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Furta Sacra and the Military Use of Relics by Italian Maritime Cities (11th-14th Century)

Simone Lombardo

Abstract

Relics had a great impact within the conflicts of the late Middle Ages. Their use by Italian maritime cities shows the relationships between public power, violence, religiosity, and the construction of a civic identity. Maritime cities, including the main cases of Genoa, Venice and Pisa, allow us to investigate the use of relics in wide-ranging Mediterranean conflicts. Since the very early crusades, the military expeditions to the Levant by Italians coincided with a season of "holy theft" to obtain relics from Eastern deposits. The overseas victories against the infidels had a correlative in the transfer of sacred rests to the capital. Relics were prey for war and, at the same time, were the sign of the link with the holiness of military exploits, increasing the spiritual prestige of the city. The relics transferred to the motherland from the East, guaranteed the protection of the centre and increased the divine favour. A kind of civic religiosity often developed around them, as a pillar of the city's political identity. Relics were also taken to war against other Christian enemies, in order to intercede for God's favour. Relics were also stolen from opponents. The practice intensified during the 14th century, when the flow of relics from the East diminished. In 1354, the Genoese admiral Paganino Doria stole some bodies of saints to the Venetians and transferred them to Genoa. In 1380, the theft of relics from Venetian territories in the Adriatic attempted to mitigate the defeat suffered by the Genoese. At the same time, the Venetian Carlo Zen tried to do the same in Liguria. The war of relics, within the medieval tradition of symbolic spolia to humiliate the enemy, had been fought in the waters of the Mediterranean. There seemed to be little interest in

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the relic as such: the real prestige of the furta sacra lay in taking sacred objects from the enemy. During the 15th century, Venice tried to secure relics from the advancing Turks in Greece. Relics were a treasure to be saved from war and infidels, rather than being taken into battle. The bodies of the saints, in short, had a value for city cohesion, in the face of adversities and wars, as signs of identity. Depictions of saints, whose bodies were kept in the centre, were used in banners and political-military signae. Relics were one of the focal points of the relationship between Italian maritime cities, war and God.

Keywords
Relics; Saints; Italian cities; Holy Theft.

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FURTA SACRA AND THE MILITARY USE OF RELICS BY ITALIAN MARITIME CITIES (11TH-14TH CENTURIES)

Simone Lombardo*

The remains of saints were rarely static: they moved, crossed the sea, and were transferred from distant places. Often, these journeys are narrated in celebratory texts, produced by the inhabitants of the involved cities. In this contribution, I will attempt to investigate the relationship between war, Italian cities with a strong maritime projection, and relics of saints. It is a complex and intertwined story, as relics have been considered tools and have been used as such. There is a significant tradition of studies on the theme of the translation of relics in medieval Italy and on the role of sacred remains. Patrick J. Geary's seminal work on *furta sacra* paved the way for the study of a very broad phenomenon.[1] During the early Middle Ages, the cities of the Italian peninsula deepened their identification with their patron saint, resulting in a form of symbolic appropriation of the saints. In turn, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, a pantheon of patron saints of foreign origin emerged, frequently displacing the cathedral's established titular patrons. The presence of relics, therefore, was essential in the formation of this practice. Their cults were public, regulated by municipal statutes and overseen by civic officials. Relics constituted objects of exceptional value in medieval society, endowed with political significance no less than religious significance. They united citizens in moments of crisis, served to symbolically subjugate enemies, and could even function as hostages. Yet relics should not be regarded solely through the prism of their political and symbolic uses, for they were also believed to possess

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[1] P. J. Geary, *Furta sacra: Thefts of relics in the central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

intrinsic value as tangible manifestations of the divine. As such, they were interwoven with every sphere of human activity, including that of violence.[2]

Relics served as focal points around which civic identity, prestige, and the yearnings for spiritual protection converged. To analyse this phenomenon, we must delve into the study of common cult construction and the concept of collective memory. The idea of a shared, internalised, and transmissible memory within a group sparked a historiographical debate shaped by social anthropology.[3] Historical anthropology, for its part, clarified medieval perceptions of relics and showed how they reshaped collective memory in ways closely bound up with the political and institutional dynamics of the period. While most scholarship has approached hagiographic texts primarily through philological or devotional lenses, the political and identity-forming dimensions of the saints' physical presence – and their effects on the collective imagination – have received less sustained attention. A significant proportion of studies adopted a localised focus, often tethered to a specific hagiographic tradition, and produced by local historians; comprehensive syntheses remain relatively scarce. Notably, the broader Euro-Mediterranean maritime context has not yet been explored as a shared arena in this sense. The present study foregrounds the distinctive outward orientation of the Italian Peninsula's maritime cities. Venice, Pisa, Genoa, and other centres in southern Italy assumed leading roles in appropriating relics from distant, often Eastern, contexts, whereas mainland

[2] On formation of identity and symbolic competition between cities: *Identità cittadina e comportamenti socio-economici tra Medioevo ed età moderna*, ed. Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Paolo Prodi, Stefano Simonetta (Bologna: Clueb, 2007); G. Schizzerotto, *Sberleffi di campanile. Per una storia culturale dello scherno come elemento dell'identità nazionale dal Medioevo ai giorni nostri* (Florence: Olshki, 2015). On the concept of civic religion in communal Italy, I refer to: A. Vauchez, "La religione civica," in André Vauchez, *Esperienze religiose nel Medioevo* (Roma: Viella, 2003), 247-252; A. Rigon, "La religione civica nel medioevo. Passato e presente di un tema di ricerca," in *Scritti di storia medievale offerti a Maria Consiglia De Matteis*, ed. Berardo Pio (Spoleto: Cisam, 2011), 601-614; A. Vauchez, "La religione civica: alcune riflessioni attorno a un concetto storiografico," in *Beata civitas: pubblica pietà e devozioni private nella Siena del '300*, ed. Anna Benvenuti, Pierantonio Piatti (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2016), 3-9.

[3] P. Nora, "Mémoire collective," in *La nouvelle histoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, Jacques Ravel (Paris: Retz, 1978), 398. I refer to the first conceptualisations of this sociological paradigm, which originated in the 1920s from the ideas of Maurice Halbwachs: M. Halbwachs, *On collective memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); M. Bloch, "Mémoire collective, tradition et costume," *Revue de synthèse* 11 (1925), 73-83. Halbwachs' vision was complemented by the work of Aleida and Jan Assmann, who focused on memory transmission and ritual. J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011); A. Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999).

Italian *comuni* operated within more circumscribed spheres of influence and faced greater obstacles to undertaking furta sacra over long distances. Violence, accordingly, emerges as an inseparable thread in this history of saints, war, and the sea.

I. Violent capture of relics in the East

During the early Middle Ages, the possession and transfer of relics by some Italian maritime cities were closely linked to violence. The acquisition of sacred remains, endowed with a powerful legitimising force for the civic community, almost always took place by force, whether through theft or looting. Such acts were publicly celebrated by the communities and duly commemorated, and relics, while regarded as possessing supernatural efficacy, also served as war trophies—symbols of victory and booty that asserted political supremacy over rival centres. At the same time, the remains of saints increased the spiritual prestige of the cities to which the new relics were moved and kept, guaranteeing the centre's divine protection (or its loss). Scholars have emphasised the construction of a civic identity around the bodies of saints, while victory in conflict and the capture of relics testified to divine favour. Relics, during the central Middle Ages, were often transferred to the Latin West from the East, and often by force. It was precisely the Eastern provenance – as a repository of treasures of the Christian faith – that caused a predominance of Italian maritime cities as protagonists of the *furta sacra*.

The Venetian case of St. Mark remains one of the best known. Venice's religious ties with the Levant long predated the crusades: the appropriation of Eastern relics reaches back to the ninth and tenth centuries, when the remains of Sts. Zacharias, John the Baptist, Sabas and - above all - Mark, stolen from Alexandria, were brought to the lagoon. These translations shaped the Venetian devotional landscape more than any other acquisitions. The narratives of the translation of St. Mark's body, probably dating to the eleventh century and transmitted in several recensions, became a cornerstone of Venetian hagiography. In this context, the basilica of Saint Mark assumed the character of a sanctuary, seeking recognition as a major sacred centre and even a site of pilgrimage. Equally well-known is the case of Saint Nicholas and his connection to Bari in southern Italy, a relationship that preceded the theft of his relics in 1087. Numerous legends emerged to justify the theft, whereby the saint himself is said to have appeared to declare his wish to relocate. Saint Nicholas no longer wished to remain in a place under the rule of the infidels, as was Myra in the late eleventh century. The story of the theft of Saint Nicholas's relics had a great echo, and was narrated in various sources, including two *Historiae translationis* and the

"Legend of Kiev" included in the Kyivan *Primary Chronicle*. In 1087, some sixty sailors from Bari, who had sailed eastward to trade in grain, learned that the Venetians intended to seize the relics in Antioch. Anticipating their rivals, they removed the saint's remains from Myra, then under Turkish control.[4] The translation of St. Nicholas's body to Bari profoundly shaped the devotional landscape and civic identity of the Apulian port, further consolidating its maritime vocation. Yet the cult of Nicholas soon transcended the borders of Puglia, and he came to be widely revered as the patron saint of seafarers. His role as protector of those at sea is given particular prominence in Jacobus de Voragine's *thirteenth-century Legenda Aurea*.[5]

A similar dynamic unfolded in Pisa, which stole particles of Saint Bartholomew. The saint had been martyred in Armenia, and his relics were gradually transferred westward, ultimately arriving on the island of Lipari off the coast of Sicily. In 1035, the Pisans conquered Lipari from the Arabs in a naval expedition and seized some relics of Saint Bartholomew's from the cathedral, bringing them back to their city.[6] Yet in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Pisan cultural expression was defined by the intensive use of Islamic spolia, particularly ceramic basins, incorporated into ecclesiastical architecture and juxtaposed with Roman *spolia*. This practice reflects a triumphalist strategy of appropriation, enacted both through warfare and through trade.[7] Although

[4] R. Bianco, "Il santo, il mare, le 'caravelle'. I viaggi di san Nicola da Myra a Bari," *RiMe. Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea* 1/2 (2017): 34-35.

[5] On the role of Saint Nicholas as protector of seafarers: I. Aulisa, "I santuari visti dal mare: l'Adriatico nel Portolano Sacro," in *I santuari e il mare. Atti del III Convegno Internazionale (Vicenza. 15-17 aprile 2013)*, ed. Immacolata Aulisa (Bari: Edipuglia, 2014), 142-143; M. Bacci, *San Nicola. Il grande taumaturgo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2009), 148-159; R. Bianco, "Il santo, il mare," 42-49; P. Corsi, *La traslazione di san Nicola: le fonti* (Bari: Centro studi nicolaiani, 1987).

