



St. Augustine's Bones: A Microhistory (Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book)

Harold Samuel Stone

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In 1695, workers in Pavia, Italy, chanced upon a collection of bones in the crypt of the Cathedral of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro. The workers later testified that they had seen the name of St Augustine written in charcoal on the surface of the casket they had uncovered. Yet by the time of the official inquest, all traces of the writing had disappeared. Offering insights into urban literacy and conceptions of reading, this text explores the controversy that ensued over the alleged discovery of Augustine's bones. Manuscripts, broadsides, pamphlets - even whole books - were devoted to proving or disproving the authenticity of the remains. Although these works were addressed to members of the clergy, they were also intended for the general reading public in Pavia, Milan and Venice. Their dissemination helped create a temporary public sphere in which the merits of the case were examined in a spirit of free debate. A re-examination of the dispute over St Augustine's bones illuminates aspects of Catholic spirituality in Northern Italy during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. It also reveals the different ways in which Catholic scholars, local religious leaders, and the papal administration sought to influence and direct local popular religious belief and practices. Although the controversy was officially resolved by the papacy in 1728, the debate over the relics of San Pietro continued into the 20th century. By combining methods developed in the burgeoning field of the history of the book with the tools of cultural analysis, Harold Stone not only recovers the stories surrounding St Augustine's bones, but also reconstructs the mental world of those who read or heard them.

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