tion prevail or should, in terms of what is perceived as common sense, the object be given up? I am describing the inner contention in this way because the situation demonstrates the split between instinctual demands and the role of self-imposed restriction and rational, culture-induced decision-making, especially when there is an established tradition of self-restraint and frugality. It is tempting to recognize here a dramatic variation of the infant’s pleasure-seeking impulses to have all of mother for himself or to modify the wish and reconcile his desires with the limitations imposed by the superego.

Irrespective of individual idiosyncrasies of collectors, and no matter what or how they collect, one issue is paramount: the objects in their possession are all ultimate, often unconscious assurances against despair and loneliness. They function as defenses in the service of self-assertion. They are magic remedies to ward off existential doubt and, most of all, they are witnesses of credibility.

PART TWO
MAGIC OBJECTS
CHAPTER 4

Skulls and Bones

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCHOLAR, had he tackled the subject of collecting, would hardly have begun with the pursuits of Don Juan. Nor would he have turned to the treasured possessions of children, since he would have seen no essential link between a child's anxiety and an adult's passion.

But let us for a moment follow the eighteenth-century scholar's lead and begin, as he might have done, with the craze known as Anticomonia. Roman collectors of Greek works of art and artifacts have left behind enough signposts to tell us that the drive to collect anything Greek was even then not just a matter of taste and fashion but arose out of envy and excesses of competition. It was these emotions that prompted prominent citizens like Mummius, Sulla, Julius Caesar, and in particular the notorious Caius Verres to pillage and plunder Greece and its colonies.

The fall of what was formerly Greek Sicily in the third century B.C. to Roman invaders set off a period of the most ruthless plundering and open rivalry among the victors, which drained the subjugated and defenseless people of the island of their proudest possessions. Livy recognized the fall of Sicily as the beginning of the true appreciation of Greek works of art. In effect, the Romans were the spiritual forerunners of the eighteenth-century German princess who became Catherine the Great of Russia. She herself was fully aware of her greed and cupidity. "It is not for love of art; it is voraciousness. I am not an amateur. I am a gourmandizer." Latin authors tell us about the unqualified lack of restraint among the Roman troops, in many ways reminiscent of the armies of Napoleon and Hitler. After the plundering of Syracuse in 212 B.C., Marcellus showed how great his victory had been by bringing huge quantities of Greek works of art back to Rome.

Were the Greek treasures like the trophies head hunters carry home? Or like the collection of Christmas cracker toys amassed by the little girl?
A quarter of a century after the plunder of Sicily, Scipio brought back to Rome 134 Greek statues and boatloads of embossed metalwork and coins. Meanwhile, Tarentum had fallen, and the victors appropriated the Hercules of Lysippus, one of the finest examples of Greek sculpture. Then Fulvius Nobilior shipped home 285 bronze sculptures and 230 marble statues from Ambracia. Later, in 167 B.C., Aemilius Paulus led a triumphal procession through Rome that included 250 loads of sculptures, paintings, and vases. And Strabo describes how Roman settlers looted Corinth, leaving no grave untouched. At that time Corinthian works of art and artifacts fetched the highest prices. This unmindful greed of Roman conquerors was a reflection of a trend.

We can read between the lines and see how much pleasure members of Rome’s aristocracy derived from the display of ransacked works of Greek art. Initially, all the loot was considered property of the state, but by the middle of the second century B.C., a Senate decision limited the number of statues and other objects to be publicly displayed, thus in effect initiating private ownership. After all, trendiness is often a decisive factor when it comes to collectors’ tastes. This encouraged Caius Verres, the provincial governor of Sicily, to luxuriate in self-serving and highly aggressive souvenir hunting on a grand scale. He made no effort to check and conceal his desire to appropriate untold numbers of beautiful statues and the exquisite examples of work in precious metals for himself. His passion, according to his foremost accuser, none other than Cicero himself, made of him a robber and a criminal. Indeed, Verres did not refrain from false accusations, murder, and genocide in order to obtain any object that struck his fancy.

At the time of Cicero and Caesar, Rome epitomized victorious extravagance and conspicuous consumption. Traders from all over the empire gathered there. Art dealers occupied entire city blocks. Some of the richest citizens even had their own private museums. And the thousands of elaborately decorated villas in and close to the city would eventually be copied during the Renaissance. All this reflects not only enormous wealth but also the manner in which cupidity and exhibitionistic tendencies find roundabout ways of being accepted as part of prevailing socio-cultural trends. However, Verres went too far. Cicero, no mean collector himself, accused him not only of “greed, but the insanity, the madness, [which] sets him apart from all other men,” and Pliny agreed. Verres was prosecuted but escaped from Rome, only to commit suicide.