[6] W. Dolfi, *Le reliquie del Duomo di Pisa* (Pisa: Opera della primaziale pisana, 2004); G.La Greca, *Lipari al tempo degli arabi: le reliquie di San Bartolomeo trafugate a Pisa* (Lipari: Centro studi-Lipari, 2009); V. Giustolisi, *Della conquista di Lipari araba da parte della flotta pisana nell'anno 1035 e della presunta asportazione delle reliquie di San Bartolomeo apostolo: con un saggio sul culto di San Bartolomeo a Pisa e nel suo territorio* (Palermo: Centro di documentazione e ricerca per la Sicilia antica "P. Orsi", 2010). On the role of relics in Pisa in early Middle Ages: M. L. Ceccarelli Lemut, G. Garzella, "Sulle rotte dei santi. Circolazione di culti e di reliquie a Pisa (VI-XII secolo)," *Pecia* 8/11 (2005): 227-244; M. L. Ceccarelli Lemut, "Il Mediterraneo dei Santi. Culti e reliquie a Pisa, secoli VI-XII," *RiMe. Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea* 1/2 (2017): 7-29; D. Di Pinto, "Il trasferimento forzato delle reliquie di Santo Stefano dal Monastero di Colonna di Trani a Pisa," *Neda* 1/2 (2019): 71-88.

[7] K. R. Mathews, *Conflict, Commerce, and an Aesthetic of Appropriation in the Italian Maritime Cities, 1000-1150* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 110-111, 115-125. The basins of Pisa are extensively studied. They were ceramics of Islamic provenance, used for aesthetic purposes. The aim of the basins was also to increase the importance of churches where relics were kept or places

conflicts with the Muslim world often carried a pronounced religious dimension, they did not exclude peaceful forms of exchange. The integration of Islamic spolia into Pisa's sacred architecture, including the Duomo, responded to a complex interplay of political-religious, civic, and economic motivations, while also serving a distinctly aesthetic purpose.[8] The prominence of Islamic artefacts in Pisan churches contrasts with the relatively limited presence of stolen relics, revealing a conscious orientation of the city's symbolic and artistic identity toward engagement with the Muslim world rather than toward the appropriation of saints' remains - a choice partly conditioned by the more limited opportunities for relic theft in the western Mediterranean and along the North African coast. Maritime and political preeminence was thus articulated both through dialogue with the Muslim world and through the city's self-legitimisation in terms of *romanitas*.

The most intense period of violent acquisition of relics began with the First Crusade, in which Genoa and Venice emerged as the principal protagonists among the Italian city-states.[9] In Genoa, in particular, the paucity of indigenous saints accentuated the importance of relics brought from abroad. The massive influx of sacred remains was closely linked to the city's military expeditions: the first translations from the East coincided with the campaigns of the late eleventh century during the crusade itself. The connection with the Holy Land was essential in the construction of the devotional identity: the *passagium* – expedition – had been crowned by obtaining relics and holy objects, which testified to the military commitment to the Christian cause, enhanced its prestige and nourished its spiritual life.[10] This is not the place to examine in detail the references to the Holy Sepulchre and Jerusalem in Genoese tradition.[11] What

of apostolic importance, such as San Piero a Grado. Islamic ceramics could arrive in Pisa mainly in three ways: looting, gifts, or trade. Actually, there is no evidence of an explicit connection between military campaigns and ceramics as booty. Most probably, basins were obtained through trade. K. R. Mathews, *Conflict, Commerce, and an Aesthetic of Appropriation*, 125.

[8] K. R. Mathews, *Conflict, Commerce, and an Aesthetic of Appropriation*, 144.

[9] On the analysis of a phenomenon that included not only Italian maritime cities, but the entire crusader world: J. Durand, "Reliquie e reliquiari depredati in Oriente e a Bisanzio al tempo delle crociate," in *Le crociate. L'oriente e l'occidente da Urbano II a San Luigi 1096-1270.* Roma, Palazzo Venezia, 14 febbraio - 30 aprile 1997, ed. Monique Rey-Delqué (Milan: Electa, 1997), 378-389.

[10] F. Cardini, "Crociata e religione civica nell'Italia medievale," in *La religion civique à l'époque médiévale et moderne (Chrétienté et Islam)*, *Actes du colloque (Nanterre, 21-23 juin 1993)*, ed. André Vauchez (Rome: École française de Rome, 1995), 158.

[11] In Genoa probably existed a church dedicated to the Holy Sepulchre near the Hospitaller commandery of Prè. A. Musarra, "Memorie di Terrasanta. Reliquie, traslazioni, culti e

should be emphasised, however, is that the earliest and most striking consequence of the Genoese exploits in the Holy Land was the transfer of relics to the capital, as the chronicles repeatedly underscore. According to a later narrative, the ashes of Saint John the Baptist, later to become the patron saint of the Tyrrhenian city, had arrived from Myra in 1098 or 1099 thanks to the participation of the Genoese in the First Crusade.[12] Upon the army's return, tensions between rival factions, divided between pro-imperial adherents and supporters of ecclesiastical reform, seem to have reached a critical point. The arrival of the saint's relics is said to have calmed hostilities and averted the outbreak of civil war. Deposited in the baptistery of the cathedral, the relics became the focal point of civic rituals of reconciliation. Soon thereafter, the merchant Guglielmo Embriaco set sail with two galleys, took part in the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, and emerged as one of the celebrated heroes of the First Crusade.[13]

The cult of Saint John the Baptist only became predominant in Genoa after some time, sanctioned by the laws of the *comune*.[14] In 1323, his relics were placed in the cathedral, and a few years later, in 1327, the saint was officially proclaimed

devozioni a Genova tra XII e XIV secolo," in *Come a Gerusalemme. Evocazioni, riproduzioni, imitazioni dei luoghi santi tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna*, ed. Anna Benvenuti and Pierantonio Piatti (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2013), 541-547. On the importance of the devotion to Jerusalem in Europe during the Middle Ages: A. Hendrik Bredero, "Jérusalem dans l'Occident médiéval," in *Mélanges offerts à R. Crozet à l'occasion de son soixante-dixième anniversaire*, I (Poitiers: Société d'Études Médiévales, 1966), 259-271; F. Parente, "La conoscenza della Terra Santa come esperienza religiosa dell'Occidente cristiano dal IV secolo alle crociate," in *Popoli e paesi nella cultura altomedievale*, I (Spoleto: Cisam, 1983), 231-326; A. I. Galletti, "Gerusalemme o la città desiderata," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen Âge* 96 (1984): 459-487; F. Cardini, "La devozione al Santo Sepolcro, le sue riproduzioni occidentali e il complesso stefaniano. Alcuni casi italici," in *7 colonne e 7 chiese: la vicenda ultramillenaria del Complesso di Santo Stefano in Bologna* (Bologna: Grafis, 1987), 18-49; R. Salvarani, *La fortuna del Santo Sepolcro nel Medioevo. Spazio, liturgia, architettura* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2008).

[12] On the way back, after the conclusion of the siege of Antioch, it seems that the fleet of galleys raided Myra, where the Genoese seized the relics. The events are, however, handed down by Iacopo Doria, while the absence of this information in the works of Caffaro, chronicler and eyewitness, is at least singular. Probably, there was a work by Caffaro expressly dedicated to the topic and today lost. V. Polonio, "L'arrivo delle ceneri del Precursore e il culto al Santo a Genova e nel Genovesato in età Medievale," in *San Giovanni Battista nella vita sociale e religiosa a Genova e in Liguria tra medioevo ed età contemporanea. Atti del convegno (Genova, 16-17 giugno 1999)*, ed. Claudio Paolocci (Genoa: Amici della Biblioteca Franzoniana, 2000), 44; A. Musarra, *In partibus Ultramaris. I Genovesi, la Crociata e la Terrasanta (secc. XII-XIII)* (Rome: Isime, 2017), 608-611.

[13] A. Musarra, *In partibus Ultramaris*, 123.

[14] V. Polonio, "L'arrivo delle ceneri del Precursore," 35-65.

"Pater civitatis." – "Father of the City." This marked the first conscious attempt to construct a civic cult explicitly centred on his figure.[15] Veneration of the saint acquired a consistent and enduring form toward the close of the fourteenth century, owing largely to the initiative of civic authorities' intent on reinforcing communal identity by anchoring it to exclusive cults. Thus emerged a city-wide devotion polarised around relics preserved locally but originating from the Levant.[16] The chronicler Giorgio Stella, writing at the end of the fourteenth century, underscored the close association between crusading exploits and the acquisition of relics, emphasising in his account of the conquest of Myra the discovery of those belonging to the saint.[17]

Another emblematic object of Genoese piety and prestige was the Sacro Catino, likewise acquired during the First Crusade. As William of Tyre records, the green glass vessel was taken in 1101 during the sack of Caesarea, in which the Genoese played a significant role.[18] In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Sacro Catino was prized chiefly for its material splendour, believed to be a dish of emerald, rather than for its sacred associations. Only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did the belief arise that it had been used at the Last Supper; yet even then it never became the focus of widespread popular devotion. Nonetheless, preserved in the cathedral, the Sacro Catino remained one of the most striking symbols of Genoa's enduring ties with the East.[19]

The crusading ventures of Venice prolonged the period of relic acquisition in the East, sustained by a tradition of sacred theft and by the city's close relations with the Byzantine world. The sequence of furta sacra began almost simultaneously with Genoa: in 1100, the body of St. Nicholas, declared authentic in opposition to the remains already seized and venerated in Bari, was carried from Myra to the lagoon. In the same year, the relics of St. Stephen were removed from Constantinople and brought to Venice. Soon afterwards, the remains of

[15] V. Polonio, "L'arrivo delle ceneri del Precursore," 53-54. Iacopo da Varazze was the author of a history of the arrival of the ashes of John the Baptist in Genoa: Iacopo Da Varagine, "Istoria sive legenda translationis beatissimi Johannis Baptiste," in *Due opuscoli di Jacopo da Varagine*, ed. Amedeo Vigna (Genoa: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 1874), 457-491.

[16] V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," in *Genova, Venezia, il Levante nei secoli XII-XI*, ed. Gherardo Ortalli, Dino Puncuh (Genoa: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 2001), 352-353.

[17] V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," 353.

[18] William of Tyre, *Chronicon*, I, ed. Robert Burchard Constantijn Huygens, Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis, 63-63A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1986), 471; R. Müller, "Il Sacro Catino," in *Intorno al Sacro Volto: Genova, Bisanzio e il Mediterraneo (secoli XI - XIV)*, ed. Anna Rosa Calderoni Masetti, Colette Dufour Bozzo, Gerhard Wolf (Venice: Marsilio, 2007), 94-95.

