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Transferring the Sacredness. Freedom and Property of Relics in Italian Hagiographic Tradition of *furta sacra* (cc. 7th-9th)*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the notion of property within the medieval tradition of *furta sacra* – hagiographic accounts of the thefts of relics or the bodies of saints – focusing on how it is conceived, violated, or reconstructed. I will examine a *corpus* of tales from early medieval Italy, describing thefts that took place between the seventh and ninth centuries, to highlight several key aspects, including: the violation of a sanctuary's property through attempted misappropriation, often prompted by a supernatural agency (i.e. the saints themselves); reflections on the ownership of relics based on hagiographical sources, and the

legitimacy of their transfer without the shrine's permission; the violation of sacred spaces in relation to the transference of sacredness from one place to another; and the relocation of relics, with specific rites performed to establish a new dwelling for the saint. At the same time, the theme of freedom will also be explored. In many cases of theft, two different perspectives emerge: the possibility that the saint is free to cease protecting a city, comply with the appropriation, and “reside” elsewhere; and the notion that the saint – particularly the saint's body – can be regarded as a prisoner, deprived of freedom.

Keywords

furta sacra; thefts of relics; cult of saints; relics; hagiography

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Introduction

The cult of relics is one of the most significant phenomena of medieval religious culture, encompassing social, cultural, and political dynamics.¹ The acquisition of a sacred body could serve as a pivotal moment in the political construction of power, both for towns seeking the protection of a patron saint and for churches and monasteries striving to enhance their spiritual and institutional prestige.

The theft of relics functioned as a distinct cultural practice comprising two key aspects: the possible – though not always verifiable – transfer of the relics at a specific historical moment, and the subsequent narration of this event, often composed decades or even centuries later. This narrative typically included an account of the relics' arrival in the new community.

While stories of relic theft began to emerge in the early Middle Ages, scattered episodes and literary references appear even earlier, particularly in the *passiones* of the martyrs.² These narratives often sought to legitimise the presence of relics in a particular location by asserting that they had been taken directly from the saint's original tomb.³

1 The bibliography on the cult of relics is now extensive. The following contributions were particularly relevant to the writing of this essay: Nicole HERRMANN-MASCARD, *Les reliques des saints. Formation coutumière d'un droit*, Collection d'histoire institutionnelle et sociale, 6 (Paris: Klincksieck, 1975); Peter BROWN, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Edina BOZÓKY, Anne-Marie HELVÉTIUS, eds., *Les reliques. Objets, cultes, symboles. Actes du colloque international de l'Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale* (Boulogne-sur-Mer, 4-6 septembre 1997), *Hagiologia*, 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999); Luigi CANETTI, *Frammenti di eternità: corpi e reliquie tra antichità e Medioevo*, *Sacro Santo*, 6 (Roma: Viella, 2002); Alexandra WALSHAM, *Relics and Remains* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Robert WIŚNIEWSKI, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Sofia BOESCH GAJANO, *Res sacrae: strumenti della devozione nelle società medievali*, *La storia: temi*, 102 (Roma: Viella, 2022).

2 Marco PAPANASIDERO, *Thefts of Relics in Italy: From Late Antiquity to the Central Middle Ages, 300–1150* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025), pp. 47-74.

3 On theft of relics, cf. Patrick J. GEARY, *Furta Sacra. Thefts of relics in the central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Luigi CANETTI, «Mnemos-toria e archeologia rituale delle traslazioni di reliquie tra Antichità e Medioevo», in *Atti del II Seminario "Agiografia e liturgia tra Roma e Costantinopoli" (Grottaferrata-Roma, 29-31 marzo 2001)* (Grottaferrata: Congregazione Monaci Basiliiani, 2007), pp. 131-152; Marco PAPANASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis. I furti di reliquie nell'Italia medievale*, *Premio Istituto Sangalli per la storia religiosa*, 8 (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2019); Edina BOZÓKY, «The theft of relics in the Middle Ages. Arguments, typology, and legitimacy»,

One issue that requires analysis is the ownership of relics. Particularly in the period under examination – the early Middle Ages, especially from the seventh to the ninth century – the remains of a saint were typically considered the property of a church or town, based on established tradition and their long-term enshrinement in a specific location. Various regulations ensured that relics could not be moved from one place to another without the express permission of the religious authority⁴ and, above all, that they could not be sold.⁵

Among the instruments used to legitimise the possession of certain relics are hagiographic accounts of their translation, which narrate how the relics arrived at a shrine, sometimes following a theft. These texts offer various reflections on the ownership of relics and the justification for their removal. Central to this discourse is the role of the saint and the supernatural *framework* constructed by the hagiographer to affirm both the historicity of the theft and authenticity of the stolen relics.⁶ Although this strategy may appear to be merely a means of legitimising unauthorised removals, it reflects a broader perception in which the saints themselves are the principal agents of the theft, and the events are profoundly intertwined with divine will.

in *Relics, Shrines and Pilgrimages. Sanctity in Europe from Late Antiquity*, ed. Antón M. PAZOS (London–New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 131-145; Francesco VERONESE, «Tra rispetto delle leggi e furti notturni. Narrazioni di mobilità di reliquie nelle *translationes* carolingie», *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Moyen Âge* 132, no. 2 (2020), <https://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/8396>; PAPANICOLAOU, *Thefts of Relics in Italy*, cit.

