

THE HYPOGEA OF THE CHURCHES OF NAPLES: BURIALS AND CULT OF THE DEAD

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ABSTRACT

An interesting mortuary practice widespread in Naples until the second half of the nineteenth century was the one housed in the hypogea located under the floor of churches and convents. These funerary crypts were structured according to two organizational models based on the double burial system: the *terresante* and the *scolatoi*, both of which aimed at favouring the decomposition of the corpses and reaching the state of a skeleton. According to the established procedures, once skeletonization was accomplished, the skulls were usually displayed on a cornice running along the walls of the hypogea, while non-cranial bones were placed in a common ossuary. The foundation of the ritual was the idea of death perceived not as a sudden event but as a long-lasting process, during which the deceased went through a transitional phase, gradually passing from the earthly state to the hereafter. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of these funerary rituals was the liberation of the bones from the earthly element of the flesh, an indispensable condition to allow the definitive passage of the soul into the afterlife. This process also had to be exhibited, and, therefore, in these hypogea the decomposition of the corpse was displayed to visitors. Through the corpse's progressive decomposition, the ritual was intended to visually symbolize the various stages of purification faced by the soul on its path towards the kingdom of the dead, a destination considered reached only when the skeletonization was complete, and the definitive burial carried out. This article briefly reviews the structural organization of these underground sepulchral chambers, the funerary practices held within and the worships which took root and developed within them.

Keywords: *terrasanta; scolatoio; colatoio; Hertz's theory; double burial; Cripta degli Abati; cult of souls in Purgatory; skull cult*

INTRODUCTION

In the eighteenth century, the funerary system of Naples, one of the most populated cities in Europe, was characterized by an almost total absence of outdoor tombs, as the vast majority of burials took place within underground crypts of urban churches [1, 2]. One of the causes for the widespread use of this type of burial was probably the considerable increase in the population resulting in gradual disappearance of outdoor cemeteries, which were replaced by residential buildings [1]. Most of the population was affiliated with a brotherhood and was, therefore, buried in underground hypogea of the religious structure to which the brotherhood belonged [1]. By the end of the eighteenth century, these burial places had become by far the most common type of tomb, thus generating a fearsome promiscuity between the living and the dead. In spite of the Napoleonic edict of Saint Cloud in 1804, which definitely required the abolition of grave sites inside churches and the creation of cemeteries outside the city, this type of burial survived at least until the second half of the nineteenth century. An interesting funerary practice adopted in these hypogea consisted in prolonged treatment of the corpse comprising two separate burial phases, believed to be important to accompany the deceased to the hereafter [3–7]: the first burial was aimed at favouring the skeletonization of the body, in the second one the bone remains were at the end deposited in an ossuary, usually included in the burial chamber. This bipartite treatment of the deceased is, therefore, consistent with the double burial; this is defined as a first burial followed, after a period of time, by the definitive collocation of the remains in a place other than the first tomb [3]. In terms of architecture, it was possible to substantially identify two different kinds of funerary structure in these hypogea: the *terresante* and the *scolatoi*. Although in both cases the aim was the same, i.e. the achievement of skeletonization, their geographical distribution was different: the *terresante* were common only in Naples [5, 6], while the *scolatoi* had a wider diffusion, being present throughout southern Italy [4–7] (however, a few examples have also been documented in northern Italy, and isolated descriptions have also been reported in central Italy) [8, 9]. Although certainly existing in the sixteenth century already [9], the greatest diffusion of these types of burial in Naples occurred in the eighteenth-nineteenth century. Indeed, at the end of the eighteenth century, the *terresante* were regarded the most common type of grave site, accounting for up to two thirds of all burials [2].

Funerary practices based on double burial show a remarkably broad chronological and geographical distribution in the world. The motivations underlying this custom vary between peoples and cultures of different geographic areas

