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The Cult of the Dead and the Shrines of Purgatory in the Streets of Naples. The Rise and Fall of a Popular Devotion

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ABSTRACT

Cult of the Dead and Shrines of Purgatory

The votive shrines are a non-liturgical variant of worship that avoids ecclesiastical mediation in the relationship with the Sacred. The main subjects of the following discussion are the street-shrines of Naples dedicated to the dead as well as the worship that underlies them, the cult of souls in Purgatory. This devotion was initially limited to offering of prayers, almsgiving and suffrage masses in favour of dead relatives. However, the cult underwent considerable modulation over time. Indeed, already at the beginning of the 17th century the *pietas* of the Neapolitans extended the devotion to all suffering souls in Purgatory, especially neglected souls, believed to be particularly in need of help. Since then, these souls became the major protagonists of the cult in Naples. They comprised those who died without receiving the proper rituals of passage - considered of fundamental importance to reach the afterlife, and accomplished through the practice of double burial - as well as the forgotten and abandoned dead. Without the memory and help of the living, these souls were stuck in an eternal transition which prevented their ascent to Heaven. An ultimate modification of the cult took place in the second half of the 19th century, when an autonomous form of devotion was born based on the adoration of unknown skulls. This worship variously intertwined and merged with the previous cult, thus constituting a real specificity of Naples. The skulls were regarded as representatives of anonymous souls, whose abandonment and marginality would continue forever without the intervention of devotees who take care of them. The cult of Purgatory and the intermediate nature of their protagonists is effectively represented by miniatures of the souls that still today populate the numerous street-shrines.

The great diffusion of these shrines is the direct testimony of the liveliness and strength that the cult of the dead had in Naples. They are certainly worthy of attention, care and protection as they are part of the cultural heritage of the city.

Keywords: Votive shrine - Purgatory - Cult of souls in Purgatory - Souls *Pezzentelle* - *Refrisco* - Cult of the skulls - Double burial - *Terresante*

1. Introduction

In the streets of the Naples, it is very frequent to come across votive shrines placed on the walls of the buildings. Considered a secondary religious phenomenon of little artistic value, they have aroused modest interest among scholars^{1,2}. They represent an expression of popular religiosity that allows a direct relationship with the Sacred without intermediary ecclesiastical figures or official places of worship². The shrines were built by private citizens under different circumstances - often as thanks for escaping danger, for a grace, or even to express an individual devotion - and structurally are a sort of tabernacle illuminated with different types of lights that houses a painting or a statue of a sacred entity. In a study that analyzed the shrines from a district of the historic center of the city it was found that 40% dated back to three events that had great repercussions in the history of Naples: the cholera epidemic in 1884, the first world war (1914-1918) and the second world war (1939-1945)². Likewise, it is possible that previous unfortunate events that struck Naples, such as the plague of 1656 or the cholera epidemic of 1836, also caused a surge in the construction of street-shrines¹. What is certain is that in the second half of the 18th century there was an extraordinary diffusion of devotional shrines which with their lights probably contributed to solving the problem of the public lighting of the city^{1,3}.

A feature that definitely distinguishes the votive shrines of Naples, particularly in the ancient center of the city, is that, while their upper part is entitled as one might expect to a saint, the Virgin or Christ, in their lower part they exhibit a recessed niche dedicated to figures not strictly belonging to the world of the Sacred: the souls in Purgatory (Fig. 1)¹⁻³. These niches are remarkable as they epitomize a really complex and articulated worship which had great popular success in the city. The cult of souls in Purgatory dates back many centuries and, while certainly not exclusive of Naples, in this city it spread extraordinarily and, furthermore, developed really specific characteristics, including the autonomous birth of a worship addressed to anonymous skulls, as well as the construction of street-shrines specifically dedicated to Purgatory¹⁻⁴. Therefore, in this article an attempt is made to retrace, through a review of the existing literature, the birth, diffusion and evolution of the cult of Purgatory, the forms with which it expressed in Naples, as well as the relationships of the street-shrines of Purgatory with the various aspects that the worship took on.



Fig. 1. Typical bipartite structure of votive street-shrines of the historic center of Naples featuring a tabernacle dedicated to a sacred figure at top, and a small niche of Purgatory below; the shrine is often protected by a small gate and, occasionally, there is also a small alms box.

A) Tabernacle containing the image of Saint Cajetan of Thiene with the Infant Jesus (built in 1925, restored in 1947).

B) Tabernacle with a painting of Our Lady of Sorrows with dead Christ (built in 1884, restored in 1947).

C) Tabernacle with statue of Saint Anthony of Padua with the Infant Jesus (rebuilt in 1947).

D) Tabernacle featuring an image of Saint Joseph with the Infant Jesus (no date reported).

E) In this street-shrine, immediately under the niche of Purgatory, there is a small metal door closed by a padlock with a slot to collect alms. This finding is now uncommon; it is possible that once these alms boxes were much more frequent, but then they were eliminated as objects of theft.

2. General aspects of votive shrines

2.1. Origin of the votive shrines

The custom of building votive shrines has ancient origins; the tradition of placing images of deities on the facades of houses, dates back to the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. In Roman antiquity, the Aedicula or Lararium was a small building usually located in the atrium of the house^{1,2}. Later, between the end of the

6th century and the beginning of the 7th century, the pagan deities that occupied these shrines were slowly replaced by Christian symbols¹. Although the Protestant Reformation had an oppositional attitude towards the sacred images, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) stated that they were legitimate for didactic and pedagogical function, thus probably encouraging the votive practice¹. In the 17th century Naples experienced a real devotional explosion towards the sacred images of the Virgin and saints. The two catastrophes that hit the city, the plague of 1656 and the earthquake of 1688, and the serious political and economic precariousness, were expressed in the vision of a severe and implacable God; this probably led to the attempt to implore supramundane mediators to intercede with him^{1,2} and, therefore, to the construction of votive shrines dedicated to them.

2.2. Cultural aspects of the votive shrines

The votive practice can be understood as a ritual procedure that operates ad hoc that is, an intervention aimed at solving a particular problem. Worries and difficulties can lead to looking for a solution on an extra-human level; one can get in touch with the chosen object of devotion by structuring a relationship with it, and this can lead to the solution of the problem^{2,5,6}. The shrine allows to establish a relationship with the Sacred characterized by the coexistence of two aspects: the affective and the utilitarian. The first one is represented by the familiarization with the figures object of devotion and the place where they are kept; on the other hand, the expectation of receiving help is the utilitarian component². This type of relationship, characteristic of popular religion, has at its base a hierarchical structure of the world of the Sacred at the top of which there is God, who however remains an inaccessible entity; it cannot be identified because it cannot be related to a human image. He never becomes a familiar figure, although it is possible to relate to him through an intermediary². The Virgin is regarded the mediator *par excellence*, a benevolent maternal figure with attributes of grace and mercy, so much so that on a popular level there is the belief that the mediation of the Virgin is always necessary to obtain a grace². Moreover, a common aspect of the votive practice is flexibility: the relationship with the Sacred is shaped and modified according to the needs and transformations of life, therefore including a bargaining margin¹. As regards Naples, some aspects of this religious attitude are in accord with its history and the need for redemption that has always been felt by this city, marked by earthquakes, famines and epidemics, and in a perennial subjection to the various dominations^{2,3}. The people, aware of the distance that separated them from the ruling class made up largely of foreign rulers, and distrustful of the official Church, found their religious identity in these devotional practices involving the need for mediators^{1,2}. In the worship that sees them as protagonists, this role of intermediary is played by the souls in Purgatory.

