

# Stealing the Limelight: Theft of Saintly Relics and Mythbreaking with Patrick Geary

Interview with Patrick Geary

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Born in Louisiana, and educated for a time in Mobile Alabama, Patrick J. Geary went north to receive his PhD in Medieval Studies at Yale in 1974. Today, he is professor of Western Medieval History at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. Yes, the place where Einstein worked! As if that is not enough, he's a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at UCLA. His important works include *Furta Sacra* (Princeton, 1978), *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford, 1988), and *The Myth of Nations* (Princeton, 2002). Is there something else you're not telling us, Patrick? Well, it's no secret at our own Department of Medieval Studies that Patrick has played an important role here, too. For over twenty years, he has been coming to CEU as an external reader for the MA Thesis defenses. He was supporting the Department of Medieval Studies when the university was still in his infancy and continues to visit Budapest every May. As Chris Mielke had been using this professor's very influential sourcebook, *Readings in Medieval History*, in classes as a starting graduate student, long before he completed his PhD at CEU, you can imagine how excited he was to have the opportunity to interview Patrick. It was surprising for him to hear that not only was the famous scholar coming to visit in 2013, but he happened to be a familiar face at the department!

Patrick's visits to Budapest are frequently short so this interview ended up being recorded over Skype. We were impressed with not only his incredible mind but also his courtesy and eagerness to help younger academics. It was difficult for our interviewer to narrow down his questions to only three particular topics related to Patrick's wide intellectual expanse, and all that under an hour! But especially interesting

was his work on the thefts of holy relics. All grad students have their academic heroes, and despite being a little starstruck, Chris remembers this as a truly great interview. Moreover, since Patrick is a regular at the Department of Medieval Studies, maybe another interview could be in the works at some point in the future!

## **Theft of Saints' Relics in the Middle Ages**

CM: There's so much for us to talk about because your research spans such a wide field of interest, but one of the things that I wanted to lead up the discussion with is your work on *furta sacra*, which is about the theft of saints' relics in the Middle Ages. Would you mind starting off telling us a little about how and why the relics of saints get stolen in the Middle Ages?

PG: Well, this is a project that I did many, many years ago and although I've moved to other topics, it keeps coming back. It seems to fascinate people. I began this because I wanted to understand how people interacted with the sacred in their ordinary lives and one of the most important objects in medieval society (and not only medieval society) are the remains of saints. I thought that by looking at the cult of relics and the cult of saints' bodies I could better understand how people integrated them into their world. I thought that by looking at unusual relations with these objects, specifically thefts, it would allow me to ask questions about how people understood these objects that you would not normally encounter if you were simply looking at the ordinary veneration of saints. People were worried about these thefts, so they wrote about them and tried to justify what they were doing, or they tried to explain these things. And as I began this, I found that there were dozens, probably hundreds of cases in the Middle Ages in which people at least claimed to have relics of saints that had been stolen from other Christian churches. This seems very odd to us today and it seemed somewhat questionable to people in the Middle Ages, but as I studied this, I found that churches that had bodies of saints that they claimed to have stolen were actually very proud of the fact. Actually, they had not been stolen, but they wanted to pretend that they had been stolen or to claim that they had been stolen. I found this a fascinating insight into how specific Christian communities understood their relation to the sacred but also their relationship to other

Christian churches. That they would go to other churches and literally steal the bodies of their patrons and bring them home. So, this was the topic that I began to study, and as I did, I saw that many of these steps had never taken place. But a kind of literary tradition, a way of writing about how a saint ended up in a certain church was to say that once upon a time, many years ago, there was an apparition of a saint to a holy monk in our church who complained that he was no longer being properly venerated someplace else and therefore he wanted to be removed to a church where he would get greater veneration. The monastery then sent a monk or someone to find this saint and after various adventures they find the relic and are able to escape with it, return to their own community (often protected miraculously by the saint) and the saint enters the community. So, these are the stories that I began to uncover and there are quite a few of them that developed between the ninth and the eleventh and the twelfth centuries.

CM: The most amazing thing about it is the fact that it makes sense if the saint is appearing to someone and saying, “Hey, your neighbors aren't doing what they are supposed to do” – if the saint appears to members of the community and tells them to do it, then the rhetoric in the chronicles, I think, sends a very strong message.

