



Purgatory, cult of the abandoned dead and funerary rituals in the popular culture of Naples

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Summary

The cult of the souls in Purgatory had an extraordinary spread in Naples since the beginning of the XVII century. In this city the cult took on unique characteristics due to its particular interest in abandoned souls, and because it was intertwined with the veneration of anonymous skulls present in the ossuaries and in the hypogea of the churches, the *terresante*. In these underground crypts a funerary practice called *scolatura* (draining) of the dead took place, a procedure aimed at drying/skeletonising the corpses. The skulls accumulated over the centuries in these places, or come to light during urban excavations for restoration works, in the late XIX century became objects of a worship that saw them as representatives of abandoned souls in the afterlife. This version of the cult of souls in Purgatory was officially forbidden by the Church in 1969, but the devotion continued nonetheless. The exceptional diffusion of the cult of Purgatory and abandoned dead is attested by the numerous votive shrines present in the streets of the historic centre of the city featuring niches populated by figurines depicting suffering souls with the lower half of the naked body characteristically engulfed in flames. Among them,

the presence of a miniature skull is constant, visible embodiment of abandoned souls in Purgatory, thus indicating the centrality and symbolism of this element.

Riassunto

Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio ha avuto una straordinaria diffusione a Napoli fin dall'inizio del XVII secolo. Nella città partenopea il culto assunse caratteristiche uniche per il particolare interesse rivolto alle anime abbandonate, e perché si intrecciò con la pratica di venerare teschi anonimi presenti negli ossari e negli ipogei delle chiese, le *terresante*. In queste cripte sotterranee si eseguiva una pratica funeraria nota come *scolatura* dei morti, una procedura finalizzata alla essiccazione/scheletrizzazione dei cadaveri. I crani accumulati in questi luoghi durante i secoli, o venuti alla luce nel corso di scavi urbani per opere di restauro, nel tardo XIX secolo divennero oggetto di un culto in cui erano considerati rappresentanti di anime abbandonate nell'aldilà. Questa versione del culto delle anime del Purgatorio fu ufficialmente bandita dalla Chiesa nel 1969 ma, ciononostante, la devozione continuò. L'eccezionale diffusione del culto del Purgatorio e dei morti abbandonati è attestata dalle numerose edicole votive presenti nelle vie del centro storico della città comprendenti nicchie popolate da statuine raffiguranti le anime sofferenti con la metà inferiore del corpo caratteristicamente avvolta nelle fiamme. Tra esse è costante la presenza di una miniatura di un teschio, rappresentazione visibile delle anime abbandonate del Purgatorio, a indicare la centralità e il simbolismo di questo elemento.

Keywords: Purgatory, cult of the dead, cult of souls in Purgatory, double burial, *terresante*, *scolatoi*, votive shrines

Parole chiave: Purgatorio, culto dei morti, culto delle anime del Purgatorio, doppia sepoltura, *terresante*, *scolatoi*, edicole votive

In the streets or internal courtyards of the buildings in the historic centre of Naples one can notice the presence of small votive niches placed under tabernacles dedicated to saints, the Virgin Mary or Christ. They host miniatures of naked bodies immersed up to their waist in flames, the souls in Purgatory. The niches appear as hollow structures reminiscent of a cave or an underground space dimly lit by one or two small lights, with the walls painted red; the cavity is framed by a metal support and closed in front by a glass plate. In the interior, the terracotta figurines of Purgatory souls are placed on staggered floors, while in the background there are also figures from the sphere of the Sacred itself, represented by the Virgin and Christ on the cross (fig. 1). These votive shrines are the expression of a cult that attests to the deep bond that has always linked the Neapolitan people to the world of the dead. Another form of this popular devotion with a very similar meaning is that of abandoned skulls, of which even today there are persistent traces in at least three historical places of Naples: the church of Santa Maria delle anime del Purgatorio ad Arco (fig. 2), the church San Pietro ad Aram (fig. 3) and the Fontanelle cemetery¹. Over the centuries these places had collected countless bone remains which had obviously lost any individuality. In this cult the faithful offered care and

¹ R. CIVITELLI, *Il Culto delle Anime Pezzentelle a Purgatorio ad Arco nel Secondo Dopoguerra*. Edizioni Libreria Dante & Descartes, Napoli 2016; ID., *Dalla Basilica di San Pietro ad Aram al Cimitero delle Fontanelle. Note sul Culto del Purgatorio, delle anime pezzentelle e della cultura popolare a Napoli*. Independently published, Torino 2021; S. DE MATTEIS, M. NIOLA, *Antropologia delle anime in pena*, Edizioni Argo, Lecce 1993; T. BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli. Oltre il folklore e il popolare*, Tesi di laurea in Antropologia culturale ed etnologia, Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, Scuola di Lettere e Beni Culturali, relatore Prof.ssa Francesca Sbardella, a.a. 2015-2016.



Fig. 1 - Street-shrine with tabernacle dedicated to S. Antonio of Padova above and niche of Purgatory below.



Fig. 2 - Hypogeum of the church of Santa Maria delle anime del Purgatorio ad Arco. Notice flowers, a candle, and other votive objects next to a skull.



Fig. 3 (A, B) - Hypogeum of the church San Pietro ad Aram. In addition to skulls, many other bones and bone fragments are collected.

prayers to abandoned skulls whose souls were thought in dire need of help, hoping to obtain protection and material favours in return. Both the shrines of Purgatory and the skulls object of worship therefore represent the most material aspects of a popular cult of the dead that had an extraordinary success in Naples. The cult of the souls in Purgatory spread throughout the Christian world as part of Catholic doctrine starting from the XVII century, but in Naples it underwent various modulations over time, directing its attention above all to the anonymous, forgotten souls of Purgatory. Abandoned souls therefore became both the subjects to be helped and the subjects to ask for help². Indeed, both in the cult of skulls and in the devotion to the shrines of Purgatory the action of prayer is twofold: the dead are prayed to alleviate their suffering and, at the same time, to intercede with superior entities to help overcome the difficulties of the living³.

Obviously, these worships were based on the perspective of a life beyond earthly existence, and on the deeply held belief of the possibility of an interaction between the living and the dead, from which both could benefit⁴. They have their roots not only in the official Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, but also in the cult of the first Christian saints and martyrs cultivated in the catacombs of Naples, and the miraculous power of their relics. Moreover, the birth and development of these cults were strongly influenced by peculiar representations of death, the fate of the soul in the afterlife, as well as in quite distinctive funerary and mourning customs. Indeed, the attention that the Neapolitan people reserve to death and mourning rites and to the passage of the individual from this world to the other world is so deep as to require a specific method of manipulation of the body of the deceased, still in use today: the double burial. It is a funerary practice

² DE MATTEIS, NIOLA, *Antropologia delle anime in pena* cit.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ U. VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta. Viaggio nei riti di fondazione di una città*, Meltemi Editore, Milano 2020.

comprising a provisional entombment followed by exhumation and preservation of the bone remains in a definitive grave, believed important to allow the soul to land in the afterlife. Therefore, although the cult of souls in Purgatory was not a worship exclusive of Naples, due to the peculiar cultural background of this city, it underwent some modulations that modified its nature. Moreover, these devotions for the dead had a markedly popular character and developed in part independently of the official religion, which either ignored or opposed them. Therefore, in this article the characterisation of the different aspects that the cult of the souls in Purgatory acquired in Naples, and their relationships with funerary customs and the practice of double burial are reviewed.

Double burial and death as a duration

The double burial is a cross-cultural funerary practice with broad chronological and geographical distribution that implies a concept of death extended over a period of time⁵. Indeed, according to the anthropologist Robert Hertz, after death the deceased goes through a transitional state in which it stays still in close connection with the earthly world; this liminal phase ends with the final burial of the bones which, on the one hand marks the definitive passage of the soul into the afterlife, on the other hand definitively sanctions the exit of the deceased from the world of the living and the new belonging to the world of the dead⁶. The transitional state would involve both the body of the

⁵ M. GUARINO, *Secondary burials in Naples in the modern and contemporary Age: A review*, "Ethics, Medicine and Public Health", XXII, 2022, 100793; ID., *The Hypogea of the Churches of Naples: Burials and Cult of the Dead*, "Papers on Anthropology", XXXI, 2022, pp. 7-34.

⁶ R. HERTZ, *A Contribution to a Study of the Collective Representation of Death*, in R. NEEDHAM, C. NEEDHAM, *Death & The Right Hand*, The Free Press Glencoe, Illinois 1960, pp. 27-86.

deceased and its soul as well as the bereaved survivors; it is assumed that through their rituals survivors can influence the position of the deceased, which is, in turn, perceived as having power in the life of survivors⁷. Furthermore, a symmetry is thought to exist between the physical state of the body and its soul, the transformations of the corpse during decomposition being mirrored in the state of the soul, and *vice versa*⁸.

