

# The Strange Business of Memory: Relic Forgery in Latin America

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This essay surveys assorted cases of relic forgery from colonial and modern Latin America, to argue that such forgeries are a) particularly widespread in the region; b) part of a quite formalized sector of the region's informal economies; and c) commodities produced by a wide range of elite and non-elite actors. To explain why this should be it suggests a very schematic typology of relic forgery in Latin America—taken here as a broad, Chicano construct, encompassing parts of California and upstate New York—and attempts a superficial political economy of relic forgery. This last focuses particularly on the modern period, and on the role of archaeology in a strange business: the materialization of memory through fraud.

Forging relics is, as other essays in this volume suggest, a practice that spans a whole range of times, places, and cultures. Some relics, like Mohammed's toothpick or splinters of the One True Cross—usefully interchangeable, one might think—became ubiquitous precisely because of the ease with which they could be mass-produced. Three hundred men, Luther mocked ponderously, would not have sufficed to carry off all the fragments of the One True Cross.<sup>1</sup> Such forgery is merely a subset of the broader category of artefact and antiquity fraud. There is surprisingly little historical literature on this exotic trade; yet it is, as any curator or collector knows, extremely commonplace. Museum director Thomas Hoving estimated that thirty per cent of the objects offered to the Met were fakes. Even the most knowledgeable collectors, he wrote, would purchase some forgeries over a career's span, for fakes abounded in every market; antiquity fraud was a 'massive, truly monumental industry'.<sup>2</sup> Hoving's choice of 'industry' was neither verbal sloppiness nor

<sup>1</sup> David Lowenthal, 'Authenticity: Rock of Faith or Quicksand Quagmire?', *The Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter*, 14 (1999), 5–8.

<sup>2</sup> One favoured, moreover, by at least two long-standing traits of collectors and curators: i) the drive to unearth rarities, usually of high intrinsic value and easily squared with a western aesthetic sense, and ii) the assumption, as Hoving's mentor taught him, that 'although it was a mistake to collect a fake, an error every adventurous connoisseur had

hyperbole, but a reasonable definition of a complex business bound tightly to the laws of supply and demand. Thus post-war Rome, for example, became a centre of forgery due to a potent combination of strong American demand for antiquities, their relative scarcity and the poverty of restorers, sculptors, and the academics who verified and gave provenances for their fakes.<sup>3</sup> (This was not Rome's first period of notoriety for art fraud: in the first century AD Seneca the Elder found half a dozen workshops forging Greek jewels and intaglios, while 'painters' galleys' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mass-produced old masters.)<sup>4</sup> Forgeries can have impacts well beyond a misleadingly labelled display case or a stung collector. The Donation of Constantine lent medieval popes a theocratic claim to temporal jurisdiction that legitimized sweeping land grabs: Pope Adrian IV's grant of Ireland to England, Pope Alexander VI's division of the non-European world into Spanish and Portuguese territories.<sup>5</sup> Yet for all that the historical significance of forgeries has been minimized, while the production of fake antiquities has been universal, ubiquitous, and unusually intense in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Certain characteristics of Latin American societies in both colonial and modern periods favoured comparatively widespread artefact fraud. Material incentives for forgers were consistently powerful, whether afforded by fluid property rights or by the proximity of monied consumers in North America. Opportunities for forgers were likewise strong: historically low literacy levels have magnified the power of the inventive, forging minorities, while conquest and *kulturkampf* in the sixteenth century generated a relative ignorance of the pasts of complex indigenous societies with highly sophisticated material cultures. Artefact fraud has been consequently commonplace. Its production ranges from the banal—Aztec black pottery, a form of deceptive, unlabelled tourist art since at least the 1820s—to the spectacular, such as the Aztec crystal skulls; and from the micro—the Ica stones of Peru, say—to the distinctly macro, whether the pyramid of the sun in Teotihuacán, to which the lead archaeologist added an extra level for aesthetic reasons, or the lost city of Quechmietoplican, a Mesoamerican fantasy dreamed up by

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made, *it was an absolute sin to brand as a forgery an authentic work of art!*: Jane Walsh, 'What is Real? A New Look at PreColumbian Mesoamerican Collections', *Anthonotes*, 26 (2005), 17; Thomas Hoving, *King of the Confessors* (New York, 1981), 38, 44, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Hoving, *King of the Confessors*, 83, 171–3.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hoving, *False Impressions: The Hunt for Big-Time Art Fakes* (New York, 1996), 31, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Jones, 'Why Fakes?' in Mark Jones (ed.), *Fake? The Art of Deception* (Berkeley, 1990), 12.

nineteenth-century tourist guides on the basis of abandoned mine-workings.<sup>6</sup> By the late nineteenth century forgery was quite literally an industrial process in Mexico, where artisans used high-speed rotary wheels to cut and polish stone and crystal, softened obsidian in petrol baths, soldered together filigree goldwork and, most impressive of all, used galvanization to transform waxwork dummies into copper moulds for production-line baking of ‘pre-hispanic’ pottery. (The government’s Inspector of Monuments collected over 80 such moulds.)<sup>7</sup> Given the lack of competitiveness in Mexico’s more formal industries—it cost nineteen per cent more to produce a piece of cloth in Veracruz than it did in Manchester—artefact forgery may have been the country’s most successful export industry.<sup>8</sup> By the 1930s, at any rate, purportedly prehispanic artefacts were so ubiquitous in the United States that one archaeologist claimed one of his ‘most frequent sources of Mexican objects’ to be Irondequoit Bay in New York State, where the ‘housewives and widows’ of collectors dumped them.<sup>9</sup> *Gringos* were not the only dupes: Diego Rivera’s vast collection of pre-Columbian art was ‘riddled with fakes’.<sup>10</sup>

Given such a rich hoard of stories of artefact fraud, it is tempting to blur categories and to define a relic as vaguely as possible: as, perhaps, ‘something which remains or is left behind, particularly after destruction or decay’.<sup>11</sup> This is clearly analytically unsatisfactory, reducing both the precision and the cumulativeness of any comparative studies. An exacting, functionalist definition of relics—as uniquely religious inventions, specifically body parts, intimate personal possessions and contact materials that are thought to provide

<sup>6</sup> William H. Holmes, ‘The Trade in Spurious Mexican Antiquities’, *Science*, 7:159 (19 Feb. 1886); Jane Walsh, ‘Crystal Skulls and Other Problems; Or, “Don’t Look It in the Eye”’, in Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler (eds), *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian* (Washington DC, 1997), 116–39; Massimo Polidoro, ‘Ica Stones: Yabba-Dabba-Doo!’, *Skeptical Inquirer* (Sept.–Oct. 2002); author’s interview, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Mexico City, 20 July 2000, *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Guerrero*, XXI:34 (25 Aug. 1897).

<sup>7</sup> Leopoldo Batres, *Antigüedades Mejicanas Falsificadas: Falsificación y Falsificadores* (México DF, 1910?), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890–1940* (Stanford, 1989), 37–8.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur C. Parker, ‘The Perversion of Archaeological Data’, *American Antiquity*, 5 (1939), 57–8.

<sup>10</sup> Michael D. Coe, ‘From Huaquero to Connoisseur: The Early Market in Pre-Columbian Art’, in E. Hill Boone (ed.), *Collecting the pre-Columbian Past: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 6th and 7th October 1990* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1993), 273.

<sup>11</sup> Lesley Brown (ed.), *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1993), II:2537.

supernatural means to pragmatic ends—is the easiest defended. There are, admittedly, frequent linguistic attempts to sacralize secular artefacts: deeming national heroes ‘martyrs’, their bones ‘relics’, their graves ‘altars to the *patria*’, their memories the objects of ‘cults’.<sup>12</sup> A handful of the most successful—the bones of Emiliano Zapata, or the would-be bones of Cuauhtémoc, or the Aztec crystal skulls—seem to attain for some followers the sacral function of religious relics, becoming objects that wield magical as well as mnemonic power.<sup>13</sup> The overwhelming majority do not. Yet if non-religious artefacts are generally not believed to possess the numinous power of religious relics, they do share other key characteristics. What we might call ‘secular relics’ satisfy David Hume’s actor-centred description of the miraculous, namely materials which generate ‘the passion of *surprise* and *wonder* . . . an agreeable notion [that] gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events from which it is derived’.<sup>14</sup> Relics religious and secular all work at the intersection of credulity and power; both types are examples of what Pierre Nora described as a material *lieu de mémoire*, namely ‘any significant entity . . . which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community’.<sup>15</sup> Such symbolic capital is readily converted, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued, into economic or

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the report on commemoration of Obregón’s death, Mexico City, 17 July 1945, AGN/DGIPS- 79 exp 2–1/130/633, *Periódico Oficial del Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero* XXVI:34 (21 Aug. 1903), report on parade . . . of 5 Feb. 1949, Mexico City, AGN/DGIPS-102/JNM.