3. The cult of souls in Purgatory

3.1. The birth of Purgatory

Although several historians pushed the birth of the concept of Purgatory much earlier⁷, according to Le Goff⁸, the idea of the Christian Purgatory as we usually imagine it today, took shape between the 12th and 13th centuries as a new space in the otherworldly geography, until then represented by only two places: Hell, underground and Heaven in the sky. However, the fathers of the Church already between the 2nd and 4th century began to ask the question of a possible purification for minor sins through fire⁸. In the era of the Reformation this “third place” halfway between Hell and Heaven was at the center of numerous controversies in which the Reformed opposed the Roman Church; nevertheless, the Council of Trent ultimately sanctioned the existence of the intermediate afterlife of Purgatory, where the dead undergo a painful purification of their sins which, however, can be alleviated and shortened by suffrages of the living⁸. Purgatory has the task of testing the repentance before being allowed to enter Heaven, therefore it involves suffering but also the hope of glimpsing the coveted heavenly bliss. These concepts imply a fundamental difference of the new place of the otherworld: while Heaven and Hell are eternal and immutable, represented by the ineffable enjoyment of bliss or irremediable and atrocious suffering, Purgatory is a transitory and changing condition, a passage of time that progressively nourishes the hope and, therefore, creates a tension towards a future dimension. Therefore, being a place moved by hope - a feeling very akin to human nature - of the three dimensions of the otherworld, Purgatory is definitely the one closest to the human condition. Here, the souls hope to alleviate their suffering and unhappiness and to finally be able to enjoy the blessed vision in Heaven. In short, for the souls in Purgatory, as for the people of the earth, there is hope for a better future.

3.2. Origin, characteristics and evolution of the cult

The traditional social strata of Naples negotiated with different levels of the supra-mundane hierarchy in order to obtain protection and help, and reduce insecurity in their lives. Furthermore, Neapolitans have always been sensitive to the relationships between the living and the defuncts, therefore it is not surprising that the cult of the dead, in all its forms and declinations, has had a great following in this city. They gave great importance to burial rituals, as evidenced by the widespread presence of confraternities that took care of the funeral ceremonies. Some confraternities involved in charitable works also took care of the burial of vagabonds and marginalized people and those sentenced to death - i.e. of people who died without Christian accompaniment, such as the comfort of the sacraments and the ritual support from the living, believed necessary to reach the afterlife⁹⁻¹¹.

The practice of praying for the souls in Purgatory extends at least as far back as the Council of Trent which definitively reinforced the notion of Purgatory and pointed out

the importance of suffrages to help penitent souls. The Confraternita dei Bianchi della Giustizia - founded by San Giacomo della Marca and that had its main seat at the Hospital "Gli Incurabili" in Naples¹² - already in the 15th century dealt systematically with souls in Purgatory. Its members spiritually assisted people sentenced to death, thus averting their ultimate damnation in Hell. Besides, they took care of their burial and offered masses and prayers for their souls thought to be serving Purgatory¹. It should be emphasized here that the cult of souls in Purgatory was not a Neapolitan or a southern Italy cult, nor was it born as an expression of a subordinate segment of the population; the cult interested all Christianity and all social strata, as evidenced by the spread of chapels and churches dedicated to Purgatory throughout Europe^{3,4}. What is true is that in Naples the cult underwent some modulations that partly modified its nature. If we want to use a very schematic subdivision, the following varieties of cult of the dead can be identified^{4,13}: A) the cult of souls in Purgatory addressed to their own dead, the "known" or "close dead"; B) the cult of souls in Purgatory extended to all the dead suffering in Purgatory, thus including the "unknown dead" or "abandoned souls"; C) the cult of anonymous remains, directed towards bones belonging to unknown individuals. Of these worships, the first two - that here we will lump together and call "classic" - were fully recognized by the official religion, and spread widely starting from the beginning of the 17th century. The three categories of dead to which the variants of the cult refer also play different roles in the relationships of the Neapolitan people with the supramundane. The "known dead" are the dead loved ones which have a relatively brief relationship of an unspecified kind with living relatives and acquaintances; the living give suffrage to their souls that, after a certain time, will ascend to Heaven. The "unknown dead" and "abandoned souls", due to their number and greater need for help, allow for a longer lasting and, as we shall see later, more advantageous relationship with the living¹³. The cult of anonymous remains concerns skulls thought to be representatives of forgotten, abandoned souls which are adored as relics of saints; it is believed that worshipping these anonymous remains gives *refrisco* (Neapolitan word, from *refrigerium*: refreshment) to their souls, which are expected to reciprocate with powerful intermediary or direct help¹³. Indeed, in the second half of the 19th century, the pre-existent "classic" cult of souls in Purgatory intertwined and merged with this new worship addressed to the bones collected in the ossuaries and the hypogea of the churches. This new devotion was entirely exclusive of Naples, had an autonomous, popular origin, and was the subject of debate by the Church that, although initially had an attitude of complacent tolerance, ultimately opposed it⁴.

Based on the theme of *meditatio mortis* - a reference to the idea of the constant presence of death in life - macabre representations became increasingly frequent after the birth of Purgatory. Between the 16th and the 17th century the skull became the most common iconographic typology for the representation of Purgatory and was used to expressly indicate the soul of the dead¹⁴. Moreover, the skull made explicit reference to the obligations towards souls in Purgatory as it also symbolized almsgiving, i.e. one

of the main methods of suffrage for the dead^{4,15}. Therefore, it is not surprising that since the first decade of the 17th century the skull was widely used in the decoration of chapels and churches dedicated to Purgatory. At the same time Purgatory began to expand its territorial boundaries, with a growing interest in the suffering souls in a general and undifferentiated sense. While the suffrages for the souls of deceased relatives remain, a new idea of the soul comes now forward, free from family duties towards the memory of the ancestors. This form of worship, directed towards the entire purgatorial universe, will become the prevailing one; the single ancestor is now replaced by an undifferentiated array of unknown dead, all suffering for their state, looking forward to showing gratitude to those who pray for them⁴.

A decisive turning point, associated with a surge in the cult, was determined by an event that hit the city in 1656: an epidemic of plague which exterminated the population causing thousands of deaths. The subsoil of a large area of the urban district Mercato was transformed into a mass grave where thousands of corpses were thrown. These dead, whose passing was hindered by the absence of mourning rites, are the quintessential nameless “unknown souls”¹⁵. Indeed, these non-accredited souls, lacked the support of the rites of passage that would ensure the maintenance of the individuality of the deceased^{9,16}. The epidemic denied a direct and personalized relationship with its own dead, and prevented them from becoming concrete traces of the past. The cult served to preserve these possibilities, as it offered to the memory the possibility of recognizing these anonymous dead as ancestors¹⁶.