and different times, reflecting sometimes very different instances. Moreover, although the general structure of the practice is constant, the constituent parts and the meaning of this ritual may vary greatly among different peoples. Indeed, the practice of double burial can enclose beliefs that characterize the culture of a given people and, therefore, analysing the components of this ritual can provide useful insights into the study of customs of individual societies. For example, some cases of double burial in archaeological contexts have shown evidence of manipulation of the bodies, such as mutilation, ochre-dyeing and cut marks of bones, to testify complex funerary rituals with characteristics of the rites of passages. Among some peoples the funeral ceremony is not performed after death, but only some time later instead, at the definitive placement of the remains; in these cases, the double burial seems to serve primarily to allow family members to raise enough money to organize the funeral. In other cases, the main function of the double burial seems to be to permit to relatives, thanks to the extended intermediate period after the loss of the loved one, to alleviate the pain and better manage the bereavement period. Since the double burial has as its ultimate goal the preservation of the bones only – instead of the entire body – one of the reasons that can lead to adopt this practice in some societies is that it allows to save on burial spaces. Moreover, the practice of double burial has been documented in some populations as a custom aimed at ascertaining the definitive death of the individual through the actual decomposition of the body, this for fear of transformation of the deceased into a dangerous “undead”. On the other hand, the exhumation and recognition of the body, and its transfer to a different location, are part of a well-known tradition of the Catholic Church reserved for the “uncorrupted bodies” of the saints. Finally, in some ancient cultures, the double burial was used to obtain skulls and bones which could therefore become objects of adoration as sacred symbols of the ancestors.

As we shall see, the double burial in Naples encloses several of these instances; among these, the ascertainment of the decomposition of the body – with its symbolic meaning – certainly is the element most characteristic of this practice in Naples as part of a deeply religious vision of death as a prelude to a new existence of the deceased in the afterlife. Furthermore, this religious perspective is also at the basis of the cults that flourished in the funerary hypogea where double burial was performed. The possibility to explore these hypogea nowadays, as they are still well preserved in several churches of Naples, therefore represents a valuable opportunity for study and is an interesting source of investigation into Neapolitan culture. Here, these distinctive funerary structures and rituals connected with them are reviewed with a brief discussion on their architectural organization and the forms of worship that flourished there.

DEATH AS A TRANSITIONAL PHASE AND DOUBLE BURIAL

According to the anthropologist Robert Hertz, death can be seen as a long-lasting phenomenon – after death the deceased goes through a transitional state in which it stays still in close connection with the earthly world, somehow as if it were dead, but not completely; this transitional 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 that of the dead [3]. The key notion of the theory of Hertz is that death, a painful and rapid tear, proceeds with different rhythms and durations: the time of the event of dying, which is lightning-fast, does not progress at the same pace as the inner work of the conscience that tries to assimilate the fact. Thus, death is not an instantaneous event that is consumed in the extinguishing of a sigh but a duration instead, a long and gradual process, passage from one state of existence to another; to be regarded, therefore, as a wide transition that begins at the cessation of vital functions and continues after this event [3]. For the peoples of Borneo studied by Hertz, the difficult, dangerous passage of the soul of the deceased to the kingdom of the ancestors had to be accompanied by taking special care of the corpse: the initial arrangement of the body, buried or exposed, was provisional; this initial funeral ceremony marked the beginning of a liminal phase in which the deceased, even if no longer alive, still wandered threateningly like an unsettled shadow in the earthly world. The relatives, contaminated by this impure contact, shared in part the condition of the deceased by experiencing mourning and isolation. With the second burial, the corpse, now reduced to bones, found its stable and definitive location next to the remains of the deceased ancestors. At the same time, the path of the soul was considered complete, finally aggregated to the kingdom of the dead; the relatives, freed from contacts with dangerous forces, could now put an end to their mournful isolation, thus reintegrating into the community [3].

According to the theories of Hertz, the transitional state involves both the body of the deceased and its soul, as well as the survivors involved in mourning. These three subjects are interdependent on each other: the survivors are responsible for the funerary rituals to which the corpse is subjected; in turn, the treatment of the corpse affects the fate of the soul; finally, the soul of the deceased is thought to have the power to influence the life of the survivors. As a symmetry is thought to exist between the physical state of the body and its soul, the transformations of the corpse of the deceased during decomposition are mirrored in the state of the soul, and vice versa [3].

These concepts are well embodied in the ritual of the double burial still practiced today in the modern cemeteries of Naples. It consists in an initial inhumation of the body, followed by exhumation some years after; at that time, it is checked that the bones are dried, then the remains undergo a second burial in their definitive location [4–6]. At the exhumation, in which relatives also participate, the coffin is opened by the employees of the cemetery, and it is checked that the bones are completely dry; in this case the skeleton is placed on a table, and the relatives may help the employees to free the skeleton from the shreds of clothes and from any residues of decomposition; it is washed first with soap and water, and then “disinfected” with rags soaked in alcohol that the relatives brought, together with mothballs with which the corpse is sprinkled and a sheet which acts as an envelope for the body of the dead in its new condition. Then the clean skeleton, similar to a sacred object, is therefore moved to its new burial site, generally located in a place far from the first tomb, with a ceremony that, in reduced scale, reproduces that of the funeral that accompanied the dead to its first grave. Here the dry bones, carefully wrapped in the sheet that will be periodically changed, will at intervals be dusted and scrubbed by the employees of the cemetery with rags soaked in alcohol. This latter part of the ritual is thought to be important for the soul of the deceased to maintain a good disposition towards relatives [5]. It is interesting to note that, as a whole, the preservation and care of bones as representatives of the soul configures aspects attributable to a real cult of bone remains.

