THE MAKING OF A LEGEND:
THE RELIQUARY OF THE TONGUE AND THE REPRESENTATION
OF ST. ANTHONY OF PADUA AS A PREACHER

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Introduction

Between the early fourteenth and the early fifteenth centuries, no less than ten reliquaries were commissioned, manufactured or adapted to house fragments of the body of St. Anthony of Padua. The active role played by the local mendicant community in making Anthony’s remains available and accessible formed part of a wider strategy of promotion and diversification of the cult of Anthony’s body and body-parts, which began with the saint’s initial burial in the little church of Santa Maria Materdomini in 1231. A decisive turning point in the promotion of the saint’s cult is represented by the first translation of Anthony’s remains in 1263 to the Basilica del Santo in Padua, also known as the Santo. Sources inform us that after Anthony’s coffin had been carried to the Basilica, the minister general of the Franciscan Order, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, presided over a ceremony of recognition, during which the tongue of the saint was found to be miraculously uncorrupted. Other body-part relics,

1 On Anthony’s early burial of Santa Maria Materdomini, see Francesco Lucchini, “Objects at Work. A Material and Cultural History of the Reliquaries of St. Anthony of Padua in the Basilica del Santo, ca. 1231–1438” (Ph.D diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2009), ch. 2. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help, encouragement and assistance of Luciano Bertazzo, Joanna Cannon, Donal Cooper and Cristina Knupfer in preparing this article.


3 The events are first recorded in the Benignitas, a late thirteenth-century life of St. Anthony possibly written by John Peckham, ca. 1280. See Vergilio Gamboso, ed., Vita del
including the saint’s jawbone, radius, scalp, hand and fingers were removed from Anthony’s remains in 1263. The corpus of evidence pertaining to the saint’s relics reveals that these (with the exception of the jawbone) were gradually relocated in different containers and that (uncorrupted tongue aside) they were physically manipulated and further dissected in order to generate new body fragments, supplementing those already in circulation. Taken together, the objects and practices relating to the preservation, distribution and cult of Anthony’s relics betray an unprecedented form of engagement with the body of a single saint in a single place which is altogether unparalleled in contemporary mendicant contexts. In this respect, it is important to observe that the enduring focus on the bodily remains of St. Anthony appears to be in countetrend in respect to the evolution of saints’ cults during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. According to the influential interpretation offered by André Vauchez, from ca. 1240s, the cult of saints became progressively more reliant on the veneration of painted images and less dependent on pilgrimage and physical proximity to saints’ bodies.

The long-lasting dependence of Anthony’s cult on pilgrimage and physical proximity to his body and the lack of images directly associated with his veneration rendered the promotion of the cult of St. Anthony particularly open to the problem of differentiating the saint’s profile from that of other mendicant saints. Yet the study of the reliquaries of St. Anthony reveals that these were entrusted with an ability to effectively influence expectations, beliefs, and practices relating to the cult of the saint, ultimately allowing for a more individualised form of veneration. Drawing on this evidence, this paper argues that the preservation of Anthony’s uncorrupted tongue played a crucial role in shaping the identity of the

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Evidence gathered during the 1981 canonical recognition of Anthony’s body demonstrates that the saint’s relics were severed from Anthony’s mortal remains in 1263. See Claudio Bellinati, “Due sigilli, tre iscrizioni su pergamena, una lapide marmorea documentano la prima e unica ricognizione di s. Antonio (1263),” Il Santo 21 (1981), 255–281.


For a comparison with other mendicant cults, see Lucchini, “Objects at Work,” ch. 7.
