

Modern double burial in Central Italy: funerary chamber of the Buondelmonti family in the Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta (Florence)

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Abstract. This work aims to analyze the particular burial of the Buondelmonti, one of the most important aristocratic Florentine families of the late Middle Ages and Modern Age, who had great power not only in the city, but also in the Florentine countryside. Their history has always been linked to the parish church of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta, not far from Florence, where the family built their own burial chamber. Both written and material sources state that the aristocratic Buondelmonti family was buried in this hypogeum, according to the standard double burial rite, with the corpse initially positioned on seats with a central hole and successively placed in an ossuary. This practice, which consisted in using an architectural structure, called sitting *colatoio*, was adopted to favour the skeletonization of the bodies. This structure was used by members of lay brotherhoods and convents especially in southern Italy, with sporadic cases in other areas of the country. The Buondelmonti tomb appears to be the first example of this kind of burial in Tuscany and, more importantly, the oldest discovered to date in Italy (1591). In light of the data that have emerged from this study, the authors will try to establish the reasons why the members of the family decided to be buried in this anomalous way, and above all how this Florentine family came into contact with this practice around the end of the 1500s.

Key words: secondary burial, sitting *colatoio*, funerary archaeology, Tuscany, Buondelmonti.

Introduction

Recent research on secondary burial practices in Modern Age in Italy is expanding the geography of the material archaeological evidence of the sepulchres equipped with sitting *colatoi* (1-4). This typical funerary structure consists of an underground chamber located under the floor of churches; along the wall of the chamber a series of niches are provided with masonry seats, each of which had a hole in the centre. The body was placed in a seated position so that the fluids produced by decomposition could be collected directly inside the hole connected to a drainage channel. Once the draining process and decay was

completed, leaving the bones free from the soft tissues, the skeletal remains were moved into an ossuary. An altar in the room was used to celebrate religious ceremonies in remembrance of the dead.

In sum, the practice involved two fundamental phases: firstly, the corpse was placed in a seated position on the *colatoio*, corresponding to the phase of decomposition and decay of the soft tissues; secondly, after the complete skeletonization of the body, the remains were finally placed in an underground chamber (4).

At the same time in Sicily the practice of mummification spread which, already attested in Palermo since the 16th century and in convents managed by the order of the Capuchins, made use of the so-called

horizontal colatoi. This double burial technique was characterized by the placing of the deceased on a horizontal grid, made of wood or clay tubules.

This structure and placing had the function of draining the body which was losing its fluids through the skin. The length of this procedure depended on the internal temperature of the crypt and the time of death of the deceased (5).

From an anthropological perspective and according to Hertz's theory, the funeral practice was interpreted as a particular form of double burial (6). In his essay of 1907 "Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort" Robert Hertz first analysed the concept of death as duration. He theorized that in ethnographic societies death was perceived not as a sudden event, but as a long-lasting process, during which the deceased person went through a transitory phase (7-9). According to this concept of death, the body becomes a material metaphor of the fate of the dead person's soul. After the process of decomposition, the bones without soft tissues were collected in a second definitive burial, and only then the soul could reach the world of the dead. This process can also be described as a passage-rite in the perspective presented by Van Gennep (1909), with the first burial corresponding to the central liminal (or threshold) rite. In the Catholic world, it is possible to reinterpret body decay as a symbol of the intermediate period necessary for the soul to transition to the purgatory phase. After the purification and skeletonization of the body, the soul enters in communion with the blessed. The second definitive burial of the bones decrees the end of the mourning period (6, 10). Within his Catholic tradition, the rite was maintained during the late Modern Age, especially under the management of confraternities and religious institutions, such as convents or canons of priests.

The "sitting *colatoio*" is very diffused in the churches of southern Italy (especially in Sicily and in Campania) (4), but in recent years many other sites have been discovered in northern Italy (1-3). These funerary structures dating back at least to the late Modern Age (18th century) are known with certainty not only in the South, but also in North Italy. Examples from the Po Valley seem to consist almost exclusively of structures managed collectively by ecclesiastical institutions like convents, priestly colleges, or lay confraternities.

