Experimenting with Relics: Laypeople, Knowledge and Relics in Seventeenth-Century Spain

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In 1628 Francisco de Herrera, a humanist scholar, expressed the suspicion that in the fourth century Christians could have fallen victim to religious persecution in the small town of Arjona in southern Spain. The excitement among the villagers was great and soon afterwards there were reports of apparitions of crosses that, allegedly, indicated the places where the mortal remains had been buried. Indeed, in some places human remains, showing signs of torture, were found. On the political and ecclesiastical level the discovery set in motion a whole machinery, with the aim of legitimizing these relics and declaring the martyrs the patron saints of the village. Over the last few years the topic of relics has received increasing attention from historians.¹ Recent studies of early modern relics have above all underlined the political effects of these religious objects on state-building processes and on the consolidation of town oligarchies.²

However, if we take a closer look at the sources, they provide a much richer picture of the active uses and practices involving relics among large parts of the population. In Arjona a large number of laypeople began to dig, circulate, exchange and ‘consume’ the different objects found, such as bones, nails, thorns and handcuffs. Laypeople, like the people in and around Arjona, used relics in

- 1 Specifically, medievalists have contributed to this increased interest. A seminal work was Geary P.J., *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: 1978). For the early modern period Simon Ditchfield has presented several contributions; see, among others, Ditchfield S., “Tridentine worship and the cult of the saints”, in Hsia, R.P.-C. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol 6: *Reform and Expansion 1500–1660* (Cambridge: 2008) 201–224. Interesting general works have also appeared, such as Angenendt A., *Heilige und Reliquien: die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: 1994). This growing interest has led to intercultural and trans-historical collected works, as for instance, Walsham A. (ed.), *Relics and Remains, Past and Present* 206, supplement 5 (2010).
- 2 See, among others, Johnson T., “Holy Fabrications: The Catacomb Saints and the Counter-Reformation in Bavaria”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47, 2 (1996) 274–297; Lazure G., “Possessing the Sacred: Monarchy and Identity in Philip II’s Relic Collection at the Escorial”, *Renaissance Quarterly* 60, 1 (2007) 58–93. For the case of rural Castile, see Christian W.A., *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton: 1981) especially 125–141.

very creative and varied ways. They created their own reliquaries; they produced so-called secondary relics; they used them creatively for several medical purposes, and they also expressed sceptical attitudes towards some relics by making ironical comments and jokes and expressing contempt about them.

As researchers have postulated in recent years, users attach meanings and values to objects going through complex social, religious and political processes.³ 'Knowledge' plays a key role in these processes. Recent research has underlined the importance of taking into account different types of knowledge and how they were socially constructed, elaborated and consumed in early modern times.⁴ We have to analyse 'the ways in which texts and practices of observation, experimentation, and material manipulation were interconnected', as well as the practitioners' knowledge claims and ontologies.⁵ Whereas most research in this field is focusing on new interpretations of science and nature, my interest is in different types of objects and knowledge. Just like other knowledge, religious knowledge also has to be produced, negotiated and consumed in different ways.⁶

Relevant for my purpose is the fact that in early modern Catholic Europe the meaning and knowledge of relics – and sanctity in general – received increased attention. Two aspects were key. First, the Tridentine Catholic Church tried to control the validation of objects as relics and to promote legitimate uses of them.⁷ Second, a systematization of knowledge of martyrs advanced in the early modern Catholic Church, mainly through means of new types of

3 Because of the so-called material turn, there is now an immense quantity of literature on material culture. See, for instance, the contributions in Tilley C. et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: 2006). Also, Hahn H.-P., *Materielle Kultur. Eine Einführung* (Berlin: 2005).

4 See, among many others, Burke P., *A Social History of Knowledge*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: 2000); Dülmen R. van – Rauschenbach S. (eds.), *Macht des Wissens. Die Entstehung der modernen Wissensgesellschaft* (Cologne: 2004).

5 Ursula K. – Spary E.C., "Introduction: Why Materials", in Ursula K. – Spary E.C. (eds.), *Materials and Expertise in Early Modern Europe. Between Market and Laboratory* (Chicago – London: 2010) 1–23, here 5.

6 See, for instance, the contributions in Ben-Tov A. – Deutsch Y. – Herzog T. (eds.), *Knowledge and Religion in Early Modern Europe. Studies in Honor of Michael Heyd* (Leiden – Boston: 2013).

