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Anthropology, the Medievalist ... and Richard III

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Richard III (1452-1485) died at the Battle of Bosworth, two years after attaining the English throne. The end of Richard's life, however, was not the end of his story because his fame lived on, chiefly as a consequence of Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* which portrayed the king as an evil hunchback responsible for murdering his nephews in the Tower of London.

In 1924, the Richard III Society was established for the purpose of 'reclaiming' the king's reputation and raising public awareness of the historical, rather than the fictional, Richard.¹ One of its current members, Philippa Langley, furthered these aims in 2009 by launching the 'Looking for Richard' project. The quest was to recover not only Richard's reputation but also his mortal remains, 'lost' in the aftermath of Bosworth and the upheaval of the English Reformation.²

Following the battle at Bosworth, the king's mutilated body had been brought into Leicester and given a hasty burial in a Franciscan priory, a stone's throw from what is now the city's Anglican Cathedral. The Friary was demolished shortly after the Reformation and, in 1915, the land was acquired by Leicestershire County Council. Here, beneath what had since become a city centre car park, Richard III might have remained indefinitely had it not been for the combined efforts of Philippa Langley, the Richard III Society and Leicester University. In 2012 the University's archaeological team excavated a skeleton from the friary's foundations. Six months later the bones were identified as those of Richard III, and the last Plantagenet king of England shot to public fame as 'The King under the Car Park'.³

Plans to rebury Richard in a location more salubrious than a council car park came to fruition in March 2015. The King's reburial in Leicester Cathedral was organised around a week-long celebratory

event, notable for its pomp and ceremony and for its extensive media coverage. The occasion began on Sunday 22 March with a horse-drawn funeral procession through the city's streets and the ceremonial handing over of Richard's coffin to Leicester Cathedral. After a three-day public vigil, during which over twenty thousand people filed past the King 'in calm repose', came the elaborate reinterment service when Richard's body was lowered into a specially constructed crypt behind the High Altar. On the final day, the new tomb – a block of limestone inscribed with a cross and set on a dark plinth of Kilkenny stone – was revealed to the public. The week culminated in the lighting of thousands of candles and a spectacular firework display.



The interest generated by Richard's discovery and reburial provoked much comment from the media, with public reaction generally framed in historical terms. 'It shows how keen we are on our history', was the observation of the historian and commentator, Jon Snow, during five hours of live broadcast by Britain's Channel Four, as he tried to account for the large numbers of people which had descended on the city to witness 'The King Laid to Rest'.⁴ The reburial celebrations were themselves described as 'a moment in history', and most of the tourists I spoke to when I visited Leicester on 27 March agreed with Jon Snow that they were witnessing 'history in the making'.⁵

What was particularly striking about the media coverage and the emphasis on history was the absence of any reference to another prominent element: religion. The central location for the week was an Anglican cathedral, and the key events were religious and presided over by leading churchmen including Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Cardinal Vincent Nichols, representing the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Nonetheless, the media seemed to regard the religious setting as little more than an appropriate backdrop for a cultural heritage event. During the Channel Four broadcasts, when the life and times of Richard were endlessly discussed by historians such as Helen Castor and David Starkey, much was made of recreating, and re-enacting, the Middle Ages. Even the cathedral clergy contributed to the spirit of medievalism by working with historians to write a reburial service that mixed and matched liturgy from both the past and the present.

However, no amount of secular gloss and pointed references to history and the Middle Ages could quite cover up a strong sense of religiosity that seemed to pervade the overall mood during the reburial week. In addition to the televised Christian rituals in an English cathedral, there was a strong element of spirituality in the phenomenon Channel Four called 'The Richard Effect': that is, the emotional connection to Richard III that many members of the public claimed to feel. For those who had made the effort to travel hundreds of miles to be in Leicester that overcast, cool March week in 2015, the reburial of Richard III was clearly a meaningful occasion and, as will be argued, the motives of visitors were more complex than a mere interest in history.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the Richard III phenomenon from both an anthropological and an historical

perspective. As a contemporary event, the reburial week in March 2015 more obviously fits into the ‘anthropology’ camp. Nine out of ten visitors interviewed on the final day of festivities were happy to describe their visit to Leicester as a ‘pilgrimage’, despite only half of them asserting that they had any religious belief.⁶ In view of the current popularity of pilgrimage among religious and non-religious enthusiasts, it seems that there is much about the spectacle of Richard’s reburial to excite anthropologists. For historians of medieval religion, however, there is a different, but not unrelated, point of interest because the twenty-first century treatment of, and attitudes towards, the remains of Richard III has many of the hallmarks of medieval relic veneration. As will be discussed, Richard’s modern journey from discovery to reburial (or from *inventio* to *translatio*) was punctuated by a string of medieval cultic motifs.

What follows uses the case study of Richard III in Leicester to combine anthropological and historical approaches in new ways. Apparent similarities between phenomena flourishing in different times and contexts must be treated with care, and one of the problems with comparing Leicester’s archaeological find to a medieval relic is that Richard is not, and never has been, considered a saint. However, the article argues that problematic cross-cultural comparisons are not without value because it is within such messy disjunctions – where the present and past just fail to meet – that the most fertile research opportunities often lie. First, however, the relationship between history and anthropology needs further discussion because historians and anthropologists have not always reacted positively to the idea of collaboration.

