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Palermo’s Subterranean Necropolis: The Capuchin Catacomb

Mary Buckland Rutan

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Palermo’s Subterranean Necropolis: The Capuchin Catacomb

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the University Honors Program University of South Florida St. Petersburg

May 1, 2013

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Beneath the sacred soil of Sicily’s Capuchin convent resides Palermo’s elite friars, artists, and aristocrats. All of the catacomb’s residents have departed this world. Their bodies are suspended in time, free from decomposition and decay. The Capuchin Order of the Friars Minor came to Sicily in 1534. Their mission was to care for the sick and the dead. As an act of humility, the order forbade burial in the church. The friars built the subterranean necropolis for their brethren in 1599. The Capuchin’s mummification ingenuity began with an act of divine intervention. The order’s funeral rituals correlate with the theory of secondary burial. The deceased body must be treated in a particular manner in order for the soul to reach the afterlife. The Capuchin Catacomb is one of Palermo’s most famous attractions. The catacomb mummies have been preserved in several manners, including techniques used today in modern embalming methods. The Sicilian people have a close relationship with the dead; they are adored and worshiped as relics. Globalization is a growing threat to the conservation of the catacomb’s mummies. Death is socially constructed and its perception varies greatly throughout time and culture. Each visitor of Palermo’s subterranean necropolis leaves with a sober realization of mortality.
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Chapter 1

Personal Background

My fascination with death started when I was a child. My mother argues it started before I was born. In 1980 my parents visited King Tutankhamen at the Field Museum in Chicago when I was in my mother’s womb. When I was four my father took me to the Art Institute of Minneapolis where I saw my first mummy. I was absolutely fascinated by the funeral process and the artifacts placed in the mummy’s sarcophagus. I knew from a very early age that my fate was to work with the dead. My career in the funeral industry began in 1999, at the age of seventeen. I packed three hockey bags full of my possessions and my parents sent me on my way to New York City to start college at the American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service. I was in love with the chaos and lights of the city. In North Oaks, Minnesota we had little cultural diversity so every encounter and interaction I had in my new environment was an adventure. My dad helped me find an apartment in the Bronx. At the time I did not speak a word of Spanish but I caught on quick.

I could not wait for our first embalming lab. In the summer of 2000 I received my security pass from Bellevue Hospital. Bellevue lived up to its reputation. A group of homeless people surrounded the exterior area of the hospital. As I walked through the bacteria-laden doors screams bellowed from some poor soul waiting in the hallway to be seen by a nurse. The front desk attendant was void of emotion. She meticulously looked over my pass and pointed to the elevator. Our embalming lab took place in Bellevue’s morgue. As I walked down the filthy corridors I saw five of my classmates putting on
their protective equipment. One of them looked very pale and ashy. She said she was nervous and did not feel well. Dr. Flukes, a ruddy face man with a thick New York accent greeted our group. He walked us to the back room where staff performed autopsies and embalmings. Numerous aisles of stainless steel doors surrounded the room. I noticed several puddles of water filled with some type of bodily fluids gathering on the floor. He explained that the morgue’s cooling system was old and the stalls leaked. The walls were filthy and looked like they had not had a fresh coat of paint on them since the seventies. It felt like 100 degrees in the embalming area. Large fans placed by each table helped a little with air circulation. The back door was open and I could see cars flying by on the FDR. “Go get number seven” Dr. Flukes howled out to a man sitting in the back room. He wheeled in an African American male in his 40’s who was severely emaciated. He couldn’t have weighed more than 80 or 90 pounds. Dr. Flukes explained to us to be mindful, as this man has AIDS. All indigent inmates from Riker’s Island Prison are embalmed by students at the hospital.

After the embalming process is complete the bodies are sent to Hart Island, New York City’s paupers cemetery. To visit Hart Island is an adventure of its own. The cemetery is run by prisoners; therefore, you must be escorted onto the island by a correctional officer. We each chose a arterial area to work on. The femoral artery was mine. It took me forever to find it. Someone handed me the embalming cannula (tool used to inject fluid in the arterial system) and I began to inject the right femoral artery. The smell of the embalming fluid made my eyes water and I felt light headed. I failed to affix the cannula tight enough and fluid ran down my sleeve onto my right wrist and arm. It burned like hell! Dr. Flukes told me it was all part of the trade and that if I wanted to
be an embalmer I better learn to do this right and pay attention. I fixed the cannula and started injecting again. The man’s leg began to firm and a pinkish hue started traveling down to his toes through his arterial system. I felt like Dr. Frankenstein re-animating the dead. I was so excited to have successfully assisted in an embalming.

I was in pathology class the morning of September 11, 2001. My school was located near Columbus Circle in Mid-town Manhattan. When the first plane crashed into the World Trade Center the dean told us it was an accident and to remain in our seats. After the second plane hit she rushed into the room and said, “This is no accident. We have to leave right now; I don’t know what’s happening but we have to go!” I’ll never forget the look on Ms. Dunn’s face. She was terrified. She lived two blocks away from the World Trade Center. We ran down the steps and went our separate ways, not knowing exactly what happened. I rushed to the 59th Street train station. A police officer told me I could not gain access to the train and that the entire transit system was closed. I followed a mob of people to 42nd Street. I kept asking people if they knew what was happening. A middle-aged blonde woman with tears in her eyes said, “look up.” I watched the massive television in the middle of Times Square. It kept showing the planes hitting the Trade Center. I saw these black blurs coming out of the top of the building. I asked the woman what they were. She looked over and said, “Those are people jumping out of the towers.” It was horrifying to think these poor people were jumping to their deaths. It took me six hours to get back to the Bronx. Every shop and building was locked down. New York City was immobilized. Clouds of black soot filled the air near my apartment the following days. Everywhere I went the smell of burnt electrical wire was present.
We were back in class within three days. I walked into the morgue for embalming lab and saw a dozen men standing around with FBI jackets on. The Manhattan Medical Examiners office is one block away from Bellevue Hospital. So many people were killed on 9/11 that the medical examiner’s morgue was full. Bellevue’s morgue was used for the overflow. I walked to the back to speak with Dr. Flukes and saw a young girl no older than sixteen in the corner. The autopsy technician had brought her in to identify someone. She must have loved that person very dearly. Her screams were nightmarish. I have never heard anything like that before. It was horrifying. Weeks passed and our class was able to help with the relief efforts. So many people were missing. Bellevue became a memorial of lost hope for families who were still searching and praying that their loved ones would come home. Set outside of the hospital, a large blue wall was covered with pictures of missing people. Candlelight vigils were held every night in this area. People started to campout next to the wall holding on to a glimmer of hope that their lost loved one would meet them there. I was eighteen years old and that experience changed my life forever.

Being a female funeral director in New York City is extremely difficult. After a year of desperately searching for a job I found one. I worked for one of the only funeral homes in the area that hired women. My first funeral was a man who was killed in 9/11. Due to the circumstances of the attack many of the victims that died in the World Trade Center attack were never found. Only small pieces and body fragments of people were recovered. The medical examiner still has the 9/11 tent constructed with hundreds of unclaimed victims’ remains. Families were told to bring in tooth brushes, hair brushes, and finger nail clippings of their loved ones so the forensic team could do DNA analysis.
All that was found of the man I buried was a piece of his lung that was the size of my hand. It was unrecognizable. I went to the department of health to pick up his burial permit and death certificate. Under the cause of death read the words, “homicide, act of terrorism.” Calvary Cemetery, in Long Island opened its iron gates on Sunday for this man’s funeral. In New York most cemeteries are closed on Sundays. That was the most difficult, heart wrenching funeral I have ever directed. I will never forget the sadness in his wife’s face.

After that experience I did not want to direct. I stayed in the basement of the funeral home and embalmed. I loved embalming. It brought me great pleasure to restore someone to look like his or her former self who had been ill for so long. I would walk families through the chapel doors and up to the casket to view their loved one. I observed their expressions and if something did not seem right I asked them what I could do to make it better. On countless occasions I stood over the body taking cotton out of the deceased’s mouth and reforming their features. After five years of embalming in New York I thought I had seen it all. Boy, was I wrong.

I moved to the Sunshine State in 2006. The funeral industry in Florida is unique. Funeral directors and embalmers are segregated. Most funeral homes have a centralized embalming facility and the funerals are performed in a different location. I was fortunate enough to be hired at one of the largest family-owned funeral homes in the entire state. After a year of continuously directing funerals a job opened up in the embalming facility.

Soon after arriving, I felt as if I did not know a damn thing about embalming or restorative art. There were so many manners and mechanisms of death that occurred in Florida that I had never encountered before. A boat propeller lacerated a young girl’s
face and on the table next to her laid her nearly decapitated father. Motorcycle accidents, gunshot wounds to the chest and face, hangings, stabbings, and interestingly, dogs eating their owner’s faces. The abundance of decomposing bodies that passed through the cooler doors was incredible. New York City seemed tame compared to the strange and gruesome corpses I have seen in Florida. Veronica, a friend and co-worker, asked if I would assist her on a house call in Largo. As we pulled up to the house I saw a group of people gathered down the block and a police officer standing outside of his squad car. I thought it was strange he was outside. Typically the police officer greets the funeral director inside the house and helps carry the body out to the car. The young cop laughed when he saw us and said, “Good luck, girls!”

The door was open and what was displayed before my eyes was indescribable. This man was a severe hoarder. Newspapers, rotting food, dirty clothes, and boxes were piled to the ceiling. As Veronica and I treaded further into the house a horrible stench was wafting in the air. I started to dry heave and said to my brave friend, “What the hell is that?” Veronica smiled and replied, “Welcome to Florida Mary!” Gigantic roaches lurked everywhere, looking like they could eat a small child. The bloated corpse was in the bathroom wedged between the toilet and the bathtub. He was at least 300 pounds and flies swarmed all over his face. His body was half-clothed and he had defecated all over himself and the floor. As we went to lift him into the pouch his gangrenous blackened skin sloughed off and we fell next to him. I noticed a small pile of maggots at his feet. What a horrible way to die, alone in the bathroom being eaten away by the earth’s creatures. We were unable to fit our stretcher in the house because of mounds of trash. It took thirty minutes to roll his body into our black disaster pouch. That was my first time
ever using one of those sturdy bags. We dragged the man’s body through the disheveled festering house. His family watched our every move once we were outside. I tried to display the upmost dignity and respect but it was difficult because my partner and I were covered in filth and human remains. There is no greater bonding experience than removing a decomposing body out of house filled with garbage.

Veronica and I still reminisce about our adventure. For years I embalmed and restored the remains of many poor souls who had died well before their time. One day I saw an article in the funeral director magazine, *The Director*, about a young beautiful little girl named Rosalia Lombardo. She had died in 1920. Her appearance was so lifelike it seemed impossible. Rosalia’s embalmer was mentioned in the article his name was Alfredo Salafia. Rosalia’s body is located in the Capuchin Catacomb of Palermo, Sicily. From the moment I read that article I had an overwhelming desire to see her. I had to know if she was as immaculately preserved as she looked in her pictures. Thus, I began a quest that spanned across centuries to the Continent of Europe.
Chapter 2
History of the Capuchin Catacomb

The Order of Friars Minor went through tremendous struggles throughout history. The order later divided into three branches: Franciscan Friars Minor, Conventional Friars Minor, and the Capuchin Friars Minor. They all share the belief that Saint Francis is their founder. Friar Matteo de Bascio formed the Capuchin Friars Minor in 1525. Mateeo de Bascio felt as though the Franciscans had lost their principled ideals of living an austere life, a life of poverty, and practicing devout prayer the way their founder Saint Francis had lived. In 1529, the first chapter of the Capuchin convened in Albacina, Italy (Hess). Eighteen friars attended including, Matteo di Bassi who was elected the Capuchins vicar general (Hess). During the meeting, they wrote the “Constitutions of Albacina”, a body of strict and precise laws that the order must follow.

The Capuchin friars of Palermo had a mission to care for the sick and the dead, often answering calls to assist injured soldiers on the battlefield (Le Catacombe Dei Cappuccini - 1^ Parte). The apostolate entrusted the order to care for the poor. They had the duty to perform burial and funeral rites for indigents as well.

The Capuchins Friars Minor arrived in Palermo in 1534. They inhabited the Chapel of Santa Maria della Pace (Our Lady of Peace). The order inherited the land next to the church from the wealthy Sicilian nobleman, Don Ottavio d’Aragona upon his death in 1565. They expanded their convent shortly after the inheritance of the land. Don Ottavio also gave the monastery a rare painting of “Sant'Anna, la Madonna e il Bambino” that remains in the care of the Brotherhood (Provincia regionale di Palermo). The Capuchin friars of Palermo had a mission to care for the sick and the dead, often answering calls to assist injured soldiers on the battlefield (Le Catacombe Dei Cappuccini - 1^ Parte). The apostolate entrusted the order to care for the poor. They had the duty to perform burial and funeral rites for indigents as well.
The Constitutions of Albacina, an outlined reference reveals how the Capuchin’s must treat burial (Lanza, Facchi 2000, 2). The doctrine translates as follows:

It is thereby ordered that there should be an avoidance of those things which might offend the virtues of elevated poverty, spiritual calm, and tranquil humility, so as to maintain peaceful relations with other clerics and priests, and keep a distance from any impurity which might, in time, corrupt our congregation. It is also declared that the deceased should not be received into our sacred places, expect in the case of those departed who, due to their poverty, are without family or friends who wish to bury them. In such cases, they will be shown the very heart of charity and received this with the blessing of the bishops. It is forbidden to bury the deceased within the confines of our churches, whether lay or brothers; but the Brothers may be laid to rest in some honest place in the vicinity of the church. With this in mind a chapel will be built.¹

The opulent Don Gaspare Orioles, Barone di Fontanafredda commissioned the construction of a private lavish mausoleum which included an alter to be built in the forest next to the church. The Capuchins granted the baron permission and in 1580 consecrated the cemetery that resides directly next to the convent was created (Provincia regionale di Palermo). The cemetery has a myriad of diverse residents ranging from the prince of Lampedusa to simple vagrants. The Capuchins followed funeral rites according to the Constitutions of Albacina. Deceased friars were buried in a mass grave next to the church. In 1599 forty-five friars from the group were exhumed. The brothers built a room directly underneath the altar of the church for the final burial of their brethren. This tradition was performed throughout Southern Italy, especially in Sicily. After the corpse decomposed and flesh no longer remained on the body the skeletal remains were allowed to be buried on holy ground. The practice of the Capuchins’ final burial is similar to Robert Hertz theory of secondary burial in which the soul’s journey is directly related to the treatment of the deceased body.

¹ (Lanza, Facchi 2000, 2)
However, the brothers exhumed the corpses something incredible had happened. The friars were magnificently preserved! Their faces were recognizable and their flesh had not gone through the putrefaction process. It was as if the friars were not touched by the cold hand of death. The Capuchins believed that this instance was a direct intervention from God. Instead of burying the remains they decided to display the brothers as relics.

