

POLITICAL VASES

THE ARCHITECTURAL USES OF ETRUSCAN URNS/ VASES IN THE FORMATION OF MEDICEAN POLITICAL SYMBOLISM UNDER COSIMO I, MAGNUS DUX AETRURIAE

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Urns and vases have been taken for granted as architectural elements, yet their origin remains obscure. This paper emphasizes and analyzes the first appearance of urns and vases in architecture, which happens to be for political purposes, their cultural and symbolic mission and their further appropriation in the permanent language of architecture. The uses of urns and vases as symbolic, and not purely decorative, architectural elements for the expression of Medicean political and cultural awareness, culminating in the formation of the Grand Duchy in 1569, and emergence of this significant architectural application has been largely overlooked in the literature.

These vases, originally designed for the domestic and funereal use by the Etruscans, long before the rise of Rome, entered the architectural domain exclusively as a part of the program of "Etruscan revival" initiated by Florentine humanists, architects as well as historiographers and literati. This revival combined cultural, regional and political aspirations in order to establish continuity between the Renaissance present and the Etruscan past in the vaguely defined area covering ancient Etruria and coinciding with early modern (vacillating) Tuscany.

There has been a long, not only pre-Roman but also pre-Etruscan, tradition on these lands that unites urn/vases with architecture. Among much discussed pozzo-type sepulchers, which consist of vessels containing cinerary urns, dating from the Early Iron Age, the most exemplary is the pythos found on Via Sacra in Rome.

Similar urn-pots, terra cotta doliae, containing models of houses, have been unearthed on the hills of Latin towns such as Ardea, Lavinium, Tibur, and also later on the Etruscan sites of Veii, Caere, Tarquinia, Vulci, Luni, San Giovenale and others. Around this rudely yet carefully shaped hut-urn models (normally still containing ashes when discovered) a whole array of vessels of the same material was placed: pots, vases, lamps, fibulae, knives and lanceheads. "These Early Iron Age villages had new, more forcible, and artistically more valuable crafts producing imposing bi-conical ash urns covered by helmets (or clay models of helmets) or by lids imitating roofs, ash urns reproducing huts, and, above all, richly developed metalwork..."¹ The urns and vases enormously helped modern scholars to partially reconstruct the incomplete picture of the forms of the earliest Italic buildings. As this presentation is in no way a review of the development of hut-types in Etruria and Latium I will restrict my discussion to the urns themselves.

Etruscans of later dates usually cremated their dead, and their cinerary urns, often in the shape of shorter sarcophagi, and even the proper funereal sarcophagi (some Etruscans did not cremate their dead) used for the upper classes, continue to mimic their buildings, both public and private, and to house precious ancestral remains. [The building-shaped objects were often found as votive gifts and/or foundation votives - the series from Vulci, found under the North gate, consisting of "Portico," "Temple," and "Torres," is quiet though provoking]. These urns and sarcophagi were often produced in the same Etrurian workshops that manufactured architectural terra cotta so that the same molds were occasionally used, for example, for both the scenes depicted on urns and for those on tympana.

In the case of the lower classes and servants, simple lidded vessels sheltered their ashes in an amphora, a bucchero vessel, or an olla. Although some sarcophagi were cut in tuffo, some carved from alabaster (marble, rarely used and only for very late date Etruscan, was reserved for Roman sarcophagi), the majority of all urns, including sarcophagi, were locally made terra cotta. The vases, though, were either locally made, imported directly from Greece or from South Italy and Magna Graecia.

Although Romanization occurred relatively rapidly and Romans themselves never excelled in the production of painted or relief terra cotta, it is naive to assume the complete lack of pre-Roman or non-Roman, including Etruscan, stratum during the middle ages. An abundance of Etruscan vessels, including cinerary urns, I will argue, has been continuously present in the region both physically and in written sources and documents. Another important venue for the survival of "classical objects" through the late antiquity and the middle ages was occasional collecting. Accordingly, before these urns and vases became completely "covered" and "lost" in order to be "rediscovered" by the humanists, they were partially covered or "semi-lost," both as physical objects and memories, and were part of the general medieval mingling of objects, peoples and thoughts.