History and Anthropology

In 1987 the American anthropologist, Bernard Cohn, published a collection of essays entitled ‘An Anthropologist among the Historians’.⁷ The first essay is a playful ethnographic study of a strange class of people he had encountered during his fieldwork in India: the historians. According to Cohn, the historian is a very different species from his academic cousin, the anthropologist. Whereas the historian’s preferred habitat is the library or archive, the anthropologist’s is out in the field,

and whereas the historian is 'regular in his work habits' and well-organised, the anthropologist works in 'great bursts' and lectures from notes scribbled on the back of dirty envelopes.⁸

Cohn's purpose in polarising, and satirizing, historians and anthropologists was not to propagate stereotypes, but rather to champion the notion of their collaboration. Despite historians' and anthropologists' differences, he envisaged a productive meeting of minds in the methodological shift we now know as the 'cultural turn', and his series of 1987 essays promoted the relatively new sub-discipline of 'historical anthropology' which was gaining popularity at the time.⁹

Historical anthropology, endorsed so enthusiastically by Cohn, combined cultural anthropology with 'bottom-up' social history. In the late 1970s and 1980s it produced innovative micro-studies of historical culture, such as Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), Natalie Zemon Davies' *Martin Guerre* (1983), and Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984). It was an approach enthusiastically adopted by medievalists, perhaps most famously by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in his *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294-1324* (1975) and by Jean Claude Schmitt in *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century* (1979), but also by other Annales-influenced scholars such as Jacques le Goff and Aaron Gurevich.¹⁰ Although these works and their authors have remained popular, the approach itself has since fallen out of favour. Nonetheless, anthropological influences remain, and a wide variety of anthropological ideas have seeped almost imperceptibly into many areas of history scholarship.

For medievalists, the greatest impact of anthropology on scholarly method has probably been the ritual analysis of religious and social practice informed, for example, by ideas taken from Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and Mary Douglas. Conceptualising social processes around the binary model of inclusion/exclusion has, for instance, proved a popular approach.¹¹ Social 'exclusionists' have interpreted negative phenomena – such as witchcraft and heresy – in terms of ritual pollution while social 'inclusionists' view positive phenomena – such as saints' cults – as community bonding mechanisms.¹² Tending towards essentialism, however, the 'ritual turn' has not been without its critics.¹³

One anthropological topic which particularly attracted cross-discipline fertilisation in the late twentieth century was pilgrimage. This was largely due to the popularity of the British anthropologist Victor Turner, whose book, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), captured the imagination of historians. Co-authored with his wife, Edith, *Image and Pilgrimage* adapted Arnold van Gennep's generic 'rites-of-passage' theory of ritual for Christian pilgrimage and introduced medievalists to the appealing concepts of *communitas* and liminality which continue to have scholarly currency today. Nonetheless, Turner's ability to bridge the history-anthropology divide was short-lived. When structuralism gave way to postmodernism in the 1990s, Turner's one-size-fits-all theories were discredited by historians, and the tide turned once more against anthropology.

Turning from the field of history to anthropology, the 1990s saw a parallel move away from Turner as the study of contemporary pilgrimage entered a deconstructuralist phase. In Britain and America a new generation of anthropologists attempted to open up the topic to a wider range of themes and disciplines. Edited collections of essays provocatively entitled *Contesting the Sacred* and *Reframing Pilgrimage*, together with articles such as 'Communitas Reconsidered' or 'Do you Believe in Pilgrimage?' confidently proclaimed that they were branching out beyond Turner and attempting something radical and different.¹⁴ Postmodern in their outlook and eschewing the grand narrative, the British anthropologists Simon Coleman, John Eade and Michael Sallnow were among those who paved the way for the new academic subject of 'pilgrimage studies' – now promoted at British universities such as York and Lancaster – which embraces all aspects of a topic now more widely interpreted than in the past.

One characteristic of this revisionist movement in pilgrimage anthropology has been a push towards a multidisciplinary approach. To a certain extent this aim has been successful: today anthropologists mingle with medievalists, art historians, archaeologists, tourist scholars and theologians at pilgrimage conferences, and they all happily cohabit between the covers of academic volumes.¹⁵ However, although *multidisciplinary*, pilgrimage studies is often far from *interdisciplinary*. It is striking that there is rarely any appreciable overlap between the work of historians and anthropologists; it is generally accepted that historians keep to their realm and anthropologists stay in theirs.¹⁶

In general, then, medievalists and anthropologists still tend to use each other's discipline in a limited and hesitant way. Bernard Cohn's hope for a profitable relationship between historians and anthropologists has come to very little. Although, no doubt, many historians and anthropologists are content with this state of affairs, the aim of this article is to propose an alternative view and to argue that engaging in anthropological theory and practice could be an academically rewarding exercise for historians, and particularly for medievalists conducting research on pilgrimage and saints' cults. In order to examine such possibilities, however, we must first return to Leicester and Richard III.

Richard III in Leicester, 2015

As the television cameras gathered outside Leicester Cathedral ahead of Richard's reburial service on 26 March 2015 the Channel Four presenter, Jon Snow, admitted to a moment of perplexity. 'It's hard to make sense of', he told his viewers.¹⁷ This remark illustrates that the standard explanation for all the excitement – the British love of history – needs to be queried. It urges us to look elsewhere to make sense of the outflow of public emotion directed towards Richard's relics. This is where combining anthropological and historical enquiry can be insightful, and not least because Richard's recent posthumous fame seems to have underlying religious elements which hint at relic veneration from an earlier time.¹⁸

The similarities between Richard's remains and a medieval relic begin with their *inventio*: the surprise finding of a saint's bones which, in medieval hagiography, signalled the beginning of a cult. As was often the case in the Middle Ages, Richard's *inventio* was prompted by a vision. This was not a heavenly vision as in the medieval model – an ordinary mortal being given instruction in a dream on where to find the remains of a buried saint – but an inspirational vision in the form of Philippa Langley's unwavering faith that Richard could, and should, be found.¹⁹ *Inventio* motifs continued in modern-day Leicester when, in common with numerous medieval hagiographical accounts, the discovery of Richard's skeleton was proclaimed a miracle: 'a million to one chance', according to Richard Buckley who headed the

archaeological investigation.²⁰ Confirmation of the relics' identity was another important moment shared across the centuries. This was achieved by divine revelation in the medieval centuries, but cutting edge science proved just as revelatory in the twenty-first when Richard was identified by matching his mitochondrial DNA to a living relative.



