

Article

Treasure Hunt—Roman Inquisition and Magical Practices *Ad Inveniendos Thesaurus* in Southern Tuscany

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Abstract: Resorting to the supernatural to find something lost is a practice that can be observed over a very large range of times and places. With the affirmation of Christianity, these kinds of habits and beliefs were considered superstitious by the Church. During the early modern era, the institution appointed to control the integrity of the faithful in the Italian peninsula was the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition, which had a significant number of local tribunals spread over the territory. This essay aims to study the diffusion of the practice of finding treasures by using magical items and rituals in the area under the jurisdiction of the Sienese tribunal of the Holy Office (approximately the entire southern Tuscany), whose trial sources are preserved in the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Vatican City). The research, based on around seventy individual cases, shows an interesting belief from a historical–anthropological point of view, namely: although in most cases people were looking for everyday objects that they had lost, sometimes, they used the same rituals to search for ancient treasures that they heard were buried or hidden in a particular place (church, field, or cellar), with the presence of guardians like spirits or demons, that had to be driven away with a prayer or an exorcism before taking possession of the treasure.

Keywords: treasure hunting; Inquisition; Holy Office; heresy; sorcery; magic; divination; devil; Early Modern History

1. In Search of Lost Riches

In past centuries, the use of magic to find objects of various kinds was very widespread. When something valuable happened to be lost because of inattention or theft, resorting to the help of supernatural entities that were believed to be aware of the exact place where the good was hidden, was not uncommon.

The same mechanism could also be used to look for something important that was hidden underground—many legends floated around about the existence of riches scattered in the countryside and in the cities, fortunes buried to be preserved from theft and raids, or fantastic treasures of an ambiguous or unknown form. Books circulated on this topic, like the manuscript entitled *Note about the Hidden Treasures in Several Italian Cities* (*Nota de thesori nascosti in diverse città d'Italia*), that appeared in a Sienese trial of 1612, within which were described, city by city, all of the treasures that were in the Italian peninsula, including one consisting of two precious volumes, “one consecrated, the other of experience” (“uno consecrato, et l’altro di esperienza”), which was found behind a stone inside the house of Cecco d’Ascoli,

a famous intellectual who lived between the 13th and 14th centuries, and—not surprisingly—was a well-known astrologist (condemned to the stake in 1327)¹.

To find these hidden treasures, it was usual to resort to spells that, in the trial sources, were called “ad inveniendos thesauros”, or, more briefly, “ad thesauros”. It is a phenomenon that had a wide geographical spread, especially in the early modern age, as can be seen, for example, from the fact that it appears in the still useful *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, edited by Golden (2006), and in areas far away from each other, such as in Peru and the entire Spanish America, in Aragon, in Hungary and Southeastern Europe, in Russia, and in several Italian cities like Modena and Siena²; other studies have shown the presence of this phenomenon in various countries of Northern Europe, like England³ and Sweden⁴.

Many historians, during their research, have bumped into sources that mention these practices, but the most complete and detailed study on the subject turns out to be the one of Johannes Dillinger, entitled *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America. A History*. In this book, the author analysed several aspects of the “magical” treasure hunts in the long period of time between the Middle Ages and the Contemporary world, observing how most cases took place in the early modern period, decreasing significantly during the 18th century; at the same time, Dillinger focused his attention on the development of the jurisprudence on the subject (which forbade the use of magic in research, but did not identify it exactly as witchcraft), on the constant belief that the treasures were kept by supernatural entities who played the role of guardians (who had to be driven away through the use of exorcisms), on the invocation of demons and saints to know the exact place to dig, which could also be found with the use of specific objects⁵. I will consider some of these topics later in this paper.

In the Italian peninsula, these practices were widespread; suffice it to say that “in many parts of Central Europe, the common people talked about foreigners speaking a Romance language who had come to search for hidden treasures or gold and silver mines”, and these mysterious hunters were often the Venetians, who, in the folk legends were “skilled magicians” with the ability to “find gold and treasure where the locals could not”⁶. There are many examples, in the secondary literature, of the numerous treasure hunts that happened around the Italian cities during the early modern age. For instance, the priest Guglielmo Campana of Modena, in 1513–1514, was called to Bologna to help the aristocrat Bernardino Marescotti to look for a treasure in his possession⁷; in the area of Naples Domenico De Cotiis, Ettore Cangiano and other people participated in various treasure hunts in the 1680s of the 16th century⁸; in Sicily, in the town of Nicolosi at the bottom of the volcano of Mount Etna, after an eruption and an earthquake in 1633, it seemed that many people started searching for treasures in the rubble, drawing the attention of the Spanish Inquisition⁹. In all of these cases, there was a use of magic that started a scandal and attracted the suspicion of the Catholic authorities, which resorted to the instrument of the ecclesiastical courts in order to punish those who, in their eyes, were guilty of crimes against the faith.

