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“Guarda che quel Christo, come è magro”: Migrations of the Holy in the Venetian Bay of Kotor¹

Abstract

*In her highly influential article *Migrations of the Holy: Explaining Religious Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2014), Alexandra Walsham poses challenging questions regarding the ways in which historical development is conceptualized and explained. This provocative call implies awareness of constant tension between a decisive moment of change, such as the Reformation, and “ambiguities, anomalies and ironies” that followed it in practice.²*

The aim of this paper is to examine the ways in which transition between medieval and early modern attitudes towards the sacred body was experienced by the 17th and 18th centuries’ believers in the Bay of Kotor. During this dynamic period of Venetian government most churches in the Bay were redecorated with new, Baroque artefacts, used together with the ones dating back from previous centuries. This change, although thoroughly explained from the angle of style and iconography, proved to be more complex seen through the eyes of contemporary citizens of the Bay.

Key words: *reliquaries, naturalism, Bay of Kotor, early modern body, historical change*

In the relic chapel of Saint Tryphon’s cathedral in Kotor dozens of naturalistically fashioned early modern reliquaries stand on the shelves next to their, equally numerous, medieval counterparts (fig. 1).³ This shiny and silver sacred group, viewed from the distance at least, seems to be very coherent in shape and material and very eloquent in stating the holiness of the space they inhabit. Inspected in detail, however, these artefacts reveal stylistic variations that could be without hesitation labelled as ‘medieval’ and ‘early

1 This research is part of a project “Representation of Identity in Art and Verbo-Visual Culture of the Early modern period”. Project is sponsored by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of the Republic of Serbia, project number: 177001.

2 A. Walsham, *Migrations of the Holy: Explaining Religious Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 44/2 (2014), 242-280, 242. I would like to thank Professor Walsham for comments that greatly influenced ideas outlined in this paper.

3 For various examples of reliquaries from St Tryphon’s cathedral see: *Zagovori Svetome Tripunu: blago Kotsorske biskupije. Povodom 1200. obljetnice prijenesa moći svetoga Tripuna u Kotor*, ed. R. Tomić, Zagreb 2009.

modern' (fig 2, fig 3). The reliquaries from the 14th century offer an image of a knightly armoured limb, lavishly decorated with ornaments and covered with gems. At first glance, the reliquaries from the 17th century appear simple, without any extensive decoration or jewels. Instead of knightly armor and ornamental ribbons we can see a part of an 'ordinary' human body with a combination of rippling muscles, wrists and palpitating veins. In both latter examples the observer is struck by the palpability of flesh instead of the previously emphasized materiality of jewels and ornamented ribbons.

This change is usually interpreted as a part of a broader process of the early modern naturalization of body, which the Renaissance elegantly introduced after not so elegant a breakthrough of humanistic efforts to transform the medieval ways of understanding the world. Similar transformations thus can be observed in other visual media, such as icons, paintings, and sculpture. In addition to that, the endeavours of both Aristotelian and neo-Platonic philosophers, poets, physicians, autobiographers or scientists to present the human being as an aware individual, positioned in the centre of the universe, were greeted as very welcome evidence of the same change. The writings of various theorists, such as Vasari's, only contributed to the later, Burckhardtian glorification of a modern man.⁴ Therefore, dissecting both pairs of reliquaries by using instruments of style or technique would eventually give an expected result in recognizing the 'liberation' of the body during the period.

This narrative could probably be seen as a satisfactory depiction of cultural change, but only until other criteria than that of artistic style was introduced. In both of the 14th century containers the bone is hidden from the beholder's gaze by a small square door with the possibility - which mustn't be disregarded - of occasionally being opened. By contrast, it seems that the latter examples offer their substance more explicitly. Behind the prominent circular glass holes, the beholder can clearly observe the bone particles. Thus, the faculty of touch occupied a central role in the medieval believer's encounter with the bones. On the other hand, later examples, with larger oval openings allowed a direct view of the most sacred compartment. Physical contact was not necessary to facilitate this type of communication. Once again, this change might be perceived as an

⁴ G. Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists: A Selection*, trans. G. Bull, Baltimore 1965, 58; J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of Renaissance Italy*, New York 2010. For more recent explanation of Renaissance individualism see: J. J. Martin, *Myths of Renaissance individualism*, New York 2004; S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago 2005.

early modern tendency to prioritize the sense of sight as more noble and spiritual than seductive and potentially sinful touch. On the other hand, and this view is spreading very fast across the field of history of senses, the medieval approach could be seen as more intimate, carnal and creative than an early modern regulated view from the distance.⁵ Therefore, another narrative, seemingly quite contradictory to the aforementioned one, could be employed in explaining the same transition over two periods – a narrative of repression.