Based on the above, it is clear that, to be accomplished, the ritual of the double burial necessarily requires a dry skeleton, i.e., a condition of permanent stability of the body destined for eternity: only when the skeletonization is complete can the final burial be carried out, and the eternal rest of the deceased be granted. According to this model, a close relationship exists between the physical state of the corpse and the soul: through the decomposition of the contaminating element represented by the flesh, the complete liberation of the bones – the symbol of purity and eternity – is achieved. At this moment the soul is purified so that secondary burial can take place, and the deceased can be considered definitively landed in the kingdom of the dead; there, it reunites with its ancestors, thus becoming a benevolent soul to pray to domestic altars, and whose intercession can be expected [4–6].

Therefore, the exhumation/recognition of the deceased represents a critical moment in the ritual of the double burial: if large parts of soft tissues are still present, the definitive burial will have to be postponed, and one must therefore deduce that the soul has not yet found peace in the hereafter [5–7]. It is in fact assumed that the dead which, once exhumed, still show evident signs of

ongoing putrefaction, or whose bones are judged not to be sufficiently clear, are “badly dead”, souls which still wander restlessly on this world, and for whose liberation one can only hope by repeating the burial ritual that favours their transit [5]. This unfavourable eventuality would therefore also suggest the need for further care and prayers by relatives for the deceased, still engaged in the hard journey towards the afterlife. So, the duration and outcome of the transitional period of the dead seem to be strictly dependent on the execution of the rituals of double burial, the living being able to concretely influence the fate of the deceased through the correct fulfilment of the funerary rituals [4–7]. Therefore, the funeral ceremony associated with the final burial serves not only to commemorate the departure of the deceased but also to emphasize that the passage into the afterlife had successfully taken place.

One might wonder why these practices – and also the concepts related to them – have taken root and have survived in Naples to the present day. Death was clearly experienced by the survivors as a painful loss but was considered an indispensable event to allow the soul to pass from the earthly world to the otherworld; probably, death felt as a slow process and a gradual transition, on the one hand, allowed the relatives to mitigate the psychological laceration immediately following death, on the other hand, the transitional state allowed the survivors to establish a strong and unprecedented relationship with the deceased in its new condition [6], in which it participated in both the earthly and the otherworldly dimensions. As we shall see later, this strong relationship between the living and the dead underlies the birth of the cults associated with death [10].

In summary, according to the concepts of death as a long-lasting transition and double burial, death can be seen as a slow process and a gradual transformation concerning both the body and the soul during which the corpse is progressively disintegrating, and, at same time, the soul purifies itself. This process is dictated by the duration of the decomposition and ends with the definitive burial of the bone remains; this sanctions the definitive passage and delivers the soul of the deceased to the eternity of the other world. According to this model, there is a definite symmetry between the condition of the body and that of the soul, the fate of the corpse with its progressive transformations marking the path of the soul of the deceased towards the hereafter [5].

As evidence of the central importance attributed to the correct execution of burial rituals, in the Naples of the eighteenth-nineteenth century, there were brotherhoods involved in charitable practices which offered burial in the *terresante* they managed to the marginalized, vagrants and poor to whom, otherwise, a proper burial would not have been granted (one of these congregations was

the brotherhood of Santa Maria dell'Orazione e Morte, called Verdi dello Spirito Santo) [1]. This because it was definitely felt that the appropriate rituals linked to the burial of the body were decisive for the fate and well-being of the soul in the afterlife [4, 5].

