



“Due honor to their relics”: Thomas Aquinas as Teacher and Object of Veneration

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Abstract

After his death an intense struggle ensued for ownership of the relics of Thomas Aquinas. There were both pious and political motives for the desire to possess the bones of the saint. This article introduces the topic by describing the places where Aquinas' relics can now be found. We then outline Aquinas' own views on the veneration of relics, which is characterized by an appreciation of the practice but with great caution to avoid superstition. An historical overview of the fate of Aquinas' relics sheds light on their significance, particularly in light of the canonization process. The final reflection considers the fate of Aquinas' relics in light of his own theology.

EJSTA 37 (2019)

DOI:

10.2478/ejsta-2019-0001

Article history:

Received: 23.10.2018

Accepted: 21.11.2018

Available online:
01.07.2019

Keywords

relic veneration • Dominican history • medieval canonization process



Theologians who seek the intercession of their patron saint Thomas Aquinas can of course pray to him wherever they please.¹ But those who wish to pray in the presence of his relics also have ample opportunity to do so. Aquinas became a focus of veneration after his life, a rare honor for a medieval theologian. The cathedral of Priverno, the birthplace of Aquinas' *socius* Reginald of Piperno, boasts the skull of Aquinas. Toulouse also has a skull which it claims is that of the Angelic Doctor which it guards alongside most of the saint's body. The basilica of Sant'Eustorgio in Milan houses a reliquary of the thumb of Aquinas' right hand. In the Carafa chapel in Rome's Santa Maria sopra Minerva pilgrims can pray in the presence of an arm bone of the saint, while contemplating Filippino Lippi's famous fresco "The glory of saint Thomas Aquinas". Naples was presented with the left arm of the saint, and the town of Aquino received a rib from Toulouse in 1963 when its church was consecrated as co-cathedral of the diocese of Sora-Cassino-Aquino-Pontecorvo.² A five-minute walk from the

¹ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of the journal for helpful suggestions on a number of elements in this article.

² 'Basilica Concattedrale di Aquino', <http://www.basilicaaquino.it/home>, retrieved 15 October 2018.

Thomas Instituut Utrecht, the humble chapel of the archdiocesan seminary has a small relic under the altar, a gift the archbishop bestowed in 2014.³

And there are more places that claim to have a relic of saint Thomas Aquinas. How did his body come to be divided all over Europe, and what did the relics mean to those who received them? What interests played a role in the struggle for ownership of Aquinas' relics? And what were his own views and practices with regard to the veneration of relics? In exploring these questions, this article seeks to connect Aquinas' own views on the veneration of relics and the veneration that his relics received after his death. First we will outline Aquinas' own views on relics and we will also note his own practice in this regard. Second we will try to aid the reader in understanding the complicated history of how the body was separated, a history the acclaimed biographer Jean-Pierre Torrell called "hardly appetizing".⁴ Throughout this discussion we will note how the veneration of the body continues in the liturgical texts of the office written for his feast day. In our conclusion we will offer some reflections on how to come to a new appreciation of the cult of the saint based on the greatest relic of them all: his writings. This article thus brings together a theological appraisal of Aquinas' views and practices with regard to relics with an overview of the fate of his own relics. The main contribution with regard to the historical overview on Aquinas' relics is that we offer a largely chronological approach to what happened to the relics, not only immediately following the saint's death in Fossanova but also during their transfer to Toulouse and the renewed struggle for ownership after the French revolution. Most of this information is unknown to theologians because the major biographies do not dwell on the details of this matter: Weisheipl spends two pages on the "bizarre tactics employed by the Cistercians of Fossanova to keep the body of Thomas for themselves", and we already noted that Torrell did not feel inclined to linger on this part of the history.⁵ For those who are familiar with these events, it may be helpful to take into consideration Aquinas' own views on the veneration of relics. Some of the devotions practiced around the tomb may seem macabre to present-day scholars but to the medieval believer they were genuine signs of affection and faith. It is helpful to consider the political motives behind the prolonged struggle for the ownership of Aquinas' relics or to simply observe the devotional practices from an outsider perspective. We can however not truly appreciate what these sacred bones meant for those honoring them if we do not make

³ 'Relieken geplaatst onder altaar Ariënsinstituut', <https://www.aartsbisdom.nl/relieken-geplaatst-altaar-ariënsinstituut>, retrieved 15 October 2018. Auxiliary bishop H.W. Woorts communicated to me that the archdiocese has no record of the origin of this relic and that the reliquary theca is most likely from the late 19th or early 20th century. I inspected the theca myself on 17 October 2018 and found no seal or other indication of its provenance.

⁴ J.-P. Torrell, *Initiation à Saint Thomas d'Aquin: Sa Personne et Son Oeuvre*, revised edition (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2015), 379.

⁵ J.A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought and Works* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 320-323.

an effort to understand the insider perspective, and Aquinas' own devotions and ideas are a good place to begin such a reflection.