What further complicates interpretation of these morphological and functional changes is the performative potential that these artifacts often implied. Rarely were they seen as part of a one-to-one interaction between object and subject (be they contemporary art historians or early modern believers). More often than not they were displayed as a part of a group⁶ – inside of the relic chapel, on the altars or during the processions in the streets. On the other hand, their beholders usually participated in this as part of a broader congregation, gathered inside or outside the church. Thus, dynamic mechanisms of their mutual agency could complicate these convenient interpretations of the naturalization and regulation of the body. Was early modern man able to perceive the change in representation of the holy body part, crowded in the street during the procession, beholding a pyramid of reliquaries, both medieval and modern, gathered in the specially designed carrier? Moreover, were the common laymen capable of recognizing these changes, if constantly encouraged by the ecclesiastical authorities to experience the sacred in a particular manner?

Written sources that can be used in this argument are very rare, and even when they are available a certain amount of speculation is necessary in order to reach any relevant conclusion. The manuscript of a trial dating back to 1719 could be a useful source in answering at least a part of the aforementioned questions.⁷

At the beginning of the 18th century a man called Romano found himself in front of the ecclesiastical court of Kotor, accused of sacrilege and misuse of holy objects. As was confirmed during the interrogation, Romano had

5 On the history of senses see, among others: 'Touch me, touch me not: Senses, Faith and Performativity in Early Modernity: Introduction', *Open Arts Journal*, eds. E. Benay and L. M. Rafanelli, 4 (2014/2015); *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, eds. W. de Boer and C. Göttler, Leiden 2013; *The Sensuous in Counter-Reformation Church*, eds. M. B. Hall and T. E. Cooper, Cambridge 2013.

6 C. Hahn, 'What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?', *Numen* 57 (2010), 284-316, 298.

7 BAK Church Archive in Kotor, Fond I, 345 (I-CCCXLV) XXIX *Hyacinthus Zanobetti* 1719-1732.

collected host wafers from different churches in town in order to feed his dog, after previously frying them in oil. He did so firmly convinced that it would make him invisible and able to “go to the different places”, including Rome – his home town. After that, he went with his friends to the village near Kotor where he “mocked a holy mass”, using bread (*focaccia*) and wine for the purpose of enacting his own Eucharistic ceremony. In addition to that, he mocked the physical appearance of Christ on the cross during the procession of *Settimana Santa*. As his actions reveal, Romano was very interested in the physical aspects of Christ’s nature, testing occasionally his understanding of incarnation by trying to gain powers necessary for his everyday life. Not surprisingly, church authorities condemned his interest and accused him for blasphemy after a careful interrogation. However, a more detailed look into his heretical behaviour might give us insight into an early modern perception of the religious change. His misuse of the hosts collected in the churches of Kotor was actually a very common way of practicing magic across Europe. Inquisitorial records are full of stories of early modern men and women who believed in the power that small round wafers could wield if saved after the communion.⁸ One witness, describing Romano’s behaviour said that he “fried these *Christs*” in oil.⁹ Thinking about the concomitant nature of Christ, of his coexistence in Earth and Heaven, was something that a believer was able to learn through different media of transmitting knowledge in an early modern period. What is somewhat unusual are Romano’s words in front of the antropomorphical body of Christ on the cross. According to the majority of witnesses he yelled: “Look at this Christ, how skinny he is, how ugly, and dry, and sad he is!” Also, he proposed that some clothes should be made to cover his naked body.¹⁰

As records reveal, during the Holy Week in Kotor the cross was held in a procession, calling people to join the prayer. Romano saw this object in the street, and estimated (Christ’s) appearance as somehow very offensive. What bothered him was Christ’s naked body, more precisely his ascetic physical constitution. According to him, the holy body shouldn’t be that “skinny and dry”. Taking into account the change that happened in the visual fashioning

8 For the other examples of similar processes see: J. Seitz, *Witchcraft and Inquisition in Early Modern Venice*, Cambridge 2011; L. Čoralić, Hrvati u procesima mletačke inkvizicije: treći dio: Magija i ostali procesi, *Croatica Christiana Periodica* 20/38 (1996), 1-44; ead., Hrvati u procesima mletačke inkvizicije: Peti dio: Magija i svodništvo, *Croatica Christiana Periodica* 22/41 (1998), 71-116.