7 The 25th session of the Tridentine Council (*De invocatione, veneratione, et reliquiis sanctorum, et sacris imaginibus*) dealt with this polemical topic. See, briefly, on the Tridentine Council and relics, Angenendt, *Heilige* 242–244. On juridical issues related to relics, see Dooley E.A., *Church Law on Sacred Relics* (Washington DC: 1931). For the general evolution of the Catholic Church, see Hsia R.P.-C., *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* (Cambridge: 1998). For general remarks about the effects of the new religious situation on popular culture, see Burke P., *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: 1978) 207–234.

knowledge: humanistic, historical, philological, medical, geographical and archaeological analytical tools, among others, became increasingly important for this process.⁸ In other words, the Church tried to monopolize the construction of meanings and the production of knowledge about relics.⁹

Focusing on the case of Arjona, the following paper concentrates on two aspects of the relationship between the laity and relics. First, the fact that laypeople, always in an ambivalent relationship to Church authorities, inspected and even verified the quality of relics on their own, using different types of knowledge; and, second, the fact that laypeople carried out different experiments with relics, investigating their quality, their properties, even baking small breads (*panecillos*) out of the ashes found in Arjona. This alternative perspective on 'knowing' relics in turn provides new insights into the practices of domestic devotion: the home can be regarded not only as a place for praying or reading religious books, but also as a place for accruing religious knowledge through experiments.

1 Qualifying and Validating Relics

The findings in Arjona pertaining to the decade 1620–1630 have to be seen in the context of similar discoveries occurring all around the Catholic world in the period 1570 to 1640 (for example, in Cologne, Rome, or Granada).¹⁰ The very specific circumstances of the findings in Arjona (very old martyrs, poor state of conservation, several uncontrolled excavation sites.) posed a host of challenges

8 Only in recent times has this production received some interest from researchers. See, for instance, Touber J., *Law, Medicine and Engineering in the Cult of the Saints in Counter-Reformation Rome. The Hagiographical Works of Antonio Gallonio, 1556–1605* (Leiden – Boston: 2014). Known titles include Baronius Caesar, *Annales Ecclesiastici* (Romae, ex Typographia Vaticana: 1588–1607); Bosio Antonio, *Roma sotterranea* (Roma, Guglielmo Facciotti: 1632).

9 Catholic authors published many works related to this topic. See, among others, Biagio della Purificazione, *Tractatus de adoratione* [...] (Romae, ex typographia Iosephi Vannaccij: 1678).

10 The decades 1570–1640 can be considered as the central period in the shaping of the new Catholic post-Tridentine Church: dogmatic revitalization, theological clarifications, organizational changes. In this sense, relics played a central role in this process as a difference marker with regard to Protestants. Among the most important discoveries of relics are the so-called Priscilla catacombs which were 'discovered' again in 1578 and became an excavation site for hundreds of relics. See Angenendt, *Heilige* 250–251; Johnson, "Holy Fabrications" 278–280. Between 1588 and 1595 the so-called 'plomos de Granada' were also found. See, among others, Aguilera M.B. – García-Arenal M. (eds.), *Los plomos del Sacromonte: invención y tesoro* (Valencia: 2006).

which could, however, be boiled down to two central questions: whether these really were the remains of Christian martyrs of the late Roman Empire, and if so, which of the countless objects found at the excavation sites could be considered relics. In order to answer both questions, the official Church, represented by the bishop of Jaén, started a complex canonical process of authentication and validation of the martyrs (and their relics).¹¹ Nevertheless, there were also voices within the Church being raised against a positive outcome of this process.¹²

At the same time and to some extent independently from the Church, laypeople in and around Arjona began to excavate, dig, remove and analyse objects on their own. They took on the roles of 'experts' by verifying the nature and 'quality' of relics and the presence of miracles. In other words, they converted objects into relics and events into miracles. This was a complex social practice in which different agents, different spaces and settings, and different types of knowledge were at play. As for the agents, the sources present, as we will see, an extraordinary range of people from all social strata acting as relics 'experts' (poor men, judges, merchants, vagabonds, noblemen, clerics). Many different spaces in which laypeople interacted both with each other and with ecclesiastical officers about questions regarding relics and miracles appear in the sources (the excavation sites, private houses, inns, convents, ecclesiastical tribunals). In these spaces a transfer of information, objects, interpretations, concepts, and knowledge took place.

Just as varied were the types of knowledge that were elaborated and applied – anatomical, historical, devotional and archaeological (among others). By doing so, laypeople were not only contributing to the integration of the new relics and saints into the common life of the early modern Catholic world, but they also engaged in coming to an understanding of the mysterious events

11 On this process, see Olds K., "The Ambiguities of the Holy: Authenticating Relics in Seventeenth-Century Spain", *Renaissance Quarterly* 65, 1 (2012) 135–184. The process produced a huge quantity of sources in which witnesses were interrogated about the miracles they had allegedly experienced by means of the relics of Arjona's saints. I will use (1) Villegas Bernardino de, *Memorial sobre la calificación de las reliquias de los Santos Martyres de Arjona* [...] (Baeza, Juan de la Cuesta: 1639); (2) *Memorial del pleito sobre el reconocimiento, aprovacion y calificación de los milagros, veneracion y colocacion de las reliquias de los santuarios que se descubrieron en la Villa de Arjona* [...] (Jaen: 1642) (hereafter *Memorial*); and (3) Tamayo Manuel, *Discursos apologeticos de las reliquias de S. Bonoso y Maximiano y de los demas mas martires que se hallaron en Arjona y de los milagros que Dios a obrado porellas [sic] antes y despues de suinuencion [sic]* (Baeza, por Pedro de la Cuesta: 1635).