While the creation and use of terra cotta urns and vases was important to the Etruscans, they were neither produced as objects of any artistic value nor used as such by the Romans. They certainly had no place on buildings in classical or medieval architecture. The clear intent of reviving and displaying them as architectural elements in

the Tuscan Renaissance was to honor Etruscan rather than Roman heritage and culture. Never before had lidded vases sat as acroteria on tympana, lining a roof perimeter as if defining a building contour. The display of an Etruscan vase was an open political statement that stressed the value of the culture which early modern Tuscans identified as indigenous: distinct, older and superior to the Roman. Etruscan vessels dating from the earliest archeological finds played an important part in the humanist search for and the discovery of their self-identity. To make a political statement was the *raison d'être* for the architecture of Etruscan urns and vases.

For the literate, knowledge of the particularity of Etruscan terracottas and vessels was preserved through contemporary literary forms — chronicles, “etymological encyclopedias,” and dictionaries. Nonetheless, the primary interest in Etruscan culture, subject of most discussion, was centered on its presumed highly religious nature. An influential and widely read Early Christian writer from the beginning of the 6th century, Isidore, Bishop of Seville, in his *Etymologiae* (20.3.5), made remarks on the nature of Arretine ware describing it as “the characteristic red glaze pottery made during the Early Roman Empire in the old Etruscan town of Arrezzo.”² Medieval Chronicles include numerous descriptions of unusual vessels probably belonging to pre-medieval strata. In William of Malmesbury’s *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, in the curiously transmitted story of the discovery of a series of stunning underground treasures by the mathematician Girbert, who later became the pope Silvester II (999-1003) there is a narrative about “a vessel of great weight and value, where the sculpture surpassed nature itself.”³

Scholars have been recognizing similarities among descriptions of phantasmic “excavations” to items commonly found among particularly Etruscan antiquities as the playing dice or chest-high vessels (“of great weight and value”), suggesting that the latter could have easily been the wine crater akin to the one depicted in the Tomb of the Lionesses.⁴ Similar huge vessels seem to have been objects of veneration or a cult,⁵ some used in ceremonial, funereal banqueting.⁶ Another memorable is from the Tomba del Cardinale depicting a giant vase placed on a chariot pulled by two men.

It is not surprising that among the subjects covered in the work *Della composizione del mondo* by Ristoro D’Arrezzo, written as early as in 1282, there is a whole, although tiny chapter, *Capitolo delle vasa antiche* — a detailed description of “most noble and ancient vases,” the pride of Ristoro’s native Arrezzo.⁷ In his *fiorentine Chronicles* (1, 47), Giovanni Villani echoes Ristoro’s idea about the divine origin of Arretine ware, the beauty of which is such that “it could not possible be executed by humans.” “Another literary example is a 15th century description of the contents of an Etruscan tomb at Volterra. In a letter of 1466 to a friend in Florence, the humanist Antonio Ivano from Serzana gives an excellent report on the findings in the tomb — an array of sculptured and painted urns and pottery — discovered by chance outside the walls of Volterra on the road to Pisa.”⁸ Although none of the above authors directly connects Etruscans with Arretine ware it is quite possible that their designation

“Tuscan” already entailed the Etruscan premise. This seems to be the case already in Marcial’s verses: *Arretina nimis ne spernas vasa monemus: Lautus erat tuscis Porsena fictilibus.*⁹

These are only a few of the relevant recorded commentaries in the extant works. It seems reasonable to me to suppose a larger, general exposure of these objects to the Renaissance humanists.

In the 15th century there already was a number of humanist scholars who could differentiate and name Etruscan objects and inscriptions from general studies of antiquities. Alberti’s treatises do not lack references to the Haetruscus, and he discusses the subject both on the basis of literary sources (Vitruvius, Pliny) and his own field surveys. The importance of the Dominican friar, Annio da Viterbo, for the beginnings of “modern” archeological studies, as well as for Etruscan and regional studies, requires considerable elaboration, not possible here. Another Viterbian, the respected Agostinian prior, Egidio, facilitated the spread of Annian ideas into the 16th century. This interest in the Etruscan past constituted a common platform for the Tuscan humanists and it found its various expressions in architecture. Possible inspiration from Etruscan urns is only one of these expressions. The similarity of Renaissance palaces to the so called “palazzo” Etruscan ash urn with arched door from Chiusi (now in the Archeological Museum in Florence) is striking.