A further turning point in the cult occurred in the second half of the 17th century, when the souls progressively increased their powers also acquiring characteristics typical of holiness, such as the authority to intercede with the Divine and provide protection to the living¹⁴. Thus, the living who with prayers and masses rescued unknown dead from oblivion, ensured their protection and help: the souls in Purgatory now grant real assistance to their benefactors¹⁵. Indeed, a new image of souls in Purgatory makes its way: they need the help of the living, but are very solicitous in reciprocating the suffrages they receive with graces and practical favours. Progressively the souls become, more than those to which prayers are dedicated, those to which prayers are addressed; from the role of recipients they pass to the role of powerful intermediaries³. Therefore, souls in Purgatory have turned into a kind of popular saint, and the Sacred has increasingly become an intercessor, a mediator engaged in a contractual relationship with the faithful¹⁵. Finally, in the second half of the 19th century the favours bestowed by the dead will become real miracles granted by the skulls, the worldly representatives of souls in Purgatory, even without any intercession of the official figures of the Sacred¹⁵.

3.3. The *pezzentelle*, the poor of the afterlife

The term *pezzentelle* (from the Latin *petere*: to ask) refers to the most marginal and unfortunate souls of the afterlife, spirits in extreme need of help. The *pezzente* is the

beggar and, like the beggars ask for alms on the street of this world, these souls ask for prayers; they are the beggars of the afterlife^{15,17}. These afflicted souls are the dead without adequate fulfillment of death and mourning rites, as well as the the arrays of sadly neglected souls. Souls unhappy for their condition of oblivion, without name and without family to remember them. The *pezzentelle* desperately ask for the comfort of a prayer, a mass or almsgiving; they too wait for *refrisco*. Therefore, there is an analogy between the poor and the dead marked by the same marginality: sharing the precariousness and the need for help, the poor can be regarded as vicars of the dead¹⁵. To underline the analogy between these categories, skull-shaped boxes - symbolic identification between the poor, the soul in Purgatory and the skull - become widespread in the 17th century as alms boxes^{3,15}.

In summary, the *pezzentelle* are poor souls, poor both for their irrelevant position in the supramundane hierarchy and, above all, for their condition of abandonment and deprivation of the comfort of the living; on the other hand, for the same reason, they lack any referent in this world that needs their intercession¹⁵. This category of souls are therefore in a completely different condition compared to “close” souls which receive prayers from the living with whom they are in a direct dialogue and thanks to which are destined to ascend to Heaven. In contrast, due to the lack of appropriate rites of passage or memory and suffrages from the living, the *pezzentelle* are in a perennial transition which prevents their ascent to Heaven¹⁸. In particular, souls that have not received adequate accompaniment to death are still looking for a place in the after-life and, therefore, they need even more prayers: they would require a push to enter Purgatory, to then be helped³.

3.4. The *refrisco*: the help for souls in Purgatory

The doctrine of Purgatory basically indicates three ways of suffrage to help Purgatory souls: prayer, masses and almsgiving^{3,4,8} (Fig. 1E). Souls in Purgatory are thought to suffer from an endless burning thirst, therefore the traditional cure for them is *refrisco*, which precisely means refreshment^{15,18}. Indeed, the thirst of the dead and the need to relieve it are themes that had a very long duration in Mediterranean funerary representations¹¹. The idea of *refrisco* as a metaphor for saving suffrage can be traced back to the Roman Caritas, in the myth of Cimon and Pero - the pitiful woman who breastfed her old father through the prison grate, as well as to the Christian theme of the Lactatio Virginis, widespread in the iconography of Our Lady of Grace with souls in Purgatory up to the 16th century (Figs. 2,3) (later replaced by more modest images), where breast milk, the liquid that calms thirst, symbolizes nourishment and salvation¹⁵. On the other hand, in classical iconography, charity and piety are often depicted as breastfeeding mothers¹⁵. Moreover, the symbolism of breastfeeding also alludes to the theme of the exchange between charitable and poor people and, therefore, the living and the dead. The importance of *refrisco* in history of religiosity is attested by numerous testimonies.



Fig. 2. The Virgin depicted as Our Lady of Grace descended into Purgatory to dispense *refrisco* symbolized by the milk from her breasts, the “*Virgo Lactans*”. Note how the Virgin rests her feet on the floor of Purgatory - an aspect forbidden after the 16th century - and the position of the arms of souls with folded hands. (Angiolillo Arcuccio, Museo Diocesano of Aversa, Caserta; ca. 1470)



Fig. 3. Beautiful fresco depicting the Virgin as Our Lady of Graces between the Saints Sebastian and Roch. The Virgin symbolically nourishes and refreshes with the milk from her breasts the souls in Purgatory under her feet. Note how a small cloud already separates the plane on which the Virgin rests from the purgatorial place below. (Unknown author, Church of Santa Maria Donnaregina Vecchia, Naples; early 16th century)

In the aristocratic wills of the 17th century there is almost always a reference to *refrisco* of souls in Purgatory, now increasingly disconnected from family relationships, and mostly represented by the unhappy host of abandoned souls¹⁵.

4. The cult of the skulls

4.1. From the cult of souls in Purgatory to the cult of anonymous remains

In the second half of the 19th century the cult of souls in Purgatory was intertwined with that of anonymous bone remains, thus assuming new and entirely specific characteristics. Basically it consists in the worshipping skeletal parts - above all the skulls - of dead considered to be in great need because they were forgotten or because they did not receive a proper burial¹⁴. It is fundamental to recall here two important events

that marked the history of funerary practices of Naples in the 19th century, and that probably played an important role in the birth of this new cult: A) the transition from burials in the *Terresante* under the churches (Fig. 4) (*vide infra*) to outdoor cemeteries, which deprived the people of the direct relationship they had with the bodily aspect of death; B) the emptying of the *Terresante* and of the mass graves where the bones of the dead had accumulated for centuries. This latter measure required the search for



Fig. 4. Typical structure of a *Terrasanta* with two large basins filled with earth, separated by a central corridor with two trap-doors closed by marble slabs, possibly leading to the ossuary below. In the back it is visible an altar with some exposed skulls. (Hypogeum of the Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, Naples).

In these underground chapels - where it was possible to welcome visitors and celebrate religious services - the corpses were superficially buried, exhumed after some time, and often left in the air to complete their decomposition; once skeletonization was accomplished, the skulls were frequently displayed, while non-cranial bones were placed in the ossuary.

new places where the bone remains could be kept. So, the *Fontanelle* caves became a huge cemetery that gathered nameless bones piled up in the *Terresante* and in the mass graves where the dead were buried during wars and epidemics¹⁷. Therefore, all these anonymous dead are *pezzentelle*; their ultimate salvation is at least unlikely, and they can only hope for the occasional *refrisco* offered by a charitable person. Nevertheless, even for them hope has not entirely vanished: the soul can somehow be adopted by a devotee willing to take care of it. Here, the worldly element that makes this adoption possible is called on stage: the skull, as representative of the *pezzentella*. Indeed, the adoption of the skull by a living who would dedicate all the necessary care, could not only relieve the suffering of its soul in a lasting way, but finally also to allow it to glimpse the possibility of a definitive liberation and the coveted access to Heaven. This possibility strongly ignites the hope of the *pezzentella*, therefore more inclined to reciprocate with intercessions, or even with direct favours. Therefore, they are particularly powerful souls on a relational level providing the devotee with a greater margin of bargaining and negotiation.

