complete relic-body of the Buddha, not to the remains of saints. In Chapter 40 of the 7th century encyclopedia *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 the relics of saints are at least mentioned:

There are three types of relics. First, there are bone relics; their color is white. Second, there are hair relics; their color is black. Third, there are flesh relics; their color is red. Of Bodhisattvas and Arhants there are also these three kinds. If one hits a relic of the Buddha with a mallet it will not break, while if one strikes a relic of a disciple it breaks.⁷

Generally, however, the texts discuss only the relics of Shakyamuni himself, which circulated in China as small bone fragments.

In Christianity the theoretical base for relic veneration received more attention. The priest Vigilantius who argued that the practice was superstitious and close to idolatry voiced one of the earliest attacks against overdue attention to the relics. This was countered by Jerome (d.420), who in *Contra Vigilantius* (406) argued that the relic cult was not an expression of “worship” (*adoratio*) but of mere “adoration” (*veneratio*).⁸ Eight hundred years later Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) still used Jerome’s

⁴ Brown (1981), Ch.5.

⁵ No one has ever done a head count, but of the 102 incorruptibles listed by Cruz some seventy are preserved *in toto*. Her list, however, is incomplete and many more, such as Elisabeth von Reuthe or Theresa de Lisieux, await description.

The oldest Christian mummy of which I have seen a picture is San Isidoro (1080-1172), whose relics are kept in the Madrid Cathedral.

⁶ Kieschnick (2003), 33-52.

⁷ T.53.598c: 舍利有其三種。一是骨舍利。其色白也。二是髮舍利。其色黑也。三是肉舍利。其色赤也。菩薩羅漢等亦有三種。若是佛舍利椎打不碎。若是弟子舍利椎擊便破矣。

⁸ Later many other authors defended and explained the practice. E.g. Victricius of Rouen (d.407) “De laude sanctorum”, or Thiofried of Echternach (d. 1110) “Flores epitaphii sanctorum”. Until the reformation critique was usually directed only against the excesses. E.g. the criticism against the widespread trade and forgery of relics by Guibert of Nogent (1053-c.1124).

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argumentation to refute an objection concerning the relic cult (*Summa Theologica* (III, 25)).

The cult surrounding saints and relics that was at the center of popular Christianity during the Middle Ages was diminished greatly through the impact of reformation and enlightenment. The veneration of relics, however, is still a distinctive part of Catholicism today. As late as 1952 the church issued certificates for relics.⁹ In Buddhism too whole-body relics are still venerated. On Taiwan, as we have shown elsewhere, the practice of mummification is alive and well¹⁰ and the worship of whole-body relics in Japan, Thailand and on Jihua Shan mountain in China continues.

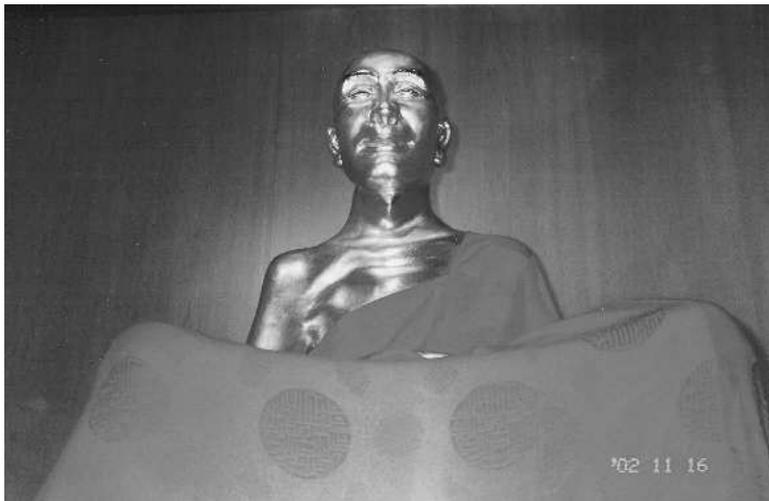


Figure 1: Shi Cihang (1895-1954) in 2002, near Taipei

1. Whose bodies?

In both Buddhism and Christianity whole-body relics are the preserve of saints. The proof of sainthood in early Christianity was seen in miracles that had to happen near the grave of the holy person. If the incident was accepted by the local authorities, the remains were transferred – “translated” – from the original grave into the church and buried again below the altar. In early Christianity saints were instituted on a local level. Only from the 10th century onwards, after pope John XV declared the sainthood of bishop Ulrich of Augsburg (d.973), the authority to conduct a translation moved from the local level to Rome.

The Christian relic cult evolved out of the veneration of martyrs in the 2nd century CE. That sainthood was not in the main modeled on the apostles or the early ascetics is significant for our comparison, since only martyrdom was open to both men or women. Christian whole-body relics therefore were obtained from both sexes, while Buddhist relics are derived exclusively from male corpses.¹¹

⁹ An example can be found in the database of the Modern History Source book at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html>.

¹⁰ Gildow & Bingenheimer (2005).

¹¹ With the exception of the most recent whole-body relic to date: Venerable Gongga, who was enshrined on Taiwan in 2001.

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In Buddhism, lacking a legislative center, sainthood has always been determined on a local level. The only figures accepted as saints in all Buddhist traditions, are the most prominent disciples of Shakyamuni. Their position and cult, however, vary greatly from culture to culture.

What were the explanations given for finding a mummified body instead of a skeleton? In those cases where the texts give a reason, Buddhist sources generally consider mummification as an attainment brought about by the virtue of the saint.