12 The bishop's prosecutor adopted a very critical stance. See, especially, *Memorial* 19–33, 47–54.

occurring in Arjona. Finally, in order to carry out their own evaluations and take their own decisions about the circumstances surrounding the discoveries in Arjona, laypeople took a lot of variables into consideration, including the origin of the relic, its physical characteristics, its specific miraculous effects, the chain of owners, and the nature of the experienced phenomena.

An interesting space in which knowledge of relics was constructed, received and shared was the excavation site. In Arjona different excavation sites emerged, which rapidly became meeting points for different groups of people: local laypeople who came to dig on their own, ecclesiastical officers engaged in controlling the excavation site, doctors who were in charge of filtering animal bones, and foreigners who came to get hold of relics. The plurality of agents present at the excavation sites, with very different professional backgrounds, led to the application of different types of knowledge (practical, humanistic, medical and ecclesiastical).¹³

For example, when Juan López of Arjona was digging – like many others – in the main excavation site, he found a bone which he thought could be valuable. Unsure about its real nature, he asked the foreman about it. The foreman bit off a piece of bone with his teeth and autonomously assessed it, deciding that it was of ‘good quality’. Unfortunately, the kind of knowledge of relics the foreman possessed is not transmitted by the source, but it was clearly practical and embodied: as chief in charge of this excavation site he was acquainted with the discovery of bones and likely to consider himself expert enough to evaluate the bone. His intervention ‘converted’ the bone into a relic, circumventing the evaluation of Church authorities.¹⁴

However, the evaluation of certain objects and arrangements found at the excavation sites required more sophisticated interpretations, including complex archaeological, technical, historical and even anatomical knowledge. This was especially true for the discovery of pieces of wood, whole skeletons, small pieces of bone, nails, and lathes, found at different excavation sites in a very

13 Recent research has underlined the creation of knowledge in places such as markets and piazzas. See Eamon W., “Markets, Piazzas, and Villages”, in Park K – Daston L. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 3: *Early Modern Science* (Cambridge: 2008) 206–223. Burke, *Popular culture* 108–112, had already referred to marketplaces, inns, etc., as places of production of popular culture. Excavation sites were undoubtedly also similar spaces.

14 *Memorial* 467–471. Biting into bones to assess their quality as relics was apparently a common practice. See, among others, *Memorial* 528. As already mentioned, Church authorities tried to control the qualification of objects as relics, requiring them to meet certain criteria: the founding place had to be a historically proven place of martyrdom, the bones or other objects had to have true ‘miraculous’ properties (that could not be explained by/related to so-called ‘natural’ causes). See for more details, see the references in footnotes 7 and 8.

bad condition (partially destroyed, or partially burnt).¹⁵ A complex hermeneutical process began, in which the main question at hand was whether this had been the place of the torture and execution of the martyrs. Laypeople tried to reconstruct the complex puzzle using several interpretative strategies: observing, analysing and evaluating the signs of burning, the existence of nails (as signs of a potential crucifixion and therefore of martyrdom), and the exact position of these objects.

Specifically, humanistic knowledge related to the history of the Church became more and more important for gauging relics.¹⁶ In the early modern period the religious production on historical, hagiographical, and technical topics was, as already mentioned, impressive. In western Europe humanistic discourses expanded very quickly during the sixteenth century, reaching even relatively small towns. Not surprisingly, by the first half of the seventeenth century, several people in Arjona, often with titles such as *licenciado* or *doctor*, were able to argue in a very humanistic way for the validity of the relics found in Arjona. They made use of historical arguments, putting in relation their knowledge about Roman archaeological findings (coins, city walls, etc.) and about the early Christian Church (names of supposed martyrs, places and times of alleged or real Christian persecutions). It was, in other words, a knowledge not based on practical skills, but on readings.

One central issue was the need to determine the antiquity of the town.¹⁷ Only if there was certainty of the town dating back to Roman times was it possible to speak of ancient martyrs at all. Laypeople showed a keen interest in discussing this issue. The *licenciado* Andrés Navarro, for instance, debated with one cleric about the origin of the town, arguing that Arjona must have had Phoenician origins and that the existing fortress probably served as a prison in Roman times. The *licenciado* Montejo was also able to postulate a hypothesis about the origin of the town, 'por aver leido en varias Historias' (because he had read about it in several Histories). He argued for a Phoenician origin, grounding his opinion on certain architectural features exhibited by the tower and the fortress. Making use of his knowledge of classical sculptures and Latin, he was able to point to the existence of a sculpture of the Roman emperor Adrian, thereby proving the Roman foundation of the town.¹⁸

15 A detailed description of the findings can be read in Tamayo, *Discursos* 274v–328r.

16 I define 'humanistic knowledge' as knowledge which is primarily based on books, the ability to read Latin texts, and historical knowledge about (pagan or Christian) Antiquity.