The only known example of a sitting *colatoio* in central Italy is found in Rome, in the church of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte. Dating back to the 17th-18th centuries, this sitting *colatoio* was used by the friars of the convent attached to the church (11).

Although we have some faint testimonies from oral and folkloristic sources (12), until today no cases of colatoi were known in Tuscany. Recently, a new colatoio, clearly intended for second burial practices, has been identified in Tuscany. The hypogeum is located under the central nave of the Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta, near Florence (Figure. 1).

For its architectural refinement and its early chronology, this case study opens new questions on the origin and diffusion of the ritual of double funeral in modern Italy, as it can certainly be dated back to the year 1591 and was built by the Buondelmonti, one of the most eminent families of Florence. The Buondelmonti are remembered for their important role in Florentine politics since the Middle Ages, and they are even mentioned in Dante's Divine Comedy (Pd. XVI, vv. 140-141).

The Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta and the Buondelmonti family

The basilica of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta rises on the hills to the south of Florence at 275 m above sea level (Figure.1).



Figure. 1 Geographical location of Impruneta in Tuscany, Italy.

The first historical attestation of the origin of the baptismal church is found in an epigraph placed on the façade of the basilica, where the date of consecration by Umberto di Silva Candida and by Pope Niccolò II is reported (3 January 1060) (13).

The changes in the architecture of the church as important place of worship are justified not only by the wealth of the territory, favorable for the investment of city capitals by the Florentine nobles and formation of rich farm units (15), but also by the strategic location along a shortcut of the Via Cassia, the important road of Roman origin that connected Florence to Rome (13).

The excavations carried out in 1917 by the archaeologist Edoardo Galli proved the existence of a Romanesque church. This church had a basilical plan with three naves divided by five arches on each side, supported by pillars with a square base, and with a small crypt in the central area of the presbytery (15). The medieval crypt, still existing, is composed of cross vaults that rest on the pulvinus (basis) of five squat columns in sandstone.

The Romanesque church was demolished around the second half of the 14th century. Although the new Basilica was a very spacious building, with a single nave and wooden trusses (13), it entered a period of crisis after the collapse of the feudal system and the birth of the first rural municipalities (16). Nevertheless, in the 14th century one of the most important Marian cults originated in the Florentine countryside. It gave new birth to the Basilica that became one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in central Tuscany. The cult of the image of the Virgin Mary of Impruneta was initially confined to the rural region (15), but the Virgin was soon adopted as Protectress of the city of Florence at a time of great economic and social difficulties, as for example the famine of 1345-1347 and the epidemic that developed with the plague of 1348 (13).

After the crisis of the 14th century, one of the most important noble families of Florence, the Buondelmonti, who exercised patronage over the Basilica starting from the 12th century, embellished and enriched the sanctuary. The power of the Buondelmonti was not only limited to the church, considered the "right eye and honour of the family" (17), but also reached many territories around Florence. The family had numerous castles and lordships in the Florentine

countryside (18). According to written sources, the best-known castle from which their surname derives is the castle of Montebuoni located near Impruneta, along the road that went towards the Chianti Valley, the city of Siena, and the sea. In 1135 the castle was destroyed by the municipality of Florence, forcing the Buondelmonti to migrate to the city (19). Nevertheless, they not only maintained power over the surrounding area of Florence, but they also found wealth and notoriety in the same urban centre, to the point of having a fundamental role after the outbreak of the struggle between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in 1215 (20). The influence of this family on the Florentine territory was such that the fame of the Buondelmonti was forever linked to the history of the Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta. They long served as religious officials of the Basilica and eventually chose it as their burial site.

In 1591 the family commissioned a sepulchre below the floor level of the church. Thus the basis of the power of this great and powerful family was concentrated in the countryside and in the domination of large territories in the Impruneta area (17).

Many commercial activities, mainly the grain trade, were also the basis of the Buondelmonti family's power and wealth, as attested by numerous documents and sources. This is the case of the intense commercial collaboration between the Florentine family and its Sicilian branch, who emigrated to Sciacca, in western Sicily, around the mid-1300s (17). Located in an extremely fertile area on the coastal road connecting Agrigento to Mazara, the position of the town of Sciacca has historically favoured trade with the Tunisian coasts (21). It is not a coincidence that the family held the extensive Verdura fief, placed along a key point with regard to Western Sicily communications (21).

