

Unveiling the simulacri corpus sanctae. The case study of Saint Aurelius Martyr (Oporto, Portugal)

J. Palmeirão

Research Centre for Science and Technology on Arts (CITAR) – School of Arts, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto, Portugal

T. Ferreira

HERCULES Laboratory & Chemistry Department at the Science and Technology School, University of Évora, Évora, Portugal

J. F. Afonso & E. Vieira

Research Centre for Science and Technology on Arts (CITAR) – School of Arts, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto, Portugal

ABSTRACT: The post-Tridentine Church promoted the cult of the martyrs' relics exhumed from the Roman catacombs by exhibiting them to the veneration of the faithful in life-sized sumptuous reliquary-images (simulacri corpus sanctae). They functioned as powerful ways of dissemination of the Catholic faith and a mean of fighting Protestantism. During three centuries, the cult of the catacomb saints or holy bodies (corpi santi) spread throughout the Christian world. In recent years, a relatively large number of studies regarding the catacomb saints and their full body reliquaries (simulacra) have emerged on publications, oral presentations, and academic research. Despite being a promising topic receiving increasing attention, these reliquaries are still largely unknown in most countries, including Portugal. An overview of the first scientific approach performed on historic textiles, the skeletal remains, and the constructive system of the 18th century reliquary of Saint Aurelius Martyr from Oporto's cathedral is presented.

1. A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The initial period after the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformations, in the beginning of the 16th century, was marked by a certain degree of puzzlement in the Catholic world. The answer quickly arrived with the Council of Trent (1545-63), and a subsequent counter-attack, armed with the clarity and focus of its decrees (Ditchfield 2007). The fortuitous rediscovery of the entrance to an early Christian underground cemetery (*Coemeterium Iordanorum*) on a vineyard along Rome's Via Salaria Nuova, on May 31, 1578, contributed to the implementation of the cult of the martyrs' relics, stimulated by Rome (Boutry 1979, Bouza Álvarez 1990). The exploration of the Roman catacombs that followed supplied the Catholic territories with a much higher proportion of martyrs than the number listed in the official martyrologic (Ditchfield 2007). From the first moment, all those buried skeletons were considered martyrs of the primitive Church, killed during the period of intolerance and persecution that characterized the first centuries of Christianity. Therefore, the massive translation of the holy bodies (*corpi santi*) carried out from the Roman catacombs was the starting point to restore and strengthen the Roman faith and promote the exaltation of martyrdom in the next three centuries (Bouza Álvarez 1990). The exhumed holy bodies were widely distributed inside full body reliquaries (*simulacra*) to Europe and America as a

message of purity, sacrifice and regeneration of the Church (Boutry 1979, Serafim 2001). In German-speaking European countries, these sacred relics functioned as powerful tools against Protestantism by replacing the relics destroyed during the Protestant Reformation (Johnson 1996).

Within the framework of the Council of Trent, the holy bodies sent from Rome were accompanied by official authentication documents (*autentica*) with detailed information on the circumstances of its exhumation. With the Constitution *Ex Commissae* by Clement X (1670-1676), dated from 1672, the official authentication documents could only be signed by the Pontifical Sacristan or the Cardinal Vicar (represented by the Custodian of the Relics and Cemeteries) to proof of the skeleton's authenticity as a genuine martyr. The entry to the catacombs would be forbidden to visitors, except for special authorization (Boutry 1979, Baciocchi *et al.* 2011, Ghilardi 2015).

In the absence of identifying elements, the anonymous saint was rebaptized (*saints baptisés*), which means that he or she was given a new name, unlike the saints with *nomine proprio* (Boutry 1979). This new name was selected under the influence of the popular saints (legitimized by the Catholic Church), a well-known ancient Christian or even a moral virtue, which led to the existence of several *corpi santi* with the same name across the four corners of Christendom (Boutry 1979, Bouza Álvarez 1990, Baciocchi *et al.* 2011).

