

The walled nuns of the crypt of Santissima Annunziata in Valenza (Piedmont, Italy)

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Abstract. The Church of SS. Annunziata in Valenza was built in 1699, together with an underground crypt that preserves the cells in which, according to a particular type of burial practice, the nuns of the nearby cloistered convent were deposited. The hypogeum space was brought to light in the twentieth century, paving the way to the study of the ritual underlying this practice and to the anthropological study of the remains that the opening of the cells have brought to light.

Key words: bioarchaeology, paleopathology, anthropology, burial ritual, convent

The Church of SS. Annunziata is located in Valenza (Piedmont, north-western Italy). Inside the building, it is possible to enter the underground crypt through a trap door in the floor. It is likely that the construction of the hypogeum took place during the building of the church, in 1699. Crossing the crypt, three rooms, about 4 x 3 m wide, characterized by parietal cells, are progressively encountered (Fig. 1). Here, the ancient nuns of the nearby cloistered convent received a particular type of burial. The deceased were deposited on a step inside a cell, in sitting position. Then, a stick placed at the level of the bust supported the corpses and a vase was located at the foot of the seat to collect the decomposition fluids. According to this ancient ritual, after a nun was buried inside a cell, the body was walled up. In a sign of humility and in accordance with the rules of the Order, the graves carried no name, only the initials preceded by the letter “S”, which stands for “Sister”, engraved in the plaster. Next to this inscription, there is the date of death, which in Christian eschatology represents the true birth. There are thirty-two tombs in total and, according to the writings in the plaster, they all belong to 18th century.

After the church of the monastery was closed in 1802, the crypt was filled with earth and then discov-



Figure 1. View of the second room of the crypt: the openings on the cell walls show the inner step on which are visible the remains. In the upper portion of the walls, some inscriptions can be clearly read on the remaining plaster.

ered and brought to light in 1973 by members of the brotherhood of S. Rocco.

In Italy, about 80 sites such as the Valenza crypt have been registered, dating between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1). These structures, defined as “*putridaria*”, were a type of architecture aimed at subdividing the treatment of the deceased into two

distinct phases: the scarification of the corpse was followed by its final location, and can be traced back to double burial practices (2).

The crypt of Valenza recalls the sepulchral typology of the *putridaria*, although we can not speak of a real double burial, since the bodies were walled up and did not undergo a second ritual translation. It is likely that these burials represented a transition phase succeeded to the open cells of the other Italian *putridaria*, a sort of compromise between archaic burial practices and the new Enlightenment mentality.

The exceptional nature of the site is the fact that allowed us to recompose the stratigraphy of the gestures, identify the will and awareness behind these “atypical” burials.

In some past researches, the archival and ethnographic sources and the religious and medical literary works of the period were examined, with the aim of proposing an interpretation of the use of these structures and the rituals they represented (3). It is of interest to integrate documentary research with the analysis of the remains (4).

The anthropological study will firstly be aimed at verifying that the burials undeniably belonged to female individuals, to confirm if the crypt was exclusively dedicated to the deposition of the nuns of the convent. Bioarchaeological studies focused on monastic populations can highlight the life conditions of the nuns, and by analysing the similarities and differences between the religious and the secular communities, questions concerning the everyday life of the Sisters compared to that of the lay women can be answered (5). In particular, the questions are directed to their rules and the kind of working activities performed. The demographic data can then be compared to those of a secular population of the same period, this comparison then presents an overview on the mortality rate of a religious context and the differences it presents with the not-devoted people. The study of a female sample usually dialogues with the high mortality rate of maternal and fertile period (6), but in this case the nuns did not have children, or they were supposed not to

have. Then, it is assumed that the length of life can somewhat approach to a higher age-at-death.

Moreover, the application of paleopathological investigations can provide an overview of the diseases they suffered from and the stressors they were exposed to, in order to analyse in depth the relationship between their life expectancy, the morbidity, their nutrition and health status.

In summary, an exclusively female sample offers the possibility to enter into social and gender studies, investigating into the life of a community not subjected to the same difficulties to which other women were dependent and therefore obtaining data on the response of the female skeleton to a life different from that imposed by the society of the time.

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