These concepts are well embodied in the ritual of the double burial still practiced today in the modern cemeteries of Naples⁹. It consists in an initial inhumation of the body, followed by exhumation some years later; at that time it is checked that the bones are completely dried, then the remains undergo a second burial in their definitive location, usually accompanied by a second funeral ceremony attended by relatives¹⁰. According to this model a close relationship exists between the physical state of the corpse and its soul: through the decomposition of the contaminating element of the flesh, it is achieved the complete liberation of the bones, symbol of purity and eternity. At this moment the soul is regarded purified and, at the same time, the deceased is considered definitively landed in the kingdom of the dead; there, it reunites for eternity with its ancestors, thus becoming a benevolent soul to pray, of whose intercession it will be possible to hope¹¹. Therefore, the exhumation/recognition

⁷ I. PARDO, *L'esperienza popolare della morte: Tradizione e modernizzazione in un quartiere di Napoli*, "La Ricerca Folklorica", VII, 1983, pp. 113-122; ID., *Life, Death and Ambiguity in the Social Dynamics of Inner Naples*, "Man", XXIV, 1989, pp. 103-123.

⁸ GUARINO, *Secondary Burials in Naples* cit. (see note 5). ⁸ PARDO, *L'esperienza popolare della morte* cit., pp. 113-122; PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123.

⁹ PARDO, *L'esperienza popolare della morte* cit., pp. 113-122; PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*; F. PEZZINI, *Doppie esequie e scolatura dei corpi nell'Italia meridionale d'età moderna*, "Medicina nei Secoli", XVIII, 2006, pp. 897-924; A. FORNACIARI, V. GIUFFRÀ, F. PEZZINI, *Processi di tanatometamorfosi:*

represents a critical moment in the ritual of the double burial as practiced in Naples: if large parts of fresh soft tissues are still present, the definitive burial will have to be postponed. Once complete skeletonisation has been achieved, the second burial can be carried out, thus also having the social function of announcing to the community the definitive death of the deceased as an individual and its belonging to the society of the dead as a pacified soul¹².

In summary, in this scheme the correct performance of funerary rituals is of fundamental importance for the fate of the soul of the deceased. In order to obtain protection and help, Neapolitan people turn to different sacred hierarchies, including Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints and, as we will see, also figures not properly belonging to the world of the Sacred, the souls in Purgatory¹³; hopes for help are reinforced by the possibility that a recently deceased relative would intervene, on their behalf, with these figures. It is believed that such an intervention is possible only if the funerary rituals are well performed, as only this could allow the soul a good otherworldly state¹⁴. Thus, the bereaved pay great attention to the performance of mortuary and mourning practices, aware that incomplete death rituals would mean that they could not expect any help from the deceased relative¹⁵.

From the above emerge some elements which underlie and definitely characterize the cult of the dead in Naples: the concern for an accurate performance of funerary rites; the prolonged contact of the living with the body of the deceased; the effort of the living to maintain a link with the soul of the

pratiche di "scolatura" dei corpi e mummificazione nel Regno delle Due Sicilie, "Archeologia Postmedievale", XI, 2007, pp. 11-49; A. FORNACIARI, V. GIUFFRÀ, F. PEZZINI, *Secondary Burial and Mummification Practices in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies*, "Mortality", XV, 2010, pp. 223-249.

¹² PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

dead; the deeply religious perspective of death with the belief of a new existence of the soul in the afterlife, closely connected to the concept of Purgatory. These points will be analysed in greater depth in the following paragraphs.

The *terresante*

At the beginning of the XVIII century in Naples there were more than 300 churches, most of which had underground tombs under their floors, basically summarized in the following types¹⁶: (A) the mass grave, represented by a pit several meters deep, usually placed under the central nave; (B) the family tomb, located at a side chapel, administered by a noble family; (C) the *terresante*, usually managed by lay brotherhoods, represented by vaulted crypts which allowed individual burials, and where relatives and acquaintances could be welcomed; they were equipped with basins filled with earth, called *giardinetti* (little gardens), where bodies were superficially buried (fig. 4); to accommodate new dead, the corpses were often exhumed from the *giardinetti* and exposed to air, thus favouring a their more rapid decomposition. In a really similar variant the *giardinetti* were absent and replaced by *scolatoi* – or *colatoi*, the terms are derived from the Latin word *colum* (drain) – represented by masonry seats on which the dead were placed to drain¹⁷ (fig. 5).

¹⁶ D. CARNEVALE, *Una ciudad bajo la ciudad. Las tipologías sepulcrales y su función social en una metrópolis mediterránea bajo el Antiguo Régimen: Nápoles en el siglo XVIII*, “Trace”, LVIII, 2010, pp. 62-70; D. CARNEVALE, B. MARIN, *Naples, une réforme difficile*, in *Aux origines des cimetières contemporains. Les réformes funéraires de l’Europe occidentale, XVIIIe-XIXe siècle*, eds. R. BERTRAND, A. CAROL, Presses Universitaires de Provence, Aix-en-Provence 2016, pp. 323-342.

¹⁷ In their most typical shape the *scolatoi* are niches with masonry seats each one with a hole in the centre; the corpse was placed to drain in a sitting position so that the fluids produced during the decomposition could be collected inside the hole which, in turn, was connected with a drainage system (PEZZINI, *Doppie esequie e scolatura dei corpi* cit., pp. 897-924). Though by no means a general

Therefore, both the *giardinetti* and the *scolatoi* had the precise purpose of favouring desiccation/skeletonization, the so-called *scolatura* of the dead. Usually in the middle of these hypogea there was an underlying ossuary closed by a grate, intended for the preservation of bone remains¹⁸. Regardless of which of the two systems was used, once skeletonization of the body was accomplished, the remains were placed in their specific definitive locations: the skull, symbol of the individuality of the deceased, was often displayed, whereas non-cranial bones were deposited within the ossuary. The display of the corpse in decomposition allowed to prolong contact with the body of the deceased and, on the other hand, it would have a symbolic meaning: in accordance with the principle of symmetry between the condition of the body and that of the soul, the display of the modifications of the appearance of the corpse would represent the various stages of purification faced by the soul on its journey towards eternity¹⁹. Throughout this treatment, relatives and acquaintances were possibly engaged in visits and prayers, as well as in providing care for the corpse and checking that skeletonization was occurred. Probably the long manipulation to which the corpses were subjected was also functional to a gradual dissolution of the ties that bound the deceased to the survivors, thus allowing

rule, the *scolatoi* were more often present in convents and reserved for the burial of religious, while the *terresante* with *giardinetti* were the places of burial preferred by the laity. Often in these crypts there was also an altar, to testify that religious services, such as funeral ceremonies and suffrage masses by relatives were celebrated.

¹⁸ PEZZINI, *Doppie esequie e scolatura dei corpi* cit., pp. 897-924; FORNACIARI, GIUFFRÀ, PEZZINI, *Processi di tanatometamorfosi* cit., pp. 11-49; FORNACIARI, GIUFFRÀ, PEZZINI, *Secondary burial and mummification practices* cit., pp. 223-249; A. FORNACIARI, *Scheletrizzare o mummificare: pratiche e strutture per la sepoltura secondaria nell'Italia del Sud durante l'età moderna e contemporanea*, "Medicina nei Secoli", XXV, 2013, pp. 205-238; CARNEVALE, *Una ciudad bajo la ciudad* cit., pp. 62-70; CARNEVALE, MARIN, *Naples, une réforme difficile* cit., pp. 323-342.

¹⁹ FORNACIARI, GIUFFRÀ, PEZZINI, *Processi di tanatometamorfosi* cit., pp. 11-49.



Fig. 4 - Terrasanta with four giardinetti and an altar in the background (Hypogeum of the church of SS. Filippo e Giacomo).



Fig. 5 - Scolatoi in the hypogeum of the church of S. Agostino alla Zecca.

to better manage grief and mourning. In conclusion, it is evident that these funerary hypogea were structurally designed for a specific ritual treatment of the corpses based on the double burial. Both the function of the *giardinetti* and of the *scolatoi* was clearly aimed at skeletonization by favouring the drainage of cadaveric liquids²⁰. On the other hand these spaces fully responded to the needs of the cult of the dead which, as we will see, in Naples developed in various forms.

The body, the skull, the soul and its destiny after death

One of the main reasons behind burial in the *terresante* was the need to monitor decomposition, up to the uncovering of the bones, proof of the successful liberation of the soul²¹. Indeed, only when freed from all its putrescible parts, the soul of the deceased could have access to the afterlife and, therefore, to Purgatory. Thus the intermediate moments between the physical death of the body and the passage of the soul of the deceased to the afterlife appear to be of crucial importance. Throughout history, the nature and location of the soul in the human body has been the subject of much speculation by philosophers, theologians, and physicians. The brain, the heart, or the body as a whole have alternatively been considered as possible seat of the soul²². In different cultures the brain and the skull have often

²⁰ However, this does not exclude, that skeletonization was sometimes replaced by desiccation and preservation of large portions of skin and soft tissues, thus resulting in a mummy rather than a skeleton: FORNACIARI, GIUFFRA, PEZZINI, *Secondary Burial and Mummification Practices* cit., pp. 223-249.

²¹ PEZZINI, *Doppie esequie e scolatura dei corpi* cit., pp. 897-924; FORNACIARI, GIUFFRA, PEZZINI, *Processi di tanatotemorfosi* cit., pp. 11-49; FORNACIARI, GIUFFRA, PEZZINI, *Secondary burial and mummification practices* cit., pp. 223-249; FORNACIARI, *Scheletrizzare o mummificare* cit., pp. 205-238.

