



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

ARCHIVIO ISTITUZIONALE  
DELLA RICERCA

## Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

Handling sacrifice. Reception and perception of Mesoamerican knives in Italy

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Domenici Davide (2022). Handling sacrifice. Reception and perception of Mesoamerican knives in Italy. QUADERNI STORICI, 169(1), 55-83 [10.1408/106199].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/912444> since: 2023-01-24

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1408/106199>

*Terms of use:*

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>).  
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

# HANDLING SACRIFICE

## RECEPTION AND PERCEPTION OF MESOAMERICAN KNIVES

### IN ITALY

#### ABSTRACT

The article explores the cultural biographies of a series of Mesoamerican knives brought to Italy during the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Dominican missionaries. Even if many of these knives were subsequently lost, at least three of them (actually, two mosaic-encrusted bladeless handles and a whole specimen) are still preserved in museum collections in Italy and UK. Besides contributing to the study of the Italian reception of Mesoamerican material culture, the article explores the five centuries-long biographical trajectory of the knives which, by going through diverse cultural contexts and regimes of value, were able to elicit an array of discourses on topics such as the humanity of Indigenous American peoples, religious difference and – even if much less than expected – human sacrifice.

**KEYWORDS:** Mesoamerican material culture; Dominican missionaries; History of collections; Human sacrifice.

#### *Introduction*

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, various Dominican missionaries travelled from Mexico to Italy bringing several pre-Hispanic and early colonial Mesoamerican artifacts such as pictorial manuscripts, masks, featherworks and stone sculptures. Among the pre-Hispanic objects – most probably confiscated to their legitimate Indigenous owners – there were various knives belonging to two different functional categories: thin obsidian prismatic blades (often called «razors») and large bifacial flint or obsidian blades provided with sculptural handles, in most cases encrusted with mosaics of precious stones, shells and metals. Given as gifts to Popes and other members of Italian political and cultural élites, the Mesoamerican knives soon entered collections in Rome, Bologna, Venice and Naples. If various of them were lost during the following centuries, at least three mosaic-encrusted sculptural handles are still existing today, two at the Museo delle Civiltà (formerly Museo Nazionale Preistorico ed Etnografico «Luigi Pigorini») in Rome and one at the British Museum in London, the latter still provided with its original chalcedony blade.

In the present paper – drawing on a large corpus of sources including missionary gift records, private letters, collections' inventories, catalogues and scholarly publications – the cultural biographies of these knives will be explored. The aim of the text is to show how during their centuries-long social

lives the two kinds of knives went through a variety of cultural and historical contexts and epistemological frameworks. Over a period of almost five hundred years, the knives were observed, described, interpreted and displayed by multiple individuals, eliciting an array of discourses on topics such as the humanity of Indigenous American peoples, human sacrifice and cultural and religious difference. The case studies explored herein can contribute to a deeper understanding of how Indigenous material culture confiscated, collected and circulated by Christian missionaries contributed to shape Italian and European notions about New World's Indigenous peoples.

### *The arrival of Mesoamerican knives in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy*

Knives represent a highly peculiar sub-unit within the larger corpus of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican artefacts shipped to Europe in the aftermaths of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, when indigenous material culture flowed through distinct networks of exchange, initiated by different social actors and spurred by different motivations. Each of these networks, or circulation spheres, also shows distinctive characteristics in terms of typology, style and ultimate provenience of the artifacts<sup>1</sup>.

The most relevant and famous circulation sphere was initiated by Spanish conquistadors such as Juan de Grijalva and Hernán Cortés who sent to Spain rich shipments of Indigenous objects – meticulously recorded in inventories and described in a variety of historical chronicles and diplomatic reports – as gifts and payments of the Royal Fifth. As shown by Alessandra Russo, the Cortesian shipments materialized the conquistador's colonial projects, envisioning the would-be political and economic space of New Spain<sup>2</sup>. The artifacts flowing through this circulation sphere mostly reached Spain and other Hapsburg domains, but some of them also reached central and northern Italy. Due to the conjunction of different historical factors, the great majority of the artifacts sent by Spanish conquistadors – with very few exceptions – were subsequently lost.

A second – specifically Italian – circulation sphere was the outcome of the activities of Dominican missionaries, attracted to Italy by the presence of the Pope and of the heads of their missionary orders.<sup>3</sup> Even if many of the objects brought to Italy by Dominican friars were also lost,

---

<sup>1</sup> On these different circulation spheres, see D. DOMENICI, *The Transatlantic Journeys of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican Things: Sixteenth-Century Italian Circulation Spheres and Their Implications in Terms of Style, Typology and Provenience*, in S. SAVKIĆ ŠEBEK, R. KOONTZ (eds), *The Challenge of Mobile Images and Objects in Mesoamerica*, Berlin (in press.). Following current usage, «provenience» refers to the place where an object was originally produced, while «provenance» refers to its subsequent movements up to the present or, in other words, its collection history.

<sup>2</sup> A. RUSSO, *Cortés's objects and the idea of New Spain. Inventories as spatial narratives*, in «Journal of the History of Collections», 23(2) (2011), pp. 11-24.

<sup>3</sup> D. DOMENICI, L. LAURENCICH MINELLI, *Domingo de Betanzos' Gifts to Pope Clement VII in 1532-1533: Tracking the Early History of Some Mexican Objects and Codices in Italy*, in «Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl», 47 (2014), pp. 169-209; D. DOMENICI, *Mesoamerican mosaics from early European collections: style, provenance and provenience*, in «Estudios

a substantial amount of them is still preserved in various European museums. It is within this Dominican-related and Italian-centered sphere that the two specific kinds of Mesoamerican knives discussed herein (also including various now-lost specimens which we know through ancient illustrations) were circulated. Indeed, no single example of them exists today in Spanish or north-central European collections and, even more surprisingly, no mention of them is found in the rich corpus of sources recording the shipments sent to Spain by Spanish conquistadors.

Three historical sources, all of them related to the Dominican world, testify the arrival of Mesoamerican knives in early modern Italy on two different occasions. The earliest one is the gift that the Dominican friar Domingo de Betanzos offered to Pope Clement VII in Rome in 1532, when Betanzos met the Pope to ask for the independence of the Mexican Dominican province. According to the Dominican historian Agustín Dávila Padilla, the friar offered various Indigenous artifacts, among them «some tools which the idolaters employed to sacrifice men to the Devil; and especially some double-edged blades, very shiny and showy, much more sharp and penetrating with a strange subtlety»<sup>4</sup>.

After this first Roman encounter, Betanzos met Clement VII a second time in Bologna, where the Pontiff had gone for his «second meeting» with Charles V in 1532-33. The event was recorded by the Bolognese Dominican Leandro Alberti in the third volume of the *Historie di Bologna*. According to his account, on March 3, 1533, Betanzos (only named as «Domingo» in Alberti's text) offered the Pope a second gift of Indigenous artifacts, which included

a two fingers-wide and two ounces-long knife made of yellow stone with the handle entirely covered by turquoises. Then some stone knives that cut like razors, which they used for shaving. By these knives we knew the kind of those knives of which the Bible speaks when the Lord says: «Make me the stone knives to circumcise». [...] Among these things, I received some books, knives, and the big knife used to kill men to sacrifice them to their idols, which I gave to Mr. Giovanni Achillino to decorate his museum together with a book and a stone knife similar to a razor<sup>5</sup>.

The second arrival of knives is recorded by a third source, the anonymous and undated printed text titled *Descrittione dell'India occidentale*, probably written by a Spanish intellectual living in

---

de Cultura Náhuatl», 59 (2020), pp. 7-65; ID., The Dominicans as Conveyors of Mesoamerican Objects to Italy and Europe, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin America*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.967>

<sup>4</sup> A. DÁVILA PADILLA, O.P., *Historia de la Fundacion y Discurso de la Provincia de Santiago de México*, Madrid 1596, p. 73-4. All English translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> L. ALBERTI, O.P., *Historie di Bologna, 1479-1543*, edited by A. ANTONELLI, M.R. MUSTI, Bologna 2006 [or. ed. 1548], pp. 629-30. See M. DONATTINI, *Il mondo portato a Bologna: viaggiatori, collezionisti, missionari*, in A. PROSPERI (a cura di), *Storia di Bologna*, vol. III, *Bologna nell'età moderna (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, t. II: *Cultura, istituzioni culturali, Chiesa e vita religiosa*, Bologna 2008, pp. 537-682; DOMENICI, LAURENCICH, *Domingo de Betanzos* ' cit.

Venice, where it was printed around 1564-1570. The text records the arrival in Italy (Rome?) of a (Dominican?) priest who had been evangelizing Mixtec and Zapotec natives in Southwestern Mexico and who I tentatively identified elsewhere with the Dominican priest Juan de Córdova<sup>6</sup>. Among the objects he brought to Italy, there were «The stone knives which they used to sacrifice men, & children in the temple», as well as «Some black porphyry razors that they used to circumcise as the Jews use to do». A whole paragraph of the *Descrittione* is devoted to a more thorough description of the knives:

Of the knives. They used to sacrifice men with some knives made of flint, very hard, & the priests kept them in the temple; the Religious man took two of these knives, & they are those that are shown together with the other things. The priest used to slide these knives under the left breast of the living victim, & putting the hand inside he took out the heart, & with the palpitating heart he anointed the face of the idol, & this was their way of sacrificing. They have two other kinds of black porphyry razors, with point and with no point, to sacrifice themselves, letting blood from the ears, & from the tongue, & from the shameful parts. And these razors cut as they were of fine steel. They are made out of a rock, with a wooden tool, & and they come off with a single strike, with the cutting edge, & with the point; they are one palm-long.