1.1. *Simulacri corporis sanctae*

The holy bodies were positioned in the interior of a simulated body, representing the martyr, and made of silk, paper mache, parchment, wood or wax. In some cases, they could also expose part of the sacred remains. These full-bodies *simulacra* were ceremonially dressed in baroque clothes, as ancient Roman legionaries or virgins, and exhibited with the signs of their martyrdom as heroes of Christian life or moral models of triumph and victory over pain and death by faith. Among the iconographic representations of the catacomb saints, the body lying in eternal rest or *somno pacis* was the most efficient representation of the deserved dream of the righteous or *sueño del justo*, as described by Bouza Álvarez (1990), although the image of the martyr lying on his elbow facing the believers was also used. These *simulacra*, made with the finest materials and executed with minutiae by nuns, monks or artisans, could be assembled and decorated in Rome or at the final destination. However, regardless the place where the set was mounted, the relics were always recognized and inspected by the bishop and experts based on the authentication documents that came with the martyr's bones. This recognition was made before the public ceremony of transporting the sacred relics to the definitive place of worship. Therefore, only authenticated relics could be exposed for veneration (Bouza Álvarez 1990, Bazarte Martínez 2006). Later, the *simulacra* were displayed inside sumptuous glass shrines, especially commissioned for them, and exhibited for devotion in churches, convents and private chapels.

2. ROMAN RELIQUARIES IN PORTUGAL

In the last few years, a relatively large number of studies regarding the historical and ecclesiastical context, manufacture techniques and conservation issues of the catacomb saints and their reliquaries have emerged in publications, conference presentations, and other academic research (Pfeiffer 2005, Prader 2012, Dahan 2014, Palmeirão 2014, Kristóf *et al.* 2015, Alterauge *et al.* 2016, Reys *et al.* 2016, Ciappara 2017, Ghilardi 2017). Despite being an issue that received increasing attention in Europe and even in North America, the number of holy bodies that came from Rome to Portugal is still uncertain, as are those that survived until now. Due to the absence of the official authentication documents, the information regarding the exhumation, donation, and arrival of many *corpi santi* to Portugal is still unclear. Moreover, due to the Lisbon earthquake (1755), the French invasions (1807-1810) and the extinction of the religious orders (1834) and the mortmain prohibitions against perpetual ownership, many relics and reliquaries were destroyed, stolen or

lost, or simply hidden for protection, and therefore banished from the cult. Others have been unnoticed and ignored for decades, despite their historic and outstanding artistic values.

Saint Fortunato, Saint Clement, Saint Justine and Saint Clare are some of the confirmed *corpi santi* that came from Rome to Portugal in the 18th century, assembled and decorated in natural sized figurative devotional reliquaries (*simulacra*). They are still exposed for public veneration in churches in Guimarães, Braga, Lisbon, and Oporto. Despite the lack of information regarding their mounting technique and materials, they are believed to be from Roman origin, unlike some well-known case studies in Central Europe (Pfeiffer 2005, Prader 2012, Koudounaris 2013).

2.1. *Simulacri of Saint Aurelius Martyr*

The *simulacri* of Saint Aurelius Martyr is one of the two 18th century remarkable examples (the other is Saint Pacific Martyr) belonging to the religious assets of Oporto's cathedral (Fig. 1). The reliquaries were exhibited on both sides of the main altar: Saint Pacific on the Gospel side and Saint Aurelius on the Epistle side (Costa 1789). They were later moved to other places inside the cathedral until the restoration works that took place in the temple in the first half of the 20th century, carried out by the General Direction of National Buildings and Monuments (DGEMN), when they were stored and forgotten for more than 80 years (Ferreira Alves 2002). On October 2012, both reliquaries arrived to the conservation and restoration centre of the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP), in Oporto, to undergo conservation works, requested by Arnaldo Pinho, Canon of the Cathedral chapter of the Diocese of Oporto.