In recent centuries, however, in China and Japan some monks intentionally aspired to become a mummy, sometimes successfully. In Japan a number of monks killed themselves by fasting and progressive dehydration, literally trying “to become a Buddha in this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛).¹² In China and Taiwan monks gave orders to inter their bodies in earthenware tubs (*kan* 龕 or *gang* 缸), which were sealed and filled with salt or coal, in order to leave a whole-body relic to the world.¹³

Intentionality is never mentioned in Christian reports on whole-body relics. The *vitae* consider the incorruptible body as a gift of god, attesting to the virtue of the saint. Thiofried of Echternach (d. 1110) coined the formula: “Decay stems from nature, its absence...from merit and divine grace.”¹⁴

In spite of this difference, both traditions agree that the absence of decay is a consequence of the saint’s virtue. In the case of women saints in Christianity the purity is clearly associated with sexual abstinence. The Anglo-Saxon historian Bede Venerabilis (672-735) tells of the abbess Aetheldhryth (Etheldreda) of Ely, who had stayed chaste throughout her marriage: “[Her body] has been granted the sign of the divine miracle, that the flesh of the buried woman could not decay, to show that she has not been corrupted by contact with men (*a virili contactu incorrupta*).”¹⁵

In Buddhism we find rather general references to the keeping of the precepts or attainments in meditation. The body of the Indian Tantric master Cubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏 637-735) was found uncorrupted five years after his death. The biographer Zanning comments: “being imbued with meditation and wisdom, the whole body did not decay.”¹⁶

In general the sources credit Buddhist masters with a dignified appearance even after mummification. The ascetic Wuxia 無瑕 (1513-1623), who lived on Jiuhua Shan 九華山 and whose whole-body relic is still there, was found mummified in his earthenware *kan* “as if alive,”¹⁷ and there are many more examples. Where the state of the bodies after several years of interment can be determined in contemporary cases, it is far less miraculous.¹⁸ The body of Qingyan 清嚴 (1924-1970) still had to be propped up with a

¹² On Japanese mummies see Raveri (1992) and Matsumoto (1993b).

¹³ On Taiwan the monk Qingyan 清嚴 (1924-1970) even bought the tubs for his burial himself. His mummy was enshrined in 1976 (s. Gildow & Bingenheimer (2005)).

¹⁴ *Flores epitaphii sanctorum* I, 3: “Ex natura est putribilis, aliud ex meritis et gratia...imputribilis.” Cited in Angenendt (1991), 344.

¹⁵ Bede *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV, 19. Cited in Angenendt (1991), 336. See also Angenendt (1997), 89-93.

¹⁶ T. 50.716a: 定慧所熏全身不壞.

¹⁷ Jiuhuashan Zhi (1990), 182. (Thanks to Justin Ritzinger for this passage.)

¹⁸ See Gildow & Bingenheimer (2005).

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stick for the first post-exhumation photo. The body of Yingmiao 瀛妙 (1891-1973), who was buried in sitting posture above ground in a small brick structure, had clearly suffered after ten years and his right arm was largely gone.

In Christianity great emphasis is placed on the purity and immaculacy of the corpse after its finding. There are many instances in which the corpses of saints after elevation were described as “like alive”, “like sleeping”, “untainted by decay”, “solid and undamaged” etc. To give an impression of the *topoi* used in the descriptions we will look at two examples of Christian whole-body relicts.¹⁹

The Frankish historian Gregory of Tours (538-594) mentions nine cases in which well preserved corpses of saints were found and translated under various circumstances. His preferred terms are *corpus inlaesum* and *corpus integrum*. In fact his own great-grandfather, Gregory of Langres (d. 539), seemed to have looked rather healthy after death: “His blessed face glorified after his passing away, so as to make it roselike. While the face seemed red, the rest of the body shone as white as lilies.” The account continues:

One would have believed he was prepared already for the glory of the coming resurrection. [...]

When a few years later his son and successor Tetricus wanted to translate the corpse of his father into the newly built apse, the cover of the coffin was moved (on god’s command).

And look, his blessed face appeared, whole (*integrum*) and undamaged (*inlaesa*), so that one would have believed he was not dead but asleep. Even the burial garment was intact. Not undeservedly he appeared glorified right after his passing, because his flesh was not spoiled by pollution [during his life²⁰].

In the work of Beda Venerabilis (672-735) whole-body relics are mentioned four times. Beda describes the bodies as *incorruptum*, *inlaesum*, *immaculatum* and *integrum*. His two *vitae* of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (c.634-687) were inspired by the discovery of Cuthbert’s undecayed body in 698. Cuthbert is one of the most popular English saints and the history of St. Cuthbert’s relics is relatively well documented.²¹ Here are excerpts from Beda’s prose account:

¹⁹ Both examples are from Angenendt (1992), with the citations somewhat extended.

²⁰ This passage is problematic; Bishop Gregory of Langres was not celibate.