¹ Vatican City, *Archivum Congregationis pro Doctrina Fidei* (from now on ACDF), *Archivum Inquisitionis Senensis* (from now on *Siena*), *Processi*, vol. 25, fo. 201r–v.

² (Golden 2006, *ad vocem*).

³ Cf. (Macfarlane 1999, *passim*; Thomas 1991, particularly, pp. 279–82).

⁴ (Lindow 1982).

⁵ (Dillinger 2012).

⁶ (Dillinger 2012, pp. 79–84). Dillinger linked the folk beliefs on the Venetians with the groups of traders who travelled around the Middle Europe in search of raw materials for the glass making; actually, for a foreign observer, these people were really able to turn worthless stuffs found in the ground into “treasures”, namely the famous and valuable glassware typical of the Venetian production.

⁷ (Duni 1999, pp. 244–8).

⁸ (Sallmann 1986, particularly pp. 17–20, 164–70).

⁹ (Alessi 1834, pp. 106–7): “alli 21 di febraro dell’anno 1633 infieri il fuoco dell’Etna e pel subitaneo terremoto crollò [. . .] Nicolosi [. . .] mentre persone malefiche cavavano ascosti tesori, adoprando inique pratiche superstiziose. Né solamente ciò credette la plebe, ma si fè severa inquisizione di coloro che intervennero all’abominevole ragunanza, e castigo dalla Corte chiesiastica ne riportarono”.

Actually, most of the sources on the *ad thesauros* spells in Italy consisted of trials of the Inquisition, the institution specially appointed by the Apostolic See to control the religious dissent. In the states of the North and the Centre of the peninsula, were a number of local courts, which were attached directly to the Congregation of the Holy Office, a department created by Paolo III Farnese in 1542, while in the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, the inquisitors were nominated by the kings of Spain, and in the wide Kingdom of Naples, a mixed system operated that was structured around the diocesan ordinaries with territorial jurisdiction, who, if necessary, cooperated with the friars sent by Rome¹⁰.

Unfortunately, despite some works that face the topic through some cases studies¹¹, extensive and detailed research is not yet available for a large number of documents that examine, in depth, the relationship between the Holy Office and these spells. What was the position of the Roman Church on the matter? How did the inquisitors judge these cases? What was the perspective of those who were under investigation? The ambition of this paper is to try to give answers to these questions—without any claim of completeness—and to contribute to the study of *ad thesauros* spells in the Catholic area.

The interest of the Roman Church towards the repression of beliefs defined as “superstitious” emerged in an increasingly clear manner during the 16th century, and among those, there was the idea that rural areas and cities were full of hidden treasures waiting to be found by those who had the ability to find them through divinatory techniques¹². It was first shown by the *Libellus* that Paolo Giustiniani and Pietro Querini were sent to Leo X in 1513, and that the two Camaldolese Hermits warned the Pope of the danger posed by these customs, and secondly, by the bull *Coeli et terrae* of Sixtus V (1586), who forbade astrology and the divinatory practices.

It is important to clarify that the theologians set the magical treasure hunting in the context of divination, probably because they thought that magicians used their power to predict where in the future the riches would be found, and not in which place they were.

Furthermore, the ability to foretell something unknowable to the humans was linked to the invocation (explicit or implicit) of the devil, who was believed to be aware of future things¹³. This concept is well clarified in a page of one of the most widespread inquisitorial manuals, the *Sacro arsenale*, written by the Dominican friar Eliseo Masini, who was himself an inquisitor, “is forbidden for magicians and astrologists to search where the treasures are, because the magicians cannot know this, unless they spy on the devil: and the astrologists for the same purpose make use of his work”¹⁴.

Lastly, it should be noted that treasure hunting sometimes implied the use of *res sacrae*, such as surplices, stoles, hosts for the Eucharist, and holy water to bless the objects used for the rituals; this was considered a serious crime, especially as many people of the clergy were involved.

2. Magical Researches in Southern Tuscany

It has been said that in the Italian peninsula, there were many *ad thesauros* spells performed, and Tuscany is no exception. Amidst the numerous evidence of this, it is useful to report the case of Jacobo Fracesso and Giuseppe di Mariano, who “had attempted to locate hidden treasure” in Orbetello in 1640¹⁵, or the one of Cul di Paiolo, a place near Arezzo, where a “French magician” organized

¹⁰ The bibliography on the history of the Inquisition in the Italian peninsula is particularly rich, and has expanded considerably in recent decades. As it is not possible to provide a specific overview in just one footnote, we refer to the texts that are most significant for this paper (Tedeschi 1991; Bethencourt 2011; Prosperi 2009; Del Col 2009; Black 2009; Prosperi et al. 2010; Mayer 2013; Mayer 2014; Aron-Beller and Black 2018).