In general, saints’ remains are considered relics and their bones emanate a sense of power for good, which can heal the sick. Saints relics were immensely popular in the years of 750-850 AD and the eleventh century. The bones of saints were prized for their thaumaturgic power and “their ability to substitute for public authority, protect and secure the community, determine the relative status of individuals and churches, and provide for the community’s economic prosperity” (Pearson 1999, 60). Relics formed an important part of the ritual in the Catholic religion because they relate to the resurrection of the body. In Catholicism, when a saint or high-ranking person of the Church dies, their body is preserved. After the preservation pieces of their remains and clothing are sent to various locations to be displayed (Jeremiah 2012, 6). The entire body of a saint is invaluable and is considered extremely sacred. Many in the faith believe that relics keep evil spirits at bay.

The Capuchin Catacomb is incorrectly named. It is actually a hypogeum which means subterranean burial ground. A catacomb is a series of underground burial sites connected with caves and tunnels. The Capuchins displayed forty of the forty-five friars. Silvestro da Gubbio, who died October on 16, 1599 is said to be the first mummified friar interred in the catacomb. In 1601 the Capuchins built an additional room and a
underground chapel due to the growing numbers of deceased friars. In 1619 the first corridor was created. In 1680 the corridor expanded and reached the area beneath the main altar where the first forty friars were placed in 1599. The friars were then incorporated into the corridor. At the beginning of the seventeenth century noblemen who supported the Capuchins could also gain burial in the catacomb. One of the first laypeople allowed burial in the catacomb was Ayla, the king of Tunis’ son who died in 1620. He had converted to Catholicism and changed his name to Filippo d’Austria.

The Capuchins created their own mummification process. They designed a small drying room which held a horizontal, bedlike device called the *colatoio*. Bodies were placed in a supine position on the *colatoio* and their flesh was desiccated. Palermo had the optimal environment for mummification: with drier air and very low humidity. The limestone walls of the drying room aided in the desiccation of flesh.

Mummification occurred by accident in these mechanisms. *Colatoios* were built to increase the rate of decomposition so the body could have a final burial service in a shorter period of time. The Capuchins preserved the corpses in several different ways. During epidemics they dipped or bathed the bodies in arsenic. Some of the bodies were dusted with lime, chalk, and arsenic, washed with vinegar, and anointed with oils. Most of the corpses in the catacomb have been mummified by the use of the *colatoio*. Some of the bodies that had been immensely misshaped due to the desiccation process were stuffed with straw to restore their life-like appearance. Historical and archaeological evidence shows that during the modern era, this treatment of the dead was practiced quite frequently throughout Sicily and Europe (Wieczorek, Rosendahl 2010, 358). On most of
the newer catacomb residents, arterial embalming was performed by professional embalmers not the friars.

In 1723 the catacomb became so popular it nearly reached its current size consisting of four corridors. At this time the catacomb was a common funerary interment site for many aristocrats and wealthy citizens of Palermo. By the mid-seventeen century women could also be buried in the catacomb. In 1787 the Capuchins opened the subterranean burial site to the public. The bodies were displayed in niches. They were affixed to the wall by wire. In 1832 the complete construction of the catacomb took place including a new section specifically set aside for virgins. In 1837 the law forbade the exhibiting of bodies due to health concerns of decaying corpses. At this time no new niches were allowed to be constructed. Bodies interred after 1837 were placed on wooden shelves. Burial was said to be at a premium; only the well-off were mummified. Some were buried in the ground of the catacomb and their resting places are marked with beautifully engraved marble gravestones. From that point forward, members of the general public were buried in the cemetery located directly next to the crypt.
The mummies of the catacomb are arranged throughout the corridors by sex, profession, and religious beliefs. Eventually five different corridors were created for friars, priests, men, children, women, and professionals (Wieczorek, Rosendahl 2010, 358). The catacomb reached its highest capacity of residents in the nineteenth century. It was described as a carnival due to its massive popularity. The chapel of virgins had an alter that has been replaced by shelves on which the skeletons of four young women stand as brides of Christ, with other virgins laid on shelves along the walls (Koundounaris 2011, 53). Steel crowns on many of the women that reside in the catacomb indicate that they were not married. The section
devoted to virgins used to be closed with gates and glass-covered niches. Bombing during World War II destroyed the glass and a large portion of the virgin and women’s section of the catacomb.

The men’s section connects with the clerical corridor and, until the end of the 1600’s biblical passages covered the walls. The section of the catacomb for professionals contains doctors, lawyers, officers, painters, and artists. Some speculate that the famous Spanish painter Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velázquez is buried in the catacomb. Originally his remains were buried in a vault located in the church of San Juan Bautista in Spain, that church was destroyed by the French in 1811 and his remains went missing (Velázquez, 1599–1660). Sculptor Filippo Pennino and Lorenzo Marabitti reside in this section of the catacomb as well as a famous surgeon, Salvator Manzella. Most of this section was destroyed along with the original entrance of the catacomb on March 11, 1943, during a World War II bombing. The priest section is on the opposite side of the Capuchin friars’ corridor. Monsignor Franco d’Agostino, bishop of the Byzantine rites of Piana degli Albnesi, is displayed in this corridor.

Sculptor Filippo Pennino designed the statue of Saint Rosalia that now resides in the Saint Rosalia chapel. The chapel was originally named Our Lady of Sorrows but was renamed in 1866 after patroness Saint Rosalia. The monks display ropes around their necks as a sign of penance. Stoles drape priests as signs of dignity. The last monk to be interred in the catacomb was Brother Riccardo of Palermo, in 1871. On November 2, 1777 writer Ippolito Pindemonte visited the Capuchin Catacomb and was inspired to write “The Sepulchres”, a famous poem which translates as follows:
But something stronger and more to be admired appeared there: wide dark, underground rooms where, in their niches, like erect images, bodies without souls still go around dressed as they were when they dies, on their dead muscles and on their skin art has sweated and driven out every living essence so that their ancient features, their flesh and even their faces are kept after a hundred years or more. Death looks at them and fears she has failed in her aim. When the falling of autumn leaves warns us every year that not less often human lives fall, and sends us to visit tombs and shed tears, then the pious crowd goes down into underground cloisters: lamps with more than one light bung from high, each one turns to the beloved body and on its pale features looks for and finds the known shapes; son, friend, brother finds brother, friend, father, the lights of the lamp hit trembling those faces, which, forgotten by the fate, sometimes more to more their stiff nerves. How many memories of common grief of common joy! What a new living in the years which so soon went by! In the meanwhile a sigh goes up, a long, evident sob, low and resounding in the arcades to which those cold bodies seem to answer: the two worlds are divided by a little opening, and life and death were never so united.

The mayor of Palermo dedicated the street which the catacomb is located on (Corso Calatafimi) to Pindemonte because of his poem.

The National Unification of Italy during the nineteenth century is referred to as the Risorgimento. Count Camillo di Cavour, the chief minister of the king of Piedmont-Sardinia, Victor Emmanuel, entered an alliance with France, to purge Austria from Italy (National Unification). Cavour allied Sardinia with France and Brittan in the Crimean War. The war sparked an upheaval against Austria and soon Southern Italy was under Italian power. Victor Emmanuel became the first king of Italy on March 17, 1861 (National Unification). In 1870 Rome was named the capital of Italy. With the new unification came new laws. In 1861 the Italian government instated a law prohibiting the “draining” of the dead. This was due to the establishment of modern, rationalistic awareness of hygiene (Wieczorek, Rosendahl 2010, 360). Outdoor cemeteries were
created and by the late nineteenth century additional laws prohibited any type of burial from taking place outside of areas designated by the government.

The Capuchin Catacomb then fell under municipal control and remained in use for another seventy years after the law was enforced as a temporary location to store caskets before their final interment in cemeteries (Wieczorek, Rosendahl 2010, 360). A notable internment occurred after World War I and the global influenza outbreak. Rosalia Lombardo was placed in the Saint Rosalia chapel in 1920, soon after her death from influenza. Her father received special permission from the government to have her displayed in the catacomb. She is said to be the world’s most beautifully preserved mummy and is known as Palermo’s “sleeping beauty.” Giovanni Licata di Baucina, Count of Isnello was the last documented burial in the catacomb in 1939.

The Capuchin Catacomb is said to have once housed the remains of 8,000 bodies and remains one of Palermo’s most visited attractions. Today, the exact number of bodies in the catacomb is unknown but, according to a recent survey, there are 1852 bodies still to be investigated, 1252 are exposed, and 600 are inside coffins (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). Through the years the friars have re-cataloged the corpses and to this day they are the sole protectors of the catacomb. Many of the bodies were destroyed by bombings that took place during World War II and a horrific fire that devastated the catacomb on March 30, 1966. The Capuchins do not receive any government funding to care for and maintain the catacomb. The only revenue that friars receive is collected from the small admittance fee to enter the subterranean necropolis and donations.
Chapter 3

Historic Accounts of the Capuchin Catacomb of Palermo: 17th-19th-Century Traveler’s Journals

The Capuchin Catacomb’s archives are extremely sparse. The convent suffered profound damage due to bombings during World War II. In addition, a horrible fire in 1960 destroyed a great number of the catacomb’s residents. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, many European travelers visited Sicily by means of the sea. Most of these men were British and American aristocrats, scholars, journalists and sailors. Due to the publication of their memoirs and private journals the history of the Capuchin Catacomb has been revealed and preserved. Although, the perceptions of these men varied greatly, their journals told compelling stories of the catacomb’s culture and residents.

Captain David Sutherland was a British sailor who traveled throughout the Mediterranean in the late eighteenth century. He was encouraged by his friends to keep a record of his adventures. When he returned to England, he received such praise from his memoirs he decided to have them published. Sutherland had arrived in Palermo on May 2, 1788. He described Sicily as the most beautiful country he had ever gazed upon during his travels. Sutherland and his companions arrived to the Capuchin convent at dusk. They first prayed in the chapel and then were guided by a peculiarly judicious brother down the long shifting flight of steps into the crypt. As he mentioned in his journal:

All the circumstances tuned our minds for the dismal scene which we were going to behold. But (will you believe me?) notwithstanding the chilling scene through which we had passed; notwithstanding our being in the midst of more than a
thousand lifeless bodies, neither our respect for the dead, nor for the holy fathers who conducted us, could prevent our smiling. The physiognomies of the deceased are so ludicrously mutilated, and their muscles are so contracted and distorted in the drying, that no French mock could equal their grimaces. The friars soon observed the mirth which these unexpected visages occasioned; and one of them as a kind memento, pointed out to me a Captain of Cavalry, who had just been cut off in the pride of his youth, but three months ago, he was the minion of a King—the favorite of a Princess—Alas! How changed! Even on earth there is no distinction between him and the meanest beggar. This idea, in a moment, restored my reflection; and I felt, with full force, the folly of human vanity. The relations of the deceased are bound to send two wax tapers every year, for the use of the Covent; in default of which, the corpse is taken down and thrown into a charnel house.²

Sutherland was humbled from his journey into the crypt. His discourse revealed a sense of reverence and remorse for his initial ridicule of the corpses. The lesson of death serving as the great equalizer is not documented by many men who journeyed into the land of the dead. The Captain expressed his true feelings at the expense of his ego. Sutherland’s journal holds a rare account in which the stipend to uphold the status of the deceased in the crypt was revealed. There is no documentation of the initial amount owed to the Capuchins for the mummification and niche. It appears that if the family did not uphold their end of the agreement their beloved would simply be tossed aside only be replaced by someone else’s remains.

Thomas Pettigrew was born in 1791 and died in 1865. A great contributor to Egyptology and archaeology, Pettigrew published papers about nineteenth century antiquary and was also a credible surgeon (Moshenska). He was a prominent London socialite who was known for holding mummy dissection parties. Thomas Pettigrew was fascinated by the mummies of Egypt and the embalming process. He argued that no

² (Sutherland 1790, 302-303)
research has been devoted to the subject except for diffused travelers logs. His
fascination began when he was allowed to witness the unwrapping of three Egyptian
mummies at a hospital in Britain. His interest grew and he began to purchase Egyptian
mummies. The sale of mummies was very popular right up until the 1920’s. He
examined dozens of mummies purchased by himself and his wealthy colleagues and
participated in lectures pertaining to the findings. His writings depicted his immense
passion for the art of human preservation;

The practice of embalming the dead is deeply interesting, were it to rest upon its
antiquity alone; but when it is considered in relation to the history of the human
species, and to the condition of the arts and sciences of so remote a period, it rises
in importance, and it is remarkable that there should not exist in any language, as
far as I have been able to ascertain, any work devoted expressly to the treating of
this subject in all its branches. 3

The accounts of the Capuchin Catacomb are mentioned in Pettigrew’s book, *A
History of Egyptian Mummies*. Pettigrew describes the catacomb’s location and design.
Based upon his narrative, it seems as though he may not have spent much time at the
catacomb or even visited it at all. The information in his book regarding the catacomb is
obtained from the diary of Captain William Henry Smyth. Furthermore, when defining
the catacomb it appears Pettigrew used the identical description of its antiquity as
Scottish writer John Strang in his published work, *Necropolis Glasguensis with
Observations on Ancient and Modern Tombs and Sepulture*. Strang’s work was published
in 1831 and Pettigrew’s in 1834. They both described the catacomb and its residents
more scientifically than creatively.

The skin and flesh have, by a process of preparation, been rendered quite hard
and resist putrefaction. It is said that some of them have been preserved in

3 (Pettigrew 1834, 6)
their recesses 250 years, and no decay has taken place. This burial place also contains the bodies of some of the nobility and more opulent people, but the are confined in chests locked up. And of which the nearest relations hold they keys.  

Captain Smyth was born in England in 1788 and died in 1865. He was a descendant of Captain John Smith, the principal founder of the first permanent English colony in North America, at Jamestown, Virginia (Frommert, Kronberg). A member of the Royal Navy, Smyth married a women from Naples who assisted him in all of his scientific research. He lived in Palermo where he met the Italian astronomer Piazzi in 1817 (Frommert, Kronberg). After his retirement from the Navy his passion for astronomy grew and he became very accomplished in the field. He was awarded a gold medal from the Royal Astronomical Society for his published observations in 1844, Cycle of Celestial Objects. Pettigrew insightfully denotes Captain Smyth’s experience of his journey to the Capuchin Catacomb.

Upon descending it, it is difficult to express the disgust arising from seeing the human form so degradingly caricatured, in the ridiculous assemblage of distorted mummies that are here hung by the neck in hundreds, with aspects, features, and proportions, so strangely altered by the operation of drying, as hardly to bear a resemblance to human beings. From their curious attitudes (he observes), they are rather calculated to excite derision than the awful emotions arising from the sight of 2000 decayed mortals. There are four long galleries with their niches filled, besides many coffins containing noble-men in their court-dresses; and among the principal personages is a king of Tunis, who died in 1620. At the end of the great corridor there is an altar, the front of which is formed of human teeth, skulls, and inlaid like mosaic work.

The alter described is no longer in existence. It can be assumed it was either stolen or destroyed during the World War II or the fire that devastated the catacomb in 1960.

