

Spatial and Semantic Translations of Human Remains (Bern, 16–17 Apr 27)

University of Bern, Institute of Art History, Apr 16–17, 2027

Deadline: Jul 31, 2026

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Spatial and Semantic Translations of Human Remains in the Early Modern World (1550–1800).

Are the deceased truly dead? Across different religious traditions, human remains have served—and continue to serve—as bearers or mediators of living energies. Especially revered deceased individuals could continue to act within the world of the living as ancestors or saints.

The conference, organized by the SNSF research project "Global Bones: Entangled Histories, Transfers, and Translations in the Early Modern Age" explores the religious and cultural meanings and functions of human remains in various early modern contexts. Particular attention is given to regions in which different traditions of engaging with the dead encountered one another.

Past relic scholarship has demonstrated that the bones of Christian saints and martyrs often acquired increased significance through their translation. Indeed, with the global expansion of Christian missions during the Counter-Reformation, these human remains attained an unprecedented degree of mobility. Almost simultaneously with the rediscovery of the Roman catacombs in 1578, larger collections of bodily relics—and later even entire corpses—began to be transferred to extra-European territories. These relics served to establish new altars and, more broadly, to christianize supposedly 'new' territories. In this process, the Christian cult of relics came into contact with other traditions of handling human remains and venerating ancestors. Such encounters at times resulted in violent conflicts, appropriations, and the destruction of revered remains, but they also generated other forms of negotiation, translations, and adaptations, as well as processes of mutual knowledge production and the emergence of new traditions.

The conference focuses on spatial and semantic processes of translation and exchange surrounding bodily relics in the early modern period. The term "translation" is deliberately understood in a double sense: on the one hand as the physical transfer and relocation of human remains, and on the other as process of cultural, religious, and semantic reinterpretation. We invite contributions and case studies from different regions of the world addressing both Christian and non-Christian contexts, as well as comparative and transregional perspectives on such encounters. Our central questions can be outlined through three thematic clusters and related lines of inquiry:

1. What constitutes a relic?

How do human remains become venerated relics in the first place? What status and functions do

the bones of ancestors hold in different cultural contexts? How is this status communicated and stabilized through practices and mediating forms such as reliquaries, processions, burial sites, images, and texts?

2. Did the meaning of human remains change through transfer into different cultural contexts?

How and for what reasons were bones appropriated and transported? From the perspective of different actors, what happened to the value and meaning of human remains when they were transferred into new places and contexts? Which intentional and unintentional processes of translation accompanied such transfers? Were the dead themselves perceived as active agents within such transfers?

3. What role did relics play within the tension between global and local powers?

How did globally operating institutions such as the Catholic Church, or the Spanish Crown engage with venerated human remains? Which universal claims and systems of value were attached to such remains? How did these meanings come into tension or conflict with local forms of veneration and interpretation? How can the local relevance of human remains be identified and assessed?

These questions are intended as guidelines for submitted proposals. We invite abstracts of no more than 500 words. Please send proposals by July 31, 2026 to urte.krass@unibe.ch and alberto.saviello@unibe.ch

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The conference is currently planned as a one-and-a-half-day event to be held at the University of Bern on April 16–17, 2027. It will include a keynote lecture as well as the presentation and publication of the project database.

The main conference language will be English, although papers may also be presented in French, German, Italian, or Spanish.

A publication of the conference papers is planned.

Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered.

For information regarding the Global Bones Project, please visit our website and blog:

Global Bones Project Website: <https://globo.unibe.ch/>

Global Bones Project Blog: <https://globo.hypotheses.org/>

Reference:

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