<sup>13</sup> Zapata is regularly invoked as a revenant who will come down from the hills on a white horse to protect his people in their hour of need; Cuauhtémoc is the object of literal prayers for intercession, and is simultaneously rumoured to wield a mortal curse against non-believers in his cult; the crystal skulls are variously believed capable of projecting holograms, promoting healing and remote control killing. Pancho Villa is also the object of a religious cult in Chihuahua, but one without many relics. Villa’s skull was stolen in the 1920s, and his bones lie in Mexico City. Samuel Brunk, ‘The Mortal Remains of Emiliano Zapata’ in Lyman L. Johnson (ed.), *Death, Dismemberment and Memory: Body Politics in Latin America* (Albuquerque, 2004), 146–53; John Womack, Jr, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (London, 1969), 330; Paul Gillingham, *Cuauhtémoc’s Bones: Forging Identity in Mexico* (forthcoming, 2010), ch.3; Robert Todd Carroll, ‘Crystal Skull’ at <http://skepdic.com/crystalskull.html>; Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford, 1998), 789–93.

<sup>14</sup> Adding sceptically that ‘if the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority’. David Hume, ‘Of Miracles’, in Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Illinois, 1988), 150–1.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: les lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols (Chicago, 2001) i, xvii.

political capital.<sup>16</sup> The relationship is old enough to be recognized in some etymologies; thus the root of the word for relic in Serbian—*mošti*—is *moć*, or power.<sup>17</sup> In widening our focus beyond the purely religious we lose some precision; but in exchange we may gain some analytical insight, for relics religious and secular are surrounded by many similar social relationships and practices.<sup>18</sup> Hence, in this essay, relics will be broadly defined as artefacts of widely accepted charismatic power, whether they serve as the sign for a famous individual or as the sign for a major, transformative idea.

There are assorted approaches that might be used here: the history of magic, religion, or memory, the anthropology of ritual and material culture, the sociology of community, instrumentalist theories of nationalism. The latter, perhaps an obvious choice for the analysis of secular relics at least, suffers however from a double weakness. Constructivist readings of hero/relic cults tend to assume a top-down flow of production, in which these signifiers of identity are invented by narrow coteries of metropolitan elites and artlessly consumed by their gullible subjects. Instrumentalist readings of symbolic manipulation further tend to assume that the mere existence of a statue, a reliquary, a grave, a postage stamp, or any other place of memory constitutes in itself conclusive proof that the represented symbol is central to both producers and consumers of that memory. I am unconvinced that either of these assumptions works everywhere, all the time. Some straightforward quantification of the resources invested—by both producers and consumers of symbols—would be a useful rule-of-thumb gauge of those symbols' significance in the everyday scheme of things. It is worth remembering, moreover, that Pierre Nora's 'entirely symbolic' history, or 'history of the second degree', was originally deeply reliant on an older, more positivist historiography which he and his followers effectively cannibalized. Without such older historiographical traditions to relate to, it becomes impossible to 'point up the links between the material base of social existence and the most elaborate productions of culture and thought'. How does an 'entirely symbolic' historiography know what that material base looks like? How could we assess the 'reuse and misuse' of historical narrative in the utter absence of a professional historical narrative?<sup>19</sup> Cultural analyses which overly despise the material can

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), 47–67.

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Čolović, 'Relics' in *The Politics of Symbol in Serbia* (London, 2002), 166.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Lyman Johnson's argument that the representational conventions and the narrative structures of nationalist relic cults are 'clearly derived from the earlier cult of saints'. Lyman L. Johnson, 'Why Dead Bodies Talk: An Introduction' in Johnson (ed.), *Death, Dismemberment and Memory*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Nora, *Rethinking France*, xx, xxiv.

produce partial, and eventually sterile interchangeability, understandings of the past—understandings of the sort which Nora, at base an empiricist whose *meisterwerk* filled seven volumes, might despise. Hence, in this survey, the use of culture and political economy as twin organizing concepts in attempting a relic-centred brand of the history of memory. An understanding of a relic's cultural context is essential to understand the sources of its power; but a grasp of a relic's political economy is also essential to understand why and how people fetishize, materialize, and trade these symbols across the world.<sup>20</sup>

This is not a contrarian's effort to graft a *marxisant* analysis onto a primarily cultural field of history; it is merely following the lead of specialists in artefact forgery. Such specialists repeatedly stress the business side of relic fraud. Leopoldo Batres, a prominent and politically able archaeologist of late nineteenth-century Mexico, put it particularly clearly: 'One of the industries that has reached the greatest sophistication since long ago has been the falsification of antique objects.'<sup>21</sup> (He should have known, as something of a participant-observer: it was Batres who wittingly added a level to the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacán, and Batres who tried to sell one of the first fraudulent Aztec crystal skulls to Mexico's National Museum.)<sup>22</sup> Batres was quite right: some two thousand years earlier the mummy sellers of Hawara in Egypt had defied pharaonic decree and sold worshippers crocodile mummies that CT scans show to be wholly crocodile-free.<sup>23</sup> His contemporaries agreed with him. William Holmes, director of the Smithsonian at the time, warned of how the 'increased demand' of his 'museum-making era' had 'led to many attempts, on the part of dishonest persons, to supply the market by fraudulent means'.<sup>24</sup> A century later the stress on forgeries as the end products of classical economics endures. As the curator Mark Jones observes,

Fakes are . . . only secondarily a source of evidence for the outlook of those who made and uncovered them. They are, before all else, a response to demand, an ever changing portrait of human desire.

<sup>20</sup> And may even provide 'an ideal if somewhat unusual microcosm in which to examine the creation, evaluation, and circulation of commodities'. Patrick Geary, 'Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics' in Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 169.

<sup>21</sup> Batres, *Antigüedades Mejicanas Falsificadas*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Author's interview, Salvador Rueda, México DF Oct. 1995, Walsh, 'Crystal Skulls and Other Problems', 127.

<sup>23</sup> The prior existence of the decree establishing that animal mummies should actually contain animals is suggestive. Maev Kennedy, 'Massive Mummy Fraud Discovered after 2,000 Years', *The Guardian* (21 June 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Holmes, 'Spurious Mexican Antiquities', 170.

Each society, each generation, fakes the thing it covets most . . .  
Where there are fakes it is clear that there was a booming market in  
the things thus imitated: fakers are above all creatures of the  
market.<sup>25</sup>

What follows, then, is a typology of relic fraud in Latin America; some case studies to illustrate each category; and two final questions: how big a business has relic production really been? And who are the producers, who are the consumers, and how are they connected?

Relics reflect what societies need to find or forge. As such, production fashions shift nimbly to keep pace with shifting belief systems. On this basis we might propose four types of relic forgery in Latin America: religious, monarchic, nationalist, and scientific. These types show a certain evolution over time: thus religious and monarchic frauds tend to occur in the colonial period, while nationalist and scientific forgeries are more characteristic of the modern period. The labels are more roughly indicative than tight, mutually exclusive categories, as distinct relic frauds often fall into more than one class. Thus the enterprising Antonio Tandazo Montoya y Minchala, who used a blend of fake royal charters and papal bulls to set himself up as a *cacique* in several indigenous villages in highland Ecuador, created a set of forged text relics both religious and monarchic.<sup>26</sup> And the bones of the last Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc, a nineteenth-century production, were primarily nationalist relics; but were also to some extent monarchic (he was indigenous royalty), scientific (the forger aimed to substantially recast a central narrative of Mexican historiography) and religious (assorted authors and public speakers developed the parallels between Cuauhtémoc and Christ; communist schoolteachers devised prayers to the last *tlatoani*).<sup>27</sup>

This last was a striking tribute to the enduring influence of baroque Catholicism in Latin America. An Augustinian concern with conversions in quantity rather than doctrinal quality had allowed the first churchmen in Latin America to build a large church with real speed: in Mexico alone there were an estimated four million converts by 1540, served in 1559 by some 160 monasteries.<sup>28</sup> There were over 100 missions in Peru by 1600; Lima's (rather

<sup>25</sup> Jones, 'Why Fakes?', 13. See also Hoving's systematic use of industrial metaphors in Hoving, *False Impressions*, 26, 30, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Joanne Rappaport and Thomas B. F. Cummins, 'Literacy and Power in Colonial Latin America', in George C. Bond and Angela Gilliam (eds), *Social Construction of the Past: Representation as Power* (London, 1994), 95–6.