9 XXIX *Hyacinthus Zanobetti* 1719-1732: „friger quelli Christi“.

10 Ibid.: Romano’s words are transcribed in different ways, according to the various testimonies. Almost all of them contains these elements: “Guarda che quel Christo, come che è nudo (...), come magro, brutto, secco e triste! (...) Bisogna vestito, (...) li volemo fare una baretta, un paio di braghezze alla Morlacca (...)”

of the body during the early modern period, it could be concluded that Romano preferred (or was used to) the new, different way for its representation – a muscular, strong, naturalistic body of Christ that could be found all across early modern Europe. His disgust with the tormented corporality of the Saviour thus could be interpreted as a rather successful spreading of taste in naturalistic qualities of body during the period. However, one of the written testimonies complicates this conclusion. According to the one witness Romano said in front of the crucifix: “Look how skinny this Christ is; he is skinny just like I am!”¹¹, after which he proposed making new clothes for the figure. Apparently, Romano’s view of naturalism significantly differed from the contemporary one. What he found offensive in the image of Christ was, actually, the naturalism of its representation, in Vasari’s own words: his form that derives “accurately from life”.¹² In Romano’s view, the holy body should be easily distinguished from ordinary human’s appearance, full of imperfections, usually underfed and weak. It seems that what he wanted to see instead was an idealized image of the sacred body – strong, healthy, and recognizable by the visible veins and muscles. Romano’s possible *idealized* body, as opposed to the one that imitates nature in details, recalls, in fact, the body that we usually categorize as *naturalistic*.

What can we make of this story, in which objects and people were connected through a complex web of negotiation and tension between approved and restricted use and misuse? In order to untangle the change that occurred in visual representations of the body after the Reformation (or Tridentine council, Renaissance, Columbus’ discovery, or scientific revolution), a distant comparison between medieval and early modern objects and attitudes should not be enough. What could be more rewarding, although more challenging at the same time, is careful analysis of contemporary reception of this transition. This effort should appreciate different settings in which objects were used, as well as diverse situations in which early modern people could perceive them. Therefore, instead of examining Romano’s reasons for blasphemy in negative terms of lack of education, possible poverty, superstition or his status as a foreigner in Kotor, it would be worth asking questions with a positive connotation.¹³ Instead of asking

11 Ibid., “Guarda che quell Christo, come è magro, è magro come me!”

12 G. Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 58.

13 On the responsibility of a historian dealing with the inquisitorial processes: J. Arnold, *The Historian as Inquisitor: The ethics of interrogating subaltern voices*, *Rethinking History* 2/3 (1998), 379-386; *The Unorthodox Imagination in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. S. Page, Manchester 2011.

what he *could not know* it should be asked what he *could see* in a broader context of the early modern Venetian commonwealth. More precisely, in which situations the citizens of the Bay were able to observe and comment on the medieval representations of body

Fortunately, both visual and archival sources can be very helpful in answering these questions. The very prominent presence of medieval artifacts in post-Tridentine Europe is usually explained in terms of the importance of tradition for contemporary ecclesiastical efforts in reshaping early modern Catholicism.¹⁴ In accordance with that, medieval icons and reliquaries often continued their lives throughout the subsequent centuries as objects of cult, miraculous epicentres of villages, towns and states. Therefore, the presence of medieval artifacts in the Venetian Bay of Kotor is not in any way an unusual phenomenon. What complicates this explanation is the way in which these objects were displayed and presented to the believers. Only very rarely did they remain unchanged. The reliquary of Saint Tryphon's head, the most important holy object of Kotor, was renewed in the mid-17th century – a new, golden calotte replaced a medieval, silver one.¹⁵ The rest of it preserved its medieval appearance (fig. 4). The medieval icon of Our Lady of the Rock, the most important sacred object in Perast¹⁶, was given a new, silver cover, which permitted only faces of Mother and Son to be visible (fig. 5) - displayed among figures of saints and angels as a part of the baroque altar. Therefore, apart from physical metamorphosis, performative changes were quite common. During the processions in Kotor medieval reliquaries were carried together with their early modern neighbours in the wooden carrier, made probably during the 18th century. Moreover, the busts of medieval Italian patron saints were dressed in lavish baroque clothes while being carried through the streets.¹⁷ In addition to that, the 'makeover' could have been conducted

14 H. Belting, *Religion and Art: The Crisis of the Image at the Beginning of the Modern Age*, in: id., *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago 1996, 458-484; K. Noreen, *Serving Christ: The Assumption Procession in the Sixteenth-Century Rome*, in: *Remembering the Middle Ages in Early Modern Italy*, eds. L. Pericolo and J. N. Richardson, Turnout 2015, 231-245.