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One of the most curious cultic motifs to translate itself to the present day concerns the fate of Richard's original grave. The veneration of abandoned saints' graves is a well-known medieval Christian practice, providing a secondary pilgrim focus in addition to the main shrine for many English cults.²¹ Seemingly following on in this tradition, Leicester City Council not only preserved the Greyfriars excavation site but also turned it into a tourist attraction: the hole where Richard's body had once laid is now the central focus of the new Richard III Visitor Centre where it can be viewed through a glass floor. According to the promotional literature, the grave area has been designed as a 'contemplative space' with seats enabling visitors to sit and

‘reflect’, suggesting an unexpected blurring between the boundaries of heritage and religion, as well as that between the past and present.²²

As with Richard’s grave, so with his new tomb in Leicester Cathedral: although strikingly modern in appearance it also points towards medieval relic veneration in being located immediately behind the High Altar, the place usually reserved for saints in English churches before the Reformation.²³ As was often the case in the central Middle Ages, the space within the church in modern Leicester was expanded in order to accommodate the new tomb and expected influx of visitors.²⁴ Architectural additions such as a new chapel abutting the tomb are also suggestive of a medieval cult, as is the commission of a stained-glass window commemorating Richard’s life and death which is strongly reminiscent of the ‘Becket’ windows at Canterbury Cathedral marking St Thomas’s own 1220 reburial, or ‘translation’.²⁵

Despite these parallels to medieval relic veneration, the Anglican Church at Leicester made it clear that Richard was being honoured as an ordinary mortal rather than a saint, and that his burial privileges signified his earthly status among men rather than his celestial standing with God. For example, Richard’s reinterment was a ‘reburial’ (not a ‘translation’), his resting place is a tomb (not a shrine) and there was no liturgy of intercession. If Richard’s devotees felt compelled to ‘talk’ to Richard, Protestant doctrine on the afterlife determined that he would not be talking back.

As if to emphasise Richard’s non-saintly status, the Leicester clergy portrayed him as a kind of Everyman. The Bishop of Leicester, the Right Reverend Tim Stevens, told his congregation during the Service of Reinterment that Richard represented ‘all human life’, particularly in his courageous endurance of disability, bereavement and loss. This, in fact, was the Church’s explanation for the ‘Richard Effect’. It was Richard’s suffering, said Tim Stevens, which helped to forge a ‘deep connection’ between the fifteenth-century king and those who came to Leicester in March 2015 ‘bearing their own burdens of grief’.²⁶

The visitors I spoke to in the Cathedral Gardens on 27 March had not, of course, come to Leicester to venerate a saint: parallels to medieval relic devotion did not occur to them and even the ardent Richardian among my interviewees understood the occasion as a heritage, rather than a religious, event. Nonetheless, in talking to a variety of people as they queued to see the newly revealed tomb on the

final day of Richard's reburial week, I was struck by the fact that Tim Stevens's religious message resonated with public feeling in ways which would have been recognisable in the Middle Ages when the laity was encouraged to interact with their local saint as they might a close friend.²⁷ Thus the majority of those I talked to on 27 March spoke about Richard with feeling and empathy, echoing Channel Four's repeated claim that people had 'taken Richard to their hearts'. She felt close to Richard because he was an 'underdog', said one of my interviewees, because he was 'devastated' by the death of his son, said another. 'Sympathy' for Richard was also mentioned, as was his 'personality', and indignation was expressed that Richard was 'betrayed and usurped'. Visitors to Richard's tomb were clearly not only objective consumers of history.



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The response of the general public to Richard III in March 2015 clearly problematizes the conceptual boundaries between history and religion, and between the past and the present. The remainder of the article draws on anthropological theory and my own fieldwork to examine these awkward cross-currents further and to suggest how

anthropological approaches might be harnessed to gain a deeper understanding of the medieval cult of relics.

‘History Meets the Present’²⁸

During Richard’s reburial week in March 2015 there were several distinct aspects of Richard’s posthumous identity which seemed to account for the modern ‘devotion’ to a medieval king. The first of these, and perhaps the most prominent, was the media’s explanation that – motivated by a love of history – the public was attracted to Richard as a historical figure.

There are, however, difficulties with this interpretation as has already been indicated. Perhaps most strikingly, the Richard Effect tended to conceptually collapse the distinction between past and present, thus negating any sense of time and history. The popular idea that Richard was being given the funeral he had been denied in 1485 helped to generate the impression that 1485 had been catapulted – and Richard with it – into 2015.²⁹ Past and present seemed to converge in many minds: in his reburial sermon Tim Stevens, for example, spoke of Richard ‘stepping out of the pages of history’. The ‘heritage’ aspect of the week’s events – which sought to replicate many ‘medieval’ features of Richard’s time – even led the historian, Helen Castor, to talk about ‘the fifteenth century bursting into the twenty-first.’³⁰

Like the novelist Philippa Gregory – who told Channel Four viewers that ‘the past is really here and now’ – the tourists I spoke to in Leicester uncritically accepted the notion that history could be experienced in the present. One woman told me that she enjoyed witnessing history played out ‘in real time ... in the flesh’. Notionally cancelling out the distancing effect of time closed the emotional gap between Richard and his modern devotees; bringing the past into the present meant that, for many, Richard was less a distant historical figure than a knowable friend. ‘Richard came alive as a person this week,’ one woman told me. As we have already seen, the general public seemed peculiarly receptive to the idea that it was possible to have a meaningful, even personal, relationship with Richard and it seems that blurring the historical past with the living present was an important element in creating a sense of connection with a long-dead king.