Smyth wrote in-depth details about his visit to the catacomb in the early nineteenth

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4 (Strang 1831, 49-51) (Pettigrew 1834, 242)
5 (Pettigrew 1834, 242)
century. All of this information is documented in his 1824 memoirs accompanied by his sketches. He describes the *colatoio* as a small apartment, at the end of one of the galleries, which struck him with severe nausea due to the exceedingly offensive stench (Smyth 1824, 88). The friars explained the *colatoio* as an oven which desiccated the bodies. Smyth described the friar who was guiding him through the catacomb as being acclimated to the sight and smell of decomposition. He was taken back by the monks lackadaisical attitude towards the physical properties of death and the putrefaction process.

This is something that happens to every funeral director. For years I would retch from the smell of decomposing bodies. I would embalm such cases with two masks on just to diffuse the odor. After spending my first summer in Florida I was forced to become accustomed to the smell. My colleagues laughed when I vomited in the medical waste because I had a stream of purge leak into my shoe. When you’re the new kid in town you get the pleasure of performing the dirty jobs. Sure enough, I had to care for every one of those maggot-infested bodies in the summer of 2006.

Decomposing bodies occur in the sunshine state on a daily basis in the summer months.
Other narratives also paint vivid images of the catacomb. Cooper Willyams was born in Essex in 1762. A topographer and artist, he was appointed as a chaplain. He spent his early years at sea. On May 24, 1798, he served as a chaplain of the ship, the Swiftsure. He served in the battle of the Nile, and his journal A Voyage up the Mediterranean in the Swiftsure, is the most authentic account of the battle (Courtney).

He described his visit to Palermo:

Lord and lady accompanied him on Easter Sunday to the Capuchin monastery. After viewing the chapel and upper apartments, we descended into the subterranean cemetery of the dead, much larger, and therefore more extraordinary than that I visited near Syracuse. It is in the form of a cloister; on each side of the alleys are niches for the dried monks. The number of them amounted, I was informed, to no less that five thousand bodies; some of which had been dead near two centuries. In a separate chapel or aisle, were the bodies of the nobility and gentry who from pious motives chose to be placed in this curious preservtaory. Among the rest, the capuchin our ciceroni showed us the body of a Moorish prince, who had abjured his native religion and embraced the Christian
faith, he, of course was a sort of demi-saint. Some of the bodies in this place were dressed in their gala suits; others were habited in the monastic cowl. Our conductor took from a small coffin the remains of a young prince dressed in the fashion of his day and presented it to the ladies as a toyman in London would have shown a doll. Unfortunately the young gentleman, perhaps from too rough treatment at other times, dropped his head, which fell forwards, to the no small alarm of his fair visitors. The monk then showed us a door of the oven in which these bodies were dried, and would fain have invited the ladies to see the process; but on entering it they hastily retired: and well they might, for the first object that faulted their eyes was the body of a fat officer, who had died only the day before in a fit of apoplexy as he was on duty at the mole. I wished to know something of the process, but could not understand it: the body was extended on a low stove, and covered with a sheet, seemingly preparatory to the operation. When the body is properly prepared the door of the oven is carefully closed so as to admit none of the external air. After remaining six months in this place, it is sufficiently dried to be placed in the niche or coffin as required; the skin then appears dry, shrunken, and hard, apparently of the substance of tanned leather.6

Willyams account is the only documented journal in which a woman has visited the catacomb in that particular era. This could be because many of the men who wrote about the catacomb traveled by ship with other naval men. The friars who offered visitors a tour of the catacombs seemed to have very diverse personalities. It seems that this particular brother was trying to frighten the women by handing them the deceased child. From Willyams’ description the brother who guided them seems sinister.

John Strang was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1795 and died in 1863. He studied French and German and had great literary skills (Bayne). In 1817 he visited numerous catacombs, burial grounds, and sepultures in France and Italy. He wanted to reach out to the public of Glasgow and the Members of Merchants’ House of Glasgow to improve Scottish churchyards and cemeteries. His goal was to research the funeral and burial customs of Europe and compare them to Scotland. He was disappointed in status.

6 (Willyams 1802, 176-177)
Scotland’s sepultures. He felt improvement was necessary for Scottish practices and that the dead deserved greater reverence.

His dream was to convert Fir Park into a beautiful garden cemetery. Fir Park was established in 1650 by the Merchants’ House, which had purchased the land (The Friends of Glasgow Necropolis History). Strang’s hope was to, “be respectful to the dead, safe and sanitary to the living, dedicated to the Genius of Memory and to extend religious and moral feeling.” (Strang 1831, 6). Strang’s published work, *Necropolis Glasguensis with Observations on Ancient and Modern Tombs and Sepulture*, offered a desperate plea for the Merchants’ House to create a bountiful necropolis in which stipends were made to preserve and respect the memory of the dead.

His writing was well-received and his mission was fulfilled. The Merchants’ House asked architect David Hamilton, Stuart Murray (Curator of the Botanical Gardens), and James Clelland (Superintendent of Public Works) to produce a feasibility study for forming the Glasgow Necropolis and in 1828 the committee of Directors of Lands and Quarries agreed to the proposal (The Friends of Glasgow Necropolis History). The first burial in the cemetery took place in 1832. Now the Necropolis holds 50,000 burials and 3,500 tombs.

Strang wrote about the general attitude of how the Scottish people perceived catacombs and underground crypts that reside in churches. He explained how disgusting and unsanitary they were and that the Scottish people would not be honored by having such a thing exist in Glasgow. He described his visit with antipathy and in an apprehensive tone:

*Amid such dank and lugubrious receptacles of the departed, there is nothing with which the warm bosom of the living can sympathize. There, the recollection of*
the entombed relative or friend, is associated not with the peaceful repose and the
toughing beauties of nature, but with the frightful horrors of the charnel-house
and the cold productions of art. The new Catacombs of the Capuchin Covent of
Palermo are divided into two broad and vast galleries, in the walls of which are
niches filled with the dead, clothed in the dress, which they wore during life.
The bodies of Princes and Barons here stand in splendid cases, many of which
display ornaments of the richest kind: the nearest relative of the deceased holds
the keys of them.\(^7\)

He is unimpressed with the alleged image of immortality that the corpses of the
catacomb represented. After visiting the Capuchin Catacomb and several others in Rome
and Paris, Strang’s mantra is as follows: “I have once more escaped from the sepulcher.
Soon shalt thou return, thither, and there shalt thou remain forever!” (Strang 1831, 49).
The catacomb’s display of the dead made Strang fear his own mortality.

Nathaniel Parker Willis was an American author, poet, and editor that was born in
1806 and died in 1867 (Nathaniel Parker Willis). He worked with Edgar Allan Poe and
Henry Longfellow. He became the highest-paid magazine writer of his day (Nathaniel
Parker Willis). He spent the summer of 1832 on board a US Naval ship that was
traveling throughout the Mediterranean. The ship was guided by Commodore Patterson
who was a virtuoso of Mediterranean travel and a remarkable historian. Willis described
him as an enlightened and enterprising traveler who was the best of advisers and the best
and kindest of guides (Willis 1853, 283).

On June 25, 1832, Nathaniel Willis arrived at the port of Palermo. Captivated by
the city, he wrote about how alive the harbor was and the many distinguished creatures
to be seen. He proclaimed that the whole air of Palermo seemed different from any other
town upon the continent, claiming, “the peculiarities are said to be Saracenic, and

\(^7\) (Strang 1831, 50-51).
inscriptions in Arabic are still found upon the ancient buildings.” (Willis 1853, 46). At the time of his visit he encountered two or three hundred vagrant men, women, and children, laying outside half naked begging for food and money. Palermo was both wealthy and impoverished. Willis and several American Navel men were guided through the streets in a carriage. Their escort pointed out the faces of nobility as they passed them in their carriages. Willis describes them as follows:

They were named to us by their imposing titles as they passed, and we looked in vain into their dull unanimated faces for the chivalrous character of the once renowned knights of Sicily. Ladies and gentleman sat alike silent, leaning back in their carriages in the elegant attitudes studied to such effect on this side of the water, and gazing for acquaintances among those passing on the opposite line.8

On June 26, Willis and the naval men visited the Capuchin monastery. They were greeted by three or four brothers in long grey beards, and the heavy brown sackcloth cowls of the order ties round the waist with ropes (Willis 1853, 48). Willis heard travelers’ stories about the catacomb and was enthusiastic to see its subterranean treasures. His account of the necropolis is transcendent:

A more frightful scene never appalled the eye. The walls were lined with shallow niches, from which hung, leaning forward as if to fall upon the gazer, the dried bodies of monks in full dress of their order. Their hands were crossed upon their breasts or hung at their sides, their faces were blackened and withered, and every one seemed to have preserved, in diabolical caricature, the very expression of life. The looked more like living men cursed with some horrid plague, than the inanimate corpses they were. Below in three or four tiers, lay long boxes painted fantastically, and contains, the monk told us the remains of Sicilian nobles. Upon a long shelf above sat perhaps a hundred children from one year to five, in little chairs worn with their use while in life, dressed in the gayest manner, with fancifull caps upon their little blackened heads, dolls in their hands, and in one or two instances, a stuffed dog or parrot lying in their laps. One of them had his arm tied up, holding a child’s whip in the act of striking, while the poor thing’s head had rotted and wrapped upon its breast; and a leather cap fallen on one side, showed his bare skull, with the most comical expression of carelessness. We quite shocked the old monk with our

8 (Willis 1953, 47).
laughter, but the scene was irresistible. At the extremity of the last passage was a new vault appropriated to women. There were nine already lying on white pillows in the different recesses, who had died within the year, and among them a young girl, the daughter of a noble family of Palermo, stated in the inscription to have been a virgin of seventeen years. The monk said her twin-sister was the most beautiful woman of the city at this moment. She was laid upon her back, on a small shelf faced with a wire grating, dressed in white, with a large bouquet of artificial flowers on the centre of the body. Her hands and face were exposed, and the skin which seemed to me scarcely dry, was covered with small black ants. I struck with my stick against the shelf, and startled by the concussion, the disgusting vermin poured from the mouth and nostrils in hundreds. How difficult it is to believe that the beauty we worship must come to this!9

At the time of his visit there were an estimated three thousand bodies buried in the catacomb. The friars were always happy to give tours to paying travelers. Willis wrote about how some of the bodies were very ancient. In particular one monk from the early seventeenth century still had his tongue in his mouth. “The friar took hold of it, and moved it up and down, rattle it against his teeth” (Willis 1853, 49). The section built for women he described is the virgin vault, which was the last edition to the catacomb in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The friar explained that the *colatoio* did not have any deceased bodies for Willis to see during his visit. He told Willis that, “the stench, for a week or two was intolerable” (Willis 1853, 49). As they scuttered out the catacomb exit the body of an elderly women who had died that morning arrived at the convent by carriage. The men were scared and jittery from her grave repose.

Willis’s encounter with the Capuchin Catacomb is the most detailed experience of any travelers’ journey to the sepulcher. His writing is a profound historical narrative. Its no wonder that he worked with Edgar Allen Poe, as his writing is darkly poetic.

9 (Willis 1853, 49)
George Russell and M. Fromm traveled to Sicily in 1815 with plans of visiting the temples and other Grecian antiquities (Russell 1815, 5). Their trip from Rome to Sicily was a treacherous odyssey. They encountered Neapolitan soldiers who had besieged the town of Civita Vecchia. They took the *Mary of Poole*, to Palermo that was occupied by one hundred and thirty people and a shipment of charcoal. Forced to stay in a small cabin with six other people for several days until being allowed to leave the ship when docked, they suffered the thirteen days the boat took to arrive at Palermo. They were mandated to be examined by health care personal two times at the *lazaretto* (hospital) when they arrived to the port (Russell 1815, 25). They were then brought in for questioning by the police. It appears that the previous plagues brought to Palermo by seamen had caused the city to be cautious of new visitors. Russell described his experience at the catacomb as follows:

The Capuchin convent or depository for the dead, wherein the fathers and brothers of the order, after their decease, are placed in rows, perfectly upright, their backs being supported against dwarf walls. In this *cimiterio* we beheld, horribly exemplified by the varied appearances of more than five hundred human bodies, the grim tyrant death in all his different stages of decay, from the most perfect human, although cold and lifeless form, to, literally speaking, the mere skeleton. The present establishment of the convent consists of nearly two hundred and fifty fathers and brothers.10

Russell mentioned the presence of an alter made of teeth arranged in a mosaic pattern much like the travelers who visited the catacomb after him. Russell documented that original brothers interred in the catacomb are labeled with their names and dates of death.

The *Festa of Santa Rosalia* is mentioned in his writing. He explains its origin and the duration of the feast at the time, five days. Although he was not in Sicily for the

10 (Russell 1815, 32-33)
celebration, he spoke with many natives and he transcribed astonishing details of the celebration:

The car upon this shrine is borne is decorated, or rather overloaded with ornaments of every species; it is drawn by fort mules, and filled with a considerable number of musicians. A grand display of fire-works here takes place.  

John Ross Browne was born in Ireland in 1821. He moved to America when he was thirteen years old and later became a reporter for the US Senate (J. Ross Browne). Browne was known for his writing and his animated illustrations. In 1851 Browne visited the Capuchin Catacomb and termed it “a place of great antiquity.” Browne emanates fear and wonder as he describes his encounters with the residents as follows:

Entering the ancient and ruinous court of the convent, I was conducted by a ghostly-looking monk through some dark passages to the subterranean apartments of the dead. It was my first visit to a place of this kind, but I must confess the sight was rather startling. I was struck with the wonderful variety and marked expression of character in the faces and forms around me. There were progressive dates of death, extending from remote centuries up to the present period the niches being arranged as to admit of a regular order of deposit. I sat down on a

11 (Russell 1815, 52)
box containing a dead child, and looked up at a row of bodies opposite that attracted my notice in a particular degree. In the middle stood a rollicking fellow, about two years dead, whose sunken eyes appeared still to burn with the fire of life and humor. His hands were lifted in a deprecating manor over a congregation of corpses sitting on a shelf below. Some appeared to be listening; some grinning at his humorous harangue; others with their heads together seemed to question the propriety of his anecdotes; old gentlemen, with knitted brows and lantern jaws; ranges of bodies stood on each side of him as if laughing, talking, praying, dying, suffering, listening, rejoicing, and feasting at the banquet of death. Turning away from this strange exhibition of death’s doings, I followed the old monk to the vaults allotted to the women. The bodies were not placed in an upright position like those of the men, but were laid out at full length in glass cases. It might be supposed that the air of the catacombs is in some degree affected by the fresh bodies; but this is not the case. There is no offensive odor, and the visitor would scarcely know, if he did not see them, that he was surrounded by the dead.

His imagination ran wild and he depicted the decedents as “staring at the intrusion, their skeleton fingers vibrated as if yearning to grasp the living in their embrace.” (Browne 1977, 20-21). He went on to describe that each body was labeled with their name and date of death. Only several of the catacombs decedents are labeled currently. Many of the bodies Browne saw were recently interred in the catacomb at the time of his visit. He scripted, “One little man dressed in a black dignity suit had the end of his nose eaten by worms; he must be a miser whose death was caused by starvation.” (Browne 1977, 22). Browne was spellbound by his experience. He conversed with one of the brothers in great detail. The monk disclosed that he slept in the catacomb. This notion shocked Browne. The monk explained that he wanted to be closer to God by surrounding himself with mortal remains and he was happy to rest with the dead. Browne analyzed his journey in great depth. He tells stories of what the corpses might

12 (Browne 1977, 20-27)
have done in their mortal lives. Browne is wildly imaginative and his experience is one of the most creative journeys documented.