²¹ In 875 the body was moved from Lindisfarne to various sites in Northumbria to protect it from Viking raids, from there to Durham in 995, where it was enshrined on September 4, 999. The tomb was opened once in 1104 and the body still found intact. Until the destruction of the tomb on orders of Henry VIII in 1537, Durham was one of the most important pilgrimage centers in England. On the destruction of the tomb Archbishop Charles of Glasgow wrote in 1887:

[The commissioners of Henry on approaching the Shrine in 1537] found many valuable and goodly jewels...After the spoil of his ornaments and jewels they approached near his body, expecting nothing but dust and ashes: but, perceiving the chest he lay in strongly bound with iron, the goldsmith...broke it open, when they found him lying whole, uncorrupt, with his face bare, and his beard as of a fortnight’s growth, and all the vestments about him as he was accustomed to say mass. (Cited in Cruz (1977), 54-55)

The monks were allowed to bury Cuthbert again in the ground under where the shrine had been. This was opened again in 1827, at which time a skeleton, clad in decayed robes, was found. The designs matched those described in the 1104 accounts. Some argued the real body was elsewhere, but the remains of the 7th

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Now divine providence, [...] inspired the minds of the brethren with a wish to remove his bones, which they expected to find dry and free from his decayed flesh, and to put them in a small coffer, on the same spot, above the ground, as objects of veneration to the people. This wish they communicated to the holy Bishop Eadbert about the middle of Quadragesima²²; and he ordered them to execute this on the 20th of April, which was the anniversary of the day of his burial. They accordingly did so; and opening the tomb, found his body entire, as if he were still alive, and his joints were still flexible, as if he were not dead, but sleeping. His clothes, also, were still undecayed, and seemed to retain their original freshness and color. When the brethren saw this, they were so astonished, that they could scarcely speak, or look on the miracle, which lay before them, and they hardly knew what they were doing. As a proof of the uncorrupted state of the clothes, they took a portion of them from one of the extremities – for they did not dare to take any from the body itself – and hastened to tell what they had found to the bishop, who was then walking alone at a spot remote from the monastery, and closed in by the flowing waves of the sea. [...] The brethren brought with them [...] the piece of cloth in which the body of the saint had been wrapped. The bishop thanked them for the gift, and heard their report with eagerness, and with great earnestness kissed the cloth as if it were still on the saint’s body. “Fold up the body,” said he, “in new cloth instead of this, and place it in the chest which you have prepared.”²³

The two examples from Gregory of Tours and Beda show several topic elements, some of which are comparable to the Buddhist treatment of whole-body relics. The nature of the whole-body relic is that, like any relic, it has to be found and made public postmortem. However, because the body is “miraculously” preserved, it signifies, presents and represents, not only an abstract principle (see the discussion of agency below), but the very person of the saint in a much stronger fashion than a bone fragment. In the whole body of the saint, the saint, of course, is present.

2. Whole-body relics in sacred space

2.1 Exhumation and enshrinement

The earliest cases of whole-body relics in China were mountain ascetics that were “found” mummified in their caves and enshrined in a temple nearby. In Chinese Buddhism abbots and high-ranking monks were often cremated, but generally, in most areas, clerics and lay-believers were buried. In part this was due to financial reasons. Wood was expensive, especially in Northern China. Moreover, there existed a strong Chinese predilection for earth burial that the Indian custom of cremation could not overcome.²⁴ That cremation stayed the exception was a necessary condition for the appearance of whole-body relics. The first whole-body relics appeared probably in

century wooden coffin make this unlikely. For a meticulous analysis of these findings of 1827 see Battiscombe (1956).

²² The first Sunday in Lent, the season of fasting before Easter.

²³ Following the translation in J.A. Giles (1910). An earlier, anonymous *vita* emphasizes that Cuthbert was not dried and stiff. His limbs were flexible and “the throat and the knees were like with a living human.” (Cited in Angenendt (1991), 324).

²⁴ See the extensive discussion of funeral practices in Silvia Ebner von Eschenbach (1995).

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Central Asia, where the dry desert climate was conducive to mummification. Since the 7th century the mummified bodies in China were coated and gilded to turn them into more durable images.

Kosugi Kazuo has explained how the site where Buddhist whole-body relics were enshrined changed over the centuries.²⁵ He proposes three stages. In a first phase the corpses were venerated where they were found, namely in mountain caves (*sanchū no sekishitsu* (山中の石室)). Secondly, from the 5th to the 7th century, the mummies were slowly moved into locations that could accommodate worshipers more easily. In 624, for instance, the corpse of the monk Huichao 慧超 was placed in a small hut next to a temple, where after one year he still remained unchanged. However, the endless daily offerings, the flowers and the incense burning slowly obscured the door or hole to the cabin, so that he eventually was put onto the dais, presumably inside the temple.²⁶

From the 7th century, in a third phase, the Chinese whole-body relics were gilded and placed on a dais or into a stūpa. They were freely accessible to the public or at least shown on certain days. In the case of Suiduan 遂端 (d. 861) we are told:

He passed away unexpectedly in full lotus position. A short while later there appeared seven blue lotus blossoms from his mouth. People came from far and near to see and pay their respect. The people in the town decided together to make a tub²⁷ and bury him at the foot of the Mountains to the East. More than twenty years later lights were often seen at the grave, when people finally opened and checked they found Suiduan’s corpse as if alive. A crowd welcomed it back to the temple. It was covered with linen, lacquered and decorated. Today [in the 10th century] it is kept in the so-called True Body Hall.²⁸

Special buildings, stūpas or shrines are built for whole-body relics even today, although usually the gilded mummy-relic is placed on the dais in the main hall, next to images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.²⁹

In Christianity the connection between relic and church was even stronger. Transferring the corpses of saints – mummified or as skeleton – into the church building was a powerful ritual that elevated the status of both the deceased and the sacred place. Between the 4th and the 10th centuries saints *became* saints just because of this elevation. Vice versa, the church became a sacred space only if it harbored a relic. The translation was a threefold process consisting in raising the body (*elevatio*), transferal to the altar of a church (*translatio*) and second interment (*depositio*). Before the *elevatio* that needed

²⁵ Kosugi (1993), 287-291.

