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PURGATORY, ICONIZATION OF SUFFERING, AND DEVOTIONAL ASPECTS

ČISTILIŠTE, IKONIZACIJA PATNJE I POBOŽNI ASPEKTI

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SUMMARY

Purgatory is a relatively recent theological innovation in the geography of the otherworld. It was associated with a different vision of death centred on the fear of bodily corruption and body-soul dialogue, and a distinctive attitude towards the macabre. Since its affirmation, Purgatory appeared as an in-between, transitory dimension closely connected with the earth, where purging souls were allowed to dialogue with the living, as if they could prolong their earthly life there. Combining pain with the wait for liberation in Heaven, Purgatory was therefore an intermediate place of both suffering and hope for the coveted bliss. The settlement of Purgatory had the effect of reducing the fear of eternal damnation, and therefore, the terror of Hell was replaced by that of one's own death and the consequent decomposition of one's body. The cult of Purgatory spread in the 17th century, based on the possibility of relieving the suffering of the dead through the suffrages of the living. This article is about the beliefs, themes, and customs related to Purgatory, focusing above all on the numerous pieces of evidence coming from Naples, where the worship of Purgatory was particularly intense and took on peculiar characteristics. An attempt is made to analyse the most popular aspects of the cult and the testimonies concerning it, which today remain represented by persistent traces of the cult of the skulls, the presence of urban votive shrines, and modern funerary practices based on double burial.

Keywords: *Purgatory, cult of the dead, cult of souls in Purgatory, Gisleni's tomb, Triumph of Death, transi tomb, double burial, votive shrines*

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Introduction

The birth of Purgatory allowed the establishment of an exchange relationship between the living and the dead, which had not been officially regularised until then. However, although the acceptance of the doctrine of Purgatory occurred in 1274, the cult of souls in Purgatory spread only from the beginning of the 17th century (Le Goff, 1981). It has its roots in the Tridentine Church, which formalised the possibility of the living helping the souls of the dead through suffrages, traditionally represented by prayers, masses, almsgiving, and good works. However, a reward was expected from the dead: the souls of Purgatory, once ascended into heaven, would have prayed for those who had helped them (Amirante, 2018). Therefore, in the post-Tridentine age the living and the dead that are paying for their sins in Purgatory are in a close reciprocal relationship: the living can influence the dead in Purgatory through suffrages, thus alleviating their pain and shortening their stay there, and the souls in Purgatory have the power to reciprocate the help to the living who have offered suffrages in their favour, thus establishing a exchange from which both penitent souls and the living benefit. Furthermore, the good deeds of the living would encourage similar actions by other people, and thus also reduce their future post-mortem punishment (Welch, 2013). In short, the system of solidarity based on the reversibility of merits through Purgatory has become an endless circular chain of perfect reciprocity (Le Goff, 1981).

The present article addresses some cultural, artistic, and devotional aspects related to Purgatory, exploring beliefs, themes, and practices with a specific focus on the extensive evidence from Naples, where the cult of Purgatory took on unique characteristics and was intimately linked to peculiar mortuary customs and burial rituals.

Late medieval vision of death, Purgatory, and development of macabre imagery

With the establishment of Purgatory, the approach of the living to the world of the dead certainly contributed to the development of a new sensitivity towards death and to the affirmation of the macabre. When Purgatory was accepted as doctrine, anxiety about the soul's punishment after death created a greater focus on death and the consequent decomposition of the body (Sandeno, 1997); macabre images of decay were added to the sacred repertoire as a means of calling the faithful to a more rigorous morality (Frugoni, 2017; Frugoni & Facchinetti, 2016). According to the new vision of the afterword, no person, unless surrounded by a reputation of sanctity, could directly aspire to bliss without first a period of purifi-

cation for one's sins in Purgatory. As a result of the Church's acceptance of Purgatory, Hell became less fearful to people's imagination and was replaced by the fear of one's death (Sandeno, 1997). The decay of the body was not seen as a natural process; it was viewed as the body's punishment for one's sins. Indeed, it was believed that decomposition did not come from earthworms, but from worms of sin dwelling within the body (Sandeno, 1997). Thus, the changing emphasis of the religious spirit on more gruesome aspects certainly influenced the development of the macabre (Sandeno, 1997). Indeed, the representation of physical decomposition of the body had notable iconographic success starting from the 14th century, a moment of concomitant affirmation of Purgatory (Scaramella, 1991). These depictions were mainly intended to elicit fear and disgust, and to arouse contempt for vices, and therefore the desire to embrace repentance and lead a righteous life. A further factor that contributed to the birth of macabre imagery was, moreover, the outbreak of the terrible plague epidemic that devastated Europe between 1347 and 1352, known as the Black Death (Sandeno, 1997).

The new attitude towards death shifted the focus to individual death and the judgment immediately following death, rather than to the Last Judgment (Frugoni, 2017; Frugoni & Facchinetti, 2016; Sandeno, 1997). However, the faithful no longer had to fear ending up in Hell, as eternal damnation is now an event that concerns very few bad people; in Purgatory, the souls suffer punishment, but they cultivate hope for the future, sure of their prospective liberation in Heaven (Frugoni, 2017). Furthermore, although relegated to this place of expiation, they can communicate with the living, even through apparitions and dreams, asking for suffrages (Le Goff, 1981), thus somehow prolonging their relationship with earthly life.