4 Jean MICHAUD, «Cultes des reliques et épigraphie. L'exemple des dédicaces et des consécérations d'autels», éd. BOZÓRY, HELVÉTIUS, *Les reliques. Objets, cultes, symboles*, cit., p. 199; Maria G. CASTELLO, «The cult of relics in the late Roman Empire. Legal aspects», in *Public Uses of Human Remains and Relics in History*, eds. Silvia CAVICCHIOLI, Luigi PROVERO (London–New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 29-46.

5 On the trade in relics, cf. David HUNT, «The traffic in relics: some late Roman evidence», in *The Byzantine Saint: University of Birmingham, Fourteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Sergeï HACKEL (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1981), pp. 171-180; Martina CAROLI, «Culto e commercio delle reliquie a Ravenna nell'Alto medioevo», *Bizantinistica. Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi* 7, ser. 2 (2005): 73-84. For a later period, cf. also Pierre-Vincent CLAVERIE, «Les acteurs du commerce des reliques à la fin des croisades», *Le moyen Age* 114, no. 3 (2008): 589-602.

6 On this aspect, cf. Hubert SILVESTRE, «Commerce et vol de reliques au Moyen-Âge», *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 30, no. 3-4 (1952): 721-739.

In the following pages, I will analyse a series of relic thefts that took place in the Italian peninsula between the seventh and ninth centuries, although the sources – or at least the surviving manuscript copies – were written one or more centuries later, based on earlier accounts. The period of composition indicates that the memory of these events was re-interpreted over time, likely shaped by specific historical and political circumstances that necessitated a revised version or new interpretation of the legend.⁷

I have chosen to focus on this period due to its significance in tracing the earliest examples of the *furta sacra* genre. My decision to examine a specific geographical area, such as the Italian peninsula, is driven by the need to deepen our understanding of this context, particularly given the crucial role played by different political entities – such as the duchies of Venice and Benevento – in employing the rhetorical and cultural device of sacred theft. To conduct this analysis, I will adopt a historical and anthropological approach, drawing on hagiographic texts as key sources for exploring medieval cultural history.⁸ The theme of “ownership” will be examined primarily from a historical-hagiographic perspective, with particular attention to the cultural mechanisms employed to legitimise the ownership and possession of relics, as revealed in the textual sources.⁹

7 On the question of rewriting in hagiography, cf. Monique GOULLET, *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques. Essai sur les réécritures de Vies de saints dans l'Occident latin médiéval (VIII^e-XIII^e s.)*, Hagiologia, 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

8 On this perspective, cf. Sofia BOESCH GAJANO, «L'agiografia», in *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra Antichità e Medioevo*, Atti della XLV settimana di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo (Spoleto: CISAM, 1998), pp. 798-843.

9 On the subject of ecclesiastical property – which is deliberately not examined in depth here – and on the lexicon of *res sacrae* and the canonical shift of the thirteenth century, which underscores the differences with the early Middle Ages, see: Giacomo TODESCHINI, *I mercanti e il tempio. La società cristiana e il circolo virtuoso della ricchezza fra Medioevo ed età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), pp. 73-78; Luigi CANETTI, *Impronte di gloria: effigie e ornamento nell'Europa Cristiana* (Roma: Carocci, 2013), pp. 298 and following; BOESCH GAJANO, *Res sacrae*, cit. In this regard, the following work is also of relevance: Patrick GEARY, «Extra-Judicial Means of Conflict Resolution», in *La giustizia nell'alto medioevo (secoli. V-VIII)* (Spoleto: CISAM, 1995), pp. 771-803.

The property of relics threatened by theft

The question of ownership of a saint's remains emerges most clearly in the sections of hagiographic legends that describe the moment of theft. A useful example is the translation of the relics of twelve martyrs, stolen by Arechis II of Benevento and relocated to four Apulian centres – Potenza, Venosa, *Velinianum*, and *Sentianum* – in 760.¹⁰ According to the sources, particularly the *Translatio*, Prince Arechis personally visited these cities to acquire the relics. The hagiographer employs a rhetorical strategy that emphasizes the poor veneration the relics previously received, justifying their removal:

[...] *de illis squallidis et inhonestis loculis, quibus incongrue tumulata iacebant, omni cum reverentia elevavit* [sc. relics].

[Arechis] lifted the relics with all due reverence from those squalid and unseemly places where they had been inexplicably buried.¹¹

This framing portrays the act not as a theft but as a rightful and necessary intervention. In some cases, the narrative even suggests the use of threats to secure the relics. Arechis' authority, bolstered by his recent proclamation as Prince of Benevento – having previously been Duke – played a crucial role in compelling local inhabitants to surrender the relics without resistance.

In this case, the territory involved in Arechis' mission was already part of the Duchy-Principedom of Benevento. On the basis of his noble right, he claimed the relics as his property, employing the well-known hagiographic *topos* of the inadequate veneration of relics as a justification

10 On this theft and the other translations made by Arechis, cf. Antonio VUOLO, «Agiografia beneventana», *Campania Sacra* 26 (1995): 261-292; Luigi PEDRONI, «Santa Sofia e la ricerca di reliquie nell'ideologia di Arechi II», *Mediaeval Sophia* 15-16 (2014): 133-150; Francesco VERONESE, Giulia ZORNETTA, «Holiness on the Move: Relic Translations and the Affirmation of Authority on the Italian Edge of the Carolingian World», *Medieval Worlds* 13 (2021), pp. 54-75; Giulia ZORNETTA, «Alla ricerca del sacro? Arechi di Benevento nella traslazione dal ducato al principato», in *Aspetti del sacro e di vita quotidiana tra tarda antichità e medioevo*, a c. di Maria Cristina ROSSI, Lester LEONARDO, Antonio MACCHIONE (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2022), pp. 213-225; PAPASIDERO, *Thefts of Relics in Italy*, cit. 78-81.