Together with the idols they also took a certain wooden tool used to circumcise as the Jews use to do, that is an ebony tablet, two fingers-wide and one span-long, & on the lower side it has a black porphyry razor, & with that tablet they used to circumcise over a round wooden board<sup>7</sup>.

### *Sacrifice, autosacrifice, circumcision and flintknapping in the Dominican missionary discourse*

Despite their geographical and chronological differences, the three sources share a series of common elements. In all cases, the missionary gifts included two different kinds of knives. A first, larger type was characterized by long bifacial flint or chalcedony («yellow stone») blades and sculptural handles (at times encrusted with mosaics of precious stones), invariably interpreted as tools employed for human sacrifice. A second type included smaller knives, often called «razors» and which the author of the *Descrittione* further divided in two sub-groups (with point and with no point): the blades of this second type clearly correspond to obsidian («black porphyry») blades of the type currently known in archaeological jargon as «prismatic», due to their distinctive trapezoidal section.

---

<sup>6</sup> D. DOMENICI, *The Descrittione dell'India occidentale, a Sixteenth-Century Source on the Italian Reception of Mesoamerican Material Culture*, in «Ethnohistory», 64 (2017), pp. 497-527.

<sup>7</sup> ID., *The Descrittione cit.*, pp. 510, 515.

These blades are associated with autosacrifice (or bloodletting) in the *Descrittione* and with Jewish-like circumcision both in the *Descrittione* and in Alberti's *Historie*.

Even at first sight, then, it is clear that the two kinds of knives were not only a common presence in Dominican gifts (while they were extremely rare in the conquistadors' shipments to Spain, where obsidian prismatic blades were never recorded), but that they were also understood according to a common ideological framework centered on notions of sacrifice and circumcision. Synthetizing here what I have treated at length elsewhere, the objects brought by the Dominicans performed a double discursive function, being perceived as tangible evidences of both Indigenous idolatry and of the possibility to defy it through the conversion of the Natives, whose intellectual potential (i.e. rationality) was witnessed by their technological skills<sup>8</sup>. A key notion of this Dominican discourse was *ingenium* (Spanish *ingenio*, Italian *ingegno*), a term which in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was commonly employed to refer both to technologically complex artifacts and to the intellectual quality required to create them. As an intellectual quality, *ingenium* was specifically related with the ability to assemble complex things, thus being at the base of disparate activities such as the mechanical arts and the creation of metaphors. The discursive formation built on the Indigenous artifacts was completely coherent with the position that Dominicans – and especially the members of the School of Salamanca – were defending in the then flourishing intellectual disputes on Natives' rationality, humanity, and convertibility, best represented by the famous Valladolid debate (1550-1551). The Dominican arguments fostered a transformative missional colonial project based on a specific Judeo-Christian vision of time which, despite linear, was perceived as a non-homogenous one, being marked by the fundamental threshold of Salvation. Idolatry, represented by «pagan-like» idols («they had another idol, called the idol of the Midwives (that was as Lucina, which the poets imagine as the Goddess of childbirth)») and by artifacts as the masks «through which they used to speak with the demons»<sup>10</sup>, was thus located in a conceptually ancient past. The success of the missional project, on the other hand, was usually witnessed by feather mosaics with Christian imagery, where the Indigenous technique of featherwork – praised by Las Casas himself as a proof of Indigenous *ingenium*<sup>11</sup> – was put at the service of Truth, so showing that Mesoamerican Natives had already undergone the transformative process which would have ultimately turned them into fully blown Christians.

---

<sup>8</sup> ID., *Missionary Gift Records of Mexican Objects in Early Modern Italy*, in E. HORODOWICH, LIA MARKEY (eds), *The New World in Early Modern Italy, 1492-1750*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 86-102; ID., *The Dominicans as Conveyors* cit.

<sup>9</sup> ID., *The Descrittione* cit., pp. 509, 515.

<sup>10</sup> ALBERTI, *Historie* cit., p. 629.

<sup>11</sup> B. DE LAS CASAS, *Apologética Historia Sumaria*, in *Obras Completas*, vol. 7, Madrid 1992, p. 592. Las Casas' words on featherworks were later repeated, almost verbatim, by the Franciscans Gerónimo de Mendieta and Juan de Torquemada; see G. MENDIETA, *História eclesiástica indiana*, Mexico 1870, p. 405; J. TORQUEMADA, *Monarquía indiana*, Madrid 1723, p. 256.

It is within this discursive formation that the two kinds of knives performed their argumentative function. Large flint knives with sculptural handles testified the practice of human sacrifice, a veritable trope in the European speculations over Natives' identity, where it was commonly assumed as a proof of barbarism, a notion that had a key role in Dominican intellectual debates. If Alberti limited himself to the rather scanty mention of a knife «used to kill men to sacrifice them to their idols»<sup>12</sup>, the author of the *Descrittione* indulged in a much more gruesome description of the sacrificial practice, employing a phrasing ultimately deriving from Hernán Cortés' second letter: «The priest used to slide these knives under the left breast of the living victim, & putting the hand inside he took out the hearth, & with the palpitating hearth he anointed the face of the idol, & this was their way of sacrificing»<sup>13</sup>.

Counterbalancing these discourses on knives and sacrifice, the second type of knives induced different associations, whose relevance is testified by the ample space that Dominican sources devote to «razors» despite their unassuming appearance, at least when compared with the outstanding visual complexity of the sculpted and mosaic-encrusted handles of the large sacrificial knives.

The *Descrittione* first mentions what was one of the actual functions of the obsidian blades, that is, implements employed in autosacrificial rituals where Mesoamericans used to let «blood from the ears, & from the tongue, & from the shameful parts»<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, as it had been done since the time of Juan Díaz's *Itinerario* (1520), this ritual practice – which implied the wounding of male genitalia – was conceptually paired and ultimately identified with circumcision<sup>15</sup>. In the *Descrittione* this activity is associated with a rather intriguing object, described as «a certain tool used to circumcise as the Jews use to do, that is an ebony tablet, two fingers-wide and one span-long, & on the lower side it has a black porphyry razor, & with that tablet they used to circumcise over a round wooden board»<sup>16</sup>. The same association between «razors» and circumcision had been already established by Alberti who, beside stating that they were also used for shaving, wrote that «By these knives we knew the kind of those knives of which the Bible speaks when the Lord says: 'Make me the stone knives to circumcise'»<sup>17</sup>. This phrase is extremely interesting, since it is a testimony of the rather typical antiquarian mindset that framed the early modern perception of Mesoamerican material

---

<sup>12</sup> ALBERTI, *Historie* cit., p. 629.

<sup>13</sup> DOMENICI, *The Descrittione* cit., p. 510, 515.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> A similar association, even if related with large sacrificial knives, appears in a letter sent from Mexico, around 1540-1541, by the Franciscan friar Francesco da Bologna. The letter states that Indigenous priests employed «a stone knife like those that, in ancient times, were used for circumcision» to open the chest of sacrificial victims. See FRANCESCO ALLÉ (Francesco da Bologna), *Lettera del reverendo padre Francesco da Bologna*, in P. COLLO, P.L. CROVETTO (a cura di), *Nuovo Mondo. Gli italiani*, Torino 1991, p. 436. For the dating of the letter and for information on its author, see M. DONATTINI, *Three Bolognese Franciscan Missionaries in the New World in the early Sixteenth century*, in *The New World in Early Modern Italy* cit., pp. 63-85.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> ALBERTI, *Historie* cit. p. 629.

culture: not only objects and texts are jointly used as sources of knowledge, but objects are understood as tangible evidences which can illuminate the texts' content, a method which in this case is surprisingly employed with the *Old Testament*. Alberti had already done something similar when stating that by looking at Mesoamerican featherworks «it seems to recognize what is said in the Scriptures about the God's tabernacle which is recommended to be embellished with feather materials»<sup>18</sup>.

Despite the several references to Jewish customs and practices, in the Dominican texts analyzed herein there is no explicit allusion to the so-called «Jewish Indian theory» which traced back the origins of Indigenous American people to the Lost Tribes of Israel. In the formulation of Gregorio García (1609) the practice of circumcision was even listed among the «proofs» of the Jewish ancestry of American Natives<sup>19</sup>. However – even if the theory was advocated by Dominicans such as Diego Durán and one of the anonymous authors of Codex Vaticanus A (*Vat. Lat. 3773*), a direct source of the *Descrittione*<sup>20</sup> – in the texts we are commenting here the presumed Jewish-like circumcision served not to trace a historical connection but, rather, to establish a comparative analogy which allochronically located Mesoamerican Natives in a specific stage along the path to Salvation<sup>21</sup>. When understood as circumcision tools, obsidian «razors» placed their indigenous makers in a conceptual position similar to that of Jews, i.e., still not Christians but just one step before Salvation. In this context, obsidian blades were also endowed with a further discursive function, since the very possibility to trespass that fundamental eschatological threshold was witnessed by the «razors» themselves, whose sharpness («And these razors cut as they were of fine steel») and ingenious technology of production were repeatedly praised as proofs of the Natives' intellectual qualities. The most explicit reading of the blades' flintknapping technology as a testimony of *ingenium* was provided by nothing less than Bartolomé de Las Casas who, in the *Apologetica Historia*, devoted a rather long passage to this topic:

There were artisans of stone blades, and it is wonderful to see how the blades are made and the very fact that they do them in this way, and I do not know if I can explain it: they sit on the ground

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*. On the much-discussed topic of the tabernacle, see A. RUSSO, *Image-plume, temps reliquaire? Tangibilité d'une histoire esthétique (Nouvelle-Espagne, XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, in «Images Revues, histoire, anthropologie, et théorie de l'art», (2008) online <http://imagesrevues.revues.org/988>.

