

The Society of Jesus and the diffusion of the cult and iconography of Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins in the Portuguese Empire during the second half of the 16th century

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The legend of Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins (the cult was removed from the universal calendar of saints in 1969) is a pre-Jesuit cult. The first vestige is an inscription at the Church of Saint Ursula in Cologne. This inscription, that is attributed to a certain Clemantius and is dated from the 4th or 5th century, states that an ancient basilica was rebuilt on the spot where some virgins had been martyred.² According to legend, Ursula was the daughter of a Christian British King and had taken a vow of chastity. However, Conanus, a pagan king, moved by her beauty and kindness, wanted her as his son Aetherius's wife. She agreed to marry him in three years time on the condition that he would convert to Christianity and that she would travel to Rome first. Therefore, she embarked for Cologne – and afterwards for Rome – with ten noble maiden, each of whom was escorted by a thousand women.³ On the way back, she, her *virginalis milizia*, several bishops and Pope Cyriac, who had resigned in order to accompany them, were all tortured and martyred by the Huns near Cologne.⁴

¹ This text is based on a paper that was presented by the author at the annual meeting of the Sixteenth Century Organisation and Conferences, Toronto, October 2004.

² Anton LEGNER, *Kölner Heilige und Heiligtümer*, Köln, 2002, 211.

³ This incredible number probably derived from the fact that a copier misread the term 11M, which indicated 11 martyrs, for eleven thousand.

⁴ Jacques de VORAGINE, *La Légende Dorée*, Paris, 1967, vol II, 294-298.

Without a doubt, the explosion of this rather bizarre medieval devotion in the Portuguese territories overseas resulted from the interest of both the Crown and the ecclesiastic authorities in its perpetuation. Saint Ursula and her companions were honoured for many centuries in Portugal, this cult having been popular since the formation of the State. More precisely, two main episodes of the Reconquest, the Conquest of Lisbon (1147) and the Conquest of Alcácer do Sal (1217) are said to have taken place on 21st October, which is the feast day of Saint Ursula and her companions. Nevertheless, the interest of the Crown in this cult developed mainly from the first years of the 16th century, being contemporary to the peak of Portuguese overseas expansion. In 1517, at the demand of Emperor Maximilian and as an offer to his cousin Queen D. Leonor (1458-1525), the widow of King D. João II (1455-1495), the body of Saint Auta, the daughter of Quincian and Gerasima, the royal couple of Sicily, was translated from Cologne to Lisbon where it was taken in triumphant progress through the streets of to the Convent of Madre de Deus.⁵ Indeed, a great quantity of relics related to Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins was removed mainly from Cologne but also from other German towns to the Iberian Peninsula in the second half of the 16th century. In particular, Philip II from Spain (and I from Portugal) and his fourth wife, the Archduchess Anne from Austria were active consumers of this devotion. Actually, Philip II from Spain was a compulsive collector of relics. During his lifetime the Escorial kept as many as 7,420 relics, including 70 heads of the Cologne virgins. Apparently, Queen Anne herself was offered four heads during her trip to Cologne in 1570.⁶

Translating this cult overseas, in 1585, the Third Council of the Province of Goa decreed that a special veneration should be given to the Eleven Thousand Virgins in the Archdiocese.⁷ From my point of view, the Jesuits, who were the largest and most influential order in the Portuguese overseas missions, must be acknowledged as having had the main role in this respect. Literature clearly reflects the Jesuit involvement with the cult of Saint Ursula and of the Eleven Thousand Virgins as various members of the order recycled the legend in their

⁵ Damião de GÓIS, *Crónica do Sereníssimo Senhor Rei D. Emanuel*, Coimbra, 1970, IV part, chapter XXVI, 451-452.

⁶ Jaime Ferreiro ALEMPARTE, *La leyenda de las Once Mil Virgenes, sus reliquias, culto e iconografía*, Múrcia, 1991, 169.