PG: It becomes a justification. In some cases, the saints are in a territory that has been devastated by war. In some stories they are taken from countries that had been conquered by Islam. St. Mark, who had been stolen from Alexandria to Venice – there's still a Christian cult there, but they sneak the body out of Alexandria and bring it to Venice.<sup>26</sup> St. Nicholas in Myra, he is stolen by Italian merchants who bring him back to Italy.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes the story is that the church has been abandoned or

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<sup>26</sup> St. Mark was a first-century evangelist to whom the authorship of the shortest and likely earliest canonical gospel, the Gospel of Mark is widely ascribed. His remains are still kept in Venice's St. Mark's Basilica, a very popular attraction with tourists, along with many other treasures and relics looted over the centuries. The theft of the body from Alexandria by two Venetian merchants occurred in 828.

<sup>27</sup> St. Nicholas (270-343) was bishop of Myra. Legends regarding him formed the basic inspiration behind our beloved Santa Claus. In his own lifetime, he was a participant in the Council of Nicaea and gradually gained a reputation as a renowned

destroyed, or at least is not giving the saint the veneration that he or she deserves so the saint decides to move. So, the story becomes less of a theft than of a saint wishing to move and finding human agency to move to a better place. It's also a way of explaining the presence of a renowned saint in some fairly obscure location without having to say, "We bought it," which is often the case because there are relic merchants who travel around Europe selling what they claim are relics. If you say that you bought a saint's body, one can be very suspicious. But if you say that you sent a monk there, he stole it, he was pursued by the community, and through the miraculous intervention of the saint he got away with it, well, that sounds much better.

CM: One of the characters in the *Canterbury Tales* (I think it's the Pardoner)...One of the things that Chaucer jokes about him is that he had phials of pig's blood and bones of pigs that he was passing off as relics.

PG: "Pygges bones" he's selling. So, how do you know that these are real relics? How does one ever know that a relic is real? Whether it's a human remain or an animal remain and whether that human was a saint? So, what is attached to it is a story that becomes self-authenticating – that this is the saint, this is how it came to this community and in some cases, we have different stories. In some cases, there's a story that the relic was a gift then later on they say, "No, it wasn't a gift. It was a theft," because if it was a gift, then the receiver is in the debt of the giver. There is a hierarchical relationship established between the source and the place that the saint ends up. This is often the cases with the Roman relics. The popes have a very careful strategy of sharing relics of Roman martyrs with other churches to tie those churches to Rome. But if, as is a number of times the case, someone says, "Oh, we stole this saint from Rome. We were not given this saint by the pope," this is an independent relationship between the saint and the Church rather than a sign of dependence of the Church on Rome providing these relics as part of papal politics.

CM: The Byzantine emperor was also another key figure in terms of relics that came to Western Europe as gifts. After the Fourth Crusade in 1204,

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worker of miracles. His assumed remains were absconded to Bari in 1087.

there's this famous quote of a dowager empress of Byzantium, saying that the Byzantine court was in such a poor state that the only thing that they had left to sell in order to raise money were these relics.

PG: Well, in fact, after 1204 there is a massive, massive theft and distribution of saints' relics organized very systematically by the Latin Crusaders who conquered the city. As the Byzantines would later say, the Muslims would have been less cruel than the Latins. They pillaged the churches and there is an enormous number of relics that have been brought back. And this has something to do with the absolute failure of Latin Christendom to see Eastern Christendom as part of the same community, the same faithful society – that they are legitimate victims of plunder. The relics of Constantinople, which had been acquired by emperors for generations going back to the time of Constantine, are divided up as spoils of the conquest and then sent back to the churches of Western Europe.

CM: I think it goes back to that comment that you made earlier how the saints would appear to the abbots in these stories and say that, “The church who has me isn't worshipping me properly,” and I think that really reinforces that notion of what you just said on the complete lack of recognition on the part of the Venetians and others in the Fourth Crusade when Constantinople gets pillaged.

PG: Yes, it's a sense of complete lack of respect for the Eastern Christian community that this would be simply normal procedures. Spoils of war, taking of property in wartime which is seen as largely legitimate right into the nineteenth century (and by many beyond), is extended in the Middle Ages to sacred objects. Napoleon confiscated the Treasury of San Marco in Venice and took it back to France. Some of it was lost and destroyed but ultimately much of it was returned to Venice. I don't think that he was particularly interested in the relics, but I do think that he was interested in the gold and silver reliquaries that he was acquiring. Of course, the Venetians had stolen many of these themselves from Constantinople so one might say that this is continuing what the Venetians did... Although, by the early nineteenth century there was much objection to this and ultimately after the Congress of Vienna, they required the return of manuscripts stolen by the French.