11 *Translatio corporum Beneventum*, in *Acta Sanctorum, Septembris*, vol. 1 (Paris-Rome: Palmé, 1868): 143, no. 3.

for their transfer.¹² However, the emotional reaction of the local inhabitants – who handed them over *moerentes atque gementes* (“lamenting and sighing”) – highlights their opposition and sorrow at this appropriation.¹³

The contrast in perspectives is evident: the prince exercised what he saw as his legitimate right to take the relics, while the cities considered them their own, likely due to their long-term possession and the fact that these were the very places where the saints had been martyred. Despite their resistance, once Arechis secured the relics, they became part of his domain and were placed within the ducal sanctuary of Saint Sophia in Benevento, further reinforcing his authority and the political-religious significance of the translation.¹⁴

However, the theft of a saint’s remains is considered damaging to those who have safeguarded them up to that point. This notion may lead the community to steal another saint’s body to compensate for the loss of the previous one’s remains. This was the case with the theft of the relics of Saints Primianus and Firmianus, taken by the inhabitants of Lesina in Apulia (now in Molise), after the city in which they had been kept, Larino, was partially devastated by the Saracens. When the survivors of Larino realised that the bodies of their patron saints had been stolen, they took up arms and marched to Lucera – whose inhabitants had founded Lesina following the attack on Lucera itself by the armies of Constans II in 633. During their march, they discovered the tomb of Saint Pardus, patron saint of Lucera, and decided to bring his body back to Larino.¹⁵ This example highlights another significant aspect of the issue of relic ownership based

12 PAPASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 90-91.

13 *Ibi*, p. 143, no. 3. On the emotional aspect, cf.: Barbara H. ROSENWEIN, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

14 On this church, cf. Hans BELTING, «Studien zum Beneventanischen Hof im 8. Jahrhundert», *The Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962): 180; Silvio CARELLA, «Osservazioni su Santa Sofia di Benevento», *Studi beneventani* 7 (1992): 141-186; PEDRONI, «Santa Sofia e la ricerca di reliquie nell’ideologia di Arechi II», cit.

15 On this theft, cf. PAPASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 105-111. For more on these saints and their cult, cf. Giovanni MONGELLI, s.v. «Pardo», in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, a c. di. Filippo CARAFFA, Giuseppe MORELLI, vol. 10 (Roma: Città Nuova, 1968), cols 333-334; Giovanni LUCCHESI, s.v. «Alessandro, Firmiano, Primiano e Tellurio», in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, first appendix (Roma: Città Nuova, 1987), cols 38-39; Giuseppe MAMMARELLA, *Larino sacra II: la diocesi, la genesi della cattedrale, i SS. Martiri Larinesi* (San Severo: Lions Club, 2000); ID., *I santi martiri larinesi* (Termoli: Grafiche Landolfi, 2001); ID., *San Pardo: Patrono principale di Larino e diocesi* (Campobasso: Palladino, 2011).

on hagiographical sources. The inhabitants of Larino regarded the remains of Saints Primianus and Firmianus as their rightful property by historical tradition. For this reason, upon realising that the *pignora sanctorum* had been taken, they perceived it as both theft and a defilement of their community. One way to resolve the matter was to recover the relics or, as ultimately occurred, to compensate for the loss by acquiring another sacred body – that of Saint Pardus.¹⁶ The value of the property had to be restored either with the stolen object itself or with something of equal worth.

Another aspect of the perception of ownership of saints' relics relates to the idea that they belong to the saints themselves. It is not unusual that the cultural perspective of devotees was that the saints possessed a personal will – an expression of the greater will of God – by which they could permit or forbid theft and transfer to another place. An excellent example of this perspective is found in the *Life of Saint Appianus*.¹⁷ According to an anonymous hagiographical dossier – composed in the area of Comacchio between the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth, perhaps to support the formal cause of his canonisation before the Pope – in the ninth century some inhabitants of Pavia attempted to retrieve the saint's body from Comacchio, where it had been kept since his death. At this point in the story, two different perspectives on ownership emerge: on the one hand, the community of Comacchio considered the saint's body their own, as he had spent many years in their city for “commercial” purposes related to the supply of salt to his monastery of origin, Saint Pietro in Ciel d'Oro; on the other, the people of Pavia believed his remains should be returned to the place where he had been a monk.¹⁸ The first viewpoint is based on the perception of

16 On this aspect, cf. Marco PAPANICOLA, «I furta delle reliquie dei ss. Primiano e Firmiano, e di s. Pardo. Forme della narrazione agiografica e rituali di traslazione», *Chaos & Kosmos* 16 (2015): 1-20.

17 On this saint, cf. Alfonso M. ZIMMERMANN, s.v. «Appiano di Comacchio, monaco», in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, vol. 2 (Roma: Città Nuova, 1962), cols 317-318.

18 *Vita S. Apiani monachi*, in *Acta Sanctorum, Martii*, vol. 1 (Paris-Rome: Palmé, 1865), p. 320, no. 10. On the question of translation, cf. Giovanni SPINELLI, «Sant'Appiano di Comacchio: un patrono cittadino mancato?», *Ravenmatensia* 11 (1986): 47-70; Glauco Maria CANTARELLA, «Sant'Appiano, un tema interminabile?», in *Storia di Comacchio nell'età moderna*, vol. 1 (Casalecchio di Reno: Grafis, 1993), pp. 147-172; ID., «Nota su Sant'Appiano di Comacchio», *Anecdota. Quaderni della Biblioteca Lodovico Antonio Muratori* 5 (1995): 7-17; PAPANICOLA, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 124-126.

ownership as a consequence of actual possession of the body, while the second is founded on a different idea – one that necessitated theft to be realised. Returning to the story, the inhabitants of Pavia seized the relics of Saint Appianus during the night, but when they reached their boat, it could not move due to the saint's intervention. Unable to steal the body, they abandoned it in a nearby church dedicated to Saint Maurus.