John Murray of Albenarie Street of London became famous for his worldly travels. He embarked on his journeys throughout Europe as the railways branched out to many European countries in the mid-1800’s (Mister, 1993). He traveled to Sicily on four separate occasions: 1847, 1852, 1857, and in 1863 (Murray 1864, 2). His travel guides became a staple for English tourist in the 1900’s. Murray described a peculiar set of paintings hanging just above the staircase before entering the catacomb. “One represents the death of a good man surrounded by priests and angels; the other that of a sinner, whose last moments are embittered by visions of fiends and flames.” (Murray 1864, 108).

He mentioned that the catacombs residents should not be considered mummies because they contained a sense of vitally and character. Like many other visitors of the catacomb, Murray noted that the decedents appeared as though they could speak with the living. Their faces and posture seemed so lifelike that they could be mistaken for being asleep (Murray, 1864).

He described the subterranean niches as a gallery. Murray explained what visitors had in store for them upon their arrival to the catacomb by declaring, “Few will behold it for the first time without strong feelings of disgust at this degrading caricature of Death”. (Murray 1864, 108-109). When Murray visited the Capuchin Catacomb it had a sense of chaos and was surrounded by people. It was explained to Murray that the decedent’s families changed the body’s clothing every year. This practice is no longer allowed in the catacomb and many of the residents bloodlines have long since died or moved away.
from the area. Murray viewed the catacomb as an attraction more than a spiritual epiphany.

William Henry Davenport Adams was an English writer and journalist born in 1828. Adams described the catacomb in a fashion similar to Murray’s recollection. He portrayed the corridors of niches in a way that resemble galleries which one would think statues should be housed in (Adams 1886, 136-137). The catacomb evoked mixed emotions for him. He stated that an overwhelming sense of melancholy, terror, and disgust stuck him as he perused through the catacomb’s corridors. Adams referred to the drying room that contained the *colatoio* as, “the Oven, which is the place where the corpses are dried before they were placed in the niches.” (Adams 1886, 136-137). Next to the drying room at the end of the hallway sat an altar. Adams described it as a “a mosaic composed of fragments of bone.” (Adams 1886, 136-137). Adams only mention of a specific resident in the catacomb is the king of Tunis, who died in 1620. He described how richly attired and how illustrious he was (Adams 1886, 136-127). He was referring to the king’s son. This a mistake many travelers made in their documentation of the catacomb. Adams did not elaborate in length as well as his fellow English travelers did. During his travels he spent a great deal of time visiting the catacombs of Rome which he seemed to have preferred over the Capuchin Catacomb of Palermo.

Palermo was indeed then as it is now a melancholy place filled with unimaginable beauty and tragedy. The historic documentation scripted by these travelers is marvelous. Unknowingly, they have preserved the Capuchin Catacomb’s legacy. Through their memoirs one can envision how truly sacred and progressive the ancient subterranean city of the living dead once was.
“Sicily is a paradise populated by demons,” remarked Alexandre Dumas. As my journey began, these words resonated in my head. We had flown all night and day. It took nineteen hours and three planes but we had finally arrived in Palermo. The airport was tiny and wedged between two breathtaking mountains. We waited and waited for our bags. When I asked the airport attendant where our luggage was he glared, laughed, and walked away. I felt a cloud of anguish sweep over me. I only knew a few Italian phrases and “where are our bags?” was not one of them. What have we gotten ourselves into? After an hour of hyperventilating I noticed a backroom with a metal detector. Our prayers had been answered. Our bags were laying on the ground. We picked them up and off we went.

Our taxi driver spoke English, which was a relief because no one in the airport seemed to understand us. She asked why we were visiting the city and I replied, “to see the Capuchin Catacomb.” She grew very quiet and we continued our journey in awkward silence. Traffic was comparable to the mid-town tunnel on any given weekend. The road was narrow and rocky. She drove the silver minivan like she was Mario Andretti. She tried to charge us 30 Euros, double the fare of what a cab ride should be to our hotel. Haggling is a Buckland family tradition. My fiancé quickly grabbed our luggage out of the back of the van while the driver and I argued over the fare. I gave her about 15 Euros and we quickly walked away. When we glanced back she looked extremely displeased.
and irritated. I thought she set us up to be robbed. We scoured the area in a panic looking for the street sign.

Our hotel was hidden down a narrow one-way street called Porta Felice. We dragged our feet and luggage down the alleyway passing by some menacing characters sitting outside. Clothes were hanging form the balconies and the smell of urine scorched my nostrils. I could not tell if it was human or animal. Trash lined the sidewalk and its stench was foul. Thankfully the Trip Advisor website did not steer us wrong about our hotel. The Hotel Porta Felice was exquisite. It had a decadent staircase and entryway ensconced in marble and brass. A rough looking maintenance man who had a scowl plastered to his face escorted us to our room. As we reached the doorway I could feel the air-conditioning blowing at full capacity. I had never been so grateful. It was over 100 degrees outside and we were drenched in sweat. We slept clear through the afternoon and night.

Our guide was scheduled to meet us bright and early in the morning. I searched for over a month to find someone who was available and had knowledge of the catacomb prior to our trip. August is not a good time to visit Sicily. Most Sicilians take this month off for vacation. August is also a holy month for Sicilian monasteries. This information was not relayed to me until I started looking for a guide and after I had booked our non-refundable flight. Our guide was a native of Palermo. She had studied history in New York and has written several guidebooks about Sicily. She said that she had arranged for me to meet with one of the brothers from the Capuchin convent. We waited two hours for her until she made an appearance. She quickly apologized and told us that her train was late. Apparently timeliness is not transcontinental. We started our adventure to the
catacomb irritated by our guide’s unprofessional demeanor. We took three buses and walked several blocks but finally we had arrived at the sacred destination. The exterior of the church was surprisingly modest. It looked like an apartment complex from the seventies. With old brown grimy paint and bars in the windows. The church doors were sealed when we arrived.

(The Capuchin Order of the Friars Minor Church Santa Maria della Pace)

The entrance to the catacomb is located on the side of the church. We entered the tiny room and encountered the keeper of the catacomb, Francesco. He started off as a souvenir clerk fifteen years ago and now oversees the entire catacomb. Our guide explained that although there are large warning signs plastered on every wall of the catacomb that state, “No Film, No Fotografia,” but if we gave Francesco 20 € on top of our 3 € fee each that we would be able to film our experience, as long as we did not make it obvious to the other patrons. I discreetly slipped him 20 € and we walked down the
musky staircase. Money certainly talks in this town! It turned out that even though we supposedly had arrangements to meet with one of the brothers no one was available to speak with us. This came as no surprise due to the way things were going with our guide’s track record. There are currently fifteen to twenty Capuchin monks that live in the covenant and none of them speak English. Our guide had confessed that she did not like giving catacomb tours and her fear grew as we reached the massive burial grounds.

Our guide, Concheta, explained that the Capuchin order of Palermo’s mission was to take care of the impoverished, sick, and the dead. They now take care of the spiritually sick. It is a mystery of how this order mastered the mummification process. Some say it was the atmosphere of the catacomb. With its moisture-free cool climate it has all of the perfect characteristics for mummification.

 Darkness, anticipation and a sickly sweet smell filled my head as I entered the catacomb. It was delightfully surreal. Nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to see. This place is an embalmer’s dream come true. My eyes first laid sight on what was resting below the clear plexiglass floor. An intricately carved marble grave lay beneath my feet scripted in Sicilian with a skull and cross bones. There was no date on the marker. Our guide estimated the interment to be the early eighteen hundreds due to the specific dialect. The deceased that lay beneath the marker was some type of royalty. She was able to make out the word baron. To my left suspended from a putrefied concrete niche is one of the first Capuchin friars to be placed in the catacomb, brother Silvestro of Gubbio (1599). His body is latched to the wall with rusted wire. He is a remarkable sight to see. His features have a grim sense of sarcasm, his mouth has a distended smile and his flesh is extraordinarily preserved. His vestments are made of a
simple cowl and his body has been stuffed with straw to give him a lifelike appearance. His hands are perfectly mummified, even his fingernails are intact. I stood in amazement staring at brother Silvestro only to be pushed out of the way by a German couple. I heard the woman heave and I quickly moved out of her way.

(Friar Silvestro of Gubbio, 1599)

Next to Silvestro laying on several pillars is a series of nameless skulls. Brother Silvestro is one of the only residents in the catacomb that is labeled. The Capuchin archives are sparse. The convent and the catacomb were severely affected by bombings in World War II and a horrific fire in 1966. Many of the church’s sacred documents along with sections of the catacomb were destroyed. The first hallway is lined with Capuchin friars. The ancient walls are corroded and laden with cement patchwork. These poor corpses have seen better days. One friar’s skull is completely disintegrated.
His body is barley held together by a series of wires and the rope that hangs around his decomposing vertebrae. This corridor is brimming with corpses. As we looked up a wooden casket ensconced with golden handles and intricate carvings dangled above our heads. The friar’s hollow eyes are empty and cold. They seem to follow us as we departed from them. Fake metal flowers were haphazardly placed next to one of the brothers. They clearly did not belong with them. Closterphobia began to set in and I quickly sped up to catch our guide who was walking very fast down the corridor.

We quickly turned right into the professional’s corridor. We encountered an artist who had been bathed in arsenic. His brown matted hair and pencil mustache are still intact. His skin looks fake; it is ghastly white and porous. His body is stuffed with straw like many of the catacomb’s residents. His neighbor is marvelously preserved as well. We reflected on what these men were like in life. A clamorous voice blared through the loudspeaker. Francesco, the catacomb keeper was speaking Italian. Apparently we were
being too obvious with our video camera and some of the other visitors were starting to take pictures of the corpses. I turned the camera off and Concheta walked upstairs to speak with Francesco. We walked through the corridor in blackness because Francesco had turned the lights off to prevent us from filming. At the end of the hallway a skeletalized uniformed soldier lays in his casket stacked on top of another soldier. His once pristine uniform is now in tatters.
At the end of the priest corridor is the only intact drying room. The drying room contains the *colatoio*. Neon green stains surround the entire area where the *colatoio* is located. Most of the terracotta pipes are missing from the device. Concheta explained that the brothers solely maintain the upkeep of the catacomb. Through the years the friars have re-cataloged and reorganized the corpses. Many of the artifacts placed in the corridors do not belong to the corpses residing in those areas.

Our guide stated that many of the caskets placed on the floor were from Bourbon times because they bared the emblem, life, death, and miracles. This is a common statement of tombstones in Sicily in the era before the National Unification of Italy. On the way to see Rosalia Lombardo, we passed through the virgin vault. This is the newest section of the catacomb. Unfortunately it was nearly destroyed from bombings during World War II. The words “Seguono L’Agnello Odvunque Vada, Sono Vergini” are painted on the wall along with an immense black cross. This translates to, “they follow
the lamb where he goes, they are virgins.” In this section lay twenty female virgins. All of them are adorned in white with headdresses. There is only one casket residing in the vault. She was a noble girl who died in 1866. That was the only information our guide could make out on her marker.

A luminous beam gazed upon us while walking to see Rosalia Lombardo. The corridor she is interred in has two large windows. Concheta named one of the corpses next to the window “the scream” after Edward Munch’s painting. His resemblance to the subject is uncanny. In the middle of the corridor is Palermo’s sleeping beauty, Rosalia Lombardo. She looked more incredible than I had imagined. Her body is placed in a specialized nitrogen filled capsule. She was just recently moved to this area within the past year. It is extremely difficult to see Rosalia in great detail through the circular glass capsule. She looks like a living doll. Her blonde curls are still perfectly preserved. Her casket has an embossed golden cross adorning the area that covers her head. Her clothing is still intact and free from corrosion. Her face looks much more tanned than the picture I had seen of her in the magazine. Our time with Rosalia was cut short as a crowd of people swarmed around her.
While we exited Rosalia’s corridor an amazing spectacle unfolded before my eyes. A woman in a glass casket looked as if she was trying to escape her tomb. Her
head is perched against the glass casket and her body looks like it’s lurching forward. I can see why there are so many accounts of visitors claiming to have spoken to the dead down here.

Some of the shelves are in dire need of repair. Several shelves have collapsed and the bodies have fallen on each other. Metal grates encase many of the residents. It looks like they have been untouched for years. We entered the women’s section. Beauty has vanquished from their faces. They are but mere skeletons and decomposing cloth. Their features are hideous and unappealing. Along with many of the women are young children who have been dipped in arsenic. All of them are wearing bonnets. Many of these bodies are buried with flowers (artificial) and steel crowns.
The last section we sauntered through had ancient biblical verses on the wall pertaining to the souls’ protection in the afterlife. A mummified man draped in a hardened cloth looked as though he was floating on the wall. Several of the bodies in this
section were damaged by the fire of 1966. This section also contains entire families.

Concheta named one of the corpses, “Planet of the Apes.” I have no clue why she called him that but it was good to see she was starting to relax.
To the left is a corridor draped with caution tape. This is the first section of the catacomb that was created in 1599. The remains of the original forty mummified friars are supposed to be resting here. The floor had collapsed underneath the plexiglass. No lights adorned the hallway. I leaned over the tape to take a glimpse. Hundreds of skulls rested on limestone shelves. They are haphazardly arranged by size. It was extremely hard to make out any recognizable form within the corridor. The area is very small, probably eight feet long and ten feet wide. This sacred holy place seems unholy to me. I have attended many funeral masses throughout my career in funeral service. The message that was explained to me was the dead must be buried whole. This display of nameless skulls without carcasses seems sacrilegious.

The catacomb was closing for lunch. I glimpsed into an open room that was once used in the mummification process. Corroded caskets were stacked to the ceiling. The caskets have white mold and rotted iron on them. I hope whoever placed them in there had their tetanus shot because they look riddled with bacteria. We thanked Francesco and exited the catacomb. I felt grateful for simply being alive. Being surround by death makes you truly appreciate life. The cemetery was open so we quickly took a look around. The sun was excruciating hot and we had not eaten all day. Dehydration was starting to set in but we traveled on. Beautiful marble mausoleums surrounded the entire cemetery which was surprising small. Many of the monuments have frescos adorning them which had been weather damaged. We visited the grave of Giuseppe Tomasi, who once the prince of Lampedusa. He wrote *The Leopard*, which is considered one of the most important novels in historic Italian literature.
Our journey to the catacomb was one of the most incredible experiences of my life. The question came to my mind, how peaceful could death be for these people? Did they ever fathom how many sets of eyes would gaze upon their lifeless bodies? I felt guilty for being so fascinated with the residents of the catacomb. These were all once living beings even if they are currently considered historical artifacts.
Chapter 5

How to Make a Mummy: The Preservation Techniques

Used in the Capuchin Catacomb

The word “mummy” is derived from the Arabic word of Persian origin for wax or bitumen (Pearson 1999, 56). Mummification occurs when some circumstances inhibits the decomposition process is inhibited. There are two categories of mummies: spontaneous and anthropogenic. Spontaneous mummification takes place when bodies are exposed to extreme environmental conditions such as aridity, cold, and heat (Panzer, Zink, and Piombino-Mascali). Anthropogenic mummification occurs when the body has been intentionally preserved by human interaction. When the conversation of mummification arises most people identify anthropogenic mummification with the Egyptians. Egyptians believed that the human spirit remained eternally connected to the viability of the body (Why did ancient Egyptians believe it was necessary to mummify their dead?). They also believed that after death the soul departed from the corpse, and after burial, soul returned to the body. Therefore, the body must be preserved in order for the soul to return to its rightful owner. Mortal preservation became an essential element to achieve immortality in the afterlife and, thus, Egyptians went to great measures to preserve. The Egyptian mummification process did not transpire by accident.