<sup>27</sup> Juan Campuzano, *Cinco héroes de Guerrero: Galeana, Guerrero, Cuauhtémoc, Álvarez, Altamirano* (México DF, 1961), 23; *El Universal* 4 Oct. 1949.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Knight, *Mexico: the Colonial Era* (Cambridge, 2002), 33–5.

worldly) large convents housed over a thousand nuns apiece.<sup>29</sup> That speed was fuelled, in part, by the early Franciscans' apocalyptic interpretation of the conquest. By the late sixteenth century this had been supplanted by a baroque Catholicism that centred on the doctrine of purgatory. In this religious framework saints' relics were a critical source of both sacred and temporal power, instruments to harness the magical intercession of their referents. Such beliefs stretched back to Cortés himself, who carried an image of the Virgin Mary on his standard, told the Indians of Cempoala that she would serve as their new 'intercessor' and instructed the Nahuas of Tenochtitlán to pray to her for rain.<sup>30</sup> 'Relichood' lies in the eye of the beholder, and paintings, crosses, tapestries, clothes, statues, and their adornments could all be constituted as relics; magical objects that were expected, when appropriately propitiated by the deserving, to perform miracles for both individuals and communities in need.

A broad range of social practices could catalyze those miracles. Some were rigorously programmed, such as the annual saint's day processions around a settlement's centre, or an individual's prayer to their eponymous saint on his or her day, or the persignation required on crossing a relic's path. Others were more ad hoc, ranging from personal invocation, accompanied by physical contact with the relic if possible, to the grim parades of relics that desperate communities mounted as last-ditch defences against drought or plague. A broad range of fabricated images—sometimes containing body parts or contact relics, occasionally containing prehispanic idols—were believed to take on the life and the numinous power of the saint in question, and were worshipped with intimacy: lovingly dressed, petitioned, chatted with, and offered food. While this was a universal medieval lay belief, in Mexico the associated practice was probably helped by the Nahua faith in *ixipitla*: statues or humans who impersonated the gods, and in their ritual disguise lured the referents into temporarily possessing them.<sup>31</sup> The miracles that were sometimes believed to result were central to baroque cosmology, providing something of a counterweight to what Weber called 'the problem of theodicy', or why a just God should permit the existence

<sup>29</sup> Charles H. Lippy, Robert Choquette and Stafford Poole (eds), *Christianity Comes to the Americas, 1492–1776* (New York, 1992), 58, 62.

<sup>30</sup> William B. Taylor, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion', *American Ethnologist*, 14 (1987), 10–11.

<sup>31</sup> Jeanette Favrot Peterson, 'Creating the Virgin of Guadalupe: The Cloth, the Artist, and Sources in Sixteenth-Century New Spain', *The Americas*, 61 (2005), 571–610; Geary, 'Sacred Commodities', 176.

of evil.<sup>32</sup> They were also critical to any religious institution's balance sheet, attracting the local (and in cases long-distance) faithful and ensuring financial support for convents, monasteries, and churches. Cash was not the only material benefit of relics. Relics and the saints' cults they underpinned were also used to promote political autonomy for villages, or to provide legal protection for community lands in the form of confraternities. In Tonalá, Oaxaca, for example, the miraculous discovery of a cross inside a cave backed up the town's claim to the regional dominance it had enjoyed before the conquest.<sup>33</sup> Relics were key instruments in what Claudio Lomnitz has called 'a popular culture built at every point on the domestication and popularization of the death cult'.<sup>34</sup>

There was, however, a key problem with relics in early colonial Latin America: their scarcity. European churches had been stockpiling relics of the saints and martyrs since the fifth century, and had taken the logical next step in adding value—transferring their thaumaturgic power to reliquaries—around the tenth century. During the key early stages of evangelization missionaries in Latin America, on the other hand, lacked both their own saints and their own relics.<sup>35</sup> The mere passage of time can lend gravitas and 'relichood' to all sorts of community belongings. For the first generations of conquerors and conquered, however, little or no time had passed, and the signifiers of foreign saints were all too newly crafted. One response to the shortage was to import: in 1617 the Jesuits sent a monk relic-hunting in the graveyards of the Basque country, explaining to their guardians that 'I need relics of saints and in these chapels there are few or none of them'.<sup>36</sup> Another was to forge. In 1648 the Inquisition opened a case against one Domingo de Robles, who had entered Valladolid, Yucatán,

with some skins that he claimed were of saints and other pieces of paper and bits of wax or [illegible] like pieces of Agnus and a rosary with a little wood cross and a Christ, and with all of this he went

<sup>32</sup> Richard Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts* (Stanford, 2005), 274.

<sup>33</sup> *Historia de Tonalá, Oaxaca coleccionada por el Sr. Pbro. D. Avelino de la T Mora López para Conmemorar el III Centenario del Hallazgo de La Santa Cruz En la Gruta del Río de Santa María Tindu, Oax.* (Sant Domingo Tonalá, 1957), 56. With thanks to Ben Smith.

<sup>34</sup> Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York, 2005), 261.

<sup>35</sup> David A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition across Five Centuries* (Cambridge, 2001), 19–20.

<sup>36</sup> Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 247.

around healing and using these things to rub the women, saying that his relics had the virtue of healing.<sup>37</sup>

Such early colonial wide boys were clearly commonplace, as both the ecclesiastical and civil authorities drew up regulations to control relics. Their forgery devalued one of the papacy's traditional currencies of power, namely the central reserves of relics that were the catacombs, filled with the bones of early Christian martyrs.<sup>38</sup> The Santo Oficio attempted to physically vet all relics; the colonial authorities passed an edict declaring that 'no trader or merchant can sell [relics], and if traders possess any such objects, they must declare them, so that they can be repossessed and placed in a convenient destination'. Yet by hook or by crook the urgent demand for relics was satisfied. By 1728, the *Gaceta de México* recorded, the relics displayed on All Saints Day in the cathedral included 'the body of Saint Primitivo, that of Saint Hilaria, two heads of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, of Saint Anastasio, of Saint Gelacio, of Saint Vito, and others'.<sup>39</sup>

Relic production was more than a local business centred on local concerns and local politics. Two religious cults attained continental significance, namely those to St Thomas the Apostle and the Virg en de Guadalupe. Both were strongly politically charged arguments that creoles deployed in the battle against peninsular discrimination. (An all-encompassing prejudice, as Jorge Ca izares-Esguerra shows, which damned not only the lands and peoples of the Americas but even their stars, imagined as the source of baleful influence and collective inferiority.)<sup>40</sup> One response was to argue for pre-evangelization, the theory that the Americas had been converted to Christianity at the very beginning. The *Acta Thomae* claimed, after all, that St Thomas the apostle had proselytized far 'beyond the Ganges'. He had reputedly been a stonemason, and his name meant 'precious twin'; both characteristics of the pale-skinned Mesoamerican god Quetzalc atl. The easily made identification was further strengthened by the crosses that bewildered the conquistadors and by assorted rumours and fragments; it resolved, moreover, the theological dilemma of how the Son of God could have overlooked a vast proportion of humanity. The St Thomas cult could function simultaneously as an

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>38</sup> Geary, 'Sacred Commodities', 182.

<sup>39</sup> Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797* (Arizona, 1996), 30, 59, Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 248.