[19] On the discussion around the *Sacro Catino* I refer to: A. Musarra, "Memorie di Terrasanta," 549-553.

numerous other saints, among them Isidore, Anastasius, and Donatus, were likewise taken in the East and translated to the Venetian centre.[20] Throughout the twelfth century the Byzantine Empire remained the principal source from which the Venetians appropriated relics, and the very concept of *translatio* was consistently framed as a movement from East to West. The underlying notion was that the Christian East had failed in its duty to safeguard the relics entrusted to it. The remains of the saints, therefore, were destined to move westwards, where they would receive the veneration they deserved.[21] Geary has observed that the mechanisms of translation varied according to the political relationship with the former custodians: Venice pursued this appropriation by violent means, seizing relics from the Byzantine Empire as a symbolic assertion of cultural and political ascendancy.[22] The forcible capture of sacred treasures thus articulated an overtly hostile posture towards Byzantium. Such acts of spoliation were celebrated as exploits that humiliated Venice's rivals by demonstrating that the Empire was unworthy of preserving holy objects. In this way, Venice symbolically subjugated one of the great powers of the Mediterranean.[23] As Karen Rose Mathews has noted, secular *spolia* and looted relics in Venice functioned as mutually reinforcing symbols. The sacred aura of the relics magnified the prestige of individual churches, which themselves came to be conceived as monumental reliquaries. Conversely, the incorporation of columns, capitals, and sculptures taken from antiquity and from the Byzantine world enhanced the splendour of the church-reliquary and, at times, even underpinned its legitimacy. Already in the twelfth century, the bodies of saints were understood as war trophies, a potent emblem of Venetian triumph over a formidable and threatening adversary, one that was culturally alluring yet ultimately cast as antagonistic.[24]

[20] A. Rigon, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo veneziano," in *Genova, Venezia, il Levante nei secoli XII-XI*, ed. Ortalli, Puncuh, 398-399.

[21] K. R. Mathews, *Conflict, Commerce, and an Aesthetic of Appropriation*, 78.

[22] P. J. Geary, "Sacred commodities: the circulation of Medieval relics," in *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 189; K. R. Mathews, *Conflict, Commerce, and an Aesthetic of Appropriation*, 79.

[23] K. R. Mathews, *Conflict, Commerce, and an Aesthetic of Appropriation*, 79.

[24] K. R. Mathews, *Conflict, Commerce, and an Aesthetic of Appropriation*, 84-85; D. M. Perry, *Sacred plunder: Venice and the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015); H. Westermann-Angerhausen, "Spolia as Relics? Relics as Spoils? The Meaning and Function of Spolia in Western Medieval Reliquaries," in *Saints and Sacred Matter. The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. Cynthia J. Hahn, Holger A. Klein (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks 2015), 173-192.

This period of sacred theft and *translationes* reached its culmination in 1204 with the sack of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade, which unleashed a new wave of Eastern and Byzantine relics. Among the treasures seized were the bodies of St. Lucy and St. Simeon, an arm of St. George, an ampulla containing the blood of Christ, as well as numerous icons and holy images.[25] Venice thus became the heir to a vast religious patrimony transferred from the East to the lagoon. The subsequent influx of relics throughout the thirteenth century was remarkable: the remains of St. Helena arrived in 1211, those of St. Marina in 1213, St. John of Alexandria the martyr in 1216, St. Paul the martyr in 1222, St. Paul the Hermit in 1240, St. Eutychius in 1246, and St. John the Merciful in 1249.[26] This continuous stream of sacred bodies and objects profoundly shaped Venetian devotions, determining the dedications of churches both in the lagoon and on the mainland. In this way, Venice sought to fashion itself as a new sacred centre, with St. Mark's Cathedral assuming the character of a vast reliquary designed to house this holy treasure. Unlike many Italian cities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Venice appeared reluctant to cultivate devotions centred on contemporary lay saints associated with penitential practices, though such figures were not altogether absent. Instead, the city's cultic life remained oriented toward saints from distant lands, whose relics, brought from the East, were domesticated within the Venetian devotional landscape through the city's overseas projection. The most prestigious of these relics, naturally, derived from Constantinople and the Holy Land.[27]

During the following centuries, the appropriation of relics was seen as the longest lasting and most impactful achievement of Venetian enterprises in the Holy Land. The fourteenth-century chronicles of Andrea Dandolo and the anonymous Pseudo-Enrico Dandolo, describing the events of the Venetian crusade of 1123-1126, do not dwell on the military exploits, but on the description of the theft of relics from the Levant. Pseudo-Dandolo focuses on how the Venetians obtained the body of Saint Nicholas. The chronicler even engaged in a comparison of sources: while one tradition located the finding of the relics near Myra, another named the city of Patras, "che è in Romania bassa."[28] In any case, the bodily remains of Saint Nicholas were moved to the Lido, although Venetian sailors left a part of the saint near Bari.[29] Similarly, in

[25] S. Tramontin, "Influsso orientale nel culto dei Santi a Venezia fino al secolo XV," 807-808.

[26] A. Rigon, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo veneziano," 405; A. Niero, "I santi patroni," in *Culto dei santi a Venezia*, ed. Tramontin, 87-88.

[27] A. Vauchez, "La difficile émergence d'une sainteté des laïcs à Venise aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles," in *Genova, Venezia, il Levante nei secoli XII-XI*, ed. Ortalli, Puncuh, 345-347.

[28] *Cronica di Venexia detta di Enrico Dandolo: origini-1362*, ed. Roberta Pesce (Venice: Centro di studi medievali e rinascimentali "E.A. Cicogna", 2010), 55.

[29] *Cronica di Venexia detta di Enrico Dandolo*, 55.

that same period Callixtus II's crusade mostly resulted in obtaining a stone on which Christ sat down to preach, "cum sí aduxe et tolse quella de Thyro."[30] The stone was transported by ship to Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice. In the author's time, it was still standing by the altar of Saint John the Baptist. On the Greek island of Chios, the body of Saint Isidore was recovered and placed in the relic container that had become Saint Mark's Basilica. With a certain pride, the anonymous author recounts how the body of Saint Stephen was also furtively taken by the Venetians from some monks in Constantinople.[31] Likewise, amidst the seizure of the Byzantine capital during the Fourth Crusade, the author insisted on the large amount of *spolia* taken by force, which allowed the Venetians to embellish their cathedral.[32]

What brings Pseudo-Dandolo's attention to events overseas is a logic of appropriation. In the earlier chronicles, the same literary position was accompanied by descriptions of facts and events. In the anonymous, these descriptions were considerably reduced, while the reports on the theft of relics remained of the same length. The *furta sacra*, the true material legacy of the time of the crusades and still visible in 14th-century Venice, is the focal point on which the Pseudo-Dandolo wants to centre his attention. In short, relics are one lasting result of a successful war. The description of the crusade was reduced to an examination of how sacred objects were transported from the East to the capital, which inherited sanctity from those lands.[33] The Fourth Crusade was an unavoidable moment for all Venetian chronicles, which felt an apologetic duty towards the operations of their own city.[34] Even smaller towns like Ortona, on the Adriatic coast, obtained their share of relics. The bones of Saint Thomas the

[30] *Cronica di Venexia detta di Enrico Dandolo*, 59.

[31] *Cronica di Venexia detta di Enrico Dandolo*, 60. Andrea Dandolo also recounts the appropriation of the relics of Saint Isidore in Chios, although the focus on this event is just a part of a longer narrative. Andrea Dandolo, *Chronica per extensum descripta, aa. 46-1280 d.C.*, ed. Ester Pastorello, Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, ser. II, 12/1 (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1938-1958), 234.

[32] *Cronica di Venexia detta di Enrico Dandolo*, 78.

[33] For a general overview of the theft of relics, and particularly the case of Venice: M. Papasidero, *Translatio sanctitatis. I furti di reliquie nell'Italia medievale* (Florence: Firenze University Press 2019), 37-46. For the English version of the book: M. Papasidero, *Thefts of Relics in Italy. From Late Antiquity to the Central Middle Ages, 300-1150* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2025).

[34] On the relationship between Venetian chronicles and the Fourth Crusade: Ş. Marin, ""Dominus quartae partis et dimidiae totius Imperii Romaniae". The Fourth Crusade and the Dogal Title in the Venetian Chronicles' Representation," *Quaderni della Casa Romena di Venezia* 3 (2004): 119-150; Ş. Marin, "Between Justification and Glory: the Venetian Chronicles' View regarding the Fourth Crusade," in *The Fourth crusade. Event, aftermath, and perceptions*, Thomas F. Madden (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008), 113-121.

Apostle had been moved from the Greek island of Chios to Ortona in 1258 by galleys. The transfer would turn the small town on the Abruzzo coast into a devotional centre, enhancing its political identity.[35]

II. Relics and secular spolia. Holy plunders in wars between maritime cities

While the violent appropriation of relics from the East continued between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we can also witness other dynamics. In particular, the mutual theft of relics between Italian maritime cities had taken hold. Holy relics were no longer just plundered from the East, stolen from the Byzantine Empire or from the lands of Syria and Palestine, but also from the Italian rivals themselves. Relics could be spoils of war, meaning moral and political superiority, or even used as hostages. The inhabitants of the maritime cities of the peninsula were therefore not only perpetrators of spoliation, but also its victims. Ana Marinković has likewise traced the systematic removal of relics by Venice across its Adriatic dominions, emphasizing the political function of such thefts, which were carried out in accordance with St. Mark's logic of subjugating subordinate communities.[36] A hagiographical text written in 1203 recounts the 1171 Venetian assault on Traù (today Trogir), then under Byzantine rule, during which the Venetians stole an arm from the body of Saint John, a local bishop venerated in Traù since the 12th century.[37] The narrative describes divine punishment striking the Venetian fleet and later relates Traù's unsuccessful attempt to recover the relic through envoys. According to the text, the arm miraculously returned on a comet, borne by angels. In reality, it was more likely restored following Traù's submission to the Kingdom of Hungary in 1180. As Ana Marinković has argued, the relic functioned as a hostage to secure the city's loyalty, and was consequently transferred to Traù's new lord.[38]

This was not an isolated case. St. Chrysogonus came to be venerated as one of the protectors of Zadar from a precise moment: in 1190 his intercession was believed to have secured the city's victory in the war against Venice. In 1205, following the events of the Fourth Crusade, Zadar concluded peace with Venice

[35] R. Di Martino, "Il viaggio di San Tommaso Apostolo da Chios a Ortona," in *Dai Giustiniani all'Unione Europea: un percorso continuo. Atti del convegno Bassano Romano, 17 aprile 2004*, ed. Enrico Giustiniani (Bassano Romano: Comune di Bassano Romano, 2005), 301-305.