The history of the catacomb mummification developed as a much different practice than those of Egypt. The Capuchin friars of Palermo buried their brethren in a mass grave beside the church. The Constitutions of Albacina, the Capuchins sacred document, forbade initial burial on holy ground. After a period of time the brothers
exhumed the dead friars to commence the ritual of final burial. To the Capuchins, the
disinterment brought forth a divine intervention from God. Forty-five of the Capuchin
monks exhumed in 1599 were perfectly preserved. The actual number of friars buried in
the mass grave is undocumented. The Capuchins’ intent was to bury the friars’ skeletal
remains beneath the altar of their church, Santa Maria Della Pace.

Sicily’s soil and dry climate facilitated in the spontaneous mummification of the
forty-five friars. The Capuchins dug a subterranean sepulture to display the friars’
corpses. To the Capuchins, the mummified brothers offered proof of direct intervention
from the heavens. Word began to spread throughout the city of Palermo that the
Capuchins had devised a mysterious method to preserve the dead. Soon many within the
entire province of Palermo, including many international aristocrats, wanted to be
mummified by the friars and spend eternity in the Capuchin necropolis. The catacomb
mummies are preserved in three different manners: *colatoio*, arsenic, and arterial
embalming.

The *colatoio* is a specialized preservation device commonly known as the strainer.
In other regions of Southern Italy this structure is called the *cantarella, colatoi*, or
*scolatoi*. The terms are derived from the Latin word *colum* (drain) (Piombino-Mascali,
Maxiner, Marvelli, Panzer, Aufderheide, 341-352). These devices were mainly found in
Southern Italy. The *colatoio* is designed for the desiccation-liberation of the bones
through the down-flow of cadaveric liquids (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini). There are two
types of *colatoios*: one is a niche designed for sitting and the other a horizontal bed
designed on which the body is laid upon. In both instance, the purpose of the *colatoios*
was to de-flesh the corpse.
In Southern Italy the bodies would rest in niches along long rows of sitting colatoios (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini). Sitting colatoios existed in subterranean crypts typically under the floors of churches. The deceased were placed in a seated position in a specialized niche with a hole located at the bottom (colatoio). All of the putrefaction liquids would then collect inside the hole connected to a drainage canal (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini). After the completion of the decomposition process, they would transfer skeletal remains to an ossuary. Almost every catacomb in Southern Italy has an ossuary for this process. However the skull, the symbol of the deceased’s individuality, was placed on a shelf and displayed near an alter in the church (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini). The entire de-fleshing process took anywhere form several months to a year.

The horizontal colatoio occupied in a small “drying” room (4 meters x 5 meters) comprised of limestone and tuffaceous rock. This specific type of colatoio was used by the Capuchins of Palermo. In fact, 50 percent of the horizontal colatoios were used by
Capuchins, 31 percent used by Confraternities, and 19 percent used by priests, all of these horizontal drainers resided in Sicily (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini). The drying room allowed for six to eight bodies at a time to temporarily reside on the colatoio. Corpses were splayed out across a continuous horizontal grate comprised of terracotta or wooden pipes approximately ten centimeters wide. The deceased would first be undressed and placed on the colatoio. As the body rested on the grill of the colatoio, it slowly lost its putrefaction liquids through the skin (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini). Initially, the room containing the colatoio was left open without closure. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the practice changed as drying rooms were sealed. It was said this process took place because the “stench caused the ladies of Palermo to faint” (Lanza and Facchi 2000, 9). This ensured that the desiccation would be viable. The colatoio was sealed for eight – twelve months. Air circulation was allowed through a small window located in the chamber. The names of the deceased, were written on the outer door along with a date so the friars could track the process. The conditions that promoted the excellent mummification of the corpses in the catacomb were low humidity, cool temperatures, and good ventilation from perpetually opening windows (Panzer, Zink, and Piombino-Mascali).

There was a drainpipe connected to the bottom of the colatoio, which had a basin to collect the putrefied liquids (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini). Drainage also took place between the walls of the colatoio and the corridors. Sometimes the friars would lay the bodies in the sun and anoint them with scented oils before they were displayed in their niche (Lanza and Facchi 2000, 9). The Capuchins cultivated their own mummification process throughout the years. Sometimes they dusted the bodies with chalk and arsenic...
before displaying them in the catacomb corridors (Wieczorek and Rosendahl 2010, 157). Due to the limestone deposits in the drying room and the dusting process the corpse would have ghastly white tinge to their flesh when the process was completed.

    After the mummification stage the bodies were exposed to air, cleaned with vinegar, dressed, and then placed into coffins or wall niches (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). Some of the mummies who were distorted from the drying process were stuffed with straw and bay leaves to fill out their shape. Due to the sacred nature of this process in the church, only the Capuchin brothers were allowed to perform the mummification process. On November 2, All Souls’ Day, relatives of the deceased and the community had free access to the subterranean necropolis and were able to assist in funerary ceremonies (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini). Relatives were expected to change the corpses’ clothing periodically but mainly this ceremony happened on All Souls’ Day. Family members sometimes anointed the corpses with oils and brought flowers to show reverence for the dead.

    The Capuchin order earned prestige for their preservation techniques. Mummification became extremely popular in mid-seventeenth century. Lay people were eventually allowed the privilege of admittance the catacomb and their corpses to be preserved in the colatoio. Stipends were made to the church in exchange for their immortality and or course the purification of their souls. One of the first documented members of nobility interred in the catacomb was in 1622. It was Ayala, the son of the King of Tunisia, who had converted to Catholicism and took the name Filippo d’Austria (Koudounaris 2011, 53). Eventually laypeople outnumbered, the friars buried in the catacomb. The Capuchins made significant money selling niches (Koudounaris, 2011,
They were able to purchase beautiful paintings and sculptures which decorated the walls of the crypt. Prospective occupants of the catacomb would periodically drop in and test the niches to ensure that they fit in the space before purchasing the burial site.

Mummification in the colatoio was practiced for several reasons. It controlled the decomposition process of the deceased. It was also considered a right of passage in which the soul of the deceased was prayed for during the intermediate period in which the corpse was freed from putrefaction. The Capuchins believed the preservation of their brethren to be an act of God and they were very proud to display the friars in such a manner that was proof of the divinity.

Sicily was ravaged by numerous plagues in 1582, 1624, 1675, and 1743. Palermo’s pestilence occurred because it was a major sea port. Sailors worldwide would come to shore, unknowingly spreading lethal diseases. When these occurrences struck, Palermo the Capuchins preformed a new form of preparation. To prevent the spread of pestilence, the friars dipped or bathed the bodies in a compound comprised of arsenic, zinc, and lime. Arsenic is a naturally occurring mineral found in soil, bedrock, and water (Arsenic). The name is derived from an Arabic word meaning “powder of the cave” (Bentley and Chasteen). The highly poisonous nature of arsenic compounds had been known for centuries. The colorless and tasteless compound, arsenious oxide (arsenic (III) oxide), also termed “arsenous oxide” and often simply “white arsenic” or arsenic, it was at one time employed as a rat poison. Due to the fact that it was easily available, it was also commonly used for criminal purposes (Bentley and Chasteen). The poison has been used throughout history for medical treatment as well as an anatomical preservation
method. The use of this substance for preservation of any kind is currently illegal in all countries and has been for sometime.

Dipping the body in arsenic yielded incredible preservation results and a remarkable appearance of the deceased. This process made the bodies extremely ridged. The strong chemicals had a better preservation result than the traditional drying process. The corpses preserved by the arsenic baths have most of their flesh and hair intact.

(Examples of Bodies Bathed in Arsenic)

Many of the catacomb’s residents were eviscerated and embalmed arterially with arsenic and mercury in the mid 1800’s. Cinnabar and red lead was used to color the embalming mixtures as dyes to make the deceased appear more lifelike (Wieczorek and Rosendahl 2010, 360). Professional embalmers and physicians of the time including
Giusseppe Tranchina, Placido Bugliarelli, Giambattista Gall, Gioacchino Romeo, and Filippo Parlatore performed the arterial embalming process. In the early 1900’s Alfredo Salafia became Palermo’s most famous embalmer. He embalmed Palermo’s celebrated sleeping beauty, Rosalia Lombardo.

Antonino Prestigiacomo (1844) was injected arterially with arsenic and mercury. He was said to be extraordinarily vain and a well-known womanizer. His wishes were to look as good in death as he did in life. His mummy contains glass eyes. Many of the dead were originally fitted with glass eyes in order to appear more lifelike, but they disappeared during World War II, because they were popular souvenirs for American GI’s (Koudounaris, 2011, 74).
The desiccation that occurred in the Capuchin Catacomb’s *colatoio* is reasoned through Robert Hertz’s theory of secondary burial. The practice of embalming became increasing popular in the nineteenth century. The use of the *colatoio* lessened as embalming practices were performed in funeral homes. Eventually, in 1880, the Italian government outlawed the drainage of bodily fluids in sepultures, directly pertaining to the *colatoio*. They deemed this practice an extreme health hazard and a violation of hygienic law. The catacomb transformed all but one of the *colatoio* into ossuaries to store decaying caskets. The *colatoio* can been seen through a crosslink metal gate in the professional’s corridor of the catacomb.

(The Last Remaining *Colatoio* in the Capuchin Catacomb)
The methods used to preserve the Capuchin Catacombs residents evolved throughout the centuries. Initially the preservation of the dead took place by accident. At the end of the twentieth century preservation became not only intentional but was performed to display social status. The Capuchins were innovators of the mummification process. The proof of their talents lies in the ancient remains of the Capuchin Catacomb.
Chapter 6
Secondary Burial: The Death Ritual

Robert Hertz was born into a wealthy Jewish family near Paris on June 22, 1881. Known for his ingenious work in the field of anthropology, Hertz was a recognized social activist of his time. He is also acknowledged for his work in the fields of sociology and psychology. Recently, his theories have been applied to grief and bereavement studies. Anthropological studies of death worldwide have supported Hertz’s theory and his work currently stands as a basic historical and key theoretical reference point for sociological work on death (Davies 2000, 97). Hertz was nineteen when he joined the Année Sociologique group that included leading sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, and Maurice Halbwachs (Death and Dying). The group used a capacious extent of diverse theories to analyze behavior instead of accumulating and documenting cultural facts. Hertz wrote about collective representations to explain how values are related to concrete individuals (Death and Dying). Rodney and Claudia Needham were the first to translate Hertz’s work from French to English in 1960. Anthropologist Robert Parkin interpreted Hertz’s work in 1996 in his insightful anthology, The Dark Side of Humanity. After the initial translation, Hertz’s theories were finally recognized as great contributions to the field of anthropology and sociology. Hertz was a scholar, soldier, and a innovator in the field of sociological religion. Tragically, he died in World War I on April 13, 1915. However, his work was remarkably ahead of its time. Hertz made profound connections between the living and
the dead, which are exceedingly relevant in the field of funeral service. His analysis of final burial or second burial rites is displayed in the Capuchin Catacomb.

Hertz studied primitive tribes and researched the Dayak peoples of Kalimantan, Borneo, Polynesia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Australia. Hertz used scientific analysis to dissect the emotional responses of death. He proposed a ritual known as secondary burial (final disposition). This is where the corpse, the soul, and the mourners go through a process simultaneously assuring the funeral ritual is completed correctly.

He delved into three stages: the physical death including the temporary internment of the body, the intermediate period, and the final or second burial. The living must outwardly display signs of mourning. One must express sorrow for a certain period of time, change the color of their clothes, and modify the pattern of their usual life (Hertz 1960, 27). The response of society’s loss of a loved one and the progression as mourners sought to cope is another point that he examined. Hertz sedulously investigated the concept of death and the practice of a double burial. In Hertz’s observations as soon as the death occurred there was a period of temporary burial. The deceased was stored in one’s home until the final burial took place. The Dutch government forbade this practice for hygienic reasons (Borneo was under British and Dutch control during the mid-19th century). This prohibition is similar to the Italian government outlawing burial in the catacomb due to unsanitary conditions.

During the intermediate phase, the deceased, was placed into a coffin and all of the cracks were sealed with a resin (Hertz 1960, 29). The waiting period varied greatly among cultures, ranging anywhere from six months to two years. Many complicated sociological aspects deal with the grieving process of the living as well as the treatment
of the dead that are accompanied by the rites that occurred during the stages leading to second burial. Many of the tribes prepared elaborate funerary feasts during this time (Hertz 1960, 31). The corpse has to have all of its flesh desiccated and only bone can remain in order to fulfill the funerary rites of passage. The funeral feast represents a component of the extensive ritual known as the *tiwah* in Indonesia. The putrefaction of the corpse is compared to ‘the petrifying thunderbolt’ because it too threatens with sudden death the members of the house, whom it strikes (Hertz 1960, 32). The sealed coffin contains the evil spirits that are housed in the corpse. These spirits are associated with the decomposition process that encompasses foul odors and harmful leakage from the body. Hertz coined the term of the decomposing corpse’s purification stage as the mortuary infection. In Bali the casketed body is kept in the house for weeks before the cremation occurs: the coffin is pierced at the bottom ‘to permit the escape of the liquids, which are gathered in a basin that is emptied every day with great ceremony’ (Hertz 1960, 33). In Borneo the putrefied liquids are collected and mixed with rice, which is eaten by the family of the deceased during the mourning period (Hertz 1960, 33).

The process in which the body decomposes symbolizes the grave importance to the funeral ritual. It directly relates to the soul’s journey. Without the final burial rite the deceased and their living family members are subject to a magnitude of evil.

Mummification, which accidently happens during the temporary disposal of the body or first burial, becomes a means of secondary burial. Mummification occurs during this stage due to the composition of the soil and external elements. Embalming is considered to be the completion of the intermediate phase as well. Even though the body is not brought to skeletal remains in these two instances, it is free of decay and in a permanent
state. The Capuchins believed this to be true as well and after a period of time (intermediate process) the body was displayed in the catacomb or placed in its final resting area.