¹¹ Cf. (Duni 1999; Sallmann 1986).

¹² (Lavenia 2001; Lavenia 2013; Valente 2015).

¹³ The devil’s knowledge of the future is a concept already present in Augustine of Hippo (cf. Limonta 2017); on the invocation of demons (and saints) in treasure hunting, see also (Dillinger 2012, pp. 62–3).

¹⁴ “Non è lecito né da i Maghi, né da gli Astrologhi ricercare, ove siano tesori, perché non possono ciò sapere i Maghi, se non spiano dal Demonio: e gli Astrologhi a tal effetto si servono pure dell’opra di lui” (Masini 1639, p. 354).

¹⁵ The trial took place ten years after the fact in the court of Siena, and was studied recently by Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, who summarized it as follows: “Giuseppe had known of a certain magical practice, which involved the two men going out under cover of the night with a cane made of consecrated olive wood. On this cane were carved some mysterious letters, and the

an excavation to seek a treasure on the property of the Marquis Bartolomeo Montauti, in which the same Bishop of Arezzo, Niccolò Marchetti (1691–1704), commanded a priest to exorcise the dig¹⁶.

Many of these situations can be found among the trials of the court of the Holy Office based in Siena, which extended its jurisdiction to approximately all of Southern Tuscany¹⁷. The purpose of the following pages is to describe these sources (mostly unpublished), giving an analysis of the beliefs, the status of the people involved, and the attitude of the Roman inquisition in front of these circumstances. Doing this, we preferred to give priority to around seventy trials, in which the only charge was the *ad thesauros* spell, because the judicial procedure is clearer and not tainted with other crimes; but it must be said that there are dozens of trials in which the spell in question is mixed with other types of offence, given that the magicians usually practiced a lot of different charms¹⁸.

The most common use of divinatory arts was aimed at searching for objects that were lost or stolen. In Siena, it was already mentioned in the 15th century in the *Sermons* of the Franciscan friar Bernardino da Siena, who reported an event occurred in Lucca in 1417—a man had lost a large sum of money and asked an old woman to help him find it; during the night, she invoked a devil, who revealed that the money had been “lost by accident in a pigsty”, and that there was still some there (the rest was eaten by pigs)¹⁹.

Another example is given by a peasant woman named Marta, who, in 1592, admitted that finding lost objects was actually her job, “when someone lost something they came to me to let me look [into a carafe] [. . .]. [And I have done it] for necessity, because those who came paid me one *giulio* (currency of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany) or two”²⁰. Oscar Di Simplicio, leading expert in the study of witchcraft in early modern Siena, has observed that the “experiment of the carafe” was statistically the most widespread spell in the Sienese state²¹. It worked more or less in the following way: a jug had to be filled with water (better if blessed), and a virgin girl had to look onto the surface; she, being pure, could see reflected on the water the exact place where the lost object was. Frequently, there were different prayers recited during the ritual, and some people held blessed candles.

Some cases show these customs particularly well. In 1679, a man named Giuseppe Paganucci reported in Piombino a mid-aged woman, Violante Buoncompagni, because she had heard about the existence of a “hideout” in a house, and she practiced (with other people) the ritual of the carafe to find where it was; moreover, she “had two young women kneeling close to this jug and it seems to me that the priest Mariani told me that each of them had a candle burning in their hands, and in this way everyone could see the hideout inside the jug [. . .]; meanwhile, Violante muttered to herself some words, which were reputed to be prayers, and at the same time the two girls saw in the jug a frightening figure; therefore the work failed”²². This experiment could be also used to find treasures, as follows: three years later, in Pitigliano, four people reported themselves to the vicar of the Holy Office, because they tried to find lost riches after Riccardo Borghi had heard that “in some

idea was that the cane would lead the two men to the right place to dig for treasure. Although Jacobo and Guiseppe believed that they had found the right spot and had started digging, they never located the treasure” (Kallestrup 2015, p. 111).

¹⁶ At the end of the excavation, it appeared to just be a stone crucified Christ, and the foreigner magician left with angry, while the priest was put before a judge by the Inquisition, and was condemned to the galley for many years (nothing seems happened to the bishop and the marquis). See (Cristelli 2008).

¹⁷ (Di Simplicio 2010).