²² For an excellent review on this topic with extensive bibliography see: G. SANTORO [et al.], *The anatomic location of the soul from the heart, through the*

been associated with the concepts of soul and immortality. In skull cults, widespread in many different cultures and countries, the human skull is usually regarded as a bridge between the realm of the living and that of the dead; it can be worshipped for honouring the ancestors or for the belief in the transmission of protective or other properties from the deceased to the living, thus implying that the skull is the seat of a spiritual and immortal principle²³. The skeleton, including the skull that is the fundamental part of an individual, contains the essence of the individual because it is the immutable part, what remains of us after death. Indeed, in the cult of abandoned skulls widespread in Naples from the second half of the XIX century, the skull is traditionally considered the concrete representation of a soul in the afterlife²⁴, a visible depiction of a forgotten defunct. Despite this mostly symbolic correspondence between skull and soul, it is not clear where exactly the soul is believed to reside in the body according to Neapolitan belief. The concepts related to the double burial and the relationship between the body and soul in the representation of death seem to indicate that the soul can separate from what remains of the body after death only when the putrefactive processes have ended and every part of the body is dry, thus underlining the absolute need for the absence of humours for the departure of the soul from the body. It follows that, if we want to give credit to this intuition, Neapolitan culture

brain, to the whole body, and beyond: a journey through Western history, science, and philosophy, "Neurosurgery", LXV, 2009, pp. 633-643.

²³ T. COWAN, *Il fuoco nella testa. Uno studio sullo sciamanismo celtico*, Edizioni Crisalide, Spigno Saturnia 2016, p. 49. The powers attributed to the skulls of dead individuals are manifold and varying in different cultures. In this regard, it is known that in Europe until the beginning of the XX century the human skull has been used as a medical remedy for various diseases, especially neurological disorders: P. CHARLIER, S. DEO, *Human skulls used for neurological remedies*, "The Lancet Neurology", XVII, 2018, p. 847.

²⁴ G. VACCA, *Nel corpo della tradizione: cultura popolare e modernità nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia*, Squilibri, Roma 2004, pp. 28-29.

identifies the seat of the soul precisely in the flesh²⁵. In this hypothetical interpretation, the soul would be somehow bound to the body through the humid component of the flesh, the loss of which during desiccation/skeletonization would allow the soul to separate from the remains. In this regard it is significant that in the Neapolitan tradition water is absolutely not allowed to wash the body of a died person, but only surgical alcohol should be used, thus indicating that any moisture would hinder the desiccation of the body and therefore the liberation of its soul²⁶. Therefore, the Neapolitan belief would seem to identify the location of the soul in fresh soft tissues, hence the absolute necessity of drying the body through a well-performed double burial to permit the soul to free itself and access the afterlife.

The reform of burials: the abolition of the *terresante*

Major changes in the mortuary practices of Naples took place in the XVIII century culminating on one hand with the abolition of burials under churches and on the other with the affirmation of the extra-urban cemeteries in the XIX century²⁷. The success of the *terresante* lay in the use to which it was intended: a self-sufficient funerary system designed to divide the treatment of the deceased into two distinct times and spaces: the *scolatura* of the corpse in the *giardinetti* or on the *scolatoi*, followed by the deposition of the bone remains in the ossuary obtained in large cavities on a lower level; the bones that accumulated there constituted the simulacrum of the community's ancestors. As long as the mechanism that regulated this funerary system remained in balance there was no need for significant expulsion

²⁵ FORNACIARI, *Scheletrizzare o mummificare* cit., p. 207.

²⁶ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123 e p. 107.

²⁷ F. PEZZINI, *Disciplina della sepoltura nella Napoli del Settecento. Note di ricerca*, "Studi Storici", LI, 2010, pp. 155-208; CARNEVALE, MARIN, *Naples, une réforme difficile* cit., pp. 323-342.

of dead. Their transfer to the natural cavities of the Neapolitan surroundings – mostly to the Fontanelle cemetery – was accepted by the population as necessary only on occasions of sudden explosion of mortality with shortage of available space²⁸. A different issue was public burials in masse graves of churches and hospitals: while the *terresante* were functionally divided into two different sectors, the mass graves concentrated the burial in a single room and in a single operation, with little or no attention to the celebration of funerary rites²⁹. Therefore public burials were intended only for the poorest people. However, unlike the mass graves in the naves of the churches, whose access plaque were opened and closed only when needed, the *terresante* were intensely frequented community places, where the bodies were buried under a thin layer of earth which did not guarantee a sufficient filter against harmful miasms³⁰; their atmosphere saturated with cadaveric fumes communicated continuously with the outside. The surviving relatives sought contact with the bodies of their dead that were subjected to frequent manipulations: it is known that in the *terresante* the partially decomposed corpses were frequently exhumed, stripped, dressed and finally placed along the walls of the burial chamber to continue their decomposition³¹. Therefore, due to their structural and ritual elements, the *terresante* represented the most dangerous type of burial³². The health authorities, arguing the need to abolish burial in the *terresante*, describe the state of health of the undertakers as follows: “these are very frequently tormented by malignant fevers, by cachexia, by suffocating

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ PEZZINI, *Disciplina della sepoltura nella Napoli del Settecento* cit., pp. 155-208.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ FORNACIARI, GIUFFRÀ, PEZZINI, *Secondary Burial and Mummification Practices* cit., pp. 223-249.

³² PEZZINI, *Disciplina della sepoltura nella Napoli del Settecento* cit., pp. 155-208.

catarrhs, by dropsy, they are subject to sudden death [...]”³³. In this regard, in support of the need to reform burials, the case of the Ospedale degli Incurabili – that was equipped with a vast mass grave called the *piscina*³⁴ (pool) – was also cited. Up until the construction of its *Camposanto* outside the city in 1763, the fumes coming from the mass grave of the Incurabili were thought to cause various health ailments:

A fever perennially attacked the hospital patients and workers; the sores healed with difficulty; that is, many greater evils than those that commonly afflicted the large hospitals were observed. The problems of the Ospedale degli Incurabili were attributed to the “noxious and fetid exhalations of the corpses” as it was demonstrated, the doctors concluded, by the fact that they ceased when they began to bury their dead outside the city³⁵.

To protect the living it was therefore necessary to intervene on the burials, i.e. carrying out the definitive exodus of the dead out of the city through the creation of the outdoor extra-urban cemeteries. Nevertheless, the definitive application of the new measure aimed at the abolition of burials under churches was slow and difficult. In fact the carrying out of burials inside *terresante* are still documented in 1888³⁶.

History of the church of Santa Maria Antesaecula

³³ Cfr. ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI NAPOLI (ASN), Supremo Magistrato e Soprintendenza generale di Salute, b. 286, *Appunti e scritture originali*, cc. 1r-5r.

³⁴ A. MICILLO, *Il Complesso di Santa Maria del Popolo degli Incurabili di Napoli. Evoluzione Storico Urbanistica*, Tesi di Dottorato di Ricerca in Storia e Conservazione dei Beni Architettonici del Paesaggio. Facoltà di Architettura, Dipartimento di Storia dell’Architettura e Restauro, Università degli Studi di Napoli “Federico II”, relatore Prof. Leonardo Di Mauro, a.a. 2013.

³⁵ ASN, Supremo Magistrato e Soprintendenza generale di Salute, b. 286, *Appunti e scritture originali*, cc. 1r-5r.

³⁶ FORNACIARI, GIUFFRÀ, PEZZINI, *Processi di tanatometamorfosi* cit., pp. 11-49.

In 1275 Pier Leone Sicola, grand prothonotary of King Charles I of Angiò and devoted to the Virgin Mary, founded a church with an adjoining boarding school for poor girls in the Forcella district. The complex therefore took its name and was called S. Maria a Sicola³⁷. This small church has an important history as it became the favourite of the Angevin sovereigns. Indeed, it is said that King Ladislao of Angiò-Durazzo (1377-1414), suffering from a serious form of sciatica which no physician was able to cure, recovered after going to prayer in this church (fig. 6A). An epigraph, affixed on the facade of the church, and still clearly visible today (fig. 6B), recalls this recovery:

DIVUS LADISLAUS REX CUI M-
ORBO SIATICE ESSET INFECTUS
CONVERSUS AD BEATAM VIRGI-
NEM SICULAM LIBER EVASIT
DIVA IOHANNA SOROR REGIS
LADISLAI QALIBET EBDOMA
DA IN DIE SABATI EAMDEM
SUMMA CUM VENERACIONE
VISITABAT AB EADEMQUE
SINGULI PACIENTES
SANI REDIBANT³⁸.

³⁷ Pier Leone Sicola also established a royal congregation at this church to which Charles I and Charles II of Angiò, Charles III of Angiò-Durazzo and his children Ladislao I and Giovanna II belonged: G. CAUTELA, L. DI MAURO, R. RUOTOLO, *Napoli sacra. Guida alle chiese della città*, Elio De Rosa, Napoli 2010; G.A. GALANTE, *Guida sacra della città di Napoli*, Società Editrice Napoletana, Napoli 1985.

³⁸ (Translation): “The divine King Ladislao, suffering from sciatica, turned to the blessed Virgin in the Church of S. Maria a Sicola and was healed”. The divine Giovanna, sister of the King, every saturday visited the same with utmost veneration, and from these every sick returned healthy”. The epigraph probably also hints to a prodigious fresco image of the Virgin which at that time was



Fig. 6 (A) - Facade of the ancient church of S. Maria a Sicola, today in a complete state of abandonment and decay.

present inside the church (ibidem); unfortunately, there is no trace of the fate of this fresco image.