⁷ *Third Council, Fourth Session, Decree 8*, in Joaquim Heliodoro da Cunha RIVARA (ed.), "Archivo Portuguez-Oriental", New Delhi, 1992, vol. IV, part 5, 165.

publication of popular collections. The pre-eminent Spanish hagiographer Pedro de Ribadeneira, included their history in the *Flos Sanctorum* or *Libro de Las Vidas de Los Santos* (Madrid, 1599), the most celebrated life of saints in the Baroque period.⁸ The work *Vitae e Martiriy SS. Ursulae* by the German Jesuit Herman Crombach constitutes the most comprehensive account of the martyrdom of St. Ursula and her maidens.⁹

Looking more closely at the Portuguese context, the Jesuits were further fundamental in enlisting the support of the Crown for the spread of this cult. Peter Fabre, whom early Jesuit sources always linked with Ignatius and Francis Xavier, had a strong devotion for Saint Ursula and her companions and during his stay in Cologne in 1540 he used to pray in Saint Ursula's Church. As he had a Papal licence authorising him to remove bodily relics from the Cologne, he took with him seven heads of the Eleven Thousand Virgins when he left. Four years later, he offered two of these heads as well as four big bones to the Portuguese Royal Couple. The Prince was also offered a bone of one of these virgins-martyrs. Moreover, Fabre distinguished the Jesuit College of Coimbra, founded in 1542 in order to train the Portuguese candidates to the "missionary vineyard", with another two of those heads. As a result, the College was commonly known the College of the Eleven Thousand Virgins.¹⁰

At least in Portuguese eyes, the Jesuit Church of São Roque, Lisbon, could rival with El Escorial as far as relics were concerned. As we can read in an amusing report by Manuel de Campos dated 1588, Juan de Borja (1533-1606), the son of General Francisco de Borja, decided against all odds to hand out an incredible array of relics, including eighteenth heads, four arms, two teeth, forty non specified bones and a hundred and eight relics of the companions of Ursula, to the Church of S. Roque in Lisbon. As retribution and at their demand, he and his wife were later buried in the High Chapel. On the 22nd January 1588 the relics were moved from the Cathedral to S. Roque in a magnificent procession in

⁸ Günther ZEHNDER, *Sankt Ursula: Legende, Verehrung, Bilderwelt*, Köln, 1985, 40.

⁹ Hermann CROMBACH, *Vita et martyrium S. Ursulae et sociarum vndecim millium virginum etc. Ex antiquis monumentis bona fide descriptu, notabilibus argumentis, quibus his*, Cologne, 1647). (For a history of this cult in Cologne and in the European countries, see also Anton LEGNER, *Kölner Heilige und Heiligtümer*, *op. cit.*, especially the third part "Kölner Reliquien in den Ländern Europas", 267-401.

¹⁰ Maria Cristina OSSWALD, *Goa and the Jesuit Cult and Iconography before 1622*. (forthcoming).

which took part members of brotherhoods, both secular and regular priests from all orders, the Cathedral Chapter and children attending Catechesis.¹¹

During an age when local pilgrimage centres took on an increasingly relevant role, the Jesuits championed in taking the remains of the saints or especially virtuous persons on long voyages, transferring them mainly from Rome and Northern European countries to Spain, Portugal and their far-flung domains, and vice-versa.¹² Thus, they played a fundamental role in the creation and flourishing of peripheral centres of pilgrimage and contributed decisively to the integration of local cults into the universal Roman devotion. In this sense, St. Ursula and her companions were conferred more than a fringe role in the definition of Tridentine sacred routes simply by providing an almost unlimited possibility of fragmentation of first quality relics, *i.e.* heads.¹³ During the sixteenth century heads of those virgins could be found throughout Europe and especially in missionary areas, such as the Slavic territories and the non-European colonies turning a local devotion of Cologne into world devotion. Alone in Goa, by 1578, the church of Old Saint held three heads related to this cult (the above-mentioned head of St. Gerasima, the head of Saint Boniface, the captain of the Virginal army,¹⁴ and a third head of an anonymous virgin). In 1610 the College of Salsete held several bodily remains of important figures related to Ursula, such as Pope Cyriac and St. Pauline, one of the virgins, as well as of the Theban Saints.¹⁵ Indeed, the Jesuits were the first to take their bodily relics to the Orient and apparently they had the monopoly of the translation of these relics throughout the Portuguese Empire. After the head of St. Gerasima was sent to Goa in 1548, heads and bones of other virgins arrived in Mozambique (1560), Malacca

¹¹ Manuel CAMPOS, *Relação do solene recebimento que se fez em Lisboa que se levaram à Igreja de S. Roque da Companhia de Jesus aos 25 de Janeiro de 1588*, 16v, 18. (See also: Jorge CARDOSO, *Agiológico Lusitano*, Porto, 2002, vol. I, 345, Nuno VASSALO E SILVA, *Os Relicários de São Roque*, in “Oceanos, Os Jesuítas e a Ideia de Portugal”, November 1992, 113.)

