

BOOK REVIEW

Bedazzled Saints: Catacomb Relics in Early Modern Bavaria

By **Noria K. Litaker**. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2023. Pp. 300. Cloth \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0813949949.

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Visitors to the numerous Baroque churches in Bavaria have a good chance of seeing the subjects of Noria K. Litaker's monograph *Bedazzled Saints*—the “holy bodies” of finely clothed and richly bejeweled Roman martyr saints. While modern people probably would shudder or at least feel alienated at the sight of the lavishly decorated skeletons, the veneration of these holy bodies was most familiar to the early modern faithful and a vibrant part of religious life in Post-Reformation Bavaria. Based on a broad range of archival sources and published prints, the study analyses the acquisition, transfer, distribution, and display of relics from the Roman catacombs to the Electorate of Bavaria during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The author's main interest lies in investigating “the negotiated nature of early modern sanctity—and confessional identity more broadly—in the period after the Thirty Years' War” (2).

The book is framed by two main arguments. Firstly, the early modern cult of relics was not merely a Counter-Reformation reaction to the attacks expressed by Protestants of all denominations but rather formed a core element of Baroque Catholicism and allowed for “an affirmative expression of Catholic identity” (4). Secondly, the strenuous effort of acquiring, reconstructing, and staging catacomb relics was a complex process that involved ecclesiastical and secular authorities as well as individual actors, religious orders, and parish communities. The book thus pays tribute to recent developments in religious history and material culture research by recognizing both the authoritative control of confessionalization and the active participation of the local populace in the making of Catholic culture and identity. By actively shaping their faith in various manners early modern believers tried to find their place in the universal Catholic church. In contrast to older folkloristic literature on the subject, which often focused on individual sanctuaries, the present study adopts a broad geographical and chronological approach by examining the translation of relics across Bavaria over a period of two centuries. A table in the appendix provides a concise overview of the Roman catacomb saints translated to Bavaria from 1590 to 1803.

A well-organized tripartite arrangement with two chapters in each section gives the book a clear structure. The first two chapters explore the motivation of diverse protagonists to procure relics from the Roman catacombs and to create entire “holy bodies” from the bulk of bones that arrived in Bavarian towns and villages. In the first wave of relic translation Duke Wilhelm V and his successor Maximilian I were mainly concerned with turning Bavaria into a *terra sancta*, a territory full of holy places and a stronghold against Protestantism. However, confessional polemics soon yielded numerous initiatives to obtain whole bodies of early Christian martyrs for cloister and parish churches and to arrange new forms of display. The painstaking endeavor to obtain sought-after relics was mainly driven by the strong belief in the power of certain saints to intercede on behalf of the believer for

health or protection. Reassembling the scattered bones into a lifelike body, decorating it with cloister work (*Klosterarbeit*), and clothing it in textiles was a time and labor-consuming process.

The third and fourth chapters focus on how whole-body saints materially embodied the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation and how they enabled the faithful to take part in confessional debates about the early Christian history of Catholicism. In the wake of the Reformation, the liturgical understanding of the Eucharist had become a confessional marker. Catholics held onto the belief that wine and bread turned into the blood and body of Christ through liturgy. It was precisely this understanding that was made visible and understandable to the congregation by means of staging and decorating whole-body relics. Often placed atop or within a side altar and holding vessels filled with their blood, the martyr saints paralleled the sacrificial death of Christ. By dressing Roman saints with legionary garbs and attributes such as palm leaves, laurel wreaths, or small terracotta vessels, early modern Bavarians took part in the paleo-Christian movement far away from a “scholarly milieu” (125).

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the solemn introduction and local appropriation of saintly strangers from Rome, who quickly became new heavenly fellow citizens for an earthly community. A splendid festival culture accompanying the relic translation included a set of performative elements that brought the saints to life. Welcoming processions, religious services, plays, ephemeral architecture, and actors who embodied the saints integrated them into the local communities and made them familiar to the population. However, the solemn introduction of the relics was only the beginning of a close relationship between the new saint and the local parishes where “devotional microclimates” (149) quickly developed. A decisive factor for their localized veneration was the mode of display. Often lying in glass shrines or in showcases with painted shrine covers Roman martyrs acted as human role models, heavenly guardians, and powerful intercessors. The book is rounded off with an epilogue in which the author gives an outlook on catacomb saints in the modern era and their remains today.

Through her sophisticated analysis of Roman catacomb saints in the former Electorate of Bavaria Noria K. Litaker convincingly demonstrates that the shaping of early modern Catholic faith was a highly creative process that involved a range of different actors and local communities. It is a strong argument for the polycentric functioning of the Roman church between universalism and particularism, between rigid doctrines and the active participation of the faithful as well as the relevance of material culture for the religious experience. There are occasional inaccuracies in the correct naming of the Bavarian territory or rulers, which the author sometimes refers to as “duchy” or “ducal” even after 1623 (e.g. 26, 34, 51). These minor errors, however, are easy to overlook in view of the rich source material processed with in-depth expertise and the persuasive analysis. Litaker’s monograph is an important contribution to recent interdisciplinary research on religious material culture, early modern Catholicism, and devotional practices in the early modern period. The pleasant read is recommended not only for specialists in the field of research but also for advanced students and doctoral candidates as well as for a wider audience interested in the history of Catholicism in Bavaria that can still be experienced today.