<sup>40</sup> This, Ca izares Esguerra argues, may be the earliest manifestation of scientific racism. Jorge Ca izares Esguerra, 'New World, New Stars: Patriotic Astrology and the Invention of Indian and Creole Bodies in Colonial Spanish America, 1600-1650', *The American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 33-68.

instrument for proselytization in the Americas and for Creole self-defence in Europe. The outcome, in short order, was the rapid emergence of the relics necessary to substantiate such a useful idea. In Peru the Augustinians alleged St Thomas to have been the Inca founder-god Viracocha, his path remembered in the indigenous shrines, the *huacas*, that criss-crossed the Andes. In Brazil his footprints were discovered in rock, worshipped as the tracks of a great prophet by the Tupinamba. In Chile both footprints and letters in rock were interpreted as further traces of the apostle, leading one father to send rock samples to Rome for substantiation.<sup>41</sup>

The various footprints of St Thomas may well have been straightforward strides of faith. The apparition of the Virgin Mary in the Valley of Mexico, on the other hand, was attacked as a knowing invention from the start.<sup>42</sup> The story is widely known: Mary is held to have appeared three times on a hill outside Mexico City, Tepeyac, to a poor and pious Nahua named Juan Diego. The soon-to-be bishop Zumárraga disbelieved the story; and so, the earliest account tells us, the Virgin instructed the Indian to gather flowers in his cloak and to present them to the Franciscan. When the cloak was opened and the flowers fell, however, they had left fixed on the material the 'Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in her holy image which today is preserved, guarded and venerated in her sanctuary of Guadalupe of Mexico' (Fig. 1).<sup>43</sup> The relic was extremely successful, drawing intense veneration from first Spanish and, much later, indigenous pilgrims. By the 1680s Jesuits were promoting it as unique in the world, powerful even beyond St Luke's supposed paintings of Mary, for the Mexican image, they claimed, had been painted by God or Mary herself.<sup>44</sup> This earliest account, however, comes over a century after the apparition of virgin and relic, and was founded on oral histories; as the author straightforwardly owned up, 'I searched for papers and writings regarding the holy image, but I did not find any'.<sup>45</sup> This may have been because the sixteenth-century devout seem to have considered the relic

<sup>41</sup> Jaques Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl y Guadalupe: La formación de la conciencia nacional en México* (México DF, 1995), 232–65.

<sup>42</sup> And has continued to generate controversy to the present. The recent canonization of Juan Diego met with protests from, among others, the abbot of the Basilica of Guadalupe himself. *Reforma* 2 Dec. 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Miguel Sánchez, *Imagen de la Virgen María madre de Dios de Guadalupe, milagrosamente aparecida en la ciudad de México [1648]*, cited in Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, 63.

<sup>44</sup> Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, 99. For a convincing rebuttal of the myth that the Virgin of Guadalupe was instantly powerful among indigenous populations see Taylor, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain'.

<sup>45</sup> Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, 56–7.



Fig. 1. The painted cloak with the iconic Virgen de Guadalupe, Valley of Mexico, sixteenth century. By permission of the Museo de la Basílica de Guadalupe

nothing more than a rather good painting (Bernal Díaz compared the putative artist to Michelangelo).<sup>46</sup> The first record of the cult comes in September 1556, when Archbishop Montúfar lavishly praised the Virgin of Guadalupe and her image's miraculous cure of a stockbreeder. The iconodule bishop drew a stinging rebuttal from the iconoclast Franciscan provincial, Francisco de Bustamante, which in turn sparked an investigation into the cult. This investigation revealed that the cult's material centrepiece, the painted cloak, was held to work miracles but was also believed to have been made by one of the great indigenous painters, Marcos Cipac de Aquino; a finding that no one challenged.<sup>47</sup>

To the inventive Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman the answer was clear: the archbishop had planted the image to promote conversion in the Valley of Mexico. Without evidence for such a Machiavellian interpretation, however, it seems more likely that this was a collective progression into fraud.<sup>48</sup> For Serge Gruzinski the authors of the 'irrefutable construct' were clearly the three authors of the mid-seventeenth century who successfully transmuted a sixteenth-century painting into a miraculous image.<sup>49</sup> For seventeenth-century creoles there was the same solid ideological motive to invest the painting of the virgin with magical power as there had been to find traces of Thomas the Apostle, namely a defence against metropolitan discrimination. And there was also a powerful material motive. As Jaques Lafaye has argued, converting a cult to the Spanish Virgin of Guadalupe into a domestic apparitionist movement had a major economic effect. The alms collected in her name had hitherto been remitted to the Jeronymites in charge of the mother house of Guadalupe in Extremadura; after 1600 they stayed in New Spain. The impact was immediate. Even as the relic was subjected to repeated archdiocesan inquiries it drew in large sums from the faithful. On at least one occasion, the visit of 1653, the two phenomena were connected, the archbishop concerned to track down where the abundant alms were actually going.<sup>50</sup> As early as 1576 the chapel generated a surplus that could be set aside for orphans' dowries; a new building, opened in 1622, was part-financed by alms-givers who received, in return, copper-plate certificates worth 40 days' remission of sins; by 1749 the cult was wealthy enough to invest

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Peterson's detailed reconstruction of the actual process of painting the image. Peterson, 'Creating the Virgin of Guadalupe', 588.

<sup>47</sup> Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 60–4; Serge Gruzinski, *La guerra de las imágenes: De Cristóbal Colón a 'Blade Runner' (1492–2019)* (México DF, 1995), 111.

<sup>48</sup> Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 7–8.

<sup>49</sup> Gruzinski, *La guerra de las imágenes*, 124.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

nearly half a million pesos in further building works.<sup>51</sup> In 1757 the Indians of nearby Zacualpan protested that their priests had initiated feast days in honour of Guadalupe to increase their incomes.<sup>52</sup> The Virgin of Guadalupe, above all other Latin American relic cults, has been extraordinarily ‘good to think’; she has also been extraordinarily good business.<sup>53</sup>

Largely coeval with religious relics were monarchic relics. Given the theocratic nature of contemporary European rule, it is unsurprising that the two categories sometimes overlap. Thus the councilmen of Puebla, for example, were offered relics to kiss on the feast day of Saint Teresa as a mark of her special favour to these local arbiters of distant royal power.<sup>54</sup> While the bones of Spanish royalty were unavailable, those of their indigenous counterparts were theoretically to be had; but in a relic-aware culture, their politically driven disappearance was over-determined. Cortés left Cuauhtémoc, the last Mexica emperor, hanging from a tree in the Tabasco Plain; the viceroy had Tupac Amaru, the self-identified Inca who led the 1780 indigenous rebellion, dismembered and scattered across the Andean Highlands. Contact relics may have been more common, and were clearly sometimes forged. In the mid-seventeenth century the Andalusian adventurer Don Pedro de Bohorques Girón re-invented himself as ‘Huallpa Inca’, and, equipped with serviceable Quechua and a faked silver diadem of the sun, persuaded 25,000 Andeans in the remote Calchaquí valley to accept him as their lord.<sup>55</sup> Yet monarchic relics were most commonly textual, and took above all the form of royal land grants to communities across Latin America.

The power of these *títulos*, which proliferated in the mid-seventeenth century, may have drawn in part on the universal, carefully constructed charismatic sway of kings, expressed in beliefs such as the royal touch; but it was also rooted in earthier considerations. In a period of sometimes chaotically

<sup>51</sup> Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl y Guadalupe*, 374–80; Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, 54; Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 227–35.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, ‘The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain’, 14–15.

<sup>53</sup> She remains so to the present: Marian apparitions multiplied in Mexico’s chaotic *fin de siècle*. Squatters in Mexico City in the late 1990s, threatened with eviction, found an image of the Virgin in the cross-section of a tree they felled; underground travellers read Marian outlines into a damp stain in the Hidalgo metro station that became ‘*la virgen del metro*’, *Reforma* (30 Jan. 1999); Juan Villoro, ‘El testigo innecesario’ in *La Jornada Semanal* (19 Dec. 1999).

<sup>54</sup> Except when they fell out with the church. Frances L. Ramos, ‘Succession and Death: Royal Ceremonies in Colonial Puebla’, *The Americas*, 60 (2003), 192–3.

