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## **FLORENTINE EPIGRAPHY**

**Aspects of Propaganda and  
Patronage Under the Medici**

**Eds. Patrick Kragelund & Marianne Pade**

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## Introduction

In connection with the publication of my *The Latin Inscriptions of Medici Florence. Piety and Propaganda, Civic Pride and the Classical Past* (Rome 2021) in the Supplementary Papers of the Danish Academy in Rome, the Academy's previous director and my diligent editor, prof., dr.phil. Marianne Pade suggested that we should organise a seminar on Florentine epigraphy to be published in the *Nordic Journal of Renaissance Studies*. We succeeded in gathering a group of scholars from the US, from the Netherlands, Finland, and Italy and without undue technical difficulties we could meet in a Zoom conference, my own lecture suitably being transmitted from the banks of the Arno, where it all started.

For Renaissance epigraphy in general, the Florentine corpus of some 220 texts presented in my book is a remarkably rich and well-preserved corpus that with notable variety and with a cluster of highly competent authors and historically crucial dedicatees develops a cornucopia of specimens, illustrating the ways Renaissance epigraphy adopted and expanded the models and parameters found in classical Roman epigraphy, in palaeography, linguistic style, metrics, historical resonance and sheer communicative impact.

In the anthology's first five chapters the focus is thematic and chronological, moving from religious donations, institutions and events, then finally turning to the *Comune* and its heroes, from Scripture and from Ancient Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Then follow chapters (VI-VII) focused on what might be termed the 'classical turn' of Florentine epigraphy. As emerges from one of its most notable monuments this classical turn manifested itself with a truly astonishing, fully fledged suddenness, as an Athena emerging from the forehead of Zeus. Suddenly 'medieval' parameters were abandoned in favour of an approach resolutely aimed at *recreating* (we are in the early *rinascimento!*) a classical style idiom. The place and circumstances for this recreation could hardly be more prominent: we are at the Medici sarcophagus in Brunelleschi's *Sagrestia Vecchia* in S. Lorenzo in 1433-35. The monument is for the father and mother of Cosimo the Elder and his brother Lorenzo.

Here, all of a sudden, we get a truly pioneering, stylistically very conscious and, in its choice of means, very spare and studiously correct attempt at writing a Roman style epitaph: dedicator in the nominative, dedicatee in the dative, filiation (abbreviated F followed by a genitive), ancient Roman

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<sup>1</sup> Kragelund 2021, ch. I-V.

time-reckoning; and much more besides.<sup>2</sup> In fact, were it not for the names, this dedication could well have stood on display in the Via Appia of old.

As I have argued, this sudden reorientation calls for an explanation. Who among the learned men around Cosimo the Elder was responsible? In an inspiring Warburg paper from 1941, Frits Saxl quotes Francesco Sasseti (of Sasseti Chapel fame) for telling his children that if they needed a suitable epitaph (we are at the end of the fifteenth century) they would have to ask “Fonzio o qualche huomo docto intendente di simili cose” (Fonzio or some man of learning who understands similar things).<sup>3</sup> Now, the said Bartolomeo Fonzio possessed a copious so-called *sylloge*, which Saxl edited. A *sylloge* is a manuscript *compilation* or *anthology* of admirable ancient inscriptions. These Fonzio had copied from other such *syllogae* and he used them as a pattern book, when a patron wanted a suitable epitaph.

This is, most likely, what would have happened, when Cosimo the Elder and his brother in 1433 wanted an epitaph for their parents, by then both dead. The Medici brothers must also have had access to someone “intendente di simili cose” – how else could they get the brilliant result? From the limited ancient epigraphic evidence known at the time, the problems in identifying the models of relevance are not insurmountable. We are doubtless dealing with some of the protagonists of the movement that in the 1430’s recreated learned awareness of epigraphy. To this group of scholars we have a brilliant introduction<sup>4</sup> by the late, much missed Doyen of Roman epigraphy, previously *Scriptor Latinus* at the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana Marco Buonocore. Marco singles out the *syllogae* (notebooks) compiled by Poggio Barcciolini and Cyriac of Ancona.

What could be learnt from Poggio and Cyriac’s notebooks were the hall marks of a dedication to the dead of ancient Rome, found in a quite staggering number in the prose Medici-inscription.