In 2013-2015 the material, technical, and microbiological study, as well as the curative conservation intervention of the reliquary of St. Aurelius was carried out by Palmeirão (2014, 2015). Disposed in a carved, gilded wood shrine, with a glass front (Fig. 1), the full-body *simulacri* is lying on his right elbow towards the believers and is ceremonially dressed in baroque clothes with the *Chi Rho* Christogram on the chest. The holy martyr is accompanied by the attributes of his martyrdom: the blood vessel with the Christian monogram *VAS SANGUINIS*, the palm, the flower wreath, and the sword. On his left hand, in front of the palm, the inscription in capital letters: *S. AURELII M.*. The set (*simulacri* and attributes) rests on a rectangular wooden litter that allowed its displacement inside and outside of the cathedral (e.g. processional veneration). In the production of the *simulacri* a wide range of different materials – textiles, metal, paper, fabric, glass and wood – was used, making it a complex case-study from the material, technical, structural, and decorative points of view.



Figure 1. *Simulacri* of Saint Aurelius Martyr disposed in a carved gilded wood shrine.

3. SCIENTIFIC EXAMINATION

3.1. Methodology

Visual examination and morphologic evaluation were performed with a precision wire-account magnifier and an optical microscope (OM) in order to identify the textile fibres. Twenty samples of fibres were collected from the *simulacri* vests: warp and weft yarns from the fabrics, embroidery polychrome yarns and fixation yarns from the cloak and the lace from the litter. The fibres were handcrafted in small cork stoppers, which were cut by hand to obtain thin sections in the transverse direction to be observed with transmitted light. All samples were also observed in longitudinal section in order to complement the information gathered from the cross-section analysis. Conventional radiography was used to identify the presence of internal structures in the simulated body as also the location, positioning, number and condition of the bones inside it. The *simulacri* was removed from the shrine and the examination undertaken without removing its vests. A single exposure of the full body and two partial radiographs of the head and pelvis were performed.

3.2. Instrumentation

Magnification and counting were performed with a precision wire-account graduated 10x magnifier.

Optical microscopic images (OM) were obtained with a Meiji Techno binocular microscope with optical system KHW10x, Fn20, coupled with a ProgRes® CapturePro 2.7 digital camera (objective magnifier ranges from 100x to 200x).

Radiographic examination was performed with a portable X-ray ampoule YXLON®, model SMART® 160E/0,4. The X-ray tube was placed at a distance of 180 cm from the film KODAK® AA400 (CEN C5) without additional filter Al. The parameters were as follows: 40 kV, 6 mA, 35 s.

3.3. Results

The *simulacri* vests, in baroque style, consist of 27 textile elements, predominantly in silk and flax fibres (fixation yarn from the cloak): 11 fabrics, 1 embroidery, 9 metallic laces, and 6 passementerie elements (Palmeirão 2014, 2015).

A radiographic image of the complete skeleton as it is in the *simulacri* is presented in Figure 2. This non-invasive technique allowed to confirm the existence of human bones and to assess their condition of preservation, as well as the assembly method of the bones and the internal characteristics of the reliquary. An internal metallic structure on which the remains and the vests were mounted was identified on the X-ray images. Besides the thin metallic structure of the set (red), as well as its metal reinforcements (black and blue) were detected (Fig. 3). The skeleton is incomplete and some bones were assembled in a non-anatomical position. The non-anatomical position of the skeleton was also observed on a radiological study performed by Kristóf *et al.* (2015) in Hungary. Some ante-mortem and post-mortem fractures were also observed. In the latter case, the fractures may have occurred due to improper handling, transportation and/or storage of the *simulacri*.

