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PRACTICES OF DOUBLE BURIAL AND CULT OF THE DEAD IN NAPLES

*ABSTRACT: The ritual of the double burial consists of a first temporary burial followed, some time later, by recovery of the remains and their definitive placement in a second burial site, generally different from the first, often accompanied by a second funeral ceremony. The practice has survived to the present day in the modern cemeteries of Naples, directly derived from an ancient ritual widespread until the second half of the nineteenth century which took place in subterranean chambers, under the floor of churches and convents. These hypogea were structured according to two organizational models: the *terresante* and the *scolatoi*, both of which aimed at favouring the decomposition of the corpses and reaching the state of a skeleton. According to the procedure, once skeletonization was accomplished the skulls were displayed on a cornice present along the walls of the hypogeum, while non-cranial bones were placed in a common ossuary. At the base of the ritual there was an idea of death perceived not as a sudden event, but instead as a long-lasting process, during which the deceased went through a transitional phase, gradually passing from the earthly state to the hereafter. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of these funerary rituals was the liberation of the bones from the earthly element of the flesh, an indispensable condition to allow the definitive passage of the soul into the afterlife. This process also wanted to be exhibited and, therefore, in these hypogea the decomposition of the corpse was displayed to visitors. Through the progressive corpse's decay, the ritual was intended to visually symbolize the various stages of purification faced by the soul on its path towards the kingdom of the dead, a destination considered reached only when the skeletonization was complete, and the definitive burial carried out. These practices provided the basis for establishing close relationships between the living and the defuncts, and fostered the development of cults that dealt with the dead. This article briefly reviews the structural organization of these underground sepulchral chambers, the funerary practices they housed and the forms of worship centered on the cult of the dead which took root and developed within them.*

KEY WORDS: Double burial – Terrasanta – Scolatoio – Mummification – Cult of souls in Purgatory – Cult of the skull

INTRODUCTION

The Neapolitan funerary system in the eighteenth century was characterized by the almost exclusive burial of the dead in underground rooms placed under the floor of churches and convents (Carnevale 2010, Carnevale, Marin 2016). An interesting funerary practice adopted in these hypogea consisted in prolonged treatment of the corpse comprising two separate burial phases, believed to be important to accompany the deceased to the hereafter; the first burial was aimed at favouring the skeletonization of the body, in the second one the bone remains were deposited in an ossuary, usually included in the burial chamber. In terms of architecture, in these hypogea it was possible to substantially identify two different kinds of funerary structures, both aimed at achieving the skeletonization: the *terresante*, common only in Naples (Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010); the *scolatoi* widespread throughout southern Italy (Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari 2013, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010) and documented, to a much lesser extent, also in northern and central Italy (Licata *et al.* 2018, Bini *et al.* 2021). Although certainly already existing in the sixteenth century (Bini *et al.* 2021), the greatest diffusion of these types of burial in Naples occurred in the eighteenth-nineteenth century. Indeed, at the end of the eighteenth century, the *terresante* were regarded the most common type of grave site, accounting for up to two thirds of all burials (Carnevale, Marin 2016). Prohibited by new hygiene and public health regulations, this type of burial nevertheless remained operational in the Neapolitan *terresante* until the second half of the nineteenth century (Carnevale 2010, Carnevale, Marin 2016). Actually, the ritual of double burial has survived up to the present day in the modern cemeteries of Naples where, albeit in a very simplified way, it is still practiced, thus providing extremely valuable elements of investigation on this ancient practice. On the other hand, the possibility nowadays to explore these hypogea, still preserved in several churches of Naples, represents an exceptional opportunity for study and a further source of investigation. Furthermore, the underground spaces which hosted these funerary practices also welcomed worships associated with the dead, the cult of souls in Purgatory and the cult of the skulls, particularly lively and felt in Naples (Pardo 1989, Battimiello 2015, Amirante 2018). Therefore, in this review these distinctive underground funerary structures and the rituals of double burial connected with them are reassessed, with a discussion of their architectural

organization and the forms of worship that flourished there. Funerary practices based on double burial are cross-culturally and quite ubiquitous in the world, showing an impressive chronological and geographical distribution. However, the reasons behind this ritual may vary in peoples and cultures of different geographic areas, and at different times. Although some structural elements of the double burial appear to be recurrent, others are characteristic of individual societies. Similarly, the very meaning of the practice or the elements that compose it can vary profoundly from one society to another. Therefore, one of the objectives of this contribution is to demonstrate how double burial has assumed a particular cultural significance in Naples, and how its study can be used to unearth a set of more particular ideas on the cult of the dead in Neapolitan society.

The double burial and the process of death as a duration

According to the anthropologist Robert Hertz, death can be seen as a long-lasting process: after death the deceased goes through a transitional state in which it stays still in close connection with the earthly world, as if somehow it is no longer alive without being completely dead; this liminal phase ends with the final burial of the bones which, on the one hand marks the definitive passage of the soul into the afterlife, on the other hand definitively sanctions the exit of the deceased from the world of the living and the new belonging to the world of the dead (Hertz 1960). According to the theories of Hertz, the transitional state involves both the body of the deceased and its soul, as well as the bereaved survivors; it is assumed that survivors can, through their rituals, influence the position of the deceased, which is, in turn, perceived as having power in life (Pardo 1989). Furthermore, a symmetry is thought to exist between the physical state of the body and its soul, the transformations of the corpse during decomposition being mirrored in the state of the soul, and vice versa (Hertz 1960).

These concepts are well embodied in the ritual of the double burial still practiced today in the modern cemeteries of Naples. It consists in an initial inhumation of the body, followed by exhumation some years later; at that time it is checked that the bones are completely dried, then the remains undergo a second burial in their definitive location, usually accompanied by a funeral ceremony attended by relatives (Pardo 1989). This sequence of operations corresponds, in short, to the basic mechanism of the double burial.