In addition, the marriage (1490) between Pietro Buondelmonti of Sciacca (1426-1496) and the Florentine Ginevra Strozzi (?) also testifies the frequent and constant contacts with the city and the original family branch. The marriage gave birth to Girolamo Buondelmonti, who in the early 1500s became priest of S. Maria dell'Impruneta, the place over which the Florentine Buondelmonti held patronage (21).

It is also interesting to note that some members of the Sicilian family branch belonged to the Confraternity of Santa Margherita of Sciacca, founded

in 1393 (21). The brotherhood was one of the most important and richest congregations in Sciacca and its power grew after it had joined the Disciplini Confraternity, which devoted itself to the cult of the dead. When a member of the religious community died, the members of the brotherhood watched over the remains of the deceased and, after a solemn funeral, buried the deceased in the cemetery, accompanying the coffin with prayers and self-flagellation (22).

Archaeological and architectural description of the site

Inside the building of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta it is possible to enter the underground crypt, commissioned

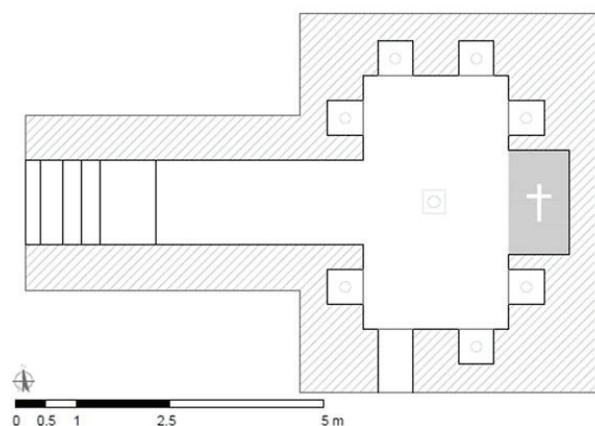


Figure 2. Plan of the sepulchre of the Buondelmonti family in the Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta.

by the Buondelmonti family. This little hypogeum (524x292 cm) is situated at the centre of the building, with east-west orientation, in the same position as the overlying Church (Figure. 2).

Access to the building was originally through a trap door, now sealed by a slab of white marble, which led to the small tomb through steep steps of various heights and through a corridor of a few meters (335 cm). The burial chamber contains a lowered vaulted ceiling (286 cm high) and eight semi-circular niches with a seat each. Seven of these niches had a central hole (17 cm in diameter) that was used to drain cadaverous sewage (Figure. 3). Each hole is connected to a central drainage pit through a number of pipes. The central drainage pit was probably used to capture the cadaverous sewage, as well as to clean the floor when the process of decomposition had been completed (Figure. 4). Opposite the access to the hypogeum, there is a small altar in a large niche surmounted by a lowered arcossolium; the Latin cross positioned at the centre of the niche and the altar testifies that prayers and religious services were performed here (Figure. 5). The typical architectural structures in the tomb, such as the shelf and the ossuary, devoted to this practice, are absent or are located in other abnormal positions. The shelf, where the skulls of the dead were generally placed once the skeletonization had taken place, is missing. The ossuary, unlike those usually described in historical documents, is on the northern side of the nave of the upper basilica far from the sepulchre. A number of charcoal and black smoke inscriptions on the burial chamber walls testify to the use of the tomb by the visitors. The inscriptions



Figure 3. Seat inside a niche with central hole to drain cadaverous sewage.



Figure 4. Central drainage pit on the floor of the sepulchre.



Figure 5. Altar on the opposite side of the hypogeum’s access with two niches on the sides.