²⁶ T.50.582a: 殞於龍阜之山開化寺側。作窟處焉。經停一年儼然不散。日別常有供禮香花無絕。後遂塞其窟戶。置塔於上。

²⁷ The burial, in sitting position, in two earthenware tubs (*kan* 龕), was the common form of burial for monks. See Gildow & Bingenheimer (2005).

²⁸ T.50.869c: 咸通二年忽結跏趺坐而化。須臾口中出青色蓮華七莖。遠近奔走皆至觀禮。邑人同心造龕窆於東山之下。二十餘年墳塋屢屢光發。後開視之形質如生。眾迎還寺漆紵飾之。今號真身院存焉。

²⁹ A special pavilion-like structure was build for the gilded mummy of Cihang (1895-1954) near Taipei. For the position of the mummy on the dais in two other contemporary cases see Gildow & Bingenheimer (2005).

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the permission of a bishop or a secular ruler, a three day fast was customary. The *translatio* involved redressing of the body, a procession, and a mass at the new resting place inside a church. A yearly ceremony, modeled on the arrival (*adventus*) of secular rulers in the community, was held to commemorate the *translatio*.³⁰

In the beginning translation existed only in Gallic Christianity. Under Roman law it was a crime to tamper with the grave. Gregory I. (d.604) writes: “For the Romans ... it is all unbearable and a sacrilege, if someone strongly desires to touch the bodies of the saints.”³¹ Therefore the altar as reliquary became the norm first in Gaul during the 5th and 6th centuries. The practice became formalized in the Second Council of Nicea (787) when the presence of such relics was declared obligatory for the consecration of a church. This is the reason why Catholic churches are still consecrated in the name of a saint. Originally, this indicated the presence of some relic of that saint. Since saints had to be buried beneath an altar, the place near the altar became an ever more attractive burial place. After the 8th century Christian burials took place inside the church or its immediate surroundings, the nearer to the altar the better. Moving the graveyards into towns and villages constituted a marked break with the funeral customs of antiquity.

Deposito called for a burial of the relics below the altar and later in specially constructed tomb-shrines behind and above the altar. The development, parallel to that in Buddhism, was towards an ever more prominent place for the relics in sacred space, and reflected their growing importance during the Middle Ages. Whereas the first reliquaries were closed containers, during the later Middle Ages artists started to design reliquaries with an opening that allowed the visitor to see the relics.³² Most of the whole-body relics on display in Europe today are displayed in elaborate, coffin-shaped reliquaries with one or more glass windows.³³

On the surface the mode of display constitutes a major difference between Buddhist and Christian whole-body relics. The Christian glass coffin is an iconic category of its own. Saints are usually depicted standing or acting out scenes of their *vita*. As whole-body relics, the coffin points to their death, while the glass windows prove that eternal, physical presence is possible for the virtuous even beyond death, a central tenant of Christianity. Like so many Snow Whites, they rest until the heavenly prince will awaken them at the time of resurrection. Buddhist whole-body relics on the other hand, especially where gilded, are rather inconspicuous. They blend into the ensemble of other sitting images in Buddhist iconography and their ritual function is similar to that of the other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas on the dais. They receive offerings, are dusted off and clothed (see below) in regular intervals. By elevating him personally into the ranks of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas the Buddhist saint too is shown as having attained the goal. Though very different on the outside, we can therefore discern a deeper unity: both Christianity and Buddhism represent their saints as having successfully eluded death and decay, in the framework of their respective soteriologies.

³⁰ Brown (1981), Ch.5.

³¹ Gregory I. *Epistola IV*, 30: *Romanis...omnio intolerabile est atque sacrilegum, si sanctorum corpora tangere quisquam fortasse voluerit*. Cited in Angenendt (1991), 330.

³² Dinzelsbacher (1990), 140.

³³ See the photos in Cruz (1977). With the exception of the body of Catharine of Bologna (d.1463) that was enshrined in sitting position in 1475 all whole-body relics on the photos are lying as they would in coffins.

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Figure 2: Catherine Labouré (1806-1876), Paris

2.2 Clothing

Another parallel between Buddhist and Christian whole-body relics is the frequent mention that the mummified corpses were found fully dressed; that the clothes too had not decayed. While it is not surprising that conditions that arrest the decomposition of the body, would also preserve the clothes, mentioning the state of the clothes also contributes to the notion of personal presence and has therefore a meaning beyond the factual statement. *Kleider machen Leute* – the construction of the presence of the saint requires decent clothes. Even the mummified head of Saint Catharine of Siena (1347-1380), which is carried through Siena in a yearly procession, wears wimple and head veil of a nun. Saint Cuthbert, we remember, was unearthed with garments that “seemed to retain their original freshness and color” but re-dressed anyway before he was buried again.³⁴ Gregory of Tours mentions the finding of the mummy of an unknown girl (later canonized) whose “garment...was white and immaculate (*inlaesum*), not dissolved by foulness or stained by blackness.” In 1280 the body of Saint Hugh of Lincoln (1140-1200) was found incorrupt and his Carthusian habit in an “excellent state of preservation”.³⁵ There are many more examples.