¹⁸ The documents of the Sienese Holy Office, which worked from the 1560s until its suppression in 1782, can be consulted since 1998 in the ACDF, where more than 200 volumes were moved from Siena at the beginning of the 20th century. See (Cifres 2000, p. 83).

¹⁹ (Montesano 2018, p. 153).

²⁰ “Quando alcuno aveva perso qualcosa correvano da me acciò facesse mirare [nella caraffa] [. . .]. [E l’ho fatto] per bisogno, perché quelli che venivano chi mi dava un giulio, chi due” (Di Simplicio 2005, p. 75).

²¹ (Di Simplicio 2005, p. 74).

²² ACDF, Siena, *Denunce 1676–1681*, fo. 759r: “faceva stare in contro a questa Caraffa due fanciulle in ginocchioni e mi parve mi dicesse il Prete Mariani che ciaschuna di esse avesse una candela accesa ne le mani, et in tal modo tutte vedessero dentro la Caraffa il Repostiglio [. . .] fra tanto Violante mormorava fra se alcune parole, ch’eran giudicate orazioni, e nel istesso tempo le due fanciulle videro dentro la Caraffa una figura spaventosa; non riuscì però l’opera”.

places were hidden large amounts of money since the war of Castro²³; one of those who did the experiment, Francesca di Andrea, said that she saw four different places in the water inside the jug where there were hidden money, silver, and gold²⁴. Sometimes, the rituals were considered more serious by the inquisitorial judge; in 1672, in fact, a ritual organized by a priest named Giovanni Turini and two other men, Antonio Marini and Fausto Tagliabossi, who let virgin boys and girls look into a glass ampoule filled by blessed water, with a burning candle aside, invoking the Holy Spirit to find out where a treasure was, led to three sentences, of which two led to abjure *de levi*, and one, for the priest—who also used surplice and stole during the ritual—to abjure *de vehementi* (after being tortured during the trial)²⁵. It should be noted that the invocation of the Holy Spirit has been interpreted by the judge as an invocation of the devil; the difference can be explained with the position of the Church, with regard to the demonology, or maybe with the explicit passage of the abovementioned Masini's *Sacro arsenale*.

Anyway, the most used object for finding treasures that were hidden underground was the “divining rod” (or mosaical rod), which was a forked branch or a couple of sticks commonly used for rhabdomancy. This practice, originally utilized to find mineral veins or water, could also be applied for treasures. The idea behind this custom was that “some kind of emanation of minerals, metals, water—or treasure—rises out of the Earth to the surface and somehow attracts the dowsing rod”²⁶. The difference between a common rod and another one that was used by magicians was that the latter had signs, crosses, or short formulas engraved on it (often blessings, extracts from prayers or magical words), reputed to increase the power of the object.

The Sienese court of the Holy Office faced a lot of cases of this kind, and through them, we can recreate all of the phases, from the making to the use of these staffs. For example, the Franciscan friar Filippo da Petroio, in 1595, confessed a “secret” handed down, for make a divining rod. On a particular day, like Sunday, at sunrise, one needed to go to an olive grove and recite on bended knee the whole John 1:1, before cutting two forked branches from a tree, and, upon them, one had to engrave the word “Adonai” (which means “God” in Jewish) and to draw a rising sun. After that, one could go where the treasure was thought to be, and see where the sticks brought them; at the same time, to increase their effect, it was recommended to recite over and over again a verse of the Psalm 51, “*ecce enim veritatem dilexisti: incerta et occulta sapientiae tuae manifestasti mihi*”²⁷. The mixing of the sacred and profane is clear, and the ritual also entailed a good knowledge of Latin, which was used only by cultured people.

The treasures could be literally anywhere, not just in the rural areas, but also inside cities, in the richly decorated Renaissance houses of the Sienese patricians. In fact, the case of the noblewoman Agnese Tinelli, who was denounced by another woman in 1678, because in front of her, she used three rods to find a hidden treasure in her own house, which was certainly not isolated²⁸.

Also, the branches of the olive tree were the principal kind of wood that could be used for making a divining rod, but they were not the only one. In 1680, for example, the canon Vieri da Grosseto used

²³ “In alcuni luoghi ci erano nascosti dalla guerra di Castro buone somme di denari” (ACDF, *Siena, Denunce 1682–1688*, fo. 160r). The war of Castro was a conflict between the Papal States and the Farnese dukes of Parma in the 1640s, which ended with the destruction of the city of Castro in 1649 by the pope Innocent X (cf. [De Maria 1898](#)).

²⁴ ACDF, *Siena, Denunce 1682–1688*, fo. 158v–159r.