Based on the above, it is clear that to be accomplished the ritual of the double burial necessarily requires a dry

skeleton, i.e. a condition of permanent stability of the body destined for eternity: only when the skeletonization is complete can the final burial be carried out, and thereby the eternal rest of the deceased be granted. According to this model, a close relationship exists between the physical state of the corpse and the soul: through the decomposition of the contaminating element represented by the flesh, it is achieved the complete liberation of the bones, symbol of purity and eternity. At this moment the soul is regarded purified so that the deceased can be considered definitively landed in the kingdom of the dead; there, it reunites with its ancestors, thus becoming a benevolent soul to pray in domestic altars, and of whose intercession it will be possible to hope (Pardo 1989, Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010).

Therefore, the exhumation/recognition of the corpse represents a critical moment in the ritual of the double burial as practiced today in Naples: if large parts of soft tissues are still present, the definitive burial will have to be postponed, and one must therefore deduce that the dead has not yet found peace in the hereafter (Pardo 1989, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Fornaciari 2013); this eventuality would also suggest the need for further prayers, visits to the cemetery and other forms of care by relatives in favour of the deceased (Pardo 1989), still engaged in the hard journey towards the afterlife. So, the duration and outcome of the transitional period of the dead are strictly dependent on the execution of the rituals of double burial, the living being able to concretely influence the fate of the deceased through the correct fulfillment of the funerary rituals (Pardo 1989, Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Fornaciari 2013). Thus, the funeral ceremony associated with the final burial serves not only to commemorate the departure of the deceased, but also to emphasize that the passage into the afterlife has successfully taken place, a sign of the soul's good state and the appropriateness of the funerary rituals (Pardo 1989).

One might wonder why these practices, as well as the concepts related to them, have taken root and have survived to the present day in Naples. Death was clearly experienced by the survivors as a painful loss, but was considered an indispensable event to allow soul to pass from the earthly world to the otherworldly world; probably death felt as a slow process and a gradual transition on one hand allowed the relatives to mitigate the psychological laceration immediately following death (Pardo 1989), on the other hand the transitional state allowed the survivors to establish a strong and

unprecedented relationship with the deceased in its new condition (Fornaciari *et al.* 2010), in which it participated in both the earthly and the otherworldly dimensions; as we shall see later, this strong relationship between living and the defuncts underlies the cults associated with the dead in Naples.

In summary, in this scheme the correct performance of funerary rituals is of fundamental importance for the fate of the soul of the deceased. In order to obtain protection and help, Neapolitan people turned to different sacred hierarchies, including the Virgin Mary, the saints and the souls in Purgatory (Pardo 1989); hopes for help were reinforced by the possibility that a recently deceased relative would intervene, on their behalf, with these figures. It was believed that such an intervention was possible only if the funerary rituals were well performed, as only this could allow the soul a good otherworldly state (Pardo 1989). Thus, kinship paid great attention to the execution of mortuary practices, aware that incomplete death rituals would have meant that they could not expect any help from the deceased (Pardo 1989). Such concerns also justified the existence of the brotherhoods which administered the funerary ecclesiastical hypogea: they facilitated obtaining a burial place, ensured the performance of funerals, besides providing economic assistance to their members (Pardo 1989). Furthermore, as evidence of the central importance attributed to the correct execution of burial rituals, in the Naples of the eighteenth-nineteenth century there were brotherhoods involved in charitable practices which offered burial in the *terresante* they managed to the marginalized, vagrants and poor to whom, otherwise, would not have been granted a proper burial (one of these congregations was the brotherhood of Santa Maria dell'Orazione e Morte, called *Verdi dello Spirito Santo*) (Carnevale 2010).

Since Hertz published his seminal essay on the double burial in Dayak society, many other anthropologists have followed his lead, and while they agree that the main stages and structures of the ritual are similar cross-culturally, they have also demonstrated that they are embedded in quite different sets of cultural beliefs.

Complementing Hertz's original concepts of death as transition and double burial, Van Gennep proposed a model conceived as a passage into another social dimension, including a phase of separation, margin or limen, and aggregation (Van Gennep 1909). Death would initially involve a separation of the individual from the community; the gradual disintegration of the



FIGURE 1: Typical structural organization of a terrasanta: a vaulted room with four "giardinetti", a central corridor and niches; above the latter a ledge for the laying of the skulls runs along the walls; in the middle of the corridor one can see the grate that gives access to the ossuary below. (Church of Santa Luciella, Napoli.)



FIGURE 2: Two large "giardinetti" separated by a central corridor with two trap-doors closed by marble slabs, possibly leading to the ossuary below (this is accessible through an opening with a grate, visible in another point of the corridor). In the back of the hypogeum, in a large niche, there is an altar with some displayed skulls and votive objects on it. (Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, Napoli.)

body would correspond to the liminal period; finally, the stable dry skeleton would indicate that the dead has been aggregated into the other world, thereby also symbolizing a rebirth.

Danforth analyzed the death rituals in a rural community in northern Greece (Danforth, Tsiaras 1982). These rituals are characterized by a long period of deep mourning: the bereaved may visit the grave every day, even for periods of hours. However, these activities cease at the end of the mourning period, marked by the exhumation of the body; the bone remains are therefore delivered to the village ossuary, an act which "ensures ultimate oblivion". From now on the deceased is no longer commemorated by the relatives but by the collectivity, since it has now become part of the community of the dead. This attitude is distinctly different from the Neapolitan customs according to which after secondary burial masses are celebrated in suffrage of the soul by relatives who make every effort to maintain a connection with the defunct. In keeping with Van Gennep's model, Danforth views the entire death ritual as a passage: the entombment is the rite of separation, the exhumation is the rite of aggregation. However, here aggregation refers only to the mourners who after the secondary burial finally re-establish relationships with the living. Conversely, the dead is not aggregated, it merely departs, thus seeming to finally reach the negative status of non-existent (this also explains the extraordinary intensity of the liminal period, as the bereaved try to prevent this non-existence by retaining a profound and prolonged contact with the dead). This view is in stark contrast to the deeply religious perspective of death in Naples where double burial is strictly connected to the belief of a new existence of the soul in Purgatory that, in turn, preludes to the bliss of Heaven.