CM: I think one of my favorite stories is the one of Hugh of Lincoln biting off the finger of Mary Magdalene and smuggling it from France back to England in his mouth.<sup>28</sup>



French reliquary of a finger bone, 15<sup>th</sup> century  
(Walters Art Museum, Baltimore).  
(Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>)

PG: Yes, actually there are a couple of stories of that sort, and this is the individual who has devotion to a saint, he is left alone with the saint and, to him, this possibility of acquiring a particle, a piece, of the saint which

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<sup>28</sup> Hugh of Lincoln was later canonized in 1220, twenty years after his death.

is a tangible continuation of the saint's presence in the world after her death is so important that any other issues of propriety or justice disappear. The saint is a person – and he has a relationship with that person – and he is going to take that person or part of that person with him home and he just doesn't care how he's getting it. We should not assume that everybody would consider this fine. Certainly, the people who have the body are not too enthusiastic about this. Churches have guards. They put up physical barriers to access the relics, but there's always the tension that if you have the saint's relic in a reliquary or in a sarcophagus that can't be seen, then the faithful might wonder whether it's really there. So, you have to make it visible at certain times and in certain ways but that's also making it vulnerable through this kind of operation. So, you have the individual devotee like Hugh. You have an institution where the cult of the saint develops and that develops. They have a desire to have the saint physically present and it may simply be a legend that “Oh, well here he is. How did he get there? He was stolen” – or they may actually send someone off to try and do the deed.

CM: For the pilgrims or the people visiting, some of the reliquaries that you see in various museums, you often see that there are these windows made of rock crystal or early glass and the reliquary is protecting the object. But also the people passing by would be able to see a very small sort of portion of it as proof that it's there. I do have a question out of ignorance. We've been talking a lot about the thefts of the bodies of saints – is it just body parts that are stolen in this period from the ninth to twelfth centuries or do we also see other aspects of them that are stolen, like clothing or holy objects related to them that aren't necessary parts of the body?

PG: What we primarily hear about in these accounts (which become stereotypical literary accounts) is the theft of bodies. But what the body *is* is very obscure. Sometimes the text will make it sound like it's an intact body. It may be just dust. It may be bits of bone like the tooth. It may be a finger. But certainly, there are other sacred objects which are stolen and circulated. We have this going on in the Fourth Crusade when precious liturgical vessels find their way to the West and thus there are a number of churches that claim that they have the Holy Grail. These are presumably liturgical cups, chalices and the like, or maybe even not

liturgical objects that find their way to the West, and legends edifying them as sacred objects form around them. There are a number of church inventories which signal the presence for objects which are then associated with saints or even with Christ.

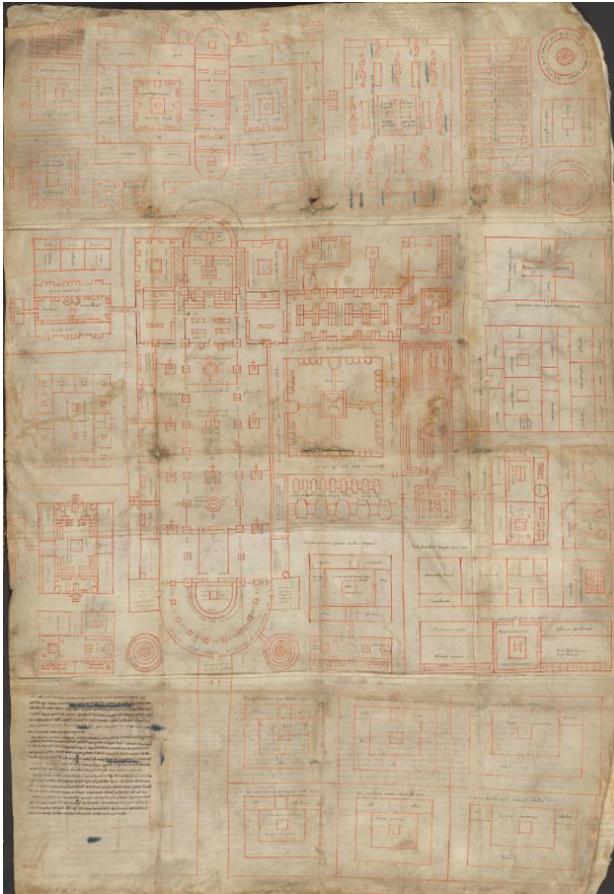
## The Monastery of Saint Gall

CM: Moving on from the theft of relics, I wanted to talk a little bit more about your involvement in the Saint Gall Monastery. Now I'm not as familiar with this project so would you mind telling us a little about your involvement in it?