<sup>19</sup> See G. GLIOZZI, *Adamo e il Nuovo Mondo. La nascita dell'antropologia come ideologia coloniale, dalle genealogie bibliche alle teorie razziali (1500-1700)*, Firenze 1977; E. FENTON, *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel*, New York 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Ms. *Vat. Lat. 3773* (Codex Vaticanus A), Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, f. 54r. On the relationship between this manuscript and the *Descrittione dell'India occidentale*, see D. DOMENICI, *Códices mesoamericanos en la Italia de la primera edad moderna: historia y recepción*, in J.J. BATALLA ROSADO, J.L. DE ROJAS, L. PÉREZ LUGONES (coords.), *Códices y cultura indígena en México. Homenaje a Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo*, Madrid 2018, pp. 351-75.

<sup>21</sup> See, J. FABIAN, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York 1983.

and took a piece of black stone similar to jet, which is as hard as flint and precious, more beautiful and shining than alabaster or jasper. That piece was one palm long, or slightly more, and as thick as a leg, or slightly less, and round. They have a wooden pole as thick as a spear and three cubits long, or something more, and at the tip of this pole they stick, well fastened, a piece of wood, one palm long and as thick as a biceps, or slightly more, with a cut and flat front side; and this is put on the pole's tip to increase its weight. They unite the naked feet and with them they keep the stone and with their hands they take the pole and they put the front part of it, which I said it was like a spear, cut and flat, against the margin of the stone block, which is also cut and flat; and then they push toward the chest, and a pointed and sharp blade flakes away, as if they had done it from a root with a sharp knife, or as if they had done it with steel and then worked it with a grinding stone and sharpened its edges with a sharpening stone. And they can create twenty or more blades in a very short time.

These blades are similar to those used by barbers to let blood, safe that they have a protuberance in the middle section and that their extremities are slightly convex. They cut the beard almost as a metal blade, but they soon lose their sharpness, so that a man would need two of them to fully shave his face. Seeing their production is worth of admiration, and the fact that they devised such an art is no small argument in favor of the liveliness of the genius [*viveza de los ingenios*] of the men that devised such a working method<sup>22</sup>.

This passage of the *Apologetica* is clearly the hidden referent of the multiple descriptions of obsidian «razors» in the above commented sources. In a refined rhetorical play, the sharpness of the blades, also praised in the scanty passage by Dávila Padilla («sharp and penetrating with a strange subtlety»), became a material counterpart of the Natives' intellectual sharpness. Indeed, in early modern thinking sharpness was the main attribute of a good ingenium, as also attested by works such as Girolamo Cardano's *De subtilitate rerum* (1550) or Baltasar Gracián's, *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* (1648). The rhetorical play was further enhanced by the fact that, as also happens in Spanish, the Italian term «ingegno» referred both to an intellectual quality and to its complex material products, so that the presumed circumcision tool is termed in the *Descrittione* as «un certo ingegno»<sup>23</sup>.

In sum, within the allochronic structure of Dominican colonial discourse, large flint knives were tangible evidence of the Mesoamerican Natives' idolatrous past, while the obsidian «razors» served to conceptually assimilate them to Jews and to testify the intellectual potential that would have

---

<sup>22</sup> LAS CASAS, *Apologética Historia* cit. pp. 590-1. Again, Las Casas' words were later repeated by Mendieta and Torquemada; see MENDIETA, *Historia* cit. p. 405-6; TORQUEMADA, *Monarquía* cit., vol. IV, p. 257. According to Lawrence H. Feldman, the three authors would have depended on a now lost text by the Franciscan Andrés de Olmos; L.H. FELDMAN, *A Franciscan ethnographic school: plagiarism among six early colonial authors*, in «Katunob», 7/2 (1969), pp. 59-68.

<sup>23</sup> DOMENICI, *The Descrittione* cit. p. 510.

allowed them to overcome their non-Christian past. Such relevance of the obsidian blades, witnessing a specific position along the path to Salvation, also explains why in Dominican sources they were accorded a so relevant position, even greater to the one accorded to the large knives associated with human sacrifice, a topic that – despite its relevance in the early modern perception of Indigenous American religious practices – Dominicans committed to claim the Natives' intellectual potential were obviously not willing to emphasize.

*Mesoamerican knives and 16<sup>th</sup> century natural historians: Ulisse Aldrovandi and Ferrante Imperato*

Once they were given away by their Dominican conveyors, the Mesoamerican artifacts entered a new phase of their Italian social life. Alberti recorded that he himself had given a «big knife used to kill men to sacrifice them to their idols» and «a stone knife similar to a razor» to his friend Giovanni Filoteo Achillini, a Bolognese musician and poet who owned a museum of antiquities<sup>24</sup>. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of Achillini's collection are unknown, but two objects of the same kind – maybe the very same ones – later surfaced in the museum of Antonio Giganti (1535-1598), whose 1586 inventory records «a stone sacrificial knife with a wooden handle, one foot long» and a «stone razor»<sup>25</sup>. Together with other specimens from the Giganti collection, the two knives then passed – probably around 1597-98 – into the collection of the Bolognese polymath Ulisse Aldrovandi, as attested by his book *Musaeum Metallicum*, published posthumous in 1648 and edited by Bartolomeo Ambrosini, then keeper of Aldrovandi's museum in the Bolognese Palazzo Pubblico. In a chapter discussing iron and its uses, Aldrovandi mentioned the well-known trope of the Amerindian lack of this metal, then writing that

in the Indian province of Themistitan, since they have no iron and steel, they produce knives with an emerald green or dark stone (which some call Ethiopic stone), with very elegant handles, of which we place before the reader's eyes two images. The first one shows a larger knife, with a finely sculpted wooden handle. The second image shows a longer and narrower knife, with the handle made of jade [*lapide renali*]<sup>26</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup> ALBERTI *Historie* cit., p. 629; Id., *Descrittione di tutta Italia aggiuntavi la descrittione di tutte le isole*, Venezia 1550, pp. 299-300; Donattini, *Il mondo* cit., pp. 572-6; DOMENICI, LAURENCICH MINELLI, *Domingo de Betanzos' cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>25</sup> L. LAURENCICH MINELLI, *L'indice del Museo di Antonio Giganti. Interessi etnografici e ordinamento di un museo cinquecentesco*, in «Museologia scientifica», 1/3-4 (1984), pp. 191-242.

<sup>26</sup> U. ALDROVANDI, *Musaeum Metallicum*, Bologna 1648, p. 157.

Coherently with the topic of the whole volume – metals and stones – Aldrovandi’s reading of the two (unfortunately lost) knives strictly adhered to his interests as a natural historian, only mentioning green and black obsidian or «Ethiopic stone» (the former from Sierra de las Navajas, Hidalgo, Mexico), and describing the jade handle of the obsidian prismatic blade (an element never attested by archaeological finds). Both knives, of whose geographical and cultural origin Aldrovandi was perfectly aware, were illustrated in two beautiful woodcuts (fig. 1) but, significantly, Aldrovandi did not attempt any iconographic interpretation of the ornitomorphic wooden handle, nor did he expand on the practices of human sacrifice or (presumed) circumcision, as it was customary in the texts so far commented<sup>27</sup>.

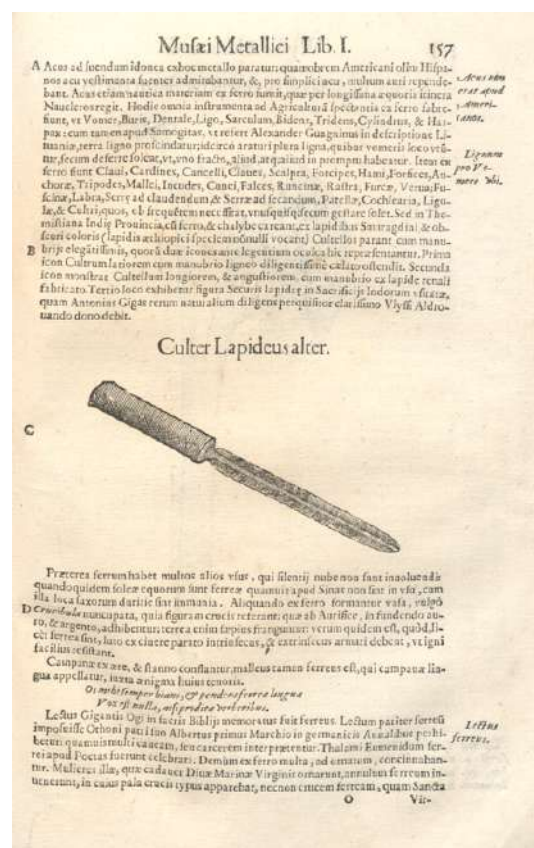


Fig. 1. *The two Mesoamerican knives illustrated in U. Aldrovandi, Musaeum Metallicum (1648)*

A similar interest in the material constituents of Mesoamerican knives was shared by the Neapolitan apothecary Ferrante Imperato, owner of a famous collection. In Book 22 of his *Dell'Historia Naturale* (1599), devoted to the origins of stones and their differences, besides offering the first modern translation of Theophrastus' treatise on stones<sup>28</sup>, Imperato discussed the formation

<sup>27</sup> See D. DOMENICI, *Rediscovery of a Mesoamerican greenstone sculpture from the Aldrovandi Collection*, in «Journal of the History of Collections», 34(1), (2022), pp. 1-22.

<sup>28</sup> A. MOTTANA, *The first modern translation of Theophrastus' 'On Stones': Ferrante Imperato (1599)*, in «Rendiconti Lincei. Scienze Fisiche e Naturali», 21 (2010), pp. 1-25.

of glasses and the process of vitrification underwent by pumice when exposed to fire. In this context, he wrote that «the fact that black [pumice] is denser, is confirmed by glasses from quarries, which are black and dense, so that they are also apt to cut. And for this reason, the knives from West Indies, made with similar stones, are marvelously excellent»<sup>29</sup>. The phrase is followed by a woodcut showing, with considerable detail, the two sides of a Mesoamerican obsidian prismatic blade, under the title «Indian knives made with flint [*pietra focara*] or fossil glass» (fig. 2)<sup>30</sup>.

