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Gift-Economy and the Jesuit Management of Relics in the Asian Mission

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At his death, Francis Xavier held a fragment of Loyola's handwriting and a relic. Beyond this episode, it is well-known that books, devotional objects, merchandise, and prints criss-crossed between Asia and Europe, in both directions, and despite an imperfect mailing system. Indeed, in the long seventeenth century the Jesuits became the main producers and distributors of relics, as well as authenticators of their legitimacy. However, there is still no comprehensive treatment of Jesuit relics against the background of early modern diplomacy and the global traffic of goods. This paper focuses on the classic, Maussian account of reciprocity in relationship with generosity and the Jesuit disciplines of the self, asking new questions about the status of these commodities. It makes an argument that in our over-reliance on the 'biography of things', invoked both by Subrahmanyam and Appadurai, we may have underestimated the relic's capacity to recapitulate theology and anthropology as discursive forms of patronage. The paper, seeking to locate the relics as motion, instead of in motion, pays special attention to the Jesuit mission to Asia, which demonstrates a dialogue with the Reformation's critique of the fragmentation of the holy body, its complex management, and the (dis)connected agency of empires.

Short Biography

Stefano Gulizia is a senior lecturer at Ca' Foscari University of Milan. He serves as the president of Scientiae and is the editor in chief of the Scientiae Studies book series. His last essays include "Cartesianism between Northern Europe, Germany, and the Medici Court" (Brepols 2023), "Assembling the Scribal Self," in Beyond the Learned Academy (Oxford 2024) and "Disputing the Animation of the Heavens in Rome around 1616" (Centaurus 2024, with PD Omodeo).

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