<sup>55</sup> Bohorques was deeply aware of the power of relics, and chose to meet the Spanish governor of the province; Robert Ryal Miller, ‘The Fake Inca of Tucumán: Don Pedro de Bohorques’, *The Americas*, 32 (1975), 196–210.

fluctuating property rights, such grants were the main source of clear title for indigenous villagers. They were, as such, subject to frequent forgery throughout the colonial period and beyond. The Ecuadorian forger Montoya, arrested in 1803, confessed to his inquisitors 'that he carried with him seven royal charters and that he managed to be the *cacique* of many villages and that he could live wherever he liked'.<sup>56</sup> Forgeries were not just the work of entrepreneurial individuals like Montoya: across Mexico both Spanish and indigenous kings were invoked in villages' primordial titles, which were systematically forged by indigenous communities.<sup>57</sup> 'It seems', James Lockhart reports,

that somewhere in the orbit of Mexico City there existed what amounted to a factory or studio for false titles, where towns in need could have a document made to order, complete with pictures in a pseudo-sixteenth-century style, indigenous-style paper, and a final smoking to give the appearance of age . . . The antiquing process extended to the (often rather skeletal) texts themselves . . . the fabricators bent over backwards to use indigenous vocabulary<sup>58</sup>.

Forged titles were not, finally, restricted to out-of-the-way places in the countryside. In 1753 petitioners claiming descent from the last Mexica emperor, Cuauhtémoc, produced a royal grant signed by Philip II, dated 1523, which ceded those heirs extensive lands in the central Mexico City *barrio* of Tlatelolco. The *Audiencia de México* declared it false without too much trouble; Philip II had yet to be born in 1523.<sup>59</sup> Yet the faked Tlatelolco grant was not just ambitious; it was also an accurate reflection of the clout of both Spanish and indigenous royalty in text relics, instruments potentially more powerful than any other in Spain's litigious colonies.

Such relics endured well beyond the monarchy they represented (forged *retablos*, tin *ex votos* with deliberately naïve paintings and homilies, are easily found in the markets of modern Mexico City, while *títulos primordiales* have

<sup>56</sup> Rappaport and Cummins, 'Literacy and Power in Colonial Latin America', 95–6.

<sup>57</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *Le colonisation de l'imaginaire. Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol. XVIe –XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1988), 139–188.

<sup>58</sup> James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, 1992), 413–15.

<sup>59</sup> Hector Pérez Martínez, *Cuauhtémoc: vida y muerte de una cultura* (Campeche, 1982), 261–3.

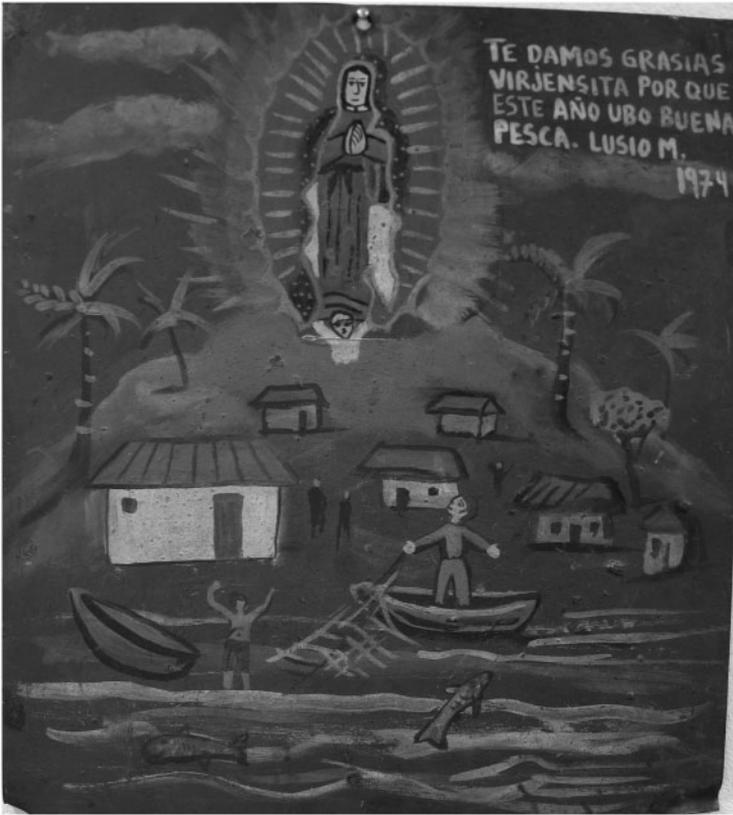


Fig. 2. 'We thank you little Virgin because this year there was good fishing. Lusio M. 1974'. Tin ex voto, La Lagunilla Market, Mexico City. Photograph courtesy of Paul Gillingham

commonly been invoked in twentieth-century land disputes) (Fig. 2). Yet as the colony receded into the past so forgers tended to eschew its symbols in favour of new classes of relic forgery, namely the nationalist and the scientific. Between c.850 and c.950 two social phenomena coincided in Latin America: the rise of modern nationalism and the rise of modern archaeology. The two were deeply interrelated. Some of the roots of archaeology in Latin America were exogenous, as the United States and Europe found in lost indigenous cities a focus for their own Rousseauian romanticism, and indulged it by commodifying the cultures and pasts of the Other. As the playwright Rodolfo Usigli put it to an American academic, 'You buy everything . . . the codices, the manuscripts, the incunabula, Mexico's archaeological

treasures; you'd buy Taxco, if you could only get it home'.<sup>60</sup> Yet archaeology also flourished for endogenous reasons: archaeologists provided many of the skeletons on which the flesh of a modern nation-state could hang. Ruins and artefacts bore witness to the antiquity and urbane sophistication of prehispanic culture, which lent Latin American nations legitimating identities. Bones—if they could just be found—would provide secular, nationalist relics to tie contemporary populations to would-be founding fathers. And when neither ruins, artefacts, nor bones were forthcoming, they could always be manufactured.

Before stratigraphy, before radiocarbon dating, before thermoluminescence or electron microscopy, before in fact the professionalization of archaeology or history, it was rather difficult to tell the difference between genuine and fake. A double illiteracy was at work: the long-term high incidence of quite literal illiteracy in Latin America, which strongly favoured fraud, and the more immediate cultural illiteracy of foreign consumers, which led them to buy into the systematic mass production of forged prehispanic artefacts.<sup>61</sup> The anthropologist Edward B. Tylor found the manufacture of sham antiquities to be 'a regular thing' in 1850s Mexico.<sup>62</sup> It was not just laymen, but also Tylor's colleagues who fuelled the business, falling victim 'so often . . . [to] money-making tricksters'.<sup>63</sup> Archaeological fraud became sufficiently widespread in the late nineteenth century that the 1878 world fair had a special section devoted to notable forgeries, while Mexico's National Museum dedicated an exhibit space to exposing fake prehispanic pottery, and the journal *Science* published articles warning of the vendors' sophistication.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the most far-reaching frauds of all, however, were those aimed at the domestic market: the nationalist relics.

Some of these cases matched classic instrumentalist models, and were the products of elites at the very top of the state, backed by the cultural managers of a complicit academy. Such was the case of the relics of Mexico's *niños héroes*, the child heroes: six cadets believed to have been the last defenders of Mexico City against the United States Army in 1847, who fought with

<sup>60</sup> Through characters in his *meisterwerk*, *El gesticulador*. Rodolfo Usigli, *El Gesticulador* (México DF, 1985), 44–5.

<sup>61</sup> Holmes, 'Spurious Mexican Antiquities', 170; Ignacio Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology* (London, 1980), 160–7.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Walsh, 'What is Real?', 2. Walsh dates the expansion of the fraudulent antiquities market to the immediate post-Independence period.

<sup>63</sup> L. P. Gratacap, 'An Archaeological Fraud', *Science*, 8 (5 Nov. 1886), 403–4.

