

**OSSUARIES:
DEATH, RESURRECTION AND THE LIVING**

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During my studies on the connections between the Black Death and culture during the Renaissance, I have repeatedly come across a rather obscure aspect of Renaissance Europe which has particularly attracted my attention. I am speaking about the concept of ‘ossuary’, a room or set of rooms containing hundreds of human bones - often arranged in the most peculiar forms - gradually becoming places of cult activities, charged with symbolic meaning. I find this topic most interesting from an anthropological perspective, because the Black Death had an enormous impact on Renaissance culture and the worldview of European countries. In fact, in a time when medicine could not offer solutions to the recurring epidemics, the response to the disease could only be cultural. I am not arguing that culture is something generated from lack of scientific explanations, but rather that the way in which the disease was approached was reflective of conceptions of self, embodiment and belief which belong to the area of anthropological inquiry. In this article, I wish to illustrate the ways in which a specific aspect of Renaissance culture, namely ossuaries, reflects conceptions of death and resurrection through two relevant examples, the ossuary of the Cimitero delle Fontanelle (Naples) and the Vault of Santa Maria (Rome). I would like to note here that this brief article has been produced not only as a result of visits to ossuaries, but also after consulting original Renaissance sources in which reference is made to the need to deal with the increasing amounts of dead bodies. The most useful tools have been two of Paul Koudounaris’ books, in which he has gathered what are probably the most complete collection of pictures and history of ossuaries around the world. These two works mentioned in the bibliography may be of interest for further reading.

As briefly stated in the introductory paragraph, an ossuary is a place where the skeletal remains of human bodies are gathered after exhumation. Their function varied from place to place, meaning that some ossuaries were characterized by a symbolic, rather than a practical, declination. In most ossuaries which did not result from a simple accumulation of cadavers throughout the years, the aesthetic and symbolic elements have acquired a fundamental role.

As is evident in the first photograph (fig. 1), some ossuaries are more than mere storage space for bones. In fact, as bones were gathered in such places after exhumation, it is often the case that skeletal remains were arranged to form the most singular, and even complex, structures to decorate the vault itself, increasing the prestige of the place of worship to which they belonged (Koudounaris, 2013). Therefore, since the term ossuary can indicate both a storage where bones are simply accumulated, and a place where the stored bones are arranged in decorative patterns of varying complexity, we will hereby discuss the implications of the ossuaries of the second symbolic kind which my examples illustrate. Given the stated definition of ossuary, I will proceed to illustrate how these places related to culturally-specific conceptions of death and resurrection.

The ossuary of the Cemetery of the Fontanelle in Naples was characterized by a very singular procedure of attribution of meaning which evolved throughout time as we will presently see. In 1656, the local tuff caves began to be used as mass graves for the victims of bubonic plague. As burial space began to diminish in local cemeteries and churches, bones were exhumed and carried to such caves that are now part of the Fontanelle burial ground. By 1863, when the caves were last filled with the skeletal remains of the victims of a cholera epidemic, a very particular cult had developed around the bones. This cult consisted in the ‘adoption’ of one of the many anonymous skulls, with people praying for a particular *grace* - or favour - to the dead (Koudounaris, 2011). As the following photograph (fig. 2) illustrates, the faithful would build small structures or make offerings to the skulls to gain the benevolence of the anonymous dead.

The second ossuary I would like to present is the vault of Santa Maria Immacolata in Rome (fig. 3). This example perfectly illustrates the declination of ossuary where bones have been used for decorative and symbolic effect. The bones of 4,000 monks gathered between 1528 and 1870 have been arranged in patterns and figures to decorate the crypt.

A plaque at the entrance reads, ‘we were what you are, we are what you will be’, a typical *memento mori* warning the visitor of the evident metaphorical value of the place and the imminence of mortality. Therefore, unlike the Cimitero delle Fontanelle, the crypt of Santa Maria has a clear and official symbolic purpose, which mirrors the Catholic conceptions of death and resurrection; the body is but a fleeting shrine, a short-lived container which is doomed to fade and die, freeing the soul. Some of the figures composed with bones - a skeleton holding a sickle and a scale, skull and crossbones - are clear references to the notion of the divine justice waiting for the soul once freed from the caducity of its mortal shell.