Within this framework what is perhaps the most surprising is the absence of God and all references to the beyond. Of course, the burial is in a church – but so was the sarcophagus of Folco Portinari, the father of Beatrice – his inscription (Kragelund 2021, II.1) ends with a prayer, “May his soul, because of God’s mercy, rest in peace”. Nothing like that here, so also on this theological issue is the style remarkably faithful to the ancient (or should one say ‘heathen’?) paradigm.

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<sup>2</sup> I here summarize my findings laid out in Kragelund 2021, VII.1; they, in turn, are succinctly summarised by Merisalo in her contribution to this volume, pp. 13-16

<sup>3</sup> Saxl 1941, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Buonocore 2005, 21-41.

I shall not here go into unnecessary detail, since the importance of this background is laid out in detail in Kragelund 2021, chapters VI and VII. Indeed, the importance of Poggio and Cyriac will cause no surprise, but what perhaps needs emphasising is the crucial role of the, in modern scholarship, commonly neglected epigraphic dictionary by Pseudo-Valerius Probus. This dictionary was clearly much in use in the fifteenth century. Its *lemmata* suggest that it is pre-Christian, but in modern discussions it is often confused with the likewise spurious *De notis iuris* once ascribed to Valerius Probus.<sup>5</sup> Surely, the existence of a seemingly Late Antique epigraphical dictionary is an issue that deserves further scrutiny!

What in any case matters is that this Florentine reorientation from the medieval to classical parameters of Roman epigraphy also broadened out to adopt phrases and expressions used in inscriptions quoted or invented by ancient authorities. In the triangle between event commemorated, language adopted and metrical models employed it is, in short, clear that epigraphy was conceived as a genre *per se*, a medium through which members of the Florentine city state, in Latin the *Res publica*, could eternalise the aspirations of its civic humanism. In this approach that was pioneered by the Medici inscriptions, citizens and authorities would follow suit up through the fifteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

But in the changing political landscape of the Florentine republic, it soon became clear that the genre also, and indeed easily, could adapt to new, more monarchical aspirations. And for such aspirations we may once again briefly turn to the inscriptions of the Sagrestia Vecchia, because on the side of the sarcophagus facing those entering one meets a verse inscription in four very solemn elegiac couplets framed by a classical *tabula ansata*. I am happy to see that my colleagues (Buonocore, below p. 4, Merisalo, below p. 15) agree in seeing the model for this poem in an ancient verse epitaph in elegiac distichs (CIL VI 12652) now standing next to the *Dying Gaul* in the Capitoline Museums. This was a poem that in those days was much copied.

But what matters in this context is, first, the poem's designation of the tomb as a *Mausoleum* (l. 12). This is a strong word, heavy with princely, not to say monarchical ambition. Arresting to have it here, so early in the Medici trajectory. The other arresting aspect is the use of the concept PATRIA, in the first line, in the third and in the final. One goes away with the impression that this was a public funeral – as for instance was Brunelleschi's in the Duomo (Kragelund 2021, VI.5). But this was *no such*

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<sup>5</sup> PROB. *litt. sing.* 271 ff.; on the dictionary, see Kragelund 2021, 301 n. 145-146.

<sup>6</sup> Kragelund 2021, ch. VI-VII; Hankins 2000 is a fine introduction to a much debated area.

*thing*. Still, with a deft turn of phrase, the poet has given expression to a typical Medici approach to the issue: even if not everyone else would do so, they themselves made sure to stress their intimate links with the PATRIA.

With the “Advent of the Medici Monarchy” and “The Medici Comeback” (Kragelund 2021, ch. VII-VIII) the anthology documents how such aspirations became ever more pronounced, but also how they, increasingly, caused controversies that still, centuries later, emanate from monuments of the period.

This, of course, culminates with the accession of “Cosimo de’ Medici, the Second Duke and first Grand Duke” (Kragelund 2021, ch. IX). In an almost torrential outpouring of epigraphic monuments, often accompanied by the Augustan symbol of the Capricorn heralding the advent of a new age, Cosimo set out to inscribe what was now *his* city, with inscriptions that deliberately echoed the Golden Age of Rome’s first emperor. In this endeavour, Cosimo was aided by a series of experts, among them Piero Vettori and Vincenzo Borghini (more on whom below). Monuments like the Porta Romana, the Medici Mercati, the Public Archive, the marble floor of the Duomo, the Uffizi, the Equestrian Statue of the Piazza Signoria and the new bridge across the Arno (to mention just some) still bear witness to this determined and well orchestrated epigraphical *tour de force*.