Like in Christianity, Buddhist whole-body relics are clothed wherever they are displayed. The Buddhist mummies in Japan are without exception carefully dressed. Like the mummies in Thailand, the Japanese whole-body relics are not gilded.³⁶

In the 19th and 20th centuries Chinese whole-body relics were produced by putting the monk in two earthenware tubs that were filled with salt, coal or another substance that would absorb the fluids from the body. In the course of this induced mummification, the

³⁴ The same happened again in 1104. Cruz (1977), 54.

³⁵ Cruz (1977), 79.

³⁶ Cf. the photos in Sakurai et.al. (1998).

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clothes of course do suffer. Once gilded and on the dais, however, the whole-body relics are usually dressed in the kind of robe worn by monks on festive or ritual occasions.

In the case of Yingmiao (1891-1973) on Taiwan, every year on the day before the beginning of Chinese New Year, the abbess of the temple changes his robes and cleans his body-image with a wet rag.³⁷ Obviously the tradition that members of the Sangha are given new robes once per year is extended to Yingmiao’s mummy.



Figure 3: Shi Yingmiao (1891-1973) in 2002, Taipei

All whole-body relics, seated or lying, coated or untreated, are dressed in habits. Their representation as present religious persons is complete.

The dress of statues in churches and temples might either be part of the sculpture or the statue itself might wear a real, often expensive dress. In the 18th century the “Religions-Polizey” instituted by John II of Austria were impatient with “the abuse, that clothes the statues and images in special dresses, shirts, stockings and shoes, has them wear wigs, adorns them with golden, silver and other hearts and other such frill.”³⁸ That statues and whole-body relics were both dressed might seem self-evident considering that nudity in Christian and Buddhist sacred spaces is extremely rare. The fact, however, points to a deeper connection between relic and image.

2.3 Whole-body relics and images

Body-icons in sacred space are an important, perhaps essential, trait of both Buddhism and Christianity. Both Buddhism and Christianity make extensive use of the iconic depiction of bodies in their sacred spaces. Both traditions eventually preferred the iconic representation of bodies over aniconic modes, although at the same time both harbor

³⁷ Gildow & Bingenheimer (2005).

³⁸ *Missbrauch, vermög welchem den Statuen und Bildern besondere Kleider, Hemder, Strümpfe, Schuhe angelegt, Perücken aufgesetzt, golden, silberne und andere Herzen angehängt und andere Puzwerke beygebracht würden.* (Cited in Angenendt (1997), 268.)

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strong ascetic tendencies that suspect the body.³⁹ Usually the bodies, as we have seen, are dressed, nudity is the exception. Where physical representation of saints is ubiquitous, it is quite natural to represent them with the help of their physical remains. This leads to an ambiguous relationship between relic and image.

This ambiguity found its form in the body-reliquaries that are known in both Buddhism and Christianity. Drawing from Chinese and Japanese sources Doris Croissant has shown how the “Mumienporträt” does have similar functions as portrait-sculpture.⁴⁰ She proposes to view the body-reliquary as a mediating form between the mummy and the portrait. In the ash-remains-images (jp. *yuikaizō* 遺灰像) the ashes of the saint were mixed with the clay for the image.⁴¹ There are also a number of statues in which relics or fake organs were found. One of the earliest passages concerning alluding to such a body-reliquary is from the *Fayuan zhulin*:

During the years Taixing [318-322] of the Jin dynasty, the Dongs and Wangs of Qian venerated a wooden statue. One night there appeared lights and behind the image there was a sound and something fell to the ground. They checked and found relics. These floated in water and glittered in the five colors. [They] circumambulated them clockwise three times. Later, when the monk Facheng saw the relics, these leaped up four, five feet, right against his chest. Facheng said: If you let me establish a temple, these wondrous powers will be for all to see. Thereupon the relics in front of him leaped up again. Facheng founded a temple and a stūpa [for the relic]. [After that] every day more than ten people entered the Dharma in Qian [i.e. became Buddhists, probably by taking refuge].⁴²

Robert Sharf compellingly argued for a “ritual, structural, and functional interrelationship” between Buddhist whole-body relics and portrait sculptures. Especially the role of funeral portraits and their worship “seems to have developed in conjunction with the practice of preserving the remains of the deceased.”⁴³ Sharf also suggests that the famous statue of the Chinese monk Jianzhen 鑒真 (jp. Ganjin) (688-763) in the Tōshōdaiji in Nara was in fact a substitute for a failed attempt to mummify the monk. The existence of a link between image and relic in Christianity very similar to that in Buddhism further strengthens the arguments of Croissant and Sharf.

For in Europe too there clearly was a connection between portrait-sculpture and reliquaries. There the fragmentary relics of saints were often placed in reliquaries that

³⁹ Strong (1986) cites a number of reasons why there are no saints in most forms of Judaism, Protestantism and Islam. We might add one more: a cult of saints can only develop in a tradition that allows representing them somehow. It is difficult to remember saints that are not depicted or in some way encoded into space. In Islam for instance, the graves of martyrs might become the center of some cult, but in the architecture of holy sites there is no place for images of their bodies, much less so for a body as image. In Hinduism, another world religion with a strong preference for iconic symbolism, the prevalence of cremation makes whole-body relics impossible.

⁴⁰ Croissant (1990).

⁴¹ Kosugi (1993).

⁴² T.53.601a: 晉太興中。於潛董汪信尙木像。夜有光明。後像側有聲投地。視乃舍利。水中浮沈五色晃昱。右行三匝。後沙門法常看之。遂騰踊高四五尺投常懷中。常曰。若使常興立寺宇更見威神。又躍于前。於即常爲建寺塔。於潛入法者日以十數焉。 Cf. the similar passage in T.52.410c where the monk’s name is Faheng 法恒。

⁴³ Sharf (1992), 20.