Both the above illustrated examples define two different conceptions of death and resurrection, developed around similar places. In the case of the Cimitero Delle Fontanelle, the meaning attributed to the place evolved through the centuries, materializing itself in a rediscovery of a formerly problematic and shunned area, and in the attribution of a sentimental value toward the unknown dead. The cult developed around the ossuary is therefore embedded in popular tradition and local logics of the relationship between death, resurrection and kinship rather than in Catholic dogma which amount to religious conceptions and symbolism. In the vault of Santa Maria the symbols of separation after mortality are explicit. By contrast, at Cimitero Delle Fontanelle, death, resurrection, and the borders between the living and the dead appear extremely blurred, almost non-existent; the living adopt the remains of the dead and establish with them a connection with the intent of obtaining a favour, a grace, in *this* world, not in the afterlife.

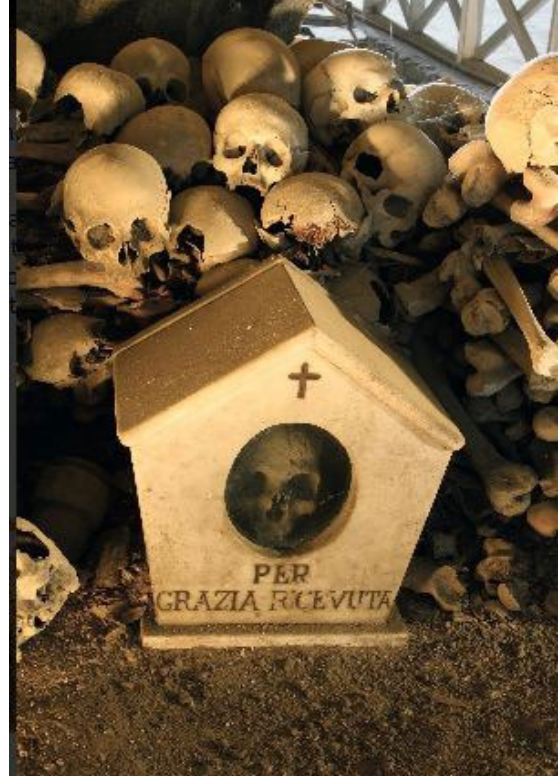



Fig. 1 (left): Sedlec Ossuary, Czech Republic. (Photograph courtesy of Catarine Geer).
Fig. 2 (right): Cemetery of the Fontanelle, Naples (Photograph courtesy of Paul Koudounaris).



Fig. 3: Santa Maria Immacolata, Rome (Photograph courtesy of Paul Koudounaris).

By contrast, in the case of the crypt of Santa Maria, the above-mentioned boundary is clearly marked; the body, its caducity, is the only link between the dead and the living. The plaque itself, reminding the visitor ‘we were what you are, we are what you will be’ is both a moral warning, and an emblem of resurrection, as it hints to the nullity of the body and to the eternity of the spirit. Such a notion of resurrection is certainly of a more intellectual or doctrinal origin than the one which evolved around the Cimitero delle Fontanelle, revealing less about the beliefs of the common people, and more about the understanding of Catholic doctrine and its imposition.

In conclusion, we have observed how ossuaries reflect conceptions of life, death and resurrection in two different ways. The Fontanelle ossuary is the result of a renegotiation of meaning; from a mere storage space, it became a place of worship, mirroring the spirituality of the common people. Distant from the official teachings of the Catholic Church, the centre of the cult - the idea that praying to the dead may result in some advantage for the living - is embedded in the traditional notion of the interaction between the living and the dead, rather than in religious doctrine. In contrast, the ossuary of Santa Maria, being the resting place of bones of friars, clearly reflects the less comforting and more theological resurrection-related beliefs of the Catholic Church. The interaction between the living and the dead, the very core of the place itself, is limited to an omen of resurrection; beware of your deeds because the fate of your soul after death is determined by your very actions during your life. 

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