Soon Romans began to go farther afield in their search for art objects. “The store of works of art in Greek countries was inexhaustible enough to satisfy the greed of Romans to the full,” Friedländer wrote. For example, Caesar’s collections of cameos was famous. Then, as now, and probably at all times, collectors had their secret sources, their spies and agents to track down their trophies for them. Gold, silver, manuscripts, tapestries, and paintings became all the rage. Not surprisingly, along with the increase in the demand for and the value of such objects came a vast trade in copies, bringing many Greek artists and craftsmen to Rome. And when the copies could not keep up with the demand, outright forgeries came on the market as well. When these turned into a flood, expertise soon evolved into a regular profession.

Such developments take cognizance of the historical difference between connoisseurship and mere accumulation. Collectors are often aware of the obsessional drive in their habit, but there is a speculative element as well. The need for authentication and approval by experts is a reflection of two forces existing within the collector—the desire for self-assertion through ownership and a sense of guilt over narcissistic urges and pride. As a result, some people require the concurrence of an authority or, in essence, a parental substitute who by providing guidance helps eliminate inner conflicts, thereby removing the collector’s ambivalence or subliminal sense of wrong-doing.

To explain further the compelling force that drives collectors, let us now turn from the eighteenth-century scholar to anthropological observations. The Reverend R. H. Codrington, in his classic account of Melanesian life and thought prior to the contact with the West, described the natives’ concept of mana, sometimes referred to as soul-substance, or life-force, as the “invisible power which is believed by the natives to cause all such effects as transcend their conception of the regular course of nature, and to reside in spiritual beings, whether in the spiritual part of
living man or in the ghosts of the dead, being imported by them to their names and to the various things that belong to them, such as stones, snakes, and indeed of objects of all sorts. 49

Mana, then, is present in both people and objects, providing them with power and exceptional dynamism. It can cure disease, cause evil and misfortune, and in many ways serve as a medium of potency. “Some relic such as the bone of a dead person whose ghost is set to work is, if not necessary, very desirable for bringing his power into the charm; and a stone may have his mana for mischief.” 40

The concept of mana, and occasionally even the same word in different local variations, is known throughout the South Seas. The Maori of New Zealand used to connect it with authority and supernatural power. So did the Samoans, as well as the natives of Tahiti, Raratonga, the Marquesas Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Mangareva, and Hawaii. 41 The Batak of Sumatra refer to it as tondi, and in the island group of Mentawei, natives describe this indefinable and mysterious energy as a residue of kere, while the Javanese call it kesakten. Many African tribal groups and North American Indians have similar concepts of a life-force.

We are dealing here with a presumably intangible and obscure power which, in whatever form it takes, seems to be universally accepted by preliterate peoples as existing in a world of mystery, magic, and medicine. At times this power has curative properties; at other times it can be harmful, fascinating, or even dangerous. The power itself is not visible. It is only the notion of or belief in it that is effective when the need for support finds a symbolic equivalent of strength. The supernatural efficacy of these mana-laden carriers transcends realistic judgments or intellectual reflection.

There are innumerable magical objects that have mana. Whatever the tangible aspect of the power-imbued fetish, it helps soothe anxiety, insecurity, or a sense of vulnerability, and is, as Henri Bergson put it, “a precaution against the danger man runs, as soon as he thinks at all, of thinking himself alone.” 42

This dynamic conception of strength or power is not arbitrary. When man is in the grip of needfulness and in search of support, its emotions ascribe various kinds of potency—healing, protective, mystical, rescuing, or, alternatively, destructive—to whatever device can furnish such a feeling, or merely prevent anxiety. Effigies of ancestors or demons can be numbered among such devices, as can relics of saints and martyrs. All are similar to the cherished teddy bears or children’s dolls, or the memorabilia of relatives or outstanding persons such as Churchill or Hitler.

Logic is eclipsed when objects held by a baby or worshipped by a religious believer are no longer literal representations of something but instead become carriers of mana. As such they are often treated as if they had a soul or a life-force of their own. They are, then, not merely ideological representatives but can be regarded as organisms permeated with basic strengths and capabilities. In other words, they are often employed in an attempt to master reality or, more concretely, to master anxiety by way of reassuring or even delusional fantasies.

When a child gives a name to a plaything, we tend to regard it as nothing more than the harmless abatement of temporary insecurity or unhappiness or a fear of being alone. But is this essentially different from a Melanesian native’s trust in mana, or the conviction that magical properties exist in the bones of a dead ancestor?

A patient of mine, when leaving my consulting room, was in the habit of taking a tissue from the bathroom and, as she eventually told me, guarding it carefully until her next visit to me. There is little mystery here. All she had done was to unconsciously invent a simple, unobtrusive, and temporary fusion with me. Private rituals like this, in essence not very different from compulsive collecting, are an attempt to create artificial or illusory companions. And so attaching any sort of power or mana-like life-force to objects makes them special, which in turn are meant to make their own special or different. Seen in these basic terms, collecting of objects is a distinctly individual experience.

