



# The Empire of Death: A Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses

*Paul Koudounaris*

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**From bone fetishism in the ancient world to painted skulls in Austria and Bavaria: an unusual and compelling work of cultural history.**

It is sometimes said that death is the last taboo, but it was not always so. For centuries, religious establishments constructed decorated ossuaries and charnel houses that stand as masterpieces of art created from human bone. These unique structures have been pushed into the footnotes of history; they were part of a dialogue with death that is now silent.

The sites in this specially photographed and brilliantly original study range from the Monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Palermo, where the living would visit mummified or skeletal remains and lovingly dress them; to the Paris catacombs; to fantastic bone-encrusted creations in Austria, Cambodia, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Italy, Peru, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and elsewhere.

Paul Koudounaris photographed more than seventy sites for this book. He analyzes the role of these remarkable memorials within the cultures that created them, as well as the mythology and folklore that developed around them, and skillfully traces a remarkable human endeavor. 290 photographs, 260 in color

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