It is the belief that since the body is not taken at once to its ‘last resting-place’ the soul does not reach its final destination immediately after death (Hertz 1960, 34). The soul undergoes a waiting period where it hovers over its body and sojourns familiar places. While the soul is lingering it is considered a danger to the living. Death has given it the power to inflict disease on the survivors if they neglect to care and provide for it as they did in life (Parkin 1996, 87-99). When the rite of the second burial is practiced, the soul is allowed into the afterlife. During this period of time the soul is unwanted in world of the living and the land of the dead; it is in a state of unrest. Hertz cautioned that the complexity of these ideas and practices does not necessarily happen in this order or go through the entire process in every belief (Parkin 1996, 87-99).

The deceased relatives are obliged to care for their loved one during this process and devote large quantities of their lives and time to help the journey be successful. The bereaved are subjected to a set of prohibitions that constitute mourning process. The dead body can no longer be touched without danger; it is the object of horror and dread (Hertz 1960, 37). The idea that the recently deceased is viewed as an object of horror is also associated with their personal belongings and anyone they had been intimate with. All of the deceased’s possessions and memories must be exorcised. The waiting period is altered if the body is cremated. The cremation is viewed the same as the desiccation of the corpse and final burial is allowed to take place. In both instances the soul’s journey is
complete. When the body has been cremated the ashes must be collected carefully and placed into a funeral monument in the Indian ritual (Hertz 1960, 43).

Many diverse rituals are performed in cultures during the intermediate period. Some include endocannibalism (feasting on the corpse), mourning, and the temporary burial of the corpse. The final funeral service puts an end to the current state of anxiety and worry that the soul has been trapped in and it is introduced into the society of the dead (Hertz 1960, 58). This rite is not an easy journey. It is a grueling task that requires an incredible amount of sacrifice. The accompaniment of priests and healers must help guide the soul to the hereafter. The soul will reunite with its ancestors. If the living and the dead have too much intimate contact after this period it is said to be dangerous for the living (Hertz 1960, 61). Many stories have been told about family members visiting the catacomb and speaking with their departed loved ones. Accounts exist of the original forty-five friars who were first mummified having been seen walking the streets of Palermo at night on several occasions when the plague came to Sicily. Sicilians have a close relationship with the dead. They memorialize them and celebrate their lives.

During the final ceremony, an ossification of people’s memory of the deceased takes place (Vebrux 5-10). Secondary burial ends the grieving period for the living. The final ceremony brings the entire community together. The unification of the mourners and society is vital to the community’s social survival. Hertz contends that the final ceremony has three objectives: to give burial to the remains of the deceased, to ensure the soul peace and access to the land of the dead, and to free the living from the obligations of mourning (Parkin 1996, 87-99).
During the period of first burial the mourners, the corpse, and society are separated. This is true in the intermediate period as well. The final ceremony involves a complete unification. The soul is unified with its ancestors and mourners are reconnected to their normal life. In preparation for the second burial the skeletal remains are cleaned and purified. In the case of the Capuchin mummies the friars washed the corpse with vinegar, herbs, and salts then placed clean garments on the body. In primitive tribes there is an incorporation of purifying the deceased bones and purifying the mourners to be reintroduced back into society (Parkin 1996, 87-99). The purification takes place through ritual washing of both the dead and the living. The family of the deceased must also be freed of the contamination of the soul. They are released of the mourning process through complex rituals, which in some primitive tribes include bathing in the blood of a human sacrifice.

In every culture, the status of the deceased matters. Hertz explains that if a chief dies the fear of the power that his soul holds incites the entire village to be deserted for a period of time. At first, only the Capuchins were allowed burial in the catacomb; after a period of time they allowed the socially elite and wealthy to be buried. Eventually even the bourgeoisie were allowed to be interred in the subterranean crypt. If the deceased is buried immediately and there is no funeral ritual the mourners and the deceased will not be connected. There may be a concern for the soul’s salvation (Parkin 1996, 87-99).

Occasionally the intimate possessions of the deceased are destroyed, but there are also cases in which objects of the dead are kept as relics (Vebrux 5-10). The destruction of objects is symbolic of the decomposition process. Intimate possessions are considered elements of the deceased individual. Many of the mummies in the Capuchin catacomb
hold personal artifacts. These include symbolic possessions such as ornate crowns (symbol of virginity), special garments, ropes strung across the neck (sign of penitence), or religious vestments. The exploration of the significance of the deceased’s intimate possessions and how they are part of the concept of the person is analyzed by Eric Vebrux, thanatologist (Vebrux 5-10). Hertz stated that the condition of the corpse is a metaphor for the fate of the soul and the person’s non-mortal components (Vebrux, 5-10). The significance of the deceased’s personal belongings is a realm which involves the living as well as the dead. Changes in the treatment of the corpse and related material objects should have consequences on the perspective of death (Vebrux 5-10). This theory causes changes to occur in the funerary process that involves material objects. The mummies of the catacomb displayed cultural perception changes of death customs throughout the centuries. One instance is the newest resident of the catacomb, Rosalia Lombardo (1920). She holds a prayer card between her perfectly preserved fingertips. The first monk to be interred in the catacomb, Friar Silvestro da Gubbio (1599) is wrapped in cloth and stuffed with straw. He holds no possessions.

Hertz’s theory included the idea of social decay for the mourning family as well as for the deceased. They are viewed differently as the process evolves through different stages. The mourning relatives are thought of as being contaminated by society. This a pernicious status for the grieving family that is seen in every culture. Death is a subject that makes most people uncomfortable. When a death occurs, a certain stigma encompasses the community as people avoid the subject. European Protestants were revolted at the Catholics’ grand display of catacombs and bone monasteries. Protestant chroniclers unleashed a torrent of vitriol against the morbid displays found in
Catholic sanctuaries (Koudounaris 2011, 63). Catholicism wanted to maintain the strong significance that the deceased represents. The Protestants did not accept the relationships between the living and the dead.

The concept of second burial is detectable in Southern Italy. Death is seen as a “rupture that sanctions the beginning of a long transition from one ontological regime to another” (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). Death is also viewed as a “passage during which strong relations are established between the living and the dead and which end with the second burial which sanctions the definitive accreditation of the deceased in the afterlife with a changed status” (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). In Southern Italy the concept of these practices remains very much alive. The Italian people have a strong connection between the dead and the living.

The exhumation of remains and their definitive arrangements are in close metaphorical connection to the soul’s journey (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). Hertz hypothesized that Purgatory is the Catholic rendition of second burial. He stated:

The notion of Purgatory is actually a transposition in moral language of the notion of a phase that precedes final departure. The sufferings of the soul during the intermediate period first appear as a consequence of the transitory state in which the soul lies. At a later stage of the religious evolution, the pains of the soul are conceived as the continuation and necessary expiation of the sins it has committed during its terrestrial existence.13

A place of collective purification, halfway between sky and earth, where the sins are expiated because of the sufferings of the living in direct communication with their dead, offers a guarantee of reciprocity and exchange with the deceased (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). This explains the period in which the mourners feel and express an array of emotions such as guilt, fear, and anxiety for their departed family. The most

13 (Hertz, 1907)
dangerous stage of the soul’s journey is the period before the secondary burial. Once confirmation has been received in the Afterlife, the soul has to pay for the Purgatory and is intensely close to the living for the suffering it receives and for the work of intercession by which it repays the living (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). This is why the souls in Purgatory are a sacred reference point close to the living and objects of great devotion (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). Once secondary burial has been completed which results in the soul’s purification, the soul is able to make its final journey and this results in the disconnection of the deceased survivors’ mourning period. The connection between Hertz’s ideas and the concept of Purgatory is perceivable, especially in Sicilian funerary practices.

In the seventeenth century the Bourbon government protested against funerary practices being held in cemeteries in which merely dirt was used to cover the body. The sacred soil, known as the terrasante, is a series of shallow graves in which several inches of dirt covered the corpse. The terrasante was typically located underneath a public church. These graves were merely temporary burial grounds. They were resting places for the first burial of the deceased. The Supreme Magistrate of Health which was connected to the institution of supervising the hygienic conditions of Naples was interested in the rituals that took place in the terrasante (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). The body would be left in a shallow grave for a period of time in which the putrefaction of flesh would commence. The body would then be moved to either a grave or displayed in a catacomb. This practice was highly protested by the Magistrate of Health. On December 20, 1779, a group of doctors working for the Magistrate wrote the following:
Consider the great danger that is to be feared by that barbarous way of burying corpses, which is common in this city in the places usually named *terresante*. They are found in Churches, some underground and some level of the streets, where they usually have their openings. In many small parterres the corpses are buried in ditches, and then covered with earth at a depth of three to four inches. Sunday Mass is also said in these hypogea or *terresante*, with the participation of many people. After some months, the corpses are uncovered, some of them are thrown into the burials, and others placed as an ornament in some niches arranged around the *terresante* themselves, and here they are let to continue their putrefaction, and diffuse their lethal exhalations in the free air.\(^\text{14}\)

Many accounts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from doctors working for the Magistrate of Health stated that this practice was abusive. Doctors Gennaro Baretta and Gaetano Barba wrote about how dangerous the *terrasante* was because the skeletons have not been prepared by the skilled hand of a physician, but are corpses partly decayed, and consequently capable of exhaling odors that are bad for the health (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). The pair was disgusted by the ornamental display of skeletal remains in the churches of Sicily. The Sicilian display of skeletal remains commemorates and honors the dead. Just about every church in Sicily has at least one finger or skull exhibited as a healing relic. Doctors working for the Bourbon government aimed to abolish the practice of second burial but never succeeded.

The *terrasante* was where the initial stages of decomposition took place. After a period of time the corpse was moved from the *terrasante* to a *colatoio* (drainer) where the final stages of decomposition took place. When mummification occurred instead of the display of skeletal remains during the intermediate process, it was considered a sign of sanctity (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). In Southern Italy this process materialized because of the dry climate and high temperatures in the summer months. An

\(^{14}\) (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249)
ossuary was located in each terrasante. The drained fluids and flesh during the putrefaction process are placed in an ossuary and sealed. A scholar of the beginning of the twentieth century wrote about the traditions of the village of Oppido in the Basilicata region in which the priests of the village practiced a certain funeral rite (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249).

The priests had their own particular burial under the choir of the Mother Church, with wooden seats all around, with a holed bottom, on which the corpses were placed, seated and dressed in a cassock and cotta with a cap on the heads, and here they stayed until they were decomposed. The remaining bones were collected in the cemetery, which was a central hollow assigned to this use. 15

This and many other documentation of funeral rituals practiced in Catholic Europe, particularly in Italy, are a direct display of Hertz’s theory of secondary burial. The statistical data found in the geographic survey performed by Antonion Fornaciari, Valentina Giuffra, and Francesco Pezzini revealed that fifty Sicilian sites of various religious institutions used the sitting and horizontal colatoio in funerary rites (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). The draining of the bodies in the sitting colatoio was possibly viewed at a lower level than the mummification of bodies that the Capuchins performed in the horizontal colatoio.

The ritual of the second burial in the Capuchin Catacomb is displayed in stages. After a death occurs the Capuchins performed initial funerary rituals. When first established they buried their brethren in a pit next to their chapel Santa Maria Della Pace. After a period of time they exhumed them for secondary burial underneath the alter of the church. During the time in which the bodies of the brothers rested in the large burial mound their bodies were transformed. They became mummified in the soil. The

15 (Giannone, 1905, 151-152)
transformation of the bodies also transformed the friars’ souls. The Capuchins believe that once the mortal remains have relinquished from the body (flesh and bodily fluids) the remains are allowed in hallow grounds. According to Hertz, the period of transition when the body decayed acquainted the dead with two dimensions, that of the living and that of the dead (Fornaciari, Giuffra, Pezzini, 223-249). The mummification process halted the decay of mortal remains, which is the same concept of eliminating the corpse of its toxic residue so the soul could travel to the heavens. This process is performed through sacred rituals, which included the ceremonial washing of the remains and use of the colatoio. To this day, the Capuchin friars are the only ones allowed to tend to the mummies of the catacomb. The deceased was temporary interred in the colatoio for eight to twelve months. The chamber was closed to ensure that the desiccation of human flesh has occurred. During this period of time the grieving family prays for the soul of the deceased and is in a period of mourning. After the mummification process has been completed the body is displayed along the walls of the catacomb or placed into a casket resting on the floor of the crypt. The funeral rite of second burial is a practice that has been performed by the Capuchin friars of Palermo since their establishment in 1534.
Chapter 7

Alfredo Salafia’s Magic Embalming Fluid

Alfredo Salafia was born on November 7, 1869 in Palermo, Sicily, into a military family. A self-taught chemist and taxidermist, there is very little documentation of his early life. Although many writers refer to Salafia as doctor, he never completed medical school. Salafia studied under Dr. Tranchini of Naples (Bryant 2003, 538). Dr. Tranchini was a strong believer in preservation methods through the use arsenic, is an excellent body preservation compound but one that is extremely dangerous to handle. The use of arsenic in modern embalming is illegal due to its high degree of toxicity. Dr. Tranchini’s compound was one pound of dry arsenic dissolved into one gallon of alcoholic wine, which was injected into the cadaver by way of the femoral or carotid artery (Bryant 2003, 538). For years Salafia practiced on the remains of animals. He perfected his fluid on unclaimed bodies at the University of Palermo from 1892 to 1900 (Quigley 1963, 50-54). It is rumored that one his trial embalming subjects was his father, Filippo Salafia. After years of experimentation on indigents he went on to embalm a cardinal, his brother Ernesto Salafia, a senator, a count, many famous Sicilians and Americans.

Italian premier (prime minister) Francesco Crispi died in 1901. He was embalmed in Naples, Italy (Quigley 1963, 50-54). Apparently he was embalmed so poorly he had started to decompose rapidly before he could have a public viewing. His family commissioned Salafia so he could be viewed prior to his interment in the Pantheon in Palermo in January of 1905 (Quigley 1963, 50-54). Salafia transformed Crispi’s
appearance and the community was able to marvel at his repose. The coffin was opened in 1910 and it is said that his body was unchanged from his original viewing (Quigley 1963, 50-54).

Cardinal Michelangelo Celesia of Palermo died in April of 1904. Salafia had the honor of preparing his remains, which were viewed seven months after he had been embalmed (Quigley 1963, 5-54). Like so many other clergyman of that era, his tomb was reopened in 1909 for religious ceremonies. It was said that the cardinal was in perfect condition and some people believed that he was merely sleeping. Due to Salafia’s successful embalmings of these great men, the Italian ordinance that stated ten years were required between death and the burial of the remains within a church was waived (Williams, 2009).