Synchronic historical viewpoints are, of course, not new. Religious ritual, particularly in the Christian tradition, works on the principle that re-enacting moments of history allows participants to re-experience them in the present.³¹ 'Asserting that the past is now, too,' is a recognised feature of modern pilgrimage and, in the Middle Ages, the same idea allowed historical or pseudo-historical figures – such as saints – to remain relevant and accessible well after death.³² The modern Anglican approach to Richard III is, then, not without precedent.

It is instructive to look more closely at how 'history' was brought into the present in Leicester during Richard's reburial week. The time-slip effect was mainly achieved by inserting symbolic references to the Middle Ages into the modern proceedings, sometimes producing striking juxtapositions such as the funeral cortege which included a motorized police escort and two armoured knights. Then there were more compelling medieval adaptations such as Richard's reburial service, taken from a genuine fifteenth-century reburial liturgy but modernised, translated into English and purged of most of its Catholic traits. The service itself was a patchwork of hybrid medieval-modern elements: psalms sung to modern compositions, the medieval Vulgate bible placed on the modern coffin, and Judith Bingham's anthem set to the words of the thirteenth-century mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg. To many members of the public, the reburial service – with its combination of the familiar and unfamiliar – seemed 'authentic' and 'what Richard would have wanted.'³³

The fact that these fusions of cultures did not appear particularly incongruous to Richard's fans can be explained by modern theories of authenticity which argue that what tourists accept as historically 'authentic' usually corresponds to their own expectations of the past.³⁴ These expectations are shaped by cultural assumptions and are often met by including anachronistic elements in heritage events: welding the alien past to the familiar present is known to enhance a sense of 'authenticity'. Heritage professionals understand the value of fulfilling tourists' expectations of authenticity, and they occasionally privilege authentic 'truth' over historical 'truth' in a way which has resonance with the religious 'truths' promoted by medieval hagiographers in their rendering of saints' lives.³⁵

The important point here is that 'authenticity', when defined as an intuitive sense of what the past *should* have been rather than what it

actually was, has emotional currency which is a valuable asset for the modern tourist industry. Modern heritage scholarship also examines tourists' emotional responses to museum artefacts. Those with 'numinous' value are often those which generate feelings of ethnic, regional, national or religious identity.³⁶ In this respect it is interesting that among my interviewees on 27 March were two local visitors, both of whom not only expressed stronger feelings towards Richard than those who had travelled some distance, but who also referred to Richard in the present tense. 'He's our King', were the words of one man who lived five miles away. As museum curators and heritage professionals realise, visitor experience is enriched when tourists feel personal connectedness or emotional attachment to a historical object or to a specific historical individual, and one way to achieve this is to lessen the time divide between history and the present.³⁷

The 'heritage' lens, then, is a useful tool for analysing the emotion responses felt towards historical artefacts and long-dead strangers, and may therefore also suggest ways in which medieval communities related to their own past. It might seem anachronistic to view medieval relic veneration within the sphere of modern cultural tourism, but medieval saints (ostensibly historical figures) were also heritage products, and medieval relics (historical artefacts) embodied myths of identity and fostered a sense of belonging just as museum 'relics' do in the modern world.³⁸ Imagining a medieval saint as a heritage commodity as well as a religious relic not only points to new research possibilities but it also prompts us to think more deeply about the relationship between history and religion in the Middle Ages.

Contested Discourses

A second explanation for Richard's posthumous popularity proffered by the media during the reburial week was Richard's status as a dead king. Julian Fellowes (screenwriter, royalist and member of the House of Lords), for example, referred to the events in Leicester as 'a celebration of monarchy', while Jon Snow hailed the reburial as 'a royal event' and his fellow Channel Four commentator, Krishnan Guru-Murthy, described it as 'a service fit for a medieval king'.³⁹ Fully embracing the monarchy theme, Channel Four's coverage of the three

church services – intercut with commentary and interviews – was structured in the style of televised British state funerals.⁴⁰ Although not exactly ignoring the fact that burying an English king in a cathedral five centuries after his death was unprecedented, the televised event was presented to the public as part of a royal funerary tradition.

On the surface, the public accepted this interpretation of Richard's posthumous popularity: half of my interviewees affirmed that it was the fact that Richard was an 'anointed English king' that made him worthy of honour. However, when questioned more closely, my respondents admitted that it was not so much Richard's royal status that made him a figure of interest and 'respect', as his human qualities. Richard as a noble, knight or even a peasant would have been equally as interesting, they all conceded. It was Richard's 'personality' which attracted her, said one woman, the fact that he was a controversial figure, said another. In this instance, the general public seemed more attuned to the Cathedral's 'religious' discourse of Richard the ordinary man, rather than the patriotic idea of Richard the British monarch.

This discrepancy between the media-promoted 'public' discourse on the one hand and private sentiment on the other nicely fits into the 'contestation' approach of post-Turnerian pilgrimage anthropology.⁴¹ However, it also has relevance for the medieval cult of saints which had its own official medium in hagiography. Medieval hagiography, principally in the form of saints' lives and miracles, ostensibly reported the testimonies of witnesses and, like Channel Four, transmitted the cultural assumptions of the day. Medievalists often debate to what extent these sources were biased, and there is nothing new in suggesting that there were mismatches between the public cultural narrative on the one hand and what ordinary people 'really' thought on the other.⁴²

However, the modern case study of Richard III offers medievalists something more than a confirmation that official narratives do not always speak for ordinary people. It provides us with the opportunity to gain some understanding of the mechanics of how this medieval media distortion might have worked. In modern-day Leicester, for example, it was not so much that Channel Four, the BBC and other news outlets purposely misrepresented public feeling, but rather that – when interviewed – the public's first reaction was to repeat views current in the media, and the views current in the media were not always directly sourced from the public, as we have seen in the case of Channel Four.