1. Veneration of Relics as a Sign of Affection

What were Aquinas' views on the veneration of relics?⁶ We can answer this question by looking at his own devotional practice and of course by studying his writings. In his commentary on the Psalms Aquinas gives the most concise definition of what a 'relic' is: that which is left over of a person when the spirit is separated from the body.⁷ He is aware that legends surround relics of the saints. In a commentary on the death of John the Baptist he notes that "it is said that they buried [the body] in Sebaste, since he was near there. Afterward, when Julian the apostate saw many people coming to his relics, he had him burned, except for the head".⁸ But if a relic is merely that which is left over of a person after his death what is then the value of the relics of saints? Aquinas seems to presume this value since he considers irreverent treatment of these remains not just disrespectful but sacrilege because by the treatment of relics of the saints "in some way their persons are either venerated or dishonored".⁹

The veneration of relics is not an indication of the intrinsic value of the material object, say a rib or a finger, but a sign of respect for the person whose relics they are. This becomes even more clear when we turn to Aquinas' most extensive discussion on relics, which we find in the *tertia pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* as part of a question on the reverence due to Christ. The opening objections are strong: it would seem wrong, foolish even to worship the dead as pagans do and "to venerate lifeless objects".¹⁰ Yet Christians have always honored the bodies of the saints and in particular the relics of the martyrs. In his response Aquinas appeals to the common experience of children keeping souvenirs of a beloved parent, an example already given by Augustine: "a person who holds another in affection will venerate whatever remains of him", and this pertains both to the body as well as to other things such as clothing or a ring.¹¹ If we treat what remains of our loved ones with this kind of respect it is evident that "we are bound to hold in veneration the saints of God as being members of Christ, sons and friends of God and our advocates with him". Therefore we "accord due honour to any of their relics; and this is primarily true of their bodies, which were the temples and instruments of the Holy Spirit, dwelling and acting within them, and which are to be made like the body of Christ by glorious resurrection. It is for this reason that God himself grants honour to their relics by

⁶ In this article I only address relics of the saints, for relics of Christ see *STh* III, q. 25 a. 4 and q. 54 a. 3, ad 3.

⁷ In *Psalmos* 36, 25.

⁸ In *Matt.* 1234.

⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 99 a. 3 resp.

¹⁰ *STh* III, q. 25 a. 6 arg. 1-2.

¹¹ *STh* III, q. 25 a. 6 resp.

performing miracles when they are present”.¹² Two things stand out in this response. First, the honor given to relics is derived from the dignity of their living body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. Second, any miracles in relation to relics are due to God and not to the relics themselves since these are merely present when the miracle occurs. We will explore these two points further.

Aquinas “evidently assumes that there is concrete and real material continuity between a saint’s living body and their relics”, Antonia Fitzpatrick concludes on the basis of the article we are discussing.¹³ It is not so much the body that is honored as an object in itself, the relics of saints are venerated “for the soul which once was united to it and which now enjoys God; and for God, whose servants they were”.¹⁴ That body may be lifeless because it is no longer connected to the soul, it is materially the same and “as such will be reunited to its form” at the resurrection of the dead.¹⁵ The implication is that the faithful who venerate relics address their prayers to the soul of the saint and honor God for them rather than place their faith in the lifeless bones in front of them, even though these have a special connection to the saint’s soul. In similar fashion the medieval custom of swearing an oath on relics or by the saints can be understood. It is still directed to God because we swear “by the saints, who believed God’s truth and observed it”.¹⁶ In this case the relic or even the name of a saint serves as something intermediate because the truthfulness of what is said is still sworn to God, by way of his saints. With regard to the second point about miracles involving relics we can point to a story from the life of Aquinas. We know that he always carried relics of saint Agnes with him. One time, when his *socius* Reginald fell seriously ill with a fever he made use of them.¹⁷ The legend recounts that he “praying, placed [the relics] on the breast of the sick man” who was healed instantly.¹⁸ The practice of carrying relics is acceptable to Aquinas “if it is out of confidence in God and the saints”. However, “if account were taken of some irrelevance, for instance, that the locket is triangular and the like, which has no bearing on the reverence due to God and the saints, it would be superstitious and wrong”.¹⁹ We find the same care to avoid superstition in a small treatise entitled *De operationibus occultis naturae* in which Aquinas denounces astrology, necromancy and other forms of magic. He brings up relics in passing and explains that those who were healed by the shadow of saint Peter (cf. Acts 5, 15-16) or “at the touch of the relics of some saint” were not healed because

¹² *STh* III, q. 25 a. 6 resp.

¹³ A. Fitzpatrick, *Thomas Aquinas on Bodily Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 166.

¹⁴ *STh* III, q. 25 a. 6 ad 2.

¹⁵ *STh* III, q. 25 a. 6 ad 3.

¹⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 89 a. 6 s.c.

¹⁷ C. Le Brun - Gouanvic (ed.), *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino de Guillaume de Tocco* (1323) (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996), 37. References to her edition of the text are given as *Ystoria*; Torrell, *Initiation*, 349.

¹⁸ *Ystoria* 50: “reliquias dicte sancte, quas ad pectus suspensus ex deuotione portabat, orans supra pectus infirmi posuit, et infirmus sanus et ylaris in lecto resedit”.

¹⁹ *STh*. II-II, q. 96 a. 4 ad 3.

these objects have power in and of themselves but “only by the divine operation which makes use of these bodies to this effect”.²⁰ This wording is stronger than that in the *Summa* where the relics are merely said to be present when a miracle occurs. Still, it is clear that these relics do contain any miraculous power but that miracles are granted by God in response to the faith of those praying with relics.

This brief overview suggests that Aquinas approved of common practice with regard to the veneration of relics and did himself participate in this. Yet his careful answers to objections with regard to this practice suggest that he is at least aware of more superstitious motives. He emphasizes that any divine power in relation to relics is the power of God who chooses to act as He wills, not a power contained in bones. In his reflections on relic veneration we recognize Aquinas as a pious and theologically careful person. This care stands in stark contrast with the struggle that would ensue when his own body became a relic of the once living man, a struggle for possession of coveted bones between religious orders, kings and countries.