17 A detailed report of this issue and its problems in Tamayo, *Discursos* fols. 261r–274v.

18 *Memorial* 388–389.

Some laypeople were able to successfully link their abilities as sharp-eyed observers with their humanistic knowledge in order to offer careful descriptions of the disposition, the materials and the quantity of objects found at the excavation site. One telling example is that of *doctor* Juan Sánchez Ramírez, appointed by the ecclesiastical authorities as examiner of one of the big excavation sites in Arjona. He offered a very detailed account of the findings positioned near the city walls, describing precisely how many human skeletons were found, in which positions they lay and which signs of violence they exhibited. In addition, he was also able to accurately describe the objects excavated: some skeletons presented nails which pierced the bones; a pot was found in which – as he and others supposed – tar had been warmed to torture Christian prisoners; amputated fingers were discovered, etc..

The same Juan Sánchez Ramírez was able to bring forward different arguments. Regarding the complex archaeological evidence of the excavation site in Arjona, the question of whether the bones could have belonged to ancient Christian martyrs was by no means easy to answer. Juan presented several arguments in favour of his position. Firstly, he insisted on the anatomical evidence of the bones, since both their position and signs of torture pointed, according to his opinion, to martyrdom. Secondly, several bones showed signs of torture, for instance notches, holes and other marks. Referring to his knowledge of Roman torture practices, he argued that the methods of torture revealed by the bones were not usually used for ordinary criminals in Roman times. His opinion was based on his knowledge of Latin and ancient Church history, two elements which indicate his thorough humanist education.¹⁹ Interestingly, the *doctor* claimed to have compared the bones found in Arjona with the descriptions of the wounds produced by ancient torture techniques. And, thirdly, he precisely analysed the spatial arrangement of different objects at the excavation site: for instance, the existence of a big cauldron which he interpreted as a method of torture used for Christians in Roman times.

The sources present *doctor* Juan Sánchez as often speaking with other town inhabitants at the excavation site. By making these explanations in front of other townspeople, people like *doctor* Juan Sánchez, *licenciado* Andrés Navarro

19 Specifically, he mentioned his readings of works of authors such as Nikephoros Xanthopulos (1268/1274–1328) whose *Church history* had some resonance in this period with a Latin translation published under the title *Nicephori Callisti Xanthopuli, scriptoris verè Catholici, Ecclesiasticae historiae libri decem & octo [...]* (Basel, Per Ioannes Oporinum & Heruagium: 1561) (with several editions). The standard work on tortures was of course Gallonio Antonio, *De SS. Martyrum cruciatibus [...]* (Rome, ex typographia Congregationis Oratorij apud S. Mariam in Vallicella: 1594). See Toubert, *Law*.

and *licenciado* Montejo were likely to influence their opinions about the events in Arjona. Many witnesses who were interrogated about the excavation site around the city walls used – at least according to the ecclesiastical records – the same ideas and words as *doctor* Juan. While it is not possible to prove that they were adopting his opinions, the fact that most of them referred to the conditions of prisoners in Roman times makes it probable that they had integrated this humanistic knowledge into their own interpretation of the remains found in their town. In essence, the position of people like *doctor* Sánchez linked objects of torture to martyrdom, ignoring the fact that parts of the Church were strongly opposed to this conclusion.

However, the humanistic written tradition was not the only source of knowledge used by laypeople to understand the distant events in Arjona. ‘Practical’ or ‘professional’ knowledge could also be useful to postulate hypotheses about the chronology of events. Pedro de Lara, public notary in Arjona, argued that the skeletons could not have belonged to Roman pagans, for he had previously seen Roman tombs and they had always looked completely different: the bodies were laid out properly and the niches were decorated with small, beautiful bricks and there were clay jars in the tombs.²⁰ In other cases, carpenters judged the quality of the wood of a lathe.

