

BETWEEN MEDICINE AND FAITH. THE HISTORY OF THE ALLEGED BLESSED ALBERTO BESOZZI AND THE AUTHENTICITY OF HIS RELICS

IZMEĐU MEDICINE I VJERE. POVIJEST NAVODNOGA BLAŽENOG ALBERTA BESOZZIJA I AUTENTIČNOST NJEGOVIH RELIKVIJA

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SUMMARY

The monastery of Saint Catherine of Sasso was built overhanging the eastern shore of Lake Maggiore in the municipality of Leggino (VA). In particular, our paper concerns the relics housed in the Sacellum of the church of St. Caterina. According to the tradition, the first Sacellum dedicated to the saint was built before the 16th century over a medieval hermit's refuge. The chronicle, the Historieta, remembers that, in the 12th century, a merchant of Arolo, Alberto Besozzi, survived the lake crossing shipwreck and made a vow to St. Catherine of Alexandria. He decided to retreat in prayer in a cave on that part of the coast.

The Sacellum, now incorporated in the monastery complex (at the bottom of the central nave of the church), preserved human remains of Blessed Alberto in the past.

We present the important role that the Sacellum and the relics have played not only for the

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faith, but also for the devotion of pilgrims and local people. In this context, this monument is related to the sense of religiosity and spirituality that pervaded medieval life, where every form of prayer is to be materialized in the physicality of a tangible creation.

Keywords: Medieval hermit's cave, Blessed Alberto Besozzi, funeral atrium, Rinascimental sacellum, place of pilgrims

INTRODUCTION

The cult of relics represents one of the main aspects of Christian religiosity and, at the same time, a fascinating field of research for scholars from a historical and anthropological point of view.

The first Christian persecutions favored the flourishing of a considerable number of relics of martyrs and the creation of sacred places to keep their remains. Later, the cult extended to ascetics, hermits, illustrious personalities of the church, such as bishops and abbots, and all those who embarked on the path of faith accepting pain and suffering. Even the spaces made sacred by the presence of the saints and their relics were transformed into sanctuaries where the faithful went on pilgrimage to obtain graces, intercessions, or simply to pray^{1,2}.

Therefore, the authenticity of the relics is an ever-current concern of the Church.

Relics in the church have always received particular veneration and attention to the protective value and power attributed to them^{3,4}. The theme of the relics, together with that of their veneration, has always been the subject of a wide debate in the ecumenical sphere and of skepticism for many believers as well^{5,6}. Christian belief in the power of relics, physical remains or objects, is as old as the faith itself. The New Testament emphasizes the healing power of the objects touched by Christ and his apostles. In particular, the saint's body symbolized a tangible spiritual bond between life and death, between

¹ Fiocchi, N. (2010), I santuari martiriali, in: BoeschGajano, S., Calì, T., Scorza Barcellona, F., Spera, L. eds., *Santuari d'Italia*, Roma, De Luca Editori d'Arte, 59–75.

² Atti x Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Cristiana (15-18 settembre 2010), Università della Calabria, Arcavacata di Rende.

³ Walsham, A. (2010), Introduction: Relics and Remains, *Past & Present*, 206(5), 9–36.

⁴ Morris, C. (1972), A Critique of Popular Religion: Guibert de Nogent on The Relics of the Saints, in: Cuming, G.J., Baker, D. eds., *Popular Belief and Practice*, Vol 8: Studies in Church History, Cambridge, 55–60.

⁵ Geary, P. (1994). Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages. Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics, in: Geary, P. ed., *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca, 194–220.

⁶ Rudy, K. (2000). *A guide to mental pilgrimage*, Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenale Ms. 212, Paris, Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte.

man and God. Therefore, the authenticity of the relic and mortal remains is a fundamental aspect that has continuously engaged the church in the effort to protect the faithful from the veneration of remains^{7,8} whose authenticity had been declared superficially or maliciously false^{9,10}.

In the recent Instruction of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, entitled “The relics in the church: authenticity and conservation”, the importance and the precious character of the sacred remains are emphasized “because the body of the Blessed and the Saints, destined for resurrection, was on earth the living temple of the Holy Spirit and the instrument of their holiness, recognized by the Apostolic through beatification and canonization”¹¹. The document indicates the canonical procedure to be followed to verify the authenticity of the relics and mortal remains and to ensure their conservation. The relics of the Blessed and Saints “cannot be exhibited for the veneration of the faithful without a special certificate from the ecclesiastical authority that guarantees their authenticity”. The procedure “to promote the veneration of relics through possible specific operations is also described: canonical survey, taking of fragments and packaging of relics, translation of the urn and alienation of the relics”. The Instructions also recall the steps necessary to obtain the consent of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and carry out these operations. “The procedure to follow for the pilgrimage of the relics” is also indicated. An important aspect is reserved for the inspection of the relics. The instruction states that those who “take part in the operations” on the relics must “first take an oath or promise to faithfully fulfill their task”. “The relics or mortal remains are to be placed on a table, covered with a decent cloth, so that the anatomical experts can clean them of dust or other impurities”. Finally, the Instruction underlines that trade (the exchange of a relic in kind or money) and the sale of relics (the transfer of ownership of a relic for the consideration of a price) are absolutely prohibited, as well as their display in profane or unauthorized places.