THE TERRESANTE AND SCOLATOI

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, there were more than 300 churches in Naples; most of them had underground tombs under their floors, basically of the following types [2]: (a) the mass grave, represented by a pit of a few meters depth, which was enough to accommodate the bodies; (b) the family tomb, located at a side chapel of a church, 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 to visit the dead and pray for them. Generally there was a central corridor that divided the floor into several parts occupied by basins filled with decompacted earth, called “giardinetti” (little gardens) where bodies were superficially buried (Figures 1–5). To accommodate new dead, the corpses were often exhumed from the “giardinetti” and exposed to air in niches present along the walls of the hypogeum, thus favouring their more rapid decomposition (Figure 3); (d) the *scolatoi* were really similar underground chambers, the only differences being that the “giardinetti” were absent, and the niches were provided with masonry seats, each one with a hole in the centre; the corpse was placed to drain in the niche 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 (Figures 6, 7) [4–7].

So, both the *terresante* and the *scolatoi* had the purpose of favouring the skeletonization of the dead. In the *terresante*, the corpse was left buried in the “giardinetti” to begin decomposition and cause the body to lose the bulk of the liquids; when the corpse was partly dry, it could be moved into a niche, where decomposition continued until the skeletal stage was reached [1, 2, 4–6]. In the case of the *scolatoi*, the corpse was left on the masonry seat until the skeletonization occurred, usually without any previous treatment [4–7]. Usually, in the middle of chambers which housed both the *terresante* and the *scolatoi* there was an ossuary represented by a pit closed by a grate, intended for the preservation of bone remains (Figures 1, 8 A, B) [1, 2, 4–7]. Often, there was also an altar to testify that religious services, such as funeral ceremonies and suffrage masses by the relatives, were celebrated in these hypogea

(Figures 2, 4, 5) [5, 6]. 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 as the symbol of the individuality of the deceased was displayed on a masonry cornice above the niches (Figures 1, 3), whereas non-cranial bones were deposited within the common ossuary. Based on these considerations, it appears clear that the burial apparatus adopted in the *terresante* and the *scolatoi* is completely consistent with the model of the double burial: the first part of the ritual aimed at favouring the decomposition up to complete skeletonization, followed by the exposure/preservation of the bone remains. On the other hand, the exhibition of the corpse in the niches would have a deeply symbolic meaning: in accordance with the principle of symmetry between the condition of the body and that of the soul, the exhibition of the progressive cadaverous decomposition is seen as the metaphorical representation of the hard journey of the soul towards the afterworld [5]. The change from an individual to a collective burial location in these hypogea is also significant. While during the transition phase the deceased stands alone in the niche of the funerary room, after the secondary burial the soul – symbolized by the dry bones – is no longer isolated but is now reunited with its ancestors in the kingdom of the dead symbolized by the common ossuary.

Probably the long manipulation to which the corpses were subjected in these hypogea was also functional to a gradual dissolution of the ties that bound the survivors to the deceased. Throughout this treatment process, relatives and acquaintances were possibly engaged in visits and prayers as well as in providing care for the corpse and checking that the skeletonization of the body occurred. Indeed, this last event, on the one hand, allowed the final burial of the bone remains, thus ensuring the definitive passage of the deceased to the hereafter; on the other hand, it also freed the survivors from the obligation of mourning [3–5].

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. On the other hand, as we shall see, these spaces corresponded to the needs of the cult of the dead which had a great following in Naples.



Figure 1. Typical structural organization of a *terrasanta*: a vaulted room with four “giardinetti”, a central corridor and niches; above the latter a ledge for the laying of the skulls runs along the walls; in the middle of the corridor one can see the grate that gives access to the ossuary below. (Church of Santa Luciella, Naples)



Figure 2. Two large “giardinetti” separated by a central corridor with two trapdoors closed by marble slabs, possibly leading to the ossuary below (this is accessible through an opening with a grate, visible at another point of the corridor). In the back of the hypogeum, in a large niche, there is an altar with some exposed skulls and votive objects on it. (Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, Naples)



Figure 3. A niche interposed between two “giardinetti” surmounted by a cornice with several skulls exposed above. Inside the niche, the corpse was exposed to complete its decomposition (it is not clear how the body could remain standing in the niche; one possibility could be that it was kept in a slightly leaning case). Note the numerous ex-votos on the wall testifying graces received; their presence possibly contributed to reinforcing and self-perpetuating the cult of the dead. (Church of Santa Luciella, Naples)



Figure 4. Altar with an overlying fresco depicting the deposition of Christ. Below and on the sides, part of two “giardinetti” and niches are visible. The corpses were left buried in the “giardinetti” for a limited period, probably no more than 6–8 months, after which they could be moved to the niches as an “ornament” of the burial chamber (4, 5). (Church of Santa Luciella, Naples)