¹² For instance, at the demand of General Cláudio Acquaviva, an arm of his nephew Rodolfo Acquaviva, one of the five Jesuits martyred in Salsete (Goa) was sent to headquarters in Rome in 1600, while the other arm was taken to the Jesuit College of Naples in 1634 (the family Acquaviva originally came from Naples). (BARTOLI, Daniello, *La missione al Gran Mogor (1663)*, Milano, 1945, 119.)

¹³ Gelenius, writing in the middle of the seventeenth century, remarked that notwithstanding the spread of these relics there still existed more than 2,700 heads at the Church of Saint Ursula in Cologne, which was the main shrine dedicated to Saint Ursula. (A. GELENIUS, *De Admiranda, sacra, et civili magnitudini Coloniae Claudiae Agrippinensis Augustae Ubiorum Urbis*, Cologne, 1645, Book I, 336).

¹⁴ This relic was in particularly good shape as only three teeth were missing.

¹⁵ Sebastião GONÇALVES, S.J., *Primeira parte da História da Companhia de Jesus nos Reynos e Provincias da Índia Oriental*, Coimbra, vol. I, 102.

(1567), Japan (1581), Daman (1581), Bazain (1584) and Bahia, Brazil (1575).¹⁶ In less than fifty years the Jesuits provided their houses in Asia, Africa and Brazil with heads and bones not only of the Virgins, but also of some of their most distinguished companions, such as St. Boniface. Moreover, relics of the three hundred and eighteen Theban saints (the male counterpart of Ursula and the Eleven Thousand virgins, as they were martyred with St. Gereon, and whose relics were initially preserved partly at the Church of St. Gereon in Cologne)¹⁷ were also treasured in several Jesuit houses in the Orient. Nevertheless, the demand by Jesuit oriental houses seems never to have been fully met. While the fathers from the Professed House in Old Goa and those in Japan disputed this issue, parties in Malacca also eagerly desired possession of at least a head of one of those virgins. Accordingly, by the middle of the seventeenth century all Jesuit churches in the Portuguese missionary territories had at least one altar dedicated to the Eleven Thousand Virgins. Moreover, the construction of the Professed House in Goa (1584-1604) began on the Saint's day and two of the Jesuit colleges in Portuguese colonies, namely the College of Daman and the College of Chaul, were dedicated to the Eleven Thousand Virgins. This devotion assumed such a sacred character for the Jesuits in India that they allowed only the very generous people – *muito beneméritos* – to be buried in the chapels of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins.¹⁸

Without a doubt, confraternities operating from Jesuit churches were fundamental in keeping cult of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins alive, especially in the far flung missions. In 1549, the year after the safe arrival of the head of St. Gerasima in Goa, Provincial Gaspar Barzeus, ordered the institution of a confraternity in honour of the Eleven Thousand Virgins at the College of S. Paulo Velho in Goa in order to celebrate miracles as well as conversions associated with this relic. On this occasion, one of the existing side altars was re-consecrated to this cult, and the painting of a rich oil retable for the same altar was commissioned. Viceroy D. Afonso de Noronha (1550-1554), who was the first member of this confraternity, ordered the engraving of a silver monstrance to preserve the head in a decent manner and distinguish it from the other relics.

¹⁶ Around 1654 there were three heads in Bahia (one of which was identified locally as Ursula herself), one in Pernambuco, one in Rio de Janeiro and a fourth one in São Paulo. (Jaime ALEMPARTE, *La leyenda de las Once Mil Virgenes...* ed. cit., 169-177)

¹⁷ According to legend, at the end of the 3rd century Mauricio and his companions were charged to combat the Gauls who rebelled against Roman dominion during the time of Emperor Maximilian Hercules. As they refuted, they were slaughtered.

¹⁸ *Instructions by Francisco Gonçalves, Cochín, 4 May 1572*, in Joseph WICKI, (ed.), "Documenta Indica", Roma, 1964, vol. VIII, 548.

