CHAPTER 15

Luther Relics

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The prize for the oddest Luther relic must surely go to the ‘Luther Flea’. Carefully preserved in the archive in Altenburg, the late nineteenth-century scholar who discovered it could give it a precise date: 5 April 1525, for the mummified flea was stuck between the pages of Luther’s handwritten manuscript.1 This was a portentous moment, at the height of the Peasants’ War when it seemed that all Germany might be overrun by rebels, and when Luther would shortly call for the rebellious peasants to be stabbed and slain by the princes.

Was the flea a Luther relic, a curiosity, or even a joke? We will never know for sure. Any scholar capable of reading Luther’s hand in manuscript would have been familiar enough with sixteenth-century German literary culture to be reminded of Johann Fischart’s flea poem, a rhyming semi-pornographic tour de force which imagines the progress of a flea around women’s bodies.2 (Fischart went on to translate Rabelais for German readers.) Or perhaps the find recalled the reformer’s famous challenge to Erasmus in “The Bondage of the Will” to “Take a single flea or louse . . . and if, after combining all the powers and concentrating all the efforts both of your god and all your supporters, you succeed in killing it in the name and by the power of free choice, you shall be the victors.”3

The flea is about as close to the body as one can get, a ‘relic’ in the sense that it offers the owner a connection (of a kind) to the physical Doctor Luther. But its indecency—by definition fleas get under the clothes—suggests that this is

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1 Harald Meller, (ed.), Fundsache Luther. Archäologen auf den Spuren des Reformators (Stuttgart: Theiss Verlag, 2008), 320, 322. This catalogue of the recent superb exhibition also included an excellent collection of the most important ‘Luther relics,’ and this essay is greatly indebted both to it and to the permanent exhibition in the Lutherhalle Wittenberg, which pays particular attention to the image of Luther in subsequent generations. I would like to thank in particular Dr Andreas Stahl of the Landesdenkmalamt Halle; and also Petra Wittig and Jutta Strehle of the Lutherhalle Wittenberg; Dominik Collet, Nick Stargardt, Alex Walsham, and the members of the early modern Workshop at Oxford.


not a relic in the conventional sense. And there is a fine irony in the moment that the flea immortalizes: Luther, the Reformation hero, will soon write the piece that will forever align him with the princes, yet here he is, subjected to the same itch as any peasant. In this essay I want to explore how people in the sixteenth century and beyond dealt with objects associated with Luther. Did they create a quasi-saint’s cult out of Luther? Or—as is the case with the flea relic—is there something altogether too physical in these Luther relics for them ever to work as straightforward devotional objects?

A relic is a material object which relates to a particular person, event or place. Typically an object becomes a relic only after the death of the person to whom it is attached, and often it is believed that certain powers of that individual are transferred to the relic and inhere within it. Commonly, relics are fragments, parts of something that has been attached to the holy person or object, so they multiply the locations of the sacred and enable the divine to travel. Physicality is extremely important: objects associated with the body, clothing, or even parts of the body itself are prime candidates for becoming relics. Pre-reformation culture had used relics as a powerful form of devotion, especially in relation to saints. Intimately connected with healing, they were also tied to salvation: viewing particular relics could get you time off purgatory. It was Frederick the Wise’s huge relics collection which remained a thorn in the side of the reformers (and it was no accident that the 95 Theses were probably posted on the eve of All Saints Day, when the relics collection went on display and gave indulgences to the viewers).4

The cultural battle ignited by the Reformation put the issue of relics centre stage, because Luther and Lutherans rejected devotions to the saints, masses and purgatory—and relics were crucial to all of these. Like many devout Catholics, Luther could poke fun at relics, like the head of St John the Baptist (certainly burnt by the Saracens),5 the Virgin’s milk6 or the fabled “chamber pots of eleven thousand virgins”7—but he also saw them as sinister, inherently

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4 There is on-going debate about whether or not the 95 Theses were actually posted. See most recently Volker Leppin, Martin Luther (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2006), 125–6; Joachim Ott and Martin Treu, Luthers Thesenanschlag—Faktum oder Fiktion (Leipzig: Evangelischer Verlagsanstalt, 2008). The theses were certainly sent by letter to Albrecht of Mainz on October 31.
5 LW, vol. 54 (Table Talk), 131, no. 1272; WA (Tischreden; hereafter cited as TR) vol. 2, 21, no. 1272.
6 LW vol. 54, 247, no. 3637b; WA TR vol. 3, 472, no. 3637 b.
7 The chamber pots were a joke made by a pious Catholic which Luther recounted. LW vol. 54, 273, no. 3785; WA TR vol. 3, 612, no. 3785.