4.2. Characteristics of the cult of anonymous remains

The worship of saints has played a fundamental role in the development of the cult of anonymous remains, because it is around it that the relationship with the dead took a ritual form¹⁵. The saints are chosen dead recognized to have supernatural skills including the power to grant graces and miracles; their worship represented the model on which the cult of anonymous remains was structured, i.e. a cult based on the effectiveness of the body, the relics and the burial place¹⁴. People adopted unknown skulls and worshiped them in the same way one venerates the relics of saints and, in return for their devotion, they expected a reward. The cult required some kind of initiation through which the believer made contact with the soul of the skull and included a promise of limited time commitment^{13,18}. Sometimes the skull was chosen by the faithful, while in other cases the soul came in a dream to the faithful to ask for help, similar to a nocturnal apparition of a thirsty dead relative looking for *refrisco*¹⁵; subsequent communications between the believer and the soul typically occurred through dreams¹. They have now entered into a reciprocal relationship: the living provides *refrisco* to the soul of the skull, and this responds by trying to fulfill the requests of the devotee. When the living receives answers to its requests, it rewards the skull with further care. In these rituals one can perceive a definitely feminine trait and a correlative infantile - or, alternatively, senile - connotation of the spirit object of the adoption, suggesting a symbolic correspondence between children, old people and dead, thus underlining the character of non self-sufficient categories, thus in need of charity, thoughtfulness and dedication¹⁵. The *refrisco* often consists of material and symbolic gestures: in addition to prayers and the lighting of candles, the skull is cleaned with alcohol and cotton wool. Indeed, most worship practices essentially consist of forms of

ritual cleaning, where the cleaning/disinfecting the of bones symbolically represents the purgation of the soul. In fact, the theme of the relationship between purification and cleaning is ancient; the progressive cleaning of the bones corresponds to the timing of the purification of the soul necessary to deserve its ascent to Heaven¹⁵.

In short, the cult of the skulls is a strongly material worship, focused on the physical nature of human remains which are adored like relics, thus recapitulating the cult of the saints in its traditional formulation. The protagonists are the anonymous, abandoned souls in Purgatory, identified in the skulls that, as the bodies of saints, are somehow considered miraculous. Indeed, in traditional Christianity, holiness, before being a quality of soul or a spiritual state, is a specific quality of the body¹⁴. The cult had specific characteristics: it was born as a popular and autonomous worship, the followers were mainly women, it implied an individual relationship with a single chosen skull and had a markedly ritual character; it took place in the common ossuaries and in the *Terresante*; the cult could not be interrupted - this would have been a violation of the initial promise - otherwise the believer would be compelled by frightening dreams¹³; this latter recalls the dreams concerning the dead relatives, if periodic visits to the tomb were not made, or when the sheet that wrapped the skeleton of the deceased was not periodically changed and the bones cleaned¹³.

5. The ritual of double burial

Death is a rite of passage *par excellence*^{19,20} and since ancient times the Neapolitans have been devoted to the cult of the dead^{4,21-24}. Traditional Neapolitans attach great significance to the proper accomplishment of the funerary and mourning rituals, thought indispensable to accompany the dead to the hereafter^{13,18}. The deeply rooted fear that the dead could remain in the condition of eternal precariousness of the passage is a major concern, and it is reflected in the absolute importance given to respecting the rules of death rituals¹⁸. Indeed, the attention that the Neapolitan people reserve to the passage from this world to the other world is so deep as to require a specific method of manipulation of the body of the defunct to guarantee the completion of the transition: the double burial. This practice is considered fundamental to allow soul to reach the afterlife and, therefore, make possible the passage to Purgatory¹⁵.

After death, the majority of theologians argues that, while some souls are condemned to the eternal sufferings of Hell, some are certainly destined for Heaven; however, only really good people and the saints - but not all - can ascend directly to Heaven, as the vast majority of people destined to ascend to Heaven must first purify themselves for a variable time in Purgatory, depending on the sins committed in life⁸. It follows that a prevalent percentage of individuals after death will enter Purgatory and, indeed, in inner Naples the otherworldly life as a whole is identified in Purgatory, thereby leaving only a marginal role to the concepts of Hell and Heaven¹⁸. Theologians have

usually held that the access of the soul in one of the three places of the otherworld takes place immediately after death and the first judgement⁸. However, the popular culture of Naples shows a more complex vision: here there is the belief that upon the individual's death the soul remains somehow still tied to the body until the process of transformation of the cadaver is completed; this implies a close relationship between the state of the body and the situation of its soul and, therefore, the need for a complex funerary practice involving a double burial. This procedure allows to control the decomposition of the corpse, thus ensuring the definitive separation of the soul from the body, and therefore its transfer to the afterlife.

The practice is still widely in use in the modern cemeteries of Naples and, while for the traditional Neapolitan it has retained its original meaning, it cannot be excluded that one of the main reasons for its application today can be the need to recover space for new deceased.

5.1. Double burial, the afterlife and Purgatory

The double burial is a bipartite funerary ritual comprising a provisional entombment followed, some time after, by exhumation and definitive burial of the remains in a place other than the first^{9,11,23,24}. Therefore this practice implies that burial takes place in two phases: the first, provisional, ends with the complete decomposition of the body, and identifies a liminal period corresponding to the purification of the deceased from any trace of its bodily existence; the second burial is instead definitive, and consists in the permanent preservation of the bone remains in a new grave. Therefore, according to this ritual only when the body has purified itself of the corruptible elements of the flesh, it has the right to undergo definitive burial and, at the same time, the soul of the deceased can be considered definitively landed in the afterlife^{9,11,23,24}. Obviously the condition of the body after the exhumation is of fundamental importance: the persistence of large parts of fresh tissues indicates that the soul has not yet reached the afterlife, and in this unfortunate case it is only possible to hope for a repetition of the burial rite. The exhumation therefore has great symbolic and social importance, and is charged with strong emotional tension regarding the state of the body. Indeed, this is indicative of the accuracy and completeness of the mourning rites and, therefore, of the success of the ritual as a whole: only after complete skeletonisation can the remains be extracted from the first grave, and relatives can be sure that the transition has been complete, thus also confirming that the mourning rites had been performed correctly¹³. Having ascertained the completeness of the drying of the remains, the grave-diggers cleans the skeleton with alcohol - with the symbolic value of disinfecting/eliminating any impurities of the soul - and the remains are sprinkled with mothballs and wrapped in a sheet that will subsequently be periodically changed, as a form of care towards the defunct^{11,13,18}. In some way, the care given to the skeleton after the final place-

ment of bone remains in the definitive grave, already represents a form of *refrisco* provided to the deceased: the periodic cleaning of the bones and the changing of the sheet will provide soothing and well-being to the soul of the dead^{11,18}. In fact, the deceased itself can come to relatives in a dream to request attention to its skeleton, as well as to solicit other acts that bring *refrisco* to its soul, including masses in suffrage or charity actions¹⁸. Thus, these funerary customs underline the complex relationship existing between body and soul of the dead, and between the burial rituals to which the body of the deceased is subjected, its bone remains, and the condition of its soul in the afterlife.