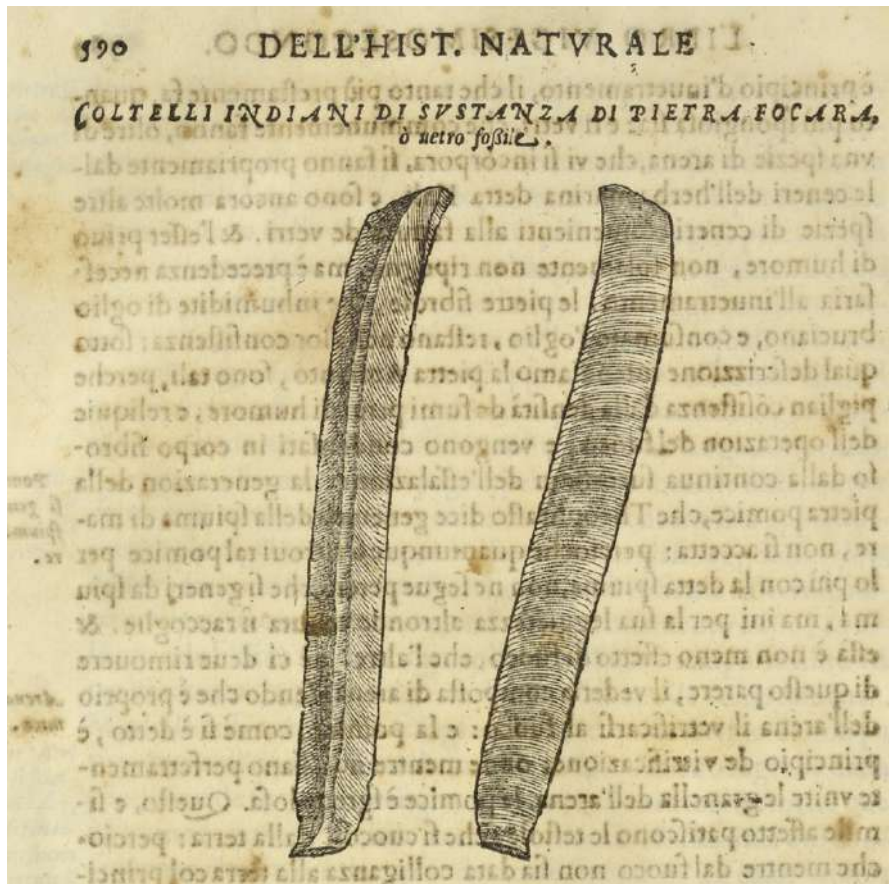


Fig. 2. Prismatic obsidian blade in F. Imperato, *Dell'Historia Naturale* (1599)

It is difficult to imagine how Imperato knew about Mesoamerican obsidian blades: A. Mottana speculated that Imperato reproduced the image from the manuscript that Nardo Antonio Recchi copied from Francisco Hernandez's work in Spain, then passed to Francesco Cesi<sup>31</sup>. However, this hypothesis is extremely weak, since no images of obsidian blades are known to have ever been drawn

<sup>29</sup> F. IMPERATO, *Dell'Historia Naturale*, Naples 1599, p. 589. It is worth remembering that Aldrovandi and Imperato were in close contact. Aldrovandi's personal copy of *Dell'Historia Naturale*, still preserved in the Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, bears a manuscript note on its last page, penned by Aldrovandi himself, stating that he finished reading the whole book on December 13, 1602.

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, p. 590; see also p. 693.

<sup>31</sup> MOTTANA, *The first modern cit.*, pp. 7-10; ID., *Ferrante Imperato, primo traduttore italiano del trattato di Teofrasto 'Sulle Pietre'* (Napoli, 1599), in «Atti Accademia Pontaniana», N.S., LVX (2011), p. 38.

by neither Hernández nor Recchi. Even more significantly, the extreme accuracy of Imperato's woodcut, perfectly reproducing a Mesoamerican prismatic blade including the highly distinctive shape of its proximal end (i.e., the lower in the image), clearly indicates that the artist working for Imperato had in front of his eyes an actual blade and not a graphic reproduction of it. We cannot be sure that the woodcut was made in Naples but, if so, we can wonder how the obsidian blade had reached the city. As remarked by P. Findlen in a recent article on Imperato's museum, Naples – part of the Spanish empire and a major Mediterranean port – was a highly connected place, thus explaining the «global reach of Imperato's supply chain»<sup>32</sup>. Accordingly, Imperato could have obtained the blade from a variety of sources, but the possibility that it derived from Betanzos' gifts is worth of consideration. If the hypothesis is correct, since Imperato was born around 1525<sup>33</sup>, the blade should have passed through the hands of one or more intermediate owners.<sup>34</sup>

Despite these uncertainties, it is significant that Imperato's comments on «knives from West Indies» focused on their materiality and were included in a text devoted to stones, thus precisely matching Aldrovandi's attitude. The distance between the discursive framework employed by the above-commented Dominican authors and the natural historian mindset which characterized both Imperato and Aldrovandi is readily evident in their different appreciation of the blades' sharpness. While Dominicans interpreted it as a material evidence of subtlety of *ingenio*, Imperato perceived it as a simple effect of the physical properties of certain glasses, while Aldrovandi plainly ignored such characteristic.

### *The 17<sup>th</sup> century: a new guise as Egyptian-like sphynxes and idols*

All the three knives illustrated by Aldrovandi and Imperato were unfortunately lost, so that their reproductions in 16<sup>th</sup> century woodcuts constitute the only available sources for their study. Nevertheless, three other Mesoamerican knives were recorded in 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian (or Italy-related) collections. Their belonging to the same group of mosaics brought by Betanzos is strongly suggested by stylistic and – where observable – material elements<sup>35</sup>.

---

<sup>32</sup> P. FINDLEN, *Why put a museum in a book? Ferrante Imperato and the image of natural history in sixteenth-century Naples*, in «Journal of the History of Collections», 33/3 (2021), pp. 419-33. On the relationships between Naples and the New World, see M. COOLEY, *Southern Italy and the New World in the age of encounters*, in E. HORODOWICH, L. MARKEY (eds), *The New World in Early Modern Italy, 1492-1750*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 169-89.

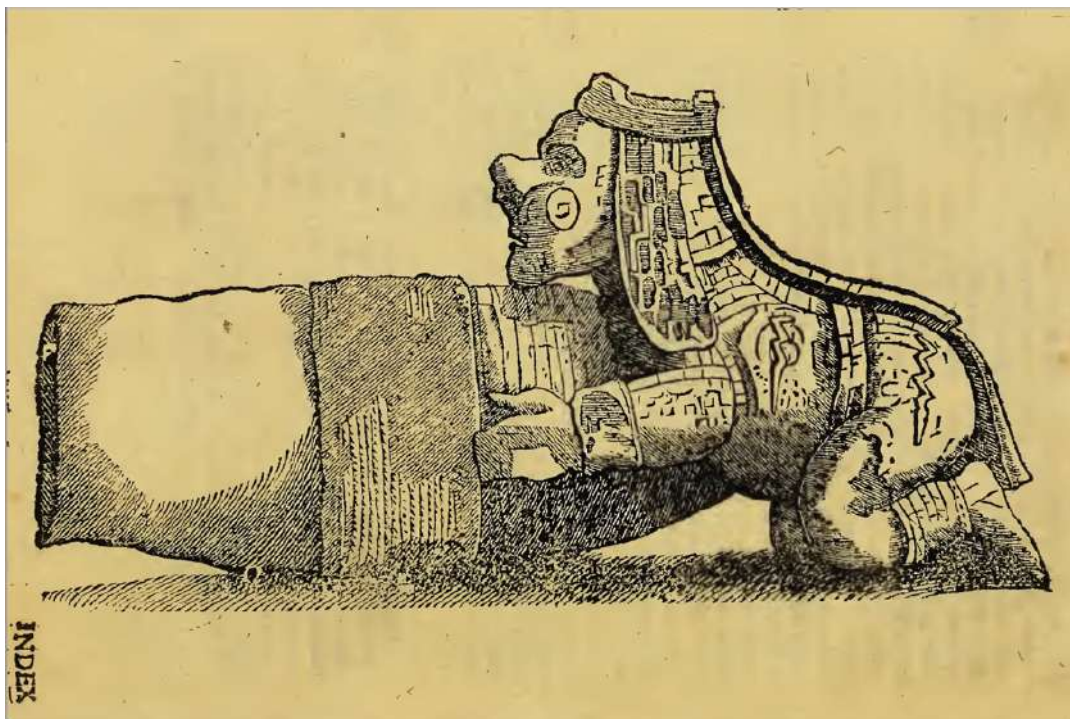
<sup>33</sup> C. PRETI, *Ferrante Imperato*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 62 (2004), online [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ferrante-imperato\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ferrante-imperato_(Dizionario-Biografico)/)

<sup>34</sup> Also from Naples, and of unknown origin, was the obsidian blade that, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Giuseppe Donzelli gave to the Danish scholar Thomas Bartholin: T. BARTHOLIN, *De unicornu observationes novae*, Padua, 1645, p. 283.

<sup>35</sup> DOMENICI, Mesoamerican mosaics cit.

