

## JEWELS & BONES

'The world desperately needs to delete magical thinking. We need people to think clearly, critically, rationally to solve human problems. We don't need the distraction of overcoming superstition and – frankly – religious nonsense.'

– David Madison, 'Holy Relics, Batman!'

### 1. Heavenly Bodies

'There's not much difference between going on pilgrimage and doing black magic. They're just two ways of doing the same thing. In the first you say I am going to attain the Supreme. In the second you say I am going to exorcise the ghost. If you find God, the ghost disappears. If the ghost disappears, you find God.'

– Geetanjali Shree, *The Empty Space*

It is the first time these photos have appeared in print. As I discovered more about them I had the feeling that it was my duty to tell their fascinating story. Skeletons often fetch high prices, especially if renamed as saints.

They are morbid reminders of an embarrassing past and many were stripped of venerable status before being sold to Catholic churches and religious houses to replace tangible relics destroyed in the Protestant Reformation.

What is certain is that bits of saints have been canonised; hands, teeth and other body parts dug up and installed on orders from the Vatican. Nothing but jewels and bones for the world's most secretive religious establishment.

Many incorruptible bodies are hidden away in lock-ups and containers in obscure towns and forgotten archives, gruesome remains holding churches to ransom. None of them qualified as recipients of divine intervention.

### 2. Hard-Wired Veneration

'For centuries, some Christians have venerated the bodies and possessions of saints, but more often than not, there's no way to tell whether something is St. Peter's skull or a really old potato.'

– Rick Paulas, 'The Weird and Fraudulent World of Catholic Relics'

Prestigious relics in complex containers,  
pious memorials before which the faithful  
feel strongly touched.

The healing power

of physical remains the focus of this holy site;  
the objects themselves cannot be glimpsed.

Desired artefacts crossed political borders:  
long distance travel between hard thinking  
mystics and God, abundant evidence of  
afterlife and resurrection, grace remaining  
in the martyr.

Conceptual boundaries  
between faith and disbelief, hard-wired  
veneration, imposes meaning upon the sacred.

The journeys made by medieval men  
a tangible distance.

Inestimable treasure  
more than mementoes: hallowed bones  
in remarkable forms. Dust and idiot bliss.

### 3. Men Steal Saint's Remains

'Venice, Italy – Two armed men forced their way  
into a Venice church Saturday night, broke a  
glass coffin and stole the remains of the third  
century martyr St. Lucy, authorities said.

As they were stuffing the body in a sack, the  
head fell off and they left it on the floor,  
police said.'

– UPI news archives for 8 Nov, 1981

Even though incorruptibility  
does not automatically confer  
sainthood upon the subject,  
it can be properly appreciated  
as a tangible memorial rather  
than a holy scheduling quirk.

How many incorruptible saints  
are there? Divine intervention  
held many churches to ransom,  
bodies were hauled out of the  
catacombs at the mere suggestion  
someone might be a martyr.

Whether mummified flesh or  
nothing but bone, articles of faith  
suggest incorruptibility is more  
like a favourable, if fading, sign

from God than eternal reward.  
It is all based on the premise

that association and proximity  
allow people to get closer to God.  
A unique method of radiocarbon  
dating has yielded diagnostic  
evidence as proof, discovered  
even older sanctified *remains*.

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is *saints still* matter; hands, teeth  
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