With Cosimo’s successful establishment of Tuscany as a territorial state, the glory of the Medici was its nadir soon followed by decline, an aspect illustrated in the gradually more subdued epigraphy of his successors that frequently dwell on past glories (Kragelund 2021, ch. X).

But where the Medici experienced decline, Florentine pride in its great men continued to flourish (Kragelund 2021, ch. XI-XIII) – in no field more exuberantly than in everything associated with Michelangelo, to whom a descendant dedicated a splendid Hall of fame (ch. XII). Far less straightforward was the road of Galileo to epigraphical fame, since a Vatican ban on at all honouring his achievements was for long in vigour. In 1693, the fiftieth anniversary of his death, this ban was challenged by his devoted pupil Vincenzo Viviani, who turned his entire city palazzo into a public memorial for the great scientist, with meter-long inscriptions. This was some decades later followed by a, at long last, public monument in S. Croce, a development intriguingly documented by inscriptions still in place (Kragelund 2021, ch. XIII).

On this wide-ranging material, Marco Buonocore offers a magisterial *tour d’horizon*. He points to the recent works on material from Papal and post-risorgimento Rome by Alberto Paolucci and Antonino Nastasi (to which I, due to Corona, sadly had no access) as well as to the excellent anthology by Tyler Lansford, *The Latin Inscriptions of Rome* from 2009,

with whom I share the ambition to combine high levels of scholarship with broad accessibility, also for those with little or no Latin. Due to the staggering wealth of the Roman (some 400) as opposed to the Florentine material (some 220) Lansford has wisely opted for a regional disposition and a generous use of maps, which I only found it imperative to imitate in the case of the Duomo and the area surrounding it (Kragelund 2021, fig. 2.6), a plan on which readers will find 23 notable memorials marked out.

Buonocore further highlights the copious variety of parallels between the Florentine corpus and that of antiquity, for instance in the case of the bilingual dedication of the Tiberian freedman to his beloved Claudia Homonoea (CIL VI 12652 = IGUR III 1250), in the use of one letter abbreviations such as HMHNS and SPQF and the elegiac memorial to the inundations in 1557 (Kragelund 2021, I.2), with its numerous parallels in Roman renaissance epigraphy (Lansford 2009, 394-99; 336-39).<sup>7</sup>

Buonocore rightly highlights a notable aspect in what is without doubt the single largest inscription in this material. This monumental inscription that covers the whole façade of the house of Galileo's admiring pupil Vincenzo Viviani (Kragelund 2021, XIII, 3-4 with fig. 13.1a) was clearly not meant to be read, line by line. Its sheer panoramic size is enough to convince onlookers of the excellence of its honorand, much, one imagines, as would the scale of the Ankara *Res gestae* to its onlookers in antiquity.

Buonocore finally reminds us how this material in stylistic and palaeographic terms gives a panoramic survey of the scripts employed from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. Here, we get an *iter epigraphicum* reaching from the gothic to the monumental Roman.

It is on this latter aspect that Prof. Outi Merisalo offers a detailed study. By focusing on the palaeography of the tombs in S. Lorenzo. she lays bare an intriguing contrast: While the inscriptions, in linguistic terms, are perfect imitations of the classical idiom, the monumental capital letters used by the Medici sculptors were of Carolingian inspiration. Merisalo notes classicising elements, but in a well-illustrated tour taking us further up the peninsula she outlines how the cutting-edge centres in the developments of the humanistic script were Padua, Verona and Venice. Merisalo's fascinating sample traces the gradual northern evolution of the *antiqua*, the *italica* and the restored Classical capitals, then returning south to S. Lorenzo to show how the dedications to Cosimo the Elder and his sons Piero and Giovanni (Kragelund 2021, VII.2-3) belong to a period of transition, still loyal to traditional Florentine patterns, but not without awareness of the new enthusiasm for Augustan-type geometrical capitals. The issue seems well

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<sup>7</sup> Kragelund 2021, II.6; VII.3. SPQF: IV.8; VI.5; VI.9.

worth pursuing, for instance looking closer at the scripts employed by the epigraphists of Duke Cosimo II.