This episode effectively demonstrates the rhetoric surrounding saints' protection of their own relics and their ability to permit or deny translation. Moreover, it highlights a specific belief in the will of the saints, an aspect that helps explain the central role of miracles and supernatural interventions in accounts of *furta sacra*.¹⁹ The miraculous serves as the language through which hagiographers depict the agency of saints. In this way, they are shown to possess a clear will and to convey the idea that they are the rightful owners of their own bodies.²⁰

In the case examined, there is no recorded request for the transfer of the relics, nor any form of authorisation sought by the thieves. Indeed, it is precisely this clandestine transfer which, accompanied by the saint's blessing, confers upon the devotees who took possession of the relics a legitimate claim to their ownership.

Acquiring, confirming, and negotiating the property of relics

Theft is a means of removing relics from one place and transferring them to another. The written record of this action is often shrouded in myth, potentially altering the characteristics of the original translation. However, this act – the actual translation, inevitably mediated by written narration – is tied to the notion that ownership must shift from one community to a new one. To achieve this, thieves often performed specific rites – not only at the moment of the *furtum* but also upon their return home. The first of these rites was associated with the ritual performed during the opening of the tomb, when the saint had to be persuaded and entreated to accompany the thieves.²¹ The translation of the relics of Saint Mark offers many

19 In this regard, cf. PAPANASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 141-144.

20 Cf. Gennaro LUONGO, «Agiografia fondana», in *Fondi tra antichità e medioevo. Atti del convegno (Fondi, 31 marzo-1 aprile 2000)*, a c. di Teresa PISCITELLI CARPINO (Fondi: Comune di Fondi, 2002): 194-195 no. 5.

21 CANETTI, *Mnemostoria e archeologia rituale delle traslazioni di reliquie*, cit.

details on this practice. According to the principal source, the *Translatio sancti Marci Venetias*, around 828, a group of Venetian merchants stole the saint's body from his tomb at Bucoli, near Alexandria. Before transferring the relics, they engaged in negotiations with the monks guarding his body, particularly two of them, Theodorus and Stauratius. This prolonged conversation, conducted over several days, was intended to secure their complicity in transferring Saint Mark's remains.²² This act of persuasion, coupled with the ritualised and honourable opening of the tomb, constitutes one of the pivotal moments in translation narratives, particularly when it is read in the context of hagiographic tradition.

This approach was not primarily concerned with the issue of ownership but rather with ensuring that the theft could be carried out swiftly and without resistance. However, the explicit consent of the monks also served as a means of transferring ownership of the saint to them and, ultimately, to Venice. The negotiation was rooted in an awareness that the relics were considered the rightful property of the people of Alexandria. The two custodians, in fact, emphasised the risk of execution should they be discovered by the Alexandrians (*diversis poenis a plebe occideremur*).²³

Once again, the long-term possession of a sacred body, coupled with the fact that it rested in the place where the saint had been martyred, was regarded as clear evidence of rightful ownership.

After convincing the monk and the priest, the relics arrived in Venice, where further rituals had to be performed to complete the process of translation. Within the tradition of *furta sacra*, the adventus rites were ceremonies conducted by those who had stolen sacred bodies to formally introduce them to their new city. This expression is associated with the

22 On this saint and the theft of his relics, cf. Francesco SPADAFORA, Antonio NIERO, s.v. «Marco, evangelista», in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, vol. 8 (Roma: Città Nuova, 1966), cols 711-738; Antonio NIERO, «Questioni agiografiche su san Marco», *Studi veneziani* 12 (1970): 3-27; Reinhard LEBE, *Als Markus nach Venedig kam. Aufstieg und Staatskultur der Republik von San Marco* (Frankfurt am Main: Krueger, 1978); Giorgio CRACCO, «Santità straniera in terra veneta (secc. XI-XII)», in *Les fonctions des saints dans le monde occidental (III^e-XIII^e siècle). Actes du colloque de Rome (27-29 octobre 1988)* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1991), pp. 447-465; ID., «I testi agiografici: religione e politica nella Venezia del Mille», in *Storia di Venezia dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 1, *Origini. Età ducale*, a c. di Lelia CRACCO RUGGINI et al. (Roma: Mondadori, 1992), pp. 923-961; PAPASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 37-42.

23 *Translatio Marci evangelistae Venetias*, a c. di Emanuela COLOMBI, *Hagiographica* 17 (2010): 121, X.4.

ceremonies and rituals marking the entry of Roman emperors into cities in Late Antiquity, as extensively studied by Sabine MacCormack.²⁴

Upon arrival at the port, following a brief negotiation between the merchants and the political authorities, the former handed over the body to the latter. Bishop Orso Partecipatius (d. 853), accompanied by a long procession of priests and clerics, received the relics and carried them first to the Duke's Palace, then to a grand basilica constructed to house the remains. The ritual performed by the clergy was intended to welcome the new patron saint and sacralise his presence, thereby asserting possession of his body. From this moment onwards, the body of the Evangelist no longer belonged to Alexandria but to Venice.