Other spaces such as private houses or inns were also common places in which knowledge about relics was discussed, applied or rejected. In such spaces other types of knowledge were also frequently invoked: a medical-anatomical knowledge and what we may tentatively call a ‘devotional-sensorial’ knowledge. The assessment of relics and corpses of martyrs by professional doctors is one of the most important developments in the history of Christian saints. Whether influenced by this discourse or not, anatomical knowledge was also highly valuable for laypeople in order to gauge the quality of a bone as a relic. In their answers many witnesses gave information and formulated hypotheses about the exact anatomical location of the bones they possessed. One of the main issues at stake was ascertaining whether the bones were human (and how to prove it).²¹ But others went even further in their analysis of their

20 See *Memorial* 183–184.

21 Some claimed to have a rib, others a femur, others toe bones. See *Memorial* 9, 416, *passim*. During the early modern period modern anatomy was developed. However this kind of new knowledge does not seem to have permeated to non-experts. As new research has shown, professional doctors only slowly integrated this knowledge into their own practical work. See, among others, Pomata G., “Malpighi and the holy body: medical experts and miraculous evidence in seventeenth-century Italy”, in Cavallo S. – Gentilcore D. (eds.), *Spaces, Objects and Identities in Early Modern Italian Medicine* (Oxford: 2008) 96–113.

possessions. Catalina de Morales, for example, took home some bones from the excavation sites, which her husband examined very thoroughly. He tried first of all to distinguish human from animal bones; then he looked for notches in the bones as evidence of martyrdom. He concluded that one of them, which had a knife notch, was probably 'good' and that they should store it particularly carefully.²²

Private houses were spaces in which relics and miracles were often validated by laypeople on their own. They frequently appear as spaces in which many people (relatives, friends, neighbours or clerics) came together to see, touch, kiss and smell relics.²³ The plurality of agents who acted as 'experts' for validating relics or miracles is surprising. Miguel Sáenz was a poor man who helped with the digging in one excavation site in Arjona. In the process he managed to acquire a piece of wood from a lathe that had been discovered and that was, allegedly, the instrument of torture of the martyrs. Some days later, constrained by his difficult economic situation, he burnt the piece of wood to heat his home. As a result of this, blood was found in the small burnt piece of wood, so that he and his wife were afraid of having committed a sin by burning the wood. The situation demanded an interpretation. Instead of asking Church officers, Miguel ran to his neighbour, don Bartolomé de la Barrera, a 'grave caballero' (a serious gentleman). Don attentively listened attentively to the explanations of his neighbour, then carefully examined the ashes, appreciated the value of a nail left among the ashes, and finally qualified the event as miraculous.²⁴ Apart from being a *grave caballero*, nothing seems to have qualified don Bartolomé as an expert in sacred relics. Don Bartolomé seems to have used a kind of devotional knowledge, which enabled him to assess relics and miracles intuitively.²⁵

22 *Memorial* 416. The use of relics as medicine was extremely creative. Most of the questions of the examination revolved around the issue of healing miracles. On medicine in early modern times, see Wear A., *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550–1680* (Cambridge: 2000).

23 For instance the home of María Fernández appears in the sources as a meeting point for many people. See *Memorial* 428–474. For examples of inns in which relics were shown and qualified, see *Memorial* 10.

24 See *Memorial* 327–329.

25 He was not alone. Many other people assessed bones by smelling them, by taking only clean bones, etc. See *Memorial* 403, 533, *passim*.

2 Experiments: Scepticism, Juridical Dispositions and Baking

Laypeople not only acted very autonomously in judging, validating and qualifying objects as relics and events as miracles, but interestingly enough they also experimented with relics in different ways. At least three reasons can be distinguished in the sources for experimenting with relics. One reason was a rather sceptical stance towards either these objects or their miraculous effects. Secondly, the ecclesiastical juridical discourse about relics (and sanctity in general) led laypeople to adopt different probationary strategies and to focus on specific aspects of the sacred. Thirdly, experiments could be used as a source of religious experiences.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, scepticism about relics and miracles seems to have reached at least some groups among Catholic believers.²⁶ The humanist tradition, the pressure of the Church to fight against false miracles, and perhaps even the criticism expressed by Protestant theologians, must have had an impact on these social groups.²⁷ As for the case of Arjona and its martyrs, sceptical stances towards relics and miracles occasionally came to the fore, although not always explicitly articulated. For instance, after seeing blood on one bone from Arjona, the countess of Altamira explicitly declared that she was not a great believer in miracles. Some people attributed their healing not to the effect of the relics, but to the use of medicines.²⁸ Other people suspected that the bones did not belong to humans, but to donkeys. Occasionally people were suspected of faking relics and miracles.²⁹ The sources from Arjona give a rich picture of the different practices of laypeople in experimenting with relics. Laypeople took the initiative to investigate the qualities of the bones and ashes by carrying out small experiments, trying to exclude fake or natural causes for the effects they experienced.

Official ecclesiastical discourses also contributed to the construction of local knowledge about relics and saints and to the tendency among laypeople

26 Scepticism in early modern times is a complex issue which has received interesting contributions in recent years. A general philosophical introduction can be found in *Larmore C.*, "Scepticism", in *Garber D. – Ayers M.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: 2003) 1145–1192.

27 For humanistic criticisms, see, among others, Angenendt, *Heilige* 233–241; Dooley, *Church Law* 45–46.

28 *Memorial* 30.