2. The Fate of the Relics of Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas was a teacher of the veneration of relics but his body also became an object of veneration. This makes him unique among medieval theologians. How did this cult develop after his passing? The circumstances of the death of Aquinas are well-established and there is no need to dwell on them for too long. Bartholomew of Capua recounted that during Mass on the 6 December 1273, the feast of St. Nicholas, Aquinas was “suddenly struck by something that profoundly affected him” and after this Mass “he never wrote or dictated anything (...) he hung up his instruments of writing in the third part of the *Summa*, in the treatise of penance”.²¹ The hagiographic narrative interprets this event as a mystical experience, a vision of divine things. Torrell does not discard this interpretation of the event but also argues that the fact that Thomas was severely overworked may have contributed to the event in the chapel and the subsequent inability to dictate to his scribes. Weisheipl interpreted it along the same lines but also noted that “the possibility of a stroke resulting in brain damage through hemorrhage cannot be ruled out”.²² Whatever the event may have been, Thomas Aquinas was weakened and no longer able to work. He was taken to the house of his sister countess Theodora to recover. In spite of his illness Aquinas went on a journey either late January or early February of 1274 to attend the council of Lyon, where his expertise was requested. At one of the stops on the journey, in the castle of his niece Francesca in Maenza, Thomas fell ill. After a few days he resumed his travels but he soon had to stop to rest at the Cistercian abbey at Fossanova. An eyewitness later

²⁰ *De Op. Occ. Nat.* lines 64-70: “quod enim ad umbram Petri apostoli sanarentur infirmi, uel etiam quod ad tactum reliquiarum alicuius sancti aliqua egritudo pellatur, non fit per aliquam formam hiis corporibus inditam, sed solum per operationem diuinam que huiusmodi corporibus utitur ad tales effectus”.

²¹ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino*, 320-323; J.-P. Torrell, *Initiation*, 369-370, 374-376.

²² Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino*, 322.

recounted that Aquinas said that “if the Lord must visit me, it is better for him to find me in a religious house than in a house of lay people”.²³ He would not recover and on 7 March 1274 Thomas Aquinas passed away in the abbey.²⁴

It is remarkable that Torrell in his biography seems to refuse to further go into the events that followed. He notes that those events are “hardly appetizing” and goes on to other matters. What ensued after Aquinas’ death was a prolonged and at times bitter fight for ownership of the remains of Thomas Aquinas. This stands in stark contrast with the respectful views on relics we just described and some of the details are downright gruesome.²⁵ The most important reason for this situation is succinctly described by Constant Mews in his study of the *translatio*, the solemn transfer of the relics. He notes that the death of one of their most famous brothers in a Cistercian abbey “created a major problem for the Order of Preachers”.²⁶ The order felt they had a rightful claim to the body of Aquinas but the Cistercians had already begun to treat him as one of their own. After he breathed his last the monks washed Aquinas’ body, following the customs of their order. They also gave him a burial according to the Benedictine rite.²⁷ The washing of the body occasioned the first miracle, as Marika Räsänen recounts in reference to one of the witnesses for the canonization: “When the monks were preparing to [wash the body], Petrus explains how they first decided to say farewell to Thomas: they kissed the feet of the dead man in deference to his holiness. When the Sub-Prior of the monastery, Iohannes de Florentino (sic), who had lost his sight, was about to kiss the dead man’s feet, the others suggested to him that ‘he should lay his eyes against the eyes of a saintly man’. Iohannes followed this advice and according to Petrus, he at once fully recovered his sight”.²⁸ Already before the funeral Aquinas’ body thus became an instrument of healing. The power that was somehow related to the body also manifested itself in negative events: the mule that carried Aquinas to Fossanova died when it saw the body, and a dog that kept watch in the room where he lay ill died in the same way.²⁹ In 1312 a priest refused to venerate a hand-relic of Aquinas because he was not yet canonized. “Immediately”, a witness at the canonization noted, “he was seized by an intemperate tremor and his head was seen to become large as if it was an immense, heavy cyst”. Only when the priest repented and venerated the relic he was relieved of the tremor and swelling.³⁰

²³ Torrell, *Initiation*, 372.

²⁴ There is no evidence for the theory perpetuated most prominently in Dante’s *Divina Commedia* that Aquinas was poisoned, see: M. Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics as Focus for Conflict and Cult in the Late Middle Ages: The Restless Corpse* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 70-71; Torrell, *Initiation*, 376.

²⁵ A key source for the fate of the relics is: C. Douais, *Les Reliques De Saint Thomas D’Aquin, Textes Originaux* (Paris: C. Poussielgue, 1903). The works of Räsänen, Mews and Richards draw from this source.

²⁶ C.J. Mews, ‘The *Historia Translationis Sacri Corporis Thome Aquinatis* of Raymundus Hugonis: An Eyewitness Account and Its Significance’, in: M. Räsänen, G. Hartmann, E.J. Richards (eds.), *Relics, Identity, and Memory in Medieval Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 257.

²⁷ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d’Aquino*, 329.

²⁸ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 63.

²⁹ C. Le Brun - Gouanvic (ed.), *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, 38; Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 64.

³⁰ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 127.