The transfer, therefore, can be seen as an acquisition of property carried out through an ostensibly illegal act – a theft – yet legitimised by the authority of hagiographic tradition and the portrayal of the saint's consent. His presence alongside the Venetians was affirmed through signs and miracles at every stage of the translation.

The *adventus* rites are also performed in other accounts of theft, such as that of the Twelve Martyrs. After forcing the locals to surrender their relics, Prince Arechis II led them in procession (*occursus*) to Benevento and the ducal shrine of Saint Sophia. Though the relics were now in his possession, it was necessary to bring them into the city and place them together under the same altar in the church.

According to sources, marked by rhetorical embellishment, the relics were received by a great multitude: monks and nuns, clergy and laity, young and old, rich and poor, all bearing offerings. Arechis enshrined them in the sanctuary, alongside many other relics gathered from across Southern Italy during his rule. This was the final act in the process of acquiring ownership; from this moment onwards, the relics became part of the sacred treasure of Benevento.

Here, too, the presence of the saints – and thus the legitimacy of the “transfer of property” – was affirmed through supernatural signs, such as the vision that Arechis is said to have experienced while praying in Santa Sofia.²⁵

24 Sabine MACCORMACK, *Adventus. Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981).

25 Leone OSTIENSE, Pietro DIACONO, *Chronica Monasterii Casinensis*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, vol. 7 (Hannover: Hiersemann, 1846), p. 587 nos 6-9. Cf. also *Translatio duodecim martyrum*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*

The issue of ownership also becomes particularly evident when there is a local reaction to the theft. A notable example is the near revolt in Alexandria following the theft of Saint Mark's body. According to the account, when the merchants opened his tomb, an intense fragrance (*odoris fragrantia*) spread throughout the entire town.²⁶ The inhabitants rushed to his sepulchre to verify whether his body had been taken. However, thanks to a clever ruse – the merchants had placed the body of Saint Claudia, who had been buried nearby, in place of Saint Mark's – the locals failed to realise what had occurred.²⁷

In other cases, the demand for the restitution of a saint's body by the community that has been robbed further underscores the issue of ownership. A particularly instructive example is found in the legend of the translation of Saint Trofimenae's remains. According to the *Historia inventionis ac translationis et miracula sanctae Trophimenaе*, she was martyred in Sicily, and her body was miraculously transported to Minori, where it was discovered and enshrined in a church.²⁸

In 839, fearing that her remains might be stolen by Sicard, Prince of Benevento, her *pignora* were transferred by the Bishop of Amalfi to this city. Some time later, a delegation from Minori, led by members

rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum (Hannover: Hiersemann 1878), p. 576; *Sermo in vigiliis SS. XII Fratrum*, a. c. di. Vittorio GIOVARDI, *Acta passionis et translationis sanctorum martyrum Mercurii ac XII fratrum* (Romae 1730), p. 70; *Acta Sanctorum, Septembris*, vol. 1, (Paris–Rome: Palmé, 1868), p. 137 no. 36.

26 *Translatio Marci evangelistae Venetias*, cit., p. 123, XIII.3.

27 *Ibi*, p. 123, XIII.2.

28 On the saint and the theft, cf. Massimo OLDONI, «Agiografia longobarda tra secolo IX e X. La leggenda di Trofimenae», *Studi medievali* 12, no. 2, ser. 3 (1971): 583-636; Riccardo AVALLONE, «La “Historia s. Trophimenaе” e il “Chronicon salernitanum”», *Critica letteraria* 18 (1990): 757-774; Reginald GRÉGOIRE, a. c. di, *Febronia e Trofimenae. Agiografia latina nel Mediterraneo altomedievale. Atti della Giornata di Studio (Patti, 18 luglio 1998)* (Cava de' Tirreni: Avagliano, 2000); Amalia GALDI, «Principi, vescovi e santi in Salerno longobarda», in *I Longobardi dei ducati di Spoleto e Benevento. Atti del XVI Congresso internazionale di studi sull'Alto Medioevo (Spoleto, 20-23 ottobre 2002; Benevento 24-27 ottobre 2002)* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2003), pp. 1429-1449; Thomas GRANIER, «Conflitti, compromessi e trasferimenti di reliquie nel Mezzogiorno latino del secolo IX», *Hagiographica* 12 (2006): 33-71; Antonio MAMMATO, *La santa e la città: santa Trofimenae e Minori. Problemi storiografici e tradizione manoscritta* (Minori: Centro di cultura e storia Pompeo Troiano, 2010); Maria STELLADORO, *Santa Febronia: vergine e martire sotto Diocleziano* (Gorle: Velar, 2011).

of the clergy, travelled to Benevento to request the return of her body. Despite the theft, they still regarded her remains as their rightful property. Bishop Orso, acknowledging both their claim and the fact that Benevento had acquired ownership through the act of theft, sought to satisfy both cities: the body was to be divided into two parts, with one half returning to Minori.²⁹

This episode demonstrates the enduring issue of ownership of sacred bodies following theft. The delegation of priests or *optimates* sought to assert a claim against the thieves, but through diplomatic means. The return of Trofimenà's relics was celebrated with the *adventus* ritual, similar to those we have already examined in other translations. As a result, part of the relics was restored to the town of Minori, which had long possessed them, while another portion was now regarded as the rightful property of the Beneventans.

A very similar case is that of Saint Leucius, whose remains were stolen from Brindisi by monks from Trani, possibly in the seventh century, before being taken by a count from Benevento. In an effort to request their restitution, a delegation of monks from Trani approached the count, who ultimately decided to divide the relics to satisfy both parties.³⁰

Alongside the property issues: the saints and their will

Alongside a broader reflection on the ownership of saints' relics, another perspective emerges – one that regards their remains not as mere objects to be possessed or stolen, but as the material manifestation of living beings who, having been glorified after death on their *dies natalis*, retain the power to decide whether to leave, remain, resist theft, or permit it. This viewpoint, which is clearly reflected in the texts, was also a specific perspective adopted by devotees in the early Middle Ages and in the centuries that followed.