29 See, for instance, *Memorial* 452, 456–457, where María Fernández is under suspicion. A clear fake which was discovered can be seen in *Memorial* 524. People judging miracles in which children or adolescents were involved seem to have been particularly sceptical. See, for instance, Tamayo, *Discursos* fols. 129v–145v. Other cases can be found in *Memorial* 42, 44, 507, *passim.*; and Tamayo, *Discursos* fols. 97v–104v.

to experiment with relics. Several spaces and agents appear in the sources as transfer points between these levels, for example, foreign clerics who stayed as guests in private houses, and civilians, such as doctors and judges, who collaborated with Church institutions as experts. However, among the spaces in which laypeople came in close contact with the elaborated ecclesiastical discourse on relics, the interrogation carried out in the canonical validation process was of paramount importance. In and around Arjona over 600 witnesses were interrogated by the ecclesiastical officers, which clearly reveals that the concepts used in official religious discourse reached a high number of people. The questions witnesses had to answer touched on many aspects: how they found the relic, what exactly they did with it, what they experienced, whether the bones or ashes bled, how much blood came out, which physical qualities the blood had, whether a fake could be suspected.³⁰

The consequences of these examinations were highly ambivalent. On the one hand, although the Tridentine Church tried to rigorously control the validation and use of relics, the canonical process indirectly conferred a significant position to the witnesses. Through their involvement with the process, laypeople were enabled to express their own view of the events, stressing the aspects they wanted to underline. On the other hand, laypeople were obviously adopting and adapting the practices, concepts and ontologies of the ecclesiastical authorities (analysis of the qualities of the blood, adoption of some juridical techniques, use of the concept of the 'supernatural' and the 'preternatural').³¹

Finally, the idea of 'experimental religion' also has to be considered. The expansion of the 'experiment' in early modern times is related to the changing epistemological and philosophical context of the crisis of Aristotelian natural philosophy and of the development of so-called 'modern science'.³² However, as recent research has shown, the concept of 'experiment' is also present in the religious literature at this time, in which it has a very broad meaning.³³ Apart from meaning 'experience', it postulates experimental knowledge as relying

30 The exact wording of the question can be read in the many pages of the *Memorial*.

31 An account of the distinction between supernatural and preternatural can be found in Daston L., "Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe", *Critical Inquiry* 18, 1 (1991) 93–124.

32 The topic is too vast to be summarized in a footnote. See in general Park – Daston, *The Cambridge History of Science*. Relevant among others are also, Licoppe Ch., *La formation de la pratique scientifique. Le discours de l'expérience en France et en Angleterre (1630–1820)* (Paris: 1996) and Anstey P. – Vanzo A., "The Origins of Early Modern Experimental Philosophy", *Intellectual History Review* 22, 4 (2012) 499–518.

33 For a good general account of the changes which the categories 'experience' and 'experiment' undergo during the seventeenth century, see Dear P., "The Meanings of Experience", in Park – Daston, *The Cambridge History of Science* 106–131.

upon trials and observations:³⁴ 'it places a priority on first-hand witnessing, it is useful, it provides motivations for practical activities, it is explicitly sought after rather than passively received, and, finally, it stands in contrast to knowledge that is merely notional and speculative'.³⁵ Indeed, the uses of the words *experiencia* (experience as noun) and *experimentar* (experience as verb) in the Spanish sources from Arjona, often denote the sense of 'trial' or 'test'. They also describe activities in which the agent is actively seeking some kind of evidence.

A telling example of some of these evolutions is that of the nobleman don Íñigo Fernández de Córdoba. In 1629 don Íñigo heard about a famous young girl who supposedly was able to make bones from Arjona bleed by putting them into her clothes (following a very common and typical pattern). Instead of waiting for ecclesiastical canonical approval, don Íñigo, who was rather sceptical about the girl and her supposed abilities, took the initiative to clarify the issue on his own. He brought the girl to his home and put her through a more or less thought-through experiment, imitating the practices carried out by ecclesiastical authorities. First, he wrapped a bone in a piece of paper and placed it in her clothes, close to her skin, and did not take his eye off her. Eventually the young girl fainted, and on unwrapping the bone don Íñigo found fresh blood on it. However, this did not prove anything to don Íñigo, who sceptically repeated the experiment several more times using other bones. Although the event could be repeated several times, the nobleman was not yet completely convinced of the nature of the events and the day after started another attempt, this time adding that he would pay for one mass for the Arjona martyrs. Soon afterwards the young girl fainted and the bone bled again. Don Íñigo eventually seemed convinced.³⁶

The young María became a kind of provider of secondary relics in the form of pieces of paper drenched in blood. In order to obtain these secondary relics, don Íñigo and the members of his household first religiously and morally 'cleansed' the young girl: the young girl was forced to confess and take communion and even undergo exorcism. Even though sceptical at the start, the nobleman used ecclesiastical techniques that he had probably seen in church to imitate some of the trials carried out by bishops in similar cases, testing for fakes. And he even began to 'hacer informaciones de los milagros' (write

34 See, among others, *Memorial* 6, 298.

35 Harrison P., "Experimental Religion and Experimental Science in Early Modern England", *Intellectual History Review* 21, 4 (2011) 413–433, here 422. Harrison uses Protestant literature. To what extent this is also valid for the Catholic world has still to be investigated.