But there are certain objects or collections that arouse shared sensations in the viewers. An early form of effecting relief from anxiety and exercising imaginary strength was skull collecting. This is an expression of sentiment with which Western man is familiar, for the Catholic church has long looked on the skulls of saints and martyrs with awe and devotion. These are more than just the corporeal residue of the actual person or even of his or her mysterious, awe-inspiring identity, and they are also more
than the tangible symbols of survival. Once we inquire into the latent meaning of skull worship and postmortem power, we have to abandon the straitjacket of logical argument or defensive reasoning.

Thought, Jan Huizinga observed, has a marked tendency "to embody itself in images." Here, it is the conception of immortality that we are trying to attach to an object. Underlying this demand for a relic, and in particular a skull, is a powerful emotional experience. By keeping an ancestor's skull, the believer confers everlasting life on that person. That is to say, his spirit remains. It really means that if he can attain immortality, then in some way or other the owner of the skull can as well.

In the case of the ancestral skull, certain South Pacific tribes actually model the ancestor's image on the skull itself. In the case of a saint or a martyr the skull is sometimes preserved in a reliquary which supposedly resembles his or her countenance. This is an obvious attempt to preserve or reclaim life. However, we would miss the point if we regarded this kind of habit only in terms of reclamation or preservation, or as a stab at mastery and ownership linked to possessiveness and a phallic-exhibitionistic tendency.

The accumulation of relics epitomizes what the whole process of collecting is about. People tend to attribute intrinsic power or life-substance to important parts of the body or, in an emotionally more detached spirit, to remnants of the past, like the Greek works of art Roman citizens considered highly desirable collector's items. Such endeavors often reflect a belief in transmigration of the soul. It is not essentially different from the mana I dealt with before. Several collectors of antiquities and tribal art have told me that the objects in their collections were silent witnesses of eternity, or, as George Ortiz put it, "evidence of infinite truth."

The dominant factor in this search for "evidence" is a guarantee of perpetuity. The objects are regarded as testimony that death is not final and the end of all existence; that one does not have to face abandonment, the dread of being left alone and, ultimately, demise and nothingness. Collecting skulls, bones, or anything belonging to ancestors or important or holy persons is a particular form of denial. It is an irrational custom; a blending of conscious dread and unconscious aggression. The skull or the relic is unquestionable proof that the person is no longer alive, and yet this knowledge is denied by assuming that he or she still holds magical potency or secret-regenerative power.

Ritualized or institutionalized collecting illuminates elementary patterns which, whether one likes it or not, must be treated as documentary evidence of the presence of a profound state of anxiety but then warded off collectively, say, by the Church, by converting a feeling of helplessness into a manifestation of imaginative action. At the same time, we must realize that anyone in the grip of this kind of existential doubt may seek and find relief in many different ways. Thus, the solutions chosen are determined by inner conditions as well as by the prevalent sociocultural tenor. We have seen how the rudiments of these feelings are well-set in early childhood for there is no culture in which a young child can grow up without anxiety and the dread of being left out or alone. This is doubtless a key phenomenon with the deepest consequences, a fact that helps to explain why we find related ways of dealing with such fundamental feelings in many different times and places.

As we shall see later, much of contemporary collecting, even by institutions, is a continuation, however camouflaged or arcane, of what has often been observed among many preliterate peoples. The deep-seated attempts to grasp and hold—the fore-runners of chase and capture—grow out of an archaic need for reassertion, because there is no one who has no submerged memory of powerlessness and early suffering.

In view of this, it may be worthwhile to consider another fundamental aspect of collecting. As I said earlier, many primitive peoples believe the head to be the seat of a person's life-force or soul. However, many tribes do not restrict this belief to the skulls and bones of their ancestors; hair, nails, teeth, genitalia, and even former belongings may also be mana-laden. Whatever the object, the emphasis remains on the transmigration of spiritual power or efficacy. Not too long ago, in the Sepik River region of New Guinea it used to be possible to see here and there a recently captured head. It was customary to hang such trophies at the outside of the men's community house. There they remained until an appropriate feast was organized to mark a ritual in which adolescent males were initiated. These boys with the aid of adults, usually their fathers or uncles, had taken
the heads of neighboring tribes, in preparation for becoming recognized members of the adult male society. Only after such a traditional initiation or rites of passage from boyhood to adulthood was the young man allowed to wear a particular tribal emblem, such as a pubic covering, in recognition of his new status.