The Iconography of Purgatory

The divulgation of Purgatory required a repertoire of new images. The "Triumph of Death" is one of the newest iconographies that defined the belief in Purgatory, and indeed, almost everything in it alluded to Purgatory (Frugoni, 2017; Frugoni & Facchinetti, 2016). In Italy, its iconographic image is frequently structured in the following way: in the centre is depicted Death holding a deadly weapon, most often a great scythe or a sickle with which it mows down human lives. On one side, there are groups of beggars invoking Death (vide infra), and on the other side, there are rich people enjoying themselves (Figure 1). The moralising inspiration of the latter group of characters is evident: those who are too tied to the pleasures of the world do not see sudden death looming and, therefore, risk eternal damnation due to the impossibility of extreme repentance and confession of

sins (Frugoni, 1988, 2017; Frugoni & Facchinetti, 2016). Thus, through the awareness of its inevitability and its punishing character, in the collective imagination, death prefigured Purgatory.

Figure 1. Detail from the "Triumph of Death" by Buonamico Buffalmacco, Monumental Cemetery of Pisa. In the centre, the scene is dominated by Death, personified by an older woman with bat wings who swoops down to cut off human lives with her scythe; below, a heap of corpses; above, the souls of the victims are contended between angels and demons. At the bottom left, a group of beggars invokes Death. At the bottom right, a scene of courtly life with young rich people who, unaware of everything around them, are enjoying themselves in a lush garden; the moralising inspiration of this *memento mori* is obvious: those who are too tied to the pleasures of the world do not see the impending death and, not being able to repent, risk eternal punishment. Source: catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it.

The theme of the "Encounter of the Three Living and Three Dead"—very frequently present also in the "Triumphs of Death"—chronologically marks the emergence of the macabre in painting (Frugoni, 1988). A representative example of this theme was depicted by Buonamico Buffalmacco in the "Triumph of Death" in the Cemetery of Pisa (1336–1341), where a group of nobles, while out hunting, suddenly comes upon three rotting corpses. The three corpses are realistically depicted in the well-known different stages of decomposition (Goff, 2010): the one above appears in the bloated stage, the one in the middle in the decay stage, and the one below in the skeletal stage (see Figures 3a and 3b). Two essential concepts

emerge in the story: the horror of the metamorphosis caused by death, as well as the incitement to abandon the mundane aspects of life (Frugoni, 1988).

Figure 2. The "Encounter of the Three Living and Three Dead". A group of courtiers on horseback, accompanied by dogs and falcons during a hunting trip, come across three corpses. The cadavers appear in different stages of decomposition: bloating (above), decaying (middle), and skeletal (below). Source: ilmanifesto.it.

The motif of the meeting of the living with their dead self is present in another late medieval theme, the "Danse Macabre", referring to the anguish of sudden death. This terror is visually represented by the skeletons that suddenly and mercilessly drag the living away (Frugoni, 2017; Frugoni & Facchinetti, 2016). A further macabre purgatorial theme, with a strong meaning of memento mori is the "transi tomb", which was widespread from the late Middle Ages until the 17th century and was usually commissioned while the patron was still alive. The peculiarity of the "transi tomb" is that the person housed in the grave is depicted as a corpse in a variable state of preservation[1] (Park, 1995; Sandeno, 1999; Welch, 2013) (also vide infra).

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[1] The "transi tombs" housed rich and powerful individuals, and an important reason for their construction was probably to try to decrease the amount of time spent the deceased would spend in Purgatory through the prayers solicited by the onlookers. The choice to show oneself as a corpse probably refers to a need for humiliation and penance to obtain

The macabre in the Baroque: the tomb of Giovanni Battista Gisleni

The process of preparing for death persisted, and the macabre continued to influence Baroque art. The sepulchral monument of the architect Giovanni Battista Gisleni (1600–1672), located in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome (Cover, Figure 3), is interesting for its explicit references to Purgatory (Mossakowski, 2009). It is centrally composed of a white marble tombstone in the shape of an unrolled drape, placed on a frame of grey Bardiglio marble. Above the tombstone, there is the portrait in oil of Gisleni enclosed in an oval frame of Bardiglio. Below, the portrait is completed by a marble cartouche bearing a short inscription. Under the tombstone, there is Gisleni's white marble coat of arms, and on the sides, two gilded bronze medallions. The first depicts a caterpillar emerging from its cocoon, while the second shows the butterfly that has completed its metamorphosis and flies away into the sky. Below, the viewer's attention is drawn to a naturalistic half-figure sculpture of a skeleton, placed on a black marble plinth. The skeleton, sculpted in Giallo antico Numidian marble, is wrapped in a white marble shroud and emerges from a dark rectangular cavity, closed in front by an iron grate (Cover). The cell in which the sculpture is enclosed represents the iconographic context in which a penitent soul can move in the afterworld: a soul imprisoned in Purgatory (Greco, 2015). In the image of the skeleton behind the grate, Gisleni probably also wants to demonstrate that death loses its power and is ultimately defeated by eternal life in the otherworld. Indeed, the second medallion clearly refers to this topic, with the caterpillar flying away from the cocoon in the form of a butterfly, symbol of eternity and resurrection. Thus, the symbol of the metamorphosis of the human soul, which, after an earthly existence, with death transforms and ascends to Heaven. However, this metamorphosis could also refer to the transformation the human body undergoes after death, since Gisleni is depicted as living above and as a skeleton below. Under Gisleni's portrait above is the

salvation. Thus, the "transi tombs" demonstrated not only the mortification of the deceased, but also served as a mirror for those who saw it. Often the "transi tomb" consists of two registers, with the depiction of the deceased as alive above, and as dead below, lying on a shroud, and sometimes enclosed in iron bars. The corpse could be shown in various stages of decomposition, sometimes accompanied by worms, snakes, or frogs. All "transi tombs" express the contrast between earthly wealth and the degradation of the individual in death, with emphasis on the transience of worldly life and the inevitability of death. These tombs often bear inscriptions in which the deceased refer to the current state of their body and express anxiety about the fate of their soul, by actually warning onlookers to reform their own lives. Additionally, there are often inscriptions that explicitly solicit passersby to pray for the dead buried there. In summary, the "transi tombs" contain clear references to Purgatory (Sandeno, 1997; Welch, 2013).

inscription *NEQVE HIC VIVUS* ("Neither alive here"), while beneath the skeleton one reads *NEQVE ILLIC MORTVVS* ("Nor dead there"). Therefore, a paradox is evident between the two portraits and their captions. Gisleni, portrayed as living, is remembered as dead—probably because we are never fully alive, as our bodies are destined to die—while the sculpture depicting him as dead suggests he is still alive, subsisting as a purging soul in the otherworld (Greco, 2015). Thus, the human existence (above) is nothing because it is destined to vanish, while the soul (below) can continue to live forever (Ricasoli, 2015).