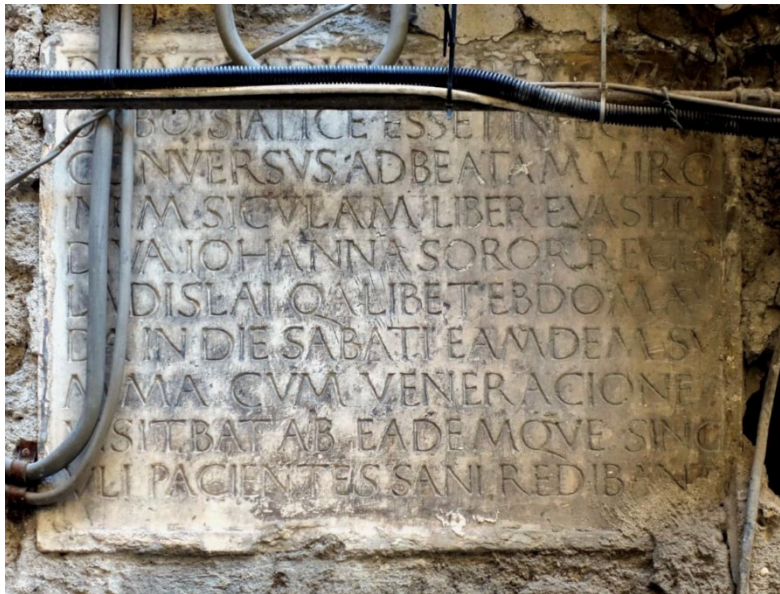


Fig. 6 (B) - Epigraph placed to the left of the portal of church of S. Maria a Sicola which recalls the healing of King Ladislao. No date is reported.

After this event, which was somehow retained miraculous, the institute of S. Maria a Sicola was subsidised by large donations coming directly from the Crown³⁹. The epigraph also reports that, Ladislao's sister Giovanna II went to the church every Saturday, as a sign of devotion and gratitude. Sciatica – from the Greek *ischios*, “hip”; and latin *ischiadicus*, “sciatic” – is a pain that radiates from the buttock downwards along the course of the sciatic nerve, in most cases due to a pathology of lumbar intervertebral discs⁴⁰. The disease has been known since antiquity, but ancient Greek and Roman physicians commonly attributed it to diseased or subluxated hip⁴¹. Hippocrates (460 BC-370 BC) would be the first physician to use the term “sciatica” and to provide details of its natural history, while the Roman physician Caelius Aurelianus (about V century AD) accurately illustrated its symptoms. Few useful concepts or treatments of sciatica emerged in the dark ages, but a substantial breakthrough came in 1764, when Domenico Cotugno in Naples differentiated sciatic nerve pain from arthritis of the hip⁴² with which sciatica had been confused for centuries. Finally, in the XX century the concept of prolapsed disc material causing pain as a causative factor in sciatica took shape⁴³. Although sciatica can occasionally progress to become chronic and difficult to treat, most cases are self-limiting and resolve within a matter of weeks to months⁴⁴. Therefore, the sudden healing of King Ladislao'

³⁹ CAUTELA, DI MAURO, RUOTOLO, *Napoli sacra* cit.; GALANTE, *Guida sacra della città di Napoli* cit.

⁴⁰ J.M.S. PEARCE, *A brief history of sciatica*, “Spinal cord”, XLV, 2007, pp. 592-596; A.H. ROPPER, R. ZAFONTE, *Sciatica*, “New England Journal of Medicine”, CCCLXXII, 2015, pp. 1240-1248; M.A. STAFFORD, P. PENG, D.A. HILL, *Sciatica: a review of history, epidemiology, pathogenesis, and the role of epidural steroid injection in management*, “British journal of anaesthesia”, XCIX, 2007, pp. 461-473. (See also the extensive bibliography in these articles).

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² PEARCE, *A brief history of sciatica* cit.

⁴³ STAFFORD, PENG, HILL, *Sciatica* cit., pp. 461-473.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

sciatica does not appear to be a completely unexpected event. Ladislao died in 1414 as a result of a prostatic abscess⁴⁵, and the throne of Naples was succeeded by his sister Giovanna II. Due to the tumultuous development of the Forcella district, it was believed that this area was unhealthy and not suitable for the boarding school and, therefore, in 1622 the entire complex was transferred to the Sanità district, under the name of S. Maria Antesaecula, a distortion of the original name S. Maria a Sicola⁴⁶. Presumably the church was built using a free space inside an older building⁴⁷ (figg. 6 C, D). On the other hand, the loss of the royal grant resulted in the suppression of the boarding school, which was transformed into a monastery of Teresian nuns⁴⁸. The church and the monastery – heavily damaged by the bombings of the Second World War – underwent a radical restoration, and currently houses a health facility. Interestingly, in the 80s of the XX century restoration work has been carried out which has led

⁴⁵ F. SORRENTINO, *Visti da vicino. Un caso clinico: La strana morte di re Ladislao*, “Medioevo: un passato da riscoprire”, VI, 2002, pp. 68-72. The Queen Giovanna II, very devoted to the memory of her brother, built on his tomb in the church of S. Giovanni a Carbonara a majestic monument.

⁴⁶ CAUTELA, DI MAURO, RUOTOLO, *Napoli sacra* cit.; GALANTE, *Guida sacra della città di Napoli* cit.

⁴⁷ One of the two access portals is surmounted by the epigraph shown in the figure 6D; (translation): College [dedicated] to Saint Mary to the ages of ages chosen before the ages as mother of the king of heaven, without changing the place and the name Sicola, so that in the ages the discalced Carmelite virgins would choose her as the divine patroness down the ages. Year of the lord 1622. Both the words “Ante Sæcula” and “Sicola” are reported, thus testifying to the sameness and continuity of the religious institution in its new location. The similarity of the sound of words, and a possible reference to the expression commonly associated with the Virgin Mary: “Ab initio, et ante sæcula creata sum” (ibidem), probably underlie the transition of the denomination a “Sicola” → “Antesaecula”. It is not entirely clear when this name change occurred; as “Vico S. Maria Antesaecula” is the current name of an alley immediately adjacent to the original church in Forcella, there is the possibility that the name S. Maria Antesaecula had already come into use when the complex was still in its first location.

⁴⁸ CAUTELA, DI MAURO, RUOTOLO, *Napoli sacra* cit.

to the discovery in a basement space of a draining room comprising eight masonry *scolatoi* inside niches⁴⁹, probably reserved for the treatment of the bodies of deceased nuns (fig. 6 E). Although existing in all likelihood, no environment attributable to an ossuary came to light during the restoration work.

The burial, the afterlife and Purgatory

As we have seen, one of the great advantages of the *terresante*, which probably contributed to promoting their wide diffusion in Naples, was to avoid the promiscuity of the mass grave, thus allowing funeral rites to be celebrated⁵⁰. This would also guarantee that the memory and individuality of the dead were retained. Indeed, the living had an interest in maintaining the individuality of the deceased and, therefore, in ensuring a clear point of reference for their future relationships with it⁵¹. If the deceased had lost its individuality, the living would have had no hope either of its protection and intercession or, more generally, of a close link with its soul⁵². On the other hand the complexity of the treatment of the bodies in the *terresante* raises questions about the reasons that justified its persistence over time. One reason might be the chronic lack of space in the sepulchral areas of Naples⁵³ which forced the premature exhumation of the corpses from the *giardinetti* to make room for new dead; as it was necessary to guarantee equal treatment to all members of the brotherhood that managed a *terrasanta*, a system was needed that

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ CARNEVALE, *Una ciudad bajo la ciudad* cit., pp. 62-70.

⁵¹ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.



Fig. 6 (C) - One of the two access portals to the new church, S. Maria Antesaecula.

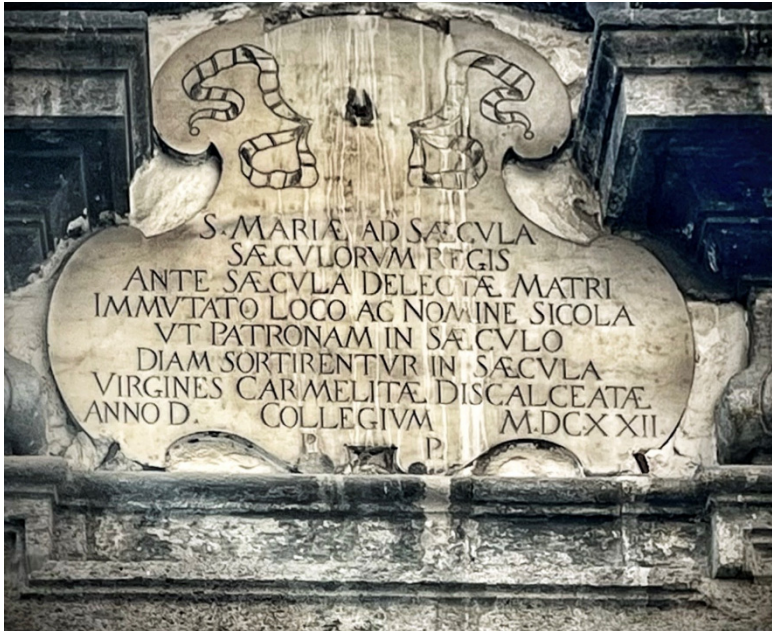


Fig. 6 (D) - Epigraph placed above a portal the new church, S. Maria Antesaecula.



