A forgotten religious heritage: the *simulacri corpus sanctae.*

Study, inventory and safeguarding of Portuguese reliquaries

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Introduction

When considering the reasons for exhibition the holy relics in places of worship during modern age, one should keep in mind the decree **"On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images"** from the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent (December 3-4 **1563**). The Catholic Church stressed the role of relics as intercessors between the world of the living and the dead by emphasizing the efficacy of the invocation of the saints to gain benefits from God through Christ: (…) *the holy bodies of* ***holy martyrs****, and of others now living with Christ, –which bodies were the living members of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Ghost, and which are by Him to be raised unto eternal life, and to be glorified, –are to be venerated by the faithful; through which (bodies) many benefits are bestowed by God on men* (...) [1]. Thus, the exhibition of relics and the pilgrimage to the holy bodies were a practice of devotion fully legitimized by the Council against the reformist prohibitions [2].

Fifteen years after the last session of the Council, in the Spring of **1578**, an unknown early Christian underground cemetery (*Coemeterium Iordanorum*) on a vineyard along Rome's Via Salaria Nuova was discovered by chance [3]. The exploration of the Roman catacombs that followed caused a massive translation of the holy bodies (*corpi santi*) and the implementation of the cult of the martyrs' relics all over the Christian world [4].

What are the *simulacri corpus sanctae*?

The ***simulacri corpus sanctae* (*martyris)*** are a typology of devotional reliquaries made from the bones found inside the Catacombs of Rome after their rediscovery on **May 31, 1578**.

According to historical sources, thousands of skeletons allegedly from the early martyrs of the Catholic Church (killed during the first three centuries of Christianity) were massively exhumed from their resting places (*loculi*), assembled and displayed inside simulated martyrs' bodies. These **full body reliquaries or *simulacra*** were nobly dressed as ancient Roman legionaries or virgins with the signs of martyrdom (palm, blood vessel, sword, wreath of flowers and Chi Rho monogram), made with the finest materials and complex techniques executed by nuns or artisans specialized in the art of embroidery, *papier mâché*, plaster, wood or wax. During **three centuries (XVII-XIX)**, these *simulacra* were sent to the several Catholic countries where they were exposed inside wooden shrines in churches, convents, monasteries and oratories to be venerated by the faithful [4]. The visual contact with these **life-sized figurative reliquaries** of great exuberance and colour as "memorials of martyrdom" had the purpose of consolidating the faithful in the expectation of the final resurrection and eternal life in Christ through faith.

Simulacri corpus sanctae in Portugal

The study, inventory and safeguarding of the *simulacri corpus sanctae* is a pioneer investigation in Portugal. Despite their remarkable technical, artistic execution many of these reliquaries were left to oblivion for dozens of years. Unnoticed or ignored by the faithful, owners, and public in general, the *simulacra* were simply abandoned inside their shrines or coffins and left to degradation, which in some cases caused the irreversible loss as religious and artistic testimonies of the Counterreformist Church in Portugal.

The *simulacra* are not rare in Portugal. In fact, so far, we have already counted **more than 60 bodies** brought directly from Rome to be exposed and venerated in Portuguese churches, convents and private chapels, among the **17th and 19th centuries** (**Figures 1-2**).

However, and although we have confirmed the existence of 44 *simulacra*, we do not know the whereabouts of more than 23 *simulacra* mentioned in historical documents. Many of these reliquaries were probably destroyed, hidden or even lost due to the Lisbon earthquake, the Napoleonic wars and the extinction of the religious orders after the Liberal revolution [5]. As most of these missing *simulacra* were sent to Lisbon, it is possible that they had disappeared during the earthquake on November 1, 1755.

Of the 67 *simulacra*, 32 are dated, 16 have a probable date and 19 have no date. The absence of the official authentication documents (*autentica*) and other official documents that should mandatorily accompany the bodies when sent from Rome is the main reason for this lack of information. Without these documents, the information regarding the exhumation, donation and arrival of the *simulacra* to Portugal is unclear.

Despite the lack of historical information about the mounting techniques and materials used in the execution of these typology of reliquaries, they are believe to be from Roman origin [5]. A wide range of different materials were used: silk, gold and silver, jewels, parchment, fabrics, paper, metals, glass, wood, plaster and wax. By observing the various *simulacra* in Portugal, we have identified three categories chronologically applied regarding their mounting techniques. In this sense, we have *simulacra* with:

- Skulls uncovered;
- Skulls covered with fabric (painted or not), parchment, *papier mâché* or plaster;
- Skulls (and limbs - forearms, hands, legs and feet) made with wax – *ceroplastic reliquaries* [6,7] (**Figure 1**).