²⁵ ACDF, *Siena, Processi*, vol. 48, fo. 497r–600v (sentences and abjurations at fo. 544r–550v); or this trial see also the letters in ([Di Semplicio 2009](#), pp. 377, 380–1, 385).

²⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the use of the divining rod, see (([Dillinger 2012](#), pp. 95–105 (cit. p. 99))). This method was well-known even by intellectuals and scholars of the Renaissance, namely: Georg Agricola, expert of mineralogy and author of *De re metallica* (1556), knew of the use of the rod, but did not recommend it ([Dillinger 2012](#), p. 104), and Giambattista Della Porta definitely criticized it ([Eamon 1994](#), p. 208), but the sources show that these voices remained unheard for centuries.

²⁷ ACDF, *Siena, Processi*, vol. 7, fo. 858r–899v; *Cause 1595*, fo. 150r–187v. The friar was imprisoned and tortured during the trial, and, in July 1595, was condemned to various penances (*Processi*, vol. 7, fo. 897r–898v). The recitation of that particular verse of Psalm 51 was certainly common practice, because don Guglielmo Campana said the same words in Bologna in 1513–5114 (cf. [Duni 1999](#), p. 247), as well as Gabriele Nasazzi, who did it in Pisa in 1612 (ACDF, *Siena, Processi*, vol. 25, fo. 374r).

²⁸ ACDF, *Siena, Denunce 1676–1681*, fo. 394r–v.

a reed leant against his chest to search a treasure that, according to a legend, was buried in a vineyard near Roccastrada²⁹. In 1729, instead, Francesco Martinelli used an elm branch, because he had heard that “they had the virtue of finding treasures or hidden things, or veins of water, or metals”, but, despite the attempt, nothing was found³⁰.

The experiment of the divining rod was really widespread, but the different attempts that people made in the early modern age to find hidden treasure show a great variety of items used in disparate rituals. For instance, in 1676, a friar used a blessed candle and the bones of the dead, in addition to the rod³¹; in 1723, the patrician Francesco Maria Bartoli abjured *de vehementi*, because he had watered five broad beans with blessed water, planted in a death’s head in order to do a ritual with the pods³². The use of bones is not surprising, because it was a common belief that the dead, as with the devils, were aware of many of the things of the world of the living; for the same reason, they could also help to find treasure, showing themselves in dreams or in a supernatural vision; in 1682, in fact, a woman said that in the cathedral of Pitigliano, one of her ancestors appeared to tell her the location of a treasure in the church, and the way to recover it³³.

One of the most complex objects was the “geomantic ball” (“palla geomantica”), which was a specific type of magnet hanging by a thread, the use of which was similar to the rod—when the magnet tilted in one direction, its angle showed where the treasure was³⁴. An important historical source clearly shows the process of making this particular ball—in a 1722 trial, Niccolò Tondi handed the Sienese inquisitor a sheet of paper entitled *Geomantic ball. True and real way to make the geomantic ball which the Eastern Indians use to find gold and silver mines and other metals, it also indicates where are hideouts and treasures (Palla Geomantica. Vero, e real modo di fabbricare la palla geomantica con la quale gli Indiani Orientali se ne servono per trovare le miniere dell’Oro, e del Argento, e altri metalli, dà segno ancora dove sono ripostigli o Tesori)*. The procedure was particularly articulate, as follows: a hazelnut had to be pierced with an iron awl and had to be empty and successively filled—at specific moments during the week—with tin, copper, lead, silver, iron filings, quicksilver, and a piece of magnet; after that, a thread had to be inserted into the hole of the hazelnut, and the whole artefact had to be covered with wax³⁵. Obviously, the geomantic ball could be made in different ways, according to the different contexts.

In southern Tuscany, the geomantic ball was used particularly in some cases during the 18th century. In the already mentioned 1722 trial, for example, it was written that, according to a legend, the founder of a monastery in Abbadia San Salvatore along with some monks had hidden important books and silver inside the building so as to save them during the wars, and in 1722, some Fathers endeavored to find them. Firstly, a French hermit tried the experiment of using the divining rod, and secondly—because the first attempt had not worked—the Florentine, Father Galgano Bartolini, used the geomantic ball, which seemed to indicate a place in an underground room; the abbot of the monastery, Orazio Angelini, exorcised the place “having a doubt that there could be Guards or Illusions” (“dubitando che vi potessero essere Guardie o Illusioni”), and after an excavation nothing was found³⁶.

The statement of Angelini takes into account another important aspect of the treasure hunting—it was a common opinion that the hidden riches were guarded by supernatural entities, which, in the context of Christian religiosity, were usually devils. It is hard to find terms like “spirit” or “ghost”

²⁹ *Ibidem*, fo. 859r–860r.