Senator Giacomo Armo, Signora Maria Pareti, Cav. Salvatore Biondo, the Count of Francavilla were all very elite deceased members of society who gave Salafia his claim to fame (Quigley 1963, 50-54). Salafia was an ambitious man and in 1910 he took his secret formula and set of skills to New York. Accompanied by his nephews, Oreste Maggio and Achille Salomone, they opened a funeral home in New York, in January 1910. The type of facility they opened is known today as trade embalming center. The family was hired by local funeral directors to embalm their clients for a considerable fee. The Salafia family embalmed the departed for $300 per body at their facility (Williams, 2009). They offered their services at a discount of $150 for anyone who became a shareholder in their fluid company, called the Salafia Permanent Method Embalming Company of New York (Quigley 1963, 50-54). They even offered a $1000 money back guarantee. Whether any of Salafia’s clients took this offer up is undocumented.
The Eclectic Medical Institute was an American institution that practiced freedom in medical thought throughout its ninety-four year history (Haller 1999, 11-13). The concept of the college was to build a school based on plant medicines, maintenance of the body’s vital force, avoidance of depletive remedies, and the dual concepts of specific diagnosis and specific medication (Haller 1999, 11-13). The founders taught students to use milder medicine to cure patients. The school recruited three types of students: Those who truly believed in medical eclecticism, high risk students who could not succeed in other medical schools, and well-educated sons of Jewish immigrants who because of either exclusion or quota restrictions at other medical colleges chose the college as a back door into medicine (Haller 1999, 11-13). The medical establishment, including medical doctors, hospitals, and even the Medical Examiners Association, refused to take students who attended the school seriously due to the school’s obscure science and philosophy. Many alumni were refused internships. The entire Eclectic Medical School system closed due to it continuously failing to receive an “A” rating from the American Medical Associations Council on Medical Education (Haller 1999, 11-13). The New York campus closed in 1913.

In April 1910, Professor Salafia embalmed the unclaimed body of Joseph Flinch to display the effectiveness of his skills and closely guarded formula. The embalming took place at the Eclectic Medical College in New York. The school’s concept of alternative medicine was the perfect outlet for Salafia to demonstrate his unique preservation method. Flinch’s body was in an intermediate state of decomposition. He had black and green areas on his face, neck, torso, and limbs (Quigley 1963, 50-54). Fifteen gallons of Salafia’s fluid was injected into Flinch’s decomposing remains via the
right carotid artery (Quigley 1963, 50-54). He did not drain any of his blood. Which means in all likelihood Mr. Flinch’s body would have been extremely swollen and grossly bloated. In modern embalming four to seven gallons of fluid is sufficient to successfully embalm a decomposing body. Salafia’s non-drainage practice is still carried out when preserving cadavers for medical schools. The term is called “anatomical embalming.” Flinch’s body was not refrigerated but stored in a controlled environment. There was no elaboration in how he was stored but the conclusion can be drawn that he was stored in a wooden casket with a glass covering. Salafia used this practice with the majority of the decedents he embalmed.

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SESSION OF 1910 AND 1911
The session begins September 15, 1910, and continues 32 weeks.
There is a constant demand for Eclectic physicians, men and women who have faith in medicine. At this school we teach Eclectic Medicine, and consider the department of Materia Medica and Therapeutics one of the utmost importance.
The clinical and laboratory facilities of the school are unsurpassed.

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(Mundy Nelson M.D. 1910, 13)
(Advertisement located in the 1910 quarterly report for the Eclectic Medical College)
He manufactured his signature casket out of wood and glass and sealed it with wax so minimal oxygen encased the deceased. Colleges typically had to delay their dissecting labs until the winter months due to the cadavers decomposing so rapidly. Six months later Flinch’s body was dissected in an open forum of physicians, faculty members, and funeral directors at the college.

Frank E. Campbell attended the dissection (Quigley, 1963 50-54). This gentleman is one of the most famous funeral directors to ever hold a scalpel. His funeral home was named after himself like many businesses of that era. Frank E. Campbell was also one of the world’s most notorious, glamorous, illustrious funeral homes of all time and continues to live up to its reputation. Going to mortuary school in New York City I always dreamed about hanging my license on their wall and becoming a member of their embalming team. Every famous New Yorker and socialite that has departed has graced the Campbell chapel, from the rapper Notorious BIG to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

It was documented that after Flinch’s embalming the decomposition signs had nearly vanished (Quigley 1963, 50-54). One of the professors noted, “The body was well-preserved with the skin, firm, and moderately hard and dry. All tissue, including fat, was firm and dry. No odor of decomposition, or fecal odor, was present, only the chemical odor of the embalming fluid.” (Quigley 1963, 50-54). Salafia quickly became famous due to his miraculous preservation fluid. “The Salafia Method” was displayed once again in 1910 by Alfredo Salafia’s nephew, Achille Salomone, at the New York State Embalmers’ Association in Syracuse (Williams 2009). The method was performed on the decomposing indigent body of a man named Jenkins who weighed approximately 130 lbs. (Quigley 1963). It was said that Jenkins had a pretty severe case of
arteriosclerosis, the hardening of the arteries. This disease is a nightmare for embalmers as it causes plaque build up in the arteries. When an embalmer raises the arteries that need to be injected with fluid they snap and fray like a weak piece of rope. I have had several occasions when embalming fluid has erupted in my face because of a frail artery bursting during the injection process. Mr. Jenkins body was sealed in the Salafia signature casket, which had a glass top (Quigley, 1963). The body was dissected almost one year later. It was said that the areas that had been treated with the fluid were ridged and well preserved. The method was a public success once again.

In 1911 Salafia began to sell his embalming fluid to funeral homes for $18 per six-gallon case (Quigley, 1963 50-54). An estimated twenty-five American casket companies distributed Salafia’s enchanted fluid (Williams 2009). Chemical companies were very competitive and still are in the United States. This may have sparked Salafia’s decision to leave America. He stopped selling his fluid in 1912 and left New York for his
hometown Palermo, Sicily, to retire. There was no further evidence of Salafia’s embalming company continuing after his departure from America.

Alfredo Salafia’s principal recognition is displayed in the Capuchin Catacomb in Palermo, Rosalia Lombardo. Rosalia’s remains are a legacy in Sicily. She is known as the sleeping beauty of Palermo. She was named after Sicily’s patron saint Rosalia or “La Santuzza” (the little saint). In 1624 Palermo suffered from a horrible plague. Saint Rosalia appeared in a vision before a hunter outside of the city. The hunter went into a cave that materialized before him in the vision and found Rosalia’s bones with an inscription on the wall that beckoned, “I, Rosalia, daughter of Sinibald, Lord of Roses, and Quisquina, have taken the resolution to live in this cave for the love of my Lord, Jesus Christ.” (Who is Saint Rosalia?).

Saint Rosalia was born in 1130 A.D. and died in 1166 A.D. She was said to have lived her life in extreme religious devotion. Legend states she was led to a cave on Mount Pellegrino by two angels to die in solitude. The myth says that she ordered the hunter to gather her bones and have them carried in procession through the streets of Palermo (Saint Rosalia). Three days after the procession, the plague ended (Who is Saint Rosalia?). She is celebrated every year with a feast in Sicily between July 1 and July 15. Beautiful ornate floats covered in roses are made for the celebration. Her remains are carried through the streets of Palermo every year just as they were during the pestilence outbreak in 1624. We were fortunate to see a new work of art that was displayed in the 2012 celebration, sculpted by Salvatore Rizzuti. Rizzuti is a famous religious and secular artist who holds the title Chair of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Palermo (Salvatore Rizzuti Sculptor).
I had the honor to gaze upon Saint Rosalia’s sacred remains that are opulently displayed in a large resplendent ornate silver urn surrounded by candelabras with shimmering electric lights. Her sarcophagus is made out of pure silver and weighs over 1400 pounds ("Year of Prayer: 365 Rosaries"). Her remains are held in the heart of Palermo, the Duomo Di Palermo.
Rosalia Lombardo was born in 1918 and died on December 6, 1920. She died from a respiratory infection, which was most likely pneumonia. Rosalia’s father was a famous general. He was so grief stricken he called upon Sicily’s most famous mortician, Alfredo Salafia, to memorialize his beloved daughter. The Sicilian government granted special access to the family to have Rosalia laid to rest in the Capuchin Catacomb. The government outlawed burial in the Capuchin Catacomb in 1881 because of the health hazard and risk of contamination. Rosalia is the only exception to this law and her father must have done whatever it took to have his beautiful daughter laid to rest in the
sepulcher. Like many of the Capuchin Catacomb’s bereaving family members he wanted the world to see his precious daughter for eternity.

Dario Piombino-Mascali a native of Palermo, boasts a certain connection with the Sicilian people. He is widely known as Italy’s mummy master. He is the leader of a team of anthropologists that founded a unique on-going study that’s over half of a decade. The study is titled the “Palermo Capuchin Catacombs Project” (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla, 155-165). The study began because of Dario Pimbino-Mascali’s obsession with the immaculate state of Rosalia Lombardo’s remains. She is perfectly preserved. She is practically free from dehydration and decomposition. She is unlike any other resident in the Capuchin Catacomb. While time and gravity have desiccated all of the bodies that hang on display in the catacomb, Rosalia is almost lifelike. Some wonder if Rosalia’s body was replaced with a wax-like doll. Alfredo Salafia placed Rosalia in one of his custom designed signature caskets. Rosalia lays in a lead lined elegantly carved coffin with ornate bronze lions feet on each of the four corners to elevate her remains. She is secured under two pieces of glass, which are sealed with wax (Italy’s Mystery Mummies). Her head rests on a wooden block and the interior of the casket is lined with the finest silk. The team was granted special permission from the Capuchin order to x-ray Rosalia in hopes of discovering her secret of immortality. The team cumbersomely hauled a bulky x-ray machine down two flights of stairs, which guided them to Rosalia’s resting place. At the time of their first investigation (2009) Rosalia’s remains were placed in the Saint Rosalia chapel of the Catacomb along with several other small children in 1920. What the team discovered was an incredible testimony of one of the most prolific embalmers of all time.
The evidence from the x-rays displayed Rosalia’s organ’s completely intact including her brain (Italy’s Mystery Mummies). Salafia did not use cavity treatment, nor did he drain the child’s blood. He simply injected his formula through Rosalia’s arterial system. She is said to be the world’s most perfectly preserved mummy.

In 2011 Dario Piobino-Mascali and Albert Zink (head of the Institute for Mummies and the Iceman) took the Palermo Capuchin project to a premier level. The team received special permission from the Ministry of the monastery, Father Calogero Peri, to remove twenty mummies from the Catacomb and perform CT scans of their remains. The team felt it was necessary to do this because they have noticed rapid signs of decay on Rosalia’s features and mold growing on many of the other mummies. Rosalia had never left her chapel prior to this experiment. The friars were extremely nervous about her being disturbed. One wrong move and her remains could have been destroyed. The team gingerly carried her out of the catacomb successfully for her examination. What they found was astonishing. The CT scan gave a much more in-depth perspective of Rosalia’s remains than the x-rays. The team verified her cause of death (pneumonia) because her right lung was dense (Rafiy). They noticed an empty bottle placed underneath the wooden block Rosalia’s head rests on which they believe may have been filled with an anti-mold substance by Salafia (Rafiy). Sometime in the late 1970’s early 1980’s Rosalia’s glass casket top was cracked. The Capuchin brothers quickly placed another piece of glass atop of the broken one. The moisture in the Catacomb has increased over the years. Dr. Zink stated that to preserve the average mummy the moisture content must be fifty percent (Rafiy). The moisture content in the
Capuchin Catacomb is at eighty percent, therefore mold has started to form on the mummies and eventually they will decay.

Piombino-Mascali and Zink made a desperate plea to the Capuchin convent to agree to remove Rosalia from her chapel to a specialized glass and metal structure that will help preserve her remains (Rafiy). Rosalia has rested in the Saint Rosalia chapel for over ninety years. The brothers agreed that she be moved for the sanctity of her preservation. The Capuchins care very deeply about their “sleeping beauty” and want her remains to be memorialized. She is the premier attraction of the Capuchin Catacomb. When the team removed the second layer of glass that was placed on top of her casket there was evidence of mold growing between the layers, which has helped speed up her decomposition. The team concluded that flashes from photographs have taken a toll on Rosalia’s remains throughout the years as well as the high moisture index in the catacomb. Rosalia now rests in a custom-tempered one-inch thick glass chamber that has automatically regulated temperature controls, a continuous flow of humidified nitrogen, light resistant capabilities, with a moisture content of 65 percent. The chamber in which she lays is connected to a computer in Piombino-Mascali’s office located in Bolzano, Italy, so she can be monitored intently. She no longer resides in her original interment site, Saint Rosalia’s Chapel. She is located at the very back of the catacomb in a roped off area. The research team determined that this area has the least amount of moisture content in the catacomb. The case she is interred in is said to last at least 100 years (Brunetto).

Shortly after Rosalia was moved to her new home a supposed nephew made accusations that Rosalia’s body was suffered damage during the move and he intended to
pursue litigation (Brunetto). The prosecutor closed the case due to defamation and fraud but this case did spur a complaint that was filed in 2011 by Rosalia Lombardo’s sister who is eighty-six years old (Brunetto). Apparently her lawyers have argued that Rosalia’s image will no longer be able to create an economic return for the family due to the capsule surrounding her. Judge Lorenzo Hank is left to make the decision of monetary reimbursement (Brunetto). As in the past Rosalia is under the care of the Capuchin Monastery this measure had to be taken to ensure the historical preservation of Rosalia’s body.
Dario Piombino-Mascali was able to track down a distance relative of Salafia. He met with the niece of Salafia’s second wife, Anna Fillippone (Italy’s Mystery Mummies). She had inherited a collection of her great uncle’s archives. Along with his colleagues Dario discovered an unpublished masterpiece, Salafia’s personal diary. Enclosed in the sacred pages of his diary was a beautifully scripted document, “New special method for the preservation of an entire human cadaver in a permanently fresh state” (Italy’s Mystery Mummies). The secret formula was unmasked! For years it was said he had taken the ingredients of his secret formula to the grave. There has been a tremendous mystique about Salafia’s formula and talent. In Salafia’s memoirs the ingredients of the formula read as follows: “one part glycerin, one part formalin saturated with zinc sulfate and chloride, one part of an alcohol solution saturated with salicylic acid” (Piobino-Mascali, Außerheide, Johnson-Williams & Zink, 10). He went on to state embalming was to be performed by a single injection site such as the femoral artery via gravity injector. Gravity injectors are used to treat a deceased cavity in modern embalming. No other methods were to be performed such as treatment of the cavity or drainage of blood. The translation of the introduction of his journal reads as follows, “The Egyptians tried, the Capuchins tried but none achieved the idea this is to preserve the cadaver such as addressed at the moment of death. I was able to achieve this!” (Italy’s Mystery Mummies). This manuscript is one of the first forms of documentation in which formaldehyde was used in embalming fluid.
In 1855, Alexander Michailowitsch Butlerow discovered formaldehyde. In 1867 technical production of the chemical became possible (Brenner 72-96). This chemical revolutionized the preservation process. But not until another half century later did formaldehyde preservation became regularly used for the preservation of corpses for anatomical education. Formaldehyde preserves tissue by reversibly cross-linking primary amino groups in proteins with other nearby nitrogen atoms in proteins through a -CH2-linkage (Brenner 72-96). Currently, formaldehyde is under critical observation due to its possible carcinogenic properties (Brenner 72-92). Starting September 2007, the
European Union banned the use of formaldehyde as a biocide under the Bio-cidal Products Directive (98/8/EC) (Brenner 72-06). American embalmers use fluid that contains formaldehyde. Under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration act all embalmers are required to protect themselves from this toxic chemical by wear PPE (personal protective equipment).