[36] A. Marinković, "Hostage relics and Venetian Maritime Control in the Eastern Adriatic," in *Ein Meer und seine Heiligen. Hagiographie im mittelalterlichen Mediterraneum*, ed. Nikolas Jaspert, Christian A. Neumann, Marco Di Branco (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöning, 2018), 275-296.

[37] D. Farlati, *Život sv. Ivana Trogirskog: po izdanju Daniela Farlatija*, ed. Kažimir Lučin (Split-Trogir: Matica hrvatska - Književni krug, 1998).

[38] A. Marinković, "Hostage relics and Venetian Maritime Control," 279-281.

and accepted its rule. The Venetian decision to remove the relics of St. Chrysogonus was most likely linked to the symbolic role the saint had acquired after 1190. The relic was transferred to the lagoon and venerated there. The story of its return to Zadar is transmitted in several versions, with the date ranging between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries.[39] In any case, the aim of the Venetian doges was to reaffirm their control over the rebellious cities of the Adriatic. One means of ensuring such subjugation was to seize a city's relics and keep them in the capital as hostages. The body of another patron of Zadar, St. Simeon, was likewise requisitioned and temporarily transferred to Venice around the middle of the fourteenth century. Retained there as a guarantee against renewed rebellion, the relic was only restored to Zadar after the cession of the city to the King of Hungary in 1358.[40]

During the fourteenth century, a certain narrowing of horizons among the Italian maritime cities can be discerned, as Benjamin Kedar has suggested, linked to the contraction brought about by the prevailing socio-economic conditions.[41] The provenance of holy relics likewise shifted. No longer were the *furta sacra* directed primarily eastwards; instead, the Italian peninsula itself, once an importer, was transformed into a reservoir of sacred remains. The wars between Genoa and Venice are indicative of this trend. In 1354, the Genoese admiral Paganino Doria, during the conflict against Venice, stole with his fleet the bodies of Saint Maurus and Saint Eleutherius kept in Parenzo (today Poreč, Istria), and moved them to the Genoese church of San Matteo, managed by the Doria family.[42] The war of Chioggia is, perhaps, the most emblematic moment to show the war of relics, which ran parallel to the fighting at sea. By 1379, the Genoese captured a number of Veneto-Istrian towns: Caorle, Grado, Trieste, Rovinj, Umag, Cittanova (today Novigrad). In some of these they had confiscated relics and brought them to Genoa. The bodies of Saint Pelagius and

[39] A. Marinković, "Hostage relics and Venetian Maritime Control," 281-283.

[40] A. Marinković, "Hostage relics and Venetian Maritime Control," 284-285.

[41] B. Z. Kedar, *Merchants in crisis. Genoese and Venetian men of affairs and the fourteeth-century depression*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

[42] V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," 389. On the sack of 1354 and the subsequent problems with the recovery of the relics: G. Cuscito, "I santi Mauro ed Eleuterio di Parenzo. L'identità, il culto, le reliquie," *Atti del Centro di Ricerche Storiche Rovigno* 16 (1985-1986): 53-56. In the eighteenth century, Bishop Vincenzo Maria Mazzoleni succeeded in regaining two femurs of the saints from the Doria family. They were brought back to Poreč, where in 1749 Bishop Gaspare Negri finally consecrated an altar to Saint Maurus: G. B. Contarini, *Memorie storiche delle sacre reliquie de' SS. martiri Mauro ed Eleuterio protettori della città e diocesi di Parenzo* (Venice: Simone Occhi, 1749). The relics were only fully returned from Genoa to Poreč on 10 June 1934: E. Migliorini, F. Forlati, P. Sticotti, M. Brunetti, "Parenzo," in *Enciclopedia Italiana* (Rome: Treccani, 1935).

Maximus, patrons of Cittanova, are documented in the Genoese church of San Matteo in 1381.[43] In 1380, a fleet of galleys commanded by Matteo Maruffo attempted to rescue the besieged Genoese and Paduans in the lagoon of Chioggia. Despite their failure, Maruffo's fleet was festively welcomed in Genoa for bringing back a great number of relics, stolen from Venetian territories in the Adriatic. The arrival of the relics was celebrated with solemn processions, in the presence of the clergy and officials of the government, and the relics were divided between the cathedral of San Lorenzo, the *comune*, the patrons of the galleys and some city churches. It was a meagre attempt to balance the military defeat. Many of the relics were not even known to which saint they belonged: a sign that the true prestige of the *furta sacra* was having taken sacred objects from the enemy, even more so than the relic itself.[44]

Instead, the body of Saint Euphemia, the patron saint of Rovinj, was taken by the Genoese army to Chioggia. After the Venetian victory in the siege, the commander Vittor Pisani recaptured the relic and brought it to Venice, to the church of San Canzian.[45] In 1401, the lay representatives of Rovinj begged for its return, which was finally granted. Also, during the War of Chioggia, in 1378, a Venetian fleet under the command of Vittor Pisani attacked Kotor, a subject to the King of Hungary. During the conquest, the hand of Saint Tryphon, the town's patron saint, was stolen. The relic was transported to the Venetian church of San Fantin.[46] The citizens of Kotor protested: a first document shows a request for restitution in 1400, repeated in 1423. Both pleas were refused. Vittor Pisani's insistence on keeping the remains of Saint Tryphon in his parish church, San Fantin, despite the fact that it was not the most important relic, shows a clear political message and the asymmetrical relationship between the two cities.[47] Marinković interprets even these episodes through the concept of a "hostage-relic situation": uncertain of the loyalty of Rovinj and Kotor, Venice retained its

[43] A. Marinković, "Hostage relics and Venetian Maritime Control," 286.

[44] The relics were conserved in the cathedral of San Lorenzo, inside a chest with three different locks, the keys of which were given to as many people. Other relics were given to various city churches, such as San Giorgio and San Luca, which received the remains of their respective saints. The list of relics is in: Archivio di Stato di Genova (ASGe), *Archivio Segreto, Diversorum* 497, ff. 45v.-46r. Genoa, 6 March 1382. Edited in: S. Lombardo, *La Croce dei Mercanti. Genova, Venezia e la Crociata Mediterranea nel tardo Trecento (1348-1402)* (Paderborn: Brill, 2023), 566-567.

[45] A. Marinković, "Hostage relics and Venetian Maritime Control," 286; *Translatio corporis beate Eufemie*, ed. Mate Križman, Josip Barbarić (Pula: Zavičajna naklada "Žakan Juri", 2000), 186-191.

[46] N. Jakšić, "Un gruppo di reliquiari trecenteschi da Cattaro a Venezia e Chioggia," in *Letteratura, arte, cultura tra le due sponde dell'Adriatico*, ed. Guido Baldassarri (Zadar: Sveuciliste, 2008), 219-237.

[47] A. Marinković, "Hostage relics and Venetian Maritime Control," 289.

relics, just as it might have held men in order to guarantee the fidelity of subject communities.[48] This hypothesis does not, however, exclude a straightforward Venetian eagerness to appropriate relics, particularly in the case of subjugated cities deemed inferior. Beyond political calculation, one must also consider the perceived spiritual prestige that came with preserving sacred remains in Venice itself. Once again, the city sought to fashion itself as a new Byzantium.

In the same conflict, the Venetian admiral Carlo Zen arrived in Liguria with his fleet of galleys. He managed to steal some relics of Saint Venerio del Tino from Portovenere. The Genoese chronicler Giorgio Stella states, however, that they were fake relics, perhaps to downplay the impact of the theft.[49] Devotional horizons narrowed, and civic competition seemed to be the real devotional focus. On 26 September 1386, the Roman Pope Urban VI, who was in Genoa at the time, issued an indicative privilege: those who went on the feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist to venerate his relics, kept in the Genoese cathedral, were granted the same indulgences enjoyed by the Venetian Basilica of Saint Mark, for the feast of the Ascension.[50] The Genoese did not even ask for the exact terms of the indulgences, which in fact are not stated on the papal bull. They just wanted the equivalence with the church and the patron saint of the rival city. The veneration of saints, spiritual benefits or *furta sacra* seemed a matter of civic prestige in the aftermath of the Chioggia war.[51]

In the fourteenth century Philippe de Mézières did not hesitate to describe Venice as one of the centres of lay religiosity in Europe.[52] The nature of translations, however, had shifted, and the flow of relics from the East came to an end during this period.[53] Venetian efforts were redirected, at best, toward Eastern Europe and the Slavic lands, as in the case of the remains of St. Gerard of Csanád, a Venetian martyred in the eleventh century, which were brought to the lagoon in 1384.[54] In the fourteenth century, translations also took place within the city itself, as relics were transferred to other churches or relocated to

[48] A. Marinković, "Hostage relics and Venetian Maritime Control," 287-289.

[49] The chronicler Giorgio Stella claimed to have spoken personally with the abbot of the San Tino monastery. The abbot swore that he had never known to whom the relics removed by the Venetians belonged, but that they were definitely not those of Saint Venerio. *Georgii et Iohannis Stellae Annales Genuenses*, ed. Giovanna Petti Balbi, Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, ser. II, 17/2 (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1975), 174.

[50] The papal bull is in: ASGe, *Bolle e brevi* 1554, doc. 12. Genoa, 26 September 1386. Also Giorgio Stella quotes it: *Georgii et Iohannis Stellae Annales Genuenses*, 193.

[51] The *furta sacra* were also a way of humiliating the enemy, taking away his otherworldly protection references. V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," 390.

[52] A. Vauchez, "La difficile émergence d'une sainteté des laïcs à Venise," 347-348.

[53] A. Niero, "Reliquie e corpi di santi," 192.

[54] A. Niero, "Reliquie e corpi di santi," 205.

different sites within the urban fabric.[55] Certainly, the arrival of relics, images, and Greek icons from the East never ceased altogether, at least until the fifteenth century.[56] These, however, were isolated instances, almost all dating from the fifteenth century, when efforts were made to safeguard the Byzantine sacred heritage from the advance of the Turks. Only a handful of such cases can be observed.[57] More characteristic of the period was a tendency to re-evaluate ancient cults, often dispersed among the churches, *Scuole*, and sanctuaries of the lagoon, especially in response to particular events or moments of danger. Venice no longer had to legitimise its own greatness with new acquisitions through violence, but had to jealously defend its religious heritage from external assaults, such as Genoese attacks, or from internal theft. This defensive effort culminated in the compilation of catalogues of relics kept at the *Scuole*. Relics were often reserved for use by the confraternity that possessed them and were governed by restrictive regulations. In fourteenth-century Venice, the priority was to defend against *furta sacra*. The earlier dynamism of new acquisitions had given way to the static concern of preservation.[58] New arrivals might come through personal donations, such as the fragment of the True Cross presented in 1370 by Philippe de Mézières to the Scuola of San Giovanni Evangelista.[59] When linked to war, new acquisitions occurred within the Italian context. In Venice during this period, the preference was to safeguard the patrimony amassed over the centuries rather than to enlarge it with further relics from the Levant. Relics circulated instead through mutual theft between Italian cities or were obtained from neighbouring regions.