A singular example of death as long-lasting transition is that observed in Tana Toraja, located in Sualwesi, in northern Indonesia. Here death is not seen as the terminal event of life, rather it is incorporated into life itself (Swazey 2013). When a person dies, a real funeral is not performed, the deceased is simply kept in a room of the house. It is not considered dead, but rather a sick or sleeping person, and continues to be part of the family, being cared for, symbolically nurtured and included in conversations. Only when the family is ready to part with its loved one, and has enough money to organize the funeral, the status of the individual is regarded that of a dead. The funeral ceremonies take place years later death, and are lively events that last up to weeks. The body is ultimately placed in a shallow

cave or coffin suspended on a rock face. However, every year the ceremony of cleaning the corpses takes place during which the bodies are exhumed, cleaned and dressed with new clothes. Although very different from the funerary rituals that took place in Naples, the presence of elements in common is evident, including the prolonged contact with the corpse which, as we shall see later, is characteristic of the burials in the Neapolitan hypogea; furthermore, ceremonials somewhat reminiscent of that of the cleaning of corpses have also been reported in the *terresante* of Naples where, on commemorative occasions, bodies were recovered, stripped and dressed with new clothes (Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010).

The *terresante* and *scolatoi*

At the beginning of the eighteenth century in Naples there were more than 300 churches, most of which had underground tombs under their floors, basically summarized in the following types (Carnevale, Marin 2016): (a) the mass grave, represented by a pit of a few meters deep enough to accommodate the bodies; (b) the family tomb, located at a side chapel of a church, administered by a noble family; (c) the *terresante*, usually managed by lay brotherhoods, represented by vaulted crypts which allowed individual burials, and where relatives and acquaintances could be welcomed to visit the dead and pray for them; generally there was a corridor that divided the floor into more parts occupied by basins filled with decompacted earth, called "*giardinetti*" (little gardens), where bodies were superficially buried (*Figures 1-5*); to accommodate new dead, the corpses were often exhumed from the "*giardinetti*" and exposed to air in niches present along the walls of the hypogeum, thus favouring a their more rapid decomposition (*Figure 3*); (d) the *scolatoi* were really similar underground chambers, the only differences being that the "*giardinetti*" are absent, and the niches are provided with masonry seats, each one with a hole in the center; the corpse was placed to drain in the niche in a sitting position so that the fluids produced during the decomposition could be collected inside the hole which, in turn, was connected with a drainage system (*Figures 6, 7*; Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Fornaciari 2013). Though by no means a general rule, the *scolatoi* were more often present in convents and reserved for the burial of religious, while the *terresante* were the places of burial preferred by the laity.

Therefore, both the *terresante* and the *scolatoi* had the purpose of favouring the skeletonization of the dead.



FIGURE 3: A niche interposed between two "giardinetti" surmounted by a cornice with several skulls displayed above. Inside the niche the corpse was exposed to complete its decomposition (it is not clear how the body could remain standing in the niche; one possibility could be that it was kept in a slightly leaning case). Note the numerous ex-votos on the wall testifying graces received; witnessing mutual assistance between the living and the dead, their presence possibly contributed to reinforcing and self-perpetuating the cult of the dead. (Church of Santa Luciella, Napoli.)

In the *terresante*, the corpse was left buried in the "giardinetti" to begin decomposition and cause the body to lose the bulk of the liquids; when the corpse was partly dry, it could be moved into a niche, where decomposition continued until the skeletal stage was reached (Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Carnevale 2010, Carnevale, Marin 2016). In the case of the *scolatoi*, the corpse was left on the masonry seat in the niche until the skeletonization occurred, generally without any previous treatment (Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Carnevale 2010). Usually in the middle of the chambers which housed both the *terresante* and the *scolatoi* there was an ossuary represented by a pit closed by a grate, intended for the preservation of the bone remains (*Figure 1*; Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Carnevale 2010, Fornaciari 2013, Carnevale, Marin 2016). Often there was also an altar, to testify that religious services, such as funeral ceremonies and suffrage masses by relatives were celebrated in these hypogea (*Figures 2, 4, 5*; Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Fornaciari 2013). Regardless of which of the two systems was used, once skeletonization of the body was accomplished, the remains were placed in their specific definitive locations: the skull, symbol of the individuality of the deceased, was often displayed on a masonry cornice present above the niches (*Figures 1, 3*), whereas non-cranial bones were deposited within the common ossuary. On the basis of these considerations, it appears clear that the burial apparatus adopted in the *terresante* and the *scolatoi* is completely consistent with the model of the double burial: a first part of the ritual aimed at favouring decomposition up to complete skeletonization, followed by the exposure/preservation of the bone remains. On the other hand, the exhibition of the corpse in the niches would have a deeply symbolic meaning: in accordance with the principle of symmetry between the condition of the body and that of the soul, the exhibition of the progressive cadaverous decomposition can be seen as the metaphorical representation of the the hard journey of the soul towards the afterworld (Fornaciari *et al.* 2007). The change from an individual to a collective burial location in these hypogea is also significant: while during the transition phase the deceased stands alone in the niche of the funerary room, after the secondary burial the soul – symbolized by the dry bones – is no longer isolated, but it is now reunited with its ancestors in the kingdom of the dead – symbolized by the common ossuary.

Probably the long manipulation to which the corpses were subjected in these hypogea was also functional to a gradual dissolution of the ties that bound the deceased

to the survivors. Throughout this treatment relatives and acquaintances were possibly engaged in visits and prayers, as well as in providing care for the corpse and checking that skeletonization of the body was occurred. Indeed, this last event on the one hand allowed the final burial of the bone remains, thus ensuring the definitive passage of the deceased to the hereafter, on the other hand it also freed the survivors from the obligation of mourning (Hertz 1960, Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010).

In conclusion, it is evident that these funerary hypogea were structurally designed for a specific ritual treatment of the corpses based on the double burial. On the other hand these spaces responded to the needs of the cult of the dead which in Naples had a great following.