Figure 5. Four “giardinetti” separated by two intersecting corridors. At the end of the hypogeum, there is an altar of polychrome marbles with a high relief above depicting the deposition of Christ. In these chambers funeral ceremonies and masses in memory of the dead were celebrated. (Church of the Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini, Naples)





Figures 6. A row of sitting *scolatoi* within niches along the hypogeum wall (A, B) equipped with a seat with a hole in the centre (C). Between a niche and another, there are metal attachments (B, arrows) for an object (probably a rod or a rope) that was supposed to prevent the corpses from falling forward. Evident signs of recent restoration interventions are detectable in this room. In particular, the drainage system used for the outflow of cadaveric liquids is no longer detectable. (Church of San Severo al Pendino, Naples)



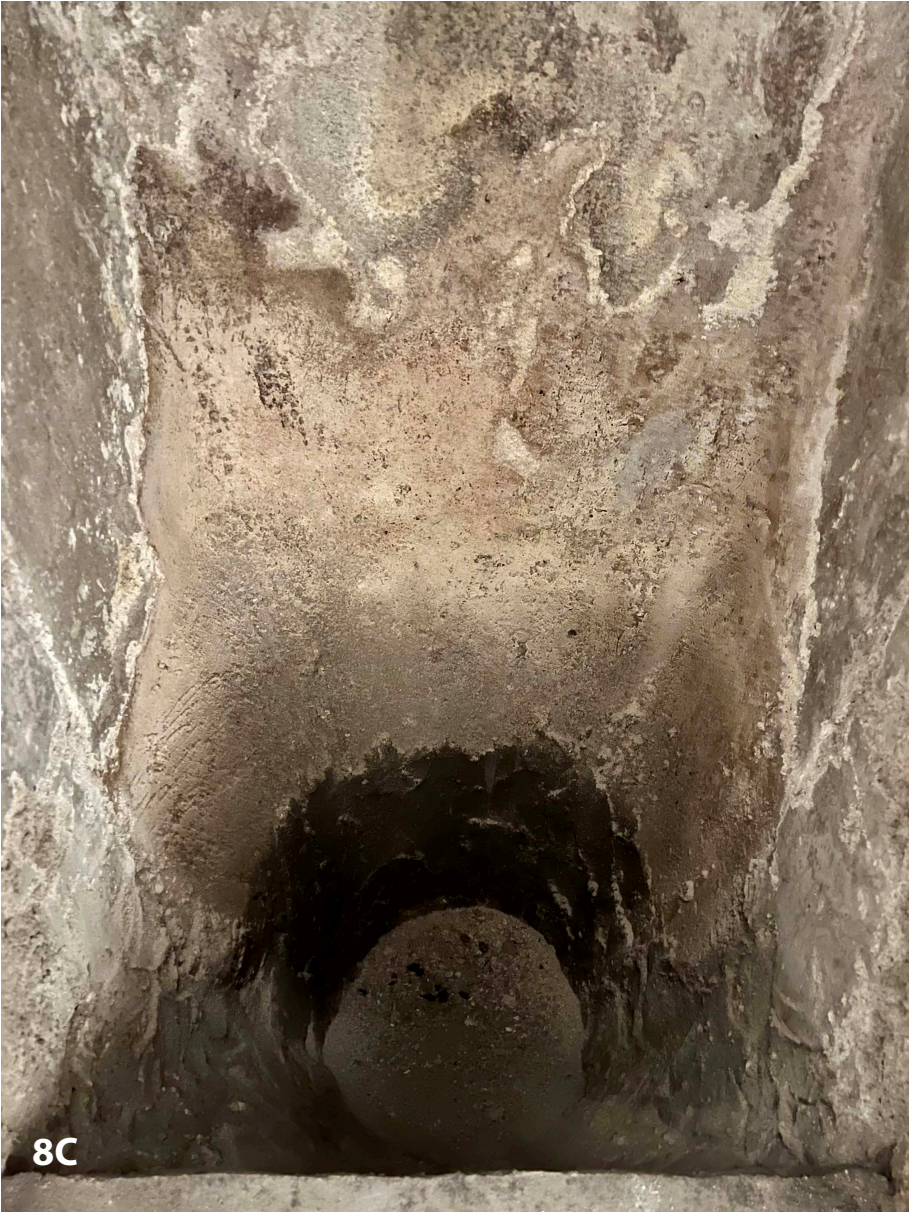
Figure 7. Hypogeal funerary chamber with sitting *scolatoi* represented by niches equipped with simple masonry structures featuring a seat with a hole in the centre; the latter is connected with a compartment below in which a container could be inserted for the collection of the cadaveric liquids. (Convent of the Clarisse, Castello Aragonese, Ischia, Naples)



