

Review: Paul Koudounaris, *Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures and Spectacular Saints From the Catacombs*, Thames and Hudson, London, UK, 2013 (2015 edn.)

Pages: 189

Counter-Reformation Corpses

The author makes many insightful points on the reason for these abominations being raised up and put on display “for the faithful”. In first place was the need to establish an unbroken chain between the early church under Roman persecution up to the Counter-Reformation. Such a link could then be used to justify heretical teachings of the mass, indulgences, works-based salvation, etc. as taught by Rome.

The sad side is the number of people (mainly Germans) who were duped out of their gold and silver for unidentifiable dead bones. Also, the irony some were likely true Christian martyrs of the Catholic Church itself under Emperor Constantine, who would be horrified to know where their bones ended up.

Rome established the Sacred Congregation of Rites and Ceremonies in 1588, and the papal Swiss Guard became especially invested in the trade. All skeletons were accompanied by official Church documents, yet only about ten per cent are thought to be authentic.

Pope Damasus I (366-384) claimed martyr bones were identifiable by a 'supernatural glow'!

Introduction: Blessed Bones (pp. 11-21)

Catholic doctrine of venerating the remains of saints is said to ensure their assistance.

All skeletons were taken over the Alps to Germany from Italy in the 17th and 18th centuries. These were all from the second to fifth centuries AD.

Papier mache masks were often made to cover skulls.

A *Lieberfest* is the “Celebration of the Bodies”, or the *Katakombenheiligen*.

I) Holy Bodies: Relics and the Roman Catacombs (pp. 23-55)

On 31 May, 1578 on Rome’s Via Salaria, a hollow was found which led into the Cemetery of the Jordanians.

Celsus in the second century asked: “what sort of human soul is it that has any use for the rotted corpse of a human body?”

Eunapius of Sardis was perplexed as to why Christians in Egypt collected bones and skulls and “made them out to be gods.”

In the fourth century AD, a Carthaginian noblewoman Lucilla obtained a relic skull which she would kiss before the Eucharist. She supported one Donatus Magnus who led the Donatist Schism.

Augustine accused relic dealers of engaging in fraud and being inspired by Satan.

In Cologne during the fourth century, St Ursula and 11,000 virgins were martyred.

Luther said relics were “a completely unnecessary and useless thing”, also that they were the bones of dogs and horses. John Calvin said it was a form of idolatry.

The German Peasant’s War was 1524-26 and the Schmalkadic War 1546-47.

The Reformation left relics in short supply in many key areas for Rome.

Catacombs means “sunken valley”. Estimated burials in Roman catacombs are between 500,000 and 750,000.

A 1907 Switzerland study counted over 150 full skeletons, plus 1,000 smaller fragmentary bones.

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“Translation” is the term for moving a relic.

In the fifth century, relics were moved above ground as protection from Gothic invaders. In the eighth century, Lombard invaders plundered the catacombs and they fell into oblivion.

A capital “M” could have represented “Martyr”, “Marcus”, “Maximus”, “Memoria”, “Mensis”, or “Manis”.

“Sang” (sanguis) was also used on grace plaques.

Popular name choices for ‘saints’ were Felix (happiness), Clemens (clemency), Constantius, Deodatus (“God-given”), and Maximus (greatness).

A relic finding was an *inventum*. Only about ten per cent are thought to be authentic.

II) The Church Triumphant (pp. 57-101)

Relics were translated for over two hundred years. Bones were placed in a wooden box called a *capsula*.

If merchants offered a good price they were engaged in the translation even if they were heretics.

An *illation* (“carrying in”) could last for a year before translation.

Bones were initially strengthened with animal glue coating and wax.

A 17thC budget from St Matthews of Dormettingen shows 898 guilders (~3.2kg of gold) were paid for saint Clemens.

The traditional symbol of martyrdom was a palm frond.

The most poorly-attended translation ceremonies still attracted 1,000s, and hundreds of kilos of gunpowder were used in ceremonial salvos.

III) Communal Property (pp. 103-138)

It was common practice in Germany to baptise the first child in honour of a new Katakombenheilingen.

Churches would begin keeping a “miracle book” after a completed translation. and manipulation was a common belief by the bones, such as St Donatus in the Jesuit Bad Munstereifel church.

IV) The Mighty Will Fall: The End of the Reign of the Catacomb Saints (pp. 139-192)

Bavaria was the most highly concentrated area of *Katakombenheiligen*.