Figure 6. Some charcoal and black smoke inscriptions on the burial chamber walls.

indicate the name, surname and date of the visit to the hypogeum (Figure. 6). The oldest inscription (3 January 1777) shows that at least starting from the last quarter of the 1700s the crypt was no longer used as a tomb, but had become a tourist destination for visitors passing through Impruneta. Moreover, one of the eight niches, located on the southern side, was opened to create the current access that connects the Tomb to

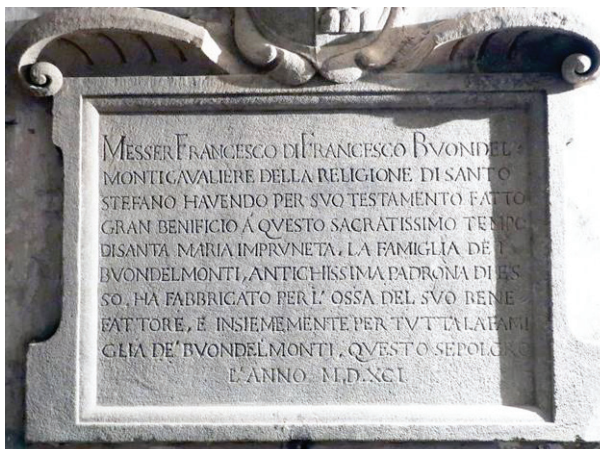


Figure 7. Epigraph on the southern side of the sepulchre.

the adjacent medieval crypt of the Church. This peculiar burial chamber was commissioned by the Buondelmonti family, as confirmed by the two slabs located on the southern and northern sides of the tomb. Both epigraphs show the family’s coat-of-arms, characterised by a mountain surmounted by a cross.

The first epigraph (Figure. 7), written in Italian and placed on the southern side of the tomb, bears the following inscription:

MESSER FRANCESCO DI FRANCESCO BVONDEL/
MONTI CAVALIERE DELLA RELIGIONE DI SANTO/
STEFANO HAVENDO PER SVO TESTAMENTO FATTO/
GRAN BENEFICIO Á QVESTO SACRATISSIMO TEMPIO/
DI SANTA MARIA IMPRVNETA. LA FAMIGLIA DEI/
BVONDELMONTI, ANTICHISSIMA PADRONA DI ES/
SO, HA FABBRICATO PER L'OSSA DEL SVO BENE/
FATTORE, E INSIEMEMENTE PER TVTTA LA FAMI/
GLIA DE' BVONDELMONTI, QVESTO SEPOLCRO/
L'ANNO M.D.XCI (28) /

The second epigraph (Figure. 8), located on the northern side, bears this pair of elegiac couplets, written in Latin:

D. O. M. /
STEPHANIVS FRÁCISCVS EQVES BONIMÓTIUS AEDE/
HANC PROPRIA MORIÉS QUI DECORAVIT OPE/
HIC SITUS EST. TEMPLI SOBOLES PATRONA MERET/
GENTILI ATQ' SUIS HAEC MONUMENTA DICÁT/
A. NO A PARTU VIRGINIS/
CID. ID. XCI (29) /

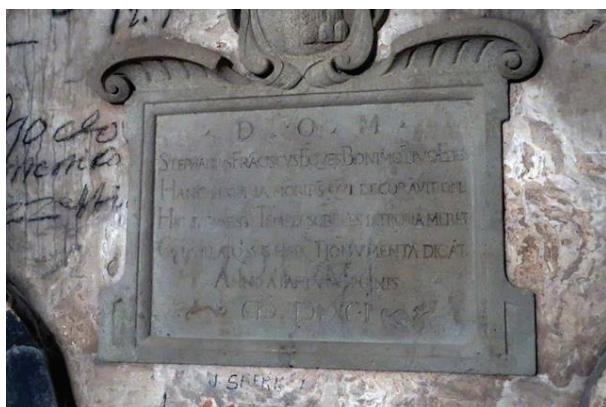


Figure 8. Epigraph on the northern side of the sepulchre.

As we can understand from the two inscriptions, in 1591 the tomb was built by this important Florentine family who had patronage for many centuries over the Basilica. In particular, it was created to honour Messer Francesco di Francesco, general depositary of Pistoia (a kind of present-day finance minister), knight of Saint Stephen's Order and patron of Florence. According to various documents, Francesco Buondelmonti was born on the 19th of August 1533 to Francesco Buondelmonti (1485-1533) and Francesca (De) Libri (?) and died on 1 August 1591 at the age of 57 years (25). As claimed in his will, he financed numerous renovations of the church's interior such as four altars located on the sides of the nave, stone pulpit and baptistery (20).