On the same day, around five hundred persons joined this confraternity. Around 1552 it counted circa two thousand members and was therefore one of the most numerous confraternities in the Orient.¹⁹ Furthermore, this confraternity played an important role in conversion. For instance, in 1560 circa two hundred people were baptised on the feast day of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins.²⁰ Moreover, Roman headquarters were very pleased with this confraternity. Just as the local Jesuits, Roman headquarters regarded it as quite helpful in the apostolic work.²¹ Indeed, by December of the same year the Curia Generalizia was negotiating with the Papacy the attribution of indulgences to it. The next year, a female confraternity was consecrated to the same cult at the College of S. Paulo Velho. Its institution was made possible thanks to the support of a rich and virtuous woman who contributed with almost her possessions thereto. Following the Goan example, by 1575 there were confraternities of honoured lay people dedicated to the Eleven Thousand Virgins in all Jesuit churches in the Orient. In 1579 the Provincial of Brazil, José Anchieta, raised the first such confraternity in São Paulo at the demand of General Everard Mercurian.²²

Unsurprisingly, the arrival of these sacred heads to the missionary stations was surrounded by imposing ceremonial. For example, in 1548 the head of St. Gerasima was brought to the cathedral of Goa on 14th October and taken in solemn procession to the College of Saint Paul on the afternoon of the same day. In 1584 the scholars of the College of Bahia organised a particularly imposing procession and theatre play evoking the dream of St. Ursula on the arrival of three heads belonging to the Eleven Thousand Virgins. Namely, a gigantic nave carrying St. Ursula and her companions was followed by the angel exhorting them to accept their fate heroically. In Goa relics of this Virginal Army were practically always exposed by day – and sometimes at night – and they were the object of special ritual on the occasion of their feast day.²³ In 1559, the 21st October, which had been the official feast day of St. Ursula and of the Eleven

¹⁹ Luis Fróis S. J. to his companions in Coimbra, Goa, 1 December 1552, in Joseph WICKI (ed.), “Documenta Indica”, Roma, 1954, vol. II, 461.

²⁰ Luis Fróis to Gaspar Tavares, Goa, 7 December 1560, in Joseph WICKI (ed.), “Documenta Indica”, Roma, 1956, vol. IV, 759.

²¹ D. Filipe II, King of Portugal, to Dom Jerónimo de Azevedo, Viceroy of India, Lisbon, 6 March 1616, in Raymundo António de Bulhão Pato and Artur da Silva Rego, *Documentos remetidos da Índia ou livro das Monções, Monumentos inéditos para a História das Conquistas dos Portugueses em África, Ásia, e América*, Lisboa, 1880, vol. III, 444-445.

²² Jaime ALEMPARTE, *La leyenda de las Once Mil Virgenes...* ed. cit, 178-179.

²³ Hermann CROMBACH, *Vita et martyrium S. Vrsule et sociarum vndecim millium virginum...*, ed. cit., 715-716.

Thousand Virgins since the 9th century, became the official starting date of the school year at São Paulo.²⁴ In time, this practice became the norm for all educational institutions of the Society of Jesus in the Orient whereas it marked the end of the academic year in Brazil. In 1589 Claudio Acquaviva determined that the general baptisms were to be transferred from the Day of Jesus (1st January) to the feast day of St. Ursula and to the feast day of the Conversion (31st December).²⁵ Therefore, jubilees were given and disputations also took place on this feast day. This special religious festivity, which was attended by both common people and the local ecclesiastic and political authorities, was one of the highlights of the annual agenda of religious celebrations. Jesuits in the various Indian towns and the lay members of the confraternities of these Holy Virgins competed with each other in order to celebrate the feast in the greatest splendour, spending considerable sums of money. They excelled in the decoration of the streets and of their churches, with a profusion of branches, columns written with enigmas in Greek and Latin, banners, richly coloured rugs and cloth from China and Flanders (Gobelin tapestry). Moreover, *theatrum sacrum* narrating their story sang the mass in the local language and there was also dancing on those very special occasions.²⁶

The cult of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins imparted a special context for female affective piety. Ursula and her maiden enjoyed the particular attention of local converted women. The latter often went to churches in order to contemplate their images, and intercession to their relics and images was particularly successful in childbirth. In particular, the feverish devotion demonstrated by the converted pregnant women for the relics and images of Ursula and her virginal escort exemplifies the appropriation of Western cult by non-Westerns, thus decisively contributing to its successful rooting outside Europe.

The interest in virgins-martyrs as models of sainthood relates to the spread of the cult of virginity that was particularly fostered by Post-Tridentine Church.²⁷ When Francis Xavier arrived in Goa, he could not fail to express his disapproval of the moral decadence of the Portuguese living in the Orient. 16th century religious and secular documents regarding the Portuguese Empire often

²⁴ Francisco Cabral and some Portuguese Jesuits to General Diego Lainez, Bassein, 1 January 1563, in Joseph WICKI (ed.), "Documenta Indica", Roma, 1958, vol. V, 628.