The *scolatoi* and mummification as an alternative to skeletonization

The function of the *scolatoi* – or *colatoi*, the terms are derived from the Latin word "colum" (drain) – described above has sometimes been interpreted as being connected to a mummification practice. Its structure, a niche with a masonry seat with a hole in the center ("sitting" *scolatoi*), was instead clearly aimed at skeletonization by favouring the decomposition and the drainage of cadaveric liquids. However, this does not exclude, especially in hot and dry environments, that skeletonization was occasionally replaced by the preservation of large portions of skin and soft tissues, i.e. mummification. Similarly, corpses buried in the *terresante* could undergo dessiccation rather than decomposition, thus resulting in a mummy rather than a skeleton (*Figure 8*; Fornaciari *et al.* 2010). These findings, which have sometimes been regarded as signs of sacredness, should be interpreted as accidental and unintentional (Fornaciari *et al.* 2007).

Conversely, a second type of funerary setting featuring "horizontal" type *scolatoi* was widespread in Sicily, the function of these structures being really to promote the mummification of the body through dehydration. These *scolatoi* consisted of small rooms equipped with a horizontal grid, made of wood or ceramic tubules, on which the corpse was placed. The body, lying on the grid, slowly lost its fluids by simple oozing through the dermis. The ventilation, ensured by air intakes, and the constant temperature maintained thanks to the characteristics of these rooms obtained in the subsoil of religious buildings, ensured the drying of the corpse. The mummified body was then exhibited in crypts or funerary chapels, where it could be visited



FIGURE 4: Altar with overlying fresco depicting the deposition of Christ. Below and on the sides, part of two "giardinetti" and niches are visible. The corpses were left buried in the "giardinetti" for a limited period, probably no more than 6–8 months, after which they could be moved to the niches as an "ornament" of the burial chamber (Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007). (Church of Santa Luciella, Napoli.)

by relatives and acquaintances. It can be assumed that this process was developed by the Capuchin order towards the end of the sixteenth century, and only later it extended to other components of the Sicilian clergy, as well as to some lay brotherhood (Fornaciari 2013).

Skeletonization by double burial and mummification could be seen as two forms of treatment of the corpse carried out through different techniques, but leading to a common outcome: to give a definitive location only to the remains freed from perishable parts. Therefore,

the two different types of scolatoi, one conceived to destroy, the other one to preserve, intervene on the process of decomposition with the same purpose: to transform the putrescible parts of the body into something permanent and immutable, the bones or the mummy, and deliver it to the eternity of the definitive sepulcher (Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Fornaciari 2013).

In summary, the scolatoi can be classified into: (a) the "sitting" type, equipped with seats with a hole in the center, the most common, being widespread throughout southern Italy; it was aimed at draining and decomposition of the dead placed in a sitting position to drain the liquids produced by putrefaction; (b) the "horizontal" type, widespread mostly in Sicily, was instead intended for mummification; this process took place by dehydration due to slow loss of fluids through the skin of the dead placed on a horizontal grid (Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Fornaciari 2013). Probably, mummification as well as skeletonization have the same objective of resolving the uncertain moment of the change, that liminal phase in which the body undergoes irreversible transformations. Although they are different practices and seemingly contradict each other, mummification is comparable to skeletonization by double burial, since the aim is the same: to stabilize the corpse and transform the body into an incorruptible simulacrum of the living, the skeleton or the mummy.

The hypogeal burials and Purgatory

One of the great advantages of the *terresante* and the scolatoi, which probably contributed to promoting their wide diffusion in Naples, was that of avoiding the promiscuity of the mass grave, and allowing to prolong the contact of the survivors with the deceased, easily identifiable in the "giardinetti" or in the niches (Carnevale 2010). Indeed, the burial system adopted in these hypogea allowed the celebration of the memory and the individuality of the dead: relatives and acquaintances could be welcomed into the hypogea to pray for the deceased and take care of its body. The living had an interest in maintaining the individuality of the deceased and, therefore, in ensuring a clear point of reference for their future relations with it (Pardo 1989). If the deceased had lost its individuality, the living would have had no hope either of its intercession or, more generally, of a close link with its soul (Pardo 1989).

One might wonder why such complex body treatment was used in the *terresante* which, as we have seen, could include the transfer of only partially dried bodies from

the "giardinetti" to the niches to complete their decomposition. One reason might be the chronic lack of space in the sepulchral areas of Naples (Battimiello 2015) which forced the premature exhumation of the corpses to make room for new dead; as it was necessary to guarantee equal treatment to all members of the brotherhood, a system was needed that ensured a turnover of corpses by making room for new dead; therefore, speeding up the skeletonization of the bodies in the niches was functional to an economy of space, thus facilitating the final part of the practice, the gathering and the definitive storing of the bones in the ossuary. On the other hand, another reason could be that one wanted to witness the decomposition, ascertain the slow disintegration of the body which made the deceased participant simultaneously in two dimensions, that of the living and that of the dead, until the exposure of the bones, symbol of the successful liberation of the soul (Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Fornaciari 2013). Indeed, only when freed from all its bodily parts, the deceased could have access to the afterlife and, therefore, to Purgatory, thus becoming a benevolent and helpful entity, capable of intervening advantageously in human events. Furthermore, the display of corpses and skulls responded to the requests of the Catholic Reformation which employed terrifying images of death as inspiration for "meditatio mortis", and encouraged the cult of Purgatory, whose iconographic representation was made up of macabre images (Carnevale 2010, Battimiello 2015, Carnevale, Marin 2016).

According to the notions of long-lasting death and double burial, the Catholic Purgatory – a place where the souls, after a temporary suffering due to expiation of their sins, are destined for Heaven – could be regarded as an extension of the concept of death as gradual transition, a further preparatory period of the soul preceding its final liberation: the soul, once gained access to the world of the afterlife, continues its purification in Purgatory, a phase necessary for the final admission into Heaven (Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010, Fornaciari 2013). Therefore, one could think that after death the process of purification would take place in two stages. The first corresponds to the transitional period in which the sufferings of the soul appear as a consequence of the transition state in which the dead is (Fornaciari *et al.* 2010); in this phase one could imagine that, during decomposition, the deceased – the soul of which is still partly connected to the body – painfully purifies itself by progressively eliminating the contaminating element represented by



FIGURE 5: Four "giardinetti" separated by two intersecting corridors. At the end of the hypogeum there is an altar of polychrome marbles with a high relief above depicting the deposition of Christ. Here funeral ceremonies and masses in memory of the dead were regularly celebrated. (Church of the Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini, Napoli.)