At the time of the canonization, decades later, there was an established tradition that claims Aquinas quoted Psalm 132, 14 when he was brought to the abbey: “this is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I desire it”.³¹ The Cistercian interpretation of this saying was that the holy man before his death designated where he wanted his body to rest.³² These stories may go back to the days of Aquinas’ death at the abbey but they only came to the surface long after the body had been buried. After the funeral rites Aquinas was first buried in the abbey church but the body was moved to saint Stephen’s chapel within the cloister, perhaps to guard it against theft by Dominicans. Consequent events would show that this fear was anything but irrational. Already in 1274 the university of Paris petitioned -to the Dominicans not the Cistercians- for the body of their former *magister*. The letter from the faculty of arts employs the metaphor of Thomas as a light for the church, an image that will recur in many tributes. In the letter the senders lament that “it is as though the sun had withdrawn its splendour or suffered the overshadowing of an untimely eclipse, now that this light of the Church is put out”. They then move on to their petition: “we beseech you, out of our great gratitude and devout affection towards the memory of so great a cleric, so great a father, so great a master, of your generosity to grant us the bones of him now dead whom we could not recover alive; for it were surely in the highest degree improper and unworthy that any town or place other than Paris, than this the noblest of all university cities, should guard the bones of him whose youth was nourished, fostered, and educated here at Paris, which then received from him in return the inexpressible benefit of his teaching. Does not the Church rightly honour the bones and relics of her saints? Then is this not a desire both reasonable and pious that we should wish to give lasting honour to the body of such a master? Thus he whose fame is kept green amongst us by his writings, may also, by the remembered presence of his tomb in our city, live on for ever in the hearts of our posterity”.³³ Along with this request they also asked the order for some of Aquinas’ philosophical writings. No response from the Dominicans has been preserved but the request gives some insight into the motives for the petition.³⁴ The university already had the ‘relic’ of his works, now they wished to preserve Aquinas’ presence in an even more tangible way by retaining the body of the master.

In spite of this Parisian request and the Dominicans’ understandable desire to have the remains of their famous brother in the order’s custody, Fossanova would for decades be the place where pilgrims came to venerate Aquinas’ relics. It is also from there that the body was divided into pieces. The fact that it was buried in the cloister

³¹ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 30-32; Torrell, *Initiation*, 378.

³² It was not uncommon to presume saintly foresight with regard to the resting place: Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 76. For the earlier use of the verse by other saints, cf. J. Healy, *Insula Sanctorum et Doctorum: Or, Ireland’s Schools and Scholars* (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 4th edition 1904), 200, 453.

³³ K. Foster (trans./ed.), *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1959), 153-155.

³⁴ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 64; Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d’Aquino*, 332-333.

meant that only men had access to it, given that Cistercian observance strictly forbade women to enter the realm of the monks. It is for this reason that Thomas' niece Francesca could only venerate his body at the church doors before the funeral.³⁵ As we noted the body was soon moved to saint Stephen's chapel but it was returned to the church seven months later after Aquinas appeared in a dream to the prior of the monastery and asked: "take me back where I was first".³⁶ The legend claims that when "they opened the grave, with iron instruments, long after his exhumation, in which his corpse was placed from his tomb in the church, such a perfume diffused that it seemed that there was opened <not> the tomb containing the rest of a man but a coffin full of aromas".³⁷ The body was returned to the choir and later, in the early 1280s it was placed in the apse of the abbey church. An inscription on the marble tomb praised Aquinas as a 'light': "Thomas died here that he might become a greater light for the world, and Fossanova its candelabra, the celebrated place created by the burning, unhidden light. Who would deny that this Fossa is Nova".³⁸ Placing the tomb in the church made it easier for pilgrims to pray at the shrine of Thomas Aquinas. They did so in different ways but the common denominator in the legends is the importance of physical contact with either the tomb or a relic of Aquinas. There are a number of primary sources available that testify to this and they are brought together by Räsänen. People would kneel in front of the tomb, place their children on it or would climb it themselves, sometimes spending up to two hours laying on the tomb to pray for healing, often promising to offer *vota* in recognition of a miracle. A panegyric evokes Biblical imagery in claiming that "the blind saw, the deaf, the dumb were restored to health". The importance of physical contact with the body is attested to by a prayer recorded in the documents: "Beate Thoma, corpus sanctum, libera me...".³⁹ Blessed Thomas is here identified with his "holy body", and it is to the body that the prayer is addressed. Claire le Brun - Gouanvic calculated that 45% of the miracles attributed to Aquinas involved contact with his tomb or the imposition of his relics at the gate of the abbey, a relatively high number compared to saint Louis of Toulouse who was canonized six years before Thomas.⁴⁰

Women who wished to ask for the intercession of Thomas could not enter the monastery, as we noted before. If they wished for some form of physical presence of him during their prayer another way had to be found. This is where portable relics begin to enter into the story. In fact a relic by its very nature is an "incomplete, indeterminate and portable" presence of a saint or another venerated person and it

³⁵ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 67; Torrell, *Initiation*, 377.

³⁶ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 76.

³⁷ *Ystoria* LXVI, 206; translation in: Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 80.

³⁸ "Occidit hic Thomas, lux et foret amplior orbi / Et candelabrum sic Nova Fossa foret / Editus ardenti locus est, non fossa lucerna / Hang igitur Fossam quis neget esse Novam?", quoted in: Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 93.

³⁹ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 108-118.

⁴⁰ Le Brun - Gouanvic (ed.), *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, 56-58.

allows for “informal extemporized devotions”.⁴¹ Some witnesses claimed to have been healed after being touched by Aquinas’ skull and a twelve-year old girl named Adelasia was said to be healed after a relic box was placed on her head. The monks of Fossanova, the sources note, “were always ready to carry [the relics] to the gate”.⁴² These sources give us insight into female devotion to Aquinas but more importantly they indicate that at some point during the decades that Aquinas was buried in Fossanova at least parts of the body were extracted from the tomb. This would later become an important argument in support of the Dominican claim to the body, as it was construed as the mishandling of the remains of a holy man. After all, the body was found to be incorruptible during the first transfer back to the abbey church and other sources claim this was the case even twelve years after Aquinas’ death.⁴³ In spite of this obvious sign of its sanctity the Cistercians violated the dignity of the body by dividing it into pieces, Dominican authors reproached.