36 *Memorial* 534–536; Tamayo, *Discursos* 107r–v.

reports on the miracles).³⁷ In order to gain moral certainty that this was a miracle, don Íñigo did not rely on customary devotional signs such as receiving a clue in answer to prayer, but painstakingly experimented with relics at home following canonical procedures.³⁸

Don Íñigo was not the only one who experimented with relics. The 66-year-old Hipólito Muñoz was also an exemplary case. In November 1629 he witnessed a miracle at María Fernández's home, when one of the bones she had acquired from the excavation site began to bleed. Hipólito was very curious and examined the phenomenon thoroughly, observing the bone for at least an hour, noticing exactly how much blood came out, and recording what exactly he felt, as he later reported to the ecclesiastical officers. In a second interrogation Hipólito was able to add more details to his observations, and also reported on the experiments he had carried out with the relic in order to explore its qualities. To shed light on the whole issue, Hipólito had put on his glasses and observed the bone for an hour, paying attention to the colour and texture of the bone, declaring that 'mas parecia carne que hueso, y estaba todo morado (it looked more like meat than a bone, and it was completely violet). But that was not enough for him: taking a pin he pierced the bone three or four times, attentively analysing what happened. Hence Hipólito was able to describe in detail what the blood looked like and exactly how it came out of the bone. He also formulated the hypothesis that the blood must have been warm as it came out, since it coagulated very fast.³⁹

The fact that, in a second attempt, Hipólito paid special attention to the blood's qualities was probably a consequence of the first ecclesiastical interrogation. As already mentioned, witnesses were asked about the qualities of the blood coming out of bones and ashes. The risk of fakes was obviously high and both authorities and laypeople were aware of this problem. Consequently, much energy was invested in describing, analysing and judging the physical

37 Unfortunately it is not completely clear what the expression in the source means, but it probably points to the fact that they began to write down the events and circumstances of the miracles. For a complete example of the experiments carried out by ecclesiastical officers, see *Memorial* 405–408.

38 As in other similar cases, the home was the stage of this kind of experimental religion. Experiments in natural philosophy also often involved the whole household. See Cooper A., "House and Households", in Park – Daston, *The Cambridge History of Science* 224–237, here 229.

39 Hipólito does not seem to have been the only one who used a pin to analyse the bones from Arjona (or perhaps to fake the blood?). Pedro Hidalgo declared that he saw the *licenciado* Ibáñez performing the same operation with a bone; see Villegas, *Memorial de Arjona* 466.

qualities of the blood.⁴⁰ After all, the very validation of a miracle depended on it. Clerics were therefore forced to pay careful attention to these qualities, which is apparent from some of the answers of the witnesses.⁴¹ Laypeople such as Hipólito integrated these requirements into their own observations and experiments. By observing the blood carefully, they often used the same words and concepts in their answers as the clerics.

The experiments with relics also took other creative forms. This is especially visible in the uses people made of the ashes found at the excavation sites in Arjona, which were suspected of producing miracles such as bleeding. Undoubtedly the most relevant use was the baking of small cookies or breads (*panecillos*) which were then consumed as medicine, either by eating or drinking them or by applying them to the skin.⁴² The sources reveal an astonishing plurality of agents (men and women, pharmacists, doctors of law and even clergymen) who took part in these practices. By producing and consuming the *panecillos*, people were able to heal illnesses, pay debts, present themselves as good Christians, and, last but not least, experiment with the sacred and with miracles.

For instance, Juan Díaz de Salas, a chemist, described how he baked *panecillos*. First, he went to one of the excavation sites to get bones. Then he greased baking moulds using oil. He crushed one of the bones into small pieces and added the pieces to the *panecillos* dough, writing the names of two saints, Bonoso and Maximian, onto the breads.⁴³ The *panecillos* baked by Juan with bone splinters began to bleed. He was, however, not really convinced that this

40 The bishop's prosecutor was especially sceptical about the blood phenomena in Arjona. See *Memorial* 26–29.

41 There are many examples. See, for instance, *Memorial* 289.

42 The production of the *panecillos* shows the blurring between production for private consumption and production for a kind of market. While some people produced only a few *panecillos* for their own personal use, the production figures are in other cases striking. The *licenciado* Montejo sent 800 pieces to Madrid and Luis Ibáñez had even set up a kind of industrial production: he produced 8000 pieces and – he added – he would be able to produce 8000 pieces more (in *Memorial* 383, 449). Ashes from Arjona got embedded in the big exchange routes of the globalized Spanish monarchy (Granada, Seville, Salamanca, Madrid, South America). The reasons for baking these *panecillos* are not explained in the sources. A practical reason was certainly the fact that the ashes could be transported more easily in this form into other regions. Interestingly, ecclesiastical authorities do not seem to have tried to control this practice.