Scholars have emphasised this idea, for instance, through the concept of *praesentia*, or presence, as introduced by Peter Brown.³¹ According to Brown, saints are perceived as being present in their sanctuaries, particu-

29 *Historia inventionis ac translationis et miracula Sanctae Trophimenae*, in *Acta Sanctorum, Iulii*, vol. 2 (Paris–Rome: Palmé, 1867), p. 237 no. 22.

30 PAPASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 155-156.

31 BROWN, *The Cult of the Saints*, cit.

larly at their tombs, where they demonstrate their presence by performing miracles and offering supernatural signs. Another useful concept, particularly when applied to my *corpus* of sources, is that of the church as the house of the saints, as developed by Edina Bozóky.³²

Drawing on extensive evidence from medieval hagiographic sources, Bozóky argues that the place where saints are buried is not merely a tomb but a home, where they continue to dwell and work miracles. In line with this idea, devotees – particularly during pilgrimages – visit saints much as they would visit friends, echoing Brown’s notion of the saint as a “friend”, or even as familial figures.

These anthropological tools can be applied to the question of the ownership of relics. If saints live in churches and have the power to decide whether or not to stay in a particular town, theft is generally not seen as an illegitimate act, but rather as the means by which the “friends of God” enact their relocation to a new home.

The stories examined often feature elements that connect the theft to the saint’s will through specific experiences, such as dreams and visions. A notable example comes from the legend of the translation of the relics of Saint Januarius. According to the *Translatio sanctorum Ianuarii, Festi et Desiderii*, Prince Sico of Benevento seized the martyr’s relics in 831 during the siege of Naples. The tale recounts that, after his arrival, the saint appeared in a dream to a woman, warning her in advance of his departure, as he wished to return to Benevento, his native land (*Beneventum, plebs enim mea est*), partly due to some bad behaviours on the part of the Neapolitans.³³

The dream in which the saint manifests his will is a hagiographic *topos* – but above all a cultural device, dating back at least to Late Antiquity

32 Edina BOZÓKY, «“La maison” des saints et les miracles», in *Le Moyen Âge miraculeux*, éd. EAD (Paris: Riveneuve, 2010), pp. 98-110.

33 *Translatio sanctorum Ianuarii, Festi et Desiderii*, Mario IADANZA, a c. di., *Principi, vescovi e reliquie a Benevento tra i secoli VIII-IX. La traslazione di san Gennaro da Napoli nell'anno 831*, Quaderni di Hagiographica, 20 (Firenze: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2021), pp. 136-138 no. 1. On the saint and the theft of his body, cf. Domenico AMBRASI, s.v. «Gennaro», in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, vol. 6 (Roma: Città Nuova, 1965), cols 135-151; Amalia GALDI, «*Quam si urbem illam suae subdiderit*. La traslazione delle reliquie di san Gennaro a Benevento tra istanze politiche, agiografia e devozione», in *San Gennaro nel XVII Centenario del martirio (305-2005). Atti del convegno internazionale (Napoli, 21-23 settembre 2005)*, a c. di Gennaro LUONGO (Napoli: Editoriale Comunicazioni Sociali, 2007), pp. 223-242; PAPANZANO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 52-53.

and firmly rooted in the cultural context of the time – that serves to legitimise the theft, meaning it could not be considered a sacrilegious act. At the same time, the inclusion of this detail at the start of the tale allows us to reflect on early medieval culture – and more broadly, on the Christian perspective – in which the will of supernatural beings, such as saints, could be communicated through dreams and visions.³⁴ The analysis of these aspects sheds light on the hagiographer's role as both editor and creative author, often reworking previous written sources, oral traditions and other cultural and legendary material.

From a historical-cultural perspective, the dream indicates that Januarius could decide where to reside, thereby approving the theft of his sacred body and its transfer to Benevento. The miracles he performed during the procession to his new home and upon entering the city were signs of his willingness to move to another place.

Another cultural theme that emerges from the texts is that, at times, saints – based on the perception of them as living beings – could be considered prisoners, or they could underscore, through supernatural means, their absence and decide to return to their home. In the case of Saint Januarius, he expressed through a dream to a woman his desire to return home, although his presence in Naples was not linked to a theft. A clearer example of this dynamic can be found in the *Historia* of Saint Trofimenia. According to the text, during the period when her body was kept in Benevento, a custodian entered the empty church where the saint appeared to him, highlighting her *praesentia* despite the absence of her remains.³⁵ This episode focuses on the desire to preserve her cult in Minori, but it also implicitly points out that her relics were stolen without her permission or

34 On dreams in the Middle Ages, cf. Pierre MARAVAL, «Songes et visions comme mode d'invention des reliques», *Augustinianum* 29 (1989): 583-599; Steven F. KRUGER, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Jean-Claude SCHMITT, «The Liminality and centrality of dreams in the Medieval West», in *Dream Cultures. Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*, eds. David D. SHULMAN, Gedaliahu A. G. STROUMSA (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 274-287; Jesse KESKIAHO, *Dreams and Visions in the Early Middle Ages. The Reception and Use of Patristic Ideas, 400-900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Marco PAPASIDERO, «Le madri di fronte ai sogni di predestinazione della santità nel Medioevo», in *Maternità e Monoteismi / Motherhood(s) and Monotheisms*, a c. di Giulia PEDRUCCI, *Le religioni e la storia*, 2 (Rome: Quasar, 2020), pp. 231-245.