The earliest 17<sup>th</sup> century mention of a Mesoamerican knife in Europe (arguably in Italy) is found in a letter that Jacob Gaffarel (1601-1682), the famous French scholar of Jewish things also working as personal librarian for Cardinal Richelieu, sent from Venice to the Genoese Aristotelian physician Fortunio Liceti (1577-1657), who was writing a book on thunderbolts<sup>36</sup>. In the letter, dated September 17, 1633, after narrating how in Provence a thunderbolt had struck a priest while saying Mass, Gaffarel added «And if Your Lordship would like to mention an Egyptian idol, which I happened to have, reproducing its figure in your book you may do a great service to the public. I gave a picture of it to Mr. Rhodio, who will present it to Your Lordship. You will see that, as far as thunderbolts are concerned, it is impossible to imagine a better antique»<sup>37</sup>. The very fact that Gaffarel could send a detailed visual reproduction of the object, which could have hardly been traced by memory, suggests that he had it with him in Venice, where he may have bought it.

The now lost painting of Gaffarel's «Egyptian idol» was reproduced as a woodcut in Liceti's book *Pyronarcha sive de fulminum natura de que februm origine libri duo*, published in Padua in 1634 (fig. 3).



<sup>36</sup> G. ONGARO, *Liceti, Fortunio*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 65 (2005), online [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fortunio-liceti\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fortunio-liceti_(Dizionario-Biografico)); O. TRABUCCO, *Fortunio Liceti: un aristotelico nella Repubblica delle Lettere*, in «Studi Filosofici. Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale», 36 (2013), pp. 27-66.

<sup>37</sup> F. LICETI, *Pyronarcha sive de fulminum natura deque februm origine libri duo*, Padova 1634, pp. 118-9; L. CAPITAN, *Le couteau de pierre à sacrifices humains de l'ancien Mexique dans deux livres du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle; comparaison avec les deux pièces originales*, in «Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres», 60/5 (1916); L. QUATTRINI, *Un coltello sacrificale azteco in due opere del 1634 e del 1687. Analisi e comparazione con manufatti analoghi giunti in Europa nella prima età moderna*, Bachelor thesis, Università degli Studi di Bologna, a.a. 2017-2018.

Fig. 3. Mesoamerican knife in F. Liceti, *Pyronarcha sive de fulminum natura* cit. (1634)

In the book, Liceti drew on Gaffarel's interpretation of the object as an Egyptian idol, building a long and complex interpretive discourse, also providing information on the object's (presumed) provenance and its material composition, arguably learnt via the abovementioned «Mr. Rhodio»<sup>38</sup> who must have seen the actual specimen, so further strengthening the hypothesis that Gaffarel actually had it in Venice. Indeed, Liceti wrote that it was a wooden sculpture covered by a mosaic of multicolored stones, and that it had been found by a Memphite merchant in the ruins of temple in Africa, where people used to seek protection during thunderstorms. Apparently establishing a relationship with the function of the object itself, Liceti mentioned that «Ethnici» used to offer sacrifices to the Demons in order to appease them, a custom – he noticed – also observed by the Spaniards among the Indians. Discussing the cult to thunderbolts among various populations, Liceti brought the knife back into the picture, saying that it was possible that the figure on the knife was a (feminine) idol of thunderbolts adored in Libya. He also observed that the blade fragment was made with a material that vulgar people knew as «thunderbolt stone», and then wrote at length about his own interpretation of what he understood as the thunderbolt-related iconography of the object, starting with its colors (blue, green, yellow, and red) and then commenting various of its formal traits<sup>39</sup>. Without going here into the intricacies of Liceti's argument, it is worth reminding that his work was later reproduced by the Hungarian theologian Matthias Zimmermann in his *Florilegium philologico-historicum* (1687) a dictionary-like work where, under the rubric «de Fulmine et Fulgore», the author verbatim repeated Liceti's text, accompanied by a new woodcut also based on Liceti's one.

In between the two editions of Liceti's text, two other mosaic-encrusted knife handles, lacking the original blades, surfaced among the possessions of the Bolognese Marquis Ferdinando Cospi, whose collection was displayed at Palazzo Pubblico – nearby the Aldrovandi museum – since 1660. We do not know how Cospi obtained the two handles but since their stylistic features indicate that they had been part of Betanzos' gift of 1533 we are forced to imagine that they had previously passed through one or more unknown Bolognese collections. The Cospi collection was described by the Cremonese physician and professor of Greek literature Lorenzo Legati in three different works, published in 1667, 1677, and 1680. The *Museo Cospiano*, printed in 1677 by Giacomo Monti, by far

---

<sup>38</sup> Most probably Johan Rode, or Rhode (1587 c.- 1659), a Danish physician and humanist who was residing in Padua; E. SNORRASON, *Der Dane Johan Rhode in Padua des 17. Jahrhunderts*, in «Acta medicae historiae Patavina», 14 (1967-68), pp. 85-120. I thank Sabina Brevaglieri for calling my attention to the Danish physician, who was a correspondent of Johannes Faber; she also pointed out, as an alternative but less probable hypothesis, that a «Hans Rhode» appears among the correspondents of Cassiano dal Pozzo.

<sup>39</sup> LICETI, *Pyronarcha* cit., pp. 368-77.

the most complete and detailed catalogue, is divided into five different books, devoted to terrestrial animals and monsters (Bk. 1), fishes, shells, plants and fossils (Bk. 2), «artificial things» such as scientific instruments and vessels (Bk. 3), medals and coins (Bk. 4) and «Images of the Gods of the Ancient» (Bk. 5)<sup>40</sup>. This last book, actually written by the physician Silvestro Bonfiglioli after Legati's death, is mostly devoted to Egyptian and Classic idols and opens with a rather standard section on the origins of the «false Gods» of Antiquity and of idolatry, based on Eusebius, Lactantius, Clement of Alexandria and Agostino Tornielli, and rapidly reviewing Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman idols. The whole passage sounds quite formulaic, almost like a literary pretext to introduce the descriptions of the actual objects, which in their turn were used by Bonfiglioli to show his erudition. The initial passage is not exempt from a certain degree of irony, as when the author states that to those idols, «as if they were saint Gods, [Cospi] used to offer obsequious tributes of adoration».<sup>41</sup> Chapter XV, titled «On Sphynxes» is introduced by a woodcut representing the two Mesoamerican knife handles (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. *Handles of Mesoamerican knives in L. Legati, Museo Cospiano (1677)*

The text states:

<sup>40</sup> L. LEGATI, *Museo Cospiano annesso a quello del famoso Ulisse Aldrovandi e donato alla sua patria dall'illustrissimo signor Ferdinando Cospi*, Bologna 1677.

<sup>41</sup> *Ivi*, p. 455.

And since Indians had been mentioned<sup>42</sup>, and because I believe that these two simulacra, which are in the Museum, and which are herein illustrated, are their manufactures, I esteem worth provide some information on them. Trying to describe them would be an offense to the person who copied them in diligent woodcuts. Nevertheless, it is not to be left out that they are made out of wood, and covered by a thin and light encrustation, composed as a mosaic of very small scales of various colors which even if, as far as the drawing is concerned, they do not offer the nobility seen in brush-painted miniatures, they anyway show a strong patience on the part of who was able to join them to give perfection to a so foreign work. To which use they were devoted, and which name they could have, I cannot guess. I perfectly know that some people imagined, also based on Plutarch, that the union between a human and a beast could sometimes produce a certain being called sphynx, which the Egyptians represented as a Lion with the face of a virgin woman<sup>43</sup>.

It is interesting to note that Bonfiglioli, who recognized the «Indian» provenience of the two objects, seems dubious about their identification as sphynxes, even if he only took advantage of this interpretation to introduce his subsequent treatment of Egyptian sphynxes. The loose «Egyptian» identification could had been proposed by Ferdinando Cospi himself, since Legati's *Inventario semplice* (1680), where the physical location of the objects in the museum is recorded, shows that the two handles, recorded as «Sfiingi [sic] di Musaico in Legno», were displayed on Shelf VIII together with «Figures, Idols, etc. » (including Egyptian ones) and not on Shelf X, devoted to «Foreign things, natural and artificial», where most Indian objects were exhibited, including the Mesoamerican Codex Cospi<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, it is clear that neither Bonfiglioli nor Legati (as well as, arguably, Ferdinando Cospi) were able to recognize the object's function as knife handles. This is an interesting aspect since it suggests, as also does the woodcut, that when collected by Cospi the two artifacts already had the blade sockets infilled with a resinous material that can still be appreciated today (fig. 5), thus obscuring their identity as knife handles.

---

<sup>42</sup> The author is alluding to a previous mention of Indians adoring the Tiger as a «simulacrum of the Sun».

<sup>43</sup> LEGATI, *Museo Cospiano* cit., p. 477-8.

<sup>44</sup> ID., *Inventario semplice di tutte le materie esattamente descritte che si trovano nel Museo Cospiano*, Bologna 1680, pp. 13, 15-6.



Fig. 5. *Handles of Mesoamerican knives today at the Museo delle Civiltà (Rome). Notice the resinous material filling the blade sockets. Photo by D. Domenici.*

After expanding on Egyptian sphynxes, Bonfiglioli went back to the «Indian» objects, reiterating his doubts:

I think that the Egyptians depicted such monsters differently from the Greeks, since the latter used to depict them with wings, bareheaded, and with styled hair, while the former depicted them with veiled heads and no wings, as trustworthily witnessed by many ancient marbles and coins. If we want to compare what it was said about sphynxes with our images, I am not able to see any similarity, especially because one has a human face with no hairstyle, the other looks like that of a terrible Killer Whale. I would rather suppose that the Gentiles created such monsters and considered them among the important things of religion, putting them at the entrance of the Temples not only to express the darkness of the religious mysteries, but also to express that God was to be feared so much as loved; and so they depicted those monsters half human and half animal to express that God was fierce with the ungodly and lovely with good people; if so, if our simulacra are of that kind which, sadly, are today esteemed among the Idolatrous Indians, as said before, we could suppose that they were created for such a purpose. On the other hand, if we want to agree with Diodorus that sphynxes were animals similar to Monkeys, Baboons, or Mammon Cats – if not precisely these beasts – we could compare their human and animal faces, matching those of the simulacra, with all that we already said about those animals<sup>45</sup>.