⁷ Brazinski-Allegra, P.A., Fryxell, R.P. (2013), The Smell of Relics: Authenticating Saintly Bones and the Role of Scent in the Sensory Experience of Medieval Christian Veneration, *Inst Archaeol*, 23(1), 11–5.

⁸ Geary, P. (1994), The Saint and the Shrine: The Pilgrim's Goal in the Middle Ages, in: Geary, P. ed., *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca, 163–76.

⁹ Bethell, D. (1972), The Making of a 12-c. Relic Collection, in: Cuming G.J., Baker, D. eds., *Popular Belief and Practice*, Vol. 8, Studies in Church History, Cambridge, 61–72.

¹⁰ Bozóky, E. (1999). *Les reliques: objets, cultes, symboles*, Brussels, Helvétius.

¹¹ *Istruzione della Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi su “Le reliquie nella Chiesa: Autenticità e Conservazione”* [online] Available at: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2017/12/16/0905/01939.html>.

This paper is dedicated to relics of Blessed Alberto Besozzi (11??-1205) housed inside the Hermitage of Saint Catherine, an important Monastery erected overhanging Lake Maggiore (Varese province)¹².

Over the centuries, many pilgrims arrived at the shrine to pray and gather around the body of Alberto Besozzi, revered as the man who had defeated the devil. Even today, the tomb is visited by many pilgrims^{13, 14}.

BETWEEN LEGEND AND HISTORY: THE RELICS OF SANTO ALBERTO BESOZZI

From the legend reported in the *Chronicle* in 1593, Alberto Besozzi, the hermit founder of the monastery, survived the wreck of the *Sassoballaro* in 1170, when he was returning from Vergante, on the other side of the lake. He was swept overboard from the boat but was saved after praying to St. Catherine of Alexandria. In gratitude for having escaped death, he vowed to St. Catherine and founded a hermitage in which he could escape from the sins of the world¹⁵.

The fame of holiness of the hermit grew. Many ventured to his cave for advice and prayers. In 1195, an official representation of the various neighboring countries asked the hermit to intercede for the end of a terrible plague that had affected people on the Lombardy side of Lake Maggiore. After eight days of prayer, Alberto obtained the grace and, as a sign of gratitude, asked to build a small chapel next to the cave dedicated to Saint Catherine, similar to the one that contained the remains of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai¹⁶. From that moment, the faithful came to this place to implore graces^{17, 18}. In 1205, after his death, the hermit was buried in the *Sacellum* and was declared blessed by all the inhabitants of Verbano. Around 1250, the Dominican friars

¹² Caccin, A.M. (1995). *Santa Caterina del Sassoballaro*, Gavirate, Nicolini.

¹³ Signe Morrison, S. (2000), *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England, London and New York*, Routledge Research in Medieval Studies, 3.

¹⁴ Maniura, R. (2000), Voting with their feet: art, pilgrimage and ratings in the Renaissance, in: Neher, G., Shepherd, R. eds., *Revaluing the Renaissance*, 187–99.

¹⁵ Besozzi, L. (1981), Il beato Alberto e l'Eremo di Santa Caterina, *Riv SocStor Varesina*, 15, 153–56.

¹⁶ De Vit, V. (1856). *Vita del Beato Alberto Besozzi e storia del Santuario di S. Caterina del Sasso sul Lago Maggiore*, Milano.

¹⁷ Bertolli, F., Armocida, A. (1975), Carte trecentesche del Monastero di Sasso Ballaro, *Riv SocStor Varesina*, 12, 123–70.

¹⁸ Armocida, G. (1977), Un regesto dell'archivio del Monastero di Sasso Ballaro dal 1301 al 1770, *Riv SocStor Varesina*, 13, 35–54.

arrived in SassoBallaro to assist the pilgrims who were increasingly visiting the tomb of Alberto.