³⁰ “Avevo sentito dire che avessero la virtù di far trovare tesori, o cose nascoste, o vene d’acqua, o di metalli di qualsivoglia sorte” [ACDF, Siena, Cause 1729 (A), fo. 195r–196v].

³¹ ACDF, Siena, Denunce 1676–1681, fo. 97r–98v.

³² ACDF, Siena, Cause 1723 (A), fo. 423r–426r.

³³ ACDF, Siena, Denunce 1682–1688, fo. 225r–228r.

³⁴ Cf. (Amoretti 1808, pp. 25–8).

³⁵ ACDF, Siena, Cause 1722, fo. 172r–v.

³⁶ ACDF, Siena, Cause 1722, fo. 143r–187v (cit. fo. 158v). The trial ended with the severe admonitions of those who had taken part in the spell experiments.

as guardians of treasure in the Italian sources, and, in any case, the meaning almost always leads to “demon”; just in some cases, is possible to find the “soul” (of a dead man). For Johannes Dillinger, there are some reasons behind this belief, as follows: “Firstly, the subterranean realm was often seen as the realm of demons. [. . .] Secondly, in the Christian ethics of Old Europe, money and wealth were at best ambivalent. Even money acquired by perfectly legal and moral means could be a diabolic temptation. [. . .] Thirdly, the power of the demons over treasure troves was simply another element of their huge magical potency”³⁷. The role of these beings was to keep the treasure hidden and to interpose themselves between the gold and the hunters, who instead had the task of drive them out, according to the Christian rite of the exorcism. In 1729, for instance, the patrician Pietro Paolo Martini abjured *de levi* for instigating a priest to do exorcisms (with surplice, stole, holy water, blessed candles, and a blessed spike) many times in many places, in order to drive away the guardians and take out the treasures³⁸. There were even books with instructions on what to do in these circumstances, which circulated among the people, as is shown in another case of the 1720s, in which the *libellus* was still attached to the file in two copies, and is entitled *Modus exorcizandi Thesaurum a spiritu maligno conseroatum et obsessum*³⁹.

The methods of transmission of these kind of beliefs is another important subject. Although there was certainly an oral diffusion among the folk about the way to find lost objects or hidden treasures, it is also true that the “secrets” to accurately practice these rituals were often written on brief sheets of paper or longer manuscripts that were widespread. These texts were obviously forbidden by the Church, a factor that increased their fascination for those who were not only trying to use the mysterious power of magic, but could also handle a book that was itself prohibited by the Ecclesiastical authorities.

In 1595, the already mentioned Fra’ Filippo da Petroio learned his magical secrets from a book that he had found in a hole⁴⁰; in 1610, another Franciscan friar, Marco da San Casciano, brought to the Sienese inquisitor a manuscript that was hard to read, “full of unknown characters and alphabetical letters, and numbers”, which was found among the ones belonging to the brother Bernardino da Ventimiglia⁴¹; in 1618, Sisto Sisti da Piancastagnaio abjured *de vehementi*, because he had tried a lot of different experiments to find treasures that he had read about in a book⁴²; in 1684, Domenico di Antonio da Castelfranco di Valdarno stole a book from a Jew and went to Asciano to find a treasure, following the indications that he had read⁴³; and in 1723, the “secrets” appeared in some sheets of paper used by Giovanni Maria Sardini⁴⁴. These examples could continue.

Sometimes, a real business was created around treasure hunting, because the knowledge of the methods to have riches out of nothing was considered valuable by those who believed in its authenticity. For instance, in 1637, Domenico di Francesco da Montevitozzo, a farmer that could not read, paid three *scudi* to a Jew to buy a book with the meaningful title of *Lucidario di Abano*⁴⁵, to search for buried treasures near his small town⁴⁶, and in 1721, Giuseppe Antonio Castellucci, in a tavern in Ronciglione, paid half a *grosso* to a hermit who dictated to him a *True secret to take out treasures guarded by souls or demons (Reale segreto per cavare tesori guardati da anime o demoni)*⁴⁷. Of course, this trade left place for speculation or frauds. It is clearly shown by the statements of the Sienese Ranuccio Venturi during the 1589 trial against the shoemaker Giulio di Francesco da Carrara, that Ranuccio told the inquisitor that,

³⁷ (Dillinger 2012, p. 62).

³⁸ ACDF, Siena, Cause 1729 (A), fo. 393r–411v.

³⁹ ACDF, Siena, Cause 1722–1723, fo. 92r–102v, 140r–148v.

⁴⁰ ACDF, Siena, Processi, vol. 7, fo. 858r–899v; Cause 1595, fo. 150r–187v.