In Naples, the practice of double burial has ancient origins, dating back to at least the 16th century, when the ritual took place in the hypogea under the churches, the *Terresante* (Fig. 4)^{9-11,15,23,24}. These were underground chambers endowed with basins filled with earth in which corpses were superficially buried; to make room for new dead, the corpses were often exhumed and left in the air to complete their decomposition^{9,15,23,24}. Once skeletonization was accomplished, the skulls were often displayed, while non-cranial bones were placed in a common ossuary included in the hypogeum. The purpose of these manipulations was essentially to monitor the decomposition of the corpse, and the whole process wanted to symbolize the purification of the soul of the deceased^{9,11,23,24}. The *Terresante* were places where relatives were allowed to access to take care of deceased loved ones, thus allowing a prolonged contact with them. Obviously, due to their use for centuries as burial places, in these underground chapels there was also an abundance of unknown bone remains whose individuality had been lost and whose souls were therefore considered abandoned. In this framework of close relationship between living and dead, the rooting of “classic” cult of souls in Purgatory and, above all, that of anonymous remains was conceivably favoured and, indeed, many churches’ hypogea of Naples were the seat of these worships.

In conclusion, the history of Naples is characterized by an attitude of the people for peculiar funerary rituals and the frequentation of the *Terresante*, the churches’ hypogea where, at least until the mid-19th century, a significant proportion of people was buried^{9,17,23,24}. In accordance with the idea of Purgatory as an underground place, the *Terresante* were indeed reminiscent of a purgatorial place; they could be considered as border places, passages between the world of the living and the afterlife, where it was ritually allowed to solicit the manifestation of the defuncts¹⁵. Still in 1835 a description of a *Terrasanta* on All Saints’ Day tells of a display of unearthed non-skeletonized corpses, and large numbers of people visiting¹⁵. It is therefore possible that these customs may have played a major role in the extraordinary success of the cult of the dead in Naples and, in particular, due to the display and accumulation of skulls in these places, they may ultimately have favoured the birth of the cult of anonymous remains.

6. The Opera Pia delle Anime del Purgatorio

The history of the Opera Pia delle Anime del Purgatorio and of its church, Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, documented in an archive that has remained intact²⁵, offers precious elements of how the cult of souls in Purgatory evolved and, in particular, it provides important testimonies on the destiny of the cult of anonymous bone remains. With the Apostolic Brief of October 15, 1606, Pope Paolo V approved the foundation of the Opera Pia delle Anime del Purgatorio. From its beginning the main purpose of the Organization was the celebration of masses in suffrage of Purgatory souls, as well as works of charity. An important activity was also health care for the poor, provided through a medical clinic attached to the church, where the most eminent physicians of Naples served - including Antonio Cardarelli and Giuseppe Moscati²⁵. The edification of the church, dating back to 1616, is particularly important as it definitively marked the transition of the cult of souls in Purgatory from the worship of dead relatives to the cult towards all the suffering souls in Purgatory¹⁵. The church is endowed with a large hypogeum comprising a second underground church with a perimeter corresponding to the upper church, a passage corridor and a wide sepulchral chapel with two *Terresante*, where the Opera Pia ensured the burial of its congregants (Fig. 4). The history of the hypogeum is full of events. Conceived to represent a suggestive descent into Purgatory³, over the centuries the hypogeum became one of main seats of the cult of anonymous remains^{4,25}. Despite its cessation as a burial place following the Edict of Saint Cloud in 1804, and a probable withdrawal of the cult in the early 20th century³, in the 40s of the 20th century there was a decisive surge in the use of the hypogeum as a place of worship and an extraordinary revival of the cult. In the autumn of 1946 Giovanni Moccia, painter and devotee of the souls in Purgatory, gave his willingness to restore the hypogeum at his own expense. From the documentation it appears that in that period the walls of the hypogeum were devoid of skulls or other displayed skeletal parts²⁵, in all probability due to refurbishment works after the cessation of use of the crypt as a burial place. The proposal of Giovanni Moccia was approved, and the works started after a short time. What happened during the renovation was decisive for the subsequent appearance of the hypogeum and for the imminent surge of the cult: while the rooms were being cleaned, the chaplain Father Apollinare Maffia authorized the unearthing of some skeletons from the *Terresante*, whose skulls were then cleaned and displayed. The hypogeum was reopened to the public and the interrupted cult of anonymous remains resumed with renewed strength. Masses for the dead were celebrated in the adjacent underground church, while the devotion to anonymous remains was practiced in the burial chapel, where numerous bones had been unearthed and displayed. However, the reopening of the hypogeum to the cult also was the subject of heated debate in the top management of the Organization. An aspect that is important to underline here is that the reap-

praisal of the cult in those years originated from the choices of the Neapolitan ruling class, and it was not an initiative born of the people. Indeed, the main protagonists of the debate were leading figures of Neapolitan civil and religious institutions. Among these Domenico Moscati, esteemed lawyer of the Neapolitan forum, and future mayor of Naples from 1948 to 1952, younger brother of Giuseppe Moscati, famous physician and academic who will be proclaimed a saint in 1987, but that already in those years was surrounded by a reputation of sanctity. The relationship between the Moscati family and the Opera Pia was very strong. Domenico was part of the government of the Organization, while Giuseppe, together with Antonio Cardarelli, was one of the medical consultants of the clinic attached to the Opera Pia. Domenico was one of the protagonists which opposed to the resumption of the devotion to anonymous remains in the hypogeum. On the other hand, others eminent personalities including the chaplain Father Apollinare Maffia, deputy vicar and provost of the Pio Monte



Fig. 5. Altar of the sepulchral chapel of the hypogeum of the Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco. Some skulls and other bones are visible on the table and on the step of the altar. Furthermore, an abundance of sacred images and statues, pictures of dead people, flowers, rosaries and candles are present both on the altar and on the ground. (Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, Naples)

del Suffragio of the Basilica of San Pietro ad Aram was instead in favour. The final decision was taken by the archiepiscopal Curia that in 1947 officially authorized the reintroduction of the cult. In the act explicit reference was made to the unearthing and display of bone remains buried in the *Terresante* as an acceptable practice²⁵. In fact, this custom was certainly already in use at least since the 16th century as part of the funerary ritual of the double burial which often culminated with the display of the skull of the dead person. Indeed, many hypogea of the churches of Naples were provided with a shelf that ran along the walls, conceived precisely for the display of the skulls of the deceased^{9,11,20}. What is different is that, while the display of skulls in the *Terresante* in the 16th-19th centuries was part of a precise funerary rite, the skulls now unearthed and exhibited in the hypogeum of the Opera Pia belonged to long dead people whose identity had been lost. Thus, these testimonials somehow expand the vision of some scholars that considered the worship of anonymous remains exclusively an autonomous manifestation of devotion of the lowest classes, antagonistic of the official religion¹⁵, because in those years both the approval and the following debate on the subject took place at the top of the Neapolitan lay and Catholic world²⁵. However, the debate on the appropriateness of this practice remained open, and the final answer came about twenty years later when in 1969 the Ecclesiastical Tribunal of Naples forbade the cult, considering it “aberrant and superstitious”^{4,15,25}. However, despite this ultimate prohibition, the cult in the hypogeum continued until 1980 when, following an earthquake that seriously hit Naples, the church was closed, and reopened only in 1992. Actually, persistent traces of worship still survives today, mostly in the form of offerings of flowers, candles and cards left in the sepulchral crypt (Fig. 5) or on the road, in front of the external grate which closes the hypogeum³.