Fig. 6 (E) - Sitting-scolatoi brought to light in recent years following the restoration of a basement room under the premises of the complex of S. Maria Antesaecula.



Fig. 7 - A skull placed into a display case together with votive objects (Hypogeum of the church of Santa Maria delle anime del Purgatorio ad Arco).

ensured a turnover of corpses by making room for new dead; therefore, speeding up the skeletonization of the bodies by exposing them to air was functional to an economy of space, thus facilitating the final part of the practice, the preservation of the bones in the ossuary. On the other hand, another reason could be that one wanted to witness the slow disintegration of the body which made the deceased participant simultaneously in two dimensions, that of the living and that of the dead, until the uncovering of the bones, concrete confirmation of the liberation of the soul. Free to have access to the afterlife and, therefore, to Purgatory, the soul can now become a benevolent and helpful entity, capable of intervening advantageously in the life of the survivors⁵⁴. Furthermore, the ritual of the *scolatura* of the corpses, whether performed in the *giardinetti* or on the *scolatoi*, was considered essential for the body to be purified, thus representing in some way a sort of anticipated expiation of the sins to be paid for in Purgatory⁵⁵. Indeed, according to the notions of long-lasting death and double burial, the Catholic Purgatory could be regarded as an extension of the concept of death as gradual transition and double burial⁵⁶. Therefore, one could think that after death the process of purification would take place in two stages. The first corresponds to the transitional period between the first and the second burial in which the suffering of the soul appears to be a direct consequence of the transition state in which the body of the deceased is⁵⁷; in this phase one could imagine that during decomposition the dead – the soul of which is still partly connected to the body – painfully purifies itself by progressively eliminating the contaminating element represented

⁵⁴ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123.

⁵⁵ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

⁵⁶ PEZZINI, *Doppie esequie e scolatura dei corpi* cit., pp. 897-924.

⁵⁷ FORNACIARI, GIUFFRÀ, PEZZINI, *Secondary burial and mummification practices* cit., pp. 223-249.

by the flesh⁵⁸; in accordance with the principle of symmetry between the soul and the corpse, the process of spiritual transition of the soul would be as unpleasant as the decomposition of the body. In the next step of spiritual evolution, the soul, definitively freed from the body, purifies itself in Purgatory; suffering is now connected with the necessary atonement for the sins committed during earthly existence⁵⁹. Due to the liminal participation of the soul in both the earthly and the otherworldly spheres and the persistence of strong relationships with the living⁶⁰, Purgatory closely recalls the transitional state of the deceased, of which could be considered an ultramundane extension. In short, Purgatory might be seen as a transitory place of purification halfway between earth and Heaven, an intermediate realm of the otherworldly. Indeed, while facing a further phase of its spiritual evolution through the atonement of sins, the soul in Purgatory continues to be in very close contact with the living being comforted by and, therefore, dependent on the survivors through their prayers and suffrages; in turn, the souls in Purgatory are expected to reciprocate the living with protection and favours⁶¹. As we will see, this relationship of dependence between the deceased and the living is at the basis of the devotion to the souls in Purgatory and abandoned skulls which took root and thrived in the *terresante*. Purgatory was conceived by the living as the most accessible level of the Sacred; just for its character closer to human condition, it allowed room for exchange, mediation and negotiation between living and the souls⁶², and this would explain the extraordinary success of the cult of Purgatory among the Neapolitan people.

⁵⁸ HERTZ, *A Contribution to a Study of the Collective Representation of Death* cit., pp. 27-86.

⁵⁹ FORNACIARI, GIUFFRÀ, PEZZINI, *secondary burial and mummification practices* cit., pp. 223- 249.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

The representations of death and afterlife in Naples are closely associated with the idea of a new existence of the dead in the other world, thus conferring a very specific meaning to funerary practices and mourning rituals. In the Neapolitan culture a major concern is that the deceased may remain stuck in the liminal transitional status, thus hindering its passage into the other world and, therefore, in Purgatory; furthermore, in this unfortunate eventuality the living could not expect any help from the dead⁶³. As souls of the dead are believed to have the power to successfully intervene in human events and provide help to survivors, the passage of the deceased into the afterlife and then into Purgatory is definitely one of the main objectives of the double burial in Neapolitan culture. This practice, by allowing the decomposition of the corpse to be checked, guarantees that the soul really separates from the body to reach the afterlife. Failure to perform or imperfect fulfilment of funerary ceremonies would mean that the soul of the deceased would fail to reach the realm of the dead as a pacified and protector soul. An entire category of the deceased, including the dead in war, the unburied, the murdered or the dead during epidemics or from violent causes, those sentenced to death, are all souls which have not landed in the afterlife due to the deprivation of the necessary ritual support offered by the community of the living. The journey of these dead was interrupted halfway, therefore they are “badly dead”, whose lack of funeral ceremonies, and thus failure to attain a pacified state in the hereafter, dooms them to remain forever in a condition of liminality⁶⁴. On the other hand, performing the funerary rituals could not be enough. Indeed, the deceased which, once exhumed, still has bones judged to be insufficiently dry and clean, cannot be subjected to definitive burial. This would indicate that something went wrong with the funerary and

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ PEZZINI, *Doppie esequie e scolatura dei corpi* cit., pp. 897-924.

mourning rites, and therefore it assumed that these are “badly dead” whose liberation can only be hoped for by reiterating the first burial ritual⁶⁵. The secondary burial, therefore, also has the function of officially confirming the correct performance of the death and mourning rites by the relatives.

The cult of souls in Purgatory and the cult of abandoned skulls

The practice of praying for the souls in Purgatory dates back at least to the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which on the one hand reaffirmed the existence of Purgatory, on the other strengthened the idea that penitent souls are helped by the suffrages of the living who can alleviate and shorten their stay in Purgatory⁶⁶. The idea of Catholic Purgatory as it is usually imagined today took shape between the XII and XIII centuries, even if the concept of an ultramundane purification connected to the symbol of the purgatorial imaginary, the fire, is certainly earlier⁶⁷. Christianity initially adopted a dualistic model of the afterlife with only two places in the otherworldly geography: Hell placed underground and Heaven placed in the sky. Between 1150 and 1250 in the doctrine of the Church a temporary intermediate afterlife took shape, in which the dead stained by venial sins could spend a more or less long time before being able to reach their final destination in Heaven⁶⁸. The purgatorial fire is a rite of passage whose purpose is to test the repentance of the soul, a trial of suffering that encloses the hope of celestial bliss. Then an intermediate afterlife where souls suffer the terrible pain of purification, but also are aware of their final salvation⁶⁹. A totally

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.

⁶⁷ J. LE GOFF, *La nascita del Purgatorio*, Einaudi, Torino 1999.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

new aspect of this third place of the otherworldly is its relationship with the living: in Purgatory souls are in direct dialogue with the living that with their suffrages can relieve the suffering of the dead. Indeed, despite being in the afterlife, the souls in Purgatory are still reachable by the living that can pray for their ultimate salvation, and also receive protection from them. Based on the idea that there was a need for suffrages to help souls, rich and powerful noblemen left part of the inheritance to celebrate masses for the souls in Purgatory, according to the principle of the “fellowship” which implies that an action taken to favour the ascent of a penitent soul to Heaven will be rewarded by the latter through an intercession⁷⁰. Then, the soul in Purgatory is reciprocally linked to the living through the suffrages that it receives, and the work of intercession by which it can compensate the living. A surge in the cult of souls in Purgatory in Naples was a consequence of a serious event that struck the city in 1656: a plague epidemic that caused countless deaths in the population. This meant that these dead were buried hastily in improvised mass graves and without the necessary funeral rituals, therefore they were poor “badly dead”. Connected to this event an obsessive devotion to souls in Purgatory originated, now extended to all the souls of the purgatorial universe, therefore to the uncredited, nameless, and abandoned souls which do not receive care from anyone. At the same time, souls begin to be attributed the supernatural ability to miraculously intervene in the lives of mortals. This element represented a definitely innovative aspect in the cult, since souls now seem to have skills that in the past had belonged only to saints, the Virgin and Jesus⁷¹. Purgatory souls thus became the saintly souls in Purgatory⁷², a kind of popular, minor saint

⁷⁰ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷² VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

involved in a *do ut des* that, on one hand alleviated the suffering of the dead, and on the other guaranteed protection to the living⁷³.