35 *Historia inventionis ac translationis et miracula Sanctae Trophimenae*, cit., p. 239 nos 30-31.

support. In fact, the decision of Pietro II, the bishop of Amalfi, to transfer her relics from Minori to Amalfi for better protection was met with her punishment: a mortal fever.³⁶ As I will discuss in the next paragraph, the body of Saint Juvenal also sought to resist theft, clearly condemning the violation of his sacred rest.

All these examples, intertwined with the theme of the saints living within their relics, suggest the idea of saints being “kidnapped” or sometimes subjected to actions against their will, as seen in the case of Trofimenia.³⁷

The theft as a violation of sacredness

The judgment on thefts is always linked to the community that composed the hagiographic legend. If the legend was written by the church or town responsible for taking the relics, there was no disapproval; on the contrary, the theft was resolutely condemned when the community that wrote the hagiographic text had been the victim. From this perspective, the theft of relics holds a plurality of interpretations, in which the hagiographer’s point of view plays a crucial role. The sacredness of spaces is also a relevant concept, elaborated within hagiographical rhetoric.³⁸ The miracles and episodes recounted in these stories take place in sacred places and spaces intimately connected to the saints, which are regarded as their domain. The saints reside within these spaces, and to violate them is to disturb their sacred rest.

An incisive example is the theft of Saint Juvenal’s body, stolen from Narni at the end of the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century by Margrave Adalbert of Tuscany and taken to Lucca.³⁹ In this case, the

36 *Ibi*, pp. 236-237 nos 17-19.

37 GEARY, *Furta sacra*, cit., p. 5.

38 In this regard, cf. Luigi CANETTI, «Santuari e reliquie tra Antichità e Medioevo: cristianizzazione dello spazio o sacralizzazione del cristianesimo?», *Reti Medievali Rivista* 3, no. 2 (2002): 1-14; Maria Chiara GIORDA, Sara HEJAZI, «Spazi e luoghi sacri. Prospettive e metodologie di studio», *HUMANITAS* 68, no. 6 (2013): 917-921; André VAUCHEZ, éd., *Lieux sacrés, Lieux de culte, Sanctuaires*, Collection de l’École française de Rome, 273 (Rome: École française de Rome, 2000).

39 On this figure, cf. Gina FASOLI, s.v. «Adalberto di Toscana», in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 1 (Roma: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Treccani, 1960), pp. 219-221. On this theft, cf. Adolfo SIMONETTI, «Adalberto I marchese di Toscana e il saccheggio di Narni nell’878», *Bollettino della Regia Deputazione di Storia Patria per l’Umbria* 7 (1901):

Translatio was written by a hagiographer from Narni not only to recount the events themselves, but also to narrate the return of the relics to the city. For this reason, the perspective adopted was that of the community that had suffered the theft. A crucial passage in the legend occurs when the margrave enters the tomb of the saint, whose body was kept alongside those of Saints Cassius and Fausta. Upon the removal of Saint Juvenal's body and its placement in its recess, the forces of nature were unleashed: thunder (*tonitrua*), lightning (*fulgora*), wind (*venti*), and an earthquake (*terra mota est*) occurred.⁴⁰ The saint thus manifested his disapproval of the interruption of his sacred rest.

Eventually, after two hours, during which the thieves were blinded by lightning, the body stood erect, almost ready to leave. At this point, another supernatural sign appeared: his legs were partly broken, and rivers of blood flowed from them, wetting the floor. The bishops and priests of Narni, who were present, tried to collect the blood in tears.

The violation of the sacred space, and above all of the saint's rest, triggered supernatural events that highlighted the gravity of the act. As already pointed out, the "miraculous" is the language of God and His saints in these stories. It is expressed through natural phenomena, which, however, manifest in a violent and "unnatural" way. There are two main examples: the unexpected thunder, with lightning, wind, and an earthquake, and the blood that issued from the broken legs of Saint Juvenal.

In particular, blood serves as a negative symbol, often representing a terrible omen in biblical and Christian culture. Consider the first of the plagues of Egypt, when the waters of the Nile were turned to blood.⁴¹ In the *Translatio*, the hagiographer links the theft of the saint's body to the insufficient worship offered to him in Narni. At the same time, divine wrath struck Lucca, the city that had stolen the relics, bringing famine and other dire omens that ultimately led to the return of the holy body.

Another useful case for explaining this perspective is that of Saint Martinus, a local hermit whose relics were kept in a church on Mount Mas-

1-17; Edoardo D'ANGELO, *Narni e i suoi santi. Storia, liturgia, epigrafia, agiografia* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2013), pp. 121-122; PAPANASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 68-70.

40 *Translatio Iuvenalis et Cassii episcoporum Narniensium Lucam*, in *Narni e i suoi santi*, a c. di D'ANGELO, cit., p. 244 no. 58.

41 Es 7:20-21.

sico, in Campania.⁴² According to the hagiographical source, Prince Arechis II, with the help of his wife, sought to obtain his body and transfer it to the sanctuary of Saint Sophia in Benevento. After a three-day fast, he came to the mountain in procession with several priests, but when he reached the tomb, a violent earthquake indicated that the saint did not approve the transfer of his relics.⁴³

This episode, together with the previous one, underscores the widespread belief that saints have personal control over their relics and can manifest their will through supernatural signs, such as natural phenomena like earthquakes. At the same time, this episode demonstrates that the saints' reactions occur when their bodies are taken and manipulated without clear supernatural authorization, such as a dream, a vision, or another inexplicable phenomenon.⁴⁴

In these examples, the sacred space can be identified with the tombs of the saints, where their most precious asset – their body – was kept. Thieves might enter the church or the crypt, but extraordinary disapproval was only manifested when they touched the container of the body, attempting to open it or remove the remains. The space itself is not considered sacred in and of itself, and there is no specific concept of the violation of sacralised spaces. The focus is on the bodies, which are the saints themselves, who miraculously live within their tombs.