43 Other people did not write any names, others used the names of Mary, Jesus, etc. Laypeople were probably experimenting with different names and testing the potential effects. The official Tridentine Church insisted on the fact that relics could only work when used to call up the saints to whom they belonged. In this and other cases, laypeople seem to have explored other possible ways of using the relics. See, for example, *Memorial* 382.

effect was caused by the bones and not by other factors. For this reason he started different experiments to exclude other causes ('para experimentar si desto podia ser causa'). First, he baked *panecillos* with other bones which did not come from the sanctuary. Nothing happened. Second, he baked *panecillos* without oil, and again nothing happened.⁴⁴ Juan Díaz was probably adapting some of the techniques he used in his profession as chemist, like the crushing of substances into small pieces, to the baking of *panecillos*. But, again, as in the case of don Íñigo, he confronted the potential miracle with an experimental attitude.

3 Conclusions

Two central evolutions took place in early modern times regarding the consumption of relics in Catholic territories. The Tridentine Church tried to control the validation and use of relics and the interpretation of sanctity. At the same time, new types of knowledge were required to qualify objects as relics: anatomical and medical knowledge for the analysis of bodies, historical knowledge for the identification of potential saints from late Antiquity, archaeological knowledge for the interpretation of excavation sites, etc..

This process affected the complex relationships laypeople maintained with relics since it redefined the boundaries of what was religiously acceptable. Relics were now examined in private homes, they were subject to demanding medical analysis, they were sometimes even dismissed as fakes. However, by availing themselves of relics and incorporating most of the new rules imposed by the official Church, laypeople integrated themselves into early modern Catholicism as shaped by the Council of Trent. At the same time, the plurality of practices carried out by laypeople points to the fact that they explored the possibilities and boundaries of religious experience.

By determining the quality of their acquisitions, and by relying on each other for authentication and classification, laypeople tried to some extent to defend their own interests against the monopoly on relics claimed by the Church. The construction of knowledge of relics by laypeople was carried out interactively and took place in different spaces (private homes, excavation sites, inns and convents), of which excavation sites deserve more attention. There, people

44 Villegas, *Memorial de Arjona* 403–404. These experiments were again carried out by many members of the household, in this case by his sons.

with very different backgrounds came together and, as the sources from Arjona reveal, exchanged views, shared knowledge about relics, and made judgements about the quality of excavated objects as relics.

Laypeople combined different types of knowledge to assess relics, to manipulate them, to integrate them in their lives and to experiment with them. Practical and professional forms of knowledge, belonging to foremen, notaries, carpenters, were brought together and used to formulate hypotheses about objects and their potential status as relics. Laypeople with a humanist background provided their neighbours with clues in the form of historical analysis of the time of the construction of Arjona or torture practices in the Roman Empire. Although new developments in anatomical discourse do not seem to have had an influence, more traditional anatomical knowledge was used by Arjona's laypeople to analyse their findings. Using these types of knowledge, laypeople challenged some positions of the official Church on the status of various objects as relics.

Knowledge was not only 'used' by laypeople to qualify and validate relics, but was also sought after explicitly by experimenting with relics. Three reasons can be distinguished in the sources for this. First, a rather sceptical stance towards these objects existed in seventeenth-century Catholic Europe: both the humanistic tradition and Church authorities contributed to the idea that relics were to be mistrusted, unless and until their sanctity was proved. By carrying out small experiments laypeople took the initiative to investigate the qualities of the bones and ashes, trying to exclude other natural causes for the effects they were experiencing. Laypeople themselves sometimes adopted sceptical stances. There is strong evidence that, influenced by the on-going ecclesiastical juridical discourse, they adopted some probationary strategies and techniques for their own inquiries in order to exclude cases of fakes and forgeries. The ecclesiastical focus on specific aspects of miracles, such as the quality of the blood coming out of bones, contributed to shaping laypeople's tests and observations.

Such 'experiments' can also be seen, third, as pertaining to a rich strain of 'experimental religion', which requires further investigation. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that laypeople consciously carried out tests and trials with religious objects such as relics in order to see whether the outcome (for instance the bleeding of a bone) still appeared. By means of such 'experiments' laypeople were able to prove or reject the possible sacred character of their objects. At the same time, by doing so, believers were actively seeking experiences of the sacred at different levels – religious, sensorial and moral.

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