It is clear that, besides the different aims of the two 17<sup>th</sup> century texts by Liceti and Bonfiglioli, both of them shared various elements. Foremost among them, the Egyptian «attribution» (but with

<sup>45</sup> ID., *Museo Cospiano* cit. p. 478.

the well-founded doubts expressed by Bonfiglioli), a symptom of the growing interest in Egyptian religious customs as prototypical examples of ancient idolatry. In keeping with this attitude, both texts included the very first attempts of iconographic interpretation, as if the objects were mysterious texts whose hidden meaning had to be revealed by means of antiquarian scrutiny. Finally, even if the topic of sacrifice was briefly mentioned by Liceti, none of the two texts really expanded on this matter, a rather surprising fact in light of the relevance that the notion of sacrifice had in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century debates on the history of religions, often fueled by descriptions of Indigenous American ritual practices<sup>46</sup>. The fact that the two Bolognese mosaic-encrusted sculptures were not even recognized as knife handles further contributed to what would have been a long absence of the topic of human sacrifice from Italian discourses on Mesoamerican knives.

To conclude this section on the 17<sup>th</sup> century it is worth mentioning a fourth Mesoamerican knife – a handled prismatic blade of unknown origin – that was in the Florentine collection of the Medici family. In the catalogue of the Real Galleria compiled by Nicolò Stenone (Niels Stensen), probably in the third quarter of the century, it is described as a “flint knife with his handle covered by a thick serpent skin”; in the later 1763 catalogue compiled by Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti the same knife, whose description makes clear that it is a prismatic blade, is said to have a handle made of “Indian cane” covered by the serpent skin, thus testifying another previously unknown form of handles attached to prismatic blades.<sup>47</sup>

### *The silent life of the «sphynxes» in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bologna*

In 1742-43, the Aldrovandi and Cospi museums were moved from the Palazzo Pubblico of Bologna to the Istituto dell'Accademia delle Scienze, the scholarly institution which had been founded in 1711 by Luigi Ferdinando Marsili and that at the mid of the century was enjoying the strong support of Pope Benedict XIV, the Bolognese Prospero Lambertini<sup>48</sup>. The inventories written

---

<sup>46</sup> See G. IMBRUGLIA, *The idea of religion and sacrifice from Grotius to Diderot's Encyclopédie*, in «History of European Ideas», 47(5) (2021), pp. 680-697.

<sup>47</sup> G. TARGIONI TOZZETTI, *Indice di cose naturali forse dettato da Niccolò Stenone e copiato dall'Originale esistente nella Real Galleria*, in ID., *Catalogo delle produzioni naturali che si conservano nella Galleria imperiale*, vol. 4, p. 114; the second mention by Targioni Tozzetti is found in ID., *Catalogo*, vol. 5, pp. 206-207. Both volumes, held at the library of the Museo Galileo in Florence, can be consulted at: <https://bibdig.museogalileo.it/tecanew/opera?bid=302341&%22=>

<sup>48</sup> Benedict XIV also gifted to the Istituto various Indigenous American objects: In 1748 he gave a Mixtec musical instrument made with a human bone, while in 1751 he offered a collection of ethnographic objects from the Upper Amazon region of Ecuador. See D. DOMENICI, *The wandering « Leg of an Indian King »*. *The cultural biography of a friction idiophone now in the Pigorini Museum in Rome, Italy*, in «Journal de la Société des Américanistes», 102 (2016), pp. 79- 104; S. TACCONI, *Benedict XIV's donation of Amazonian objects to the Istituto delle Scienze of Bologna (1751)*. *Origins and history*, in «Journal of the History of Collections», 33/1 (2021), pp. 43-55.

on the occasion of the collections' transfers are quite scanty, but they still contain useful information. In the one recorded on May 5, 1742, while the Aldrovandi Museum was being packed, the two Mesoamerican knives published in the *Musaeum Metallicum* are not clearly recorded, but one of them could be maybe identified with the «Instrument used by the Indians in sacrifices»<sup>49</sup>. In the anonymous and undated *Inventario delle cose del Museo Cospiano spettanti alla stanza delle Antichità* the two knife handles were recorded as «Two mosaic sphynxes», thus replicating the language already seen in Legati's catalogue<sup>50</sup>. It is hard to say to which extent the usage of the rather generic term «sphynx» actually witnesses an erroneous cultural attribution, but this seems to be confirmed by the fact that the two objects were recorded just before six «Egyptian wooden idols» and fourteen «Egyptian pottery idols», then followed by an idol from Japan and a book from Mexico (Codex Cospi). In the Istituto delle Scienze the Cospi and Aldrovandi collections were disassembled and reorganized in various thematic rooms. Accordingly, the Mesoamerican artifacts from both collections were located in the *Stanza delle Antichità*, where they were displayed, probably since 1750, together with Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman antiquities.

The display of the *Stanza delle Antichità* was described by Giuseppe Gaetano Bolletti in his *Dell'origine e dei progressi dell'Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna* (1751), but unfortunately – and significantly in terms of their perceived relevance – no Mesoamerican item attracted the attention of the author. We must assume that they were among the objects collectively referred as those «that were added from the above-described [Aldrovandi and Cospi] Museums, bringing no small accretion and dignity»<sup>51</sup>.

The same synthetic and rather formulaic language seen in the inventories also characterizes the publications recording the subsequent whereabouts of the collection. After the transfer of the ownership of the Istituto to the University of Bologna (1803), the objects previously displayed in the *Stanza delle Antichità* entered the newly founded *Museo delle Antichità della Regia Università di Bologna*. When Filippo Schiassi, in his *Guida del Forestiere* (1814), described Room VI, where exotic things were displayed, he wrote that the third cabinet of the room, containing «things from China, Japan, and other oriental parts», also included «two mosaic sphinxes of barbarian manufacture»<sup>52</sup>. It is worth noting that the usage of the term «barbarian» – far from being a reference to the complex intellectual debates which in the 16<sup>th</sup> century revolved around this term – seems to be a generic and rather formulaic «attribution» to an unidentified, non-European tradition. The same term was also employed by Schiassi when describing the Mesoamerican mosaic mask from the

---

<sup>49</sup> Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, Cod. 595, y.1, f. 7r: *Instrumento usato dagli Indiani ne sagrifizi*. The same inventory records the famous mosaic mask owned by Aldrovandi on f. 11r.

<sup>50</sup> Archivio di Stato di Bologna, Assunteria di Istituto, b. 13, n. 35, f. 3: *Due sfingie alla musaica*.

<sup>51</sup> G.G. BOLLETTI, *Dell'origine e dei progressi dell'Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna*, Bologna 1751, p. 59.

<sup>52</sup> F. SCHIASSI, *Guida del forestiere al Museo delle antichità della regia Università di Bologna*, Bologna 1814, p. 141.

Aldrovandi collection (also deriving from Betanzos' gift), said to be «a wooden mask inlaid of colored matters, of barbarian manufacture»<sup>53</sup>. An identical phrasing was later employed by Schiassi in a manuscript inventory compiled in 1835 where he again wrote «Two Mosaic sphynxes of barbarian manufacture»<sup>54</sup>. The two knife handles were then simply recorded as «Two mosaic sphynxes» in subsequent inventories of the museum<sup>55</sup>.

### *The Return of Sacrifice, 1800 to Present*

While the two Bolognese knife handles were living their lives under the guise of «barbarian» sphynxes, another Mesoamerican knife – also sharing the style of the objects associated with Betanzos' gift – resurfaced in Europe<sup>56</sup>. After a trip to Cuba and Mexico done between March and June 1856 in the company of the anthropologist Edward Burnett Taylor, the London businessman and collector Henry Christy was informed that the London-based German merchant Bram Hertz was going to sell his antiques collection. After a first auction at Sotheby's in 1854, where the collection was apparently bought by the Liverpool silversmith and collector Joseph Meyer, a second auction was held at Sotheby's in 1859<sup>57</sup>, when Christy managed to acquire a group of Mesoamerican objects including a sacrificial knife with a mosaic-encrusted sculptural handle. We know that Hertz had possessed the artifacts at least since 1851, when a catalogue of his collection was published<sup>58</sup>. Asked by Christy, Hertz wrote him providing important, if somewhat confusing, data about the provenance of the knife. Indeed, in his letter Hertz initially stated that the knife and a mosaic mask proceeded from «a celebrated collection from Florence»; then, in a subsequent passage, he wrote that a sale mediator, Samuel Luke Pratt, had brought the knife from Venice to London<sup>59</sup>. Since the mask was certainly acquired in Florence, it is feasible that in the first statement a Florentine provenance was

---

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Archivio Storico del Museo Archeologico di Bologna (d'ora in poi ASMAB), *Inventario degli oggetti del Gabinetto Archeologico della Pontificia Università di Bologna diretto dal Professore Filippo Schiassi. Museo dell'università. 14 marzo 1835*, fol. 16: *Due sfingi a mosaico di lavoro barbaro.*

<sup>55</sup> ASMAB, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione. Regia Università di Bologna. *Inventario delle proprietà mobili dello Stato esistenti al 31 dicembre 1870 nell'archeologia*, p. 73: *Due sfingi a mosaico*; *ivi*, *Inventario del Museo Archeologico della Regia Università di Bologna*, undated (ca. 1874), p. 28: *Due sfingi a mosaico.*

<sup>56</sup> The collection history of this knife has been reconstructed by E. CARMICHAEL, *Turquoise Mosaics from Mexico*, London: 1970 and M. CAYGILL, *Henry Christy, A.W. Franks and the British Museum's turquoise mosaics*, in J.C.H. KING *et al.* (eds), *Turquoise in Mexico and North America*, London 2012, pp. 183-96.