The bodies of saints, obtained by force during military expeditions, took on a strong internal value in maritime cities. They strengthened cohesion in the face of challenges and adversities. Their value was also external, as signs of identity, which could and should be stolen from the adversary. Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, there was a strong mobility of relics, which were plundered in the East and then in conflicts between Italian maritime cities. As a result, the pantheon of city saints increased through war, raids and *furta sacra*. Instead, the fiteenth century witnessed a certain crystallisation of cults, which became

[55] A. Rigon, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo veneziano," 409.

[56] S. Tramontin, "Influsso orientale nel culto dei Santi a Venezia fino al secolo XV," 808-809, 818-819.

[57] The only late fourteenth century case is that of the relics of the blessed Gentile from Matelica, a Franciscan friar martyred in Persia in 1340. He was a modern saint, compared to the more prestigious ancient Eastern fathers. A. Rigon, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo veneziano," 409.

[58] A. Rigon, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo veneziano," 411-412.

[59] K. Petkov, *The Anxieties of a Citizen Class. The Miracles of the True Cross of San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice 1370-1480* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 15-16.

institutionalised within each community. Relics, the legacy of past conflicts, were transformed into static and defining elements of the political organism. Scholars such as André Vauchez or Franco Cardini, with regard to the Italian context, investigated the medieval "civic religion" in this sense. While the cult of patron saints was traditionally overseen by the bishop and the cathedral clergy, from the twelfth century onwards civil institutions began to appropriate the figure of some saints. Relics, as well as depictions of patron saints in military-political banners, *signa* and seals, were a key element in this development. The *comune* and the urban aristocracy legitimised and sacralised their power by grafting themselves onto the body of a saint and the rites related to him. The interplay between the sacralisation of civic power through religious commitment and the secularisation of religion was complex, particularly in the fourteenth century.[60] The association with military exploits was strong, and religious festivals frequently overlapped with the commemoration of battles. In 1402, Marshal Boucicaut, in his reorganisation of Genoese festivities, abolished several civic celebrations that had assumed religious forms and imposed a drastic reduction in the number of *pallia* to be offered. Only four were henceforth permitted each year, foremost among them that of the Epiphany in the church of San Giorgio, offered "for all the victories of the Genoese, since Saint George is our standard-bearer." In this rite, the *comune* solemnly celebrated its military triumphs.[61]

In the Italian maritime communities, a certain ambiguity can often be discerned between *spolia*, war trophies, and relics, for in many cases their functions overlapped. These categories were repeatedly associated with confrontation against enemies and with civic self-representation. Trophies and relics alike were preserved and displayed in the same settings, such as churches and other religious buildings, so that the boundary between them was blurred. *Spolia* were frequently regarded as secular relics and assumed an almost sacred value as symbols of supremacy, linked to past clashes. Medieval war trophies and their public display are the result of an ancient tradition. Relics, especially when stolen from enemies in distant contexts, were a sign of divine favour in war and protection granted to the centre. *Spolia* and relics performed similar functions, reassuring and comforting. Civic and religious values often intersected. After all, did not the trophies stolen by the Genoese from the Venetians represent the lion of the evangelist Saint Mark, whose relics were kept in the cathedral in the lagoon? The ambiguity between relics and secular *spolia* could be easily observed within Italian maritime cities.

[60] A. Vauchez, "La religione civica: alcune riflessioni attorno a un concetto storiografico," 3-9.
[61] *Georgii et Iohannis Stellae Annales Genuenses*, 259.

The Genoese in the Middle Ages brought many war trophies back to the city, which confirmed the need for symbols to legitimize their identity. Rebecca Müller focused on the analysis of the Genoese *spolia*, although she did not consider the relics as such.[62] Most of the trophies were related to the wars against Pisa and Venice. The *spolia* were therefore publicly displayed in city churches, particularly in buildings other than the cathedral of San Lorenzo.[63] The Genoese had taken possession of the chains that closed the port of Porto Pisano in 1288-1289: this was an evident sign of superiority over their adversary. Besides the two city gates, parts of the chains had been hung on the facades of at least eleven churches in Genoa, where they remained for almost six centuries.[64] Similarly, a Venetian lion plundered in Pula in 1380 is still walled on the Genoese church of San Marco al Molo.[65] The civic value of churches, on the other hand, is not a new phenomenon. Precisely on the façade of the church of San Matteo in Genoa several inscriptions displayed victories against rival cities, in which the members of the Doria family played a key role. The battle of Meloria against the Pisans, those of Curzola, the Bosphorus and Pola against the Venetians are described.[66] These were widespread phenomena. In the thirteenth century, the Venetians plundered the stones of the Genoese tower in Acre after its destruction in the Saint Sabas war. A large square stone, taken from the foundations of the Genoese tower, was placed by Lorenzo Tiepolo near the doors of the church of San Pantaleon in Venice.[67] The Pisans, on the other hand, detached some stones from the communal palace of Lucca in 1314 and walled them up in the cathedral of Cagliari, to demonstrate their dominance in Sardinia.[68] In short, the distinction between relics of saints seized from the enemy and political trophies taken under the same conditions was often tenuous. By the end of the Middle Ages, civic politics and urban religiosity appeared closely intertwined. In short, the

[62] R. Müller, *Sic hostes Ianua frangit. Spolien und Trophäen im mittelalterlichen Genua* (Weimar: VDG, 2002).

[63] R. Müller, "Genova vittoriosa: i trofei bellici," in *Genova: opere, artisti, committenti, collezionisti e l'Europa mediterranea*, ed. Clario Di Fabio (Milan: P. Boccardo, 2005), 96.

[64] R. Müller, "Genova vittoriosa: i trofei bellici," 103.

[65] In the caption under the lion of Saint Mark, which can be seen on the left side of the church of San Marco al Molo in Genoa, one can still read: "Iste lapis in quo est figura sancti Marci delatus fuit a civitate Polae capta a nostris MCCCLXXX die XIII ianuarii."

[66] For the text of the inscriptions of San Matteo: S. Origone, A. Silva, C. Varaldo, *Corpus inscriptionum medii aevi Liguriae. 3. Genova: centro storico* (Genoa: Università di Genova, 1987). Also: A. Musarra, *Il Grifo e il Leone. Genova e Venezia in lotta per il Mediterraneo* (Bari: Laterza, 2020), 240-241, 257-258; B. Bernabò, R. Cavalli, "San Matteo in Genova: chiesa gentilizia e "monumento" celebrativo della famiglia Doria," in *Verso Genova medieval* (Genoa: Grafema, 1989), 25-40.

[67] R. Müller, "Genova vittoriosa: i trofei bellici," 102.

[68] R. Müller, "Genova vittoriosa: i trofei bellici," 102.

distinction between relics of saints seized from the enemy and political trophies taken under the same conditions was often tenuous. By the end of the Middle Ages, civic politics and urban religiosity appeared closely intertwined.

III. A relic of war. The True Cross and the Genoese

We shall now consider the issue of bringing relics into battle by the armies and fleets of the *comuni*. The most accessible evidence concerns the relics of the True Cross in the crusader armies. A durable tradition, rooted in imperial ideology and widely imitated, encouraged the carrying of relics of the Holy Cross on military campaigns. In the Byzantine Empire such relics were likewise employed in warfare, as well as in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. [69] Crusader sources, often programmatically attuned to the sacred dimension of war, emphasise these practices, potentially exaggerating the prominence of relics. Some scholars investigated the wartime use of relics of the True Cross, which had the function of raising the morale of combatants in the Holy Land.[70] Between 1099 and 1187 the relic was carried onto the battlefield on at least thirty-one occasions. Enclosed in a large cruciform reliquary, it was borne into battle by the Patriarch of

[69] For the wartime use of relics in Byzantium: A. Frolow, "La Vraie Croix et les expéditions d'Héraclius en Perse," *Revue des études byzantines* 11/1 (1953): 88-105; J. T. Wortley, "The Marian Relics at Constantinople," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 45/2 (2005): 171-187; D. F. Sullivan, "Siege Warfare, Nikephoros II Phokas, Relics and Personal Piety," in *Byzantine religious culture. Studies in honor of Alice-Mary Talbot*, ed. Denis F. Sullivan et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 395-409; J. Serrano del Pozo, "Relics, Images, and Christian Apotropaic Devices in the Roman-Persian Wars (4th-7th Centuries)," *Eikón Imago* 11 (2022): 57-69.

[70] The True Cross is one of the relics with the highest impact in the history of Christianity. In general: C. Mercuri, *La Vera Croce. Storia e leggenda dal Golgota a Roma* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2014). On the use of the True Cross by the crusader armies: A. V. Murray, "'Mighty against the enemies of Christ': the relic of the True Cross in the armies of the kingdom of Jerusalem," in Alan V. Murray, *The Franks in Outremer. Studies in the Latin Principalities of Palestine and Syria, 1099-1187* (Farnham: Ashgate 2015), Pt. XV, 217-238. Also: A. Benvenuti, "Reliquie e soprannaturale al tempo delle crociate," in *Le crociate. L'oriente e l'occidente da Urbano II a San Luigi 1096-1270*, 355-361; G. Ligato, "The Political Meanings of the Relic of the Holy Cross among the crusaders and in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem: An Example of 1185," in *Autour de la première croisade. Actes du colloque de la Society for the Study of the Crusades and the latin East (Clermont-Ferrand, 22-25 juin 1995)*, ed. Michel Balard (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1996), 315-330; D. Gerish, "The True Cross and the Kings of Jerusalem," *The Haskins Society journal* 8 (1996): 137-155; F. Caroff, "L'affrontement entre chrétiens et musulmans. Le rôle de la vraie Croix dans les images de croisade (XIIIe-XVe siècle)," in *Chemins d'outre-mer. Études d'histoire sur la Méditerranée médiévale offertes à Michel Balard*, ed. Damien Coulon (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2004), 99-114.