Figure 3. Funerary Monument of Giovanni Battista Gisleni, Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. In the upper part of the monument is a portrait of Giovanni Battista Gisleni in life, with a marble cartouche bearing the inscription: *NEQVE HIC VIVUS* ("Neither alive here"). The lower part of the monument features Gisleni depicted *post-mortem* as a skeleton. Below the sculpture is the inscription: *NEQVE ILLIC MORTVVS* ("Nor dead there"). Source: enricogalantini.net.

The anatomy of Gisleni's sculpture *post-mortem* is shockingly realistic, especially when observing the skull, with the right proportions of all its parts (Gross et al., 2023). The skeleton appears almost animated, and shows its hands crossed on

its chest as in a gesture of devotion. However, some details, such as the appearance of the neck, as well as the presence of fingernails on the phalanges (Cover), are unexpected in a skeleton (Gross et al., 2023) and could instead be more consistent with a partly skeletonised body, rather than an actual skeleton. In late medieval and Renaissance iconography, the dead were often depicted as not completely skeletonised bodies or mummy-like figures, and sometimes even as putrescent cadavers (Warthin, 1930)[2]. Furthermore, due to its tiered structure depicting Gisleni as alive above and as dead below, the monument may recall a "*transi* tomb" (Greco, 2015), whose main purpose was to promote prayers for the deceased in Purgatory (Welch, 2013) (see also note[1]). The "*transi* tombs" showed the deceased depicted as dead, but during the crucial liminal period of decomposition, when the corpse was still sensitive and vital, and when the person was believed to still be in the corpse. The penitential aspect of the image, with emphasis on the mortification of the decaying body, was authentic since it was thought that the person continued to suffer in some way while their body was decomposing (Park, 1995).

The penitential theme is indeed suggested by Gisleni himself, depicted as dead: wrapped in the shroud, with arms crossed on his chest and shown looking out from his cell, he seems to consume his contrition in Purgatory and, at the same time, solicit prayers from the viewer (Greco, 2015).

Purgatory in Naples and the practice of double burial

The notion of death in traditional Neapolitan society differs from that of most modern societies (Pardo, 1983, 1989) and closely recalls ancient Greek culture. For them, death represented a transition between earthly life, reserved for bodies joined to their souls, to the Underworld, reserved for departed souls; the latter needed a proper burial to find peace in death, otherwise they would be forced to wander without rest, forced for eternity to the liminal condition of passage (Amirante, 2018). Indeed, in inner Naples, death is not viewed as an instantaneous event, but rather as a process—a transition with a duration—that leaves room for the structuring of a mutually beneficial relationship between the soul of the deceased and their survivors (Fornaciari et al., 2010). Therefore, for Ne-

[2] The author of this work is the pathologist Aldred Scott Warthin, well-known for being eponymously associated with Warthin-Finkeldey giant cells in measles, Warthin tumour of the parotid, and Warthin-Starry stain for the diagnosis of syphilis. Warthin had extremely diverse interests, including the study of the arts. Here, he documents the representations of death from his collection of etchings, drawings, and prints, in which death is portrayed as dead in various preservation states. (For a recent biography of Warthin, see: Wright, J. R. (2021). Archives of Pathology & Laboratory Medicine, 145(10), 1297–1306).

apolitans, the intermediate dimension of Purgatory appears to be the ideal and effective resolution of the Hell/Heaven antagonism, as it offers ample opportunity for exchange with the souls residing there. Indeed, while there is nothing good for the living to expect from the damned souls of Hell, Heaven can be too remote and inaccessible a dimension (Pardo, 1983). Conversely, the souls, with all their power of intercession, are closest to the living during their stay in Purgatory, an intermediate, otherworldly place that is more similar to earthly life. Thus, the access of the soul of the deceased to Purgatory is of fundamental importance to hope to obtain help from it. Given the relevance for the soul of arriving in Purgatory, the Neapolitans attach great significance to the correct accomplishment of the funerary and mourning rituals, which are thought indispensable for accompanying the dead to the hereafter (Pardo, 1983, 1989). Indeed, the deeply rooted fear that the dead could remain in a state of eternal liminality is a major concern for traditional Neapolitans, and it is reflected in the absolute importance given to burial rituals (Pardo, 1983).

The attention that the Neapolitan people pay to death and mourning rites, as well as to the passage of the individual from this world to the otherworld, is so deep as to require a specific method of manipulation of the body of the deceased: the double burial. It is a funerary practice still in use in modern cemeteries in Naples, comprising a provisional entombment, followed by exhumation and, finally, the preservation of the bone remains in a definitive grave, which indicates the definitive death of the deceased and admission into the afterlife. According to Robert Hertz, death can be seen as a long-lasting phenomenon: after death the deceased goes through a transitional or liminal 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 corresponds to the decomposition of the corpse, and ends with the final burial of the bones, which marks the definitive passage of the soul into the afterlife (Hertz, 1907). Therefore, Hertz's theory is directly applicable to the double burial, as during the wet stage of death when the corpse is decomposing, the deceased can be described as being in a transitional state; a state betwixt and between, where the person is neither fully alive nor fully dead. During the Middle Ages, it was thought that corpses were somehow sensitive, or semi-animated, having a life gradually fading, and that such sentience could persist for more than a year after burial (Welch, 2013). Thus, the sentience of the corpse was believed to persist, though ever more tenuously, during what Hertz would describe as the transitional phase, when the body gradually decomposed. In short, only when the body was fully skeletal was it "fully defunct" (Welch, 2013).