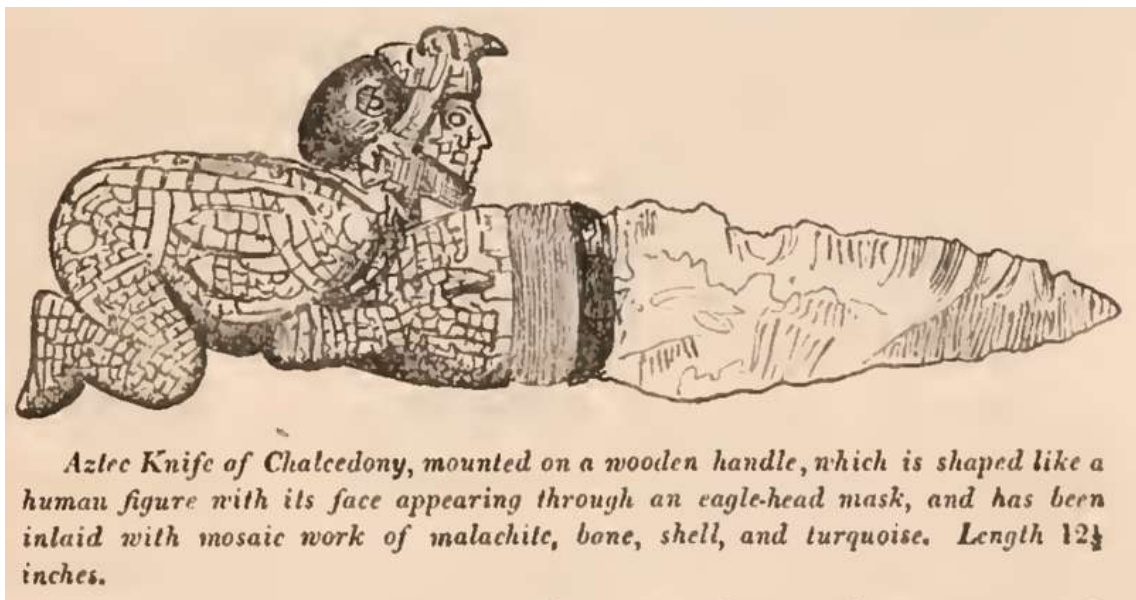
<sup>57</sup> ANONYMOUS, *Catalogue of the celebrated and well-known collection of Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, Roman, Indian, Peruvian, Mexican, and Chinese antiquities formed by B. Hertz [...], now the property of Joseph Mayer, esq. F.S.A of Liverpool*, London: 1859.

<sup>58</sup> ANONYMOUS, *Catalogue of the collection of Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, Roman, Indian, Peruvian and Mexican antiquities formed by B. Hertz*, London 1851.

<sup>59</sup> CAYGILL, Henry Christy *cit.*, pp. 183-8.

erroneously also attributed to the knife, which actually came from Venice as stated in the second, and more detailed, phrase. A Venetian provenance would also be coherent with the fact that Jacob Gaffarel – as the reader would remember – probably obtained a similar knife in Venice. Given the stylistic similarity between the two objects, they may have arrived together in Venice on an unknown occasion. Alternatively, Hertz’s knife could have passed from Florence to Venice and then to London, but this hypothesis would be at odd with the geographical distribution of the two stylistic groups into which the «Italian» mosaics can be divided<sup>60</sup>.

Be it as it may, Christy showed his recent acquisitions to Tylor, who devoted them an appendix of his book *Anahuac; or, Mexico and the Mexicans* (1861), where he narrated his Mexican voyage<sup>61</sup>. Tylor’s publication marked the beginning of the modern scholarly study of Mesoamerican mosaics, after the long silence that had followed the pioneering publications of Aldrovandi, Legati and Liceti in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly enough, Tylor devoted the first appendix of *Anahuac* to «The manufacture of obsidian knives, etc» citing at length the passage from the *Monarquía Indiana* where Juan de Torquemada – based on Mendieta’s repetition of Las Casas’ words – described the production of obsidian blades<sup>62</sup>. Then, in Appendix V, «Description of the three very rare specimens of ancient Mexican mosaic-work (in the collection of Henry Christy, esq.) », he devoted a paragraph to the knife, which he also illustrated in the main text (fig. 6).



<sup>60</sup> DOMENICI, *Mesoamerican mosaics* cit.

<sup>61</sup> TYLOR, *Anahuac* cit., pp. 337-9. The following year they were also described in C.L. STEINHAUER, *Catalogue of a collection of ancient and modern stone implements and of other weapons, tools, and utensils of the aborigines of various countries in the possession of Henry Christy*, London 1862, together with a substantial amount of other ancient and modern Mexican items.

<sup>62</sup> E.B. TYLOR, *Anahuac; or, Mexico and the Mexicans*, London 1861, p. 331-2. In the same appendix Tylor also cited the works of Vetancourt and Hernández.

Fig. 6. *The knife from Christy's collection illustrated in Tylor, Anahuac; or, Mexico and the Mexicans (1861)*

Tylor's description of the mosaics is mainly focused on their material components and technology, so that in describing the knife he mentioned the mosaic of turquoise, malachite and red and white shell, as well as the fact that the semi-transparent opalescent chalcedony of the blade reminded him of Humboldt's mention of the presence of such stone in the volcanic districts of Mexico. Beside these technical notes, Tylor also provided information on the objects' provenance and recognized that the eagle warrior figured in the knife handle closely matched similar Aztec images where a human head emerges from the mouth of an animal. Then, he added a telling observation which betrays his evolutionistic theoretical stance, writing that «there is in the stone blade the curious fact of a people which had attained to so complex a design and such an elaborate ornamentation remaining in the Stone-age»<sup>63</sup>.

Probably driven by Tylor's publication, the Italian paleoethnologist Luigi Pigorini, who in 1875 had founded the Regio Museo Nazionale Preistorico ed Etnografico di Roma, recognized the relevance of the various Mesoamerican mosaics in Italian collections. In 1878 Pigorini managed to organize an exchange with the Bolognese archaeological museum, so obtaining its Mesoamerican objects, also including the two knife handles from the Cospi Museum. Clearly enough, the «exotic» character of the Mesoamerican artifacts made that they were progressively perceived as «out of place» in the Bolognese collections, as also attested by their invisibility in the abovementioned museum guides. Pigorini described the objects in an article published in 1885, enriched by a beautiful watercolor (fig. 7), where he showed a remarkable knowledge of previous literature, citing not only the works of Aldrovandi, Legati and Tylor but also Liceti's *Pyronarcha*, for the first time brought to the attention of modern Mesoamericanists<sup>64</sup>.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ivi, p. 338.

<sup>64</sup> L. PIGORINI, *Gli antichi oggetti messicani incrostati di mosaico esistenti nel Museo preistorico ed etnografico di Roma*, in «Atti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. Serie 3: Memorie della Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filosofiche», 12 (1885), pp. 3-10. Pigorini had briefly mentioned the «two wooden figurative handles» in a previous publication: ID., *Museo Nazionale preistorico ed etnografico di Roma. Relazione al Ministro dell'Istruzione pubblica del Direttore L. Pigorini*, in «Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione. Bollettino Ufficiale», VII, Gennaio (1881), pp. 497-498.



Fig. 7. Knife handles illustrated in L. Pigorini, *Gli antichi oggetti cit.* (1885)

Thanks to the comparison of the two objects with the knife in the Christy collection published by Tylor, Pigorini was able to correctly identify them as knife handles, so putting an end to their status as «sphinxes»:

I do not know if anyone has made specific investigations on the use of these knives or daggers; I think, nevertheless, that we can concede that they were used in human sacrifices, It is well known that in Mexico they used to open the chest of the victims with stone knives, which according to the Anonymous Conqueror were very large, as the blades of the knives I am talking about. Moreover, the exquisite art of the handles, and the preciousness of the material with which they are encrusted, seem to clearly indicate that they were sacred tools<sup>65</sup>.

After centuries of complete – and rather surprising – invisibility, human sacrifice was finally revived as the discursive framework in which the Mesoamerican knives were understood.

Thanks to Pigorini's work, the three extant Mesoamerican knives (the Christy one, then passed to the British Museum, and the two Roman specimens now at the Museo delle Civiltà) were customarily described as «sacrificial knives» in an array of subsequent scholarly works<sup>66</sup>. Among them, an article by Louis Capitan, published in 1916, deserves a special mention because it was specifically devoted to the three extant knives, which Capitan compared with Aldrovandi's and

<sup>65</sup> Ivi, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> The list of publications where the three knives were described and/or illustrated is too long to be fully reported here. Among the early publications embellished by painted illustrations of the knives, the following are worth mentioning: M. DE WALDECK, *Brasseur de Bourbourg, Monuments anciens du Mexique ed du Yucatan. Palenqué, Ococingo et autres ruines de l'ancienne civilisation du Mexique*, Paris 1866, p. 44; A. PEÑAFIEL, *Monumentos del arte mexicano antiguo*, vol. 1, Berlin 1890, p. 126; F. PI Y MARGALL, *Historia de la América antecolombiana*, t. 1, Barcelona, 1892, unnumbered plate after p. 1214; H. READ, *On an ancient Mexican Head-piece, coated with Mosaic*, in «*Archaeologia*», LIV (1895), pp. 387-8; A. OPPEL, *Die altmexikanischen Mosaiken*, in «*Globus*» LXX/1 (1896), pp. 5, 8, 10; A. PEÑAFIEL, *Indumentaria antigua mexicana. Vestidos guerreros y civiles de los mexicanos*, México 1903, pl. 26a, 168.