8A



8B







8E

Figures 8. A double-flight staircase leads to this hypogeum featuring a continuous row of *scolatoi* represented by niches with a square profile (A, B); a grate gives access to the ossuary below (A, B); there are no seats or holes in the bottom of the niches (C). On the posterior wall of the niche, the metal attachments are visible (arrows), probably for a metal bracket, a hook or a rope to keep the corpse (D). Above the niches there is a continuous shelf for laying of skulls (E). (Cripta degli Abati; Church of Sant'Anna dei Lombardi, Naples)

The *scolatoi* of the Cripta degli Abati in the Church of Sant'Anna dei Lombardi in Naples

The Church of Sant'Anna dei Lombardi, founded in 1411, houses a large hypogeum called Cripta degli Abati because the abbots of the Olivetan monastery to which the church belonged were buried in this underground chamber. It is thought that the hypogeum served this function until the suppression of the Olivetan monastery in 1799. The following description refers to the current state of the crypt, which is the result of various restoration interventions carried out over time. Access to the crypt is located behind the main altar of the church via an imposing double flight of stairs that leads to an elliptical chamber. The walls of the whole chamber appear decorated with frescoes depicting a forest with the Calvary scene with the crucifixion of Christ in the centre (Figures 8 A, B). Along the walls there is a continuous row of 33 niches with a square profile intended for the draining of the bodies (Figure 8B); each niche measures 172 cm high, 52 cm wide and 74 cm deep. This type of *scolatoi* differs from the usual ones: in its lower part, the niche is anteriorly closed by a masonry wall 63 cm high; the inside of the niche is squared above while it is concave below; there is no seat and there is no hole in the bottom of the niche for the outflow of cadaveric liquids (Figure 8C). As there is no seat, it is likely that the corpses were placed upright, secured to the posterior wall of the niche by a device whose metal attachments are still visible (Figure 8D). This possibility is supported by the height at which the attachments are placed on the posterior wall of the niche, which is consistent with a support system placed at the height of the upper chest or the neck, probably a metal bracket or a rope placed under the armpits of the corpse; the possibility of a hook stuck in the nape of the neck has also been hypothesized [11]. Above the niches there is a continuous shelf with numerous skulls displayed above; each skull is enclosed in a glass and metal case (Figures 8 B, E). In the centre of the room, there is a grate on the floor that provides access to the ossuary below (Figures 8 A, B). There are no “giardinetti”; therefore, it is conceivable that the entire process of draining took place inside the niches where the corpses were placed, without any previous treatment. The very peculiarity of these *scolatoi* is the absence of seats, thus configuring a type of “vertical” structure. The *scolatoi* (or *colatoi*; the terms are derived from the Latin word *colum* – drain) are usually classified as: (a) the “sitting” type, equipped with a masonry seat with a hole in the centre, is the most common, being widespread throughout southern Italy; it was aimed for draining and decomposition of the dead placed in a sitting position to drain the liquids produced by putrefaction; (b) the “horizontal” type,

used mostly in Sicily, was intended for mummification; this process took place through dehydration due to slow loss of fluids through the skin of the dead placed on a horizontal grid made of wood or ceramic tubules, under ventilation conditions and constant room temperature [5–7]. In this regard, it must be said that occasionally, due to the occurrence of favourable environmental conditions, even the corpses treated in the *terresante* or in the “sitting-type” *scolatoi* could undergo dehydration rather than decomposition, thereby resulting in a mummy instead of a skeleton [6].

“Vertical” *scolatoi* like the ones shown here have rarely been reported in the literature. An example of a vertical type of structure with the draining function has been described in the crypt belonging to the brotherhood of the SS. Sacramento in the Chiesa Madre, in Tusa (Messina), believed to be used for preliminary draining of corpses before being moved to “sitting” *scolatoi* [5, 7]. Unfortunately, the lack of pictures prevents a comparison with the *scolatoi* described here.