These concepts can also be applied to the ritual of double burial, still practised today in modern cemeteries of Naples (Fornaciari et al., 2010; Guarino, 2022, 2023). At the time of exhumation, it is checked that the bones are completely dried, then they are washed first with soap and water, and then "disinfected" with rags soaked in alcohol— an obvious symbolic reference to purification—together with mothballs with which the corpse is sprinkled and enveloped in a sheet. Finally, the clean skeleton is moved to its new, definitive burial site. 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 during the first burial, the complete liberation of the bones is achieved, symbolising purity and the soul's disembodiment. At this moment, both the body and the soul are purified enough so that secondary burial can take place. The deceased can be considered definitively dead, and their soul admitted into the afterlife, thus becoming a benevolent soul to pray, and whose intercession can be expected (Fornaciari et al., 2010; Guarino, 2022, 2023). Therefore, the exhumation/recognition of the deceased represents a critical moment of the ritual: 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 left this world (Fornaciari et al., 2010; Guarino, 2022, 2023). It is generally assumed that the dead who, once exhumed, still show evident signs of ongoing putrefaction, are "badly dead"—souls that continue to wander restlessly on this world, and for whose liberation one can only hope by repeating the burial ritual that favours their transit into the afterlife (Fornaciari 2010; Guarino, 2022, 2023).

In summary, death could be seen as a slow process during which the corpse is progressively disintegrating, and, at the same time, the dead individual undergoes an earthly phase of purification, in some way a first step of Purgatory. Although Purgatory will be served in the afterlife, one can imagine that during the transitional state, purgatorial sufferings are already affecting both the soul and— thanks to the residual life still animating the corpse, which allows for a sort of *post-mortem* sentience—the body of the deceased (Park, 1995).

At least until the end of the 19th century, a considerable number of Neapolitans were buried beneath churches, in tombs of various kinds (Carnevale, 2010; Carnevale & Marin, 2016; Guarino, 2022): (A) the mass grave, represented by a pit beneath the central nave; (B) the family tomb, located in a side chapel and administered by a noble family; (C) the *terresante*, represented by vaulted crypts that allowed for individual burials, and where visitors could be welcomed. There were basins filled with earth, called *giardinetti* ("little gardens"), where bodies were superficially buried. To accommodate new dead, corpses were exhumed and exposed

Figure 4. Typical structure of a *terrasanta*, with four *giardinetti* and an altar in the background. Hypogeum of the church of Santi Filippo e Giacomo, Naples. Photograph from the author's personal archive, 2022.

to air, thus promoting more rapid decomposition (Figure 4). (D) In a really similar variant, the *giardinetti* were absent and replaced by the *scolatoi,* i.e., masonry seats, each with a hole in the centre. The corpse was placed in a sitting position to drain, so that the fluids produced during decomposition could be collected inside the hole, which in turn, was connected with a drainage system (Figure 5) (Fornaciari et al., 2010; Guarino, 2023). So, both the *terresante* and the *scolatoi*—documented at least since the 16th century (Guarino, 2022)—were intended to facilitate the skeletonisation of the dead through the process of "*scolatura*". The draining of the corpse's fluids indicated purification from everything earthly; decomposition, therefore, symbolised purification and the transition from the earthly world to the otherworldly (Guarino, 2023). In the *terresante*, the corpse was left buried in the *giardinetti* to begin decomposition and cause the body to lose the bulk of the fluids; when the corpse was partly dry, it could be moved in the air along the walls of the hypogeum, where decomposition continued until the skeletal stage was reached (Fornaciari et al., 2010; Guarino, 2022, 2023). In the case of the *scolatoi*, the corpse was left on the masonry seat until the skeletonisation occurred, usually without any previous treatment (Fornaciari et al., 2010; Guarino 2023). Usually, in the middle of funerary chambers was an ossuary represented by a pit closed by a grate, intended for the preservation of bone remains (Fornaciari et al., 2010; Guarino,

2022, 2023). Regardless of which of the two systems was used, once the skeletonisation of the body was accomplished, the remains were placed in their specific, definitive locations: the skull—a symbol of the individuality of the deceased and the successful passage of their soul into the afterlife—was often displayed, whereas the non-cranial bones were deposited within the common ossuary. The display of the corpse during the decomposition would have a deeply symbolic meaning: the progressive cadaverous changes could be seen as the metaphorical representation of the hard journey of the soul towards the afterworld (Fornaciari et al., 2010), but also as an expression of the painful purgatorial purification of which both the body and the soul were participants[3] (Park, 1995). It certainly served the visitors as an element of reflection on the transience of earthly life, as well as an invitation to pray for the deceased. In conclusion, it is evident that these funerary hypogea were structurally designed for a specific burial ritual with clear reference to Purgatory.

Figure 5. *Scolatoi* in the convent of the Poor Clare Nuns, Ischia, Naples. They appear like masonry seats with a central hole for the outflow of cadaveric fluids. Photograph from the author's personal archive, 2021.

[3] According to Donald Mowbray (2009), the torments of Purgatory transcend the distinction between body and spirit, thus raising the possibility of pain suffered by the incorporeal soul. Physical and emotional pain could be very close, as there is a continuum between the pain and suffering affecting the body and the soul.