The influence of the media on the public was particularly evident from the language and vocabulary of my interviewees. Those who had been watching the television coverage repeated expressions and words they had heard in the broadcasts: for example, ‘paying respects’ and ‘honouring’ Richard came up again and again, and several of those I spoke to used the term ‘anointed king’, again a phrase promoted by official sources and popularized by the media. In this instance, the public discourse was less official propaganda than cultural assumptions reinforced by people’s tendency to reiterate the safe, ‘authorised’ line when questioned by a stranger representing a British university. In the same way we might imagine that ‘what the people bring’ to medieval hagiographers in the form of pilgrims’ tales was not necessarily always what they thought.⁴³

Examining the ways in which various discourses surrounding Richard III’s reburial influenced one another and occasionally conflicted, then, is not only relevant for anthropologists. It seems likely that similar processes were present in the Middle Ages informing – or misinforming – our understanding of saints’ cults. Although we cannot know exactly what was in the minds of medieval informants, anthropological observations at least provide a warning to historians tempted to use witness testimonies recorded by religious officials as a means for assessing motivations for pilgrimage.⁴⁴ As the Richard III case study has demonstrated, even in modern contexts the underlying motivations for men’s and women’s actions are not always easy to discern.

Cult of the Dead

Channel Four’s preferred explanation for the Richard Effect, then, was the public’s love of history and its fascination with monarchy. However, as we have seen, a survey of visitors at Leicester Cathedral on 27 March indicates that Richard’s historic and royal qualities are less important to the general public than his human ones. Connected to this personalized response was the need, strongly felt and expressed by all those I met, to give Richard a Christian burial. Each of my interviewees, for example, thought that Richard’s funeral in a cathedral was important because it would have pleased him.⁴⁵ The idea of a secular alternative

was met with disapproval, even by those who claimed to have no religious belief. Indeed, four out of ten said that they would not have come to Leicester had Richard's skeleton been displayed as a historical artefact in a museum.

All those I talked to had Christian backgrounds and this no doubt goes some way in explaining their frequently asserted belief that it was 'fitting' to show 'respect' and 'honour' to the dead Richard by reburying him in a Christian place of worship.⁴⁶ One of my interviewees, a self-proclaimed atheist, told me, 'all humans should have a dignified ending no matter who they are'. In some respects it seems that Richard's status as a famous historical person or as a monarch was considered less important than the simple fact that he was dead, in need of burial and 'deserved', in the words of one of my interviewees, 'a proper send off.'

Richard's posthumous celebrity status parallels, in many ways, the constructed nature of sanctity in the Middle Ages. As with medieval saints, Richard III's kingship and his fame as a historic figure did not automatically single him out as a member of the 'special dead'; this privilege was instead engineered by local sponsors and the enthusiastic support of the general public.⁴⁷ Medieval sainthood, subject to human whim and favour, was constructed along similar lines, and witnessing the twenty-first century response to Richard's posthumous persona raises the possibility that there was a very thin line between venerating saints and honouring dead celebrities in the minds of the medieval laity. In the medieval world where saintly identities were often contested and saints' tombs lay alongside those of monarchs, bishops and lay benefactors, it is pertinent to ask how well did ordinary parishioners really understand the liturgical and theological differences between the sanctified and the non-sanctified dead.

Would it be useful, for example, to imagine a wider 'cult of the dead' for the Middle Ages, perhaps encompassing a hierarchy of deceased luminaries headed by saints and martyrs but also including monarchs, bishops and members of the local aristocracy? Rather than producing a conventional sacred/profane binary of opposition which divides saints from everyone else, such a theoretical reappraisal would realign saints on a graded continuum of the memorialised dead, a model in keeping with postmodern theory which favours a spectrum of difference. Given that the Middle Ages organised its terrestrial and celestial inhabitants into ordered, hierarchical ranks, it may well be that

scholars are missing the wider picture by studying saints' cults as an isolated religious phenomenon.

Positioning the ordinary dead in the same conceptual category as the special dead is, in fact, something that pilgrimage anthropology has been doing since the 1990s. Ethnologies of present-day secular pilgrimage have observed that gatherings of devotees at the graves of celebrities, such as Elvis Presley and Jim Morrison, and political heroes such as Lenin and Chairman Mao, have many of the same features as pilgrimages to religious shrines.⁴⁸ In view of the similarities between medieval saint veneration and the 2015 attraction to Richard III's relics, we might profitably set the Richard Effect and its associated phenomena within the 'secular pilgrimage' orbit.

Indeed, the idea that pilgrimage need not be religiously motivated has led to a widening of the topic within anthropology, which now incorporates secular heritage subsets such as roots pilgrimage, war-grave pilgrimage, and political pilgrimage.⁴⁹ If applied to the Middle Ages, this approach might alert medievalists to the probability that many ostensibly modern trends under the secular pilgrimage umbrella were also present in an earlier period. One example is the recent popularity of 'dark' heritage sites: places connected to suffering and violent death. 'Thanatourism' – a term coined in the mid 1990s – is often associated with cemeteries and churchyards, but also refers to atrocities such as the transatlantic slave trade, the Holocaust and the 'nine-eleven' terrorist attack on the Manhattan Trade Centre in New York.⁵⁰