<sup>64</sup> Batres, *Antigüedades Mejicanas Falsificadas*, 5, 2; Gratacap, 'An Archaeological Fraud'; Holmes, 'The Trade in Spurious Mexican Antiquities'.

bayonets when their ammunition ran out, and who died one by one, until the last remaining cadet wrapped himself in the flag and jumped from the castle walls to his death. The story is magnificent but questionable. Only three of the six cadets are documented as having been in Chapultepec Castle at the time. The gesture of suicide rather than surrendering the flag was attributed to various soldiers before settling on Juan Escutia, a cadet of whom we know nothing, whose passage through the Colegio Militar left no trace whatsoever. American reports of the battle record Major Seymour of the Ninth Regiment as capturing the Mexican flag. Finally, and perhaps most suggestively of all, the first commemorations of the war dead failed to mention the six cadets.<sup>65</sup> The story as every Mexican now knows it, a central plank in the strongly sacrificial metanarrative of Mexican nationalism, is a late nineteenth-century invention. Yet it was long a cult without relics. In 1944 a General claimed to know where they were buried, and within five days soldiers had dug up the necessary six skeletons in Chapultepec forest.<sup>66</sup> There was, however, a problem: the remains came from a mass grave, which contained bodies of the numerous dead from both sides. Positive identification of the cadets was out of the question: on request, however, the National Institute of Archaeology and History produced a report concluding that the skeletons were of young males and might be those of the *niños héroes*.<sup>67</sup> The Secretary of Education—backed by a group of undistinguished ‘official’ historians—then converted conditional to definitive and pronounced them the *niños héroes*. Proof positive in hand, the government made extensive use of the remains in commemorating the invasion’s centenary.<sup>68</sup>

Other nationalist relic forgeries are private initiatives, and non-elite private initiatives at that. Such was the case of Cuauhtémoc, the last Mexica emperor, whose tomb and relics were discovered in Ixcateopan, a remote village in Guerrero, in the late 1940s. This was a highly sophisticated three-part forgery, consisting of a tomb, concealed beneath the altar of the parish church; a legend, encoded in both colonial documents and contemporary diaries of the ‘living letter’, the villager who incarnated four centuries of secret memory; and an oral history, in which peasants reproduced signs to the tomb through rumours and customs such as the doffing of hats behind the church to salute

<sup>65</sup> E. Plasencia de la Parra, ‘Conmemoración de la hazaña épica de los niños héroes: su origen, desarrollo y simbolismos’, *Historia Mexicana*, 45 (1995), 247–50, 274; Ernesto Fritsche Aceves, ‘Los Niños Héroes o el olvido’, *Nexos*, 285 (2001), 78–80.

<sup>66</sup> Plasencia de la Parra, ‘Conmemoración de la hazaña épica de los niños héroes’, 264–7.

<sup>67</sup> *Excelsior*, 10 Sept. 1947.

<sup>68</sup> Author’s interview, Salvador Rueda, (México DF, Oct.1995); Plasencia de la Parra, ‘Conmemoración de la hazaña épica de los niños héroes’, 267–8.

the king hidden within. It was also, to the disbelief of scholars, the creation of the ‘living letter’ himself, an autodidact rancher named Florentino Juárez. Juárez was a self-made man, literate, politically powerful, and in local terms wealthy, who found himself on the losing end of village politics in the early 1890s. Out of favour with the regional elite, he watched as they removed over half of the municipality that his faction ruled; the half containing, moreover, many of his properties. Small-scale absentee landowners were often forced to sell up cheap or lose their lands at this time; so driven by reasons affective, political, and materialist, Juárez led a vigorous campaign against municipal amputation. He wrote letters to the regional warlord and the bishop; he petitioned the state congress; and he forged Cuauhtémoc’s tomb. It was a typical instance of instrumentalist nationalism in every way but one: the non-elite identity of its creator, who gave Mexicans who believed one of the greatest nationalist relics, and gave us a well documented case of grassroots instrumentalism.<sup>69</sup>

Our final category of relic forgery, the scientific, is a further product of the global commodification of culture and the spread of archaeology, in part to satisfy that demand. Scientific relic forgeries might be defined as those that materialize objects of pronounced charisma, rooted in a claim to radically reshape scientific understandings of the world. These may be subdivided by the ambition—of both input and outcome—that fuels their creation. Some are relatively modest. The Calaveras skull, for example, was a purportedly Pliocene skull, dug out of a Californian mine in 1866 and presented to J. D. Whitney, Professor of Geology at Harvard. Whitney used it to posit a wholly original interpretation of the descent of man, whereby homo sapiens had emerged first, and far earlier than hitherto suspected, in the Americas.<sup>70</sup> Other scientific relic forgeries are medium-range, raising teasing questions about established narratives without taking the risk of establishing categorical counter-narratives of their own. Such are the ‘Aztec crystal skulls’, life-size rock crystal skulls owned by the Smithsonian (Fig. 3), the British Museum and the French *Musée de l’homme*. Genuinely startling objects, they were

<sup>69</sup> Paul Gillingham, ‘The Emperor of Ixcateopan: Fraud, Nationalism and Memory in Modern Mexico’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 37 (2005), 561–84. Another study of grassroots instrumentalism is afforded by Claudio Lomnitz’s work on Tepotzlán; see, for example, Lomnitz, ‘Center, Periphery, and the Connections between Nationalism and Local Discourses of Distinction’ in Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico. An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis, 2001), 165–93.

<sup>70</sup> Ralph W. Dexter, ‘Historical Aspects of the Calaveras Skull Controversy’ in *American Antiquity*, 51 (1986), 365–9.



Fig. 3. 'Aztec' crystal skull, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. By permission of James DiLoreto, Smithsonian Institution

promoted as masterpieces of their culture, expressions of a technological ability beyond that of the twentieth century. (Which has proved fertile ground for a host of new age readings, ranging from the myth that the skulls, once reunited, will end the world, to the Indiana Jones story that they are the remnants of Prometheus-like aliens.)<sup>71</sup> In reality, Jane Walsh has convincingly posited a sophisticated, transnational, nineteenth-century origin. The rock crystal was Brazilian; the carvers German, from the declining lapidary centre of Idar-Oberstein; their salesman, the entrepreneurial Frenchman Eugène Boban.<sup>72</sup> The skulls constituted exemplary scientific relics. They were aesthetically powerful, they were worked from comparatively rare and valuable material, and they purported to recast quite fundamental opinions on the past, in this case the technological reach of indigenous societies.

<sup>71</sup> An idea promoted by, among others, one 'Illinois' Shapiro. Robert Todd Carroll, 'Crystal Skull' at <http://skeptdic.com/crystalskull.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Having traced the skulls to Boban, the self-described 'antiquarian to the Emperor Maximilian', Walsh suggests this origin on the basis of Boban's reported claim that the skulls were German, and the efforts of Idar-Oberstein's carvers to stay afloat at the time by importing rock crystal from Brazil. Walsh, 'Crystal Skulls and Other Problems', 116–39.

The Aztec crystal skulls were not however the most messianic of scientific relic forgeries. At least two cases posit that man and dinosaur co-existed, disproving Darwin and the long chronology in favour of either divine or alien genesis, and consequently star on websites with names like 'creationresource.org', 'bibleandscience.com' or 'forbiddenarchaeology.com'. The first is the set of clay figurines collected by German émigré Waldemar Julsrud in Guanajuato, Mexico, in the 1940s. A huge collection of these—over 30,000—were sold to Julsrud by a family who claimed to have dug them up in a genuine Tarascan ruin. The figurines are not, however, classically Tarascan. They represent instead Brontosaurus, Tyrannosaurus Rex, and other well known Mesozoic reptiles, interspersed with the odd Egyptian sarcophagus. Their message is clear: dinosaurs and (all sorts of) humans coexisted, throwing either archaeological or paleontological dating out of court.<sup>73</sup> The second, similarly themed fraud is that of the Ica stones: similarly anachronistic etchings, jumbling spaceships, kangaroos, dinosaurs, and Indians, on andesite rocks from the desert town of Ica in Peru. As in Acambaro, the site proved extraordinarily generous, yielding more than 15,000 of the stones between the 1960s and the early 1990s. Their collector, Dr. Javier Cabrera, interpreted them as the record of an extraterrestrial occupation of Earth, by the so-called Gliptolithic Man, who coexisted with the great reptiles and genetically engineered before jetting off from the nearby Nazca Lines spaceport.<sup>74</sup> Both of these scientific relic forgeries drew heavily on popular culture to challenge the elite consensus; both have done well in the age of the internet; both are eloquent of a substantial divide between academy and public, or of the predictable antagonism that Nora describes between the 'sacred context' of memory and the 'prose' of history.<sup>75</sup>

Why do people go to so much trouble to forge relics? It is difficult, as Michael Coe observes, to quantify systematically just how lucrative archaeological fraud actually was. Documents are confined to the odd gem such as the Robert Woods Bliss letters; annotated auction catalogues are comparatively rare before 1960, and even known auction prices must be treated with care due to mechanisms such as secret reserves. Isolated cases, though, give some idea of the incentives which brought forgers into production in such large numbers.<sup>76</sup> At the high end of the market Walsh has traced French dealer

<sup>73</sup> Charles C. Di Peso, 'The Clay Figurines of Acambaro, Guanajuato, Mexico', *American Antiquity*, 18:4 (Apr. 1953), 388–9.