The *terresante*, Purgatory and the "*transi* tombs"

The *terrasanta* acted as Purgatory, an intermediate space between life and death, where the dead were purified and the living could come into contact with the otherworldly. The double burial that took place there enclosed various instances; among these, the ascertainment of the body's complete decomposition by the living—with its symbolic meaning of purification—was certainly one of the most characteristic elements. Another noteworthy aspect is the display of decomposing corpses, which may have a connection to the "*transi* tombs". The "*transi* tombs", typically characterised by the depiction of a decaying corpse, have been analysed in relation to Purgatory and in light of the medieval notion of post-mortem sentience, i.e., the idea that a cadaver was somehow still sentient or conscious. Thus, although the corpse was dead, it was believed that the soul and consciousness did not leave the body until the transitional stage—the wet stage of death of ongoing putrefaction—was over (Welch, 2013). Due to the belief in *post-mortem* sentience, it was therefore considered probable that a decomposing body physically suffered the pain of Purgatory, and indeed the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory describes purgatorial punishment in highly sensory terms, that is, excruciating physical suffering (Welch, 2013). It can be concluded that the "*transi* tombs" were primarily pedagogical in nature, prompting the living to pray to help the deceased in Purgatory. The penitential aspect of the corpse depicted on the "*transi* tomb", with its emphasis on the mortification of decomposition, gained strength from the fact that the dead themselves continued in some sense to suffer while their own body was decaying (Park, 1995). Thus, showing the decomposing corpse, and therefore the person humiliated in death, could be a useful tool for inducing prayers for the dead in Purgatory (Welch, 2013).

It is quite obvious that these concepts can be applied with the same meaning and purposes to the display of decomposing bodies in the *terresante* of Naples. Therefore, Purgatory could be considered a continuum of a purification process already begun during the first burial in the *terresante,* which initially involves both the body and the soul (Fornaciari et al., 2010; Guarino, 2022, 2023). The "*scolatura*" is therefore a way of dealing with the purgatorial expiation immediately after death: the exposure of one's corpse undergoing decomposition represents the extreme form of mortification and penance, while also ensuring the prayers of the visitors for the deceased in Purgatory.

The representation of death in Naples and the importance of double burial for access to the afterlife

The Neapolitan people have shown a strong interest in the powers of the dead, hence the need to maintain contact with them in the afterlife, as well as with the supramundane authorities with whom the deceased can intercede on their behalf. To fully understand the meaning of the double burial ritual and its connection to the afterlife and Purgatory, it is necessary to consider the particular representations of death in traditional Neapolitan culture.

The strong desire of the living for the deceased's definitive passage to the afterlife is among the most characteristic aspects of Neapolitan representations of death (Pardo, 1989). Indeed, the deeply rooted fear that the dead may remain a spirit in transition is a major concern for Neapolitans. This is reflected in the great importance placed on the complete skeletonisation of the body, which represents concrete proof of the soul's passage into the afterlife, and therefore of the transformation of the deceased into a peaceful and benevolent spirit to whom one can turn for intercession and help (Pardo, 1989). However, for this to be achieved, there is a need for a "good death". To ensure that everything goes well, it is first of all necessary to accept death. In inner Naples, death should occur at home rather than in the hospital, as the dying would need the warmth of their bed to accept their death. A refusal to accept death might prevent the passage, thus leading to a spirit lying in-between the two domains, in an inadmissible perennial condition of liminality (Pardo, 1989). The moment of a person's death is associated with a strong religious interpretation of the event concerning both their body and their soul: a positive correspondence would exist between the length of the agony and the sins committed in life by the dying person; moreover, the more sins were committed, the more painful the agony (Pardo, 1989). In other words, it is as if the suffering of purgatorial penance begins already during the dying person's agony. Indeed, we have seen that in inner Naples, death is not intended as a sudden event, but rather as a gradual passage that ends with the secondary burial, which marks the passage of the deceased's soul into the afterlife (Pardo, 1989). This gradual death is, therefore, a transition that permits the purification of the individual and allows the survivors to establish a relationship with the dead person in this new condition (Pardo, 1983). Thus, a "good death" is understood as a progressive death, achieved by respecting the ritual norms concerning death, the passage rituals, and a well-performed double burial (Pardo, 1989). After the death of a loved one, the traditional Neapolitan hopes for a series of events to occur: the soul of the dead must leave this world and pass into the afterlife to reach Purgatory. This is an obligatory passage, but once purification is completed, the soul must be able

to leave Purgatory in order to access Heaven. In contrast, a "bad death" refers to the dead for whom the ritualised forms of passage have not been ensured, such as individuals who died violently or suddenly. As a result, they are doomed to an eternal condition of liminality (Pardo 1989). Consequently, every effort is made to prevent the risk that the deceased may become a liminal spirit. In this unfortunate eventuality, the survivors, obviously, could not hope for any help from the deceased. Once liminality is avoided through properly performed rituals, the danger of perpetual Purgatory still remains for the soul of the loved one—that is, the danger that the soul may remain trapped in Purgatory—if the living do not keep their memory and do not continue to care for them. Indeed, also a death with the proper rites of passage is not enough if the deceased is later neglected by the survivors: the dead need assistance from the living to avoid "eternal" Purgatory (Pardo, 1989). After the final burial, the bone remains only apparently lose their importance; in fact, they remain essential for the living to maintain a relationship with the dead. Indeed, after the secondary burial, the deceased loved one becomes the object of ritual attentions in the form of care for the remains, such as periodic cleaning of the bones and changing the sheet that wraps them, as well as suffrages for their soul in Purgatory. We have seen that traditional Neapolitans hope in the supramundane help of figures of the sacred hierarchy, including saints and the Virgin. These hopes are bolstered by the possibility of a recently deceased relative who intervenes on their behalf with these figures. It is believed that such intervention is possible only if funerary rituals are well performed and care is addressed to the remains, as only this can allow the soul a good otherworldly status and, therefore, an effective capacity for intercession (Pardo, 1989).