⁴¹ ADCE, Siena, Processi, vol. 13, fo. 761r.

⁴² ACDF, Siena, Processi, vol. 27, fo. 766r–767v.

⁴³ ACDF, Siena, Denunce 1682–1688, fo. 386r–v.

⁴⁴ ACDF, Siena, Cause 1723 (A), fo. 60r–70r. Sardini, who was *sponte comparens*, at the end of the trial abjured *de levi*.

⁴⁵ Pietro d’Abano was an Italian philosopher and astrologist lived between the 13th and 14th centuries. The diffusion of the *Lucidario* in treasure hunting is also present in the 1579–1580 case of the Venetian patrician Cesare Morosini studied by Ruth Martin (Martin 1989, pp. 88–90).

⁴⁶ ACDF, Siena, Processi, vol. 31, fo. 332r–347r.

⁴⁷ ACDF, Siena, Cause 1721, fo. 219r–220r.

when he was 14 or 15, he had been duped by Giulio and a person named Francesco da Castel del Piano (also known as “chiavaro”, probably because his job was to make keys), who had persuaded him to pay for the travel expenses of all three to go to a place near Carrara in order to find a legendary treasure, but, once they got to the point where they should have found so much wealth left there “by a queen of distant countries” (“da una Regina di lontan paesi”), they found nothing⁴⁸.

In some cases, actual excavation campaigns were organized with a large number of participants. These were huge “public” events—out in the open—in which different people worked together for the same purpose. There was the owner of the land where the pit was being dug (sometimes a patrician), a priest who exorcized the place, and the diggers who carried out the excavation. The latter were usually farmers or workers paid by the owners, or even people who lived in the neighborhood, and, attracted by the unusual, fascinating, and, above all, promising event, had made a deal with the others involved. About the role played by each treasure hunter acting in large or small groups, Dillinger suggested that usually there was an organizer, a magician (often a priest), and several supporters in most groups of treasure hunters⁴⁹. In Southern Tuscany, this was actually true in public excavations, where the role of singles participants was clear, but, in several cases, the hunters were the people who searched for treasures individually. It could also happen that the priest was a magician as well as organizer, or that some lay people gathered to practice the spell in small groups, in which the roles were mixed up.

The presence of members of the clergy, who so frequently appear in our trials, reassured the participants of the lawfulness of what was happening, and—it is good to specify this—that the excavation itself was certainly not forbidden by the ecclesiastical authorities, but the use of those practices that the Catholic Church called “superstitious”, as well as the exorcism of the pit (completed, besides, with liturgical vestments) constituted a crime for the Inquisition, which is why there are many cases of excavations witnessed by the inquisitorial documents. In addition to the already mentioned dig of Piancastagnaio in 1618, of which Sisto Sisti said “was hoed publicly and nothing was found” (“fu zappato pubblicamente e nulla s’è trovato”)⁵⁰, and the one of Cul di Paiolo near Arezzo straddling the 17th and 18th century, where a stone crucified Christ was found⁵¹, or even the one of Abbazia San Salvatore in 1722⁵², the demolition of a wall in the house of Pietro Gherardini in Pisa in 1612 can be mentioned, behind which a group of people thought to find a treasure⁵³, or the “pit very deep, and large” (“una fossa, assai profonda, e grande”) dug by some farmers near Siena during 1679, on the property of Maddalena Boninsegni, which amazed the priest who had been intrigued by news that he had heard around⁵⁴.

3. Concluding Remarks

After this quick overview of the trial sources, in which we tried to focus on the main topics of the phenomenon of treasure hunting in Southern Tuscany, with particular attention to the sources of the Sienese Holy Office, it is appropriate to summarize the main topics of my paper.

The use of magic to find lost objects was a widespread custom in the past centuries, and Tuscany was no exception; the sources, in fact, prove its existence in the long term, from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, with a wide range of participants, both men and women⁵⁵, of aristocratic and

⁴⁸ ACDF, *Siena, Processi*, vol. 9, fo. 182v–184r. This is also a rare case, in which the guardians of the treasure (according to the legend reported by Julius and Francis) were not demons, but the souls of two Moors who had been killed by the queen in order to keep the treasure safe, as long as the queen’s heirs had not come to claim what was rightfully theirs.

⁴⁹ (Dillinger 2012, p. 147).

⁵⁰ *Supra*, n. 41.

⁵¹ Cf. *supra*, n. 15.

⁵² *Supra*, n. 35.

⁵³ ACDF, *Siena, Processi*, vol. 25, fo. 374r.

⁵⁴ ACDF, *Siena, Denunce 1676–1681*, fo. 753r–754v.