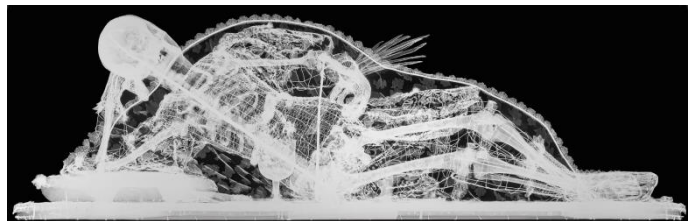


Figure 2. Radiography of the *simulacri* of Saint Aurelius Martyr.

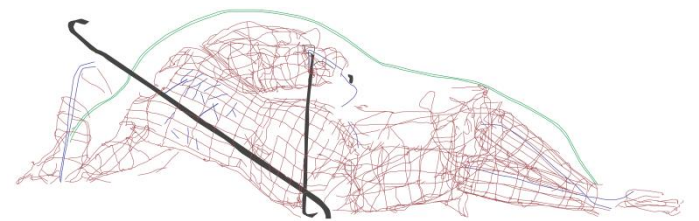


Figure 3. Internal metallic structure (incomplete) inside the *simulacri*.

4. CONCLUSIONS

After the rediscovery of the Roman catacombs in 1578, the post-Tridentine Church encouraged the cult of the martyrs' relics in life-sized sumptuous reliquaries, converted into powerful instruments of *religious propaganda*. Named catacomb saints, the thousands of holy bodies (*corpi santi*) found inside the catacombs were assembled and decorated in figurative reliquaries as soldiers or virgins (*simulacra*) and exhibited with the signs of martyrdom in glass, wooden shrines for veneration of the faithful in

churches, convents and oratories all over the Christian world. The reliquary of St. Aurelius Martyr is a remarkable example of the cult of martyr's relics in the 18th century in Portugal, as many others already inventoried. The assemblage of the *simulacri* in baroque clothes follows the common practice in Europe and it has a probable Roman origin. Indeed, the comparison of St. Aurelius with other European case studies from the 18th century pointed out the similarity of textile fibres and motifs. The radiographic study allowed to conclude the use of an incomplete skeleton in a non-anatomical position.

The research carried out on St. Aurelius reliquary focused on the material and technical history, conservation and valorisation of an 18th century Roman *simulacri* in Portugal. Accordingly, with the updated 2017 Vatican Instruction *Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation* published by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints (Bartolucci 2017), it is of utmost relevance to ensure the *mise en valeur* and preservation of this religious heritage, almost unknown in our times.

5. REFERENCES

- Alterauge, A. *et al.* 2016. Testing “Saintly” authenticity: Investigations on two catacomb saints. *RadioGraphics* 36 (2): 573-579.
- Bacocchi, S. *et al.* 2011. La distribution des corps saints des catacombes à l'époque moderne: de Rome aux nations. In J. Zúñiga (ed.), *Pratiques du transnational. Terrains, preuves, limites*: 101-120. Paris: Centre de recherches historiques.
- Bartolucci, M. 2017. *Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Instruction “Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation”*. Rome 2017. Available from: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_20171208_istruzione-reliquie_en.html. [23 December 2017].
- Bazarte Martínez, A. 2006. Veneración de reliquias y cuerpos de cera en los días de los fieles difuntos y todos santos. *Patrimonio Cultural y Turismo* (16): 57-68.
- Boutry, P. 1979. Les saints des catacombes. Itinéraires français d'une piété ultramontaine (1800-1881). *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen-Age, Temps modernes* 91 (2): 875-930.
- Bouza Álvarez, J.L. 1990. *Religiosidad contrarreformista y cultura simbólica del barroco*. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.
- Ciappara, F. 2017. Translating “Holy Bodies” (Corpi Santi) in Malta, 1667-1795. *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 43 (3): 1-17.
- Costa, P.A.R. 1789. *Descrição topográfica e histórica da cidade do Porto*. Porto: Na Officina de António Alvarez Ribeiro.
- Dahan, M. 2014. Imported Devotions: Roman Catacomb Saints in Ultramontane Montreal, MA thesis, McGill University.
- Ditchfield, S. 2007. Tridentine worship and the cult of saints. In R. Po-chia Hsia (ed), *Cambridge History of Christianity: Reform and Expansion 1500-1660*: 201-224. vol. six. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferreira-Alves, N. 2002. O tempo de Deus e o tempo dos Homens. A talha da Sé do Porto e o seu destino. In *Tempos e lugares de memória, Porto/Arouca, 5-8 Dezembro 1998*. Porto; Arouca: Centro de Estudos D. Domingos de Pinho