The Neapolitan skull cult: origin and destiny

In Naples, the cult of the souls in Purgatory had its own specificities; it was particularly intense, showed a particular interest in "abandoned souls", and in the late 19th century merged with the popular worship of the unknown skulls preserved in the common ossuaries and in the *terresante* (Civitelli, 2016; Maiello, 2019). The cult of skulls concerns anonymous skulls adored as relics (see also note[4]), thought to be representatives of abandoned souls in Purgatory. The cult of skulls was a feature of the cult of the dead, completely exclusive of Naples; it had an autonomous, popular origin and was the subject of debate by the Church, which, although initially had an attitude of complacent tolerance, ultimately opposed it (Civitelli, 2016; Maiello, 2019).

Over time, the bones remain preserved in the terresante, eventually losing their identity and relationships with the deceased. These are now anonymous bones

that once belonged to individuals who have fallen into oblivion, unknown individuals that no living person cares about. However, in their becoming anonymous, they emerge as protagonists in a new aspect of Neapolitan devotional tradition: the care of souls pezzentelle (a Neapolitan term from the Latin petere, meaning "to ask") (Civitelli, 2016), precisely identified in these anonymous skulls asking for help. The interest of Neapolitans for "abandoned souls", the souls pezzentelle that no one cares about and ask for help, indeed found its ultimate autonomy in the new cult of the skulls, which concretely represented them and embodied their sad condition of oblivion (Pardo, 1983, 1989). It is believed that worshipping these anonymous bones gives refrisco (a Neapolitan term derived from refrigerium, meaning "refreshment") (Niola, 2022; Pardo, 1983), i.e., relief to their souls, who are then expected to reciprocate with powerful intermediary or even direct help, often represented by material favours (Pardo, 1989). This cult spread among the most popular strata of the city where the souls of the skulls were seen as an otherworldly projection of one's own precariousness, but they also represented a possibility of reducing this precariousness through their power to intervene in the people's lives (Pardo, 1983, 1989). In the modern age, Naples was hit by two serious issues that marked its history: the plague epidemic that struck the city in 1656 (Fusco, 2009) and the cholera epidemics of 1836 and 1884 (Tagarelli et al., 2000). It is possible that both of these events played a role in the development of the cult of the skull. Indeed, it is probable that the birth of this worship has been the result of social, political, and human troubles that brought the city into a state of great suffering (Maiello, 2019). Another decisive aspect was certainly represented by the consequences of the Second World War, due to the impossibility of mourning the bodies. 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 deceased, and therefore the unknown skull turned into a dead family member. This cult took root in the terresante and other places where skulls of unknown identity were kept (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 were "adopted" and became objects of personal devotion (Figures 6a, 6b) (Carnevale & Marin, 2016; Battimiello, 2015, pp. 65–69). The cult of skulls also involved a strong sense of reciprocity: on one side, there was the anonymous skull with its forgotten soul asking for help to overcome the sufferings of purification, on the other, there was the faithful, who prayed for that soul and, in return, awaited a reward (Amirante, 2018). Thus, the devotee offered prayers with the purpose of obtaining protection, material favours, and graces, with these anonymous skulls being venerated as

highly valued intercessors[4] (Battimiello, 2015, pp. 65–69). The cult of skulls lasted until 1969, when the ecclesiastical authorities, which only allowed the worship of the remains of saints, banned it (Civitelli, 2016; Maiello, 2019). Despite this, the cult remained quite active until 1980, when many places of worship were closed following an earthquake that seriously hit the city. Some worship practices, in fact, still persist, mostly in the form of an offering of candles, flowers, and other votive objects (Figures 6a, 6b).

Figures 6a and 6b. A skull together with votive objects (a). Skulls and votive objects (b). Figure (a) photographed in the hypogeum of the Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco; figure (c) in the hypogeum of the Church of San Pietro ad Aram, Naples. Photographs from the author's personal archive, 2021–2023.

[4] It is known that the power inherent in the bodily remains of holy dead underlies the cult of the relics of martyrs and saints, and their display in churches and crypts is a well-known custom. Indeed, the bodies or relics of the holy dead are seen as special loci of access to the Divine (Bynum, 1998), and this is therefore sufficient to justify their veneration. In the case of the Neapolitan skull cult, an apparent continuity developed between the common dead and the saints to such an extent that these skulls were venerated as relics of saints.

The poor and Purgatory

Another element that characterised the worship of skulls was the charitable one. Indeed, the cult of abandoned skulls closely recapitulated the duty of almsgiving for the poor: just as it was necessary to give alms to the poor and marginalised of the earth, so it was essential to care for the abandoned and forgotten souls of the otherworld. The term *pezzentelle* refers to the most marginal and unfortunate souls in the afterlife, spirits in extreme need of help. A *pezzente* is a beggar, and like beggars who ask for alms on the streets of this world, these souls ask for prayers because no one cares for them; they are the beggars of the afterlife (Niola, 2022; Civitelli, 2016). These afflicted souls are the dead without adequate fulfilment of death and mourning rituals, as well as the arrays of sadly neglected souls. The *pezzentelle* desperately ask for the comfort of a prayer, a Mass, or almsgiving. Therefore, between the poor and the dead, there is an analogy marked by the same marginality: in sharing the precariousness and the need for help, the poor can be regarded as vicars of the dead. The poor, for the harsh treatment that life reserves for them, serve their Purgatory on earth and are therefore the representatives, in this world, of the *pezzentelle* of the afterlife (Niola, 2022). Due to the lack of memory and suffrages from the living, abandoned and forgotten souls, as well as people who died without the proper passage rituals, are in a perennial transition that impedes their ascent to Heaven (Pardo, 1983). In other words, if not rescued from care by the living, the *pezzentelle* remain eternally stuck in Purgatory.