The absence of an outflow system and of the hole itself in these *scolatoi* is unexpected; one option could be that the cadaveric liquids were collected in a container placed at the bottom of the niche which was emptied from time to time; however, there is currently no trace or documentation of these containers. Finally, it cannot be excluded with absolute certainty that the niches were intended to house already “drained” or partially dried corpses, the drainage process having taken place elsewhere. Obviously, only future research and new insights could answer these questions.

THE HYPOGEAL BURIALS AND THE PURGATORY

One of the great advantages of the *terresante* and the *scolatoi*, which probably contributed to promoting their wide diffusion in Naples, was that of avoiding the promiscuity of the mass grave and allowing to prolong the contact of the survivors with the deceased, easily identifiable in the “giardinetti” or in the niches [1]. Indeed, the burial system adopted in these hypogea allowed the celebration of the memory and the individuality of the dead; relatives and acquaintances could be welcomed into the hypogea to pray for the deceased and take care of his body. One might wonder why such complex body treatment was used in the *terresante* which, as we have seen, included the transfer of only partially dried bodies from the “giardinetti” to the niches to complete their decomposition. One reason could be the chronic lack of space in the sepulchral areas of Naples [10], which forced the premature exhumation of the corpses to make room for new dead. As it was necessary to guarantee equal treatment to

all members of the brotherhood, a system was needed that ensured a turnover of corpses by making room for new dead; therefore, speeding up the skeletonization of the bodies in the niches was functional to an economy of space, thus facilitating the final part of the practice, the gathering and the definitive storing of the bones in the ossuary. Another reason could be that we wanted to witness the decomposition, to control the slow process of decay which made the deceased a participant simultaneously in two dimensions, that of the living and that of the dead [6], and thus participate in the transition process that the defunct undergoes, up to the exposure of the bones, symbol of the successful liberation of the soul [4–7]. Indeed, it can be imagined that contemplating a decaying dead whose bones gradually appear, for a visitor could give the sensation of being progressively relating to the soul of the deceased and, therefore, with the immaterial world of the afterlife. Furthermore, the display of corpses and bones corresponded to the requests of the Catholic Reformation which employed terrifying images of death as inspiration for “*meditatio mortis*” and encouraged the cult of Purgatory whose iconographic representation was made up of macabre images [1, 2, 10].

According to the notions of long-lasting death and double burial, the Catholic Purgatory – a place where the souls, after a temporary suffering due to expiation of their sins, are destined for Heaven – could be regarded as an extension of the concept of death as gradual transition, a further preparatory period of the soul preceding its final liberation: the soul, having gained access to the world of the afterlife, continues its purification in Purgatory, a phase necessary for the final admission into Heaven [4–7]. Therefore, one could think that the process of purification after death would take place in two stages. The first corresponds to the transitional period in which the sufferings of the soul appear as a consequence of the transitory state in which the soul lies [6]; in this phase one could imagine that, during decomposition, the soul painfully purifies itself by progressively eliminating the contaminating element represented by the flesh [3]. This is in accordance with the principle of symmetry between the soul and the corpse where the process of spiritual transition of the soul is as unpleasant as the decomposition of the flesh. In the next step of spiritual evolution, the soul, definitively freed from the body, purifies itself in Purgatory; sufferings are now connected with the necessary atonement for the sins committed during earthly existence [6].

As we have seen, the living are actively involved after the first burial with rituals aimed at remembering the deceased and prayers; after the definitive burial of the bone remains, suffrages will be given to the deceased for the well-being of the soul; now it is in Purgatory and needs the sufferings connected

with the purification of sins to be alleviated and shortened by the suffrages of the living [4, 5]. This notion is another important point on which the cult of the dead is founded.

In short, Purgatory could be seen as a place of purification halfway between earth and Heaven, an intermediate realm of the otherworld. Due to participation of the purging soul in both the earthly and the otherworldly spheres and the establishment of close relationships with the survivors [6], it closely recalls the transitional state of the deceased. 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. This relationship of dependence between the deceased and the living is at the basis of the devotion to the souls in Purgatory and of the cult of skulls which took root and flourished in the *terresante*.

The cult of the souls in Purgatory

The practice of praying for the souls in Purgatory extended at least as far back as the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which definitively reaffirmed the existence of Purgatory and reinforced the notion that the souls therein are helped by the suffrages of the faithful which could alleviate and shorten the time of the sufferings before the ascent to Heaven [10]. Based on the idea that there was a need for suffrages to help souls, rich and powerful noblemen left a considerable amount of the inheritance to celebrate masses for the souls in Purgatory, according to the “fellowship” principle – an action taken to favour the ascent of a penitent soul to Heaven will be rewarded by the latter through prayers for the soul of the devotee [10]. 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 [4–6].

