



Title: In search of the holy prepuce

Interviewee: David Farley

Duration: 7 minutes, 58 seconds

About this transcript

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Introduction

Who says religion is incapable of bowing to modernity?

In this episode of Bookpod, David Farley talks about *An Irreverent Curiosity*, a piece of travel writing that traces the whereabouts of Jesus' prepuce, a snippet of circumcised flesh that allegedly existed in several European towns at the same time – until the Vatican discouraged further discussion of the matter.

Presentation

So, to explain the title, let's actually start with the subtitle: "In Search of the Church's Strangest Relic in Italy's Oddest Town."



So the strangest relic is the prepuce of Jesus, snipped off the baby Jesus on his eighth day, as it states in the Bible. And it had this fascinating history floating around medieval Europe. At one time, there were several copies of this holy prepuce floating around Europe and there was one in Rome, of course.

And it ended up in this hill town north of Rome, Calcata. And it stayed there for centuries. And then it went missing about twenty years ago.

The reason why it's called "an irreverent curiosity" is because it was once a papal-approved relic. Popes granted indulgences to people who came to venerate and pray in front of this holy relic, and then it fell out of favor with the church in the late nineteenth century.

In August 1900, Pope Leo XIII made a decree stating that anyone who spoke about or wrote about the holy prepuce would face excommunication.



Later on, when someone asked the Church, "Why did you forbid the speaking of or writing about this relic," this church spokesperson said, "Because we feared it could cause an irreverent curiosity."

And the reason why it's called Italy's oddest town is because, in the 1960s the village was abandoned for fear its cliffs were crumbling. It's this beautiful, bewitching hill town on 450-foot cliffs. And hippies and artists discovered it.

And they came in and patched up the houses, the potholes in the cobblestone alleyways. And they bought the houses from the people who had abandoned them for a very small sum because the people who abandoned them thought, "Ha, I'll sell this house to a hippie," because as the rules stated in the Italian government, once the town was abandoned, it had to be destroyed.



But these hippies, mostly Italian hippies, had the rule overturned and they saved the village. And so today, the village is just made up of these now aging hippies and artists and kind of wackos, bohemian types.

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I was living in Rome in the year 2002 and went on a day trip to Calcata. It was just such a fascinating place. I mean, it's about half the size of a football field. And there's an absurd amount of art galleries. There's a bunch of great restaurants. It's totally pedestrianized. There's only one way in and one way out. The gate is about wide enough to fit a donkey cart, say. It's just this little kind of playground of sorts. And it's fascinating, and I wanted to move there.

And then I found out about this bizarre relic that they had that disappeared under rather mysterious circumstances. And when I started to scratch the surface of the history of



this relic, I found out that it loomed about the periphery of so many different interesting historical epochs.

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According to the Book of Luke, Jesus was circumcised on his eighth day, and then that's all that's stated about it. The next time the holy prepucce appears in print again is in the so-called apocryphal gospels, which are these books that were left out of the Bible, particularly in the gospel "The Infancy," which is a really fun read. It goes into great detail about what happened to Jesus' prepucce after the circumcision.

It also then traces Jesus' teenage years when he went through, as most of us do, a kind of rebellious phase. Anyone who wronged him, he would just kind of zap them dead. It was sort of like a B-grade movie.



So, the holy prepuce is given to an old woman, and she gives it to her son, who is a pharmacist, who puts it into a jar of preservative nard, this kind of oil. And then it disappears after that and only reappears again, according to the documents, in the eighth and ninth centuries when the great Gaelic King Charlemagne is praying in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and an angel or, as some sources say, the hand of God, comes down and hands Charlemagne this box.

And what it is, when he opens it up, it's kind of a goodie bag of relics. Inside was a piece of the true cross and the holy prepuce. And Charlemagne takes it back to Europe and after that, the story frays a bit. Some monasteries in France, churches in France, towns in France – they all seem to be in France for some reason – all claim that they were given this special relic by Charlemagne.

And then of course there's another story that says that on Christmas Day in the year 800, when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne the holy Roman emperor, Charlemagne, as a gift, gave Leo III this holy prepuce, and Leo III put it in the



Sancta Sanctorum, the Holy of Holies in Rome, where it remained until 1527 when, due to the spoils of war and plunder, ended up in this village, Calcata.

Before 1527, the relic existed in several villages and towns, mostly in France. There was one in Germany. Santiago de Compostela apparently had a holy prepuce of their own as well.

And I think one of the reasons why you could get away with such a thing being in the Middle Ages is simply because of communication. You know, most people hadn't gone beyond their own backyard. And so, if their town had a holy prepuce, they probably had no idea that others had existed. So I think that's why people weren't skeptical at all.

You can almost see some relic salesman flipping through the Bible trying to figure out what possible relics they could come up with, and then they, you know, maybe they came to the Book of Luke and got to the part where it talks about a circumcision, and they say, "Ah-hah!"



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We tend to forget living in the twenty-first century about how pervasive religion was in people's minds in medieval Europe. I mean, even a gust of wind was considered the breath of Satan, and every act was attributed to God or Satan or something.

So I don't think people had the same idea about this prepuce that we have now and people snicker about it and make fun of it and make fun of people in the past for praying to it.

Unfortunately, the piece of flesh that people were praying to was some poor soul's prepuce.

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If you know where to look in the Vatican library, you can unearth lots of centuries' old documents about this particular relic that were written complete with the papal imprimatur, the papal stamp of approval, to show that this was at one time very much a legitimate and approved-of relic.

You know, there were all these wild theories about what happened to it: That Neo-Nazis had stolen it, that a satanic cult had stolen it, that the priest had sold it. And then the prevailing one, which a lot of the villagers believe is that the Vatican had something to do with the theft. And so I decided it was my job to try to figure out the truth.

This is not really a spoiler, but I end up having to go to Turin. There was a theory that the priest had sold it to someone, to a relic collector in Turin, which has a history of black magic and the occult.



And so I went up to Turin. And it was in Turin where I discovered where it really was from, it turns out, a Vatican insider. But I won't say where it really is until you read the book.

Introduction

You can read more about the Church's strangest relic – and more of David Farley's travel writing at www.dfarley.com.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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