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completed the body or a body-part as sculpture. There are hand-, arm-, foot- and head-reliquaries.⁴⁴ The earliest whole-body reliquary is that of Saint Fides of Conques (10th century). The presentation of Fides’ relics, contained in a large golden sculpture and studded with gems,⁴⁵ is most similar to that of whole-body relics in Buddhism.

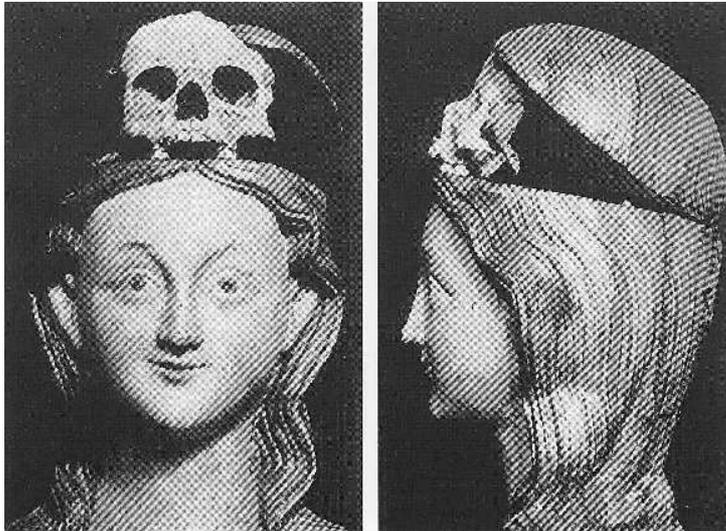


Figure 4: Head-Reliquary, Cologne (from: Angenendt (1997), pl.10)

Hans Belting affirms “an alliance between relic and image” in the European tradition. He holds that in an “analogy between reliquary and statue”, both were meant as “proof of the physical presence of the saint.”⁴⁶

Another link between image and relic is that images too are sometimes endowed with agency. The effigy is not merely a focal point for remembering the deceased, but also points to their continuous presence. This is not contradictory: remembering the dead brings them into the presence of the mind. All societies have rules and mechanisms for remembering not only the dead but anything past. The things remembered do not play a purely passive role; they interact with our minds, act on us. Therefore, most religions credit the dead, at least some of them, with agency. By the use of our cultural memory the dead are in a sense still active in our world. In that they both rely on memory and hope the function of images is similar to that of relics.

A final connection between image and relic is the commodification that comes with materiality. A whole-body relic was and is an immense asset for a temple as well as for a church.⁴⁷ The *elevatio* raised not only the body but also its economic value. Next to tales of dramatic findings and miracles we therefore find in both traditions Christian as well as Buddhist, a history of theft, forgery and trade in relics.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ See the pictures in Dinzelbacher (1990), Figs.1, 2, 4.

⁴⁵ Angenendt (1997), 183 + Fig.3.

⁴⁶ Belting (1990), 333.

⁴⁷ For the transformation of the Caoyi Temple into a pilgrimage center through the presence of Huineng’s mummy see Faure (1992).

⁴⁸ For Europe this has been extensively researched by Geary (1978). For the most famous case in Buddhism, the alleged theft of Huineng’s head, see Faure (1992). For the more recent “transfer” of the mummy of

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3. Presence/Absence/Agency

The explanations given in Buddhist and Christian scholasticism itself for the agency of relics seem to differ greatly, as is to be expected in the case of radically different eschatologies.

Christian saints are able to provide intercession with god, because of their privileged position near god. Again Thomas Aquinas:

They [the saints] are able to plead by virtue of their merits, which are seen by god and not only contribute to their glory, but are also helpful to our prayers and appeals.⁴⁹

Intercession is possible through the power of merit that was created by their virtue. The power inherent in the relics was therefore also referred to as *virtus*. It was believed one could see *virtus* as light, as an aura. Christian saints are supposed to be “the light of the world” (Mt 5,14) and when they die their souls rise shiningly into heaven.⁵⁰ This “mysticism of light” is one of the most important metaphors for European spirituality and appears topically in earlier texts about saints and relics. The merit of the saints was believed to be in some form present in the relics.⁵¹ Nevertheless, in the 13th century Thomas Aquinas argues against those who believe that “there always remains a certain force (*aliqua vis*) in the ashes.”⁵² De-reifying the miraculous power of the relics, he insisted on a purely theological explanation for the miracles.

In Buddhism there are a number of texts that tell of miracles worked by the relics, but as in Christianity, relic veneration was not a central topic for the scholastic tradition. The miracles brought about by relics, many of them involving lights “in five colors” (*wuse guang* 五色光) and scents, were duly reported, but no doctrinal foundation was thought necessary. The *Fayuan zhulin* says of the relics of the founder:

[The Buddha] wanted to make the humans and gods happy and therefore let his merit flow through sea and land, whatever belonged to him, even his teeth, hairs and clippings, the liquids of his skull-cap and eyes, his possessions: the robe, the begging bowl, the water container, his staff; and the traces of where he sat and his footprints. In the present as well as in the past their saintly power to transform is boundless. Its propitious sympathetic influence was constant, an auspicious ray, a steady brightness.⁵³

Huineng’s student Xiqian 希遷 to Japan see Matsumoto (1993a), 209-211. In Taiwan the mummy of Qingyan (d. 970, enshrined 1976) was contested by two factions and was brought to its present site only after considerable effort. (Gildow & Bingenheimer (2005)).

