

Letter

Cadaverous Decomposition as a Representation of the Soul's Journey. Anthropological Evidence of a Funerary Ritual

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Abstract: Our archaeological and anthropological investigations carried out inside the Crypt of the Franciscan Monastery in Azzio (Varese, Northern Italy) allowed us to discover a singular funerary practice of Franciscan friars. It consisted of a secondary burial practice.

Keywords: secondary burial practice; Franciscan order; archaeological and anthropological investigations

Our archaeological and anthropological investigations conducted inside the Crypt of the Franciscan Monastery in Azzio (Varese, Northern Italy) allowed us to discover a singular funerary practice. The crypt, perfectly inserted into the construction plans, was built in 1608, during the edification of the new church of the Monastery, the St. Anthony Church. When we removed the heavy stone placed in the floor near the high altar of the church, we found a funerary chamber: a hypogeal elliptic room (3.70 × 2.95 m) with a vaulted ceiling. In the wall, sixteen semi-circular niches with a seat were visible and twelve of them contained human bones. On the opposite side of the stairway access, there was a small altar topped by a kiosk, where three skulls were placed. Our archaeological investigation began with the removal of the fragments that originally closed the niches from the floor masonry. After this investigation, we noted another heavy stone in the centre of the crypt floor. The engraved inscription “SEPULCRVM—FRATRUM” signalled another underground burial chamber. The opening of the trapdoor allowed us to note the presence of a common ossuary (Licata and Rossetti 2017, pp. 272–74). According to the archaeological and anthropological data, we could reconstruct the ancient depositional ritual adopted by the Franciscan friars in Azzio. When a friar died, his body was carried down to the first burial chamber and seated in a niche that then was walled (Figure 1). After the decomposition of the body, the skeletal remains of the monk were transferred into the second burial chamber, the common ossuary. In several cases, the skull, symbol of the individual, was placed on the altar or on a shelf of the burial chamber. This type of burial recalls the “sitting colatoios” (Pezzini 2006, pp. 897–924), largely present in the Southern Italy. This funerary ritual is named “secondary burial” and carries a deep anthropological meaning, intended to symbolise the soul’s journey to the afterlife. As a critical moment, the putrefying corpses could have represented the catholic notion of purgatory. With the conclusion of the decomposition process, demonstrated by the skeletonization of the corpse, it was possible to establish that passage to the afterlife had occurred and to proclaim the end of the time of mourning (Fornaciari et al. 2007, pp. 11–49). It is interesting to note that even in contemporary times, in Naples there are funerary practices that recall the ancient ritual of secondary burial. After a certain period following death, the coffin is opened and the bones are transferred to a different burial place with a funeral ceremony (Hertz 1994, pp. 1–275).



Figure 1. Burial niche (n.3) of the Crypt.

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