Helen Hills

The Matter of Miracles: Neapolitan Baroque Architecture and Sanctity. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. Pp. 656. Hb, £80.00.

Professor Hills gets down to business with her introduction and initial query: “What are we to make of the Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro in Naples Cathedral?” (1) One is not just in Naples, Italy, but finds themselves in the remarkable Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro, a place apart, one filled with opulence and mystic drama.

When they visit this somewhat dank enclosure, visitors, worshippers, and historians alike find themselves a bit disoriented and unsettled, awash in a sacred plenitude of deep mystery. We (if a seat is available or there is room in the chapel) are witnessing not just dried-up bits and pieces of very old gore that looks more like an inkblot than the living remains of a notable Neapolitan saint, we, who witness the great miracles of the modern Catholic world, are astonished. Three times a year the blood liquefies, supposedly of its own devices. One never asks “how” it is done; it simply is a miracle.

St. Januarius I of Benevento was a bishop, martyr, and saint. While no contemporary sources survive, later informants and Christian legends claim that he died during the Great Persecution, which ended with Diocletian’s retirement in the year 305. However small are the portions of St. Januarius’s miraculous blood, our saint has remained consistent and remarkably productive over the centuries. Januarius as patron saint of Naples led the faithful to gather three times a year in the city’s cathedral to witness the liquefaction of what was then and is now claimed to be our saint’s blood.

The second part of Hill’s text bears the title: “Patrons and protectors” (213). Protectors of course contended with all in Naples; there was much to be protected from. Therefore, they had a chapel just for such security and shelter. The more patron saints the city had, the more power did the city of Naples garner.

Fascinating as this monograph is, it contains little of direct relevance to historians of the Society of Jesus, its art and ministries in Naples. Hill mentions Jesuits five times: their collection of relics at Gesù Nuovo (58); the role of Sts. Francis Xavier and Francesco Borgia as protector saints (246, 333), and their participation on processions of relics (146, 375).

Hills points out that the power of Sts. Peter and Paul reinforces the strength both of their “foundational” nature as well as having a Roman presence, as it were, in Naples. There is that sense of “if some is good, more is better.” Hills writes that “we can understand this apparent excess of saints and relics by thinking the chapel as a ‘machine,’” (216) something essentially—by its very nature—powerful.

In a sense, Naples now becomes a “capital” of saints. This kind of activity surged through town from the 1620s to the 1730s. When the plague of 1646 hit, something that could be done was to build more churches and to place relics in favorable locations. New churches sprung up and more relics appeared. Protector saints soon enough were thick on the ground. Saints became specialists, depending on the nature of the scourge one was facing, whether it was because of the plague or lack of food owing to natural disaster or failed crops. Earthquakes remained a fearful threat, one that menaced buildings and landscape. Everywhere one looked there might be danger and menace.

In addition to the hazards, plagues, and disasters, there was (and still is) the remarkably powerful and stunningly beautiful side of Naples, with its museums, architecture, sculpture, and exquisite gardens. The Treasury Chapel can be conceived of as exquisite beyond all belief. As Hills writes, the “Treasury Chapel cost a treasure and contained a treasure” (123). Even with footnotes and small print Hill’s book is well over five-hundred pages. It behooves the reviewer not just to dig deeply into individual chapters, but to summarize—as well as one can—the sheer scope of Hill’s discourse.

Hills “folds the wall” with her chapter: “Niche and saints: folding the wall” (319). She knows that the “fold”—these deep openings in an ecclesiastical fabric (as it were) is a kind of baroque synecdoche. There is here, in other words, a change in meaning when a part stands for a whole. The baroque—no matter its form (painting, singing, extrapolating, sculpting) forces architecture to struggle with the whole. Here is contestation. The baroque, of course, lives and dies by struggle for control and competition. Hills critiques those curious niches and the walls, seeing them as “folds.” This then is followed by a disquisition on “niche, tabernacle, and *loculus*” (321). As I was reading this, I could not help thinking of Gianlorenzo Bernini’s aedicule at the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. She was way ahead of me, as it turns out. I soon enough was blessed with a brilliant reading of Bernini’s fabulation.

For chapter seven, Hills provides us with the title “Saints on the move and the choreography of sanctity” (351). One can tell simply from her chapter titles that she makes of Naples and especially our church the living expressions of dance and its deeply rhetorical meaning. Chapter seven logically follows with the image suggesting the “choreography of sanctity.” We are always moving in this book, which in a sense has been my experience as a whole, not just of the precincts of San Gennaro and the Treasury Chapel.

With chapter eight, “Holiness and history, relics, and gender” (386), we find something deeply significant. Both historically and etymologically the role of gender plays an important role. Especially in enclosed female convents, religious practices were changing. The significance of enclosure for women

had, as we read about it in this chapter, much to teach us about religious practices in both northern and southern Europe.

In the early modern world relics were used differently by nuns and cardinals, for instance.

In other words, gender and status determine the meanings discovered within the Neapolitan milieu (not to mention the rest of Europe—northern, eastern, southern, and western). Hills writes that “[i]n Naples nuns’ exploitation of relics reminds us of the fluidity of relics, of their contagious qualities, of the ability to transport holiness, to spread it throughout a city, and simultaneously to transform city and the soteriological economy” (409).

Chapters nine and ten carry the suggestive titles of “Heads and bones: face to face” (410) and “Silver saints: between transformation and transaction” (446). The titles themselves suggest the kinds of inquiry she pursues and the art-historical gems she promises and delivers upon.

For me, among the greatest of Hill’s contributions is the one that admits critical theory into art-historical chambers. The results of her deep inquiry—both critical and informational—is an art-historical tract as good as any I have ever read. *Complimenti!*

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Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, ed.

A Companion to Early Modern Catholic Global Missions. Leiden: Brill, 2018. Pp. x + 488. Hb, €190.00.

This volume is a collection of fourteen essays divided into five parts written by scholars whose research and work centers on the Catholic missions between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in different places of the world. Contributors are Mark Christensen, Aliocha Maldavsky, Guillermo Wilde, Anne McGinness, and Dominique Deslandres, for the Americas; Alan Strathern for Africa; Adina Ruiu and Christian Windler for the Islamic World; Ines Županov, Tara Alberts, M. Antoni J. Üçerler, S.J., and R. Po-chia Hsia for Asia; Fred Vermote and Christoph Nebgen for the fifth and last part of the book on “The Structures” (finance and missionaries).

As expressed by the title, the essays offer a global view of the missions in three different continents as far as their organization, finances, personnel,