Jerusalem or his deputy and was protected by a contingent of Templars.[71] However, the relic did not leave the borders of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and was always used in defensive campaigns, with great caution. Its loss at the Battle of Hattin in 1187 had therefore come as a shock to the Latin Christian world.[72] Other fragments of the True Cross were also used in a similar way in the Kingdom of Georgia, but maybe as an adaptation of the Byzantine pattern.[73]

The evidence emerging from Italian maritime cities is especially noteworthy. The stories of the fragments of the True Cross are particularly linked to Genoa. Some of these relics have been stolen by the Genoese in corsair actions, or arrived in the city following warlike events. A first fragment of the True Cross arrived in the capital between 1187 and 1191: we have the narratives of the chronicler Iacopo Doria, annalist and archivist of the *comune* at the end of the thirteenth century, and of Iacopo da Varagine, Archbishop of Genoa at the same time. The piece of wood, kept in a precious case, was donated to the Genoese by Conrad of Monferrat for their help in defending Tyre from Saladin's assaults. The marquis, in fact, praised the behaviour of the Genoese in the battle.[74] According to Doria, Conrad had come into possession of the fragments in Acre after its conquest, so the date of the donation would shift to 1191. In any case, the relic of the True Cross witnesses the active warlike role of the Genoese in an anti-Islamic function.[75] A second fragment arrived in Genoa in 1195 in a daring manner. Iacopo da Varagine's narration of the events is included in his *Chronica civitatis Ianuensis*, a text composed more than a century after the events, between 1295 and 1297. Caution is needed, given the archbishop's programmatic intent to educate the readers.[76]

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[71] M. Tsurtsumia, "The True Cross in the Armies of Georgia and the Frankish East," *Crusades* 12 (2013): 92-93.

[72] C. Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 379-380.

[73] There is no scholarly consensus as to whether the use of the True Cross was more directly associated with Jerusalem or tied to Byzantine ideological models: M. Tsurtsumia, "The True Cross in the Armies of Georgia and the Frankish East," 91-102; S. Nikolaishvili, *Byzantium and the Georgian Worlds c. 900-1210: Ideology of Kingship and Rhetoric in the Byzantine Periphery*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Central European University, 2019, 97-98; M. Janjalia, "Between Jerusalem and Constantinople: Revisiting the Eleventh Century Georgian Religious Art," *Convivium* 9/2 (2022): 62-81.

[74] *I Libri Iurium della Repubblica di Genova*, I/2, ed. Dino Puncuh, Fonti per la Storia della Liguria, 4 (Genoa-Rome: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 1996), doc. 331, 334: 137-140, 144-146.

[75] V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," 363-364; A. Musarra, *In partibus Ultramaris*, 619-620.

[76] The *Chronica* is written according to a historiographical model, in which God is both the inspirer and the recipient. As noted by Stefania Bertini Guidetti: "Iacopo non si preoccupa

> In the time of this archbishop [Boniface, the third of this name], namely in the year of the Lord 1195, the True Cross of Christ, referred to by antonomasia as the Holy Cross, was brought to Genoa. The patriarch of Jerusalem used always to carry this Holy Cross into battle and would obtain victory. However, as a consequence of sins, it happened that Saladin captured Jerusalem along with the patriarch and the Holy Cross. Later, when the Emperor of the Greeks came to an agreement with Saladin, the said Saladin sent the aforementioned Cross to the Greek Emperor on a certain ship. But some Genoese and Pisan galleys seized that ship by armed force. While they were dividing the spoils, a certain Pisan named Forte secretly stole that Cross and hid it in the castle of Bonifacio, which the Genoese had once destroyed but the Pisans had rebuilt. Three ships and some galleys of the Genoese then captured the said castle. Seeing this, the said Forte, trusting in the power of the Holy Cross, placed it on his chest and, passing safely through the midst of the enemy, exited the castle and hid himself in a certain forest. But at length he returned to the castle and gave the Cross to the *comune* of Genoa, becoming a citizen of Genoa. It is also said that Forte, having taken the said Cross and trusting in its power, began to walk over the sea as if on solid ground; and while he thought he was fleeing and moving away from the castle, by the will of God, he suddenly found himself back in the castle. And thus, the Genoese, having received that Cross, sent it to Genoa.[77]

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di approfondire con troppa cura le personalità dei singoli […], ciò che effettivamente interessa all'autore è la loro funzione all'interno del disegno globale della storia, di cui Dio è l'unico vero artifice." Iacopo da Varagine, *Cronaca della città di Genova dalle origini al 1297. Testo latino in Appendice*, ed. Stefania Bertini Guidetti (Genoa: ECIG, 1995), 20.

[77] "Tempore quoque istius archiepiscopi [Bonifacius, archiepiscopus tercius], scilicet anno Domini .M.C.LXXXXV, vera Crux Christi, que sancta Christi antonomastice dicitur, Ianuam est delata. Ipsam quidem sanctam Crucem patriarcha Ierosolimitanus semper in preliis deferebat et victoriam obtinebat. Accidit autem, peccatis exigentibus, quod Saladinus Ierusalem cum patriarcha et sancta Cruce cepit. Tempore autem procedente, cum imperator Grecorum cum Saladino composuisset, remittebat dictus Saladinus ipsi imperatori Grecorum in quadam nave Crucem predictam. Quedam autem galee Ianuensium et Pisanorum supradictam navem manu armata ceperunt. Dum vero spolia dividerent, quidam Pisanus, nomine Fortis, Cucem illam latenter subripuit et in castro Bonifacii, quod olim Ianuenses destruxerant, sed Pisani reedificaverant, servandam reposuit. Tres naves et quedam galee Ianuensium dictum castrum ceperunt. Quod cernens dictus Fortis, de virtute sancte Crucis confidens, ipsam pectori suo apposuit et per medios hostes secure transiens, de castro exivit et in quadam silva se abscondit. Sed tandem ad castrum rediit et ipsam

With these words, Iacopo da Varagine narrates the arrival in Genoa of the "vera Crux Christi, que sancta Christi antonomastice dicitur." According to the archbishop, the Genoese had come into possession of the very fragment that the Patriarch of Jerusalem customarily carried into battle, a source of divine favour through which he "obtained victory." Though he offers no precise details, Iacopo clearly identifies this relic with the one believed to have been lost at the Battle of Hattin in 1187. In his account, the True Cross was sent by Saladin to the Emperor of Constantinople as part of a diplomatic arrangement. The relic ended up in Bonifacio, Corsica, whose fortress was at that time at the centre of the conflict between the Genoese and the Pisans, and then in Genoa.[78] The archbishop does not appear to have been well informed about the actual course of events, since the Patriarch of Jerusalem was not present at Hattin at the time of the battle. Iacopo may therefore be referring to a different fragment of the Holy Wood, distinct from the one lost at Hattin in 1187. Rather, it appears to have been another relic associated with Latin ecclesiastical circles in Jerusalem, perhaps intended to be worn around the neck. Naturally, the absence of any explicit reference to the battle of Hattin cannot be taken as evidence to the contrary. Indeed, few possessions could have conferred greater prestige upon the Genoese than the custody of the relic whose loss was lamented throughout Europe. Today, no trace of this fragment remains, although it was still reportedly visible in Genoa at the end of the eighteenth century.[79] A further Genoese source echoes this same narrative: an interpolated version of the *Regni Iherosolymitani brevis historia*. Originally composed by an anonymous author between the late twelfth and the first half of the thirteenth century, the text survives in a redaction attributed to Iacopo Doria. Doria explicitly refers to an earlier written source as the basis of his account. It seems likely that this now-lost source also informed Iacopo da Varagine's version, given that both authors recount the events in an identical sequence. According to Doria:

Crucem communi Ianue dedit et civis Ianuensis effectus est. Dicitur etiam quod dictus Fortis, supradictam Crucem accipiens et de eius virtute confidens, super mare tanquam super terram solidam ire cepit, et dum putaret se fugere et castro se elongare, nutu Dei, in castro subito se invenit, et sic Ianuenses Crucem illam accipientes Ianuam transmiserunt." Iacopo da Varagine, *Chronica civitatis Ianuensis ab origine urbis usque ad annum MCCXCVII*, in *Iacopo da Varagine e la sua Cronaca di Genova dalle origini al MCCXCVII*, 2, ed. Giovanni Monleone (Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1941), 362-363.

[78] On Bonifacio's role in the Middle Ages: Jean-André Cancellieri, *Bonifacio au Moyen Âge entre Gênes, Corse, Sardaigne et Méditerranée* (Ajaccio: Centre régional de documentation pédagogique de Corse, 1996); G. Petti Balbi, *Genova e Corsica nel Trecento* (Rome: Isime, 1976).

[79] A. Musarra, *In partibus Ultramaris*, 621-623.

> And then the patriarch of Jerusalem was captured, along with the True Cross, which he always carried into battle against the enemies of God. This Cross was later brought to Genoa by certain Genoese, in the following manner. After the city of Acre was subsequently captured by Saladin, in time he made a truce with Isaac, the Emperor of the Greeks, under the following terms: among other things, the Emperor would build a mosque in the city of Constantinople for the use of the Saracens, and in return Saladin would restore to him the True Cross which he had taken. When Saladin sent it to him on a certain ship along with many other gifts, a certain Genoese named Guglielmo Grasso and a Pisan named Forte, who lived in Bonifacio, which at that time was held by the Pisans, came to an agreement, although they had formerly been enemies. Since both were pirates, they seized the said ship; and when Forte learned from one of Saladin's messengers that the True Cross was among the cargo, he secretly took that part and brought it to Bonifacio. Later, when three Genoese ships captured Bonifacio, Fortis took the Cross and, fleeing over the sea with dry feet, was pursued and captured by the Genoese along with the said True Cross. It was brought to Genoa with great joy, and to this day it is shown to the people on every Friday of each month.[80]

The two versions differ in minor details and, to some extent, complement one another. Doria reports the name of Guglielmo Grasso, a well-known Genoese

[80] "Et tunc captus fuit patriarcha Iherusalem cum vera cruce, quam ferebat in prelio semper contra innimicos Dei, quam post quidam Ianuenses detulerunt in Ianuam hoc modo. Nam capta postea civitate Acon per Salaadinum, procedente tempore treguas fecit cum Iursachio imperatore Grecorum hoc modo, quod inter cetera imperator in civitate Constantinopoli construeret musoca ad usum Sarracenorum, ipse vero eidem redderet veram crucem quam ceperat. Quam cum eidem mitteret in quadam nave cum multis aliis donis, quidam Ianuensis, nomine Willermus Grassus, et quidam Pisanus, nomine Fortis, qui habitabat in Bonifacio quem Pisani tunc temporis possidebant, cum antea ad invicem inimici essent, convenerunt in unum, cum ambo essent pyrate, et dictam navem ceperunt; et cum dictus Fortis intellexisset per unum de nunciis Saladini, quod ibi esset crux vera, eam autem partem subrupuit et Bonifacium deportavit; et cum postmodum tres naves Ianuensium Bonifatium cepissent, dictus Fortis, eam accipiens, super mare siccis pedibus fugens, per Ianuenses insecutus et captus cum dicta vera cruce, Ianuam est cum gaudio magno delata, et in quolibet die Veneris cuiuslibet mensis populo ostenditur." Caffaro, "Regni Iherosolymitani brevis historia," in *Annali genovesi di Caffaro e de' suoi continuatori*, I, ed. Luigi Tommaso Belgrano, Cesare Imperiale Di Sant'Angelo (Genoa: Tipografia del R. Istituto sordomuti, 1890-1929), 140-141.