PG: Absolutely. Saint Gall was one of the important ninth-century monasteries in *Allemania*. It is remarkable – not that it was the richest monastery or the most brilliant monastery in the ninth century – but it is remarkable in that its library and its archives have survived virtually 100% from its time of foundation in the eighth century right throughout history.

So, the books and the charters are all extant so it's a very remarkable institution. The monastery itself was secularized. It no longer exists. The churches from the Middle Ages were all gone, replaced by Baroque churches, but what survives are the library, its archives, and a most extraordinary object which is the so called "Plan of Saint Gall," a very large sheet of parchment – actually five pieces of parchment sewn together which present in elaborate detail the two-dimensional plan of a monastery. Everything from the monastery church, the refectory, the dormitories for the monks, the novitiate, the abbot's house, down to the toilets that would be attached to the different buildings, the chicken coop, the duck coop, the stalls for animals, the workshops – it's a complete image of a monastery from the early ninth century. A really extraordinary object, completely unique, that has fascinated scholars for decades. We know from the inscription on the document that it was repaired at one time at the monastery of Reichenau which is on an island in Lake Constance (the Bodensee), and it was prepared for the monastery of Saint Gall which was being rebuilt at the time. So, some had thought, "This is a blueprint; this is a plan of the monastery exactly how it should be built." Some have thought that this is the result of Carolingian centralization, that this was a plan drawn up under Carolingian imperial

authority, i.e. this is how to make a monastery, and this should be sent out to anyone doing a monastery, revision or founding a new monastery, and this is the official plan of monasteries. It has been the object of study for centuries with people trying to create three-dimensional models of the Plan of Saint Gall; an extraordinary attempt to figure out exactly what this would have looked like as though it were actually the monastery.



The plan of St. Gall, Anon., *Codex Sangallensis*, 9<sup>th</sup> century  
(Stiftsbibliothek Sankt Gallen), fol. 1092r.  
(Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>)

So, this has fascinated people for a very long time and I originally had the idea: “Wouldn't it be wonderful using modern computer technology to create a virtual reality model of the monastery?” This was the original plan, but we very quickly realized that the Plan of Saint Gall is a very extraordinary object, but it is not a blueprint. We do not have thicknesses of walls, we do not have elevations, we do not have building materials. The possibility of creating imaginatively a reconstruction of this is simply not possible based on the plan itself. Moreover, we perhaps shouldn't even talk about reconstruction because there's no evidence that this monastery ever existed as drawn. In fact, there are two drawings. There was an early drawing that was erased and another of the church with another, a different one, imposed on top. And then gradually the other portions were added. So, this may be seen more as a meditation on an ideal monastery, presented at the time the abbot was going to be rebuilding the monastery, drawn by people on Reichenau, but not really a plan to do it. And in terms of its organization, there were sixty-four buildings. They're put together in a rectangle, but this is not actually how they would have been spread out around their actual geographic location. So, what we decided to do was to create a database on this land that would allow one to explore the material culture of Carolingian monasticism. So, with funding from the Andrew Mellon Foundation in the United States, a team of scholars that I organized spent several years creating an extraordinarily detailed photograph of the map that allows you to look at the map in greater detail than you could with your own eyes. You can see every pinprick, every line, every erasure, every dot as well as copying all of the inscriptions on it, all of the *tituli* on the manuscript. And so, one can study this manuscript in a way that has never been possible. Then we created a series of other databases on the material culture of Carolingian monasticism. The vocabulary of materiality, images of objects from Saint Gall and other monasteries as well that then relate to the plan. All the models that have been attempted to be created of the plan in the past that appear as three-dimensional images in our website – this is <http://www.stgallplan.org>. Over a number of years, we created this very detailed tool for researching Carolingian monastic history including how the plan was created without saying “this was the monastery” or trying to rebuild it. So that was Phase One of what we were doing, and I can talk more about the second phase if you would like, but you might have questions about this.