The episodes demonstrate the dynamics of violating the saints' sacred rest. As in the case of Saint Appianus, supernatural reactions occurred

42 On this saint, cf. Gregorio MAGNO, *Dialogi*, vol. 3, ch. 16, a c. di Salvatore PRICOCO et al., *Storie di santi e di diavoli*, (Roma: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla–Arnoldo Mondadori, 2005); Domenico AMBRASI, s.v. «Martino di Monte Massico», in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, vol. 8, cit., cols 1237-1240; Luigi R. CIELO, «Cattedrali e reliquie nella Campania normanna». I “tests” di Carinola, Caiazzo e Alife», *Rivista storica del Sannio* 1 (1983): 9-22; Alessandra ACCONCI, «L'oratorio rupestre di San Martino in clivo montis Marsici, Monte Massico (Caserta)», *Arte medievale. Periodico internazionale di critica dell'arte medievale* 4, no. 2 (2005): 9-30; Domenico CAIAZZA, «Eremiti e cenobiti nell'Alta Terra di Lavoro», in *Terra di Lavoro, terra di santi. Eremiti e monachesimo nell'Alta Terra di Lavoro da Benedetto a Celestino V. Atti del Convegno di studi sulle radici della spiritualità e cultura della Campania (Raviscanina, 1 luglio 2005)*, a c. di Domenico CAIAZZA (Piedimonte Matese: Ikona, 2005), pp. 19-50; PAPASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 126-127.

43 *Vita, translatio et miracula sancti Martini abbatis*, in *Acta Sanctorum, Octobris*, vol. 10 (Paris-Rome: Palmé, 1869), p. 838 no. 9.

44 On these impeded translations, cf. HERRMANN-MASCARD, *Les reliques des saints*, cit., pp. 381-386; PAPASIDERO, *Translatio sanctitatis*, cit., pp. 123-128.

when someone tried to steal their bodies against God's will. In this instance, the violation is clearer, also because, according to the text, the theft actually took place. The theme of the violation of the saints' resting places invites further reflection on the nature of the text and the historical or rhetorical dimensions of the narrative. On the one hand, these accounts of thwarted translations may function as rhetorical devices, serving as warnings to potential wrongdoers against disturbing the relics. This is often the case with brief episodes, as in the example of Saint Appianus. On the other hand, it is possible that such episodes have a historical basis, albeit recounted through the conventional *topoi* of the genre. This is the case of Saint Juvenal, in which the account appears to be a narrative designed to perpetuate the memory of an event, while simultaneously offering a sustained reflection on divine punishment for the community's failings (sins, lack of worship, etc.), culminating in the removal of the saint's remains.

Conclusion

The theft of relics is both a cultural and often meta-historical phenomenon that characterises the history of the cult of saints, especially during the Middle Ages. It represents a cultural strategy which, irrespective of its historical accuracy, is employed by hagiographers and communities to interpret and justify the transfer of *pignora sanctorum* from one place to another. As has been noted, the issue of ownership is generally not explicitly addressed in the texts and only emerges when the theft occurs. According to the sources, ownership of relics is often based on long-standing historical precedents. Despite this, the saints are regarded as the true owners of their bodies. To support this perspective, I have examined several instances where the authorization for the relics to be transferred had to come from the saints themselves. Signs, such as storms, earthquakes, and winds, serve as explicit denunciations of the translation. All these episodes occur within the tombs of the saints, which are considered sacred spaces. Furthermore, the specific act of violating their sacred rest is realised when thieves physically touch their bodies. The saint's "house" is violated when the thieves' intentions are made explicit and the saints themselves do not approve.

Another crucial aspect that has emerged from the accounts reviewed is the will of the saints. Drawing on concepts such as *praesentia* and *potentia*, or the previously mentioned house of the saints, the theft is often

depicted as something expressly authorised by them. Expanding on this idea, the notion of property must be re-evaluated, particularly since the remains of a saint are not merely an object that can be stolen, donated, or bought, but rather the physical body of a supernatural being who can decide to leave their home. The theme of the saint's freedom to manage and protect his own relics is also treated in detail in the sources. This perspective must be understood within the broader theological, ecclesiastical, and giuridical reflections of the period and subsequent centuries. It is plausible that the saint's actions corresponded to the consolidation of contemporary ecclesiastical ideology and organisation, given that ecclesiastical and legal thought of the time was itself shaped by the evolving doctrine and practice of immunity over church property.⁴⁵

In conclusion, the relationship between the ownership of relics and theft primarily concerns the construction of written memory – which, from that moment, becomes collective memory – and serves to prove, to the devotees and other churches, how and when the relics arrived. It is not, or not solely, in fact, a question of law – an aspect intentionally excluded from the scope of this study – but rather a broader perception of the *praesentia* of the saint.

45 On the topic of freedom cf.: Nicolangelo D'ACUNTO, Elisabetta FILIPPINI, *Libertas. Secoli X-XIII*, Settimane internazionali della Mendola, n. s. 6 (Milano: Vita & Pensiero, 2019).