Prof. Henk van Veen takes us on an intriguing tour into a sixteenth-century epigraphic laboratory and lays bare the vicissitudes of what he calls a failed project. In the 1550s, Vasari was hard at work decorating the newly completed Quartiere di Leone X with frescoes turning the halls into a series of *Fasti Medicee*, one hall for each of the ancestors, from Cosimo the Elder and Giovanni delle Bande Nere onwards. Here, as later in the Salone dei Quinquecento celebrating the reign of Cosimo II (finished late 1565), clarifying inscriptions were needed, but through Vasari's letters and drawings van Veen meticulously unravels how Vasari's project ran into troubles. Vasari had first turned to the learned Cosimo Bartoli for suggestions, but the process was not straightforward; by the end of 1557 when the painting was close on completed, Vasari still lacked the ducal all clear for the needed inscriptions. At some point the artist apparently gave up on Bartoli and contacted Jacobo Guidi, but to no avail. The top authority, the Duke's *epigrammista*,<sup>8</sup> Piero Vettori was then contacted, but again in vain. "Probably in desperation", as van Veen formulates it, Vasari then turned to his old friend, the learned Vincenzo Borghini, who not so many years later would become the chief provider for the inscriptions adorning the splendid apparatus displayed in all Florence during the glorious entry of Giovanna d'Austria in December 1565.<sup>9</sup> With a detective's acumen, van Veen lays bare how also this appeal came to no fruition, the reluctance of the participants apparently illustrating that this was an unthankful task, where one could all too easily put one's foot wrong, when it came to satisfy the Duke. The time was limited and there was also a recurrent problem as to the level of commenting: should it be generalising (thus Vettori) or specific. But the frescoes are far from generalising, a circumstance making it difficult to use inscriptions lacking specifics. Days became weeks, and after further back and forth the end result was that no inscriptions were applied.

Later in 1558 Vasari then took recourse to composing an explanation entitled *Ragionamenti sopra le invenzioni da lui dipinte in Firenze nel palazzo di loro altezze serenissime*. After his death, his nephew completed the work and published it in 1588 with a dedication to Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici.

In modern history of art/ art history, the predominant theory has been to view the *Ragionamenti* as belonging to a genre *per se* that "stands alone

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<sup>8</sup> Kragelund 2021, I, 3.

<sup>9</sup> For the events and rich bibliography, see Lepri 2017.



from the paintings”. In “essence” they are, it has been said, “a kind of celebration of the Medici and of Vasari’s work”.

There is surely an element of truth in this, but I side with van Veen in viewing their primary function as that of replacing the missing inscriptions, thereby filling “the comprehension gap that arose when, in 1558, the plan to provide the paintings with *tituli* was finally abandoned” (but on this see more below, p. 38). On this reading, the *Ragionamenti* were in grand part meant to ‘stand in’ for the *tituli* that never came in place. On an intuitive basis, this down-to-earth explanation seems confirmed by modern visitor behaviour: moving from room to room most modern visitors of the Quartiere move straight to the modern multilingual version of the *Ragionamenti* standing in each room and then look up to comprehend what Vasari, section after section, had actually depicted.

Prof. William Stenhouse looks with meticulous attention at the reception of Florentine inscriptions in the rich and varied literature devoted to the city’s art and monuments. The timespan is the early modern period.

This approach is not as straightforward as it may sound. In Stenhouse’s phrase, “Guidebooks tend to be written with one eye on their predecessors” and often become normative. So questions of autopsy or otherwise are not easy to settle. Some guidebooks repeat their predecessors. And errors of transcription are plentiful. Often, the inscription’s content is all we get. In manuscript diaries, Stenhouse has detected further, sometimes accurate, transcriptions. The popular guidebook by Ferdinando Migliore paraphrased the inscriptions, but also cites them and comments upon them. In Stenhouse’s view – and his wide ranging and sharp-eyed approach seems to corroborate – “the inscriptions were important to many curious visitors to Florence, but ... they were not part of a ‘must-see list’”.

Anthologies on epitaphs of famous men include much interesting material, some of it never inscribed. Stenhouse shows how rival versions coexisted, for instance on Michelangelo and Poliziano. He unravels the perplexing case of two inscriptions allegedly relating to Paulo Giovio’s monument by the entrance to the Biblioteca Laurenziana.

Stenhouse has perceptive comments on the patterns of reception. In the main, the fifteenth century is already in the early modern age viewed as the truly golden age. Alluding to Botticelli’s *Primavera*, Rainer Maria Rilke’s verdict on Florentine art, “Frühling, aber kein Sommer” already had its early modern forerunners among those, who – apart from Michelangelo and Giovio – discarded most of what came later.

Patrick Kragelund  
Copenhagen, October 2023

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