

Burning Questions: Spontaneous Human Combustion in Early Modern Europe*

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Summary

Spontaneous human combustion shocked and confused people in early modern France. Without a body to examine or eyewitness reports savants had difficulty determining its causes. Nonetheless, people like Claude-Nicolas Le Cat and Pierre-Aimé Lair, sought to determine the causes of these events and provide a logical explanation for their appearance. This article analyzes the various arguments used by scholars to help rationalize a phenomenon that was simultaneously a medical conundrum and a holdover from the age of marvels and wonders.

Keywords: spontaneous human combustion, Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, Pierre-Aimé Lair, wonders, Enlightenment

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