This takes us to the more graphic part of this study, where we seek to establish what happened to the body of Aquinas and how different parts of it were given away as relics before what remained of him was transferred to Toulouse. When the *translatio* did happen in 1368 the casket contained only 50 bones, as opposed to the 206 in a complete human skeleton.⁴⁴ The main point of contention was when the Cistercians had begun to separate the body into parts. In 1288 the body apparently was still intact, although a hand relic had been given to Thomas’ sister Theodora. Her son later donated the relic to the Dominican house in Salerno.⁴⁵ An important source for Dominican sentiments toward the keepers of Aquinas’ body is the *Historia Translationis Sacri Corporis Thome Aquinatis* of Raymundus Hugonis, an account of the transfer of the body to Toulouse. This document also highlights the role played by Honoratus, the count of Fondi, who twice moved the body to and from his residence, which was about 35 kilometers (ca. 22 miles) from the abbey of Fossanova. Raymundus’ story introduces the claim that during the pontificate of Benedict XI (1303-1304), a Dominican, the Cistercians boiled the body of Thomas in order to separate the bones from the flesh, a measure that would have made it easier to move the body and hide it should others make a claim to it. Räsänen notes that the occurrence and timing of this story seems to serve Dominican interests, even though it may have older roots.⁴⁶ Related to this particular story is the question if and when the Cistercians forcibly separated Thomas’ head from the rest of his body. Regardless of the truth of particular stories it is clear that the Cistercians at some point began to distribute relics to a number of recipients. In 1319 the skull was reportedly moved to

⁴¹ J.M.H. Smith, ‘Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c. 700-1200), in: *Proceedings of the British Academy* 181 (2012), 150, 156.

⁴² Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 126-127, 146.

⁴³ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 122 n. 202.

⁴⁴ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 120; Torrell, *Initiation*, 378.

⁴⁵ Mews, ‘The *Historia Translationis*’, 258; Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 121, 168-169, 216.

⁴⁶ Mews, ‘The *Historia Translationis*’, 267; Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas’s Relics*, 123-125.

the cathedral of Piperno -present-day Priverno-, around 1320 'some relics' were placed on the high altar of that church. Anagni cathedral boasts possession of a relic since 1323 and a document from 1329 notes that the Cistercians granted a request of the Dominicans by giving an arm "from elbow to hand". Räsänen even develops a credible theory that each one of the commissioners in the process of Aquinas' canonization received a bone relic.⁴⁷ Apparently, Reginald of Piperno also obtained at least one relic since he was seen giving a perfectly preserved thumb from the hand given to Theodora to cardinal Hugh of Ostia.⁴⁸ In short: many parties desired to have something of the saint with them and the monks of Fossanova were willing to accommodate at least some of these requests.

3. Canonization and *Translatio* of Thomas Aquinas

In the process of Thomas Aquinas' canonization the fate of his body begins to play a large role. The Cistercians already venerated Aquinas as a saint: he was remembered daily in the liturgy of Fossanova and there was a feast day in place no later than 1317, six years before the formal canonization.⁴⁹ Naturally, the Dominicans wished to see their brother canonized. But the petition for the canonization was not made by the order but by queen Mary of Naples, the widow of Charles II.⁵⁰

Two years after the death of Clement V French cardinal Jacques Duèze was elected pope in 1316. He took on the name John XXII and was the second pope to reside in Avignon. After the difficult process leading to his election, pope John offered to canonize a Dominican as a token of gratitude for their hosting of the conclave in Lyon. The king of Aragon suggested Raymond of Peñafort but the pope chose to follow the suggestion of the house of Anjou.⁵¹ Pope John was close to the Angevin royal family to whom he owed at least part of his career. This proximity is attested to by the canonization of bishop Louis of Toulouse, a Franciscan who was the second son of king Charles II. Jacques Duèze had been a witness in the process but it is remarkable that as pope he pursued this process since he is known for his strong stance against Franciscan interpretations of evangelical poverty which he considered extreme and in some cases even heretical.⁵² It seems that the pope's generosity to the house of Anjou trumped his resentment against the spiritual Franciscans. He began his canonization homily "by praising the Dominican idea of poverty in which Friars have nothing of their own, although they have something in common just as the Apostles had".⁵³

⁴⁷ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 98, 136, 145-146, 177-179.

⁴⁸ Torrell, *Initiation*, 346.

⁴⁹ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 96-97.

⁵⁰ Le Brun - Gouanvic (ed.), *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, 8.

⁵¹ Torrell, *Initiation*, 405. Cf. A. Robiglio, *La Sopravvivenza e la Gloria: Appunti sulla Formazione della Prima Scuola Tomista (sec. XIV)* – *Sacra Doctrina Bibliotheca* 53-1 (2008), 67-70.

⁵² M. Brunner, 'Poverty and Charity: Pope John XXII and the Canonization of Louis of Anjou', in: *Franciscan Studies* 69 (2011), 232, 234, 239.

⁵³ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino*, 348.

Attaching the fame of sanctity to these moderate views aided the pope's struggle against extreme interpretations of evangelical poverty.⁵⁴ The Angevins also had an interest in the canonization of Aquinas, since it would raise a son of their region to the altars, after an actual son of the house. After their involvement in the process king Robert was also present at the canonization and gave a speech praising Thomas as "a burning and shining light".⁵⁵