Discussion/Conclusion

The study conducted on the powerful Florentine Buondelmonti family and more precisely on their sepulchre located under the floor of the Church of Santa Maria has yielded interesting results. This burial location has had great importance over the centuries from economic, positional and religious points of view. The Buondelmonti, a noble family some clergymen of which held the position of parish priests of Impruneta, retained patronage in this place for many centuries resulting in great prestige and immense fame. The history of the Florentine Buondelmonti family therefore is linked to the history of the church of Impruneta, used as eternal resting place for the members of the

family. According to the collected data, a small sepulchre built in 1591 testifies how the deceased were buried in a sitting position and subsequently inserted inside an ossuary. This particular technique called sitting colatoio adopts the practice of the double burial, which spread in the 17th-18th centuries especially in southern Italy and which had the purpose of solving the uncertain moment of transformation of the body caused by the natural process of decomposition. It would be interesting to understand how the Buondelmonti family came into contact with this particular tradition and method of treatment. Although the burials that have so far been found in southern Italy are more recent than the sepulchre under consideration, the decision to adopt this form of burial was probably influenced by one of the family branches of the Buondelmonti, who had already migrated to Sicily and more precisely to the town of Sciacca, located in the Western part of the island, around the mid-fourteenth century. They never forgot their Florentine origins, as demonstrated by the numerous documentation and constant exchange of correspondence between the Sicilian and Florentine branches of the family dating back to that period (21). These frequent contacts may have influenced the culture of the Florentine family and consequently led to adopting this type of burial practice, which was not typically Tuscan. In confirmation of this thesis is the Sicilian branch of the family, which belonged to Santa Margherita and the Disciplini, one of the richest confraternities of the time, whose main objective was to devote themselves to the cult of the dead and the atonement for sins. The sitting colatoio was indeed used in lay confraternities involved in devotional and charitable practices (26).

In addition, it would be important to understand the reasons that led this family, which had its roots in the politics of Florence, to be buried in this anomalous position, a choice adopted by many aristocratic families in Sicily. An example of a family using this burial practice is the Greco family who, like the Buondelmonti family in Impruneta, held the patronage of the church of Santa Maria dell'Aracoeli in the town of San Marco d'Alunzio, in the province of Messina (5). Ultimately, a funeral monument was on the one hand necessary to remind the living of the importance a person had had in the past and on the other hand to

differentiate the person from the rest of the community whose members were instead buried in traditional manner.

There are two other curious highlighting concerning the sepulchral chamber of the church of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta compared to other tombs of this type, such as the crypt of SS. Annunziata in Tusa in the province of Messina (4) or the crypt of S. Bernardino alle Ossa in the province of Milano (27). The first is the absence along the perimeter of the hypogeum of a shelf for the placement of the skulls of the deceased. The second is the distance of the ossuary from the sepulchre, located in the left nave of the upper basilica. This ossuary was generally located inside the chamber, where the decomposition of the bodies took place. The absence and remoteness of the two structures typical of this practice might depend on the consequences of a change in the culture acquired by the Sicilian branch of the family, or simply be due to a lack of space, or it could be a practice in an initial state and therefore has not yet reached the completeness of the more recent funerary structures.

Many questions arise from the study of this particular technique for the treatment and care of the deceased with particular regard to this specific sepulchre. For example, we are not sure whether the underlying influence was from south to north, or the opposite. Future research will try to give more complete and exhaustive answers to the origin and diffusion of this practice. However, on the basis of the study conducted so far, we can definitively claim that the Buondelmonti sepulchre proves to be unique in Italy: on the one hand, it is the earliest recorded burial that used this technique in Tuscany; on the other, it is the oldest burial of this type, dating back to 1591.

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23. Translation: Messer Francesco di Francesco Buondelmonti, knight of the order of Santo Stefano, donated this sacred temple of Santa Maria Impruneta. The Buondelmonti family, very ancient patrons of this church, had this sepulchre created for his bones and for all the Buondelmonti family in the year M.D.XCI.
24. Translation: Francesco Buondelmonti, Knight of Santo Stefano, is buried here because his riches were donated to the church after his death. The patron line of the temple dedicated these monuments to the worthy nobleman and to his family in the year from the birth of the virgin CIOIOXCI.
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