

Relic Thefts and Frauds

Of the many crimes that are present in this day and age, one that not only vandalizes the property, but as well as historical background is that of relic theft and fraud. It is not only a Christian problem it extends to the Non-Christian arena, in fact any group that professes a Deity. It is a crime that has taken away the sanctity of churches as well as many other religious and historical sites. Thefts have ranged from the early moments of Church history to the times. Of the items that were taken from the churches, relics were items of great priority. These items not only had great value to the churches they were stolen from, but a great value to relic collectors. Most of the items taking during these times were either sold or placed in underground storage, and more recently stolen and fake relics are being auctioned off on the internet. Most of these items that were place in these secret places were never to be seen again. From the times of these so called "relic hunters" to now, relic theft has become something that has taken some extreme changes. It has evolved from crime that started with minor relic thefts to something that has become a worldwide crime in need of better prevention. Relic theft and fraud is a crime that has been on the rise for the last half of this century. The founder of the ICHRusa has referred to this period in history as the "neo-middle ages" and refers to relic sellers in general as the "nEw Judas".

CHINA

Theft and smuggling of cultural relics are rampant in China, and the crimes increasingly have international connections. In 1993, a Tibetan Buddhist sculpture, named Qamba Acarab, housed in the Nyitang Zholma Lhakang Monastery in Lhasa, was stolen. Two years later, this over 1,000-year-old cultural relic under first-class state protection emerged in the United States, with a marked price of US\$8 million.

These invaluable relics have long been coveted by domestic and foreign criminals, and the region has reported frequent cases of relic thefts in recent years. Although the Lhasa Customs House has recaptured more than 1,000 items over the past four years, they represent only part of the large number of relics that have been stolen and smuggled abroad. The region still faces an arduous task to crack down on relics smuggling, said the official.

SOVIET UNION

Most former Soviet republics have of late become a bonanza for antiquities hunters. Interpol reports point to over 40 organized criminal groups operating in Western European countries alone, basically made up of immigrants from the CIS, specializing in locating, buying, and stealing antiquities. There are 525 state-owned museums and subsidiaries, plus 6,000 publicly controlled ones in Ukraine. Their stocks number more than 10,000,000 historical and cultural valuables. Enough to loot and spare. Last year was marked by 23 burglaries aimed at museum antiquities (private collections being the target in 20 cases), 206 thefts, including 83 churches and other places of worship, and 112 private collections.

USA

Romanian citizen living in the United States admitted in court this week that he was part of a ring that had stolen religious artifacts from France and that he was trying to sell them in the United States, federal officials said.

Faith Hochberg, the U.S. attorney for New Jersey, said that Sebastian Zegrean, a 23-year-old security guard who lives in Reading, Pennsylvania, had tried to smuggle a reliquary that is said to contain a bone fragment of Saint Maxellendis, a 7th-century French martyr, along with two other artifacts into the United States for sale.

Holy relics stolen from various churches in the North Shoa Zone of Oromia were seized by the police, says a report from the zonal police office. Among the holy articles seized were the holy slab of Zigamel Mariam of the Debre Libanos Monastery, the silver and bronze crosses of Mere Giorgis and Kasim Selassie churches, zonal police crime prevention and investigation section head Captain Nigussie Tessema said.

Individuals who looted the Debre Tsige Mariam and Kasim Selassie churches were sentenced to six month imprisonment by the Debre Libanos woreda court, he added.

FRAUDS

Geoffrey Chaucer: Canterbury Tales

The Pardoner explains his con game to the pilgrims, showing them how he deceives them with false relics while preaching against greed to stimulate more plentiful donations to his purse, and then he preaches against various "tavern sins" (lechery, gluttony, sloth, false oaths, and gambling)

To this day the treasures of many European churches are rich with golden reliquaries and their precious contents. The genuineness of these were not questioned by the faithful and they ran into the millions. At last by the end of the Middle Ages, some devout Christians began to doubt their authenticity. In His book, "The Work of Monks", St. Augustine gives a warning against monks who peddle false relics.