After the solemn celebration of the canonization on 18 July 1323 in Avignon the Order of Preachers had a new saint but his shrine was still in a Cistercian monastery. The situation was further complicated by unrest in the region which drove the monks out of Fossanova abbey. The aforementioned count of Fondi either stepped in and saved the body or seized the opportunity to steal it. Either way, in 1349 or 1354 the relics of Aquinas ended up in the castle of the count who kept them in his private quarters. When the situation calmed down the count returned the relics only to later again take it to his castle, eventually moving them to the chapel after Aquinas appeared in a dream to the count's mother Giacomina requesting this transfer.⁵⁶ In the meantime the Dominicans had already intensified their efforts to gain possession of the relics of their saint. The biography that William of Tocco prepared for the canonization process served to demonstrate the holiness of friar Thomas but it also "implicitly justifies the order's claim to Thomas and his corpse".⁵⁷ Among other things Tocco suggested that the arrangement in Fossanova had always been intended to be temporary. The first version of his *Vita* of Thomas was presented to pope John XXII in 1318; a final version was ready shortly after the canonization in 1323.⁵⁸ The claims that were implicit in Tocco's work became much more explicit in Bernard Gui's *Legenda*. This account of the life of Aquinas was based on Tocco but it made some new points. Gui invokes the authority of the pope who he claims had entrusted the body to the Order of Preachers. He also mentions an *instrumentum*, a legal document stating that "the Doctor himself had asked his corpse to be transferred to his confraternity in Naples when the time was suitable". The transfer of the body to St. Stephen's chapel after the funeral was framed as a preparation for the eventual transfer to Naples. Räsänen reports these novelties in Gui's account and argues that the existence of an *instrumentum* is most likely his fabrication.⁵⁹

Already before the canonization the Dominican order had pushed for ownership of the relics. One of the brothers, Remigio dei Girolami lamented: "O why does Fossanova keep the bones of the venerable Thomas? I beg that they could be

⁵⁴ Le Brun - Gouanvic (ed.), *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, 6-9.

⁵⁵ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 247.

⁵⁶ Mews, 'The *Historia Translationis*', 269; Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 187-194.

⁵⁷ M. Räsänen, 'The Memory of St. Thomas Aquinas in Orvieto', in: M. Räsänen, G. Hartmann, E.J. Richards (eds.), *Relics, Identity, and Memory in Medieval Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 301; M. Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 206.

⁵⁸ Le Brun - Gouanvic (ed.), *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, 11-16.

⁵⁹ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 209-210.

moved from there and be kept by the Dominicans".⁶⁰ It was after the canonization that their efforts began to gain traction at the papal court, although it would still take almost half a century before they were successful. Eventually pope Urban V was the one who "took special care that the body of Saint Thomas be restored to the Order. And because this Pope wanted to have the body reunited with the head, he handed it over to the Order and commanded with many indulgences that [the relics] be placed in the convent of Toulouse".⁶¹ What this document fails to mention is that by that time the Dominicans had already successfully schemed to procure the relics from the count of Fondi. Elias Raymundus, the magister of the order, was the architect of this operation. The *Historia Translationis* written by Elias' secretary Raymundus Hugonis notes in a streak of honesty that "after a lapse of time, the said lord Count [Honoratus] stole the holy body from the monks through this way at the request of our brothers". A later version of the text states the count "secretly received it".⁶² The same Raymundus received a vision that authenticated the relics.⁶³ In his *Historia* he also bolsters the Dominican claim on the body by faulting the Cistercians with mishandling the remains of the saint. He notes that the bones of Aquinas were "of reddish color, looking as if by boiling or some other change effected by heat, they had been violently detached from the flesh".⁶⁴

On 11 February 1368 the relics were brought to the Dominican convent at Fondi. Now the stage was set for a solemn *translatio* of the body to a Dominican shrine but the order had not yet received the crucial papal approval for this. Moving the relics without approval would have been a violation of canon law and could have led to the excommunication of the entire Order of Preachers.⁶⁵ Elias had in the meantime taken care of other details, such as having some of his brothers steal the stone that covered Aquinas' tomb. He was trying to create the impression that the body was moved miraculously.⁶⁶ Now that he had procured the body Elias had to face the pope and find a way to establish ownership of it. The pope's first words offered little hope: "Thief, you come well; are you there? You have stolen holy Thomas". Elias countered that the saint "is our flesh and our brother". Remarkably, the pope then simply asked Elias where he wanted the relics to be taken. On 8 June 1368, the feast of Corpus Christi, Elias' efforts were successful. He argued that since Thomas had written the office for the feast at the request of Urban IV it would be fitting that pope Urban V would render his relics to the order on the day of that feast. Raymundus Hugonis records the answer of the pope: "we give and concede to you, master, and to the Order of preaching brothers the body of blessed Thomas Aquinas, teacher of the said Order,

⁶⁰ "Heu nova cur Fossa / tenet hec venerabilis ossa? / Obsecro tollantur, / a fratribus hec teneantur", quoted in: Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 12.

⁶¹ Räsänen, 'The Memory of St. Thomas Aquinas', 285.

⁶² Mews, 'The *Historia Translationis*', 269.

⁶³ Räsänen, 'The Memory of St. Thomas Aquinas', 304.

⁶⁴ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino*, 331.

⁶⁵ Räsänen, 'The Memory of St. Thomas Aquinas', 305.

⁶⁶ Mews, 'The *Historia Translationis*', 270.

to be placed at Toulouse or Paris, as it seems best to the coming General Chapter to be celebrated and to the master of the said Order". The pope also ordered that the skull of Thomas be given to the order. Considering all the efforts Elias made to procure the relics before formally asking the pope to receive them, Mews rightfully characterizes this part of the scheme as a "legal fiction".⁶⁷ Although per papal decree a skull was given to the Dominicans at this time, in 1585 another skull was found in Fossanova. This is the skull that is now venerated in Priverno cathedral as the skull of Aquinas.⁶⁸