In Naples, the cult of souls in Purgatory had an extraordinary following and found its own specificities; it grew and had its seats within the sepulchral hypogea of the churches where the people gathered for new funerals, commemorations and to pray for their dead. Descending into an ecclesiastical hypogeum whose walls were crowded with corpses and skulls really had to suggest to people to enter Purgatory [10]; therefore, it is likely that the great diffusion of these funerary structures favoured and strengthened the cult of the souls in Purgatory so deeply felt in Naples. Probably the cult flourished because, while the souls of the heavenly spheres were regarded unreachable, those of the Purgatory were perceived as relatively close to the living, as Purgatory was considered to represent the lowest level of the Sacred, nearer to the earthly sphere [4].

Besides, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, this cult merged with the worship of the unknown human remains preserved within common ossuaries and hypogea of the churches of Naples, finding its characteristic specificity in the popular devotion to individual skulls [10].

The Neapolitan skull cult

In the modern age, Naples was hit by two serious health issues that marked its history – the plague epidemic that struck the city in 1656 and the cholera epidemic of 1836. Following the latter, the government ordered the emptying of all the ecclesiastic hypogea whose bone remains were stacked in the cave of the Sanità district, which therefore became a huge common ossuary where any individuality of the dead was evidently lost [10]. On the other hand, the epidemics prevented a direct and personalized relationship of the people with their dead. Moreover, a subsequent cholera epidemic occurred in 1884. An additional feature was later represented by the consequences of the Second World War; the missing were countless, and not being able to give a burial to their dead implied for the people a twofold suffering, both for the death and for the impossibility of mourn the body. In this context, the popular cult of the skull developed and then flourished. Indeed, the abandoned skulls compensated for these issues: the skull, a 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 with a large presence of skulls of unknown identity (among them the hypogea of the churches of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco and of San Pietro ad Aram; the Cemetery of Fontanelle). The skulls of the anonymous, forgotten dead – thus believed to be devoid of the comfort of memory and the prayers of relatives – were “adopted” by ordinary people and became objects of personal devotion in which the faithful was the guardian of both the skull and the soul of the dead [2, 10]. On the other hand, this cult also closely recapitulated the duty of almsgiving for the poor – just as it was necessary to give alms to the poor and marginalized of the earth, so it was essential to care for the abandoned and forgotten souls of the other world [10].

With the 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 existing in the *terresante*, that one of the souls in Purgatory [2]. As in the latter, the cult of the skull also included strong reciprocity: on one side, there was the anonymous skull with its forgotten soul asking for help to overcome the sufferings of purification and ascend to Heaven, on the other, there was the faithful who prayed for it and, therefore, awaited a reward [10, 12]. So, the devotee offered

prayers with the purpose of obtaining protection, material favours and graces, these anonymous skulls being regarded as highly valuable intermediators between the world here, the hereafter and the spheres of the Sacred [10].

The cult of unknown human remains originated at the end of the nineteenth century 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, the cult remained quite active until 1980, when many places of worship were closed following an earthquake that seriously hit the city; in fact, some worship still persists today in the places where this cult was most lively, mostly in the form of an offering of candles and flowers (Figure 2).

CONCLUSION

The cult of the dead in Naples has very ancient origins dating back to the first Greek-Roman settlements, and then to the birth of the Christian communities with their burials in underground places outside the urban walls, the catacombs of Naples; here the Christian cult of saints was born, associated with the worship of their mortal remains. Thus, in the ancient city, the boundaries of the world of the living and those of the dead were kept strictly separated. With an opposite attitude, in the late ancient city, the barriers that separated these two worlds gave way, so that the burials in Naples took place mostly within the city, in the hypogea of churches and convents. This generated a singular promiscuity of the dead and the living and favoured the emergence of new features in ancient cults. This article has shown how the hypogeal spaces of the churches of Naples, today converted to public monuments, have hosted a number of funerary practices, rituals, cults and beliefs focused on the dead and the hereafter in the not distant past. These have been deeply rooted in the Neapolitan culture and their stories appear to be interrelated with each other. Some of these practices, rituals and devotions have survived and, although in different ways and with reduced vitality, are still practiced today. The cult of the dead in Naples involves notable religious, historical and architectural elements and, many centuries after its birth, continues to represent an interesting source of reflection, study and research.

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