

28. RAIMONDO DE SANGRO, PRINCE OF SANSEVERO

As you walk amongst the alleyways of the historical centre of Naples, a visit to the Chapel of Sansevero is a must. It is only a few steps away from the square of San Domenico Maggiore, in the area once inhabited, in Roman times, by a colony of **merchants from Alexandria in Egypt**. In this place mystery and legend blend and transport the visitor into the fantastic world of **Prince Raimondo de Sangro**.

He became a prince at the age of seventeen, after inheriting the title directly from his grandfather Paolo, because his father had taken the priest's habit and renounced his title. Raimondo had a **superb mind** for his times: a man of letters and a scientist of insatiable curiosity, he became a member of the brotherhood of the Rosacroce, which initiated him to ancient **alchemic rites**. The Prince thus filled the basement of his nobleman's palace with ovens, test tubes and alembics. At night, it was not uncommon to see strange coloured fumes or smell particular odours emanating from the building. This gave rise to the Neapolitans nicknaming him the "wizard".

In 1744, on the Prince's own wishes, the Chapel was restored and embellished with various works of art. Today, it is best known for three of the statues which adorn it, the physical execution of which still remains a mystery. Two of them, including the very famous "**Veiled Christ**", the work of the sculptor **Sammartino**, seem to be covered by veils of transparent marble, which is, however, homogenous with the marble of the forms beneath, while the third is covered by a marble net apparently added afterwards yet also perfectly homogenous with the statue. One of the hypotheses is that this is the result of a procedure invented by the Prince for "**marblising**" cloth. Use of such a procedure, though, has still not been proven and even today there do not seem to be convincing explanations.

Among the Prince's many inventions, the most noteworthy are an "**eternal light**" (he is said to have made this from the ground-up bones of a skull which burned for hours without being consumed) and the famous "**anatomical machines**". These are two skeletons, one male and one female, wrapped in their **mummified** venous and arterial systems. The system of veins, arteries and capillaries appears petrified or rather "metallised", and even today one wonders how it was possible to achieve such a result. According to one of the most reliable theories, the two bodies underwent an experiment conducted by the Prince himself, with the help of **Giuseppe Salerno**, the celebrated anatomist of the age. A major doubt immediately springs to mind: were the human guinea pigs **dead or alive** at the time of the experiment? An anonymous old text confirms that the machines were "created" by the Prince and by Salerno through a process of metallisation, obtained by introducing a liquid for this purpose into an artery of the corpse. However, all the scholars who have analysed these exhibits have stressed that, to allow the substances to metallise the venous and arterial system, it would be necessary for the blood to remain in circulation. If such were the case, the bodies would still have been alive at the time of the injection. Regarding this question, confirmation may be found in the body of the woman, who has one arm raised, as if defending herself, and an expression of pure **terror** on her face. The woman was **pregnant**, and in the central part of her body one can also see all the veins of the foetus and those of the umbilical cord. The blood vessels of the tongue can also be recognised in the mouth. The man, on the other hand, is minus an oesophagus and his heart is larger than normal (perhaps because of the alchemic procedure). The type of substance used is not known, but it is presumed that it had a mercury base, that it was injected into the aorta and that on entering into active circulation it fixed all the system before the heart stopped.

With his death, in 1771, the Prince took numerous secrets of his art with him to the grave. The "unusual" activity and passion for alchemy of Don Raimondo contributed in no small degree towards fuelling a series of **legends** about him. Thus, he became a leading figure in the "magic" of popular Neapolitan culture.

It has, in any case, been historically confirmed that he was a mason: in 1744 he joined the "Freemasons" and in a few years climbed up the hierarchy of the secret association, reaching the rank of **Grand Master** of all the Neapolitan lodges. That period saw the beginning of the invective against the Church, against the Jesuits in particular, and against the Masons. Convinced that the only way to defend the lodges was to put them under protection from above, the Prince strengthened his relations

with the king, **Charles III of Bourbon**, whose counsellor he was, attempting to obtain his consent to membership (as had already occurred in Prussia with Frederick II), but in 1751 Pope **Benedict XIV** excommunicated all those belonging to “Brotherhoods” and ordered the dissolution of the lodges. Though reluctantly, Charles III eliminated the Neapolitan lodges with an edict and banned the Masons from the Kingdom. Still convinced that it was the only way to save his brothers from more serious consequences, Raimondo de Sangro abjured his oath and provided the king with a list of members. These were, however, merely reproached and not punished.

Other **abstruse legends** about him recount that he had seven cardinals killed and had their bones and skins made into the same number of chairs; also, that he had killed a woman who had denied herself to him, and a dwarf who had defended her, “metallising” their bodies; and that he was able to make blood liquefy, as happened with San Gennaro’s blood.

He was also a lover of **music and song** and would go about the countryside in search of youths with the right voices, buy them from their parents, have them castrated by his doctor, then close them in the Conservatory of Naples where they were “enlisted” to the singing profession.

In the 1800s rumour spread that the **headless ghost of Raimondo** wandered about the old centre of Naples unable to find peace, and that, when there was a full moon, the **pawing hooves of his carriage horses** could be heard in the streets skirting the Chapel.