In this respect, we might argue that the medieval cult of martyrs – with its focus on graves and the veneration of relics pertaining to be instruments of torture – is, in many ways, a forerunner of modern thanatourism. Visitors to late-medieval Canterbury, for instance, would have been taken on a tour of the cathedral and shown the exact spot where Thomas Becket was martyred.⁵¹ Perhaps not coincidentally, similar 'dark' aspects of Richard III were commemorated at the beginning of Leicester's reburial week as people gathered for services at the site of Richard's death and toured other places associated with his last fatal day. It would seem that now, as in the Middle Ages, the general public feel drawn to places symbolising death, and find them emotionally compelling. As studies of modern thanatourism have shown, the attraction to dark heritage cannot alone be explained with reference to history or religion. Other forces are at play. Motives for visiting the

graves and death places of strangers are said to range from morbid curiosity and recreational diversion to remembrance and education, and the need to understand, and come to terms with, 'an emotionally charged past'.⁵² Moreover, thanatourism often encompasses historical events seen as 'difficult' and emotive, and heritage managers exploit, downplay or negotiate these at their peril, and are sometimes criticised for presenting history to reflect hegemonic or nationalistic ideals.⁵³ It may not be the case that all these aspects of modern thanatourism have relevance for all medieval cults, but in focusing on the emotional power of the past and on history as 'interpretation' rather than fact, heritage scholarship and pilgrimage anthropology offers clues to the ways in which medieval people encountered and reproduced their own sense of the past through the use of relics.

The secular anthropological approach to pilgrimage, then, throws up some interesting methodological possibilities for medievalists. First, it suggests that, in order to understand how medieval cults functioned, we need not necessarily consider the phenomenon within the tight parameters of religion: as recognised by anthropologists, pilgrimages are 'multifunctional journeys'.⁵⁴ Second, 'pilgrimage' might be used as an analytical tool for examining a wider variety of medieval practices, behaviours and experiences. It may be instructive, for example, to discover whether the social, cultural, political and psychological forces at work in pilgrimage were also present in other activities such as commemorating the dead or remembering, and recording, historical events. Anthropological approaches make it possible to probe the little explored relationship between history and religion in medieval culture, offering medievalists new insights into the emotional attachments to past times, places and people that relic cults so strongly generated and fostered.

Conclusion

In examining the psychology behind modern cultic behaviour, anthropologists have looked beyond the purely 'religious' aspect of pilgrimage, and their observations go far in attempting to explain the cult-like devotion shown towards Richard III in twenty-first century Leicester. Given that the public reaction to Richard III chimes so

strikingly with relic veneration in the Middle Ages, it would seem that anthropology also has much to offer medievalists seeking new ways of understanding the relationship between relics and their devotees. However, here we must be careful of cross-cultural leaps of faith into the dark because the two phenomena are not equal. Richard is not a saint, and post-Reformation England is very different from fifteenth-century Leicester.

However, it is the fact of Richard *not* being a saint that arouses curiosity and inspires academic enquiry. ‘Hard to make sense of’, the events of March 2015 and the public’s reaction to them provoke comment, bafflement, speculation and even controversy. In this instance, the similarities between comparable cultural phenomena seem less important than their differences. Lying somewhere between historical artefact and saint – between history and religion, between past and present, and between the secular and the sacred – the relics of Richard III defy neat categories of understanding. They challenge us as historians to step beyond the familiar structures of our own discipline and, I would argue, nudge us towards new, creative ways of conceptualising the medieval world.



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Notes

- 1 'Mission Statement', *Richard III Society* website, <http://www.richardiii.net/aboutus.php>. Accessed 23/09/2015.
- 2 See <http://looking-for-richard.webs.com>.
- 3 M. Morris and R. Buckley, *Richard III: The King Under the Car Park* (Leicester, University of Leicester Archaeological Service, 2013).
- 4 Channel Four Television Corporation Limited, *Richard III: The Burial of the King* (26 March, 2015); Channel Four, *The King Laid to Rest* (26 March, 2015).
- 5 Jon Snow, *Burial of the King*; survey conducted by the author in Leicester on 27 March 2015.
- 6 In the survey conducted by the author in Leicester on 27 March, five out of ten respondents replied in the affirmative when asked whether they had any religious belief, three said 'no', one expressed ambivalence and one told me he was a 'relapsed' Lutheran.
- 7 B.S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (rev. edn Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990).
- 8 Cohn, 'An Anthropologist among the Historians', in his *Anthropologist among the Historians*, pp. 1-17.
- 9 See especially, Cohn, 'Towards an Anthropological History', and 'Anthropology and History in the 1980s: Towards a Rapprochement', in his *Anthropologist among the Historians*, pp. 42-7, 50-77. For historical anthropology, also see A. Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992).
- 10 For example, J. le Goff, 'Ecclesiastic Culture and Folklore in the Middle Ages: Saint Marcellus of Paris and the Dragon', in his *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. A. Goldhammer (London and Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 159-88; Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology*.
- 11 For example, D. Iogna-Prat, *Order and Exclusion: Cluny and Christendom Face Heresy, Judaism and Islam (1000-1150)*, trans. G.R. Edwards (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998); B.A. Hanawalt, *Rituals of Inclusion and Exclusion: Hierarchy and Marginalisation in Medieval London*, in her *Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 18-34; N. Orme, 'Access and Exclusion: Exeter Cathedral, 1300-1540' in *Freedom of Movement in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. Horden (Donington, Shaun Tyas, 2007), pp. 267-86.
- 12 For an example of the former, see R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*