An aqueous solution of formaldehyde a.k.a. formalin was sold in 1893 and was adopted in anatomy, zoology, and histology but never thought to be used for the embalming of an entire human body until 1895 (Piobino-Mascali, Aufderheide, Johnson-Williams & Zink, 10). Salafia successfully preserved entire human bodies with this ingredient by at least 1901, perhaps earlier. He also scripted the usage of paraffin wax diluted in ether, to be hypodermically injected into a decedent’s facial areas to “plump” or fill in dehydrated areas (Williams, 2009). Modern embalmers use the slang term “hypoing” to describe this method of filling out a decedent’s sunken decrepit features. When a family would discuss making their loved one look as though they had more weight to face and neck because the deceased had a severe terminal illness such as cancer or HIV, I would describe this process as a “collagen” injection to make it sound more glamorous. Several aging, prominent old Northeast St. Petersburg beauties have asked if I could perform this on them. The effect this process has when performed correctly is miraculous. A skilled embalmer can take twenty years off a decedent but if injected into a living being the results would be monstrous.

Salafia’s last documented embalming was the Archbishop of Palermo, Cardinal Alessandro Lualdi, in 1927 (Williams 2009). Alfredo Salafia died on January 31, 1933, at the age of 61. He is buried in the Cemetery of Santa Maria di Gesu’ in Palermo. This
new discovery of the documentation of his formula and method’s is proof that Salafia is one of the founders of modern embalming. Anyone who has seen Rosalia would be able to tell you that without this evidence. He is not mentioned in any American embalming textbook and is only briefly noted in historical anatomical preservation manuscripts. It is due time Salafia’s work is credited and he be noted for his exceptional talents.
Chapter 8
Capuchin Mummy Preservation Projects

Father Calgero Peri was born in Trapani, Italy on June 16, 1953. Destined to be a religious leader, he was ordained as a priest in 1978. He studied theology at S. Giovanni Evangelista in Palermo (Chiesa Cattolica Italiana). He went on to earn a degree in philosophy at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana. Father Peri has been an assistant professor of philosophy and has given lectures on theology, metaphysics, and anthropology at the University of Palermo. Father Peri has been the superior of the Capuchin convent since 1989. He is very concerned about the historical preservation of the catacomb. He suggested that a team of scientists help the Capuchins with the conservation of the catacomb’s mummies. His suggestion launched the ongoing anthropological investigation of the catacomb that is known as the “Palermo Capuchin Catacombs Project.”

The “Palermo Capuchin Catacombs Project” is a multidisciplinary project aimed at a complete investigation of the Capuchin Catacomb’s conditions, history, bio-anthropological features and conservation of the large collection of mummies (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascalci, Zink, and Palla 155-165). The mummy team consists of skilled experts from Palermo University, the EURAC Institute of Mummies and the Iceman of Bolzano, and other specialists (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascalci, Zink, and Palla 155-165). What makes the Capuchin catacomb so unique is that it has a tremendous population of spontaneous (natural) and anthropological (artificial) mummies. The project hopes to carry out a large survey that
will be used for the bicultural study of the corpses, a conservation plan, and the testing of new restoration protocols (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). The project has been sub-divided into specific categories. These projects have either been completed, are ongoing, or have yet to start. Only small samples of the research results are currently published.

The Capuchin Catacomb is the largest known collection of natural and artificial mummified remains in the world (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). Father Peri allowed the team access to the convent’s archives and communal records so they were able to compile a substantial demographic of the Sicilian population that was buried in the catacomb. The archival information has been used to obtain a deeper understanding of life habits, epidemics, and sanitation in Sicily during the Modern Era (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 158).

Bioanthropoloical investigation includes mummification method, sex, age, measurements of the mummies, skeletal remains, and tissue samples of the mummies. Paleopathological investigation is the study of ancient diseases. The information investigated includes: infectious diseases, metabolic diseases, degenerative disorders, congenital anomalies and malformations, dental disease, tumors, and trauma (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). The results were obtained by performing x-ray’s and CT scans.

Paleoradiology was developed in 1895 as a non-destructive method for examining mummies (Piombino-Mascali, Maizner, Zink, Marvelli, Panzer, Außerherde, 341-352). This type of x-ray is the standard tool used to examine mummies. It has become so
advanced that full resolutions of soft tissue can be found through this method. The team used the mobile digital radiography system know as the Dragon DR, CXDI-50G, Conano/Sedecal to investigate the mummies of Palermo (Piombino-Mascali, Maizner, Zink, Marvelli, Panzer, Aufderheide, 341-352). The device was constructed inside a corridor that was closed off to the public. This machine was specifically created to search skeletal abnormalities.

Ten mummies from the Capuchin Catacomb were studied for this specific investigation. The goal was to observe specific preservation techniques used, to explore skeletal abnormalities, the state of the mummies’ preservation (especially their internal organs), and to determine the anthropogenic mummification methods used in Sicily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Panzer, Zink, Piomnino-Mascali 2010, 1123-1132). All of the mummies examined were from the mid to late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Panzer, Zink, Piomnino-Mascali 2010, 1123-1132). In all but two cases the mummies had their clothing intact. One of the mummies examined was Rosalia Lombardo who was embalmed arterially by Alfredo Salafia. Another body was found to be partially covered in lime, and at least three other mummies showed evidence of organ removal (Panzer, Zink, Piomnino-Mascali 2010, 1123-1132).

The x-ray results yielded that nine mummies were embalmed arterially (radio-opaque mercury fluids were discovered), metal eye caps or glass eyes were used, cotton or straw was used in the mouth, nasal passage or rectum for filling of the body cavities (Piombino-Mascali, Maizner, Zink, Marvelli, Panzer, Aufderheide, 341-352). Three child mummies and an adolescent male mummy were examined while they were still in their coffins (Panzer, Zink, Piombino-Mascali 2010, 1123-1132). The other seven mummies
were removed from their caskets. Rosalia Lombardo was very hard to examine because of the lead lining in her casket so her imaging results were not as vivid as the other mummies examined. In six of the mummies both cerebral hemispheres were preserved with radiopaque traces (Panzer, Zink, Piombino-Mascali 2010, 1123-1132). The mummy that has half preserved with lime did not reveal any organ preservation except for a very shrunken brain (Panzer, Zink, Piombino-Mascali 2010, 1123-1132). The mummies that were arterially injected with arsenic and mercury showed good preservation of internal organs but the best preservation results yielded from Rosalia Lombardo. This investigation offered proof that formaldehyde is a superior preservative.

The examination displayed that one child had a very rare genetic defect called Robinow syndrome in which it had hypoplastic genitalia, shorting of its limbs, dolichocephalic skull, and deformed facial features. (Panzer, Zink, Piombino-Mascali 2010, 1123-1132). This syndrome is extremely rare, with only 1000 cases reported worldwide (Panzer, Zink, Piombino-Mascali 2010, 1123-1132). The radiographic study showed that none of the mummies examined had any indication of metabolic disease of signs of poor nutrition. This can probably because of the very high social status of the mummies in the catacomb.

Herniated pits of the femoral bone neck were first recognized in a radiological publication in 1982 and in early clinical publications they were recognized as incidental findings (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer). Currently they are connected with femoroacetabular impingement which is caused by excessive friction of the hip joint. This can cause severe damage to the joint including osteoarthritis. In 2010, twenty six mummies in the Capuchin catacomb were CT (computed tomography) scanned to see if
this condition was present. Herniated pits were used in this particular study to identify generative diseases (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer). Osteoarthritis is one of the most common degenerative diseases found in mummies and it can be used to determine lifestyle, mobility, and activity patterns in ancient populations (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer).

The study performed on the Capuchin Catacomb mummies was a test pilot to introduce herniated pits to the paleoradiological and paleopathological fields’ methodology as an indicator of femoroacetabular impingement which leads to osteoarthritis (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer). Sixteen adults were examined because of their excellent preservation state and the team’s accessibility to the mummies. Many of the mummies preserved in the catacomb have not been touched for hundreds of years and to disturb them from their resting places could destroy them. There was no archival information available about the sixteen adult mummies. The corpses general age and sex were all determined by the examination of the bodies and their artifacts. Six of the bodies examined had been anthropogenically mummified (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer). The team used a mobile 4-section CT scanner which was parked in front of the Capuchin church next to the catacomb entrance (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer).

Herniated pits of the femoral neck were categorized by size, shape, margin, and cortical breaks (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer). The mummies’ excellent preservation statuses lead to more accurate scan results. The findings were eleven herniated pits in six out of the sixteen adult male mummies examined, 37.5% of the mummies studied (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer). The age ranges of the subjects were 40 – 70 years.
old. Osteoarthritis was present in five cases and in one of the cases cysts were found on the femoral head (Piombino-Mascali, Zink, Panzer).

Paleogenetic investigation includes the study of DNA from old bones, teeth and soft tissues (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). The extraction of ancient DNA was taken out of tissue samples from the mummies in the Capuchin Catacomb to investigate their genetic profile and to identify ancient pathogen DNA (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). Palermo suffered several major plagues and there is documentation of a multitude of infectious diseases that have had a major effect on the people of Sicily. This study is currently in progress and the results have not been published.

Entomological investigations involve deterioration of mummies caused by animal infestation. The exploration of the insects in the Capuchin Catacomb are associated with the bodies time of death, how the bodies were mummified, decomposition, parasitism before death, and the environmental location of the mummies (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). Live and dead insects including arthropods are the types of entomological specimens analyzed from the catacomb. Biodeteriation is the breakdown of materials by microbial action. Mummies are considered to be organic matter. The entomological investigation resulted in specimens that showed complex traces of fungi, cyanobacteria, several insects and other arthropods (Palla, Sineo, Manachini 2011, 69-76). Samples were collected of microbial composition with arthropods and a molecular analysis was performed by the team (Palla, Sineo, Manachini 2011, 69-76). Phorids are called “coffin flies,” because they live in corpses and continue their life cycle within the wood of coffins (Smith, 1986). These specimens
were found in the Capuchin Catacomb mummies as well as multiple forms of fungus. Samples of fungi were taken from the mural paintings in the catacomb (Palla, Sineo, Manachini 2011, 69-76). The analysis of the insect and bacterial matter will help aid in the control of the degeneration of the catacomb.

The “Sicily Mummy Project” was established in 2007 and is an ongoing project that studies four mummy collections, and has gathered information on their historical and archeological context (Piombino-Mascolo, Maizner, Zink, Marvelli, Panzer, Aufderheide, 341-352). The collections investigated were from catacombs, churches, and crypts located in Palermo, Piraino, Savoca, and Novara di Sicilia. The project was partially funded by National Geographic which has produced documentaries containing general findings from the team’s work. The focus of the project is the Capuchin Catacomb. The site was chosen because of the massive quantity of whole mummies that the catacomb encompasses. The investigation conducted was of the “drying” rooms that contained the colatoio used in the desiccation and spontaneous mummification of the bodies in the catacomb. The project includes a physical examination of the corpses mummified in the colatoio. None of the mummies have been autopsied nor will they ever be this is due to the historic preservation and integrity of the remains.

The catacomb’s ossuaries which were once drying rooms have been entirely cemented off. This has caused a drastic temperature and moisture problem in the catacomb due to the lack of air circulation from the rooms. It is unknown the exact number of remains that are interred in the ossuaries. This is an area that may have the potential to be investigated but the team has not been granted permission from the Capuchin order to excavate the ossuaries. In Palermo, attempts were made to provide the
corpses with the ‘correct’ shape and a normal consistency by using stuffing such as tow or straw, even in cases where the corpse was in skeletal form (Piombino-Mascali, Maizner, Zink, Marvelli, Panzer, Aufderheide, 341-352). The reasoning behind this tradition is to provide a life-like appearance intentionally for memorialization. The team has expansion projects planned for the next several years and will continue to publish similar works in the future.

The environmental investigation is a matter which has changed drastically in the Capuchin Catacomb. The modification of the original environmental conditions has led to significant changes to the storage requirements of the mummies, as demonstrated by the continuing degradation of the bodies (Sineo, Manachini, Carotenuto, Piombino-Mascali, Zink, and Palla 155-165). The team has placed certain controls in the catacomb to monitor its temperature, moisture, and light conditions. The goal is to obtain enough information to devise a plan for the long-term preservation of the catacomb’s mummies. Hopefully, the scientific investigations that have and are currently being conducted will help preserve the Capuchin Catacomb’s mummies. The mummies of the Capuchin Catacomb hold superior historical information. The necropolis possess Palermo’s most treasured heritage. It would be a tragedy if modern infrastructure destroyed such a unique historical monument.
Chapter 9

Conclusion

The Capuchin Catacomb of Palermo, Sicily, is much more than just a tourist attraction. The Capuchin Order of the Friars Minor is a sacred and pious religious institution. The Capuchin brothers exhumed forty-five friars that were buried in a mass grave next to the convent in 1599. Their bodies were perfectly mummified. The brothers believed this act was a divine intervention form God. Forty of the friar mummies were interred in the catacomb. They were observed as relics. The initial friar’s mummification was the start of the catacomb’s epic legacy. The catacomb was originally intended for the burial of deceased Capuchin brothers, but due to incessant demand nobles, aristocrats, professionals, women, children, and eventually the bourgeoisie were allowed access to spend eternity in the underground cemetery. The Capuchin Catacomb mummies are preserved in several different manners: using the colatotio, dipping or bathing in arsenic, and arterial embalming. Rosalia Lombardo, Palermo’s sleeping beauty, resides in the Capuchin Catacomb. She is said to be the world’s most perfectly preserved mummy. Alfredo Salafia, Rosalia’s embalmer, may have been the first person to preserve a human corpse with formaldehyde. His secret formula has recently been brought to light by the discovery of his private journal.

The Capuchin’s funeral rituals coincide with French anthropologist Robert Hertz’s theories about secondary burial. In order for the soul to graduate from Purgatory, the corpse must be treated in a specific manner. Mourners must pray for their loved ones
soul to be freed from Purgatory while the corpse undergoes the decomposition or desiccation process. The Capuchin Catacomb has undergone a turbulent history. It was devastated by bombings in World War II and a horrific fire in 1966. These events damaged many of the catacomb’s mummies and archives. Traveler’s journals are some of the only recorded documents that have preserved the Capuchin Catacomb’s history. Globalization is changing the environment and threatening the mummies in the catacomb. Father Peri, bishop of the Capuchin order of Palermo proposed that a scientific study take place for the conservation of the catacomb mummies. A specialized team of anthropologists and scientists are conducting a series of investigations to ensure the conservation of the catacomb’s treasured antiquities. The Capuchins worship the dead and their devotion and love is displayed in the catacomb mummies. The catacomb is a sacred monument of Sicily’s history. It was an incredible experience to see Palermo’s wealthiest, holy, artistic, and noble residents gathered underground in Sicily’s extraordinary subterranean necropolis.
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