We should not dismiss such institutionalized customs as savagery and bloody murder. And, in any case, manic cruelty and obsessive devotion are in no way irreconcilable. Such conventions are socially approved means of diverting unconscious and implicitly repressed drives. Head-hunting and preserving relics of a saint spring from the same experiential source. It is for this reason that I have drawn attention to the conceptualizations and practices of certain native tribes.

The Marind-anim of western New Guinea used to require that a head be taken for every newborn infant. The child needed a name, and the name had to be taken from someone else who had to die for the sake of perpetuity. The name would live on. The name had hidden power, and nobody could command power without such a transmigration, which could only be guaranteed by way of capture and murder. For that reason the Marind headhunter would first force his victim to reveal his name.66

Many Christian relics are the bones and particles of martyrs, some known ones, though many more died for their belief, and no name was known. Significance and, in essence, intrinsic power is inevitably linked to a name. (In much the same manner, we have come to consider a work of art with a pedigree and signed by the artist to be more valuable than an unsigned one.)

In the case of the Marind-anim this custom used to go far beyond the ceremonial. It was an attempt at guaranteeing a homeostasis of life-substance and the perpetuation of efficacy. Thus, personal name and head or skull belonged together as an entity of power. And so these people had arranged galleries of skulls, an imaginative institution to exhibit collective tribal potency. To them, this way of collecting and exhibiting fulfilled an indispensable ego-sustaining need.

Among the Bareh-Toraj of Central Sulawesi (formerly Celebes), men who had successfully participated in a head-hunting raid could wear a red-colored headdress called ula rompe, while those who hunted a second time could add yellow to the headdress, now called uasi namhin. The different names and colors were proof of a man’s rank and courage. Someone who had gone out five times on these daring ventures was allowed to wear buffalo horns, no doubt phallic credentials. But what about the skulls? They were on display in the ghost house (lala).

These head-hunting expeditions had various purposes, the most important belonging to the initiation rites of the pubescent boys, culminating in a circumcision ceremony in the course of which the youth sat on a skull during the actual operation.68 This last instance is particularly descriptive because the entire procedure literally makes the young novice the possessor of the power-imbued skull. Here we must remember that the verb “possess” comes from the Latin potest (able) and sedere (to sit). I do not believe that any other demonstration of what it means to possess could be more explicit, starting with predatory expeditions and climaxing in the ritualized act of taking possession of the soul-substance or life-force of the slain victim. It is an unqualified enactment of ownership and triumph.

I choose these examples because they dramatize the association between a sense of mysterious power and certain culture-specific variations and elaborations regarding its passage. The rituals make it evident that possession—almost in the literal sense—and ownership are intrinsically intertwined. The young headhunters give an unsolicited demonstration of the inner meaning of a newly acquired status, a powerful supplement to one’s self-esteem, or even a new identity by way of a mysterious fusion with the mana of the dead victim. We recognize that the starting point of possession is visibly linked with a craving for power. This corresponds closely with some collectors’ desire or even condition to own objects with a pedigree proving that they previously belonged to someone famous—as if there were a transmigration of an intrinsic force. As the headhunter’s rituals make quite explicit, there is, then, a fusion of an aggressive with a passive-dependent element.

There is also, I believe, a link to certain sacramental practices. For the Orang Agung of the island of Sumatra, capturing a head was again proof of achievement and excellence. According to these peoples’ concept, a skull captured by a young man would double his strength. Bringing home the head of a slain enemy
implied courage and strength and was a precondition for marriage. But there is more, for the skull served a dramatic purpose, in a practice seen elsewhere in transparent variations. It was used as a wedding cup from which the newlyweds drank palm wine.67

Custom apart, this is an elementary example of the interdependence of two strata for the enhancement of mana or life-substance and the subsequent mystical union of slayer and slain, of preservation and perpetuation of vital power. It clearly implies the principle of the Holy Sacrament in the Roman Catholic rite (to which I shall come back in the following chapter). Once again, the various elaborations, whether more explicit or in symbolic disguise, spring from man’s elemental early development and become adapted and assimilated according to particular culture-defined imperatives and eventually to individual needs and vicissitudes.

One collector of my acquaintance is a modern counterpart of the Indonesian skull-cup collectors. This lady had gathered drinking cups since her adolescence. However, this was not simply an assemblage of containers, since every object in her collection had once belonged to or been used by some person of prominence, among them Voltaire, Tchaikovsky, Albert Einstein, Franklin D. Roosevelt, one of the Barrymores’, and the boxer Jack Dempsey. Notwithstanding the obvious difference between a Batak headhunter and a sophisticated Western woman, there is a subliminal nexus as to the inner motivation.

