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Charles IV: An Endless Search for Tongues and Toes to Enrich His Empire

Charles IV was elected to become king of the Romans in 1346. It was during this time that he began his plans for enriching his newly gained empire in Bohemia. His focus was not on conquering new lands or persecuting those he did not agree with, instead he focused on enriching the empire by collecting reliquaries. Reliquaries held relics that consisted of pieces of saints such as an arm or tongue. He knew the importance of relics not only for the value to the empire, but to its people. Charles IV's primary collection focus was on imperial relics, which consisted of the holiest relics in the Christian world, those associated with Christ and the Virgin Mary. He strove to make Prague the center for Christianity even though it had been in Rome for hundreds of years. He was successful in this endeavor but what made his plan so brilliant? This paper will discuss why Charles IV used reliquaries to enrich his empire and will also explain their importance to the king himself.

Relics hold a unique power over the people in Christianity. They were more than religious trinkets or souvenirs that one could collect. Not only did they bestow honor and power to their possessor but they were also a vessel through which a connection could be made between man and God. Reliquaries mostly consisted of the remains of saints who are considered one that is eternally in God's favor (Medieval World View). The saints lived only for God and lived exemplary Christian lives. The connection these bones or pieces of flesh had for the viewer created a channel through the saint between the living and God. Through these saints the
living could heal their souls from the everlasting grace remaining in the martyrs.
For this reason they were housed in reliquaries which were made of the finest
gemstones, gold, ivory, etc. They consisted of caskets or sculptures of the body part
that lay within them. Reliquaries were set upon altar tables and were sometimes
carried in a procession to inspire the faithful. Some did not appreciate the idea of
relics claiming them to be false idols, but the true reason for these items is best said
by Bernard of Angers who stated, “It is not an impure idol that receives the worship
of an oracle or sacrifice, it is a pious memorial, before which the faithful heart feels
more easily and more strongly touched by solemnity, and implores more fervently
the powerful intercession of the saint for it’s sins.” By viewing these relics the living
could repent their sins and feel closeness to God that they may have not been able to
find in a simple country town church. They were also a tool used for making a site
the most prestigious depending on how many or what type of relic the city or
cathedral possessed. In the medieval world there were certain things that could be
done to gain penance outside of your neighborhood church. Later these penances
would be sold as indulgences by the Vatican and began the corruption of the empire.
However, in the beginning they were seen as a way to save your mortal soul. The
most desired location was in the original holy land, Jerusalem. People voyaged
there to walk were Jesus himself had walked and to see the site of his crucifixion
where by his sacrifice he saved our souls. Under that are the city of Rome and a visit
to the Vatican. People who went there could see the pope himself and see the burial
site of St. Peter, the first pope appointed by Christ. If you could not afford to go on
these trips your third option was to make the pilgrimage from northern France to
the northern part of Spain. Along these routes you could stop in specific cities such
as Chartes or Toulouse to see the revered relics displayed in these grand churches.
The Chartes cathedral holds a shroud from the Virgin Mary’s clothing, which is
highly sought since it is an imperial relic. Along these routes churches sprang up to
put their city on the map. Sites like St. Sernin became important religious sites
along this path and many other small cities followed suit to gain tourism and
revenue. This is part of the reason why Charles IV chose to bring in invaluable relics
into Prague. Before his reign as king he was schooled in the Capetian Court in Paris
and gained first hand experience with relics at St. Chappelle. At this cathedral the
cult of relics held their ritual veneration, which Charles IV was able to see. When he
became king he refused to keep the center of the Roman Empire in Rome and moved
it into Bohemia, specifically in Prague. As it’s stated in the thesis, shortly after his
election he specifically sought to collect imperial relics, which dealt with Christ and
the Virgin Mary. Among these relics was a portion of the Crown of Thorns that was
worn by Christ during his crucifixion. Before receiving this treasure he built the
Karlestein Castle, approximately a half hour from Prague, to house his most precious
relics as well as the coronation jewels. By doing this in Prague he put the new
Roman Empire on the map. This site became a rival for Rome and the Vatican in the
religious hierarchy. After the holy land in Jerusalem, the next best place to be was
Bohemia. Since the only people who could make the trip to these sites were rich, the
revenue began to enrich his empire spiritually and monetarily. He knew the
importance of these relics to his people as well as its importance to those who 
would travel long distances to view them. It is also not simply what the relic is but 
how and who discovered it. In the early fourth century Helena, mother of 
Constantine the Great, set on a voyage to the holy land in hopes of finding significant 
items used during the passion of Christ. Supposedly she succeeded by finding the 
true cross, the holy sepulcher, and other important memorabilia from the passion. 
After this it was mainly women who patroned many reliquaries after Helena’s 
leading example. The importance of her findings resides in her persistence through 
the holy land and the favorable acknowledgement her son gave to the Christians. 
Constantine the Great reigned after the rule of Diocletian. Diocletian was a ruler 
who persecuted Christians and massacred many who believed different than he did. 
He made edicts that called for the imprisonment and torture of many clergy and was 
said to have burned whole cities that claimed their devotion to Christianity. With 
the help of his subordinate Galerius, Diocletian saw Christianity as a disease 
infiltrating tradition of the Roman Empire and endeavored upon the tenth and most 
cruel persecution of Christians in the early church. Constantine, however, saw 
things differently. He enacted the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which banned 
persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. He may have done this for political 
gain as he saw the growth of this religion and recognized the riotous seed planted 
by Diocletian would be most wise to avoid. Although, Constantine himself declared 
his devotion to Christianity and was baptized shortly before his death. He not only 
supported the Christians and in the end became one of its many devotional
followers. Constantine becomes an important icon for Christianity and is because of his and more importantly his mother’s actions that imperial relics came into great importance. Now Christians were able to be closer to Christ by viewing pieces of his cross or crown. These were the holiest of relics and channeled the savior’s sacrifice into the viewer. The realities of his actions were brought right into their realm and were no longer the tools used to tell a great story of sacrifice for the love of mankind. It was good for the soul to see the saints who had devoted themselves, and in some case given their lives, to their belief in their religion; but it was even better to experience the essence of Christ himself. Charles IV knew that this connection would not only give a grand reputation to his empire but to himself as well.