⁴⁹ *Summa theologica* III, Suppl. 72,3.

⁵⁰ Angenendt (1997), 117.

⁵¹ Cf. a 5th Roman tomb inscription: *linquunt namque suis animae uestigia membrīs / et miscent meritum corpora mensque suum* (For the souls leave traces in their limbs / and the minds mix their merit and the bodies). Cited with translation in Angenendt (1997), 113.

⁵² *Summa theologica* III, Suppl. 78,3.

⁵³ T.53.598b: 欲使福被天人功流海陸。至於牙齒髮爪之屬。頂蓋目睛之流。衣鉢瓶杖之具。坐處足蹈之跡。囊括今古聖變無窮。祥應荐臻瑞光頻朗。

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As with the Buddha himself, Buddhist saints leave their bodies behind out of compassion. By the sympathetic influence (*[gan]ying* [感]應) of their remains they remain active for the benefit of others.

Although Buddhism knows no intercession, Christian and Buddhist explanations of agency have one thing in common: in the end it is the power of the saint’s virtue that effects the desired results. Virtue is in both traditions conceived not as in modern usage as a mainly passive characteristic, some trait that one has (or not). The Latin *virtus*, the *virtù* of the Renaissance as well as the Pāli *puñña*, the Chinese terms *de* 德 and *gong* 功; they all connote a potential power, an active quality that some have in greater measure than others. In the eyes of the believer it is the mastery of this kind of virtue that enables the saints to be present in their absence.

Suppose then a considerable number of believers – probably the majority – in both traditions have believed that the saints are somehow present and accessible, that they are especially present in their relics. How are we to understand the importance of relics, especially whole-body relics, for the individual believer?

Sources and interviews suggest that miracle stories are important for the promotion of the cult. There is the hope that the saint will fulfill the one or other wish. These hopes assume a personal agency on the side of the saint. This is different from magical practices where the power resides in the practitioner or in the ritual itself; different too, from hoping for God or a Buddha to work a miracle. It is the saint *personally*, or at least his/her power left in the remains, that is physically close to the believer. Through their enshrinement the relics and saints are in reach, addressable, one can go on a pilgrimage to visit them. The way to God and the Buddhas, on the other hand, is mapped in eschatology, not geography.

The saints can fulfill wishes and, by virtue of the ambivalence of their presence/absence, act as intermediaries between the here and the beyond. The miracles worked by Christian and Buddhist saints are remarkably similar, presumably just as the wishes of their devotees. Healing, protection from fire, and bringing of rainfall were especially common wishes. In both traditions tales about miracles are abundant. Whole-body relics in both Buddhism and Christianity are usually fragrant and beautiful on their finding. Sometimes the relics want to be found, or have their casket or lacquering opened. They communicate their wish by the appearance of lights, fragrant fluids oozing out the coffin or coating, and through dreams.

How can we describe the belief that these intermediate beings or their remains will fulfill the prayers of the worshippers, without taking recourse to the explanations offered by the traditions themselves? And is it possible to claim a special kind of agency for whole-body relics that sets them apart from fragmentary relics?

When trying to frame this question from outside, Frazer’s old distinction between a “Law of Contact” and a “Law of Similarity” in magical thought is still useful.⁵⁴ It can help us to cognize some notions of the relic cult and to explain why whole-body relics are especially attractive. While the extensive discourse about magic in anthropology and

⁵⁴ Frazer (1922), 11-48.

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religious studies has largely dismantled Frazer’s definition and evolutionary theory of magic, his classification however is still in use, if modified according to the object of study.⁵⁵

According to Frazer, sympathetic magic is of two types. First there is *contagious magic*: items that have been in contact with a person, such as clothing or body parts like hair or nail clippings, may be used to establish a link that can be used to influence or contact the person. The second type, *homeopathic magic*, works through the principle of “like produces like”. Sprinkling water on the ground produces rain; a pin stuck in a doll causes harm to the victim that it represents.

In this worldview all things touched by a saintly person are believed to be magically efficacious. Body-part relics are thought to be especially powerful. As part of the saint they have part in the saint’s saintliness. But it is not only an abstract *mana* power – even if such a notion can be found in the traditions – since even a finger bone relic represents a certain human being, not an abstract principle. By a *pars pro toto* turn in thinking the finger bone, a hair, a tooth represents and substitutes for the whole person. It seems that there were voices in early Christianity that doubted the efficacy of fragmentary relics, since Victricius von Rouen (d. 407), in one of the first theological discussions of relics, strives to explain how even the smallest is connected to the whole. After a philosophical excursus he states:

Therefore we cannot complain about the smallness [of the relics], because we have said that, like in the case of genus, nothing does perish from the saintly bodies; and we have shown for sure, that there cannot be less in them of what is divine; because the whole is in the whole, and where there is a part there is the whole.⁵⁶

Whole-body relics do not need this *pars pro toto* turn. Their power of representation is far greater. His or her body is more than similar to the saint; it does not represent him by a mere part of his body. Whole-body relics combine the two forms of contagious and homeopathic magic. The mummy not only belonged to the saint in a most essential way, but also resembles, represents the saint more efficiently than any fragmentary or secondary relic.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Strong (1986). Sharf (1999) in his thoughtful article on “The Allure of Buddhist Relics” dismisses the usefulness of Frazer for the analysis of the meaning of Buddhist relics. His focus, however, differs considerably from that of this study. Sharf’s concern is with the semiotics of Buddhist relics on a much more general and theoretical level where Frazer indeed is *passé*. Here the question is, why people believe whole-body relics to be efficacious. For this, I believe, Frazer’s principles of resemblance and contiguity are still useful. On the legacy of Frazer and the continued use of his categories see also Tambiah (1990), 51-54.

