

Bling Out Your Dead

By: THL Beatrice de Winter

This class will discuss the bejeweled skeletons also known as the Catacomb Saints.

- I. Introduction – The Rise and Fall of the Catacomb Saints
- II. Relationships between the living and the dead
 - a. Dead venerated by other religions, not unusual
 - i. Egyptians: Mummies – not out in public; hidden
 - ii. Ancient Rome: Paternalia – one day festival during February (the month of the dead) in which the heads of households pay homage to deceased relatives by traveling to the cemetery and setting up an alter
 - b. Christian fetishizing the bones of the dead (i.e. worshiping them for their supposed magical powers), becomes vital to the religion
 - i. Bones required for resurrection during the second coming of Christ
 - ii. Relics and their healing powers – story of Polycarp
- III. Re-energizing Catholicism
 - a. Protestant reformation – 1517: A response to Catholicism
 - i. Sanctity of relics not based in scripture and authenticity of relics suspect – force prayer to God, not relics
 - ii. Remove superstition from religion
 - b. Counterreformation – 1545: A Response to the Protestants
 - i. Discovery of Roman Catacombs May 31, 1578
 - ii. Battleground Protestant states:
 1. Germany
 2. Austria
 3. Switzerland
- IV. Construction of Catacomb Saints
 - a. Authentication of the Saints – Who are they really?
 - i. M – martyr, S – sang (blood)
 - ii. Vessels with dried bits of “blood”
 - b. Rebaptism – required for appeal to laity
 - i. After virtues
 - ii. After actual well-loved saints
 - iii. Vanity names
 - c. Transportation, Confirmation, Presentation
 - i. Wrapping, seals, transportation agents
 - ii. “Illation” – “carrying in”: private reception and confirmation of bones by receiving church; miracle book established

- iii. Decoration – mostly by nuns
 - 1. Start as raw bones
 - 2. Add beading, wirework, use animal glue with fabric wrapped on bones
 - 3. “Jewels” were sometimes real, sometimes glass, depending on need for homogeneous sizes
 - 4. Devotion the goal, not anatomy – some adjustments were incorrect
 - iv. “Translation” – public ceremony for relic to be presented for veneration
- V. Examples of Catacomb Saints
- a. St. Pancratius – urinary incontinence
 - b. St. Leontius – Most potent: the healing skeleton. Can heal anything, including bringing babies back to life for baptism
 - c. St. Felix – saved the town market from a fire
- VI. Rejection of the Catacomb Saints - secularization
- a. Joseph II – Emperor Austria/Hungary (1782): Declared all relics w/non-verifiable providence must be destroyed
 - b. Napoleon – Emperor Germany (1803): Bartered church lands in Germany; Liquidate all valuables left in churches after they were secularized
 - c. Jewels/valuables sold, bones thrown away; people followed weeping
 - d. Some hidden, some vandalized, some sold to private collections

Works Cited

Bartlett, Robert. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Koudounaris, Paul. *Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures and Spectacular Saints from the Catacombs.* New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013.

All images below by Dr. Paul Koudounaris and reproduced with permission:



St. Leontius



St. Pancratius



St. Felix