corsair who lived in the second half of the twelfth century.[81] Indeed, letters sent by Isaac II to the Genoese and the Pisans confirm that in 1192 Grasso actually attacked a Venetian convoy returning from Alexandria.[82] On that occasion, while releasing the Genoese, Pisan, and Venetian merchants, he instead plundered the Byzantine and Saracen envoys. Among them were Muslim ambassadors *en route* to Constantinople with lavish gifts for Emperor Isaac II, who were killed and their valuable cargo, worth an estimated 6.675 *hyperpyra*, was seized.[83] Isaac II reacted harshly and retaliated against the Genoese merchant community in Constantinople. Initially, the *comune* of Genoa tried to deny any complicity with Guglielmo Grasso, but the insult, along with the theft of goods belonging to Emperor Isaac's brother Alexius, valued at 96.000 *hyperpyra*, provoked the looting of Genoese ships and warehouses in Constantinople. Hostilities ceased after merchants paid 20.000 *hyperpyra* as a preliminary indemnity. Genoa then dispatched ambassadors Guglielmo Tornello and Guido Spinola, who persuaded Isaac of the *comune*'s good faith, claiming Grasso and his accomplices had been banished and would be surrendered if caught. The treaty was reinstated, and the compensation was reduced. The story of the Genoese capture of the relic of the True Cross therefore has a kernel of truth. Iacopo Doria found information on the facts "in the books of the church of San Lorenzo" or in the archives of the *comune* under his jurisdiction. This was believed to be an important relic, although it is impossible to know whether it was really related to the fragment captured in Hattin. Above all, Emperor Isaac's complaints to Genoa do not mention the True Cross among the stolen objects. It is an omission difficult to sustain in the case of such an important relic.[84]

Two further violent episodes involving the Genoese and the relics of the True Cross took place in the immediate aftermath of the Fourth Crusade. One of these concerned a fragment of the Cross known as Saint Helena's, which had been kept in Constantinople, encased in a precious reliquary. In 1204, following the conquest of the city, the relic – along with other treasures – was loaded onto a Venetian ship. As both Iacopo Doria and Iacopo da Varagine report, the vessel was intercepted and plundered by a Genoese corsair, Dondedeo Bove de Fornari, who seized the relic. While Iacopo Doria has no problem admitting the piratical activity of his fellow citizen, the archbishop, on the other hand, is silent on embarrassing details. According to both chroniclers, Dondedeo donated the

[81] E. Basso, "Guglielmo Grasso," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 58 (Rome: Treccani, 2002), 716-720.

[82] *Codice diplomatico della repubblica di Genova*, III, ed. Cesare Imperiale Di Sant'Angelo (Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1942), 78-80, 101-107.

[83] E. Basso, "Guglielmo Grasso," 718.

[84] *Codice diplomatico della repubblica di Genova*, 78-80, 101-107.

True Cross to the *comune* and the cathedral, while he kept the other relics for himself. The De Fornari family would celebrate the exploits of their illustrious ancestor, a devout pirate, over the following centuries.[85]

There is also a record of another fragment of the True Cross seized in the course of naval violence. The chronicler Ogerio Pane writes that in 1204, a Genoese squadron of six or seven galleys surprised a ship loaded with precious goods in the port of Methoni, Greece. The vessel was plundered, and the prize was transported to Genoa.[86] The action had serious repercussions, since one of the damaged parties was the pope. The Venetian ship, in fact, had sailed from Constantinople laden with money, valuable goods and relics: these were gifts from Baldwin of Flanders, the new Latin Emperor of Constantinople, addressed to Pope Innocent III and the Templars. The pope wrote a letter of heavy complaint on 4th November 1204 to the Podestà of Genoa, listing the robbed goods and threatening an interdict against the city. Among the stolen objects was a relic of the True Cross.[87] Most of the objects were probably returned to their original owners, as the crisis with the pope did not continue. However, some relics remained in the city. In particular, the booty of a galley from Portovenere included a "Holy Cross," probably a particle of the wood of the Cross in a case. The relic was donated to Genoa and in return the men of Portovenere in 1205 were granted tax exemption on goods from the capital.[88]

[85] V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," 364-365. Dondedeo Bove de Fornari was celebrated for his theft of the True Cross in later centuries. A miniature on a mid-sixteenth century Genoese manuscript, commissioned by the De Fornari family, recalls this fact. The illustrations show Dondedeo Bove de Fornari in front of the cathedral, holding the fragment of the Cross. The caption reads: "Dondeubos de Fornarii anno 1203 capta per Venetos et alios Christianos principes Constantinopoli partem Sanctae Crucis lamnis argentei et aureis ac margaritis ornatam." The manuscript is the property of the antiquarian bookshop Dr. Jörn Günther. The four miniatures are illustrated in the catalogue: *Miniatures and illuminated leaves from the 12th to the 16th centuries* (Catalogue n. 6) (Hamburg: Jörn Günther Antiquariat, 2002), 219-227, n. 70 (*Four full-page miniatures, on leaves from a family chronicle on vellum of the Genoese Fornari family, Italy, Genoa, after 1553*). Also: E. De Laurentiis, "Da privilegio di nobiltà a oggetti d'arte: La Genealogia De Fornari miniata da Evangelista della Croce," *La Berio* 1-2 (2014-2017), 5-36.

[86] "multi Ianuenses undique congregati cum galeis VI. Romaniam intrassent, inter quas fuit quedam galea de Portu Veneris, invenierunt quamdam navem de Constantinopoli redeuntem, in quam ceperunt magnam pecunie quantitatem, et multas reliquias sanctorum et cruces dominicas, et inter se diviserunt." *Annali genovesi di Caffaro e de' suoi continuatori*, II, 93.

[87] The letter of Pope Innocent III is in: P. Riant, *Exuviae sacrae constantinopolitanae*, II (Geneve: Fick, 1878), 56-57.

[88] For the tax exemption granted to Portovenere: *I Libri Iurium della Repubblica di Genova*, I/3, ed. Dino Puncuh, Fonti per la Storia della Liguria, 10 (Genoa-Rome: Società Ligure di Storia

The history that bound the Genoese and the remains of the True Cross was continually intertwined with bloody deeds and assaults on the sea. The sources are deliberately ambiguous about the fragments of the True Cross. One must recall the proliferation of relics that occurred in the late twelfth century in the Holy Land and after the conquest of Constantinople in 1204. In times of danger, portions of relics were detached and further subdivided. New relics were also created through contact with graves, the remains of saints, or the collection of dust, oils, and bodily fluids.

The Genoese history of the fragments of the True Cross also provides a noteworthy example of using the relic as a battle talisman. In 1242, the Genoese were again preparing for war against the Pisans. A year after their heavy defeat on the island of Giglio in 1241, the Genoese Guelphs, "in reverentia Vere Crucis," took up the cross and sewed the crusaders' cross on their right shoulder. The Genoese then placed a relic on board the admiral galley of the fleet headed against the Pisans and Ghibellines of Frederick II.[89] We don't know if it was one of the fragments of the True Cross obtained by the Genoese in the raids, or another particle. The episode was also described by the Genoese notary Ursone da Sestri in his *Historia de victoria quam Ianuenses habuerunt contra gentes ab Imperatore missas*, who, describing the fleet as it set sail, notes a "sacraria" containing a particle of the Cross.[90] In *Annali genovesi di Caffaro* the military enterprise is described as a crusade against Pisa, an ally of the excommunicated Emperor Frederick II:

Patria, 1998), doc. 597: 336-338. On these events: V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," 365; Musarra, *In partibus Ultramaris*, 353-354, 624-626.

[89] *Annali genovesi di Caffaro e de' suoi continuatori*, III, 129. In the fourteenth century, the sacristy of the cathedral of San Lorenzo held a Cross called "bategeria." D. Cambiaso, *L'anno ecclesiastico e le feste dei Santi in Genova e nel loro svolgimento storico* (Genoa: Società Ligure di Storia Patra, 1917), 452; A. Musarra, *In partibus Ultramaris*, 628.

[90] "Inque die Domini classem pro litore solvit / et cruce signatas acies Dominique catervas / aequoris in liquidas misit feliciter undas. / Utque magis trepident hostes, sacraria verae / fert ad bella crucis, Satanae pressura sequaces, / cuius honore nitet per climata Ianua mundi": Ursone da Sestri, *Historia de victoria quam Ianuenses habuerunt contra gentes ab Imperatore missas*, ed. Clara Fossati (Florence: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2021), 110. He reiterates the importance of the symbol of the cross for the Genoese in several parts of the poem: "Signa Dei, vexilla crucis stant edita muris." Ursone da Sestri, *Historia de victoria*, 104. Afterwards, he writes again about the cross, although it is not easy to understand whether he is referring to the relic or the banners: "solvuntur statione rates, et littora linquunt, / excutiunt crebris spumantes ictibus undas / aequoris impulsu, remis agitatur aquarum / plana superficies, sub verbere pontus nundat. / prima ducem, vexilla crucis, felicia signa, / portans, concussum mare puppis lapsat eundo, / et remo luctante praeit; post caetera classis/ subsequitur distincta locis certoque tenore": Ursone da Sestri, *Historia de victoria*, 124.