15 Venetian goldsmith Benedetto Rizzi made the golden calotte in 1622: K.R. II 1630-1680: 155; M. Ulčar, *Sensations of the Glorious Head: Veneration of the Saint Tryphon's Reliquary through the Liturgical Year*, in: *Beyond the Adriatic Sea: A Plurality of Identities and Floating Borders in Visual Culture*, ed. S. Brajović, Novi Sad 2015, 151-172.

16 For the extensive analysis on Our Lady of the Rock see: S. Brajovic, *U Bogorodicinom vrtu. Bogorodica i Boka Kotorska. Barokna pobožnost zapadnog hrišćanstva*, Belgrade 2006.

17 Famous example of this practice is the reliquary bust of St. Januarius in Naples: H. Hills, *Beyond Mere Containment: The Neapolitan Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro and the Matter of Materials*, *California Italian Studies* 3/1 (2012), 1-21.

in more semantic than physical terms. The striking and very detailed example of this kind of transformation could, in a sense, recall the Romano case. The Book of Ceremonies in Perast describes in detail the procession that occurred during the *Settimana Santa*.¹⁸ On Good Friday two carefully arranged processions with crucifixes from eastern and western parts of the town met in the central square. One part of the procession was led by the figure of 'a dead Christ', whose head was sadly bowed and body tortured. At the forefront of another procession was the cross with "the living Christ", his body straight and the gaze lifted to Heaven (fig. 6). Skinny Christ, to use Romano's words, was labelled as dead and used to introduce the resurrected and alive one.

We can only speculate whether Romano saw *his* skinny Christ as a part of a broader baroque setting. What we know is that the occasion of their encounter was calling for the Forty hours' prayer during the Holy Week. Therefore, it was not one of the 'main' processions during Easter time, when other figures of apostles, saints and reliquaries of the True Cross were usually displayed. It might be possible that an elaborated physical or metaphorical makeover was absent, which made the medieval object more (susceptible) to Romano's criticism.

What does the story of visual transformation of reliquaries from the beginning of the paper have in common with Romano's disgust towards a medieval sacred body? Answers to this question seem to mutate rapidly, transforming themselves into numerous questions. Nevertheless, it could be possible to state a few observations that became visible during the untangling of these examples. Firstly, the change in artistic fashioning of the holy body is visible through comparison of medieval and early modern reliquaries. Usually, this change is labelled as naturalism, a new, early modern, true-to-life style. Simultaneously, medieval artifacts, more materialistic than illusionistic in bodily features¹⁹, continue to be employed by the church. These objects, although widely used, were usually somewhat transformed by various physical, metaphorical or theatrical tools. Therefore, the tension between the naturalistic and non-naturalistic way of depicting the body was present, although mitigated to some extent through adaptation of older images. When a common layman revealed his

18 PA Historical Archive Perast, Maritime Museum in Perast, *Book of Ceremonies*, PA I XXIIIa, 1742-1743.

19 On this problem see: C. W. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, New York 2011.

repulsion towards the image of the medieval body he was accused of being a heretic. This part of the story is not surprising (he would be probably equally accused if yelling in front of the baroque image), especially when compared with the terms he used to portray his abhorrence. It seems that every stylistic box that we made is somehow inverted in his words – the medieval body is awfully naturalistic, the figure of Jesus resembles an ordinary man in a problematic way, the holy body is too mundane instead of being idealized and beautiful (not skinny, ugly, dry, and sad).

Is there no Renaissance naturalism for the lower classes? Or is naturalism not the right term from the beginning? Obviously, according to Romano, naturalism does not mean ‘liberating’ the body from previously ‘static’ and ‘rigid’ representations. It seems that for him imitation of nature is not a welcomed quality when encountering the holy body of Christ. Vasari’s or Burckhardt’s celebrated naturalization is nowhere near Romano’s explanation. Apparently, what was offered to believers as naturalistic representation of the sacred could have been easily grasped by its beholders as an idealistic image - different and beautiful in its holiness.

The notion of naturalism, hence, was more complex than it appears to be only by reading prescriptive and theoretical writings of the period. When we allow for the existence of more porous limits between subjects and objects in the early modern period,²⁰ the picture is significantly changed. It seems that there was not only one explanation of an already complex relation between naturalism, idealism and materiality in early modern period.