In addition to imperial relics, King Louis IX who became St. Louis after his death inspired Charles IV to lead his people spiritually. During his schooling at St. Chappelle he not only learned of relics but was also introduced to a cult surrounding the newly canonized former King of France. St. Louis was a king who prayed and fasted relentlessly. His motto was “The peace and blessings of the realm come to us through the poor”. He would frequently invite the poor to eat at his royal table and fed hundreds of the poor on a daily basis. He also founded many hospitals and houses for those less fortunate. He led a true example of the life of Christ so naturally Charles IV took an instant liking to him and his values in life. The devotion to collecting relics was his gift to his people. By bringing the center of the Roman Empire to his people he showed his devotion to the salvation of their mortal souls.
It also assured his right to rule. Throughout history the claim of the kings was that they were placed in their position to rule by God himself. This idea of divine right to rule gave the king power in the church. By collecting imperial relics, Charles IV made the statement that he was worthy to hold the most precious relics and was therefore the best choice for king. By doing this he asserted his role in the empire and was able to move the Roman Empire into Bohemia. He held a power that put Bohemia above Rome in the spiritual hierarchy underneath Jerusalem.

In conclusion, Charles IV was able to enrich his empire not by using force or alienation, but with objects touched by Christ himself. The placement of these highly revered relics in Bohemia put it on the map in the religious hierarchy surpassing Rome. He was able to give these items as a gift to his people and also assert his placement as king of the Holy Roman Empire. By having the most revered relics in Christendom he asserted that he was worthy to be a ruler of the Holy Empire. He also knew from St. Louis that the power came from the people and therefore their happiness was the most important aspect to a kingdom. The poor are the legs that hold the empire and without them the civilization would buckle. By showing his concern for their mortal souls and collecting relics to aid their penance he showed his devotion to the people and in return gained their loyalty and support.
Works Cited


