Cannibals and Saints: Bones as Medicine in Early Modern Europe

Thursday January 14, 4pm

Bones, particularly skulls, were long used in various therapeutic preparations for a variety of ailments. What was the peculiar vital quality of bones that gave them such healing power? This talk will compare the medical uses of bones to therapeutic uses of skeletal relics, which were employed in some very similar ways from the origins of Christian relics in late antiquity. Indeed, the dividing line between miraculous and natural healing was often very faint. Although the medicinal uses of bones declined in the eighteenth century, they did not disappear from official pharmacopoeias until around 1900. Among those who believe, relics, old and new, continue to retain their healing powers.

Prof. Anita Guerrini is a historian of the life sciences and medicine with research interests in anatomy, natural history, the history of animals, the environment, and the history of food, especially around the seventeenth & eighteenth centuries in Western Europe.