Thinking in terms of not only spatial, but also chronological migrations of objects can help us understand the change in representation of the body after the Middle Ages – the perceived and experienced one, not only theoretical and prescriptive. Furthermore, this can allow conceptualizing the change as a process, which exceeds a form of imperative imposed from the above, usually explained as an instrument of counter reformation and papal control. There is a missing verb here. Incomplete sentence. The presence of medieval artifacts during the latter centuries should be more carefully inspected through the subtlety of change that this migration brought to them, through the makeover that unveiled a different attitude towards the

20 On the problem of materiality and subject-object relationship see: *The materiality of devotion in late medieval northern Europe. Images, objects and practices*, eds. H. Laugerud, S. Ryan and L. K. Skinnebach, Dublin 2016; *Things that talk: Object lessons from art and science*, ed. L. Daston, New York 2004; *Things: Religion and question of materiality*, eds. D. Houtman and B. Meyer, Fordham 2012.

holy and ordinary human body. The body that was revealed as naturalistic could easily be experienced as an ideal and privileged form of holiness while numerous and dry regulations could be accepted and used as creative tools of communication. Therefore, analysing the change in visual and verbal representations of the sacred body after the Middle Ages should be open for interpretations that exceed the theoretical frames of the period. In addition to discerning sometimes a very puzzled dialogue between subject and object it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of the choir, where numerous voices convey sometimes very diverse messages from the past. Therefore, historical change could be fluid and comprehensive, susceptible to the fashioning by the hand of members of all social classes. Above all it is often gradual, sometimes successive, sometimes spiral.²¹ We should not forget that by simplifying it as momentous and loud.



Fig. 1: Arm-shaped reliquaries, XIV-XVII century, Kotor, St Tryphon's relic chapel (photo by author)

²¹ Alexandra Walsham proposes three-dimensional, spiral process of conceptualizing the historical change: A. Walsham, *Migrations of the Holy*, 264, 265.



Fig. 2: (a) Arm-shaped reliquary, XIV, XV century, silver, glass, 50 x 7.5 cm, Kotor, St Tryphon's relic chapel (photo by Stevan Kordić) (b) Arm-shaped reliquary of St Modest, 1687, silver, glass, 59 x 7.5 cm, Kotor, St Tryphon's relic chapel (photo by Stevan Kordić)



Fig. 3: (a) Leg-shaped reliquary, XIV century, silver, 45 x 11cm, Kotor, St Tryphon's relic chapel (photo by Stevan Kordić) (b) Leg-shaped reliquary, XVIII century, silver, glass, 35 x 15.5 cm, Kotor, St Tryphon's relic chapel (photo by Stevan Kordić)



Fig. 4: Reliquary of the St Tryphon's Head, XV-XVII century, gold, silver, enamel, rock crystal, jewels, 43 x 27 x 23 cm, Kotor, St Tryphon's relic chapel (photo by Stevan Kordić)



Fig. 5: (a) Lovro Dobričević, Icon of Our Lady of the Reef, 1452; (b) Silver revetment, XVII century, Perast, Church of Our Lady of the Reef (photos by Dragan Babović)

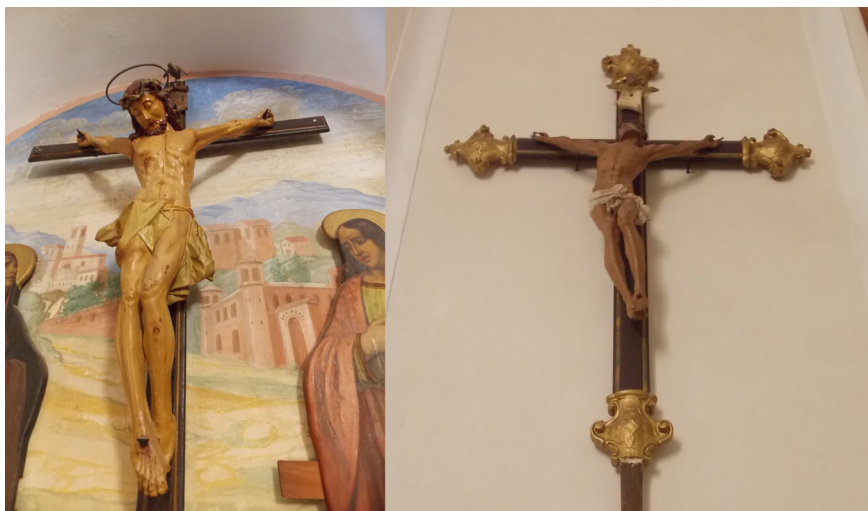


Fig. 6: (a) Wooden crucifix, Church of Saint Anthony, Perast (b) Wooden crucifix, Church of Saint Nicholas, Perast (photos by Milena Ulčar)