4. The 'Splendor of Italy' Taken to France

Now that the Order of Preachers had obtained the relics of their saints and the papal permission to transfer them, the journey to Toulouse could begin. This journey was completed with the official *translatio* on 28 January 1369, marking the transfer of Aquinas from the region where he was born to France. This event is remembered in the liturgical offices for his feast day on 7 March and the feast of the translation for 28 January. An antiphon for the feast of the translation sings of the move from Italy to France: "O how blessed art thou, mother Italy, who hast given birth to the ray of a new sun. Equally blessed art thou o Gaul, who hast received this Sun's cloak, O Toulouse, the magnificent feast will bring thee perpetual delight".⁶⁹ The 'cloak' can be interpreted as the earthly remains of the saint, which were his cloak during his life. In spite of the poetry, it is safe to say the Italians were not as thrilled as the French. The townsfolk and the bishop of Gaeta caught wind of what was about to happen and offered master Elias a huge sum of money to retain the body of the saint who was extolled as the "splendor of Italy" in the vespers of his feast day. In Southern Italy people regarded Thomas Aquinas "as one of their own" and to them the *translatio* was a loss.⁷⁰ En route to France some relics of the saint were left for veneration in Italy, in Bologna and Milan.⁷¹

Meanwhile, France had reason to rejoice. At the instigation of master Elias of Toulouse and by orders of the French pope Urban V yet another valuable relic was brought to the country. In 1239 Louis IX -by the time of the *translatio* of Aquinas already saint Louis- had brought the greatest prize of them all to Paris: the crown of thorns, leading the archbishop of Sens to exclaim that now "Paris is the new Jerusalem".⁷² By the acquisition of a large number of relics the French monarch sought

⁶⁷ Mews, 'The *Historia Translationis*', 271-277.

⁶⁸ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 150.

⁶⁹ The information on the liturgical office is derived from a hand-out provided by the working group 'Ossa Gloriosa' at their session during the 2018 International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo. An edition of "The Liturgies of Thomas Aquinas's Offices" is foreseen for 2019, see: <https://ossagloriosa.org/in-english/>, retrieved 16 October 2018.

⁷⁰ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 256; Mews, 'The *Historia Translationis*', 270.

⁷¹ Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics*, 287 n. 6.

⁷² C. Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 133.

to establish the sacrality of his country and his reign. The windows in Paris' famed Sainte Chapelle depict Louis as guardian of the coveted relics of Christ's passion and as heir to the kings of the Old Testament.⁷³ The claim that France was therefore more sacred than Rome was an argument to keep the papacy in Avignon, against the efforts of pope Urban V to return it to the Eternal City.⁷⁴ The relics of Thomas were seen as another treasure for France. One hymn acclaims that "Gaul is adorned" by "the sun that followed the sun of heaven" by traveling from Italy to Toulouse, while another rejoices in the holy relics that "adorn this kingdom".⁷⁵ Although the *translatio* brought most of the remaining relics to Toulouse, master Elias presented Charles V with the right arm of Aquinas in July 1369. The arm was placed next to the tombs of the founders of the Valois dynasty in the church of saint James, sending a clear message that "the contested legitimacy of the Valois was directly sanctified by the relic of the right arm of Thomas which, given its placement, bestowed a perpetual blessing on the royal dead, and by extension on their progeny".⁷⁶ Master Elias was keenly aware of the significance of the places where the relics were brought en route to Toulouse. Some of the miracle stories along the way are also politically significant, as Earl Jeffrey Richards points out. A town called Avignonet had been the site of a massacre of Dominican inquisitors. This is where the first miracles occurred. The intercession of Thomas is credited with the healing of "a girl who was almost dead", a "very old woman who was almost paralyzed" and "a young boy who was blind, deaf and dumb".⁷⁷ These healings signified "the political healing of the French monarchy" and "by performing miracles Thomas sanctions the struggle against the Albigensians and in so doing sacralizes the control over the county of Toulouse by the French monarchy".⁷⁸

It seems that the choice for Toulouse as the final resting place of Aquinas was that of the Order, at the behest of its cunning master Elias. The *translatio* strengthened the ties between the royal court and the Order of Preachers. But perhaps most significantly Toulouse is where the order was founded, and this history is intertwined with the struggle against the Albigensians that was also of interest to the monarchy. Furthermore, four years earlier pope Urban V had established a faculty of theology there and he desired that the students would be formed in the teaching of saint Thomas. Among the other reasons mentioned in the *historia translationis* were the beauty of the order's church in Toulouse and the piety of the citizenry.⁷⁹ The city did indeed receive the relics with the greatest solemnity as Raymundus Hugonis

⁷³ Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust*, 136.

⁷⁴ E.J. Richards, 'Ceremonies of Power: The Arrival of Thomas Aquinas's Relics in Toulouse and Paris in the Context of the Hundred Years War', in: M. Räsänen, G. Hartmann, E.J. Richards (eds.), *Relics, Identity, and Memory in Medieval Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 31.

⁷⁵ Richards, 'Ceremonies of Power', 322.

⁷⁶ Richards, 'Ceremonies of Power', 320, 324, 338.

⁷⁷ Mews, 'The *Historia Translationis*', 277; Richards, 'Ceremonies of Power', 331.

⁷⁸ Richards, 'Ceremonies of Power', 328, 332.

⁷⁹ Mews, 'The *Historia Translationis*', 274; Richards, 'Ceremonies of Power', 333.

described: "There were Prince Louis, the duke of Anjou, the brother of the King of France, several archbishops and bishops and all the clergy and a great number of people – it is said they were almost 150,000. In the light of ten thousand torches and wax candles and with all this worthy city of Toulouse moved by [this great treasure] was brought to the house of the Preachers, of the saint's own Order, with honours and joy beyond words".⁸⁰ Italians had long considered Thomas as one of their own, the citizens of Toulouse now received him as their patron.

There is much more that can be said about the struggle for Aquinas' relics, the political motives of the actions of the Dominicans, the involvement of Neapolitan and French royalty and the relics' long journey from Fondi to Toulouse. That is however beyond the scope of the present investigation and all of these aspects have been addressed skillfully by the authors we have cited. We will now make a leap forward in history and note the fate that befell the relics during and after the turmoil of the French revolution.