CM: The plan of Saint Gall is the foundation for building this website and for the research. It sounded like you said that this is something that would be useful in terms of comparing the material culture of Carolingian monasteries. If, for instance, I was interested in researching toilets of the monasteries in this time period, would I be able to go to this website and immediately start accessing information on the subject from there?

PG: Absolutely. You could examine the schematic drawings of all the toilets of the monastery. We also have related architectural and archaeological material from other sites where we can. We don't have the archaeological material from Saint Gall. There was one dig done many years ago and never published and there's currently an archaeological dig going on at Saint Gall, but the results of that dig have not been made public. But you can look at other sites where this has been done. We have photographs and material from published sources that you could then use to correlate what's going on at Saint Gall. You could also look at Latin sources from the ninth century that talk about material culture, agricultural objects and so forth, that appear in contemporary texts as well as in the plan itself. It's a jumping off point for all kinds of research into Carolingian monasteries. And then there is a database for plans and a basic bibliography for all the other Carolingian churches in the German-speaking world. We hope eventually to be able to add those from Italy and those from France as well.

CM: Being able to compare this data is really of utmost importance, especially if you're interested in researching an area on the fringes where things might have been different for practical reasons. Things might have been changed or turned around, and you could have access to this. Regarding the second phase of the research, my training is as a historian and archaeologist, so I have to ask – will publishing the archaeological results be part of Phase Two of this plan or is that something completely different?

PG: Unfortunately, we have no direct connection with the archaeological material. The first – the only – excavation inside the church was done many, many years ago by a Swiss archaeologist. My understanding is that under Swiss law he has control of that material. To my knowledge, there is only one brief article that he has ever published from that. The current

dig is going on not in the church but outside and that may be uncovering ninth-century structures and there is some hope that we might see that there is indeed some relationship to the structures that we see in the plan. But that's a project which is being done very carefully and very scientifically. When they do have results, we would certainly like to link anything that they have done to our site, but for the time being we really have no real knowledge of what has been found. Of course, you can't have a comprehensive dig of the whole area. It's very built up with the Baroque church and the successor buildings of the monastery, so unfortunately, we will never be able to see if the chicken coops were where they were supposed to be or if the brewery was at the site that the plan suggests and so forth. Phase One, as I said, was an examination of material culture – the architecture, the building materials, the glass products, the materiality of monastic life. But then we said that the monastery which produced this document is Reichenau; it's for Saint Gall. We should try to understand the mental environment within which this plan was created. The way to do that would be to re-constitute the library from Reichenau and the library from Saint Gall in order to allow one to see the mental horizons of the monks who produced this plan and the monks who received it.

For Saint Gall this is fairly easy to do because, as I said, perhaps 90% of the manuscripts are still right there in the Abbey Library. There is an excellent project being done in Switzerland to digitize, ultimately, all Swiss medieval manuscripts. This project is digitizing, among other monasteries and institutions in Switzerland, the manuscripts of Saint Gall. Reichenau is a mess. Reichenau was secularized in the early nineteenth century (if not eighteenth century). The manuscripts have been scattered all over the world, so we decided to find as many ninth-century manuscripts based on the catalogs that we have of what was in the library in Reichenau in the ninth century and reconstitute those online so that one can, in a sense, go to the library of Reichenau and pull the books off the shelf and look at them. Again, with funding from the Mellon foundation, we subventioned the work of the team doing the Saint Gall manuscripts so that they could digitize the Carolingian manuscript. We then went to Karlsruhe, where most of the Reichenau manuscripts are, but also to Stuttgart, to Vienna, to Paris, to Naples, around Europe where the Reichenau manuscripts are. We then re-analyze the content in order to provide metadata on each manuscript so

if you go to our website, you can look up a Saint Gall or Reichenau manuscript – you can either search by content, by author, or by shelf number. You can look at the manuscripts in extreme detail again. Using a technology called Zoomify, you can look from the most detailed point of hair follicles in the parchment or move back to an entire page. And we have the metadata, so not simply going on old eighteenth- and nineteenth-century catalogues, checking exactly what is in each manuscript with codicological information and bibliography on the document, on the text contained in the manuscript. So, result in Phase Two has been to create the mental world of ninth-century monasticism and to provide these two libraries, virtually intact, so that you can see what text these monks did have in the ninth century; what was their mental horizon in terms of literate culture in Reichenau and in Saint Gall.