- Brandão; Universidade Católica - Centro Regional do Porto; Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto - Departamento de Ciências e Técnicas do Património.
- Ghilardi, M. 2015. Il Custode delle Reliquie e dei Cimiteri. *Studi Romani LXIII*: 175-210.
- Ghilardi, M., pers. comm. 2016. Il martirio simulato. Fabbricazione, diffusione e devozione dei corpusanti in ceroplastica. *Le commerce des objets de dévotion chrétiens. Approches croisées (XVIe-XIXe siècles)*. Rome: École française de Rome.
- Ghilardi, M. 2017. «L'artiste s'était surpassé». Medicina e reliquie in ceroplastica nella prima metà del XIX secolo. In I. F. Sermattei *et al.* (eds), *Antico, conservazione e restauro nell'età di Leone XII*: 193-210. Ancona: Quaderni del Consiglio Regionale delle Marche.
- Johnson, T. 1996. Holy fabrications: The catacomb saints and the counter-reformation in Bavaria. *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47 (02): 274-297.
- Koudounaris, P. 2013. *Heavenly bodies. Cult treasures & spectacular saints from the catacombs*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Kristóf, L. *et al.* 2015. Condition assessment of two early Christian martyrs', St. Christine's and St. Augustine's relics with paleoradiological methods in Hungary. *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 16 (2): 249-253.
- Palmeirão, J.C. *et al.* 2014. San Aurelio mártir - Estudio y conservación de los textiles de una imagen-relicario perteneciente a la catedral de Oporto, Portugal. In M. Vivanco Ramón *et al.* (eds), *Jornadas de Investigación Emergente en Conservación y Restauración de Patrimonio, Valencia, 22-24 Septiembre 2014*. Valencia: Instituto Universitario de Restauración del Patrimonio; Universitat Politècnica de València.
- Palmeirão, J.C. 2015. Imagem-relicário de santo Aurélio mártir pertencente à Sé Catedral do Porto. Estudo e conservação integrada das reliquias, MA thesis, Universidade Católica Portuguesa.
- Pfeiffer, A.C. 2005. Auferweckt in Herrlichkeit! Barocke Heilige Leiber in Oberschwaben. Materialien, fixierungstechniken, konservatorische aspekte, MA thesis, Fachhochschule Köln.
- Prader, N. 2012. Reliquiengebeine Nur Überreste eines toten? Dekomposition, schadensursachen und konsolidierung am beispiel des katakombenheiligen Placide, Ph. D. thesis, Hochschule der Künste Bern.
- Reyes, G.S. *et al.* 2016. La radiología digital para relicarios de ceroplástica: estudio interdisciplinar para identificar el sistema constructivo y la ubicación de los restos óseos. *Ge-conservación* 10: 54-65.
- Serafim, J. 2001. Relíquias e propaganda religiosa no Portugal pós-tridentino. *Via Spiritus* 8: 157-184.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Joana Palmeirão acknowledges Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) for the research grant (SFRH/BD/124061/2016), Dr.ª Paula Monteiro (DGPC) for textile identification, and Stefan Alves (UCP) for X-ray analysis. The authors also acknowledge FCT for funding through the Strategic Projects UID/EAT/0622/2016 (CITAR) and UID/Multi/04449/2018 (HERCULES Laboratory).