Liceti's works, as well as with relevant historical information and imagery from indigenous codices<sup>67</sup>. From these seminal works onward, the «Italian» Mesoamerican knives ultimately deriving from Betanzos' gift were reproduced and commented again and again, not only in academic literature but also in popular books and webpages, where they became the quintessential material instantiations of the gruesome ritual practice which came to define «Aztec» identity in popular imagination. A detailed exploration of this 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries «pop life» of the knives – a fascinating but awesome task – is, needless to say, well beyond the scope of the present article<sup>68</sup>.

Rather paradoxically, recent scholarly scrutiny of the material dimension of the extant knives by means of scientific analytical techniques is putting in doubt their actual sacrificial function. Indeed, a xeroradiograph of the British Museum specimen revealed that its blade has been tapered for insertion into the haft, where it lies just under 25% of its total length; a tomography made on the handles in the Museo delle Civiltà also revealed a similar weak arrangement, which would have prevented to actually use the knife to open the chest of an individual, so that the knife must probably be understood as a non-functional item, as also suggested by the lack of any trace of blood<sup>69</sup>. The lack of both blades in the two specimens from the Cospi collection also suggests a similar structural weakness; moreover, one of them shows a peculiar circular socket on its abdomen, apparently indicating that the object was originally inserted on top of a staff or baton<sup>70</sup>. These characteristics suggest that the knives with sculptural and mosaic-encrusted handles were never used as actual sacrificial tools but, rather, that they were part of godly insignia probably attached to sacred bundles, as also happened with other mosaic encrusted objects<sup>71</sup>. If so, the knives would have been material referents of Indigenous Mesoamerican discourses on human sacrifice rather than actual sacrificial tools, further complicating the relationships between the objects and the sacrificial practice.

## Conclusions

---

<sup>67</sup> L. CAPITAN LOUIS, *Le couteau de pierre à sacrifices humains de l'ancien Mexique dans deux livres du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle; comparaison avec les deux pièces originales*, in «Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres», 60/5 (1916), pp. 368-77.

<sup>68</sup> Among the almost infinite array of (often kitsch) reproductions of the knives that can be found in books, movies, web pages etc. it is worth mentioning here the curious case of the knife employed by a Maya priest during a human sacrifice scene in the movie *Apocalypto* (2006), directed by Mel Gibson: the mosaic-covered handle of the knife, representing a crouching skeletal figure, has been obviously inspired by the British Museum specimen, so that it could be properly described as a «postmodern» member of the corpus described in the present article.

<sup>69</sup> C. MCEWAN *et al.*, *Turquoise mosaics from Mexico*, London 2006, pp. 26, 73-4.

<sup>70</sup> DOMENICI, *Mesoamerican mosaics* cit., p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> D. DOMENICI, *The Gaze of the Ñuhu Bundles. An Interpretation of Mesoamerican Mosaics at the National Museum of the American Indian*, in M.M. MARTINEZ, ERIN SEARS, LAUREN SEIG (eds), *Contextualizing Museum Collections at the Smithsonian Institution. The Relevance of Collections-Based Research in the Twenty-First Century*, Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology n. 54, Washington D.C. 2022, pp. 75-94.

The reconstruction of the (mostly) Italian social lives of a selected group of Mesoamerican knives revealed how their perception changed over the centuries, while they were going through different discursive formations. The most remarkable – and, to a certain extent, unexpected – result of this analysis is the rather marginal role that human sacrifice had in the texts where the knives were commented and illustrated. In the first phase of the knives’ cultural biography, associated with their arrival in Italy as a consequence of Dominican visits to the peninsula, the issue of human sacrifice – associated to the large knives with sculptural handles – was commented as a practice defining the idolatrous condition of Indigenous peoples, but it was to a certain degree marginalized by the relevance attributed to obsidian prismatic blades, or «razors». Conceptually associated with Jewish circumcision, the obsidian blades played a key role in Dominican discourse, where they defined the pre-Christian status of the Natives as well as their capacity (thanks to their «sharp» *ingenium*) to receive the Gospel and to be thus transformed in fully blown Christians.

Once entered in the network of Italian collections, during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century the knives were mostly scrutinized from the perspective of natural historians, as shown by the cases of Ulisse Aldrovandi and Ferrante Imperato. Endowed with an antiquarian mindset<sup>72</sup>, both scholars mostly centered their analyses on the material constituents of the knives, in order to locate them within larger taxonomic systems, with no room for speculative detours on religion and sacrifice. Their cases (as well as the previously commented Dominican ones) show how the much-repeated discourses on cabinet of curiosities and *wunderkammern* as collecting contexts fraught by exoticism and misattributions are largely insufficient to explain the diversity of early modern (and especially Late Renaissance) forms of collecting of non-European things.

Such an interpretive framework becomes more useful to look at the subsequent phase of the knives’ biographies, when they entered 17<sup>th</sup> century collections such as those created by Ferdinando Cospi and Jacob Gaffarel. It is only in these contexts that we can observe that geographical and cultural indeterminacy often described as typical of early modern European reception of *exotica*<sup>73</sup>. For example, the European parchment cover applied in Bologna to the Mesoamerican Codex Cospi (also owned by Ferdinando Cospi) bears an inscription describing it as a «Book from China», then deleted and changed into «Mexican». As shown by the interpretive texts penned by Silvestro Bonfiglioli and Fortunio Liceti, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century cultural misattribution was often driven by

---

<sup>72</sup> On the relationship between antiquarianism and natural history – or, to borrow Carlo Ginzburg’s lexicon, between natural and civil antiquarianism – see G. OLMI, *Ordine e fama: il museo naturalistico in Italia nei secoli XVI e XVII*, in «Annali dell’Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento», 8 (1982), pp. 225-74; C. GINZBURG, *Storia dell’arte, da vicino e da lontano*, in «Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz», LXI/3 (2019), pp. 275-85. More specifically on Aldrovandi, see DOMENICI, *Rediscovery of a Mesoamerican greenstone sculpture* cit.

<sup>73</sup> For a recent and interesting essay on these topics, see D. BLEICHMAR, *The cabinet and the world. Non-European objects in early modern European collections*, in «Journal of the History of Collections», 33/3 (2021), pp. 435-45.

the then current «Egyptomany» – best represented by Athanasius Kircher’s works – which transformed the knives into sphynxes or «Lybian» idols. Moreover, the comparison between Mesoamerican and Egyptian objects was not new: Lorenzo Pignoria had compared Mesoamerican gods with Egyptian «idols» in the appendix added to two different editions of *Le vere e nove imagini degli dei degli antichi di Vincenzo Cartari* (1615 and 1626)<sup>74</sup>. Nevertheless, not even within this interpretive framework human sacrifice gained any prominence. In the case of the Cospi handles, the discursive disappearance of sacrifice was apparently caused by the lack of the blades – a consequence of their original, non-functional status – and the infilling of their sockets, which obscured their function as knife handles.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the rather marginal status of the knives within the Bolognese collections, witnessed by the lack of texts specifically devoted to them. In the scanty inventory and catalogue entries of the time, the repeated usage of the term «sphynxes» seems more a loose and formulaic linguistic habit than a veritable misattribution.

It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the «European diaspora» of «Italian» Mesoamerican mosaics brought one knife to the attention of Edward B. Tylor, whose work initiated a scholarly wave which continued up to the present<sup>75</sup>. And it was in the best 19<sup>th</sup> century scholarly article, penned by L. Pigorini, that human sacrifice finally reentered the discursive field, sparking that continuous association between the knives and the ritual practice which characterized, and still characterizes, most texts – both academic and popular – dealing with the knives.

Curiously enough, recent scholarship on the knives – marked by a renewed interest in their materiality – suggests that even in their original Mesoamerican context, where knives were probably used as godly insignia attached to sacred bundles, human sacrifice acted more as a discursive reference than as the actual functional field in which knives were employed. Hopefully, the results of scientific campaigns currently underway will provide useful data to further proceed in the interpretation of the knives, thus adding other layers to their multiform and ever-changing identity<sup>76</sup>.

---

<sup>74</sup> S. BOTTA, *Il corpo universale degli dèi americani. Per una teoria visuale del politeismo nell’opera di Lorenzo Pignoria*, in «Civiltà e Religioni», 3 (2017), pp. 39-70; ID., *Incorporating Mesoamerican Cosmology within a Global History of Religion: Some Considerations on the Work of Lorenzo Pignoria*, in A. DÍAZ (ed.), *Reshaping the World: Debates on Mesoamerican Cosmologies*, Louisville 2020, pp. 70-99; S. MAFFEI, *La riscoperta dell’esotismo nel Seicento. Le Immagini de gli dei indiani di Lorenzo Pignoria*, Pisa 2020; P. VON WYSS-GIACOSA, *Through the Eyes of Idolatry: Pignoria’s 1615 Argument on the Conformità of Idols from the West and East Indies with Egyptian Gods*, in G. TARANTINO, P. VON WYSS-GIACOSA (eds), *Through Your Eyes. Religious Alterity and the Early Modern Western Imagination*, Leiden 2021, pp. 103-44.

<sup>75</sup> D. DOMENICI, *From the market to the museum. Nineteenth-century circulation, display and scholarly study of Mesoamerican artifacts in Italy and beyond*, in A.D. TURNER, M.E. O’NEIL, M.H. ROBB (eds), *Collecting Mesoamerican Art Before 1940*, Los Angeles (in press).

<sup>76</sup> A campaign of non-destructive scientific analyses of the mosaics at the Museo delle Civiltà, based on the infrastructure of E-RIHS.it (European Research Infrastructure for Heritage Science) has been carried out in July 2021, thanks to the collaboration between the author and the Istituto di Scienze per il Patrimonio Culturale-CNR. The processing of the data is currently underway and the results will be presented in future publications.

DAVIDE DOMENICI  
Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà  
Università di Bologna  
davide.domenici@unibo.it