[43, 44, 55, 66, 101, 07]

I asked him: "But what are they doing?" Tsar' Nikolai answered: "They are arguing about me... Tell the clergy not to believe the authorities: these are not my bones! Let them say to the authorities: 'We will not recognize counterfeit relics, you keep them, but as for us, we will leave the holy name of the Gosudar' and what the holy God-pleasers had foretold concerning him!' Tell the clergy to have icons painted and to pray. By means of these icons will I plead for wondrous aid, for I have the authority to help many... I will also receive the authority to help all the people when I am glorified upon the earth, as well! And then say to them: Russia will blossom for a little time!... Don't let them separate us upon the icons. They burnt us to powder and drank us!... And let them not seek our remains. If the clergy should not believe you and call you mad, then convey to everyone that which I will tell you! If these false relics are interred in my family crypt, then the wrath of God will fall upon this place! A terrible thing will happen, not only with the church, but with the city, as well! And if they begin to pass off these counterfeit relics for holy ones, then will I implore the Lord to consume them with fire... All the liars will fall down in a dead faint! And a demon will enter into those who will venerate the false relics, and they will begin to go mad -- and even die. There will be a war, then! The demons will come out of the bottomless pit, chasing you out of your homes and preventing you from going into the churches....

MOSCOW -- Russia's last czar Nicholas II and his family will finally be laid to rest in his former imperial capital St. Petersburg on July 17, 80 years to the day since he and his family were murdered by Bolshevik revolutionaries.

The Russian government ended seven years of agonizing and intensive scientific research Friday with a unanimous decision to recognize sets of remains found in 1991 as genuine and to inter them in state alongside Nicholas's ancestors.

The Russian Orthodox Church, anxious to avoid errors in establishing what will become, for some, holy relics, said it still reserves judgement on the authenticity of the bones.

But it said it had no problem with the government decision, paving the way for a religious ceremony for the interment in St. Petersburg's Peter and Paul Cathedral.

Survivors of the Romanov dynasty and members of European royal families are expected to attend.

Announcing the outcome after a marathon three-hour special session of the cabinet, First Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov said ministers were unanimous in backing St. Petersburg.

"This is a final decision," he told a news conference, clearly spelling out that the government wanted an end to seemingly eternal squabbling over the issue, not least between the three cities who were vying for the right to bury the czar.

The remains were uncovered in 1991 near the Urals city of Yekaterinburg where Nicholas, his empress Alexandra, their children and several servants were shot by Bolsheviks on July 17, 1918, more than a year after he had abdicated in a vain attempt to stave off revolution.

The deaths were something of an embarrassment for later communist leaders and in 1977 President Boris Yeltsin himself, then party boss of Sverdlovsk, as Yekaterinburg was then known, had the house where they died demolished.

In a further demonstration of the touchiness of the issue, Yeltsin agreed to make a final decision on the fate of the remains and then belatedly asked the government to choose.

Nemtsov said ministers had taken into account not only expert scientific advice, based among other things on genetic tests of some of Nicholas's surviving relatives, including Britain's Prince Philip, but also public opinion.

Regal St. Petersburg, relegated to second city by the communists, will hail the decision. Mayor Alexander Yakovlev has already detailed plans for a ceremony at Peter and Paul cathedral where the city's founder Peter the Great, who died in 1725, lies buried along with the czars who came after him.

Moscow will be disappointed, as will Yekaterinburg, whose local leader had waged a fierce personal campaign to hang on the bones which currently reside in the city morgue.

The final position of the Orthodox Church remains cloudy. Thursday, a synod concluded there were still doubts on their authenticity but backed an early burial.

But Metropolitan Yuvenaly, who represented the church at the government meeting, told Friday's news conference there was no disagreement between church and state.

"There is no and cannot be any conflict on this issue," the senior cleric said, praising the government for its cooperation.

The church has won back an influential role in Russian society since the end of communist repression. Yuvenaly said it was concerned that if the bones did turn out not to belong to Nicholas, then people would be "worshipping false relics."

Besides the funeral relics enshrined by Ashoka in his stupas, other relics of the Buddha such as shavings from his head and clippings from his fingernails began to "appear" or be "discovered" over the centuries. The authenticity of these relics supposedly deriving from the time of the living Buddha is questionable. Just as false relics were manufactured by unscrupulous Christians during the European medieval ages, so also did the practice occur in the Buddhist world. - Buddhist Monks at Bodhi Tree