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- (Oxford, Blackwell, 1987). For an example of the latter see P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1981; repr. 1982).
- 13 P. Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2001).
 - 14 *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. J. Eade and M.J. Sallnow (London, Routledge, 1991); *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, ed. S. Coleman and J. Eade (London, Routledge, 2004); M.J. Sallnow, 'Communitas Reconsidered: The Sociology of Andean Pilgrimage', *Man*, 16 (1981): 163-82; Simon Coleman, 'Do you Believe in Pilgrimage?' *Communitas*, Contestation and Beyond', *Anthropological Theory*, 2 (2002): 355-68.
 - 15 Recent 'interdisciplinary' pilgrimage studies conferences include *The Sacred Journeys: Pilgrimage and Beyond Project* (University of Oxford, 3-5 July, 2015), and *Assessing Pilgrimage Studies Today Interdisciplinary Symposium* (University of York, 5-6 July, 2014). Interdisciplinary volumes include *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions*, ed. S. Coleman and J. Elsner (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2002); *Redefining Pilgrimage: New Perspectives on Historical and Contemporary Pilgrimages*, ed. A.M. Pazos (Ashgate, Farnham, 2014).
 - 16 A good example is the *Pilgrimage and England's Cathedrals, Past and Present* project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (underway at the time of writing) which employs separate medievalists and anthropologists as researchers to investigate past and present pilgrimage in four England cathedrals. Details of this project can be found at <http://www.pilgrimageandcathedrals.ac.uk>.
 - 17 Channel Four, *Burial of the King*.
 - 18 For a fuller discussion of what follows, see A.E. Bailey, 'A Medieval Relic?', *History Today*, 65.8 (2015): 11-17.
 - 19 'I just became convinced that his burial place was there and still waiting to be found.' Philippa Langley, *Looking for Richard III*, <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/richard-iii-the-new-evidence/videos/all/looking-for-richard-iii>. Accessed 24/09/2015.
 - 20 Channel Four, *Burial of the King*. This quotation was also widely reported in the media.
 - 21 For medieval examples, see Bailey, 'A Medieval Relic?': 13.
 - 22 *King Richard III Visitor Centre* website, <http://www.kriiii.com/king-richard-iii-visitor-centre-opens-26-july>, accessed 24/09/2015. The Head of Arts and Museum in Leicester reportedly described it as 'an evocative space' allowing 'visitors to reflect': N. Housley, 'Preview of the Richard III Visitor Centre', <http://www2.le.ac.uk/news/blog/2014-archive-1/july/university-historian-gets-early-peek-of-richard-iii-visitor-centre>, posted 24 July 2014.

- 23 J. Crook, *English Medieval Shrines* (Princeton and Woodbridge, Boydell, 2011), pp. 211-12.
- 24 For the architecture of pilgrimage in English churches see, for example, Crook, *English Medieval Shrines* and B. Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Boydell, 2001).
- 25 For the details of these changes, see the Cathedral's 'Brief for Architects', published online <http://www.leicester.anglican.org/site-includes/uploads/wyggwan/Architects%20Brief%20for%20Grave%20of%20Richard%20III%20130313.pdf>. For an image of the proposed window at Leicester, see Bailey, *A Medieval Relic?* 27. For the Becket windows, see M.H. Caviness, *The Windows of Christ Church Cathedral Canterbury* (London, Oxford University Press, 1981).
- 26 Tim Stevens's sermon given at the *Service of the Reinterment of the Remains of King Richard III*, 26 March 2015. A transcript of this sermon can be found on the Leicester Cathedral website, <http://leicestercathedral.org/cathedral-sermons/king-richard-iii-service-reinterment>.
- 27 For saints as friends and companions, see Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, pp. 50-68; A.E. Bailey, 'Friends and Neighbours in High-Medieval England: A Hagiographical Perspective', in *The Experience of Neighbourhood in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bronach Kane and Simon Sandall (Farnham, Ashgate, forthcoming).
- 28 Rt Revd Tim Stevens, *Service of the Reinterment*.
- 29 For example, implicit in Tim Steven's statement that Richard's bones were receiving, in their reburial, the 'dignity and honour denied to them in death'. <http://leicestercathedral.org/cathedral-sermons/king-richard-iii-service-reinterment>
- 30 Channel Four, *Burial of the King*.
- 31 As, for example, highlighted by 'myth-and-ritual' theorists. See A.E. Bailey, 'Peter Brown and Victor Turner Revisited: Anthropological Approaches to Latin Miracle Narratives in the Medieval West', in *Contextualizing Miracles*, ed. M. Mesley and L. Wilson (Oxford, Medium Ævum, 2014), pp. 30-2.
- 32 A. Morinis, 'The Territory of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage' in his *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (London, Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 27 (pp. 1-23). For a modern pilgrimage example see S. Coleman, 'Pilgrimage to 'England's Nazareth': Landscapes of Myth and Memory at Walsingham', in E. Badone and S.R. Roseman, *Intersecting Journeys: the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 52-67.
- 33 This phrase was frequently used by my interviewees. For more on this theme, see Bailey, 'Medieval Relic?', p. 16.