Figure 7. The group of beggars comprising two lepers depicted in the fresco of the "Triumph of Death" by Buonamico Buffalmacco in the Monumental Cemetery of Pisa. The two lepers appear to be blind, with upper limbs ending in stumps. Source: catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it.

Figure 8. The group of beggars including a man in the centre with stumps on both upper limbs. Detail from the "Triumph of Death" in Palazzo Sclafani in Palermo. Source: artepiu.info.

An almost constant element in the *Triumphs of Death* is the presence of a group of beggars, the sick, and the crippled, who beg Death to put an end to their suffering. Death, however, does not care about them and instead directs its destructive forces elsewhere. The group of beggars in Buonamico Buffalmacco's "Triumph of Death", preserved in the Pisa Cemetery (Frugoni, 1988), appears particularly noteworthy because it portrays the figures of two lepers in a highly realistic manner. One of them shows the typical *leprous facies,* with severe nasal atrophy and loss of the nasal cartilages. He also appears to be blind, with closed eyelids and abnormally sunken or atrophic eyeballs. Both of his upper limbs end in stumps. Similarly, in the same group, another beggar appears to be blind, as his eyes are covered by a blindfold. Furthermore, the terminal portion of his right upper limb is depicted as a stump wrapped in a bandage (Figure 7). The typical *facies*, severe ocular involvement with blindness, and the self-amputation of the extremities are characteristic of an advanced stage of leprosy (Fornaciari, 2018). In medieval Europe, leprosy was seen as a disease involving both body and soul, its symptoms being considered the external manifestation of internal sin; moreover, due to the extreme clinical manifestations which paralleled the process of decomposition of

a corpse, the leper was believed to represent a state between life and death (Parkinson, 2017). Even in the group of beggars and derelicts in the "Triumph of Death" in Palazzo Sclafani, now moved to Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo (1446) (Ozzola, 1909), a male figure is depicted with both upper limbs ending in stumps wrapped in bandages at the wrists (Figure 8). In the group of wretched of the "Triumph of Death" by Andrea Orcagna, located in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence (1340–65) (Rizzo, 1981), we can identify two evidently blind beggars, an elderly woman with a noticeable thoracic hump leaning on a stick, and a cripple whose torso is supported by two crutches (Figure 9). The beggars in the "Triumphs of Death" by Buffalmacco (Figure 7) and Orcagna are accompanied by a scroll bearing the same inscription (with some minor differences between the two): *Poi che prosperitade ci à llasciati / O Morte, medicina d'ogni pena, / Dè vienci a dare ormai l'ultima cena!*

("Because prosperity has left us / Death, cure for every pain / Come and give us the last supper!").

Figure 9. Group of beggars and cripples, including two blind men above. Detail of the "Triumph of Death" by Andrea Orcagna in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence. Source: camminarenellastoria.it.

Thus, the beggars explicitly express the desire to cease their intolerable suffering by invoking Death, but in all the representations of the Triumphs of Death, the deadly protagonist constantly spares the beggars. In fact, a strong warning seems to come from the beggars themselves, through the scroll exhibited to the spectator. According to Frugoni (1988), the beggars and the lepers represent a man forgetful of the soul and otherworldly destiny. The real cure for the extreme suffering of these individuals is implicit; the solution should be to endure the ordeal and consider illness and suffering as a privileged situation, which gives space to repentance and care for the soul, and therefore a way to deserve eternal life (Frugoni, 1988). The overall interpretation is therefore strongly linked to a purgatorial theme, a Catholic perspective that attributes meaning and value in life to a path of suffering and atonement, which is destined to continue after death in Purgatory. Indeed, the life of beggars and derelicts is one of suffering and unhappiness; therefore, it can be seen already as a sort of purgatorial expiation on earth.

The street-shrines of Purgatory in Naples

The abolition of burials under churches and the construction of the extra-urban cemeteries in the 19th century weakened the bonds people had with the dead, as the funerary rituals and the cult of the dead that took place in the *terresante* had been prevented. For the Neapolitan people, strongly linked to the dead and the material aspect of their worship, it was therefore necessary to re-establish the relationship with the afterlife, and find a new reference that could represent the world of Purgatory, that intermediate dimension where the dead are still reachable, and in need of the support of the living. Thus, with the creation of devotional shrines in the second half of the 19th century, the souls in Purgatory found a new home in the streets of Naples, where the living could have a direct and immediate relationship with the dead and with the otherworldly (Amirante, 2018).

The shrine of Purgatory appears as a niche reminiscent of a cave or an underground place with the walls painted red, populated by figurines depicting the purging souls immersed in flames[5] (Figure 10). In the niches, one can identify: A) the protagonist souls in Purgatory, intermediate figures of the otherworld, suffering for the expiation of their sins, but moved by hope in eternal salvation; B) the

[5] In the vast majority of cases, the niches in Purgatory are part of a bipartite shrine: the upper part is represented by a tabernacle dedicated to an official figure of the Sacred, a saint, the Virgin Mary or Christ, while below there is the recessed niche dedicated to the souls in Purgatory, much smaller and less illuminated than the upper part. Figure 11 shows the niche of Purgatory, which is part of the shrine. Only rarely is the niche of Purgatory isolated; in this case, it is usually placed at the entrance of a church (author's annotation).

Figure 10. The niche of Purgatory, which is part of the shrine. Photograph from the author's personal photographic archive, 2021.

Virgin Mary, represented as Our Lady of Sorrows beside the crucified Christ; they are the official representatives of the Sacred and account for the ultimate purpose of the entire composition: intercession and the aspiration to Heaven, access to the world of the Sacred; C) the skull, a symbol of death and Purgatory itself. In the almost constant presence of a skull, one can glimpse a symbolic correspondence with abandoned skulls, thus underlining the commonality between this devotion and the cult of the skull (Pardo, 1983, 1989) (Figures 10 and 11 depict the typical components of the niches of Purgatory). All souls are depicted as naked figures with their lower half engulfed in flames, while their upper half is free from fire. Indeed, Purgatory is the intermediate place *par excellence* and, therefore, as representatives of this intermediate realm, souls in Purgatory are portrayed in an iconography that effectively underlines both their aspiration to Heaven and their condition of extreme punitive suffering, similar to that of Hell (Pardo, 1983, 1989).