7. The shrines of Purgatory

One of the characteristics of the street-shrines of Purgatory - that also accounts for their discussion in the final part of this contribution - is their capacity to visually summarize with effectiveness the cult of souls in Purgatory. Although it is not clear when these shrines were born, most evidence seems to indicate that they began to be built much later the emergence of the cult of souls in Purgatory, most likely in the middle of the 19th century, when it probably became common practice to insert a niche of Purgatory under tabernacles dedicated to a saint, the Virgin or Christ (Figs. 1A-D; Fig. 6A)^{1-3,16,17}. Sometimes a small box for collecting alms is also comprised in the shrine (Fig. 1E). Only very occasionally the shrine of Purgatory is isolated, as the only constituent part of the votive street-shrine (Fig. 7A). The niche appears as a hollow structure reminiscent of a cave or an underground space dimly lit by one or two small lights, with the walls painted red; the cavity is framed by a metal support and closed in front by a glass plate (Fig. 6A). In the interior, placed on staggered floors there are terracotta figurines

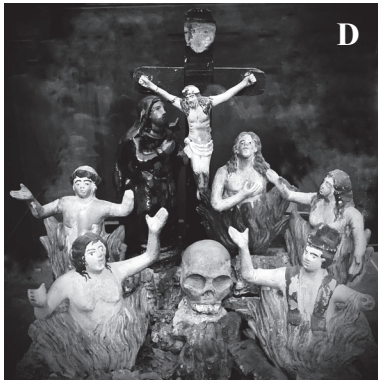
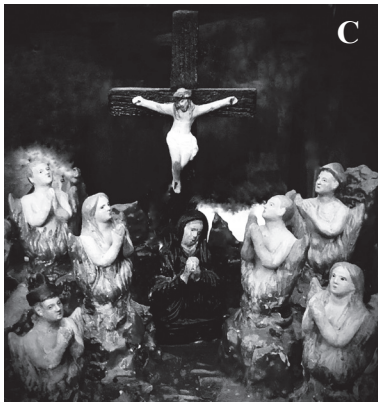
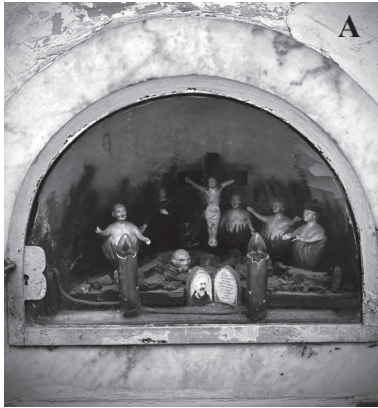


Fig. 6. Structure and composition of the shrines of Purgatory.

A) Typical niche of Purgatory framed by a metal support with a glass plate, inserted below the tabernacle dedicated to a saint. It looks like a cave occupied by figurines portraying penitent souls, Our Lady of Sorrows, Christ on the Cross and a skull.

B) Niche of Purgatory with four souls, Christ on the Cross with Our Lady of Sorrows at his feet, and two suspended angels.

C,D,E) Groups of figurines collected in the Museo dell'Opera in the Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco (Naples), once present inside the niches of street-shrines. Note the serene expres-

sion of the faces (C), and the different position of the arms of the souls with folded hands (C) or raised upwards (D,E). In (C) and (E) a soul with a soldier's helmet is clearly recognizable on the right. In addition to the figurines, pictures of dead people, flowers, images of saints and other votive objects are also very common in the niches; here, an image of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina (A) and a rosary (B) are visible. Moreover, pieces of various material painted red simulating flames and burning embers are visible in all pictures.

representing Purgatory souls, as well as figures of the sphere of the Sacred itself (Figs. 6A-E)^{2,3,16}. Indeed, in these niches we can see the visualization of the hierarchy of the supramundane as intended in the traditional strata of Naples including: A) the protagonist souls in Purgatory, intermediate figures *par excellence*, suffering for the expiation of their sins, but moved by hope in salvation and, therefore, in the ascent to Heaven; B) the Virgin Mary represented as Our Lady of Sorrows, the crucified Christ and, sometimes, two suspended angels; they are the official representatives of the Sacred, and account for the final dimension to which the entire composition aspires, Heaven; C) the skull, symbol of death and Purgatory itself (Fig. 6)^{2,3}. In addition, among the figurines are very frequent images of saints and other votive objects (Fig 6A,B), as well as pictures of deceased relatives. The presence of the latter is due to the belief that these dead, obviously not belonging to the sphere of the Sacred, could strengthen the relationship with the Divine, because they too may somehow provide some protection and intercession with God^{1,2}; furthermore, it is believed that they are accompanied and aided in their placing in the afterlife by the souls in Purgatory, thus helping to transform these close dead into benevolent ancestors³. The iconography of souls is fairly constant^{2,3,16}: the priest with the black three-pointed hat and the stole (Figs. 6A,C,D); the soldier with the helmet (Figs. 6C,E); the young woman and the old woman; the young man and the old man. All souls are depicted as naked figures with their lower half engulfed in flames, while their upper half is free from fire (Figs. 6A-E). The individual figures included in the scene have a symbolic meaning. The priest means the weakness of human nature, i.e. even a typically pious individual can commit sins. Moreover, the religious who, in spite of his function, is guilty of sins, is thought particularly in need of help because he would suffer a longer sentence in Purgatory³. In this regard, it is significant that the presence of a pope and a bishop is even noted in the oldest miniatures representing Purgatory, dating back to the 14th century⁸. The soldier with the helmet, who almost certainly died without the possibility of confession and having one's sins forgiven, represents the dead for sudden or violent causes: it symbolizes the non-accredited souls, the dead that lacked the support of the rites of passage that, due to their perpetual condition of liminality, are particularly in need of help. Indeed, the soldier embodies the "badly dead", the quintessence of souls *pezzentelle*³. The young woman probably represents the young wife who, left alone, gives herself to sin³. The presence of the Virgin Mary and Christ on the cross refers to the intercessory action, and therefore to the future salvation of souls. Similarly, the possible presence of angels wants to foretell that the passage of souls to Heaven will take place through these di-