- 34 For theories of authenticity see, for example, H. Pak, *Heritage Tourism* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2014), pp. 60-7; N. Wang, 'Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience' in *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26.3 (1999): 349-70; C.M. Cameron and J.B. Gatewood, 'Seeking Numinous Experiences in the Unremembered Past', in *Ethnology*, 42.1 (2003): 55-71. Also see H. Park, *Heritage Tourism* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2014), pp. 60-7.
- 35 See, for example, F.F.J. Schouten, 'Heritage as Historical Reality', in *Heritage, Tourism and Society*, ed. D.T. Herbert (Pinter, London, 1995), pp. 21-31 (pp. 23-5).
- 36 For example, R.P. Maines and J.J. Glynn, 'Numinous Objects', in *The Public Historian*, 15.1 (1993): 8-5.
- 37 For example, M. Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites: Service Provision and Visitor Experience* (Thomson, London, 2001), p. 166; P. Basu, 'Route Metaphors of "Roots-Tourism" in the Scottish Highland Diaspora', in *Reframing Pilgrimage*, ed. Coleman and Eade, pp. 150-174 (p. 171); T. Walter, 'War Grave Pilgrimage', in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, ed. I. Reader and T. Walter (Macmillan; London, 1993), pp. 63-91 (p. 73).
- 38 For the Middle Ages, see Brown, *Cult of the Saints*. For numinous museum objects as 'relics', see Maines and Glynn, 'Numinous Objects', p. 8. For modern examples, see G. Greenia, 'Pilgrimage and the American Myth', in *Redefining Pilgrimage*, ed. Pazos pp. 47-70; H. Mitchell, "'Being There": British Mormons and the History Trail', in *Reframing Pilgrimage*, ed. Coleman and Eade, pp. 26-44; Jill Dubisch, "'Heartland of America": Memory, Motion and the (Re)construction of History on a Motorbike Pilgrimage', in *Reframing Pilgrimage*, ed. Coleman and Eade, pp. 105-32.
- 39 Channel Four, *Burial of the King*.
- 40 *Service of Reception* (22 March, 2015), *Service of the Reinterment of the Remains of King Richard III* (26 March 2015) and *Service of Reveal of the Tomb and Celebration for King Richard III* (27 March, 2015).
- 41 For example, see Coleman, 'Do you believe in pilgrimage?'.
- 42 The extent to which the laity's oral reports were shaped by medieval hagiography is discussed, for example, in J.M. Smith, 'Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles and Relics in Brittany c850-1250', *Speculum*, 65.2 (1990): 309-43; R. Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England* (Philadelphia and Oxford, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), *passim*; L.A. Craig, *Wandering Women and Holy Matrons: Women as Pilgrims in the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden, Brill, 2009), 79-130; G. Signori, 'The Miracle Kitchen and Its Ingredients: A Methodical and Critical Approach to Marian Shrine Wonders (10th to 13th Centuries)', *Hagiographica*, 3 (1996): 279-303.
- 43 The quotation is from R. Koopmans, 'What the People Bring', in her *Wonderful to Relate*, pp. 112-38.

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- 44 Pilgrimage motivation in the Middle Ages is discussed, for example, in J. Ure, *Pilgrimage: the Great Adventure of the Middle Ages* (New York, Carroll & Graf, 2006), pp. 5-16; Hopper, *To Be a Pilgrim: The Medieval Pilgrimage Experience* (Stroud, Sutton, 2002), pp. 7-11. Women's motivations are often of particular interest: see, for example, Craig, *Wandering Women*, pp. 92-4, 97-128; S.S. Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 16-42; S. Hopper, *Mothers, Mystics and Merrymakers: Medieval Women Pilgrims* (Stroud, Sutton, 2006), pp. 1-13.
- 45 Six out of ten interviewees explicitly talked about a Christian burial being 'important' to Richard, four said it was fitting because he was a Christian. Only two of these also mentioned kingship.
- 46 The majority were English; two were American.
- 47 For the 'special dead', see Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, pp. 69-85.
- 48 E. Doss, 'Rock and Roll Pilgrims: Reflections on Ritual, Religiosity and Race at Graceland', in *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred*, ed. P.J. Margry (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2008), pp. 123-42; P.J. Margry, 'The Pilgrimage to Jim Morrison's Grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery: The Social Construction of Sacred Space', in his *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, pp. 143-72; P. Hollander, 'Heaven on Earth: Political Pilgrimages and the Pursuit of Meaning and Self-Transcendence', in *Redefining Pilgrimage*, ed. Pazos, pp. 71-85.
- 49 Examples include, K. Schramm, 'Coming Home to the Motherland: Pilgrimage Tourism in Ghana' in *Reframing Pilgrimage*, pp. 133-49; Basu, 'Route Metaphors', in *Cultures in Motion*; Walter, 'War Grave Pilgrimage'; J.B. Gatewood and C.M. Cameron, 'Battlefield Pilgrims at Gettysburg National Military Park', in *Ethnology*, 43.3 (2004): 193-216; Hollander, 'Political Pilgrimages'. For the crossover between secular and religious pilgrimage see, for example, the essays in W.H. Swatos, *On the Road to Being There: Studies in Pilgrimage and Tourism in Late Modernity* (Leiden, Brill, 2006).
- 50 For example, A.V. Seaton, 'Thanatourism: the Final Frontier? Visiting Cemeteries, Churchyards, Funerary Sites as Sacred and Secular pilgrimage' in *Tourism Recreation Research*, 27.2 (2002): 73-81. For cemeteries, see Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites*, pp. 166-9. Also Schramm, 'Coming Home to the Motherland'; J. Feldman, 'Israeli Youth Voyages to Holocaust Poland: Through the Prism of Pilgrimage', in *Redefining Pilgrimage*, ed. Pazos, pp. 87-101; J. Selby, 'The Politics of Pilgrimage: The Social Construction of Ground Zero' in *On the Road*, ed. Swatos, pp. 159-85.

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- 51 T. Tatton Brown, 'Canterbury and the Architecture of Pilgrimage Shrines in England', in *Pilgrimage: Past and Present*, ed. Coleman and Elsner, 90-107.
 - 52 Maines and Glynn, 'Numinous Objects', p. 10. For motives, see P. Robinson, M. Lück and S.L.J. Smith, *Tourism* (Wallingford, CABI, 2013), pp. 235-6.
 - 53 On managing 'difficult' sites, see Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites*, pp. 157-73. For the reflection of hegemonic or nationalistic ideals more generally, see Schouten, 'Heritage', p. 25.
 - 54 G. Rinschede, 'Forms of Religious Tourism', in *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19 (1992): 52 (51-67).