> On Sunday, the 27th of July, so that they might gather and better prepare themselves for war, all went with galleys and transports to San Pier d'Arena, where there was such a marvellous and countless multitude of noble warriors and people that it could scarcely be described in writing. The sight and number of armed galleys and ships was so joyful and immense that there was no space left in the entire square to stand. Once all the galleys and transports had been made ready and firmly equipped, the *podestà* set out with them from the said place, and that very day, with a marvellous fleet, he went to the Bisagno river. On the following Monday, the True Cross, always triumphant in every battle, was solemnly taken from the cathedral of San Lorenzo with great reverence and placed on the strongest transport vessel. The army then proceeded swiftly to Sestri Levante. And when it was heard that the enemies, by land and sea, had besieged the castle and town of Levanto with all their forces, on the penultimate Wednesday of the month of July, while the rest of the army, in honour of Holy Church and in reverence of the True Cross, were in penitence and each had taken the cross upon his right shoulder, early in the morning, with great haste and vigour, a mighty and powerful fleet of galleys and transports was assembled at sea off Deiva. There, the *podestà* boldly raised the triumphant banner of Saint George against the enemy.[91]

The Genoese episode of 1242 is the earliest attested instance of this practice. Over the preceding two centuries no source reports that any relics acquired by the Genoese after the First Crusade, including the relics of St. John the Baptist, were carried into battle. The custom perhaps appears only after relics of the True

[91] "[…] et die dominico .XXVII. iulii, ut monstra fieret et melius ornarentur ad bellum, iverunt omnes cum galeis et taridis apud Sanctum Petrum de Arena, ubi tanta fuit mirabilis et innumerabilis bellatorum proborum et gentium multitudo, quod de facili non posset scribi. Galearum et lignorum armatorum tanta fuit iocunda et visio et multitudo, quod in tota plazia nullo modo stare poterant. Paratis itaque galeis et taridis omnibus et viriliter premunitis, movit potestas cum ipsis de loco dicto, et ipsa die cum mirabili stolo ivit in Bisannem. Die vero Lune sequenti, assumpta de ecclesia Sancti Laurentii cum magna reverentia vera cruce, que semper in omnibus bataliis extitit triumphatrix, et posita in fortiori tarida exercitus ivit cum festinantia usque ad Sigestrum. Et audito quod inimici mari et terra cum omni eorum exfortio castrum et burgum Levanti obsederant, de Mercurii penultima mense iulii, dum ceteri de exercitu ad honorem sancte Ecclesie et in reverentia vere crucis penitencianti essent, et crucem quilibet assumpsisset in spalla dextra, summo mane cum magna festinantia et vigore facta maxima et potens schera galearum et taridarum in mari supra Devam, erexit potestas triumphale vexillum beati Georgii viriliter contra hostes […]": *Annali genovesi di Caffaro e de' suoi continuatori*, III, 129.

Cross reached Genoa. A parallel is noted by Iacopo da Varagine: in 1295 Oberto Doria, then *capitano del Popolo* and admiral, sailed from Genoa for Sicily, "carrying with him the saving, triumphant sign of our salvation - namely, the banner of the True Cross."[92] In the fourteenth century, the inventories of objects kept in the cathedral of San Lorenzo speak of a "crux argentea que vocatur bategeria cum cateneta argentea in [qua] est de ligno vere crucis."[93] It is not clear if the term "bategeria" refers to its old use in battle, recalling the ancient custom of the Patriarch of Jerusalem to carry that cross in battle, or to the more recent Genoese use on war fleets. Iacopo Doria and Iacopo da Varagine did not hesitate to link that cross with the one carried on the battlefield by the crusaders. Apart from the two Genoese examples of 1242 and 1295, it is difficult to encounter other episodes in which relics were carried into battle against Christian enemies. The only relic authorized for this was the fragment of the True Cross, and even then, only in a couple of episodes of particular relevance in the thirteenth century. Thereafter, we have no further record of such use of the True Cross. Certainly, the relics of the Cross would have been the object of a city cult during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The feasts of the Cross appear amongst the most important Genoese solemnities and were subject to a particular devotion.[94] There are several later testimonies of processions and religious celebrations.[95] However, they appear totally unrelated to any reference to war.

Rather, the remains of saints were a treasure to be defended and jealously preserved at home to avoid theft, not to be risked on the battlefield. In any case, the active connection between relics and aggressive wars does not seem particularly strong. Rather, sometimes relics could be used in rituals of internal city pacification, during factional struggles.[96] Along with icons of the Virgin and

[92] "anno igitur Domini .M°.CC.LXXXV. de mense ianuarii nobilem virum domnum Ubertum Aurie admiratum generalem constituunt […] recessit de partibus Ianue cum suo stolo dominus admiratus ad parte Sicilie profecturus, habens secum salutis nostre signum salutiferum triumphale, scilicet vere Crucis vexillum." Iacopo da Varagine, "Chronica civitatis Ianuensis," 105.

[93] I refer to: "Inventario della sacrestia di San Lorenzo," in D. Cambiaso, *L'anno ecclesiastico e le feste dei Santi*, 452, n. 5.

[94] In Genoa, the cult of the True Cross grew in importance by the thirteenth century. In 1278, the feasts of the Cross appeared in the Statutes of the Chapter of San Lorenzo among the most important Genoese solemnities. D. Puncuh, "I più antichi statuti del capitolo di San Lorenzo di Genova," *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria*, n.s. 2/2 (1962): 48. The relics were also subject to theft, but were ransomed upon payment of a large sum. V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," 369.

[95] In the fourteenth century, devotion to the Holy Cross was strong, as evidenced by the processions. *Georgii et Iohannis Stellae Annales Genuenses*, 136, 198, 223, 278.

[96] In general, for the pacification rituals in the Italian cities: K. L. Jansen, *Peace and Penance in Late Medieval Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

saints, relics were strongly used in processions to ward off natural disasters. The fourteenth century would see their systematic use against epidemics or cataclysms, even in Italian maritime cities. In Genoa, the relics of the True Cross occupied a place of prominence, along with those of Saint John the Baptist, against natural disasters: fragments of the Cross were carried in procession, associating themselves with the ashes of the patron Saint John.[97] In December 1245, the city's clergy carried both relics in procession to the dock of the harbour. Together, the sacred rests managed to calm the stormy sea.[98] More than a century later, however, the role of the Cross faded into the background, in favour of the patron alone. In 1391, only the relics of Saint John the Baptist were carried through the streets, due to a violent sea storm that had hit the district of San Marco al Molo. Relics were used to invoke protection from further damage.[99] Some deeply territorialised saints stood as protectors in times of adversity, made present through their relics.[100] Yet their direct association with warfare is not reflected in the sources. Although the banners of the *comuni* often bore the symbols of these patron saints, the relics themselves were not linked to the practice of Christian warfare.[101] They may have been acquired through violence or military campaigns, but they were not carried into offensive expeditions against fellow Christians. From the perspective of the citizens, these relics may have come from foreign wars, but their role was ultimately one of peace.

[97] V. Polonio, "Devozioni di lungo corso: lo scalo genovese," 371.

[98] "Die vero sabbati .XVI. mensis decembris circa mediam noctem validissima fortuna maris et temporis fuit in portu Ianue, ita quod multe naves iverunt ad terram, alie in portu Ianue afondate, galee multe tam comunis quam civium, et alia multa ligna in mari et terra destructa, et deterius accidit lignis que erant in terra quam illis de mari. Modulus fractus fuit et numquam per aliquos viventes visa fuit tanta malicia maris et temporis tempestatis. Que postquam beatissimum corpus sancti Iohannis et crux vera Beati Laurentii cum aliis reliquiis fuerunt per civitatem ad partes moduli et ripe per religiosos deportata, sedata fuit et requievit maris et temporis fortitudo et tempesta": *Annali genovesi di Caffaro e de' suoi continuatori*, III, 165.

[99] *Georgii et Iohannis Stellae Annales Genuenses*, 198.

[100] A. Benvenuti, "Riti propiziatori e di espiazione," in *Le calamità ambientali nel tardo Medioevo europeo: realtà, percezioni, reazioni*, ed. Michael Matheus (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2010), 85-86.

[101] We must notice that also banners could function as contact relics, especially in pre-expedition ceremonies, when they were at the presence of primary relics. Through this ritual association, banners could share the spiritual power of the relics themselves. In general: R. W. Jones, *Bloodied Banners: Military Display on the Medieval Battlefield* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 151-159.

IV. Conclusions

The relationship between war, Italian maritime cities, and holy relics is complex. By their very nature, maritime cities were compelled to establish connections with distant places. They were the first to be captivated by the deposits of holiness in the East, which they frequented and knew well. Their trade routes touched ports where early Christianity had expressed its first saints. Italian maritime cities were, therefore, the first in Western Europe to have the opportunity to directly access these great treasures of the Levant, including relics. This led to a long history of *furta sacra*. The phenomenon, which began well before the year 1000, peaked in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, during the time of the crusades. It had a tremendous impact on the definition of the identity of the involved cities. The relics came from the Holy Land, Anatolia, or the Greek and Byzantine world. The relics were obtained violently, through raids, acts of piracy, or during military campaigns. Genoa and Venice were the main protagonists in this accumulation. The remains of saints served multiple internal functions: they were primarily used as objects with a supernatural aura that ensured protection for the communities. The cities increased their spiritual prestige with a growing number of sacred relics preserved within them. The pantheon of venerated saints expanded, and relics were functional to the construction of civic identity. Furthermore, relics were also war trophies, emphasising the political superiority of a centre over its adversaries. In this sense, the boundary between religious relics and lay *spolia* – largely exposed in religious buildings – often appears blurred in cities like Genoa, Venice, and Pisa. This dynamic intensified during the fourteenth century, when the East disappeared as the place of origin of relics: they were stolen in conflicts between the maritime cities themselves. The bodies of saints had become treasures to be defended.

The True Cross in Genoa is an indicative, and in some ways unique, case for examining the interplay between relics and warfare in a medieval maritime commune. The Genoese acquired several fragments by force, though by varied means: one testified to their campaigns against Muslims in the Holy Land; others stemmed from the maritime exploits of Genoese corsairs, especially against Venetians or Pisans; still others were linked to conflicts in the Aegean and to battles in Corsica. All reached Genoa in the wake of armed events. The relics of the Cross are the only ones that can truly be regarded as battle relics and are attested as having been borne aboard war fleets. It happened in 1242 on an extremely grave occasion, conceived the same as a crusade, and possibly some years later. More generally, the Genoese were reluctant to hazard precious relics in naval engagements. Does this mean relics were not used in war, or is the True

Cross singled out precisely because of its exceptional status? Relics permeated daily devotion, and numerous portable altars containing sacred fragments were routinely carried on campaign. It is therefore plausible that transporting lesser relics into conflict was so 'normal' as to go unremarked in the sources, yet the evidence is insufficient to confirm this. In any case, the paucity of notices concerning relics borne by armies on overseas expeditions is unsurprising. Apart from the True Cross—with its longstanding martial associations—other relics are consistently cast as instruments of peace. They might originate in war and be its spoil, but they do not appear to have contributed materially to the conduct of war or to have accompanied campaigns beyond the walls. Relics crossed the sea as arrivals, brought into port from distant lands or rival communities, rather than as companions of fleets; taken from war, they tended toward civic peace.

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