

11. THE CULT OF THE DEAD

In a city like Naples, where myth, legend and mystery blend together to form a heady mix, it was inevitable that a cult like that of the dead, such a sensitive yet macabre subject, would be taken to heart by the people. A walk down the busiest, narrowest streets in the heart of the city is enough to understand the depth of people's **commitment and devotion**. There are shrines, and tabernacles, with images of saints and photos of the deceased everywhere.

The cult of the dead cuts right across **social class** and religious belief. It involves everyone, regardless of political ideology or social and economic class because, when it comes to death, we are all equal.

The dead have always kept in close contact with their loved ones and the house where they used to live. People believe that the dead know about the future so can warn us in **dreams** about what may happen. Dreams, in Neapolitan culture, are interpreted and translated into **numbers** so people can play the lottery.

Even the **lost souls** use dreams to ask us to pray for them and look after them, so that their suffering in Purgatory might be lessened. This phenomenon is popularly known as *refrisco*.

Until a few decades ago (though it still happens today as well) believers used to go to the underground cemeteries in Naples and "**adopt a skull**". This was the beginning of the process of offering the prayers and help that had been sought. In return, the souls were asked to cure illness, find work or a husband or even help win the lottery.

Between IX and XVIII centuries, people were buried in the churches in Naples in huge **hypogeums** which were as big as the churches above them and had tiny windows or vents for ventilation. The piles of bones in the corners belonged to people from the lower classes as the richer, more well-to-do sectors of the population had their own private tombs

The bodies were inhumated in special cells called *cantarelle*, little chair-shaped niches, with a bowl underneath. The corpse was sat down with the head resting in a special hole carved out of the tuff. After the so-called "drying process" the body was dressed and buried.

The whole process was known as *sculatura*; which is where the insult *Puozze scula'* in Neapolitan dialect comes from: a way of calling on death to strike your enemy.