<sup>74</sup> For more, see Javier Cabrera Darquea, *The Message of the Engraved Stones of Ica* (Ica, 2000).

<sup>75</sup> Nora, *Rethinking France*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Coe, 'From Huaquero to Connoisseur', 288; Jones, 'Why Fakes?', 13.

Eugène Boban's repeated attempts to sell rock crystal skulls in Mexico, France, and New York. One crops up first—billed as 'a masterpiece of lapidary art', explicitly not included among the pre-Colombians—in a sales catalogue Boban published in 1881, where it is valued at 3,500 francs. The glass skull he attempted to pass off on Mexico's national museum in 1886 (in cahoots with Batres) was priced at \$3,000; the crystal skull he managed to sell to Tiffany's of New York, which ended up in the British Museum, went for \$950.<sup>77</sup> The Wari Forger, a restorer of Andean pottery with a profitable sideline in fakes, sold a single ceremonial urn to an American collector in 1943 for \$5,000.<sup>78</sup> These were relatively large sums for their time. On the periphery, however, prices were low. William Henry Holmes of the Smithsonian found elaborate 'modern-antique' black pottery vases going at five dollars apiece at the railway station in Teotihuacán (Fig. 4).<sup>79</sup> In nearby Atzacaputzalco Scottish prospector and antiquities dealer William Niven was hoaxed by villagers who created, buried, and then dug up clay tablets, relics which he read as the remains of a forgotten culture (later popularized by Colonel Churchward as 'the Lost Continent of Mu'); a labour-intensive way of earning diggers' salaries.<sup>80</sup> Waldemar Julsrud in Acambaro only paid a peso for each figurine.<sup>81</sup> Brígido Lara, a brilliant modern forger of Totonac and Maya pottery, rarely made much more than a thousand pesos for his pieces, which his dealers sold on for tens of thousands of dollars, and which Sotheby's passed as authentic.<sup>82</sup> Forgers did not, generally, realize huge profits: why did they bother?

In cash-poor peripheral economies, however, even the promise of regular salaried employment can be significant, and a little cash will consequently buy a lot of fraud. The five dollars that Holmes was asked for his gaudily worked vase was the equivalent of some twenty days of a miner's wages, or a month's

<sup>77</sup> Walsh, 'Crystal Skulls and Other Problems', 124–9.

<sup>78</sup> Alan R. Sawyer, 'The Falsification of Ancient Peruvian Slip-decorated Ceramics' in Elizabeth H. Boone (ed.), *Falsifications and Misreconstructions of Pre-Columbian Art* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 27.

<sup>79</sup> Holmes, 'The Trade in Spurious Mexican Antiquities', 171. Forged black pottery from the Chimú and Inca periods has recently grown plentiful in Peru. Robert Sonin, 'The Art Historian's Dilemma: With Remarks Upon the State of Art Falsification in the Central and North Andean Regions' in Boone (ed.), *Falsifications and Misreconstructions*, 3.

<sup>80</sup> Robert S. Wicks and Roland H. Harrison, *Buried Cities, Forgotten Gods: William Niven's Life of Discovery and Revolution in Mexico and the American Southwest* (Lubbock, 1999), 213–25, 237–40.

<sup>81</sup> Di Peso, 'The Clay Figurines of Acambaro, Guanajuato, Mexico', 389.

<sup>82</sup> Minerva Vacio, 'De falsificadores y reproductores: Brígido Lara, Inventor del nuevo arte prehispánico', *Arqueología Mexicana*, IV (1996), 56–61.



**EXAMPLE OF MODERN-ANTIQUÉ MEXICAN VASE (HEIGHT, 11 IN.).**

Fig. 4. 'Aztec' black pottery vase purchased by William Henry Holmes in Teotihuacán in the 1880s. Reprinted by permission of the American Association for the Advancement of Science from *Science*, 7:159 (19 Feb. 1886)

pay for a domestic servant, or up to a ton or so of maize.<sup>83</sup> Niven paid five pesos on his first contact with the people of Atzacaputzalco, to be shown 'the real source' of their terracotta finds; this was the equivalent of twenty days' wages for a field labourer at the time; and for years thereafter he gave the villagers rents for their fields and cash salaries, otherwise unobtainable, for their men. Julsrud may have paid over 30,000 pesos to the father and son who forged the Acambaro relics in the early 1940s. Mexican GDP per capita at the time was only 8,000 pesos, and this was moreover a sideline for the family of forgers, occupying the long winter days when their fields lay idle.<sup>84</sup> Forgers' price strategies need evaluating, in short, in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) rather than through the relatively low gains they made in metropolitan currencies, or by comparison to the large margins made by dealers.

Relic producers could, moreover, compensate for low margins with high volumes. Lara's earnings per fraud were comparatively low, but he turned them out in industrial quantities: some 3,000 Totonac sculptures and pots, at least 500 Olmec works, hundreds of Maya pieces.<sup>85</sup> Holmes estimated that his vendors shifted at least one piece per day, which for all their (possibly tactical) appearance of poverty would have placed them among the wealthiest of contemporary villagers.<sup>86</sup> The Ica stones have attained the ultimate expression of global commodification, internet sales of reproductions at \$75 each.<sup>87</sup> In Latin America, where economies traditionally relied on commodity extraction and export, forged relics have consequently constituted very successful commodities. There is sometimes little else to sell. Ica lies in the Atacama Desert, its people heirs to centuries of deforestation, one of its main modern industries consisting in further deforestation to produce black-market charcoal.<sup>88</sup> Rocky slopes and a remote location make Ixcateopan one of the poorest municipalities in one of the poorest states in Mexico.<sup>89</sup> Such places always had paltry natural resources, losing tickets in the commodity lottery. It was the genius of some of their inhabitants to realize that history, too, can be a

<sup>83</sup> González y González, *El indio en la era liberal*, 408, 412; *Periódico Oficial del Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero*, XVII:64 (30 Sept. 1893).

<sup>84</sup> In 1940. INEGI, *Estadísticas históricas de México* CD-ROM (México DF, 2000); Di Peso, 'The Clay Figurines of Acambaro, Guanajuato, Mexico', 388.

<sup>85</sup> Vacio, 'Brígido Lara', 58.

<sup>86</sup> Holmes, 'The Trade in Spurious Mexican Antiquities', 171.

<sup>87</sup> At [www.mtblanco.com](http://www.mtblanco.com), where staff are 'Digging up the facts of God's Creation: One fossil at a time'.

<sup>88</sup> Simon Romero, 'Ecosystem in Peru is Losing a Key Ally', *The New York Times* (7 Nov. 2009).

<sup>89</sup> Moisés T. de la Peña, *Guerrero Económico*, 2 vols (México DF, 1949), II: 612–14.

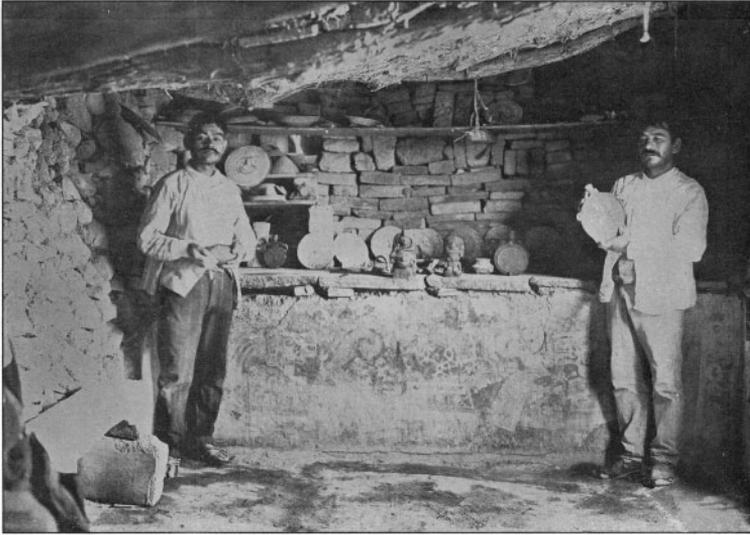


Fig. 5. The Barrios brothers' display moulds for forged prehispanic pottery in their Teotihuacán workshop: Leopoldo Batres, *Antigüedades Mejicanas Falsificadas: Falsificación y Falsificadores* (Mexico City, 1910). By permission of the Randall Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina, Wilmington

natural resource; and, using that realization, to try and turn economic peripheries into symbolic centres.<sup>90</sup>

To do that these producers needed consumers, which raises a final question: why do people buy, in both literal and metaphorical terms, forged relics? There are three principal reasons. Forged relics are, to be sure, not advertised as such, although many consumers must have suspicions that they manage to quiet long enough to consume. Yet as Geary notes, dubious provenances often act counter-intuitively to help construct relics' value. Saints' relics too precious to obtain without theft and its corollary, clandestine dealing, were among the most sought-after medieval relics: a relic 'once stolen (or said to be stolen) was valuable because it had been worth stealing'.<sup>91</sup> Similar rationales add value to nationalist and scientific relics. Latin American states began to legislate export controls on artefacts from the late nineteenth century onwards, and consequently relics of evident high value—whether rarity or intrinsic—could often only be obtained by questionable means.