FIGURE 6: "Sitting" scolatoi (A, B, C). A row of "sitting" scolatoi within niches along the hypogeum wall (A, B) equipped with a seat with a hole in the center (C), in turn connected with a drainage system. Between a niche and another you can see the metal attachments (B, arrows) designed for an object (probably a rod or a rope) which was supposed to prevent the corpses from falling forward. Evident signs of recent restoration interventions are detectable in this room; in particular, the drainage system for the outflow of cadaveric liquids downstream of the seats - usually represented by grooves ending on the dirt floor - is no longer (Church of San Severo al Pendino, Napoli).

the flesh (Hertz 1960); this would be in accordance with the principle of symmetry between the soul and the corpse, the process of spiritual transition of the soul being as unpleasant as the decomposition of the body. In the next step of spiritual evolution, the soul, definitively freed from the body, purifies itself in Purgatory; sufferings are now connected with the necessary atonement for the sins committed during earthly existence (Fornaciari *et al.* 2010).

As we have seen, after the first burial the living are actively involved with visits and rituals aimed at

remembering the deceased; after the definitive burial of the bone remains, to the deceased will be given suffrages for the well-being of the soul: now it is in Purgatory and needs the sufferings connected with the purification of sins to be alleviated and shortened by the suffrages of the living (Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007).

In short, Purgatory could be seen as a transitory place of purification halfway between earth and Heaven, an intermediate realm of the otherworld. Due to the liminal participation of the soul in both the earthly and the

otherworldly spheres and the strong relationships with the living (Fornaciari *et al.* 2010), Purgatory closely recalls the transitional state of the deceased, of which could be considered an ultramundane extension. Indeed, while facing a further phase of its spiritual evolution through the atonement of sins, the soul in Purgatory continues to be in very close contact with the living being comforted by and, therefore, dependent on the survivors through their prayers and suffrages; in turn, the souls in Purgatory are expected to reciprocate the living with intermediary or direct help (Pardo 1989). This relationship of dependence between the deceased and the living is at the basis of the devotion to the souls in Purgatory and abandoned skulls which took root and thrived in the *terresante* and other funerary hypogea. Purgatory was conceived by the living as the most accessible level of the Sacred; just for its character closer to human condition, it allowed room for exchange, mediation and negotiation between living and the souls (Pardo 1989), and this would explain the incredible success of the cult of Purgatory among the Neapolitan people.

The representations of death and afterlife in Naples are closely associated with the idea of Purgatory, thus conferring a very specific character to the related funerary practices, such as the double burial. In the Dayak society described by Hertz the transitional "intermediate period" was characterized by the fear of bereaved towards the deceased, and the idea that the dead could become a malevolent and harmful force. In the Neapolitan context this fear is replaced by the concern that the deceased may remain stuck in the liminal transitional status, thus preventing its passage into the afterlife; indeed, in this eventuality the living could not expect any help from the dead (Pardo 1989). Furthermore, among the Dayak people it was of paramount importance, and one of the ultimate goals of the double burial, to be reborn as an ancestor, thus ensuring the continued social membership of the deceased, and for this purpose special care for the corpse from death to its final disposal were given (Fornaciari *et al.* 2010). Instead, the Neapolitan representation of death is characterized by a strongly religious perspective with a new existence of the soul in Purgatory where, as we shall see later, the dead relatives are partners of complex relationships with the living. In fact, they are believed to have the power to successfully intervene in human events and provide help to survivors; therefore, the passage of the deceased into the afterlife and, therefore, into Purgatory is definitely one of the main objectives of the double burial in Neapolitan culture.

The cult of souls in Purgatory and the cult of abandoned skulls

The practice of praying for the souls in Purgatory dates back at least to the Council of Trent (1545–1563) which definitively reaffirmed the existence of Purgatory and reinforced the notion that the souls therein are helped by the suffrages of the faithful which could alleviate and shorten the time of the sufferings before the ascent to Heaven (Pardo 1989, Battimiello 2015). The idea of Catholic Purgatory as it is usually imagined today took shape between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, even if the concept of an ultramundane purification connected to the symbol of the purgatorial imaginary, the fire, is certainly earlier (Battimiello 2015). The purgatorial fire is a rite of passage whose purpose is to test the repentance of the soul, a trial of suffering that encloses the hope of Celestial bliss. Indeed, after the Council of Trent, Purgatory moves from a dimension of hope and expectation towards a place of tribulation and torture, almost comparable to that of Hell. Then, an intermediate afterlife, in which the dead had to endure a hard and painful test that, nevertheless, can be relieved by the prayers of the living (Battimiello 2015). Based on the idea that there was a need for suffrages to help souls, rich and powerful noblemen left considerable amount of the inheritance to celebrate masses for the souls in Purgatory, according to the principle of the "fellowship": an action taken to favour the ascent of a penitent soul to Heaven will be rewarded by the latter, once it has reached Heaven, through prayers for the soul of the devotee (Battimiello 2015). Then, the soul in Purgatory is reciprocally linked to the living through the suffrages that it receives, and the work of intercession by which it can compensate the living (Pardo 1989, Pezzini 2006, Fornaciari *et al.* 2007, Fornaciari *et al.* 2010).

A surge in the cult of souls in Purgatory in Naples was determined by an event that struck the city in 1656: a terrible plague that caused countless deaths in the population. Connected to this event an obsessive devotion to the souls in Purgatory originated; to them was attributed the supernatural ability to intervene also in the life of mortals – a skill that in the past had belonged only to Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the saints – in a *do ut des* that alleviated the suffering of those who were alive as well as those who were not (Battimiello 2015).