The correspondence is even more evident in another Indonesian tribe. The Wemale of the island of Ceram provide a striking example of the connection that exists among skulls, cups, and certain other objects of aesthetic appeal. (It is these equivalences that give a hint of the unconscious attributes of the “collectibles.”) The skulls of the Wemale’s victims were kept in the clan’s sanctuary, or pusaka house, together with—and this is significant—sacred vessels, gongs, and Chinese porcelain cups and bowls that for centuries have found their way to the Indonesian archipelago, not as objects for home use but as part of the treasured, almost sacred holdings of a clan or village.68 Each piece had its own history or, more to the point, a story attached to it, not unlike the lady’s collection of cups used by prominent people. Among the Wemale, crockery and skulls were enshrined in the same place, and hardly any distinction was made between them.69

The belief in a life-force or soul-substance or placeable soul is obviously an incentive for the accumulation of skulls and bones. But such a collection can soon become invested with a sort of aesthetic fiction in which a beautiful artifact can take the place of a captured head. Thus, when the Dutch governor interfered with the Wemales’ age-old custom of head-hunting, they turned instead to tinware and bronze gongs, even instituting thieving raids to faraway corners of their island in order to obtain more and more of these treasures, not unlike the stealing of holy relics in medieval times (as we shall see in the next chapter). Their instinctual incentive had been moderated or, rather, adapted to the Dutch colonizers’ demand, and now cups, bowls, vessels, and gongs replaced the forbidden skulls.68

Here is a fitting example of how raw impulses can become tamed and transformed or remolded and, from a psychoanalytic perspective, undergo secondary and often tertiary elaborations. Such developments are not at all arbitrary, and despite changes and distortions there remains a kinship with the initial, underlying concern. The mana attributed to symbolic substitutes had the same experiential meaning that was formerly attached to the heads of the slain victims. What counts is that the relevant sentiment, and the effective origins so vital to such notions, were hardly blurred.

We can recognize here the reverberation of the original passion and appetites. And we can extrapolate how man’s initial powerlessness and his attendant cravings and insecurities eventually find extensions. Counterbalancing this uncertainty becomes of paramount significance. Thus, attaching intrinsic values and mana to objects one cherishes is both an expression of frustration and a striving for security by magic means.
* CHAPTER 5 *

The Headhunter’s Bequest

A fundamental affinity exists among the skulls of an ancestor, of a sacrificial victim, and of a saint or martyr who gave their life for their beliefs. All are regarded as carriers of intrinsic power, and they concretize these ideas which represent the substance of mystery and sacrament.

Texts by churchmen starting around the fourth century A.D. stressed that the remnants of saints and martyrs had dynamis (from the Greek force), and thus the ownership of relics as a reservoir of divine patronage was introduced (or more correctly reintroduced from pre-Christian religious faith) into the creed of the faithful. A pagan custom was adapted to the needs of the young Christian church, and the passions of preliterate peoples were tailored and built into the current religious credo.

There is a church in the village of San José in the Petén in Guatemala, once the home of the Maya. The church owns three human skulls, which are the center of local worship. Here the links between pagan and Christian faith are quite clear, as one of the villagers revealed. He explained that these were the skulls of holy men of the past. “My grandfather told me they were important, and his grandfather said the same thing. They were more important than the saints because the saints are made of wood. The skulls have been human beings and have been alive. They are real bones just as ours.”

It would be hard to link the mystical and the factual more succinctly. The trust in the efficacy of the skulls, and hence their spiritual value, was the moving influence, with the concrete existence of the skulls and bones being the logical argument. The underlying principle here is the need for illusion in search of reinforcement and guarantees of a tangible presence. Man is everywhere a prisoner of his own anxiety. This inner tyranny implies from the outset a genuine craving for security and, more than that, for being special. And so owning the remains of martyrs is not unlike possessing a skull, an ancestral bone, or any mana-carrying object.

Many tribes pride themselves on a large accumulation of skulls, bones, or tusks. I have already mentioned the veritable skull galleries of the Marind-anim, and other tribes in New Guinea and elsewhere also used to collect and display skulls. But no collection of skulls and other relics can compare to that of the Roman Catholic church, especially those of the Capuchin order. And then there are the catacombs of Rome and Sicily, which contain an almost endless supply of skeletons and remnants of those men and women who died for their faith.

What we have observed in Melanesia, Africa, and Central America holds for the early Christians. In their eyes too there was a magic tie between body and soul, and consequently between the mundane and the spiritual. The soul is incorporated in the body. Reliquiae are the material residues of the dead, and as such offer a warranty of esoteric and wonder-working power, supposedly healing and preserving life and stability and promising, most importantly, eventual salvation. Medieval Christendom practiced, and even elaborated on, the mysticism and wishful longings of ancient civilizations.