CM: That sounds fantastic – and it sounds like a lot of work as well!

### **DNA Analysis, Medieval Studies, and the Myth of Nations<sup>29</sup>**

CM: Furthering the conversation on the sort of research in which you've been involved, I want to talk a little bit about the ongoing work you're doing on Migration and DNA analysis. Could you tell us a little about what DNA studies can tell us about the Middle Ages?

PG: For the last twenty years or so, there has been a lot of interest in the so-called “Migration Period,” the period that in German is called the *Völkerwanderung*,<sup>30</sup> in French it's called *Les invasions barbares*.<sup>31</sup> There are a lot of questions about what were these migrations. Were these migrations, were they invasions, were there really significant population

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<sup>29</sup> Many of the questions raised in the interview below have been answered in Geary's article in *Nature Communications*, which can be accessed here: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-018-06024-4#Ack1>

<sup>30</sup> The “Wandering of the Peoples” as it was known to German scholars who lent the historical episode a slightly softer tone than their French colleagues.

<sup>31</sup> This is “The Barbarian Invasions” that was also the more popular term in English-speaking literature until recent decades when there has been a pull in academic settings to describe it in less value-judgement-laden terms. At the same time, it does have to be acknowledged that the migrations were not always peaceful.

changes at the end of Antiquity, and what did that have to do with the end of the Roman Empire and the creation of new polities in Europe? Did the barbarians destroy Rome? Were there barbarians that actually had a significant demographic impact on Western Europe? And this is a question that has been discussed really for over 200 years. Our sources are limited to very sparse, largely literary, often polemical texts that don't give us a very clear idea of what went on and also archaeological material which is very rich, but very ambiguous. We can see in the texts descriptions that these people invaded or that such and such people were at such and such place.

But what is a “people”? Is this really just an army? Are these barbarian auxiliaries used in internal civil wars or are these large populations of men, women and children moving into the empire, either in quest of better lives or fleeing their enemies? Archaeology shows cultural change. It shows certain kinds of material culture that appear in different parts of Europe. It shows different funerary customs, building traditions, but it's a proxy for population movements. Cultures can move without large population movements, culture can move by imitation, it can move by trade, it can move by changes of style. So, this is a controversial issue that continues to be debated with inadequate sources. And the one source that people are increasingly turning to is genetics, because we all carry within us the history of all of our ancestors, all the way back before humans. Recently a variety of historians have been saying, “Look, we look at written sources, we look at material sources, we have to look at genomic sources as well to try to see if this can give us a better view, or at least a different view of population changes in the Migration Period.” Now some of this is very dangerous. Some of this goes toward a kind of centralizing that borders on racism and unfortunately there are modern politicians in Europe and elsewhere who are too eager to think that they can use genetics to find out who really is a descendant of these people and who is not. This is bad science and bad history.

Properly used, I think it is possible to analyze genetic data to give us some more information. So, I have created a project that involves archaeologists, geneticists and historians in the United States, in Italy, in Hungary, in the Czech Republic, in Austria, in Germany. And we are trying to develop techniques to look at the DNA of the Migration Period populations in order to get an idea from that material of what these populations looked like before and after their putative migrations. We're

doing this in a test case because this has never really been done before using ancient DNA; that is, DNA from cemeteries. We are taking as our test case the *Longobardi*, the Lombards, who according to written sources appear around 500 in what is today Moravia, essentially. By the 520s-540s, we are then told they are in the area of Budapest and then Vienna (the Danube Bend). Then according to literary sources, in 568 King Audoin takes all of his people – men, women and children – and they invade Italy, conquer Italy and establish the Lombard kingdom. So, we have a story from texts about origins and then movement. We have taken 800 samples from cemeteries in Italy, from Hungary, in the Czech Republic and in Austria of persons who, by their archaeological profiles, appear to be what archaeologists label as Lombards, as well as samples of people who, by their archaeological profile, are roughly contemporaneous (fifth or sixth century) but not Lombards. Are they Gepids,<sup>32</sup> are they Romans, are they something else? We don't really know.

