

Public Uses of Human Remains and Relics in History

**Edited by Silvia Cavicchioli
and Luigi Provero**

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Introduction

Silvia Cavicchioli and Luigi Provero

Human Remains From Antiquity to the Contemporary Age

The relationship between the living and the dead is central in any historical context: human remains weigh on and affect the world of the living, who as a result work and fight for control over bodies and burial places. Venerated, collected and studied, or else repudiated, forgotten and rediscovered, human remains and relics ensure a continuity with the past, and in some contexts receive new force and efficacy.¹ As has recently been noted, “in their physicality relics are only contingent material objectifications of ideas and gestures endowed with their own specific and historicised genealogies.”² There is therefore a basic tension which arises from the desire to manage and manipulate the meanings of these remains, the past and the history which they convey.

In the West, over the centuries the preservation of human remains and the veneration of relics have been most widespread in the religious sphere, in the awareness of a continuation of life after death.³ In similar ways political authority has resorted to using human remains of the past to root and legitimise its strength, and to propagate its prestige.⁴ Secular power then created its own relics, enabling the processes of transferring sacredness from the religious to the political level. These re-semantifications appear very evident from the French Revolution onwards and then throughout the contemporary era, in the Italian case giving rise to extremely interesting case studies during Fascism.⁵

In this volume we consider a broad notion of “human remains,” not necessarily celebrated or venerated. The object of our investigation in fact encompasses a diversity of human remains (real or imagined), such as those of saints (not least the crucified body of Jesus), of kings and of famous people, as well as unidentified corpses. And that diversity has a vast range of components, different in substance and in nature: whole bodies and parts of them, and even so-called contact relics. The research collected here intends to reconstruct—thanks to its significant number of case studies—the complexity of the cults of veneration, the symbols they

generated, and also the religious, political, commemorative and scientific uses assigned to them in different historical periods.

This theme is developed by means of a comparative and long-term approach—from antiquity to the contemporary era—without any pretence to exhaustivity but nevertheless with the aim of bringing a new scientific and historiographical perspective to the investigation of the theme. Whereas the subject is of recognised importance and topicality, the studies thus far conducted on human remains appear extremely dispersed.

In recent years the treatment of dead bodies and its many ramifications have attracted the attention of the scientific community. This is demonstrated, on a more general level, by the ongoing theoretical debate on the “repatriation” of remains of indigenous populations of America and Oceania and on the musealisation of human remains. It can also be seen in the contrasting viewpoints of communities in our society: the meaning given to human remains by the religious community changes when another community—scientific, anthropological, archaeological, museological, legal or historical—talks about them.

The latter, the historians, have been relatively slow to grasp the extraordinary richness offered by the study of human remains and to decipher the political and social constituents of the rituals, mnemonic processes and identity relationships expressed and mediated by them. However, the growing interest in “body politics,” in other words corporeity and thanatopolitics (the politics of death), as well as the expansion of the sub-discipline of memory studies, have undoubtedly helped to draw the attention of historiography to these subjects. Furthermore, the way that these objects of study have been assimilated into the *lieux de mémoire* codified by Pierre Nora has stressed the importance of the study of human remains in defining the processes of conflict and stability, propaganda and consensus seeking, invention of tradition and nation building.

The important studies carried out in a purely historical perspective have gradually identified various historiographical models and cultural reference points: the subject of human remains is important, but research has resulted in very different threads and lines of enquiry, demonstrating its richness and noteworthiness. It is probably not a coincidence that the bibliographies of the 14 chapters gathered here are so profoundly different from each other: this is probably not only due to the different contexts of analysis, but also to the absence of a real historiography on human remains, and the absence of a scholarly debate that has brought into full contact those who have studied the relationship between the living and the dead from a historical point of view.

Intended therefore to fill a historiographical void, the main purpose of this collection is to investigate the multiplicity of meanings that has been applied to the use of human remains over a long span of time. We have sought to produce an organic reflection on the subject and to develop

fresh angles for historical investigation enriched with anthropological and cultural implications, adhering to the research lines already followed mainly in the English-speaking world.⁶

At the same time, the authors of these chapters have had to cope with a specific weakness inherent in studies relating to Italy, on which they have chosen to concentrate their attention. Despite the recognised polysemic richness of the many areas involved and of the potential research developments, the subject has long been partly neglected and subject to historiographical prejudices, at least if one excludes contributions linked to religious traditions, the cult of saints and hagiography, and the history of art.

