

BOOK REVIEW

Thefts of Relics in Italy: From Late Antiquity to the Central Middle Ages, 300–1150

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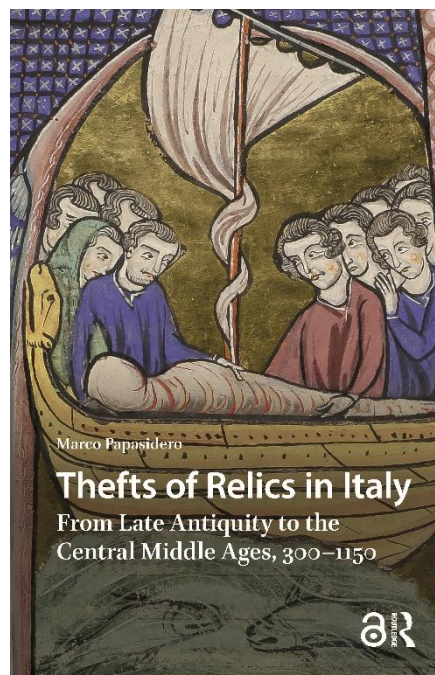
History Article

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BOOK INFORMATION



Thefts of Relics in Italy: From Late Antiquity to the Central Middle Ages, 300–1150

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This historical account of religious practice raises ethical and moral questions of interest about a belief system that for a time proudly approved of lying and stealing. The author, Assistant Professor Marco Papasidero, teaches the History of Christianity and Churches at the University of Palermo, Italy. His book establishes that over several centuries, it was accepted practice in Catholicism to steal relics of the saints from their owners and relocate them, supposedly as a sign of piety but often to gain prestige and income. Examining these thefts in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages reveals a systematic, rather than occasional, approach to not merely justifying, but positively exalting such activity. The relics involved comprised presumed remains of saints' bodies, such as bones, skin, and hair, or things used or touched by them, such as clothes, shoes, and the instruments of their martyrdom. Mendacity appeared with justifications for the larceny, or face-saving claims that freshly obtained items were the result of thievery when in fact they were due to less societally approved sales between religious institutions. The latter assertions were also used as proof of authenticity, insofar as newly stolen items were considered more likely authentic than objects merely on sale, which were known to be often fraudulent. In still other cases, religious authorities simply fabricated relics to add prestige to centers of public Christian worship.

The present Open Access title is a rewritten and reconceptualized version of the same author's previous book in Italian (Papasidero 2019). It is divided into three chronological sections to better explore sociopolitical contexts: Late Antiquity (300–600 common era (CE)); the Early Middle Ages (600–950 CE); and the Central Middle Ages (950–1150 CE). Seven chapters comprise an introduction followed by a first chapter about the phenomenon of theft of relics (in Latin, *furta sacra*) as recounted in diverse literary sources. These include histories and hagiographies (lives of the saints), accounts of how relics were relocated, saintly martyrdoms, and lists of miracles.

In clear prose that maintains scholarly objectivity, Assistant Professor Papasidero compiles a list of the extent to which this phenomenon occurred, and how authors reveled in it. Left unexamined, but possibly a suitable subject for future research in comparative religion, is what the historical legacy of theft and lies expresses about the Catholic religion. Equally non-judgmental on the issue of authenticity, Assistant Professor Papasidero also does not delve into any potential symbolic echoes of robbing items of doubtful historical validity.

Chapter Two recounts how widespread this tradition was from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages and why possession of a relic by a city, church or monastery was deemed appropriate by religious authorities. The earliest accounts present a certain logic that justifies *furta sacra*, as seen later in medieval hagiographies.

Chapter Three further weighs the political and spiritual use of thefts of relics, adding renown to the new owners, as well as the subsequent strategy developed by towns whose relics had been stolen to pilfer relics from another site to replace them. During certain eras, *furta sacra* was linked to sieges and war, as well as to the neglect or abandonment of historical tombs.

Chapter Four observes that as centuries passed and chaotic wars and sieges were fewer, tomb robberies were scheduled at nighttime to bypass guards who were more regularly hired to protect sacred treasures.

Chapters Five and Six analyze the structure of hagiographies with an anthropological look at such tales, respectively, to better understand the society in which *furta sacra* happened.

Chapter Seven is perhaps the most pertinent one for historians of religion, describing dreams and visions that reputedly led to finding relics. Rituals involved included post-pilfering processions to vaunt the imminent arrival of the objects to a new location and their formal deposition there. Resulting miracles and sacred signs were also specified to prove the appropriateness of the purloining.

A Conclusion to the book reiterates that *furta sacra* was a longstanding practice for several centuries, even surviving, albeit on only rare occasions, into the modern era. As outlandish as some of the justifications for such larceny may seem to readers today, there was also a solid practical basis for it. Owning significant relics added to the income of a religious institution, as pilgrims and other tourists became motivated to visit. So there were economic motives for owning appropriate renowned relics.

The deception did not end there; sometimes bishops sold relics to other institutions to financially support their monasteries, and to explain the disappearance of the coveted items, they claimed that they had been stolen. This type of mythography might appear to raise doubts about the basic veracity of religious practice. But the author notably refrains from expressing any personal doubt or skepticism about the deceptions recounted herein. Instead, he advances a cultural anthropology reading, with the relics embodying saintly power; dead bodies equated to living ones; churches and tombs being like homes; their relocation seen as a rite of passage; saints viewed as urban protectors; and relics deemed gifts, with their worship an exchange between saints and the faithful.

While this framework allows for exploration of the sociocultural context of *furta sacra*, it also imperturbably accepts historical claims as substantial, even if obviously fictitious, which provides a type of validation, even if now long outdated. This raises the more general question of whether scholars trying to understand religious practice of a different time and place must avoid a critical stance. Otherwise, an element of anachronistic contemporary disbelief might intrude, changing a religious history to a polemic. For example, the thieves typically persuaded themselves that their actions were validated by the saints (Papasidero, M. (2025) 30-31). So before the burglaries, the malefactors prayed to the saints to obtain a blessing for the deed about to occur.

At the time, the relics often had practical uses that still reverberate today, as when *furta sacra* were brought to coronations as symbols of divine right to power or to battlefields in hopes of guaranteeing victory. To his credit, the author cites the skepticism of religious authorities, starting with John Calvin, whose *Treatise on Relics* (1543) argued that most such objects were inauthentic, unworthy of veneration. And the Enlightenment brought more objections to *furta sacra* from such theologians as Marcantonio Boldetti,

whose *Observations on the Cemeteries of Holy Martyrs* (Boldetti; 1720) asserted that legally, such practices should be considered sacrilegious in the modern era; according to Boldetti, nor could reclaiming stolen relics by theft or violence be justifiable. Yet even Boldetti excused past historical actions, claiming that they had been divinely ordered in visions appearing to the perpetrators.

As the modern age approached, until the nineteenth century, *furta sacra* was still believed by the church hierarchy to be appropriate if backed by historical documents, local traditions, or papal declarations. In an otherwise extensive survey of the literature on the topic, Assistant Professor Papasidero omits some prominent English language analyses, such as Perry, D. M. (2015). But this is a minor quibble about a thought provoking, well researched volume that should interest all students of Christianity, the Catholic Church, and comparative religion.

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