We also don't know that the Lombards would have considered themselves as Lombards. That's just an archaeological category based on material culture. What we're in the process of doing is taking these 800 samples from Italy and from Pannonia and sequencing them. We've done a preliminary sequencing of the mitochondria in a sub-set of these – now that is in the genetics that one inherits from one's mother, so it gives you one line going back through history of mother to mother to mother. And this is what has traditionally been done in ancient DNA studies because there is a lot of copies of the mitochondrial DNA in every cell. But that only gives you one line. Just as if you look at the Y-chromosome, which is inherited from the father, you simply know father, father, father, father, father all the way back. It's like trying to read one page out of a 500-page book and write a book review. What we're trying to do now using a special advanced technique called “next generation sequencing” is to take a look at the nuclear DNA. That's the DNA that recombines in the process of reproduction, so you get a very, very rich sense of these people. What we're going to try to do with this next generation sequencing of the nuclear DNA is look at different types of sites in the

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<sup>32</sup> The Gepids were an East Germanic Tribe based in the eastern Carpathian Basin that was conquered by the Huns, becoming part of their expanding confederacy in the fourth century.

genome with tens of thousands of data points that give us a very fine, textured image of these individuals that we can then compare with others. So, within a cemetery, we should be able to tell if people are as closely related as second cousins. Who are they? What is the relationship of the people who are in this cemetery? Are these people more closely related if they're buried as Lombards in Italy? Are they more closely related to people who are in the cemeteries from Pannonia than they are to the cemeteries in non- Lombards in Italy? Or in Pannonia, are the Lombards more closely related to those buried people who we would classify as Gepid or Late Roman or Germanic? So, what do these population groups look like? Are the men and women drawn from different communities? Often in a migration you have men who migrate and then they find women wherever they are going. Is that what goes on here or do they really move men and women together, these closed population groups?



Reliquary casket of Saint Eldrade (Parish church of Novalesa, Italy).  
(Photo by James Steakley, source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>)

These are the types of questions that we are trying to answer through this DNA analysis that will let us get, at least in this first case of the Lombards, a sense of what these populations are, the relationship to their regions of origin, the relationship to the region of today, and give us a sense of whether the people who are buried in these Italian tombs are so-called Lombards. Are they genetically the same as the other Italians, but they have become Lombards, possibly under the influence of military success of the Lombards, or are these really people who have migrated? Are the women daughters of local Italians or are these women whose mothers and fathers came from Pannonia? These are the kinds of questions we are trying to do in this very international, very complicated process. And then we compare our results with those produced by isotopic analysis that can give us information about where people may have come from as well as historical analysis. So, it's an integrated, interdisciplinary project of physical anthropology, genetics and history.

CM: I wanted to ask you about the isotopes in a bit, but I think we should really emphasize that it's only been rather recently that academics have really started to question the relationship between the material culture that you find in the cemetery and the “people” involved. Because some of the earlier literature, if you look at someone who has, let's say, a fibula of the Avar people in the Carpathian Basin, it was commonly assumed that if someone was buried with an Avar type of brooch, that then they were probably an Avar. I think recently there has been a lot of questioning over this relationship – over the type of material culture that people have – even dragging it out further the type of material culture that people are buried with considering that burials don't necessarily represent an everyday costume for what people were wearing.

PG: That is certainly true. A burial represents not what the dead, but rather what the living wanted to represent. So, you're not getting a passport of an individual when you dig up his or her tomb. You're getting an image about what the survivors wanted; how they wanted this person to be represented. The materials that you find in the tomb, as you say, traditionally were interpreted as Lombard. How do you know it's Lombard? Because the texts say the Lombards were here, so what you find here must be Lombard. That's problematic – there's no clear relationship between these two. What made a Lombard a Lombard? Why

a Lombard felt that he was a Lombard may not be represented in the material culture. The material culture may simply say, "I'm a warrior" or "I'm a wealthy person." There may not be a way to express their ethnic or even their political allegiance. It's often assumed that rich burials were wealthy people, but now we're saying that, well, maybe for people between eighteen and thirty, you get the richest burials for men and women; younger and older people have less in the tomb. Well that's problematic because people wanted to establish clear hierarchies.

There's all sorts of problems with the material culture, which should not be discounted, but it has to be juxtaposed with other kinds of evidence, and one kind of evidence will be genetic evidence, just as you say isotopic evidence. Strontium isotopes are very useful for looking at indigenous and exotic persons. Did the persons that live and die in the place with the same strontium profile in the water and the soil as in his teeth? You may not know where they come from, but you can say "this person did not come from here," or "they probably did come from here." That's one way of looking at migration and there you can say, "Do the women's strontium profile parallel that of the men, or is it different?" With genetics we can simply add another layer and say, "These people seem to form a fairly tight cluster genetically, these are outliers." And then we correlate that with other kinds of characteristics to see if we can build a multi-dimensional picture.