According to the tradition, the first Sacellum dedicated to Saint Catherine was built over the Hermit's cave and allegedly had the same dimensions as the tomb of St. Catherine of Alexandria on Mount Sinai. Today, the Sacellum is incorporated in the center of the ecclesial complex, and it still represents the heart and nucleus of the sanctuary of Saint Catherine.

Since 1535, the Sacellum, a small room measuring 2.10 X 2.50 m, preserved the remains of the Blessed Alberto inside a wooden manikin. As the 16th-century drafts show, the manikin was placed in a glass urn (coffin), similar to those that preserve the today's remains. The interior of the Sacellum was frescoed in 1640, in memory of the first medieval structure by the prior Francesco Martignoni, He himself became immortalized in the inscription above the entrance with the lintel: "Prior Francesco Martignoni was here prior in 1640". The prior Francesco Martignoni was also portrayed in one of the two figures of ambrosian friars next to the door. The angel above holding a scroll: "*Here lie the mortal remains of the Milan B. Alberto Besozzi, the founder of this place*".

Near the Sacellum is the Chapel of Alberto Besozzi, a narrow place situated between a rock and the Sacellum. In this place, the Blessed (1205) was originally buried. This chapel, historically, also went by the name of the "*Chapel of the Sassi*". In fact, around the middle of the 17th century, five stone boulders of five tons, detached from the rocky wall 20 feet above, and remained prodigiously suspended in the void, entangled in the weak structure of the vault of the broken chapel. For over three centuries, the stones remained hanging there, consequently, this aroused much curiosity. In the 17th century, with the reputation of the sanctuary and its founder growing, some of his bones were removed and placed in small relics to be transported to other churches and countries, according to a singular but widespread use at that time.

On the nights of the 11th and 12th of May 1910, the stone boulders fell to the ground without causing any damage to the buildings. The subsequent discussions were lengthy. In 1983 they were removed for restoration. The last chapter of the manuscript *Chronicle "Historieta"* talks about the recovery of the corpse of the hermit Alberto during the 1400s.

During the first anthropological examination, human remains of hermit were placed in an urn of glass and brass, which was built in 1942. In 1970, when the whole complex was abandoned, waiting to adopt the necessary renovations, there was an incident of sacrilegious vandalism: the bones of the

Blessed Alberto were found on the floor, along with the damaged urn. The remains of the Blessed were transported in 1975 to the altar of the *church of Santo Stefano in Leggiuno*. Later they were removed, cleaned, cataloged (perhaps for the first time in their history), and returned to the wooden statue, which reproduces the features of the hermit. On the 11th of August 1987, Dr. Ettore De Giacomo of Leggiuno examined the skeletal remains stored in the frame. The morphological examination led to the recognition of fragmented bones (12 fragments of ribs, 16 fragments of clavicle, 3 scapula fragments, 2 large pelvis fragments, skeletal bone fragments, eight other bone skull fragments, and a tooth). After these examinations, the remains of the founder of the hermitage were returned to rest near the sacrament he alone had desired in honor of St. Catherine. A wooden manikin, covered with a cloth tunic, conceals parts of the skeleton of the Blessed, protecting the only remains that have survived (Fig. 1).

THE QUESTION OF THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE RELICS

The question of the authenticity of the remains of saints and blessed ones, always topical since the beginning of Christianity, has continuously engaged the Church to protect the faithful, who in some cases are induced to venerate relics presented as authentic, sometimes so superficial and not adequately verified. The Church exhorts us to “ensure authenticity”; where it is doubtful, the relics must, with due prudence, be withdrawn from the veneration of the faithful. In the Instruction, the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints entrusts bishops with the responsibility of “special care and vigilance to ensure their preservation and veneration and to prevent their abuse”, in close contact with the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, which must consent to the procedures implemented by the dioceses to verify authenticity, guarantee the conservation, and promote veneration.

The text replaces the Appendix of the *Sanctorum Mater* and brings together all the provisions and indications on the subject. One of the issues dealt with is better clarified as that of the ownership of the body of the Blessed, of the Saint or the venerable in question. According to the civil laws that are very different in the different states, a problem is not easy in some cases. In Italy, for example, they are the heirs who manage the body. Before closing a transfer, for example, the civil and legal issues must first be resolved, and then the request for permission from the Congregation is passed.

It is also strongly clarified that you cannot sell and buy relics. It seems a banality, but online sales for black masses are a real problem involving many parts of the world. The instruction naturally concerns the so-called relics of the first class, part of the body or, here is a novelty, ashes. It does not concern the second- and third-class relics that arise from the contact with the body or clothes. It is also clarified that only the blessed and the saints have the right to public worship while the venerable and servants of God have not this possibility. Relics are, therefore, for the saints and the blessed, and the mortal remains are for servants of God and the venerable.