This collection therefore restores the historical interpretation of human remains to a time-span that crosses profoundly dissimilar historical and cultural eras in order to highlight the layers of traditions and customs that have formed over the centuries (in addition to the increasing conflict around their conservation). At various junctures human remains have been given different roles to play: from an object of worship characteristic of Christianity, to an element of sacralisation and legitimisation of dynastic and political authorities; from weapons used in struggles between religious and civil power, to anti-relic forms either oppositional or expiatory; from identity symbols of religious and political minorities, to a building tool of a “religion of the homeland” founded on the veneration of civil remains and on the sacralisation of secular relics; from dehumanised exhibits in present-day scientific collections, to a drivingforce of the recognition politics of native communities worldwide.

The authors have given careful thought to the areas of production, discovery, preservation and exhibition of human remains by examining their many uses in terms of memory, cultural identity, political claims and scientific heritage. The research projects presented here investigate the different religious, political, memorial and scientific meanings attributed to human remains in order to decipher their function over the centuries through the interpretative high points of political history, religious history and the history of science, in accordance with questions aimed at combining the anthropological, social and cultural dimensions of such a complex subject. While Prosperi had underlined the complexity of the theme of the material and immaterial relationship between those who die and those who survive, works by Ariès and Kantorowicz, centred on the thanatopolitical practices and symbolic uses of the dead body, had already understood the need for a multi-century and multidisciplinary approach to the subject.⁷

The adoption of a long chronological perspective also makes possible the emergence of the different territorial declinations within which individuals, groups and authorities worked in order to recover, safeguard, study and catalogue, enhance or destroy human remains: on the one hand, the national contexts wherein we investigate the relics of saints,

popes, kings and emperors of Catholicism or the symbols of identity, dynasty and politics activated during the unification processes; and on the other hand, the regional contexts wherein we reconstruct analytically the mechanisms of relationships between the cult of dead bodies and local power and the practices of political legitimisation.

A Unifying Complexity

The long-term reading of human remains has been approached from different angles, but is governed by a shared methodological framework and an interdisciplinary viewpoint that also addresses anthropological and cultural elements capable of enriching the historical and socio-political interpretations of the various contexts considered. It has favoured the emergence, construction and restoration of a comprehensive unified framework in which continuities, ruptures and transformations are highlighted.

The unifying key of interpretation is therefore that of the interaction between the living and the dead, but this allows us to underscore how, through different eras, customs and gestures, human remains have taken on a variety of meanings, which often refer to a variety of disciplinary statutes. Thus, the reading of the contributions gathered in this volume—thanks to the broad chronological and thematic articulation of the chapters—suggests many positive threads of continuity and discontinuity and brings to the fore conceptual oppositions of great interest, such as those between celebrated and repudiated bodies, between inclusion and exclusion, and between individuality and anonymous collectivity.

Some of the human remains examined belonged to a prevalently static group, that is, one where the interest is in the scientific practices of verification, measurement, study, preservation, musealisation and standardisation: hence the contribution by Simone Baral which focuses on the skulls of famous Italians, from Leonardo to Raphael, that underwent anthropometric and phrenological measuring aimed at uncovering the characteristics of genius or nationality; or, similarly, the research by Silvano Montaldo in which the corpses made available for research and teaching in the anatomical institute of Turin at the end of the nineteenth century comprise the centrepiece. In these examples the static and scientific dimension of observation, cataloguing, preservation, collecting and, finally, regulation dominates: the same is true of the chapter by Maria G. Castello, which seeks to demonstrate by dint of a study of late-classical important normative instruments (the imperial legislation and the newborn ecclesiastical law) how the empire and the church attempted, in different ways and yet not systematically, to regulate the traffic and commerce in relics, their uses and misuses, their proliferation and attempted misappropriation, and also to find means of certifying their authenticity.

In contrast, some of the human remains that feature in other contributions belonged to a prevalently dynamic group, that is, one where the spotlight is on the ceremonial and ritual sphere, well-publicised moments of restoration, celebrative choreography, media-relayed ostensions and collective rituals involving body-monuments, where the spectacularity of the event (with all its political, identity and symbolic implications) is an integral part of the intervention on human remains. This is the substance of the study conducted by Silvia Cavicchioli into the repeated exhumations and relocations of the bodies of the martyrs of the Roman Republic of 1849, carried out from the Risorgimento period to that of the Fascist dictatorship, to serve as instruments of political legitimisation and transmitters of patriotic sentiment. It is also central to Paolo Cozzo's study of the postponed funeral processions of the many bodies extracted from Roman catacombs which, despite not belonging to local hagiographic traditions, still became the focal point of cults, often overlaid with meaning for the identities of the Piedmontese communities to which they were moved between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

It is therefore first and foremost individual relics that were charged with enormous community and identity significance, such as the phenomenon of the prodigious liquefaction of the blood of Saint Januarius, the long story of which has been recounted by Francesco Paolo de Ceglia; or such as the remains of Simon of Trent, which were used to support an anti-Semitic agenda, as detailed by Emanuele D'Antonio; or such as, finally, the ostension and exhibition of the body of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina in the sanctuary of San Giovanni Rotondo, an event of 2008 which Maria Teresa Milicia uses to reflect on illustrative practices of the social treatment of human remains in the contemporary world.