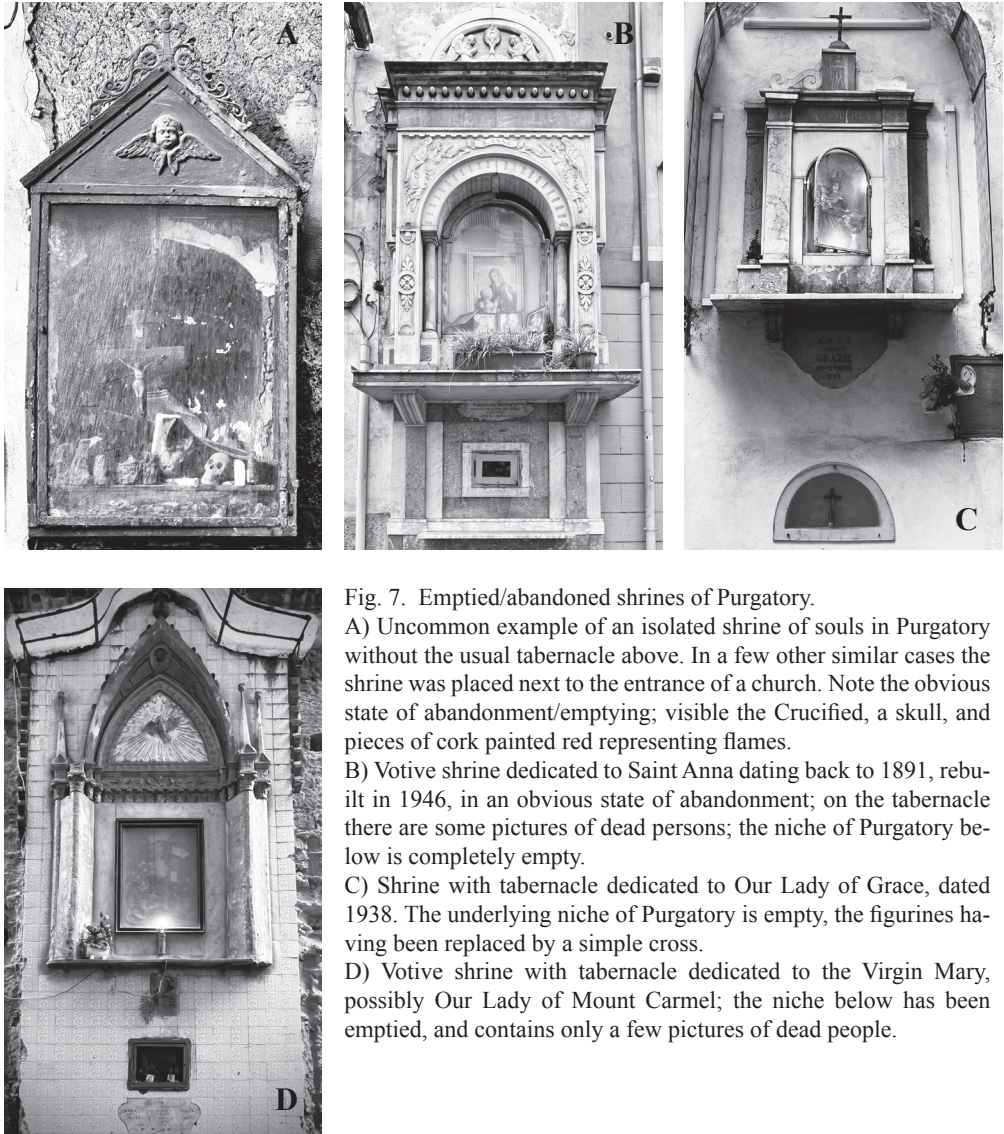


Fig. 7. Emptied/abandoned shrines of Purgatory.

A) Uncommon example of an isolated shrine of souls in Purgatory without the usual tabernacle above. In a few other similar cases the shrine was placed next to the entrance of a church. Note the obvious state of abandonment/emptying; visible the Crucified, a skull, and pieces of cork painted red representing flames.

B) Votive shrine dedicated to Saint Anna dating back to 1891, rebuilt in 1946, in an obvious state of abandonment; on the tabernacle there are some pictures of dead persons; the niche of Purgatory below is completely empty.

C) Shrine with tabernacle dedicated to Our Lady of Grace, dated 1938. The underlying niche of Purgatory is empty, the figurines having been replaced by a simple cross.

D) Votive shrine with tabernacle dedicated to the Virgin Mary, possibly Our Lady of Mount Carmel; the niche below has been emptied, and contains only a few pictures of dead people.

vine messengers, thus symbolizing the ultimate salvation². As a whole, the scene represented in the niches of Purgatory is exaggeratedly theatrical, and its dramatic nature seems just aimed at arousing emotion in devotees¹⁶. The position of the niche in the context of the entire votive shrine is also significant: it is in an intermediate position, between the Sacred figures in tabernacle above and the ground below, as if to indicate the position of souls depicted therein: in Purgatory, therefore halfway between Heaven and earth. Indeed, Purgatory is the intermediate place *par excellence*, equally distant from absolute supramundane grace and the world of the living¹¹. But it is a place of terrible suffering, and therefore souls in Purgatory are also between Heaven and Hell:

they hope looking at the sky with the upper half of their body out of the flames, while the lower half of the body still suffers the terrible pains of fire. Indeed, as representatives of this intermediate realm, souls in Purgatory are portrayed in an iconography that effectively emphasizes both their aspiration to Heaven and their condition of extreme punitive suffering, similar to that of Hell^{13,18}.

Which souls in Purgatory do these figurines want to represent? In all likelihood they represent the *pezzentelle*, souls in the marginal condition of oblivion and non-accreditation¹³. Indeed, the frequent presence of the soldier in these representations suggests that souls depicted here all share the same state of poverty and anonymity as the war dead. As we have seen, the setting of the niche is reminiscent of an underground cavity; the walls are lit by deep red glow, which recalls the widespread presence of fire that torments souls. In this way, the scenography somehow refers to a “hellish” model of Purgatory, very common in the history of Purgatory: an underground place near - but above - Hell, characterized by the same fire that burns the damned⁸. This model, shared by great theologians including Saint Thomas Aquinas, it is very different from later representations of Purgatory, like the almost heavenly place described by Dante⁸. However, despite their placement in the flames, the figurines portraying souls in Purgatory are clearly different from the damned of Hell. Indeed, although half wrapped in flames and, therefore, in a condition of extreme suffering, being aware of their future salvation and the glory of Heaven that awaits them, these souls do not convey real despair. The expression of the faces may now be imploring, now contrite, but still appears serene (Fig. 6C); the individual figures are arranged neatly in the scene, and their posture is composed and never twisted; the arms are sometimes crossed above the chests, like someone waiting patiently, or with folded hands in an attitude of prayer (Fig. 6C), or raised upwards as in a gesture of supplication or as to indicate the need for an upward push to pass into the sky (Fig. 6D)³. Probably the variability of the position of the arms reflects the iconographic transformation that took place over the centuries in the depictions of the Virgin and souls in Purgatory in art. Indeed, in the oldest artistic representations the Virgin is depicted in the flames of Purgatory and the souls show their arms crossed above their chests or in prayer (Fig. 2), but from the 17th century onwards souls will have their arms raised towards the sky where the Virgin is now placed in paintings and bas-reliefs (Fig. 8)³. Therefore, it is possible that the figurines of souls with theatrically raised arms are inspired by this later model. As we have seen, the Virgin is a constant element in the shrines of Purgatory. Often positioned in the background behind the souls, she is usually depicted standing, and in immediate relationship with the crucifix, another constant element. The Virgin, effective intercessor in aid of souls, may appear supplicant with folded hands (Fig. 6C), or she can mention with her hand to the suffering souls (Figs. 6A,E) and, at the same time, she makes a heartfelt appeal to Christ on the cross. Thus, the scene depicted has two main players: on the one hand the suffering souls that call for help, on the other the Virgin imploring