In the seventeenth century the skull became the most typical symbol to describe the afterlife of Purgatory. After having been a penitential attribute of the fifteenth-sixteenth century tradition linked to the meditation on

death – typical of some models of holiness such as Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Jerome and Saint Francis – in the seventeenth century the skull and the macabre became the most common iconographic typology for the representation of Purgatory (Battimiello 2015). The cult of souls in Purgatory grew and had its seats within the hypogea of the churches of Naples where the people gathered for new funerals, commemorations and prayers for their dead. Descending into an ecclesiastical hypogeum whose walls were crowded with skulls and corpses really had to suggest to people to enter Purgatory (Battimiello 2015). These hypogea had become the places where the faithfuls had formed a particular relationship with the dead, therefore it is likely that the great diffusion of these underground funerary structures in Naples helped to spread and strengthen the cult of the souls in Purgatory. Probably this cult also prospered because, while the souls of the Heavenly spheres were considered unreachable, those of the Purgatory were perceived as relatively close to the living, as Purgatory was considered to represent the lowest level of the Sacred, nearer to the earthly sphere (Pezzini 2006, Piombino-Mascoli, Zink 2011). Once out of Purgatory, the soul was believed to move away from the reality of the living; while remaining in some form of contact with the living, when it had reached Heavenly grace, it entered a condition no longer concrete and defined, and therefore imaginable, but instead unknown and unthinkable, however inaccessible from earthly life (Fornaciari *et al.* 2007). On the other hand, having reached Heaven, the dead no longer needed the "refrisco" (refreshment) offered by the living, thus breaking the relationship of dependency on them. Indeed, both the Heavenly grace and the punishment of Hell were definitive conditions; having reached one of them, the dead could do little for the living; conversely, the needy penitent soul fully retained the effective power of mediation throughout its stay in Purgatory awaiting the coveted ascent to Heaven (Pardo 1989).

It should be emphasized that the cult of the souls in Purgatory is not a Neapolitan cult, as it affected the entire Christian world; instead, it must be said that in Naples the cult of the souls in Purgatory intertwined – probably as a result of the explosion of interest in the cult of the relics of the saints – with a new cult, that of the unknown mortal remains (Battimiello 2015). Indeed, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the cult of souls in Purgatory merged with an interest in abandoned bone remains preserved within the common ossuaries and hypogea of the churches of Naples, finding its own specificity in a popular devotion to individual

skulls, thus giving rise to the cult of the skull. This can be considered as a devotional form born in a completely spontaneous, popular way, without the intervention of the Church, indeed, in opposition to it. The cult had folkloric connotations and, being obviously unofficial and therefore never recognized, it led to various censorship interventions by the church, until the definitive ban of 1969, which officially put an end to it (Piombino-Mascoli, Zink 2011, Battimiello 2015). This cult arose from the establishing of a direct relationship of the devotee with a soul, which occurred through the adoption of an unknown skull subjected to care and attention. Take care of an abandoned skull was thought to give "refrisco" to its soul, which was therefore expected to reciprocate with a direct or mediated help (Pardo 1989). Thus, with this singular bond it created between the living and the dead, the cult of the skull merged with and extended the other form of cult of the dead already existing in the *terresante* and other hypogea of Naples, that one of the souls in Purgatory (Carnevale,



FIGURE 7: Hypogeal funerary chamber with "sitting" *scolatoi* represented by niches equipped with simple masonry structures featuring a seat with a hole in the center; the latter is connected with a compartment below in which a container could be inserted for the collection of the cadaveric liquids. (Convent of the Clarisse, Ischia, Naples.)

Marin 2016). As in the last one – and indeed even more – also in the cult of the skull there was a strong reciprocity: on one side there was the anonymous skull with its forgotten soul asking for help to overcome the sufferings of purification and ascend to Heaven, on the other there was the faithful who prayed for it and, therefore, awaited a reward (Battimiello 2015, Amirante 2018). So, the devotee offered prayers with the purpose of obtaining protection, assistance, material favours and graces, these anonymous skulls being regarded as highly valuable intermediators between the world here, the hereafter and the sphere of the Sacred (Battimiello 2015).

The elements underlying the birth of the singular cult of the skull have probably been manifold. In connection with the great plague of 1656, the Cemetery of Fontanelle, located in an ancient cave in the historic Sanità district, became a burial place of poor and marginalized (Piombino-Mascali, Zink 2011). This site turned into a huge common ossuary – where any individuality of the dead was evidently lost – when, in the nineteenth century, the government ordered the emptying of all the ecclesiastical hypogea whose bone remains were moved there (Piombino-Mascali, Zink 2011, Battimiello 2015). The epidemics – of plague in 1656, and cholera in 1836 – had also prevented a direct