Despite their placement in the flames, the figurines portraying souls in Purgatory within the shrines are clearly different from the damned of Hell. Indeed, being aware of their future salvation and the glory of Heaven that awaits them, these souls do not convey real despair. The expressions on the faces may be at times imploring, at other times contrite, yet they still appear serene. The arms are


Figures 11a, 11b. Group of figurines including souls in Purgatory, Our Lady of Sorrows, the Crucifix (a, b), and a skull (b). Preserved in the Complesso Museale Santa Maria delle Anime Purgatorio ad Arco, Naples. Photographs from the author's personal photographic archive, 2021.

Figure 12. Painted terracotta figurines representing souls in Purgatory. Notice the serene expression on the face. Source: ansa.it.

sometimes crossed over the chest, like those of someone waiting with patience and hope, or with folded hands in an attitude of prayer, or raised upwards as in a gesture of supplication (Figures 11 nand 12; figurines of penitent souls with different positions of the arms). The presence of figurines depicting priests or clerics is very frequent among the souls (Figures 11a: a priest at the bottom left; 11b: a cleric on the left, and a priest at the bottom right; 12: a cleric on the right), indicating that faith alone is not sufficient for salvation, and there is no guarantee of salvation for anyone. The religious, precisely because of their role, were believed to end up in the deepest part of Purgatory and therefore required more prayers, because they suffered a longer sentence (Amirante, 2018). The Virgin Mary, a constant presence

in the shrines of Purgatory, is the intercessor *par excellence* and the main figure of the Sacred, responsible for the assistance and care of the souls in Purgatory (Scaramella, 1991). The Virgin Mary was believed to descend into Purgatory every Saturday to dispense *refrisco* to souls and free those destined to ascend into Heaven (Turi, 2015). Although the presence of the Virgin in Purgatory had been accepted in the previous centuries, in 1613 the Holy Office ordered that artistic representations should in no way depict the descent of the Virgin into Purgatory (Amirante, 2018). Consequently, from that point onward, official iconography placed the Virgin away from the flames of Purgatory, depicting her more appropriately in the sky above a cluster of clouds (Turi, 2015) (Figure 13). Nevertheless, in the unofficial representations of the street shrines, it was permitted that the Virgin Mary appeared in the fire of Purgatory among the penitent souls. Finally, the choice to represent the Virgin in the guise of Our Lady of Sorrows was probably inspired by holy cards spread in the 19th century, when the cult of Our Lady of Sorrows had a strong revival (Amirante, 2018).

Figures 13. "Madonna and Child with the Souls in Purgatory" by Luca Giordano, from around 1653. Source: finestresullarte.info.

In conclusion, these shrines effectively recapitulate the cult of Purgatory, with its implicit reciprocity of benefits for both the dead and the devotees. Although they are not of great artistic significance, they are certainly worth noting, as they are direct evidence of the spread of the cult of Purgatory in Naples and very effectively summarise the key themes of Purgatory: suffering, the request for help, and hope.

Due to its peculiar cultural background, the cult of souls in Purgatory in Naples underwent some modulations that modified its nature. These devotions were particularly intense, had a markedly popular character, and developed in part independently of the official religion. Starting from the general themes connected to Purgatory, this article has retraced the most distinctive aspects that the cult of souls in Purgatory acquired in Naples, including its deep connections with mortuary customs and burial practices. In this city, the cult of the Purgatory encompassed remarkable cultural, religious, and artistic elements and, many centuries after its birth, continues to be an interesting source of reflection, study, and research. In particular, studying the cult of Purgatory can help us understand the relationships between the individual and death, the body and the soul, and suffering and hope.

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SAŽETAK

Čistilište je relativno nedavna teološka inovacija u geografiji zagrobnog svijeta. Povezivalo ga se s drukčijom vizijom smrti usmjerenom na strah od tjelesnog propadanja i dijalogom između duše i tijela te s prepoznatljivim stavom prema makabru. Čistilište se od svoje afirmacije pojavljivalo kao međuprostorna, privremena dimenzija usko povezana sa Zemljom, gdje je dušama koje se čiste bilo dopušteno razgovarati sa živima, kao da bi tamo mogle produžiti svoj zemaljski život. Udružujući bol s čekanjem oslobođenja u raju, čistilište je stoga bilo međumjesto kako patnje, tako i nade za željenim blaženstvom. Mjesto čistilište imalo je učinak smanjenja straha od vječnog prokletstva te je stoga strah od pakla zamijenjen strahom od vlastite smrti i posljedičnim raspadanjem tijela. Kult čistilišta proširio se u 17. stoljeću, a temeljio se na mogućnosti ublažavanja patnje mrtvih preko molitvenih zagovora živih vjernika. Ovaj članak istražuje vjerovanja, teme i običaje povezane s čistilištem, s posebnim naglaskom na brojne dokaze iz Napulja gdje je štovanje čistilišta bilo posebno intenzivno i razvilo jedinstvena obilježja. U radu se analiziraju najpopularniji aspekti kulta i svjedočanstva o njemu, koji su danas ostali predstavljeni trajnim tragovima kulta lubanja, prisutnošću urbanih zavjetnih svetišta i modernim pogrebnim praksama koje se temelje na dvostrukom obredu pokopa.

Ključne riječi: *čistilište, kult mrtvih, kult duša u čistilištu, Gislenijeva grobnica, Trijumf smrti, trans i grobnica, dvostruki obred pokopa, zavjetna svetišta*