5. A New Challenge to Dominican Ownership After the French Revolution

Pope Urban V had granted the relics to the Dominicans and ordered that it be placed in the Dominican church of the Jacobins in Toulouse "to be venerated there perpetually". In another document he threatened excommunication on anyone who moved the relics "without the permission of the master of the Order, the General Chapter and the prior of the convent of Toulouse".⁸¹ The relics lay undisturbed for centuries and it seemed that the Order's hard-fought right to let Thomas rest among his brothers would never again be infringed upon. But the upheaval caused by the French revolution drove the friars out of their convent and the relics remained in the church. Still during the revolutionary years, in 1791, the so-called 'constitutional bishop' Hyacinthe Sermet transferred the relics to the church of Saint-Sernin, presumably "for safekeeping".⁸² After the sixth centenary of Aquinas in 1874 the question of ownership was raised again. Three years after the solemn celebrations, the archbishop began to solicit donations for a new shrine for the relics of Thomas Aquinas, without so much as mentioning the Dominicans. In spite of this, after the money was raised and a splendid reliquary was made many Dominicans were present at the dedication in 1878. They did make a subtle statement by placing a wreath on the shrine which was adorned with the words: "he is our flesh and our brother" (Gen. 37, 27), the same words reportedly uttered centuries earlier by master Elias when he petitioned the pope for the ownership of the relics.⁸³ Yet it seemed that the *fait accompli* of the French revolution had now made the bishop of Toulouse the guardian of the

⁸⁰ Räsänen, 'The Memory of St. Thomas Aquinas', 307-308.

⁸¹ B. Montagnes, 'Autour de la Translation des Reliques de Saint Thomas d'Aquin (Toulouse, 24 Juillet 1878)', in: *Mémoires de la Société Archéologique du Midi de la France* 66 (2006), 221.

⁸² Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino*, 331.

⁸³ Montagnes, 'Autour de la Translation', 217.

relics. The magister-general of the order wished to avoid a conflict and ordered that all publications on the relics be approved by his office.⁸⁴ But the order was also careful to not do anything that suggested a renunciation of their claim on the relics. It would not be until the next centenary in 1974 that the relics were returned to the church of the Jacobins. Today, saint Thomas Aquinas now rests there among his brothers.⁸⁵

6. *Lumen Ecclesiae*

When a person dies, the loved ones find themselves asking what he or she “would have wanted” to happen to the body and possessions. The bitter struggle to own Aquinas’ relics, the schemes and political interests stand in stark contrast with his devout and precise elaboration of how we may care for the relics of the friends of God. Some of those involved may have been more within their rights than others but Torrell’s “hardly appetizing” is a fitting way to summarize what happened with Aquinas’ earthly remains. Still, in light of Aquinas’ own writings we can appreciate the desire of both the Cistercians and the Dominicans to keep close to them the man they loved and venerated as a saint even before the official canonization. His Dominican brothers loved Aquinas and wished to have him with them, the Cistercians received him as one of their own and wished to keep him in their midst.

Aquinas wrote that the soul of a saint that is to be honored above everything else. And now that we have closely examined the history of his veneration we can see how this too was part of how the memory of the saint was preserved. Whatever fate befell his bones, on every possible occasion he was hailed as a shining light. The letter of the Parisian university, shortly after the death of their former master, likened his death to an eclipse and bemoaned that “now (...) this light of the Church is put out”.⁸⁶ But the epitaph in Fossanova proclaimed that by his death he had become “a greater light for the world”. Similarly, at the canonization in Avignon king Robert praised Aquinas as “a burning and shining light”. The liturgical office composed to honor the saint also praises him as “teacher of the church, light of the world” and indeed “a light to the ages”.

This ‘light’ is the relic that the church owns collectively: the teaching of one of her most esteemed doctors. To Aquinas the term ‘relic’ is not reserved exclusively for bones, even though we can assume he considers these relics *par excellence*. Relics are the things we keep to remember faithful departed with love and gratitude. Echoing a sentiment from *The Imitation of Christ* we could say that instead of fighting over a thumb of the hand that wrote the *Summa Theologiae* we should have a greater appreciation for how the saint is present to us in his writings.⁸⁷ This doesn’t diminish the value of the body of the saint which we rightly venerate. But by acknowledging

⁸⁴ Montagnes, ‘Autour de la Translation’, 218-219.

⁸⁵ Torrell, *Initiation*, 379.

⁸⁶ K. Foster (trans./ed.), *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 154.

⁸⁷ Cf. Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 169-170, c. 97.

this other relic as well we accept his own teaching and thus offer a correction to a one-sided emphasis on the bones as ‘what remains of Thomas Aquinas’.

Pope Paul VI took a similar approach in his letter on the occasion of the seventh centenary of Aquinas’ death in 1974. He made his own the words of the liturgy for Aquinas’ feast day and presented him as “a light for the Church and the whole world”.⁸⁸ In the lengthy letter he encourages the reader to “obtain and read the works of saint Thomas, not merely to find safe nourishment in these rich intellectual treasures but also, and especially, to gain a personal grasp of the sublimity, abundance and importance of the teaching contained in them”. These writings are what make us call Thomas *lumen ecclesiae*, even though we can still appreciate an opportunity to pray in the presence of a relic of “the saintliest of the learned and the most learned of the saints”.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Pope Paul VI, apostolic letter *Lumen Ecclesiae*, 20 November 1974, 3.

⁸⁹ Pope Pius IX, quoted in: Paul VI, *Lumen Ecclesiae* 30.