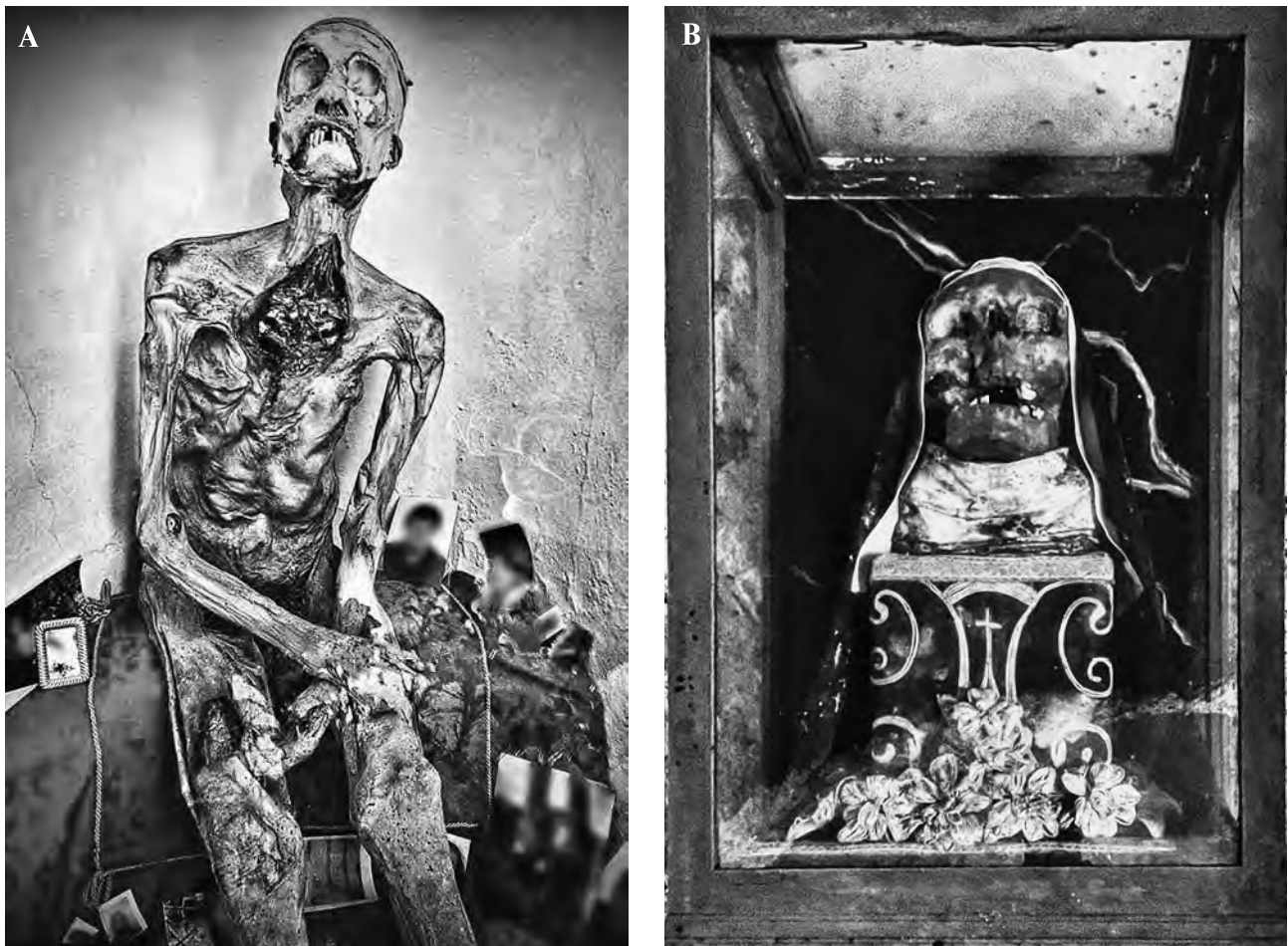


FIGURE 8: Mummification replacing skeletonization in individuals buried in "sitting" scolatoi and terresante of ecclesiastical hypogea of Napoli and neighbouring countries; in such settings this occurrence should be considered accidental and unintentional (A, B). (A) "Sitting" mummy resulting from burial in a scolatoio. (Chapel Vincenzo Camuso, Crypt of the Congrega della Buona Morte, Bonito, Avellino; the crypt was once part of a church demolished a few decades ago). (B) Mummified head of a nun buried in a terrasanta. (Hypogaeum of the church of Santa Maria del Rosario alle Pigne, Napoli; the church belonged to a Dominican convent complex.)

and personalized relationship of the people with their dead. An additional feature was later represented by the consequences of the Second World War: the missing were countless, and not being able to give burial to their dead implied for the people a twofold suffering, both for death and for the impossibility of mourn the body. In this context, merging with the antecedent cult of soul in Purgatory, the popular cult of the skull developed and then prospered. Indeed, the abandoned skulls compensated for the issue of a lack of direct relationship of the living with their dead: the skull, concrete representation of the soul, became the protagonist of a cult where the anonymous replaced the dear dead, and therefore the unknown skull turned into a dead family member. This cult took root in the *terresante* and other places where there was a large presence of skulls whose identity was unknown (the hypogea of the many churches, among which the church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco and of San Pietro ad Aram; the Cemetery of Fontanelle). The skulls of anonymous, forgotten dead – so believed to be devoid of the comfort of memory and prayers of relatives – were "adopted" by ordinary people, and became object of a personal devotion in which the faithful was the guardian of both the skull and the soul of the dead (Piombino-Mascali, Zink 2011, Battimiello 2015, Carnevale, Marin 2016). Sometimes the initial link between the soul of the afterlife and the faithful was the dream. In fact, it was during a dream vision that the soul often revealed itself by indicating the point where its abandoned and careless remains were located (Piombino-Mascali, Zink 2011). After identifying the skull, it became the object of prayers and, if it fulfilled the requests of the faithful, this was cleaned and placed into a niche or a sort of small case that then protected it from dust, thus isolating it from the other bones next to which it was previously piled up. Thereby, the skulls began to be worshiped similarly to relics or bodies of saints (Battimiello 2015). Indeed, this devotion developed according to traditional formulations of the cult of saints, i.e. the cult of the holy body, of the relics and of the tomb; indeed, according to traditional Christianity, holiness is a quality of the body as well as of the soul (Battimiello 2015). Therefore, the principle of symmetry between the soul and the body of the dead somehow also applied to the unknown skulls object of adoration: the presence of wet traces on them – possibly due to the humidity of these hypogean environments – were interpreted by the devotee as sweat resulting from the effort that the soul made trying to ascent to Heaven (Battimiello 2015). The prevailing requests of the

faithfuls concerned love, health, marriage, children; the presence in places of worship of numerous *ex-votos* made for this kind of graces also testifies to this: bouquets, birth bows, wedding dresses (Piombino-Mascali, Zink 2011).

Another element that characterized this worship was the charitable one. Indeed, the cult of abandoned skull closely recapitulated the duty of almsgiving for the poor: just as it was necessary to give alms to the poor and marginalized of the earth, so it was essential to care of abandoned and forgotten souls of the other world (Piombino-Mascali, Zink 2011, Battimiello 2015).



FIGURE 9: "Madonna delle Anime Purganti", Massimo Stanzione. The Virgin is separated by a cloud from the burning souls below. She appears to look out towards Purgatory where the action of saving of souls is carried out by the angels; the angel on the right, to which a soul is clinging, turns to the Virgin as if to find her consent. Altarpiece, oil on canvas (1638–1642). (Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, Napoli.)

An important aspect was that the souls of the neglected skulls, being deprived of cares and prayers from relatives and acquaintances, were believed not to be able to leave Purgatory. Caring for these souls offered an important advantage to the devotee: the souls of dead relatives, thanks to the due suffrages by the survivors, after a given period of time, left Purgatory for Heaven, thereby becoming more distant and less useful; instead, the array of souls of unknown and abandoned skulls allowed for more extensive and durable transactions (Pardo 1989).