Recall the case of Paul and his rag dog Micky. Paul’s belief in the efficacy of the toy helped submerge his anxiety, and with the toy at hand he learned to live with and rely on this mystery. Why then not rely on splinters or nails of the Holy Cross, or remnants of the vestments of the saints? The cathedral treasures of Milan include the shroud of Jesus Christ, the nails of the Holy Cross, and Moses’ wand, while the Cathedral of S. Giovanni in Laterano in Rome counts another wand of the prophet among its rich possessions. Also found among the relics in S. Giovanni in Laterano is Christ’s prepuce, which has turned up in a number of other places. There is, for example, a Holy Prepuce at Charroux, near Poitiers, in France, and there are others in Coulombe near Chartres; at St. James of Compostela, in Puy, in Hildesheim in Germany, and in Antwerp.

All these relics were believed to embody some inherent presence of the holy person which remained potent and effective beyond his or her earthly life. Note the resemblance to the belief in mana-laden objects of preliterate peoples. The adoration or, as several churchmen in the Vatican pointed out in my conversations with them, the veneration of such remains has developed into a significant part of the Catholic faith. Msgr. Testori, the

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priest in charge of the Custodia delle SS. Reliquie at the Vicariato di Roma, the official dispensing agency of holy relics, advised me that, even if the identity of a particular martyr is unknown, the remains nevertheless belonged to someone who had suffered and given his life for his faith. To the true believer, Msgr. Testori pointed out, a holy relic should be a sobering reminder of the devotional spirit and the vanity of earthly existence. Another priest, Msgr. C. Rogers, stressed the high-mindedness of everyone who died for what he or she felt to be the truth. What matters today is the spirit, Msgr. Rogers emphasized.

Contrary to my expectations, the office of the custodia is just a couple of rooms, with a counter, a few desks, and an upright chest with glass doors containing a few dozen jars. Some look like apothecary jars, while others are ordinary jam jars, each holding some bones or a small sack, possibly holding ashes or some other fragile material. Each jar is labeled, most of them with the name of a saint or a martyr. At the time of my visit a German priest obtained two relics, of San Sebastian and San Tomaso, each in a small envelope with an impressive seal and documentary papers. Compared with the dramatic history of relics and relic collectors, there was nothing at all macabre about the transaction.

Many relics have a legend or history attached to them, which is supposed to add to their significance and mysterious efficacy. Even the smallest particle is believed to contain power. While one may call it superstition or fantasy, this belief in their worth is one reason they are so much in demand. There is no rational explanation for it. Few subjects lend themselves better to the study of delusional conviction and possessiveness than the collecting of relics. The experiential force attached to these remnants is like a love affair—unreasoned, wishful, and occasionally manic, as we shall see.

After the early custom of building a simple altar over the grave of a martyr had been abandoned, the corpses were exhumed and transported to other places. Dismemberment had almost always occurred, but now the division of corpses and the dispersal of the various parts to churches in many different places and to individual collectors became an accepted practice that grew into “an unruly passion.” Again, the dread of helplessness and the longing for protective power found a poignant illustration under the seal of religious devotion.

When word got around that the Holy Cross had been discovered in Jerusalem, thousands wanted to share in its blessings. Splinters of the Cross flooded the market from the Middle East to Western Europe. It has been stated more than once that there was more wood supposedly belonging to the Holy Cross than all the streets of Rome could be covered with. The pars pro toto concept treated all the splinters as a depository of divine power,-endowing the owner with a reassuring notion of superiority.

And so the remnants of saints and martyrs lost much of their original purpose. Instead of being solely objects of devout contemplation, the relics began to be used as phylacteries, “to escape the darkness of the underworld.” They became a means of achieving specialness and extraordinary power, as well as an accepted way of expressing one’s voracity. Soon there was a regressive move to magical thinking and wishful projections about them.

There is clearly an archetypal undercurrent in equating something that belonged to a saint or, for that matter, to Jesus Christ Himself, with being or becoming part of Him. It underscores the need for a bond with the saint, which offers an illusory attempt at self-preservation. The dread of being left unprotected in this life, and the prospect that one will be exposed to the horrors of purgatory, is reminiscent of those fears infants are subject to in the early years of uncertainty and doubt, and in the sometimes macabre rituals of primitive peoples. The invocation of a remnant of a saint as intermediary evolves out of the feeling of being vulnerable and defenseless and, at the same time, out of an inherent sense of guilt because the instinctive response to vulnerability is hatred.

The relic cult and the often obsession with the collection of relics was preceded by the widespread use of protective amulets. Toward the end of the fourth century so many relics were brought to Constantinople that the city became the relic capital, and travelers, pilgrims, and crusaders all thronged to the city. Opportunistic merchants quickly took advantage of the pious sentiments of the visitors, and health, redemption, and divine protection were soon for sale everywhere. Appropriate holy, mana-laden bones and objects were summoned forth by the same kind of
mental condition the unhappy infant applies when helplessness
or uncertainty threatens his or her trust.