In the XVII century the skull became the most typical symbol to describe the afterlife of Purgatory. After having been a penitential attribute of the XV-XVI century tradition linked to the meditation on death – typical of some models of holiness such as S. Mary Magdalene, S. Jerome and S. Francis – in the XVII century the skull and the macabre became the most common iconographic typology for the representation of Purgatory⁷⁴. The cult of souls in Purgatory grew and had its seats within the hypogea of the churches of Naples where the people gathered for new funerals, commemorations and prayers for the dead. These hypogea were seen as border places between the world of the living and that of the dead where the faithfuls had formed a particular relationship with the defuncts, therefore it is likely that the great diffusion of these underground funerary structures in Naples helped to spread and strengthen the cult of souls in Purgatory. Probably this cult also grew because, while the souls of the heavenly spheres were considered unreachable, those of the Purgatory were perceived as closer to the living, as Purgatory was considered to represent the lowest level of the Sacred⁷⁵. Having reached Heaven, the dead no longer needed the *refrisco* (Neapolitan word from the latin: *refrigerium*, “refreshment”), the relieve offered by the living, thus breaking the relationship of dependency on them. Indeed, both the Heavenly grace and the punishment of Hell were definitive conditions; having reached one of them, the dead could do little for the living; conversely, the needy penitent soul fully retained

⁷³ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ D. PIOMBINO-MASCALI, A. ZINK, *Der Fontanelle - Friedhof und der Schädelkult im zeitgenössischen Neapel*, in *Schädelkult. Kopf und Schädel in der Kulturgeschichte des Menschen*, eds. A. WIECZOREK, W. ROSENDAHL, Schnell & Steiner, Regensburg 2011, pp. 263-266.

the actual power of mediation throughout its stay in Purgatory, awaiting the coveted ascent to Heaven⁷⁶.

As we have seen, the cult of the souls in Purgatory – certainly not a Neapolitan cult, as it affected the entire Christian world – in Naples acquired a particular character because it showed a specific interest in the souls of the abandoned dead, and because later it was intertwined with a new worship. Indeed, in the second part of the XIX century, the cult of souls in Purgatory merged with a devotion to abandoned bone remains preserved within the ossuaries and hypogea of the churches of Naples, finding its own specificity in the popular cult of abandoned skulls. This cult can be considered as a devotional form born in a completely spontaneous, popular way, without the intervention of the Church, indeed, in opposition to it. Being obviously unofficial and therefore never recognised, it led to various censorship interventions, until the definitive ban of 1969, which officially put an end to it⁷⁷. This cult arose from the establishing of a direct relationship of the devotee with a soul, which occurred through the adoption of a skull subjected to care and attention. Taking care of an abandoned skull, believed to belong to a deceased person without anyone's attention, that probably died without funeral rites or, in any case, fell into oblivion, was thought to give *refrisco* to its soul, which was therefore expected to reciprocate with an exchange of help⁷⁸. Thus, with this singular bond it created between the living and the dead, the cult of the skull merged with and extended the other form of cult of the dead already cultivated in the *terresante*. As in the cult of souls in Purgatory – and indeed even more – also in the cult of the skull there was a strong reciprocity: on one side there was the anonymous skull with its forgotten soul desperately asking for help, on the other there was the faithful who took care of it and,

⁷⁶ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123.

⁷⁷ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.

⁷⁸ PARDO, *L'esperienza popolare della morte* cit., pp. 113-122.

therefore, awaited a reward such as protection, assistance, material favours and graces⁷⁹. To understand the birth of this new cult it is essential to remember at least two important events that marked the history of funerary practices in Naples in the XIX century: A) the transition from burials in the *terresante* under the churches to outdoor cemeteries, which deprived the people of the direct relationship they had with the bodily aspect of death; B) the emptying of the *terresante* and of the mass graves where the bones of the dead had accumulated for centuries. As a consequence of the latest measure, the Fontanelle caves became a huge cemetery that gathered the nameless bones piled up in the *terresante* and in the mass graves. The Fontanelle was already a place where in previous centuries the dead of war and epidemics had been buried *vide infra*⁸⁰. Therefore it now turned into a huge common ossuary where any individuality of the dead was evidently lost. The epidemics – such as those of plague in 1656⁸¹, and cholera in 1836, 1865 and 1884⁸² – had prevented a direct and personalised relationship of the people with their dead. An additional feature was later represented by the Second World War: the missing were countless, and not being able to give burial to their dead implied for the people a twofold suffering, both for death and for the impossibility of mourn the body. Thus it is probable that the adoption of anonymous skulls functioned as a substitute for family members buried anonymously during epidemics or who died in unknown locations during the conflict⁸³. In this context, merging with the antecedent cult of souls in Purgatory, the popular cult of the skull developed and

⁷⁹ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ I. FUSCO, *La peste del 1656-58 nel Regno di Napoli: diffusione e mortalità*, “Popolazione e Storia”, I, 2009, pp. 115-138.

⁸² A. TAGARELLI [et al.], *The Cholera: the Epidemics and their social-demographic features in Southern Italy*, “International Journal of Anthropology”, XV, 2000, pp. 241-253.

⁸³ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

then spread. The effectiveness of the skulls was revealed in their mediating power between this world and the other world. Indeed, through the skulls it was possible to come into contact with the deceased members of the family: they had the power to bring the living in the presence of their loved ones in the other world⁸⁴. Therefore, the abandoned skulls compensated for the lack of direct relationship of the living with their dead: the skull, concrete representation of the soul, became the protagonist of a cult where the anonymous replaced the dear dead, and therefore the unknown skull turned into a dead family member. This cult took root in the *terresante* and other places where there was a large presence of skulls whose identity was unknown such as the hypogea of the church of S. Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, S. Pietro ad Aram, S. Agostino alla Zecca, and the cemetery of Fontanelle⁸⁵. Since it was thought that at least some of these dead died suddenly and did not receive funeral rituals, one of the main reasons for the adoption of the anonymous skulls was to make possible the passage of their souls to Purgatory. After identifying the skull, it became the object of prayers and, if it fulfilled the requests of the faithful, this was cleaned and placed into a small display case named *scarabattola*⁸⁶ (fig. 7). Thus, taking care of the skull was a way of giving *refrisco* to its soul, and the skulls were worshiped similarly to relics or bodies of saints. Not having received the proper funerary and mourning rites, these dead were still seeking for a place in the afterlife; placing them in a display case symbolically represented giving a definitive tomb to these dead, a way of compensating and replacing the missed funeral⁸⁷. According to De Matteis and Niola⁸⁸ placing the skull in the display case also represented the final act and the completion of the adoption of the skull, thus

⁸⁴ DE MATTEIS, NIOLA, *Antropologia delle anime in pena* cit.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

⁸⁸ DE MATTEIS, NIOLA, *Antropologia delle anime in pena* cit.

indicating that it has finally been given a home and a family and, therefore, an identity. In the tradition of placing the skulls in the display cases, one can also glimpse an imitation of the practices adopted by the Neapolitan curia during the urban renewal of the first half of the XX century, whereby the relics found in demolished churches were gathered and exhibited in small cases inside the cathedral of Naples⁸⁹. Indeed, this devotion to abandoned skulls developed in accordance with the traditional formulations of the cult of saints, i.e. the cult of the holy body, of the relics and of the tomb, since according to traditional Christianity, holiness is a quality of both the soul and the body⁹⁰. Even more than in the case of relics of martyrs, the bones had to represent the deceased as much as possible, so the fundamental part of the person was needed, the head⁹¹ and, indeed, the part of the skeleton adopted was usually the skull. In a way similar to the cult of the relics of the saints, the unknown bone remains acted as visible traces of dead people, with the difference that in this case the power to grant salvation was not in the objects themselves, but in the interaction that the living established with them⁹². An important aspect of this cult was that the neglected, nameless dead, being deprived of prayers and other suffrages from relatives and acquaintances, were believed not to be able to leave Purgatory; furthermore, not having received a proper funeral rite, the most unfortunate of them were not even able to enter it⁹³, thus needing even more care. As we shall see, caring for these abandoned souls offered an important advantage to the devotee: the souls of dead relatives, thanks to the suffrages by the survivors, after a given period of time, left Purgatory for Heaven, thereby becoming more distant and less useful; instead,

⁸⁹ Ibidem.

⁹⁰ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.

⁹¹ DE MATTEIS, NIOLA, *Antropologia delle anime in pena* cit.

⁹² Ibidem.

⁹³ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123; ID., *L'esperienza popolare della morte* cit., pp. 113-122.

the endless array of souls of abandoned dead/skulls in desperate need of help allowed for more extensive and durable interactions⁹⁴.

In summary, the popular cult of abandoned skulls was born in second part of the XIX century merging with the previous cult of souls in Purgatory, and lasted until the end of the 1960s, when the ecclesiastical authorities – which only allowed the worship of the remains of saints – banned it. Despite this, although scaled down, the worship still persists today in the places where it was most lively, mostly in the form of an offering of candles and/or flowers⁹⁵(figg. 2, 3, 7).

The “close dead”, the “abandoned dead” and “abandoned skulls”

If we want to use a very schematic subdivision, the following varieties of cult of the dead can be identified in Naples⁹⁶: A) the cult of souls in Purgatory addressed to their own dead, the “close dead”; B) the cult of souls in Purgatory extended to all the dead suffering in Purgatory, thus including the unknown or “abandoned dead”; C) the cult of the skulls, directed towards bones belonging to unknown individuals and believed to represent abandoned souls. Of these worships, the first two were fully recognised by the official religion, and spread widely starting from the beginning of the XVII century. The three categories of dead to which the variants of the cult refer also play different roles in the relationships of the Neapolitan people with the supramundane. The “close dead” are the dead loved ones which have a relatively brief relationship of an unspecified kind with living relatives and acquaintances; the living give suffrage to their souls that, after a certain time, will ascend to Heaven. The

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁵ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.