The day dedicated to the cult of the dead in Naples was Monday (Piombino-Mascoli, Zink 2011, Battimiello

2015), the choice of the day may not be casual. According to the "Bolla Sabatina" issued by Pope John XXII in 1322, the Virgin Mary descended every Saturday after someone's death into Purgatory to free the souls and lead them to Heaven (this privilege was originally reserved for the Carmelite order – the Carmelite scapular is, in fact, often depicted in representations on this theme; Turi 2015). After Sunday, the day in which they were thought still beneficially affected by the comfort of Our Lady's descent into Purgatory, the souls now needed new care to alleviate their sufferings; Monday therefore represented the ideal day for the



FIGURE 10: Representations of souls in Purgatory (A, B, C). (A) In the alleys of the ancient center of Naples it is very easy to come across small votive shrines that testify to the spread of the cult of Purgatory. They recall a cave or an underground environment populated by souls engulfed in flames; their open arms seem to ask the passerby for a prayer that would alleviate their suffering and accelerate their ascent to Heaven. In addition to the penitent souls, it is usual the presence of a crucifix, the Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows and a skull (symbolic correspondence with the abandoned skulls). (B, C) Two collections of statuettes representing the souls in Purgatory with a skull, the crucifix and the Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows. In these unofficial representations it was permitted that the Virgin Mary appeared in the flames of Purgatory. Once populating votive shrines now disappeared, these collections are at present kept in the Museo dell'Opera di Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, in Naples. (Painted terracotta, nineteenth-twentieth century.)

"refrisco" to allow the suffering souls to face a new week. But there is an alternative version to this explanation that refers to traces of a cult that has its roots in pre-Christian beliefs, a result of the fusion of ancient beliefs and the Catholic religion. Monday was the day once dedicated to Hecate, the goddess of the moon, the underworld and the dead; therefore, Monday would have remained the day when the faithfuls visited the underground tombs and ossuaries of the city, the choice of the day being to be considered a testimony of the pagan heritage (Piombino-Mascoli, Zink 2011).

In 1613 Pope Paul V forbade depicting the Virgin Mary descending into the flames of Purgatory in official representations, an image considered inappropriate for a figure belonging to the Celestial sphere. To remedy this prohibition, the artists separated the space between the Heaven and the Purgatory with clusters of clouds, and entrusted the angels with the task of lifting the souls towards Heaven (Turi 2015). Behind the main altar of the church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco – one of the major places dedicated to the cult of the dead, and one of the few where it is still practiced today – you can admire the "Madonna delle Anime Purganti" (1638–1642) by Massimo Stanzione, an example of the new setting of the theme of the Virgin Mary descending into Purgatory (*Figure 9*).

In summary, the popular cult of unknown skulls originated at the end of the nineteenth century merging with the previous cult of souls in Purgatory, and lasted until the end of the 1960s, when the ecclesiastical authorities – which only allowed the worship of the remains of saints – banned it. Despite this, although scaled down, the worship still persists today in the places where it was most lively, mostly in the form of an offering of candles and flowers (*Figure 2*). As evidence of the extreme diffusion that the cults of souls in Purgatory and unknown skulls had in Naples, representations of Purgatory made up of statuettes of souls engulfed in flames are very frequently found in niches on the walls of buildings along the streets of Naples; their symbolic correspondence with the abandoned skulls is often emphasized by the presence of a skull (*Figure 10*; Pardo 1989, Amirante 2018).

CONCLUSION

The cult of the dead in Naples has very ancient origins dating back to the first Greek-Roman settlements, and then to the birth of the Christian communities with their burials in underground places outside the urban

walls, the catacombs of Naples; here the Christian cult of saints was born, associated with the worship of their mortal remains. Whereas in the ancient city the boundaries of the world of the living and that of the dead were kept strictly separated, with an opposite attitude in the late ancient city the barriers that separated these two worlds gave way, so that the burials in Naples took place mostly within the city, in the hypogea of churches and convents. This generated a singular promiscuity of dead and living and favoured the emergence of new features in ancient cults.

This article has shown how the hypogeal spaces of the churches of Naples, today converted into public monuments, in the not distant past have hosted funerary customs unquestionably attributable to double burial practices. While Hertz's work has provided a valuable structural model of the stages and organization of the double burial, our understanding of this practice can be enriched by paying closer attention to the cultural beliefs in which the ritual of the double burial is embedded. The concern about the definitive passage of the deceased into the other world, a feared stabilization of the dead in a liminal status, as well as the attempt to reduce the social and emotional disruption entailed by death, are among the most interesting aspects of the rituals linked to the double burial in Naples (Pardo 1989). One of the main purposes of the double burial is to solve the difficult moment of the transformation of the body after death. In the Neapolitan context this destabilizing moment was confined within well-defined canons, took place in specific spaces annexed to sacred buildings, and involved a method that allowed to ascertain and control the slow decay of the body. The ritual also affected the relationship between the living and the dead, by guaranteeing to the survivors a gradual and less painful phase after death and during the period of mourning, and thus allowing to establish a bond with the defunct in its new dimension (Fornaciari *et al.* 2010). A characteristic of the representation of death and the afterworld in Naples is the strong religious perspective: after death a new existence awaits the individual in the hereafter; the fate of its soul in the otherworldly world, albeit decreed by divine will, is influenced by the living, who are allowed to interact freely with souls staying in the intermediate afterlife realm of Purgatory. Indeed, the double burial in Naples was proven to be significantly informed by notions of Purgatory as well as the importance of marking the deceased as an individual, thus allowing the living to maintain a personal contact with the dead's soul and, through it, with the world of the Sacred; the latter are definitely the most distinctive features of the beliefs about

death and the afterlife in Naples (Pardo 1989). These beliefs have led to an extraordinary diffusion and intensity of the cult of Purgatory, declined in different ways in the various historical periods. Some worship is survived and, although in a different away and with reduced liveliness, is still practiced today. The cult of the dead in Naples has involved notable religious, historical, architectural and artistic elements and, many centuries after its birth, continues to represent an interesting source of reflection, study and research.

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