<sup>90</sup> For more on this idea and its limits see Arjun Appadurai, 'The Past as a Scarce Resource', *Man*, 16 (1981), 201–19.

<sup>91</sup> Geary, 'Sacred Commodities', 187.

Prominent dealers such as John Wise might return from Panama with a Veraguas gold eagle under their shirts. The Olmec jade mask in the American Museum of Natural History was smuggled out of Mexico under an eminent Harvard archaeologist's coat.<sup>92</sup> The self-fulfilling, closed logic of conspiracy theory, meanwhile, empowers scientific relics such as the Ica stones precisely on the grounds of the massed opposition of 'official' scholars. Such tautological reasoning only facilitates the forgers' work.

Second, consumers initially enter the market for relics, forged or authentic, in great part because of the power they lend their possessors. As we have seen, religious relics combined magical and very material power, attracting pilgrim donations, legitimizing communities, their lands, and their political sway. Monarchic relics, whether crowns or royal grants, lent owners second-hand divine right, with all the controls over humans and resources this implied. Nationalist and scientific relics could be sold directly in both domestic and increasingly global markets, or could prove profitable in more roundabout ways. The intense social practices that surround all classes of relics allowed owners to readily convert the symbolic capital of ownership into a wide range of economic and political rents. The Ica and Acambaro forgeries have both underpinned the creation of local museums, run, in at least one case, by the initial collector's family; the Rodríguez Juárez family, 'owners' of Cuauhtémoc's bones, asked the government to return their ancestral home, collected funds in the last emperor's name, pitched their story as a radio drama and installed several generations in local political office.<sup>93</sup> Closer to home, it takes no great imagination to hypothesize the benefits beyond aesthetic pleasure that prehispanic relics afford wealthy collectors, who in lending them to museums also extend lucrative business or political networks. To revert to Bourdieu's useful schema, relics offer both very concentrated and surprisingly liquid symbolic capital.

The final reason that people buy forged relics lies in the intricate relationship that links producers and consumers. Coe has described the social networks that conveyed archaeological frauds, alongside authentic artefacts, out of Latin America between the First World War and the 1960s. At their base were the diggers; these passed their finds on to 'runners', who traded to 'residents', long-term, often foreign, city-dwellers with legitimizing alternative careers; internationally mobile dealers then passed the objects to the dealers and museums who were the relics' end-users.<sup>94</sup> These are the links of a typical commodity chain, along which information and influence flows

<sup>92</sup> Coe, 'From Huaquero to Connoisseur', 284, 288.

<sup>93</sup> Gillingham, *Cuauhtémoc's Bones*, ch. 8.

<sup>94</sup> Coe, 'From Huaquero to Connoisseur', 273–7.

in both directions. Forgers produced a blend of what their history permitted and what the market demanded, and their market research influenced their creations in three areas. First, the design of the objects forged often followed prevailing Western tastes and interests, and was fine-tuned by the feedback of art books, dealer opinions and even peer-reviewed journals.<sup>95</sup> Second, the materials chosen—at the top end of the market—were those offering the greatest intrinsic appeal, such as gold, silver, jade, or rock crystal; those most likely to elevate a forgery, such as the fake gold pendant of the emperor Tizoc, to uncontested ‘relichood’, its possessor to the first rank of entrepreneurial aesthetes.<sup>96</sup> Third, the provenance stories of forgeries tended to combine realism with high romance—artefacts were often ‘discovered’ in the course of standard rural activities, such as ploughing or well-digging.<sup>97</sup> The consumer, in the end, was caught in an effective pincer movement. If an object fitted well with an established corpus of authentic relics, then its authenticity was easily assumed. And if it did not, if it seemed exceptional, then its rarity value could only increase its desirability as a unique masterpiece.

Forgery is a universal human pursuit, relatively commonplace even in scholarland. The renowned archaeologist Shinichi Fujimura salted his digs with stoneware to argue for sophisticated ceramic-producing cultures in the far Japanese past.<sup>98</sup> Professor Reiner Protsch von Zieten’s discovery of a missing link between humans and Neanderthals proved to be his very own, Germanic, Piltown Man.<sup>99</sup> In Latin America, though, relic forgery has been particularly widespread. Three of Mexico’s central symbols of national identity, namely the last Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the *niños héroes*, have fake relics as their central signifiers. This is in part due to the democratic nature of Latin American relic forgery, as much a popular pursuit as it has ever been an elite enterprise. Many relics, from saints’ skins to alien portraits, have been created by ‘grassroots instrumentalists’—ranchers, peasants, itinerant mining speculators, indigenous communities, and backstreet antiquity vendors—who by inventing the material remains of the past also co-authored its narrative.

<sup>95</sup> Esther Pasztory, cited in Jane Walsh, ‘What is Real? A new Look at PreColumbian Mesoamerican Collections’ in *Anthronotes*, 26 (Spring, 2005), 6; Frederick Peterson, ‘Faces That Are Really False’ *Natural History* (Apr. 1953), 176–80.

<sup>96</sup> Walsh, ‘What is Real?’ 7, 17–18.

<sup>97</sup> Holmes, ‘The Trade in Spurious Mexican Antiquities’, 171.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Archaeologist Exposed as Fraud’, *BBC News Online* (5 Nov. 2000).

<sup>99</sup> Luke Harding, ‘History of Modern Man Unravels as German Scholar is Exposed as Fraud’, *The Guardian* (19 Feb. 2005).

Grassroots instrumentalists, like their elite counterparts, were quick to appreciate the tactical and economic possibilities of religious devotion or the prehispanic past, whose symbolic capital was readily convertible into economic capital. Some, like their elite counterparts, also held affective motives for their work.<sup>100</sup> It is impossible to believe otherwise in considering the life of Pedro de Bohorques, who led his Andean constituency in rebellion against Spain; or Florentino Juárez's lovingly faked Cuauhtémoc myth, with its emotive prose; or Brígido Lara's career, which took him from fraudulent genius to conservator of the prehispanic objects he clearly loved.<sup>101</sup> Yet primordialist interpretations of relic forgery can only be taken so far. While it clearly helps to have a taste for the work, it is extremely difficult to find materially disinterested relic fraud in Latin America. Of the cases we have surveyed, the Calaveras fraud is the only one with no evident pay-off; the entire creation was the practical joke of miners who disliked the aloof Professor Whitney.<sup>102</sup> It is all too easy, on the other hand, to trace the economic significance of these forgeries. Materializing memory by fraud was good, if strange, business; and as case studies from the Andes and Mexico demonstrate, it was a business open to entrepreneurs of all classes. The recent wave of forgeries discovered in leading museum collections evinces such entrepreneurs' lasting success.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Just as medieval relic promoters could hold genuine beliefs in their power at the same time as they tactically constructed their value. Geary, 'Sacred Commodities', 181.

<sup>101</sup> Miller, 'The Fake Inca of Tucumán', 202–6; Silvio Zavala, 'Dictamen acerca de los hallazgos de Ichcateopan', *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Antropológicos*, II (1950), 258–91; Vacio, 'De falsificadores y reproductores'.

<sup>102</sup> And without ethnographic detail, it is difficult to say that the ringleader of the jokers did not gain significant prestige, with all its associated benefits. Dexter, 'The Calaveras Skull Controversy', 365–9.

<sup>103</sup> Walsh, 'What is Real?'