Christianity may have supplanted paganism by that time, but
the underlying need remained. Believers were reluctant to put
their confidence in intangible blessings. They needed something
to see and touch and put their faith in supernatural assurance.
Excesses of piety and devotion, mixed in with a good measure
of avarice, quickly led to the suspension of rational judgment.
Zealots, along with connoisseurs, have long been the victims of
their own emotions, as was the case here.

In just a few short years, relics were frequently being stolen,
presumably for reasons of piety, but actually because they had
become a valuable commodity to attract pious visitors to the
places of worship. Whether born out of ideology, a lust for
beautiful objects, naked ambition, or sociopolitical aims, there is
little question that there is lying at the heart of a good deal of
theft a desire for exclusivity and power as a usually manic de-
fense against anxiety. What this meant in this case was that, if a
relic really was a protection against damnation, why should not
someone in a ready position to obtain one of these magic objects
be solaced by its ownership? In the fierce struggle to get posses-
sion of relics that marked this period, we can see the develop-
ment of a kind of acquisitiveness accompanied by a strong aura
of sanctity.

We have some information about individual relic collectors
from Carolingian times. One of them was Einhard, biographer
of and adviser to Charlemagne and his son, Louis the Pious.
Louis had provided Einhard with the bishopric of Mulinheim in
the Odenwald as a privy purse, which he now wanted to enrich
with holy relics. While Einhard was trying to gather relics for
his "City of the Blessed," or Seigensstadt as he had renamed
Mulinheim, the Venetians were smuggling the remains of St.
Mark out of Alexandria. Hilduin, the emperor’s chaplain, who
was also eager to collect such treasures, competed with Einhard
for the remains. But there is considerable evidence that posses-
siveness, even in the name of faith, is not far removed from cor-
rupcion, and Venice became the final resting place of the skull
of the saint. However, Einhard did obtain the relics of two martyrs,
Marcellinus and Peter, about whom he himself wrote an exten-
sive essay, Translato et Miracula SS. Marcellini et Petri.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that in medieval life
relics had a distinct economic appeal. By attracting worshippers,
they brought in substantial tourist revenue. There was there-
fore a practical reason for going after them. "A city without re-
lics was like a man without a shadow," Hugh Honour writes.

The discrepancy between demand and supply soon brought a
number of enterprising traders on the scene, some in clerical
garb, such as the deacon Deusdona who lived opposite S. Pietro
in Vinculi, the famous Roman church, and functioned as a trus-
tee and administrator of several rich catacombs. In him, reli-
gious zeal quickly gave way to avarice, and he took to selling
forged relics to naive and trusting believers. Obsessive collect-
ors have always been open to temptation. A few hundred years
later it was the sale of indulgences that took unsavory advan-
tage of people’s frail self-reliance. Now, perhaps counting more
on people’s naïveté, Deusdona, a veritable merchandiser in holy
relics, founded a kind of syndicate for the exploitation of both
the catacombs and willing believers. The difficulty of crossing
the Alps did not keep the deacon from paying visits to the Impe-
rial Court at Aix-la-Chapelle and cultivating relations there.

The burghers of Rome soon became aware of the constant
outflow of their spiritual capital, particularly after some people
went to look for the remains of St. Sebastian and St. Hermes and
found both of their graves had been opened. Deusdona, having
gained access to the inner circles of the Court at Aix-la-Chapelle,
probably was able to outbid his competitors for the remains.
With the consent of Pope Eugene II, part of the body of St. Se-
bastian had been brought to the French town of Soissons. Mean-
while, with relics on their way to becoming a good deal more
than objects of devotion, Hilduin had conspired in the theft of
St. Peter’s body, which belonged to Einhard, while Einhard him-
self had devised a scheme of having them taken from a church
in Rome.

Medieval man triumphed when the relics of saints and ma-
tryrs could be removed without harm or authorization of the
present keepers, who were then pronounced unworthy of their
present treasures, thus revealing a good deal about the frailty of
conscience. Gregory of Tours speaks of thieves who offered an
abbey near Bourges some relics of St. Vincent that had been sto-
len from Orbigny. Or the monks of the abbey of Abingdon let it
be known that certain holy remains in their shrines had been taken from Glastonbury, implying that they, as their new guardians, could take better care.50

While the taste and choice of collectors is predominantly influenced by their personal predilection, there is little question that the ambience of the time and surroundings also affects a person’s outlook. There is not too much conjecture in the assumption that this religiously tinted concern with holy relics came to some extent from Charlemagne himself. The emperor was a devout believer who made Aix-la-Chapelle, his favorite residence, one of the centers of relic worship. He recalled that when he was seven years old, a miracle had taken place before his very own eyes. The coffin with the remains of St. Germain was supposed to be moved from one place to another, but it was too heavy. At that moment, the miracle occurred: The coffin moved of its own accord. The young prince, who was watching from nearby, jumped up in disbelief and thereby lost a tooth.57