²⁵ Joseph WICKI (ed.), *Auszüge aus den Briefen der Jesuitengeneräle an die Obern in Indien (1549-1613)*, in "Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu" (22), 1953, 140.

²⁶ Cristina OSSWALD, *From "Modum Nostrum" to "Modum Goanum", Jesuit Art in Goa between 1542 and 1655*, PhD, Florence, European University Institute, June 2003, 283.

²⁷ Simon DITCHEFIELD, *An early Christian School of Sanctity in Tridentine Rome*, in "Storia d'Italia, Annali" 16, Torino, 2000, 189.

talked about concerns with the frequent clandestine or unofficial liaisons between Europeans and native women. Accordingly, I would like to assume that the virtuous life of Ursula could be linked to the constant exhortation made by authorities that the priests keep celibacy and the married people remain faithful to their spouses.

Missionary reports and iconography reasserted the special capacity of Ursula and her companions to deliver miraculous cures. According to witnesses, in 1548 the ship transporting the head of Gerasima, from Lisbon to Goa, ran ashore off the Coast of Mozambique and, as a consequence, the helm came off. The crew managed to set the ship back on the move only after Antonio Gomes, who was in charge of this relic, exhorted them to ask for the intercession of this head.²⁸ Missionaries and soldiers testified to the miraculous salvations of many naves during storms due to the heads of these virgins on board. Therefore, Ursula and her maiden were selected as the patrons of sailors and fishermen, as well as of soldiers sent overseas in order to fight the infidels. Their powers can be explained not only due to her sea travels, but also to the careful preparation she and her maiden must have made before embarking in London. Indeed, in some representations St. Ursula herself is steering the boat. Moreover, Ursula's escort included virgins and other persons from virtually everywhere in the known world (United Kingdom, Italy, Bohemia, Istanbul, Jerusalem), which conferred it a universal character that matched the composition of the contemporary Catholic missions.²⁹

The interest in St. Ursula and her companions needs to be set against the rediscovery of early Christian female martyrs characterising early Modern Europe as the first catacombs of early Christianity were dug from 1578.³⁰ Moreover, the books of martyrdom read during mealtimes and the cycles depicted at the Jesuit noviciates and colleges fostered collective martyrdom, but also emphasised the supernatural triumph of the martyr rather than his or her physical suffering because their main aim was to encourage the future missionaries to endure pain and probably death. This idea was further strengthened as

²⁸ *João de Albuquerque, Bishop of Goa, to King D. João III, Goa 5 November 1548*, in Joseph WICKI (ed.), *Documenta Indica*, vol. I, 301-303, and Francisco de SOUSA, SJ, *Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Christo pelos Padres da Companhia de Jesus da Provincia de Goa*, Porto, 1978, 66.

²⁹ For instance, nearly half of the Jesuits in the missionary stations in the Orient at the end of the sixteenth century were not Portuguese. (Dauril ALDEN, *Some considerations concerning Jesuit enterprises in Asia*, in Nuno da Silva GONÇALVES, (ed.), "A Companhia de Jesus e a Missionaço no Oriente", Lisboa, 2000, 54)

³⁰ Simon DITCHFIELD, *An early Christian School of Sanctity...*, ed. cit., 185.

of 1570s with the diffusion of an iconography representing the early Christian martyrs and the recent martyrdoms of Jesuit missionaries together. Similarly to St. Ursula, who had been warned by an angel that she and her escorts would go on pilgrimage to Rome and would then be tortured near Cologne, the candidates to apostolate were thus reminded that the most zealous 'workers' among them would be rewarded with the Crown of Martyrdom. The most important passages of Saint Ursula's hagiography that were obviously widely diffused by iconography focused on her missionary activity (Ursula in the presence of the King Conanus), her maritime travels (she is often represented on the ship) and her martyrdom, corresponded perfectly to the life trajectory of the ideal missionary overseas.³¹

³¹ The 1675 Martyrology of the Society of Jesus by Mathias Tanner listed 304 missionaries - martyrs. (Mathias TANNER, *Societas Jesu usque ad sanguinis et vitae profusionem militans, in Europa, Africa, Asia, et America, contra gentiles, mahometanos, judaeos, haereticos, impios, pro Deo, fide, Ecclesia, pietate, sive Vita, et mors eorum, qui ex Societate Jesu in causa fidei*, Praga, 1675).