⁹⁶ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123; *Id.*, *L'esperienza popolare della morte* cit., pp. 113-122.

“abandoned dead”, due to their number and greater need for help, allow for a longer lasting and, therefore, somehow more advantageous relationship with the living⁹⁷. The cult of the skulls concerns skulls thought to be representatives of abandoned souls which are adored as relics of saints; it is believed that worshipping these anonymous remains gives *refrisco* to their souls, which are expected to reciprocate with powerful intermediary or direct help⁹⁸. Below, we see the details of these variants of the cult of the dead and their relationships with the beliefs of the Neapolitan people.

The “close dead”: the cult at a home shrine

The traditional Neapolitans are definitely inclined to cultivate the memory of their own dead. Even today masses are regularly celebrated after death as suffrage for the dearly departed, and the remains of the deceased are honoured at the cemetery. The importance of the cult of one’s dead is confirmed by its repetition in a simplified form in the private sphere, where a small domestic altar is usually set up to commemorate the defuncts. Indeed, in addition to the cult of the mortal remains that once took place in the *terresante* and today in modern cemeteries, the pictures of the dead relatives are placed in a home shrine decorated with flowers, lights and candles and images of sacred figures; this shrine will represent the most daily and immediate relationship with the “close dead” to which the survivors can turn to pray and dialogue. At least as long as their memory is preserved, these close dead will be the ultramundane referents of the living, the daily interlocutors to which a family member can turn for the resolution of problems of everyday life, but also for an

⁹⁷ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.

⁹⁸ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123; ID., *L’esperienza popolare della morte* cit., pp. 113-122.

intercession, when it is believed that only an intervention of the highest spheres of the Sacred can be decisive⁹⁹. This form of mutual relationship will remain in place for some years after the death of the relative, at least as long as it is thought that its soul stays in Purgatory; then the masses in suffrage are progressively reduced in number until they disappear almost completely some years later, when the survivors think that the soul of the dearly departed has left Purgatory for Heaven¹⁰⁰.

The “abandoned dead”: souls in dire need of help

Although devotion to deceased relatives has persisted to this day as part of Catholic doctrine, already in the first decade of the XVII century the worship undergoes a first modulation, and the cult of soul in Purgatory became above all a worship addressed towards the endless host of unknown souls, the “abandoned dead”, that were believed to be in a perennial need for help¹⁰¹. Therefore forgotten souls, stuck in an intermediate afterlife serving a sentence, but precisely for this reason more sensitive to the pain and suffering of the living. Indeed, based on the idea that these dead were in great need of help, in the wills some money was intended for the celebration of masses for these endless hosts of forgotten souls in Purgatory¹⁰². The “abandoned dead”, whether referring to the endless array of neglected souls in the afterlife or to the variant of the cult in which they are identified in unknown skulls, in relational terms allowed a particularly profitable transaction: sharing the state of abandonment and poverty, both of these categories of anonymous dead were perpetually in great need of help and, therefore, they were more likely to reward the devotee with protection and material favours.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

¹⁰¹ BATTIMIELLO, *Il culto delle anime del Purgatorio a Napoli* cit.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*.

The “abandoned dead” on the one hand were seen as an otherworldly projection of people's precariousness, on the other hand they represented a possibility to resolve this precariousness through their power to intercede and intervene in human affairs¹⁰³. Indeed, the interest for “abandoned dead”, found its ultimate autonomy in the new cult of the skulls, which concretely represented them and embodied their sad condition of oblivion and desperate need for help¹⁰⁴.

The “abandoned skull”: a bridge between this and the other world

The anonymous skulls effectively represented these needy spirits from the afterlife, thus acting as an effective mediator between this world and the other world. The institution of Catholic Purgatory did not include the need for material remains for devotion to the dead, but in this cult the bones with their symbolism became objects with strong emotional value that urged care and mercy¹⁰⁵. The subsoil of Naples overflowed with the bones of hundreds of unknown people, many of which were believed to be “badly dead”, i.e. dead without the comfort of mourning rites, and it was precisely in these bones that the people identified the souls to cure¹⁰⁶. In this regard it must be said that, during renovation works the subsoil of the ancient churches of S. Pietro ad Aram and S. Agostino alla Zecca brought to light numerous human remains; the discovery of these bones was accompanied by the suggestion that they represented relics of saints, due to the awareness that in ancient times these places had been inhabited by early Christians and martyrs¹⁰⁷. Martyrdom,

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁶ F. AMIRANTE, *Ritorno. Il culto delle anime pezzentelle*, ShowDesk Publishing, Napoli 2018, pp. 4-18.

¹⁰⁷ CIVITELLI, *Dalla Basilica di San Pietro ad Aram al Cimitero delle Fontanelle* cit.

great epidemics and wars are circumstances in which people died violently or suddenly; their souls all share the same condition of liminality, therefore they are in dire need of help¹⁰⁸. In summary, the reasons underlying the cult of the skulls are complex and manifold. It is very likely that different factors - including epidemics and wars, the change in funeral practices and the consequent reduction of people's contact with the bodies of their own dead, a greater interest in the relics of the saints, the belief that the bone remains found in the city corresponded to dead that may not have received a proper burial, or may have belonged to martyrs - contributed to the birth of this new cult.

Although the state of extreme precariousness is shared by both and, therefore, there is a considerable degree of overlap, there are some differences between the cult of "abandoned dead" and the ultimate cult of "abandoned skulls". Exclusive features of the latter are the following: the spread among the most popular strata of the city; it was a cult limited to Naples, and it was considered unacceptable by the Church; the adoption and veneration of skull/bones like relics; the marked gestural rituality; while in the cult of the abandoned souls in Purgatory the *refrisco* is represented by prayers, masses, and almsgiving – i.e. the classical tools indicated by Catholic doctrine to help souls in Purgatory – in the cult of the skulls, the *refrisco* also consists of material care, such as cleaning and placing the skull in a case.

Origins of the cult of the dead in Naples

The catacombs of Naples, the funerary hypogea of churches and convents as well as the Fontanelle cemetery are all places of memory of past times: the underworld represents the place of the ancestors, their burial site and the meeting place with their souls. It is here that the worship of the dead was born and cultivated.

¹⁰⁸ M. NIOLA, *Anime. Il Purgatorio a Napoli*, Meltemi Editore, Milano 2022.

In these places a particular elaboration of liminality takes shape: in this border area resides those who no longer belong to life, whose bone remains we see and touch, but who are not considered completely dead, as they are placed in a passage area, in the third place of Purgatory [...]¹⁰⁹.

The cult of the dead in Naples has ancient origins dating back to the first Greek-Roman settlements, and then to the birth of the Christian communities; in those remote times a cult of powerful dead was also born: the Christian cult of saints and their powerful relics. These workshops grew in underground cemeteries located outside the urban walls, the catacombs of Naples. Here, the presence of a tomb of a saint or a martyr became the fulcrum around which the catacomb complexes developed¹¹⁰, the best known of which are the catacombs of S. Gennaro, S. Gaudioso and S. Severo¹¹¹. Moreover, in the same district of the city there is another ancient cemetery, the Fontanelle caves¹¹². The entire area comprising these burial sites from the XVII century was called *Sanità* (Health), both because it was considered uncontaminated and healthy, and for the miraculous properties attributed to the presence of the tombs of saints¹¹³.

After the stealing of the remains of S. Gennaro in the IX century, for fear of further thefts, the remains of the other saints buried in the catacombs were moved inside the city walls, and therefore the catacombs remained largely abandoned¹¹⁴. In XVII century the catacombs of S. Gaudioso returned to being a burial

¹⁰⁹ DE MATTEIS, NIOLA, *Antropologia delle anime in pena* cit.

¹¹⁰ M. AMODIO, C. EBANISTA, *Aree funerarie e luoghi di culto in rupe: le cavità artificiali campane tra tarda antichità e medioevo*, "Opera ipogea", I/II, 2008, pp. 117-144.

¹¹¹ GALANTE, *Guida sacra della città di Napoli* cit.

¹¹² CIVITELLI, *Dalla Basilica di San Pietro ad Aram al Cimitero delle Fontanelle* cit.

¹¹³ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

place reserved above all for the corpses of aristocrats and ecclesiastics who were subjected to the practice of the *scolatura* thanks to the presence in the catacombs of sitting scolatoi¹¹⁵ (fig. 8).

Between the XVII and XVIII centuries the quarries of the Fontanelle began to be used as a cemetery when there were no more burial places in the city due to a sudden, unexpected increases in the number of deceased¹¹⁶. So it gathered the dead of the plague epidemic that hit the city in 1656, then it was a site for the collection of bones from the emptying of the *terresante*, and it was used as burial place of the victims of cholera of 1836. Here also lie the bone remains that came to light between 1852 and 1853 during the works for the reconstruction of *via Toledo*, and in 1934 for those of *via Acton*¹¹⁷. The Fontanelle thus also became the cemetery of cemeteries, i.e. the definitive resting place both for those whose individual memory had dissolved – but which had originally been identifiable, such as those previously buried in the *terresante* – and for those who from the beginning had to be buried unidentifiably in improvised mass graves, due to the rapidity of deaths and the high risk of infection¹¹⁸. From the second half of the XIX century onward the Fontanelle became one of the liveliest places for the cult of the skulls.