⁵⁶ *Unde queri jam de exiguitate non possumus nam cum dixerimus as instar generis nihil sacrosanctis perire corporibus, certe illud adsignavimus non posse minui quod divinum est quia totum in toto est et ubi est aliquid ibi totum est.* (*De laude sanctorum* 10) Herval (1966), 137.

⁵⁷ That the mummy represents the saints more fully, contradicts the interpretation of Peter Brown (1981). Brown has argued that relic separation became customary in Christianity, because by keeping them in reliquaries and not in coffins, connotations of death are suppressed. This was to enhance the “imaginative dialectic” that allowed the relics to fulfill their ritual and symbolic functions. (Brown (1981), Ch.4) Apart from the fact that the reliquaries for whole-body relics are often sculptured as coffins, it is hard to see how even partial relics like the head of Catharine of Siena can avoid “connotations of death”.

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Another aspect of presence in connection with the whole-body relics, again an association that fragmentary relics can not deliver, is the notion that saints in their mummified state are “waiting” for a new age. Although the topos of the “waiting” mummy is not very common in either tradition, it is another interesting similarity. While Christian saints wait for final resurrection, when they will receive new bodies, Buddhist arhats and bodhisattvas await the arrival of Maitreya, the next Buddha.

The body of Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was discovered as though it had been “waiting for its elevation”. The *vita* of Norbert of Magdeburg (d.1134) reports that the corpse of the deceased in the grave had not started to smell after three summer days and “is waiting in hope of resurrection that every believing soul eagerly longs for.”⁵⁸ However, waiting for resurrection is not a powerful connotation in the Christian relic cult, for the saints have the power to intercede just because they are also *already* in god’s presence and not merely biding their time within their remains.

Matsumoto Akira tried to show that the Maitreya cult was an important factor in the development of Buddhist mummification.⁵⁹ He cites several instances from Central Asia, where one connotation of mummification seems to have been that the mummies are in fact meditating in suspended animation. This is supported by the Chinese/Japanese term for “becoming a whole-body relic” *ruding/nyūjō* 入定, which literally means “entering meditation”. The hope to be present in this very body when Maitreya appears and a new era begins, might have inspired some individual cases of mummification, a pervasive influence, however, cannot be shown. To our knowledge, the evidence from the 19th and 20th century cases never mentions any intention of mummification in order to “wait” for Maitreya.

4. Summary:

The various aspects of our comparison can be recapitulated and summarized as follows:

Table 1: Main Similarities

Buddhist whole-body relics	Christian whole-body relics
Privilege of “saintly” monks	Privilege of saints
Reason for preservation of the body: virtue, keeping of the precepts, asceticism	Virtue, chastity, asceticism
Enshrinement	Translation
The relic as asset: Pilgrimage centers, Theft and competition	The relic as asset: Pilgrimage centers, <i>Furta sacra</i> (Theft of the Holy)
Clothes & Public display (processions)	Clothes & Public display (processions)
Whole-body relic and portrait sculpture	Alliance of Relic and Image
Miraculous agency: Healing, fragrance, appearance in dreams etc.	Miraculous agency: Healing, exuding liquids, appearance in dreams etc.
Waiting for Maitreya	Waiting for resurrection

⁵⁸ *Vita Norberti* 23. Cited in Angenendt (1997), 110.

⁵⁹ Matsumoto (1993b), 180-191.

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Table 2: Main Differences

Buddhist whole-body relics	Christian whole-body relics
Male mummies only	Male and female mummies
Displayed in meditation posture	Displayed lying in the coffin
Intentional mummification	Mummification as divine sign

As we see, Buddhism and Christianity, in spite of their different eschatologies, show great similarities in their treatment as well as in the socio-economic functions of whole-body relics. Two of the main differences, the gender question and the mode of display, have been explained above. The former derives from the different historical development of sainthood from (male and female) martyrs in Christianity against the Buddhist notion of sainthood that was modelled on Shakyamuni’s ten eminent disciples. The latter proved to be superficial, both traditions show in fact the same thing: a saint who has defeated death, according to the respective doctrine.

For the last main difference we came across in this comparison the data on the Buddhist side is still insufficient. It is clear that in 18th and 19th century Japanese as well as in 19th and 20th century Chinese Buddhism a handful of monks have deliberately tried to have their remains preserved as a whole-body relic. As to intentionality in earlier cases and other Buddhist cultures further research is needed. It would not be surprising, if a number of Buddhist whole-body relics were produced according to the explicit intentions of the deceased that he communicated to his followers *before* death. “Attainment” in Buddhism is generally seen as acted out by an individual, not as divine gift, so some Buddhist monks might be expected to take their mummification into their own hands.

During the research for this article the comparative approach has opened a number of new perspectives on the topic. Although shown only for the fringe phenomenon of whole-body relics, the high degree of similarity is, I believe, significant for the study of comparative religions. The practice may help to understand certain commonalities in the way the human mind deals with the remains of those it considers to be ahead on the road to salvation.

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