



Zentralinstitut für Katholische Theologie  
Lehrstuhl für Historische Theologie

## ***Missionary objects and collecting (16<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> centuries)***

**“Dispersed” Workshop 4 March – 29 April 2021  
organized by Sabina Brevaglieri**

**4 March 2021, 17:00 (CET)**

**Daive Domenici**



***Handling sacrifice.  
Reception and perception of Mesoamerican knives  
in early modern Italy***

**Online participation registration is required.**

Please register per e-mail at [sabina.brevaglieri@hu-berlin.de](mailto:sabina.brevaglieri@hu-berlin.de) until 3 March 13.00 CET. The Zoom link to remote participation will be sent to registered participants in the morning of the seminar day. The presentation and following discussion will be recorded.

## Abstract

Several Mesoamerican knives arrived in the Italian peninsula over the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, mostly brought by Dominican missionaries coming from Central Mexico. Coeval textual and visual sources show that the knives belonged to two different functional categories: thin, obsidian prismatic blades (often called 'razors') and large bifacial obsidian or flint blades provided with sculptural handles, in most cases encrusted with mosaics of precious stones and shells. Given as gifts to Popes and other members of Italian political and cultural élites, the Mesoamerican knives soon entered Italian collections in places like Rome, Bologna, Venice and Naples. While several were lost during the following centuries, at least three sculptural handles are still preserved at the Museo delle Civiltà in Rome and at the British Museum in London, the latter still provided with its original flint blade.

Besides providing a description and iconographic interpretation of the objects, the article reconstructs the knives' cultural biographies drawing on a large corpus of sources including missionary gift records, private letters and collections' inventories and catalogues. The main aim of the article is to show how during their multi-secular social life the two kinds of knives, which in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century were subject to different forms of antiquarian scrutiny, elicited an array of interpretations and reflections on themes such as human sacrifice, (presumed) circumcision, human ingeniousness and idolatry. The analysis of the diverse discourses built on Mesoamerican knives sheds some light on the shifting epistemological frameworks in which indigenous American material culture was perceived in early modern Italy.

**Davide Domenici** is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Department of History and Cultures, University of Bologna. Specialized in the study of Mesoamerican and North American indigenous populations in pre-colonial and early colonial times, he directed the Río La Venta Archaeological Project (Chiapas, Mexico, 1998-2010) and the Cahokia Archaeological Project (Illinois, USA, 2011-2017). In recent years he devoted his studies to the collecting of Mesoamerican artifacts in Italy, investigating the cultural biographies of a group of objects which in early modern times were taken from their original indigenous contexts and brought to Italy, where they initiated a long collection history that often led them to Italian and European museums where they can still be admired today. As part of this project, he also investigates the artifact's materiality by means of scientific analyses performed in collaboration with various scientific institutions and research teams.