The shrines of souls in Purgatory

The shrines of Purgatory in Naples are certainly the iteration of the cult of the dead that has left the most important visual trace in the city; furthermore, these shrines are particularly

¹¹⁵ GALANTE, *Guida sacra della città di Napoli* cit.

¹¹⁶ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

significant because they effectively summarise the key points of the cult of Purgatory.

The votive shrines are built and dedicated to a sacred figure often in reference to a specific occasion highlighted by the founder that reports the date of construction of the shrine and his name engraved on a small marble slab, thus allowing the event to be immortalised. The foundation of a shrine has the ability to activate further devotions, thus increasing its importance and therefore that of the founder¹¹⁹. One of the characteristics of the street-shrines in Naples is their bipartite structure: their upper part consists of a tabernacle which houses an image of an official figure of the sacred world such as a saint, the Virgin Mary or Christ, while in the lower part they exhibit a niche dedicated to souls in Purgatory¹²⁰ (fig. 1). Before the sacred figure in the tabernacle, flowers, rosaries and other votive objects are usually placed, while in the niche of Purgatory photos of deceased relatives are frequently found¹²¹. The votive shrine is illuminated mainly in the upper part, while the niche below is provided with one or two little bulbs which give off a dim light. The souls in the niche are always much smaller than the sacred figure in the tabernacle above, and the overall meaning of the scene could be that the action of the sacred figure affects all the defuncts, that its intercession benefits all of them¹²². Actually, in addition to the figurines representing souls in Purgatory, in the niche there are also figures belonging to the sphere of the Sacred itself¹²³ (figg. 1, 9). Indeed, in the niches one can constantly identify: A) the protagonist souls in Purgatory, intermediate figures of the other world, suffering for the expiation of their sins, but moved by hope in eternal salvation; B) the Virgin Mary represented as Our

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁰ AMIRANTE, *Ritorno* cit., pp. 4-18.

¹²¹ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

¹²³ AMIRANTE, *Ritorno* cit., pp. 4-18.



Fig. 8 - A row of scolatoi carved into the stone in the catacombs of S. Gaudioso.



Fig. 9 (A)

Lady of Sorrows and the crucified Christ; they are the official representatives of the Sacred, and account for the final dimension to which the entire composition aspires, Heaven; C) the skull, symbol of death and Purgatory itself (figg. 1, B). The iconography of souls is fairly constant: the old man, the woman with full breasts, the priest with the cocked hat, the soldier and the friar. They are all depicted as naked figures with their lower half engulfed in flames, while the upper half is free (figg. 9D). The soldier with the helmet, who almost certainly died without the possibility of confession and having one's sins forgiven, represents the dead for sudden or violent causes: it symbolises the “badly dead”, the dead that lacked the support of the rites of passage that, due to their perpetual condition of liminality, are particularly in need of help. The presence of the Virgin Mary and Christ on the cross refers to the intercessory action, and therefore to the salvation of souls; indeed, occasionally there are also one or two angels which raise souls from the fire to Heaven. The position of the niche in the context of the entire votive shrine is also significant: it is in an intermediate position, between the sacred figure in tabernacle above and the ground below, as if to indicate the position of souls depicted therein: in Purgatory, therefore halfway between Heaven and earth. Indeed, Purgatory is the intermediate place *par excellence*, equally distant from absolute supramundane grace and the world of the living¹²⁴. But it is a place of terrible suffering, and therefore souls in Purgatory are also between Heaven and Hell: they hope looking at the sky with the upper half of their body out of the flames, while the lower half of the body still suffers the terrible pains of fire. Indeed, as representatives of this intermediate realm, souls in Purgatory are portrayed in an iconography that effectively

¹²⁴ FORNACIARI, GIUFFRÀ, PEZZINI, *Secondary Burial and Mummification Practices* cit., pp. 223-249.



Fig. 9 (B)



Fig. 9 (C)

emphasises both their aspiration to Heaven and their condition of



Fig. 9 (D) as for the previous three - Figurines of the souls in Purgatory. In addition to the protagonist souls, notice the presence in the shrine of Christ on the cross and the Virgin Mary as our Lady of Sorrows (A, B) and a skull (B).

extreme punitive suffering, similar to that of Hell¹²⁵. However, although half engulfed in flames and, therefore, in a condition of atrocious suffering, being aware of their future salvation and the glory of Heaven that awaits them, these souls do not convey real despair. The expression of the faces may now be imploring, now contrite, but still appears serene (figg. 9C-D); the individual figures are arranged neatly in the scene, and their posture is composed and never twisted; their arms are crossed on the chest or in a gesture of prayer or raised upwards in supplication¹²⁶ (figg. 9A-D). Purgatory is a place of waiting and hope; so, the souls in the niche seem to look at the passer-by with the silent request for help. They ask to pray for them and perhaps to have some alms for *refrisco* that would nourish their hope in salvation. The Virgin is often positioned in the background behind the souls and is usually depicted standing, and in immediate relationship with the crucifix. The Virgin, effective intercessor in aid of souls, may appear supplicant with folded hands, or she can mention with her hand to the suffering souls (figg. 9A, B) and, at the same time, she makes a heartfelt appeal to Christ on the cross. The Virgin, “advocate” and protector of penitent souls, was thought to descend into Purgatory every Saturday to dispense *refrisco* to souls and to free those destined to ascent into Heaven¹²⁷. Actually, the presence of the Virgin in the flames of Purgatory was considered unacceptable for the new canons of the Counter-Reformation and, indeed, it is not part of the post-Tridentine iconographic artistic repertoire¹²⁸. Nevertheless, in these unofficial representations the presence of the Virgin among the figurines of souls immersed in fire is definitely allowed.

Some author has glimpsed in the constant presence of a skull in the shrines of Purgatory a symbolic correspondence with the

¹²⁵ PARDO, *L'esperienza popolare della morte* cit., pp. 113-122.

¹²⁶ AMIRANTE, *Ritorno* cit., pp. 4-18.

¹²⁷ L. TURI, *I carmelitani di Puglia e la memoria della Terrasanta*, “Ad Limina”, VI, 2015, pp. 149-180.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

abandoned skulls underlying the homonym cult¹²⁹, thus establishing a close relationship between these two devotions. Indeed, both represent the most material and popular declinations of the cult of souls in Purgatory. Furthermore, the figurines of the souls grouped around Christ is reminiscent of the crucifix on Calvary, a sort of miniature of the installation found in the cemetery of Fontanelle, one of the most frequented seats of the cult of the skulls¹³⁰. In addition, the setting of the *terresante*, another place where the cult of skulls was practiced, may have played a role as a source of inspiration for the shrines of Purgatory, as these underground rooms - somehow themselves suggestive of a purgatorial place - were precisely characterised by the presence of displayed skulls¹³¹.

Conclusion

The cult of the dead in Naples has very ancient origins; it was born when the deceased were buried in underground places outside the city walls, the catacombs of Naples, which also saw the birth of the Christian cult of saints. That of the living and that of the dead were therefore two contiguous realities delimited by the walls of the ancient city. The barriers that separated these two ontological and spatial universes gave way when the saints' relics and tombs entered the late ancient city, and the living and the dead began to share the same places: it was a rupture that also affected the imaginary

¹²⁹ PARDO, *Life, Death and Ambiguity* cit., pp. 103-123.

¹³⁰ VAN LOYEN, *Napoli sepolta* cit. Calvary (from the Latin *Calvariae locus* and later *Calvarium*: "place of the skull") is the hill where, according to the Gospels, Jesus climbed to be crucified. The name derives from the fact of being the place of Adam's burial - thus symbolising the principle of regeneration and resurrection - or from the presence of the skulls of those condemned to death and not buried. The theme is therefore once again the skull which preserves the vital essence of man and the reference to unburied dead.

¹³¹ NIOLA, *Anime* cit.

boundaries that the people had placed between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, between the dead and living. This singular promiscuity of dead and living favoured the emergence of new features in ancient cults. Between the XVIII and XIX centuries new measures were introduced in burial practices which ended up moving the dead to cemeteries outside the city limits. It was therefore a change that, almost like a closing of a cycle, re-proposed the scheme adopted in Naples many centuries earlier.

This article has shown how the funerary customs of Naples are related with a strong religious perspective of the representation of death and the afterworld: after death a new existence awaits the individual in the intermediate afterlife of Purgatory where the fate of the soul is significantly influenced by the living. These beliefs have led to an extraordinary spread and intensity of the cult of Purgatory, declined in different ways in the various historical periods. This worship is summarised effectively in the niches of Purgatory, one of the most material expressions of this cult. For the Neapolitan people these street-shrines have represented the most immediate form of devotion to the defuncts. On the other hand, the bones that came to light in the underground crypts of the churches and in the Fontanelle ossuary, abandoned or forcibly consigned to oblivion gave shape to the popular worship of the skulls cultivated in those same places. Some aspects of these worships survived and, although with reduced liveliness, are still practiced today. In particular, the cult of the dead is still reproduced today by the numerous shrines of souls in Purgatory in the streets of Naples; they are certainly worthy of attention, care and protection, as they are the direct testimony of the strength that the cult of the dead had in this city.

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