The second category was the most used during almost all the 18th century. On the other hand, the third one was frequently used in the last decades of the 18th century until the last *simulacri* identified (1870). According to Ghilardi, the first ceroplastic reliquary was produced in 1769, in Rome [7].

Concerning the position of *simulacra* we can also establish two typologies:

- Resting/lying on an elbow, facing the believers;
- Lying in eternal rest (facing side or facing up) (**Figure 1**).

Despite the second and third categories mentioned above are usually seen in both positions, the first category was applied only in *simulacra* resting on an elbow, the oldest position used in this typology.

Figure 1. *Simulacra* in Portugal (convents, churches and private chapels).
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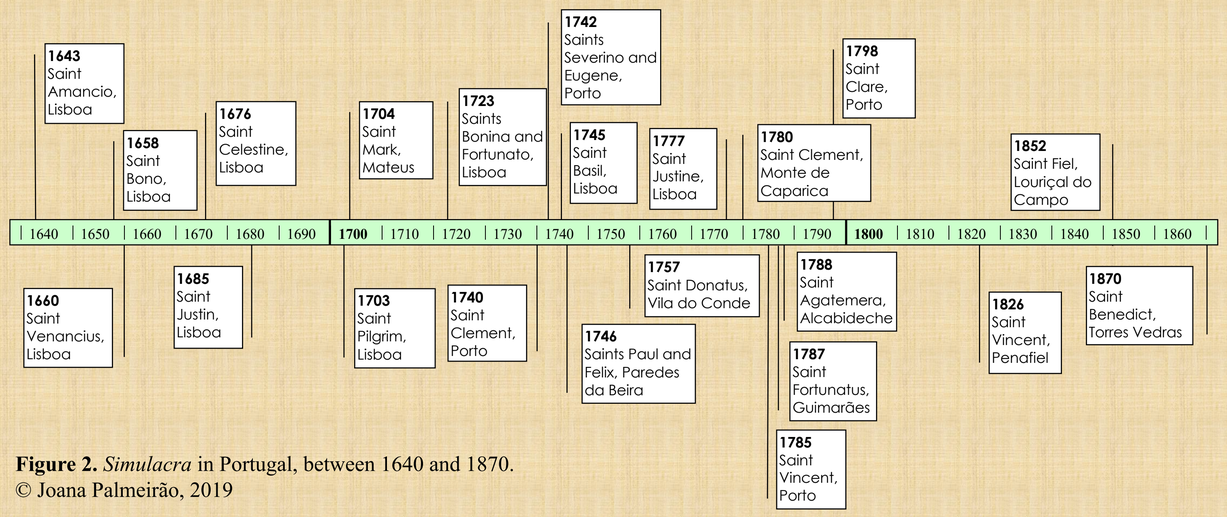

Figure 2. *Simulacra* in Portugal, between 1640 and 1870.
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Final considerations

Although the XXV session of the Council of Trent had a direct influence on the massive translation of the martyrs' skeletons from the Roman catacombs, it is not clear why these *simulacri corpus sanctae* began to be produced. The formal norms legislated by the Council for the veneration of the saints and their relics, as well for the execution of the sacred images [8] were extremely rigorous, condemning all superstition and idolatry, resorting in turn to an art of great austerity and restraint. In addition, in 1698, the practices of extracting the bodies from the catacombs and the process of canonization were already criticized by religious, such as the Benedict Jean Mabillon [9]. Although we may suppose that the exhumation and distribution of the holy bodies was not taken lightly a century after the rediscovery of the catacombs (in fact, it was subject of a strong controversy [2]), how can we account for the continued receipt of these simulated martyrs for two more centuries?

Regardless of the reasons that led to the production and distribution of these typology of devotional reliquaries, we are facing a unique heritage of great cultural and religious value that we must safeguard at all costs. We have already lost some of the *simulacra* that arrived to Portugal in the 17th and 18th centuries and unfortunately, there are still many in problematic conservation circumstances. That is why, together with a national inventory of *simulacra*, nonexistent to date, we must evaluate the conservation state, change factors and processes, with a view to the elaboration of proposals for the condition and safeguarding of the *simulacri corpus sanctae*.

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