the crucifix, representing the salvation glimpsed by souls. As attested in the history of Purgatory, penitent souls are allowed to pray to the Virgin to relieve their torments⁸; indeed, the Virgin, “advocate” and protector of penitent souls, was thought to descend every Saturday to Purgatory to dispense *refrisco* to souls and to free those destined to ascent into Heaven²⁶; however, here the souls are not usually turned to the Virgin, effective holder of the power of intermediation and executor of the saving intervention, but to the spectator (Figs. 6A,B), as if to indicate the need for its participation, necessary to achieve the right effectiveness of interaction with the Divine. Purgatory is a place of waiting and hope; so, the souls in the niche seem to look at the passer-by with the silent request for help. They ask to pray for them and perhaps to have some alms for *refrisco* that would nourish their hope in salvation. Albeit not frequent, the participation in the scenery of suspended angels (Fig. 6B) heralds the actual success of the saving action, the liberation of souls from the purgatorial flames and their ascension to Heaven. Angels that raise the chosen souls to Heaven are already depicted in the most ancient representations of Purgatory of the 13th and 14th centuries⁸. On the other hand, the presence of the angels in the shrines is in line with the official iconography on the theme of the Virgin Mary with the souls in Purgatory from the 17th century onwards, in which the chosen souls about to reach heavenly bliss thanks to the intervention of the Virgin are raised from the purgatorial fire by angels (Fig. 8)^{24,26}. Therefore, in their absence the power to bring about the liberation of souls would refer to the mere presence in the shrines of the Virgin. Actually, the presence of the Virgin in Purgatory was considered unacceptable for the new canons of the Counter-Reformation and, indeed, it is not part of the post-Tridentine iconographic artistic repertoire²⁶. Nevertheless, in these unofficial representations the presence of the Virgin among the figurines of souls immersed in fire is definitely allowed (Figs. 6A-E).

Which variant of the cult of the dead are the shrines of Purgatory inspired by? As we have seen, most of these shrines seems to have been built between the 19th and the 20th century, a period that covers both the “classic” cult of souls in Purgatory and the cult of anonymous remains. Obviously, the two cults intertwined and a clear distinction between them can be really difficult, however it is possible that both influenced the iconography of the shrines. In some respects the shrines may have arisen as an outcome of “classic” cult; indeed, the constant presence of the Virgin imploring the crucifix seems to refer to the model of “classic” cult which implies the absolute need of intermediation of figures belonging to the official sphere of the Sacred; conversely, the cult of anonymous remains admits the possibility that souls represented by the skulls, endowed with the same supernatural powers of the saints, are themselves capable of granting graces and miracles, also without the intercession of the official sacred figures. On the other hand, some author has glimpsed in the almost constant presence of a skull in the shrines of Purgatory a symbolic correspondence with the abandoned skulls underlying the cult of anonymous remains^{13,18}. While this undoubt-



Fig. 8. Beautiful painting depicting the Virgin with souls in Purgatory featuring the typical iconography in use from the 17th century onwards. The Virgin looks down on Purgatory where the action of salvation is carried out by angels; the angel on the right, to which a soul is clinging, turns to the Virgin as if to find her consent. Note how the Virgin is depicted at the top, clearly separated by a cloud from the souls in flames below; the latter stretch their arms up towards her (“Madonna delle Anime Purganti”, Massimo Stanzione, altarpiece, 1638/1642; Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, Naples)

edly represents a valid possibility, here the skull can also serve to connote the scene to represent, as the skull is the symbol of Purgatory itself, as well as of almsgiving¹⁴ and, therefore, of the theme to which the representation is aimed, the request of *refrisco*. In addition, the underground setting of the *Terresante*, where the cult of souls in Purgatory was practiced, may have played a role as a source of inspiration for the shrines of Purgatory, as they were precisely characterized by the presence of displayed skulls, and were somehow reminiscent of a purgatorial place^{9,15}. Therefore, it is possible that the representation of skulls in the shrines of Purgatory refers to their common presence in the *Terresante*. Furthermore, in the *Terresante* as well as in the street shrines there was an abundance of images/statues of saints, the Virgin Mary and Christ, as well as pictures of dead relatives (Fig. 5), thus reproducing once again the popular religious universe of Naples¹.

8. Conclusion

Albeit tolerated, the numerous street-shrines distributed in the ancient center of Naples are ignored by the Church, and their care and maintenance is therefore carried out exclusively by devotees¹³. Currently some votive shrines dedicated to souls in Purgatory are well preserved, but unfortunately the majority of them are in poor condition or abandoned (Fig. 7A-D). Despite the increasingly rapid emptying of the niches, now often occupied by a simple cross (Fig. 7C), images of saints, or pictures of deceased relatives (Fig. 7D), the niches of Purgatory testify the strength that this cult had, visually translating the strong relationship existing between the city and the world of the dead¹⁶. Indeed, the city itself with its multitude of little purgatories on the walls of the buildings seems to be in accordance with the widespread idea of Naples as a city-purgatory, since it is geographically located in the area that could ideally be Purgatory, halfway between the Underworld of the myths of the past and Heaven²⁷. Although the devotion to the souls in Purgatory is currently part of the Catholic faith, the cult of Purgatory as a popular religion has significantly weakened nowadays. Despite some persistence of worship in a few places, the decline of the cult in its street-shrine form is really evident. Nevertheless, it must also be said that the subjects of the shrines are not part of a completely gone past, as their figurines are still widely present in the plastic production of the crib-makers of the San Gregorio Armeno district. Here, in addition to the classic iconography of the penitent souls, one can also note the insertion among the purgatorial flames of well-known contemporary figures, in a form of actualization of the cult.

The shrines of Purgatory remain very interesting for their ability to visually represent a really complex, multifaceted and somewhat controversial devotional practice. In Naples this cult occurred in different versions, also in the form of an antagonistic worship towards the official religion. The believers prayed for the souls to alleviate their suffering, but also because they hoped to receive real benefits from them. Thus, the shrines of Purgatory also fascinate for this way of being strongly ambivalent; they recapitulate the relevance of practicality in votive culture by capturing the equally religious and non-religious aspects of votive behavior⁵. The shrines of souls in Purgatory bear witness to a popular devotion which must certainly have been extraordinarily intense in the past. Telling us important aspects of social and ritual life that have contributed to defining Neapolitan popular religiosity, they provide precious testimonies of the tradition of the past, and are therefore part of the culture of the city.

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