Even a fragmentary account such as this sheds light on the linkage between faith and danger. To the young boy, the experience was an unforgettable revelation of the supernatural forces to which he had to submit. After all, the concern with relics is rooted in insecurity and the concomitant need for reassurance. Relics became emotional currency in the face of existential anxiety and frustration, which inevitably result in hostile thoughts and aggressive fantasies, and they, in turn, spawn a dread of impending retribution. And the Church preaches eternal punishment for one’s earthly sins in purgatory. Such threats, actually from within, as well as dangers from without can easily menace a person’s equilibrium, to the point where delusion and fanaticism take over. The relic, like the infant’s comforter or Paul’s toy dog, is a technical device for those in need of tangible support, here in the form of another sustaining object. It represents the believer’s unequivocal surrender to the omnipresence of the Sacrament. This was especially true at a time when the Church kept reminding the believers of their inevitable guilt feelings by preaching about the horrors awaiting the poor sinners in purgatory.

Charlemagne’s childhood memory is fitting because it sharpens our awareness of the subliminal links between this awe-inspiring episode and his lifelong belief in miracles and the ever-present threat of divine justice and retribution. We cannot ascertain to what degree the sudden loss of a tooth at the very moment the coffin moved affirmed a seven-year-old’s belief in spiritual powers. Did this episode remind him of a loss of control and a need for self-preservation? Did the event increase an inner conflict over whether aggressive impulses would endanger divine protection? If we take some clues from clinical observations we understand that dreams about the loss of a tooth or teeth frequently signal concern about cannibalistic-destructive fantasies, even castration, and Charlemagne may have yearned for extirication from even unconscious culpability.59

As I have noted, magical objects are a hedge against a lingering sense of vulnerability or, in the case of the believer, a kind of promise of safe conduct. Thus, we can understand Charlemagne’s search for protective devices, as well as a kind of supernatural potency, as a means of fostering his illusion of control over both the present and the hereafter.

Just as the call of one’s faith rationalizes a rudimentary need to ward off persecutory threats, so religious beliefs turn into superstitious credulity, and, in the case of many relic collectors, into a display of crude calculation in the name of piety. Emotions of this nature are consonant with the prevailing notions of values. While the initiation and rebirth rituals of preliterate peoples demanded skulls and scalps to provide a certain guaranty of the perpetuation of the life-substance, medieval worshippers triumphed by appropriating remnants of saints and martyrs from their custodians, who did not merit their possession. Relic possession “seemed to enjoy a peculiar exemption from the common code of honesty.”60

What we witness in this constant hustling after salvation is an amalgam of a quite primitivist element of religious concepts and obsession with assurances of the means for salvation. It is as if there were a link between the emotional overtones of a headhunter’s outlook and medieval man’s existential conceptions. This is not to say that what we have here is a simple replica of ritual passion, but rather that it consists of far more profound inner determinants rooted in, as it seems, an all-pervasive existential anxiety. In other words, the question to ask is: What is the difference between the skull of an ancestor and that of a saint or martyr?
THE HEADHUNTER'S REQUEST

Under such conditions, outright cruelty soon took on the guise of a religious pursuit. When, in the year 1000, St. Romuald, a holy hermit, let it be known that he intended to leave his Umbrian village, the people in his parish made secret plans to take his life so that they would not be deprived of his sanctified remains.64

Clearly, the manic demand for holy relics did not find satisfaction entirely in spiritual pursuits. The murder of St. Romuald, and other examples like St. Elisabeth of Thuringia, offer more than a hint of how the contagion had spread. She had lived as a devout, selflessly dedicated woman helping the poor and caring for the sick. Constant exposure to people with contagious diseases eventually led to her untimely death in 1231 at the age of only twenty-three. She died in the city hospital of Marburg. The townspeople did not wait very long to obtain remnants of her blessed remains. They not only cut off her hair and removed her nails in order to obtain some corporal remnants. They also chopped off her fingers, her ears, and her nipples. It did not end here either, since the devout citizens of Marburg in their grief even ran off with pieces of her shroud.65

These were more than symbolic acts. They characterize the plasticity of emotions found during this period. Love and affection often merge with passionate violence, and occasionally culminate in outbursts of religious intoxication. Such excesses are an outgrowth of the same anxiety and chronic existential crises we have encountered in the headhunting rites of various primitive tribes, in the child's dread of being left alone, and in the needfulness of the never completely gratified, always searching collector.

PART THREE
THREE PSYCHOBIOGRAPHIES

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