The importance of the individual becomes a prerequisite for the development of memorial practices and collective celebrations. Thus, Mauro Forno describes the solemn celebration accorded to the mortal remains of another "popular saint," Giovanni Bosco, in particular during the canonical recognition of his body (on 16 May 1929 just before his beatification) and its subsequent translation, events that were transformed into gigantic collective rites in which hundreds of people participated; contrarily, in stark contrast, there is the example of condemnation provided by the ignominious burial of Jesus Christ, which Andrea Nicolotti reconstructs through an evocative rereading of the texts of the Gospels which, in the light of Jewish law and noting the apologetic objective of the evangelists, reveals a knowing attempt to ennoble the consignment of the body to a rock tomb. The notion of condemnation, degenerated into annihilation and destruction, sank to its nadir in the form of the contemptible cannibalism described by Luca Addante in his chapter on the fall of the Neapolitan Republic, in which he considers the two-way use of tortured bodies in an attempt to detect signs of an important change in the discourses on power and in its representations: with the Bourbon

restoration, and through the daily passing of public death sentences, royal power reaffirmed its sovereignty over those that it considered traitors to the Neapolitan fatherland.

In that case study, while individuals are clearly of importance, the focus is shifted decisively onto a collective dimension and the creation of political identity. This dimension, in profoundly different ways, can be found in the contributions that place the emphasis on the importance of cemeteries as places for the development of collective funeral practices, cults and community identities: these are issues considered in Luigi Provero's chapter on the community function of medieval village cemeteries, and in Natale Spineto's work on the collective exhibition of "mummies" in the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo from the end of the sixteenth to the twentieth century, and also in Diego Carnevale's work on the stratification of hundreds of human remains in the Neapolitan Fontanelle cemetery.

The first part of the volume tackles the subject of the relationship between norm and praxis in late antiquity. The second, which takes a particularly broad chronological and geographical view, is dedicated specifically to relics, to their cult and their circulation, and to the battles to control them. The third part offers reflections on the collective dimension of death, on the symbolisms of funeral rites linked to the display and manipulation of human remains, on the collective uses of places for the preservation and exhibition or else the burial of corpses. Finally, the fourth part investigates the public uses of human bodies as instruments of celebration and scientific study but also of annihilation in the contemporary era.

This volume—a significant stage of a research path rather than a point of arrival—concludes a two-year project funded by the University of Turin (Linea B—2016) entitled *Religious relics, secular relics, human remains: symbols of collective identity, instruments of power, cultural legacy, and scientific memory*, and coordinated by Silvia Cavicchioli. We wish to offer our sincere thanks to a number of scholars who accepted our invitation to participate as discussants in a series of seminars organised as part of the project in order to confer about the cornerstones of the research, namely Andrea Augenti, Pierre Antoine Fabre, Dino Mengozzi and Angelo Torre. Our thanks also go to Nicolas Laubry, the coordinator, together with Guillaume Cuchet and Michel Lauwers, of the *Transitions funéraires* project, which gave us valuable food for thought.

Finally, we extend our thanks to Ester de Fort for her generous support and Matthew Armistead, who translated this volume with great care and with special attention to English readers.

Notes

1. Michel Bouvier, "De l'incorruptibilité des corps saints," in *Les Miracles, miroirs des corps*, ed. Jacques Gélis and Odile Redon (Paris: Presses et Publications de l'Université de Paris-VIII, 1983), 193–221. The ideas in this

introduction are shared by both authors. The first section was edited by Silvia Cavicchioli, the second by Luigi Provero.

2. Luigi Canetti, *Frammenti di eternità. Corpi e reliquie tra Antichità e Medioevo* (Rome: Viella, 2002).
3. Edina Bozoki, *La politique des reliques de Constantin à Saint Louis. Protection collective et légitimation du pouvoir* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2006).
4. Philippe Boutry, Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Dominique Julia, eds., *Reliques modernes: cultes et usages chrétiens des corps saints des réformes aux révolutions* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 2009); Dominique Julia, "Reliques: le pouvoir du saint," in *L'Europe. Encyclopédie historique*, ed. Christophe Charle and Daniel Roche (Arles: Actes Sud, 2018), 296–300.
5. Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire. 1789–1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2001).
6. Alexandra Walsham, ed., "Relics and Remains," *Past and Present*, Supplement 5 (2010); Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
7. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Philippe Ariès, *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1977); Adriano Prosperi, ed., *I vivi e i morti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1982).