In this field, it is opportune that faith and science meet, finding meeting points towards dialogue and the common search for truth.

AUTHENTICATING RELICS

The relic phenomenon is much more complex than it seems. We cannot minimize the importance that relics have had for our history, politics, religion, and economy. They were taken as insignia to govern and legitimize power. They have been the subject of economic transactions by rulers and states and exchanged to obtain important political favors and great rivalries between religious and secular institutions for their possession. They protect the communities, and they created the phenomenon of pilgrimages, with the relative economic implications linked to them. At the same time, this encouraged the interchange of cultures and the creation of, among other things, important artistic works, as evidenced by the many architectural structures created along the most important routes beaten by pilgrims, as well as the formation of a European conscience and abundant literature on the subject¹⁹. Being interested in relics is an approach to a particular world full of contradictions, with lights and shadows, where devotion is confused with fetishism, deception with miracles, and magic with reality.

The significance of a relic on many occasions, especially for some of them, goes beyond its material or spiritual value. It is the memory of a world and of past ages that they themselves helped to model. They are a silent testimony of important events in our history. In many cases, the relics were the cause of the fame and prosperity of many places in the world.

¹⁹ Eichberger, D. (1996), A Renaissance reliquary collection in Halle, and its illustrated inventories, *Art Bull Victoria*, 37, 19–36.

Science can investigate the mysteries of relics. How many relics containing fragments of saints' bodies do churches keep? Pieces of bones, hair, anatomical parts contained in precious reliquaries and venerated by the faithful for hundreds of years. However, who can really say if this case contains the remains of the venerated saint? A series of questions emerge to which scholars can give, after appropriate investigations, answers. In particular, it will be possible to clarify whether the remains in the reliquary are of a man or a woman, the age, and the place where the individual lived through modern bioarchaeology techniques.

With modern scientific methods (for example, DNA analysis), it should be possible to establish the authenticity or falsity of the relics. In this case, it would be discovered that there are few authentic relics and that they are the exception, not the rule. For example, recently, the remains of the Evangelist Luke, preserved in the basilica of Santa Giustina in Padua, were subjected to DNA testing and radiocarbon dating, and it was discovered that the remains belong to a man of Syrian origin who lived around 300 AD. An ancient corpse, certainly, but it has nothing to do with the evangelist²⁰.

Today, there is doubt of the existence of Alberto Besozzi²¹. For many people, the famous brief *Chronicle* at the beginning of the Eremo is not a discovery but "an invention" of Antonio Giorgio Besozzi of the Monvalle dynasty. We find the legend of Eremo in the *Chronicle*. It is difficult to draw a conclusion about the first events of the origin of this place and the blessed Alberto.

We can formulate hypotheses, but they cannot be verified. To understand the origins of the Eremo, we must proceed with the identification analysis of human remains^{22, 23}. Besides studying the different archival materials and historiographical sources, we would like to carry out an accurate anthropological examination of the remains and find a convergence between scientific investigations and the hagiographic tradition.

Now we want to proceed with the anthropological investigations on the human remains preserved in the glass urn. The Cr14 analysis will allow us to

²⁰ Barbujani, G. (2014). *Lascia stare i santi. Una storia di reliquie e scienziati*, Einaudi.

²¹ Frigerio, P. (2001–2002). *Devozione e politica a Santa Caterina del Sasso*, Terra e Gente.

²² Licata, M., Borgo, M., Armocida, G., Nicosia, L., Ferioli, E. (2016), Diagnosis of multiple osteomas in an ancient skeleton discovered in the necropolis of Caravate - Northern Italy, *Eur J Oncol*, 21(4), 238–42.

²³ Licata, M., Monza, F. (2017), Ethical issues in paleopathological and anthropological research experiences, *Acta Biomed*, 88(3), 315–18.

date the bones and to discover if the skeletal remains could belong to Alberto Besozzi²⁴.

DXA scanning, mainly used to assess bone mineral density, has also greatly contributed to the development of paleoradiology, a branch of diagnostic imaging that allows information on human remains to be obtained in archaeological and/or forensic interest contexts. In our case, the DXA analysis on the few preserved bone fragments would allow us to obtain further information on living conditions, diet, diseases, conservation conditions of the remain²⁵. To complete the anthropological examination, it would be useful to use fluorescence techniques, X-ray, CT, and microbiological investigations of the chromatic alterations on the bones, which would offer important information on the state of conservation of the remains²⁶.

