

Baptist to the bone

By [R. Wayne Stacy](#)

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A reliquary (stone box containing sacred relics) was discovered back in 2010 on the Black Sea island of Sveti Ivan (which means "St. John") off the coast of Bulgaria. Inside were eight pieces of bone, including pieces of a skull, face, and a tooth. Because there is a monastery on the island which claims John the Baptist as its patron saint, the excavation leader, Kazimir Popkonstantinov, suggests that the bones might belong to the Baptist. The possibility is strengthened, he suggests, by the fact that found alongside the reliquary was a small sandstone box with a Greek inscription that said, "God, save your servant Thomas. To St. John. June 24." June 24 is the date celebrated by Christians as the birthday of John the Baptist, and the inscription suggests that a pilgrim had come to the monastery to seek the Baptist's blessing in the place where, he believed, John's bones resided. Alternatively, Thomas may have been the patron who built the monastery and, as an act of sanctification, donated the bones of John the Baptist to the monastery as a sacral gift.

The claim to authenticity was enhanced this week when a researcher from Oxford University subjected one of the bones (a knucklebone) to radiocarbon dating. Thomas Higham's findings, published this week ([click](#) to read the story), added credibility to the claim that these bones belonged to the Baptizer: "We got some dates that were very interesting indeed," Higham said. "They suggest that the human bone is all from the same person, it's from a male, and it has a very high likelihood of an origin in the Near East."

There is, in fact, a long history of "cult of relics" in which relics, including the alleged bones of saints, were collected and kept in sacred locations - sometimes in religious centers such as Rome or Constantinople (if you've been to Istanbul, modern Constantinople, you've no doubt seen the humerus on display at the Topkapi alleging to be John the Baptist's), and sometimes at the sites associated with the saint. Of course, it's impossible finally to vindicate these claims by modern evidentiary standards. As Popkonstantinov put it: "As far as I know there is no database with DNA profiles of the saints." All we can get are probabilities.

Nonetheless, because these associations are generally quite early, some as early as the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, one cannot simply dismiss them as without historical value. While ancients were unencumbered by our notions of empirical evidence, they nonetheless established their own “chain of evidence” of sorts in that they erected shrines or houses of worship or monasteries or other religious structures at holy sites. The fact that these structures came to be associated so early with the person or event thereby honored or remembered constitutes physical evidence of a sort for the claim. “Of all the places they could have chosen, they chose *this one*,” goes the reasoning. Hence, it is probable (and when it comes to historical evidence, “probability” is the best we can ever do) that the associations are not without some merit.

The bigger issue at stake is whether, and to what degree, faith requires evidence or proof to validate it. Generally, the “group think” on this subject is both binary and polar, if not polarizing. Some say that because Christianity is a historical religion making historical claims, then if it can be shown that any one of those claims is fraudulent, Christianity is in ruins. Others go to the other extreme and suggest that not only does faith not need evidence or proof to validate it, but the search for evidence and proof is itself counterproductive, the work of an unbeliever. Thinking, goes the reasoning, is itself an act of unbelief. This kind of mindless believing is usually taken aback to discover that it was none other than Rudolf Bultmann who was its chief proponent. He was alleged to have said: “Were they to find the bones of Jesus, my faith would be wholly unaffected.”

But faith and reason need not be enemies. It is only human to want some physical, tactile connection with the object of one’s faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, made this very point when, writing to his parents to thank them for a package of cookies and sweets they had sent him in Tegel, he wrote: *However certain I am of the spiritual bond between all of you and myself, the spirit always seems to want some visible token of this union of love and remembrance, and then material things become the vehicles of spiritual realities. I suppose it is rather like the need felt in all religions for sacraments.*

While archaeology and historical research cannot and will not convince the skeptic, that fact in and of itself does not invalidate the effort. Moreover, it was Christ himself who enjoined us to love God *with our minds*, and not just our hearts. To be sure, proof and evidence can only take us so far down the road of faith. And it seems to be true that for him who will believe, final proof is unnecessary; but for him who will not

believe, final proof is never final. But the distance between the believing heart and the doubting mind need not be as great as some suspect...or fear.

Of course, if they'd found a heated baptistery and a pair of waders....

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