⁵⁵ The gender data is that women appear mostly in the magical searches of lost (or stolen) common-use objects, whereas men are usually frequent in treasure hunts.

popular origins, both cultured and uncultured, who put into practice many attempts to find lost objects or hidden treasures. It is remarkable the presence of members of the low clergy, who contributed to the hunts with rites derived from the Catholicism, and carried out the important task of exorcising the presumed place of the treasure by the creatures that infested it as “guardians”.

There were efforts to dissuade or suppress the treasure hunts. Some intellectuals, such as Georg Agricola and Giambattista Della Porta, pointed at the ineffectiveness of means like the divining rod, while the ecclesiastical authorities, represented by the tribunals of the Holy Office, concentrated themselves on the repression of the practices and beliefs that did not conform to Catholicism, including the use of objects, formulas, and rituals related to the liturgy for profane purposes, the divinatory magic used to find the exact place in which to dig (often associated with the invocation of the devil), or the belief in supernatural entities guarding earthly riches.

All of these cases raise the following questions: “What was the actual use of treasure hunting?”, and “Where they ever found?” It is not entirely surprising that people were looking for valuables in the subsoil, especially in an area of ancient settlements like the Italian peninsula, where the possibility of finding artefacts from the past eras was not entirely improbable, and indeed the attention towards the remnants of ancient civilizations such as the Roman one rose during the Renaissance, with the affirmation of the antiquarianism; moreover, natural disasters and the wars that had taken place over the centuries had brought about death and destruction, but they had also inspired stories about valuables that had been lost and were just waiting to be found⁵⁶. These legends caused real treasure hunts, which sometimes involved a large number of people, and gave rise to impressive excavations. This is an element of cultural history that historiography should perhaps investigate more. The great frequency of these events is even more enigmatic, considering that all of the efforts made never led to any treasure. Only in one case in the Sienese Holy Office documents, in 1721, is it stated that a mysterious golden goat with some golden crescents was found, and that it was sent to Rome, but the sources are not able to provide further details⁵⁷. Even if this discovery was true (and this seems unlikely), it would be unique, as in the other studied cases, the enormous efforts made, despite the risk of being put before a judge, were in vain.

So why did people search for treasures that could not be found? All scholars agree on the attraction exercised by the possibility of acquiring wealth immediately (Jean-Michael Sallmann compared this desire to the alchemical attempts of turning poor materials into silver and gold⁵⁸), but this explanation, which it is actually true in many cases, seems too simplistic, because, in this case, it should be common practice, especially for those who were in economic difficulty; instead, we saw rich patricians involved, as well as friars who had taken a vow of poverty. Furthermore, Matteo Duni wrote that the treasure hunts were a typical hobby of the upper and middle classes (but he added that it was not astonishing to also bump into the lower classes)⁵⁹, and Di Simplicio noted that it was a matter that involved a certain degree of education, to which not everyone could access⁶⁰. In the analyzed sources, we saw a great variety of people involved, who searched for treasures in different forms—taking into considerations two extremes, there was the cultured patrician who read forbidden books and put into practice highly sophisticated rituals, and the farmer, who had heard about the use of the divining rod and tried to become rich in a simple way. They both had the same purpose and drew from the same legends and traditions, but each one reinterpreted them on the basis of his culture and his personal experiences.

For Dillinger, the fundamental meaning of the magical treasure hunts was economic, connected with the theory of limited good, “people in traditional societies behaved as if all goods were only

⁵⁶ It is shown, in this paper, by the people who looked for treasures after the war of Castro (*supra*, n. 21), or those who searched in the rubble after the eruption of the Mount Etna and the earthquake (*supra*, n. 9).

⁵⁷ ACDF, *Siena, Cause 1721*, cc. 406r–408r.

⁵⁸ (Sallmann 1986, p. 164).

⁵⁹ (Duni 1999, pp. 247–8).

⁶⁰ (Di Simplicio 2005, p. 77).

available in fixed quantities that could never be increased. Thus, one person's gain was necessarily the loss of anybody else. [. . .] Material gain was only acceptable socially if it came from outside the society, such a treasure". In conclusion, for him, "treasure hunting was an integral part of the economic magic of pre-industrial Europe"⁶¹. It is a fascinating explanation, acceptable if we consider those cases in which the purpose of the search was merely economic, but, if we look closely at the Sienese inquisitorial sources, we note that other perspectives also come out. Not all those who were involved in the hunts wanted to be richer. The members of the clergy, for instance, usually participated in order to carry out their role as expert of the supernatural, and other people seemed to have been attracted more by the search itself than by the final prize. These different approaches show a more complex and variegated panorama that deserves to be further investigated.

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