CM: The strontium is also very important in terms of the age of the people involved because one's strontium profile is made when one is an adolescent, so around eighteen to twenty it stops in my understanding. So, if someone is in the process of moving after they've become an adult, or someone uproots themselves earlier in their life, it's interesting to see how that can be affected by that.

PG: Precisely. That is one of the very interesting things to say, "Did these people come of age in this place? Or did they come of age someplace else because the strontium is laid down in childhood and then it is pretty much fixed?" But we don't have good, fine-grain maps of strontium across Europe, so we could say, "Ah, this person probably came from here, there, or the other place." We just don't know that. But when one does a detailed study of a cemetery, taking samples of the flora, the fauna, the water, the soil of the site, one can at least build an image there. The

same can be said with our genetics – we can't do everything, and this is an extremely expensive process. And we frankly don't have the hundreds of thousands of Euros yet to do the full-scale study, but what we're hoping to be able to do is to begin a database which, like our Saint Gall project which is completely public and free to anyone, we will create a database of our cemeteries, of our 800 individuals, and there will be other projects that are also looking at migration. Our hope is that people will be able to use our data, to link their data to it and to make comparisons, and it can grow like a wiki as different teams can turn to our database and add to it and, perhaps someday, we might have a very interesting, fine-grain genetic map of Europe during the Migration Period. That's sort of the long-term hope.

CM: For the last concluding segment we have here, I want to ask you to say a little bit about your work, “The Myth of Nations.”

PG: Well, that is a book that I wrote for a general audience. It's not the typical scholarly monograph that's written for a small circle of professionals. I wrote it because after many years of contact in Central Europe and Western Europe, I was increasingly concerned by the kind of ideological uses of the Middle Ages that seemed to be growing since 1989. As a medieval historian, I was rather disturbed to see the period that I deal with (which is the Early Middle Ages) suddenly becoming a political football, a political issue within certain kinds of nationalist discourses as European nations re-emerged from the Soviet umbrella, and as Western European nations began to realize the problems that migration, particularly from North Africa and the Middle East were generating in their societies. And over and over, this recalled the Middle Ages in ways that I found bizarre.

I wrote this book to talk about how, from a medieval perspective, these identities, while very real, of peoples, the very real identities of peoples that were also constructed and changed and malleable so that people could maintain the same terminology. But the context would change, people would disappear, other peoples would change who they were or what it meant to be who they were in very complex ways which seemed to be denied by a lot of national movements in our present world. I wrote this book as a plea to understand medieval history in a more creative way. This is a problem that develops from the nineteenth

century, from the birth of nationalism in the aftermath of the French Revolution. It develops initially as a romantic movement and is not initially terribly political. It becomes politicized in some ways. It leads to the horrors of the National Socialist period and then it disappears for over a generation. Now we see the whispers of this coming again. The book has been praised and criticized. It's been translated into I think thirteen languages or so. The response has been from very laudatory to being called "Neo-Bolshevik" in a review of the Albanian translation. I don't know if that's a compliment or an insult. I tend to think they didn't mean it as a compliment. It has created some interesting discussions about the relationship between the past and the present. The difference between the past and the present, but also the importance of the past in the present without simply being a model for being what the present and future should be.

CM: Whenever I get asked why on Earth I am studying the Middle Ages, the answer is usually, "Because it's still very important."

PG: It's very important, obviously in Central Europe, it's very important in Hungary because, as humans we think historically. This is how we understand who we are in terms of our past, but too often we simply construct that past to fit our present needs. So medieval history is really a battleground in portions of Europe today. Professional historians and educated people simply have to take and learn to take a critical stance *vis-à-vis* what they hear in popular media about the past and how the past hinges in some way on the present and the future.

CM: Unfortunately, it's time for the show to end, but this is something that I think we could go on and on for hours talking about. For now, I will have to say thank you very much for joining us today, Professor Geary! It's been a real pleasure having you as a guest on here.

PG: Thank you! Thank you for giving me the opportunity and maybe we can continue this another time?

CM: Oh, I would love that, thank you very much!