However, some evidence is sufficient for the faith to verify the origin of the relics. In fact, the temporary burial place of the Blessed, the Sacello, is close to the place where Alberto lived as a hermit. This connection is remembered by the fresco of the hermit founder Alberto, located behind the Sacello. For many, this is already proof of the authenticity of the Blessed and his story. For others, it is a starting point to learn more about our past, our beliefs, and our cult, of which the history of San Alberto Besozzi is a part.



Figure 1. Human remains of hermit, placed in an urn of glass.

²⁴ Alterauge, A., Becker, T., Berndt, B., Jackowski, C., Lösch, S. (2016), Testing “Saintly” Authenticity: Investigations on Two Catacomb Saints, *Radiographics*, 6(2), 573–579.

²⁵ Rubini, G., Altini, C., Fluele, F., Nappi, A.G., Sardaro, A., Sablone, S., Ferrari, C., Introna, F. (2019), The paleoradiology importance in the study of relics: the unique densitometric analysis of a bone relic of Saint Nicholas, *Hell J Nucl Med*, 22(2), 164–173.

²⁶ Macchi, V., Picardi, E.E.E., Porzionato, A. et al. (2018), Friar Leopold Mandic (1866-1942): the computed tomography of the body of a saint, *Surg Radiol Anat*, 40(8), 967-975.

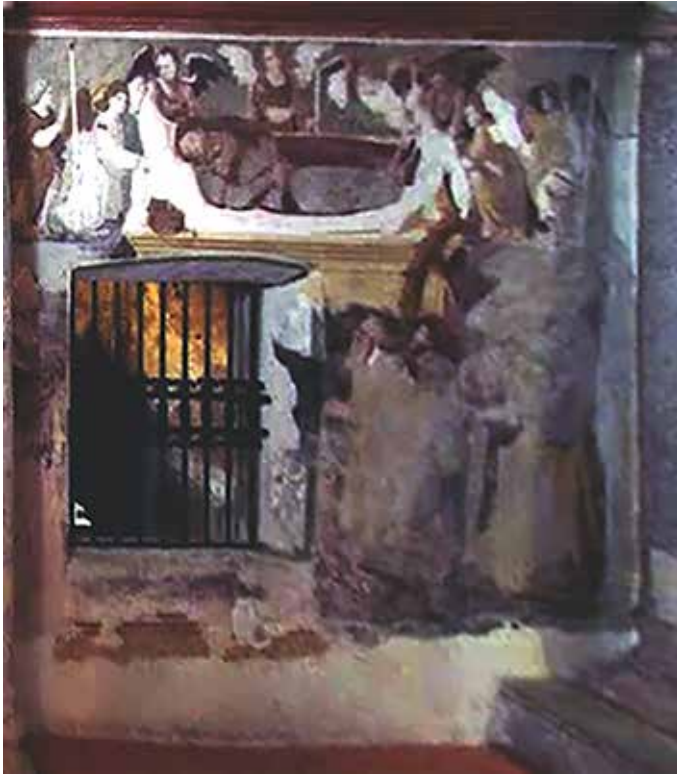


Figure 2. The Sacellum of the Blessed Alberto, Santa Caterine, Monastery of Saint Catherine (side wall).

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SAŽETAK

Samostan Santa Caterina del Sasso sagrađen je na litici istočne obale jezera Maggiore, u općini Leggiuno (VA). Članak se posebno odnosi na relikvije smještene u sacellumu crkve svete Katarine. Prema tradiciji, prvi sacellum posvećen svecu sagrađen je prije 16. stoljeća nad srednjovjekovnim pustinjačkim skloništem. Kronika Historieta bilježi da je u 12. stoljeću trgovac iz Arola, Alberto Besozzi, preživio potapanje broda dok je prelazio jezero i zavjetovao se svetoj Katarini Aleksandrijskoj. Odlučio se povući u molitvu u špilju na tom dijelu obale. Sacellum, koji je sada ugrađen u samostanski kompleks (u dnu središnjeg broda crkve), u prošlosti je čuvao ljudske ostatke blaženog Alberta.

Predstavljamo važnu ulogu koju su sacellum i relikvije imali ne samo za vjeru već i za predanost hodočasnika i domaćeg stanovništva. U tom kontekstu, ovaj je spomenik povezan s osjećajem religioznosti i duhovnosti, koji su prožimali srednjovjekovni život u kojemu se svaki oblik molitve materijalizira u tjelesno opipljive tvorevine.

Ključne riječi: *srednjovjekovna pustinjačka špilja, blaženi Alberto Besozzi, pogrebni atrij, renesansni sacellum, mjesto hodočašća*