This has been pointed out first by A. Beothius and Heydenreich and Lotz, and I believe that characterization of this urn as “palazzo” points to a certain consensus on the matter. Similar urns could have served as an inspiration for Michelozzo’s palazzo Medici-Ricardi from 1444, or even for Alberti’s Rucellai, before they became models for the whole genera of Renaissance palaces.

They have in common the use of pilasters and voussoir arches, blocks of heavy masonry, strongly articulated cornices, “Tuscan” capitals and a long pedestal bench. Another urn from Chiusi (now also in the Archeological Museum in Florence), multitiered and with an atrium, deserves similar attention.

With Renaissance conscious interest focused on and directed to the “rediscovery” of the partially lost past, the vases and urns, together with the other objects from antiquity, gained an additional, symbolical value. Tuscan architects of the Renaissance freely manipulated the “Etruscan vase” as an already firmly accepted element of the Etruscan iconographic system, which is evidenced by numerous drawings like Francesco de Giorgio’s relief from another urn from Chiusi interestingly and incidentally superimposed on an architectural study of a palace plan from around 1470,¹⁰ Giuliano da Sangallo’s sketches of antique cups entangled with architectural plans and details,¹¹ or later, Fra Giocondo’s studies of vases from 1553. The list is extensive. By 1535 a treatise exclusively on vases written by the Frenchman, Lazare de Baif was published both in Venice and in Paris, and was further published posthumously.¹² By contrast, the only vases figuring in architectural treatises appear late, in the first book of *The Five Books of Architecture* by Serlio published in 1545, and are rather apolitical and non-architectural. Yet, in the 16th century lidded vases themselves figured prominently in Tuscan, self-conscious, non-palatial

buildings. The Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano, built for Lorenzo the Magnificent by Giuliano da Sangallo, is in many aspects an essay in Etruscan inspiration, including the Etruscan deity Vertumnus (Janus) depicted in the great hall of the villa in the painting by Pontormo 1520-21, and the presence of Janus in the low pediment relief. One additional, overlooked statement in the same direction, is made by prominently placing these specific terra cotta urn/vases on the roof above the main entrance. In later depictions of the villa they appear and disappear — they are in place as we see the villa today and they seem to be there during the entry of Eleonora de Toledo, the bride of the Grand Duke Cosimo I, as is depicted in a veduta by Vasari in the Palazzo Vecchio. Among the most interesting architectural applications, these particular lidded vases are red and extremely thin (almost two-dimensional) always used as acroterial vases. Florence boasts many examples of this type like the one on the private villa in Florence from the 17th century.

The most politically prominent application of the Etruscan urn/vase, yet overlooked as such, is in the Cappella dei principi in San Lorenzo, the family tomb of the Medici, where “urns,” executed in *pietre dure*, stand for Etruria itself, the spiritual Mater of the Grand Duchy, but not personally for Cosimo, the first Grand Duke of Etruria. Even the Medici stemmas on the floor executed centuries later follow this model. They are framed in the shape of Etruscan vases, as are the coats-of-arms of all Tuscan cities shown throughout the chapel. The new Tuscan identity is directly connected with the ancient Etruscan by the display of this, specifically Etruscan, element.

Cappella dei Principi is the third sacristy of the church of Saint Lorenzo (Cappella dei depositi).¹³ This is a centrally planned octagonal building with tribunes on the parallel sides of the octagon. It is lidded with a cupola of 28.5 meters in diameter. Members of the Medici family, from the side of Giovanni delle Bande Nere and Maria Salviati, to the last descendent, Anna Maria Luisa, are buried in the crypt.¹⁴ The monumental sepulchers of the upper capella are empty. In the niches of the crypt below the mausoleum, all the Grand Dukes are buried with their jewelled crowns still upon their heads and their scepters in their hands. All the Grand Duchesses are also buried here with the one exception of Francesco's second wife, Bianca Capello.¹⁵

Works on the walls are considered to have started in 1602 and continued to the middle of the 17th century. Don Giovanni de Medici, talented illegitimate son of Grand Duke Cosimo I, who also worked on San Lorenzo's facade, designs for San Gaetano and Forte di Belvedere, and Bountalenti are responsible for the building design. Although the execution of a final project begun in 1604, under the direction of Ferdinand I, the huge Capella dei principi was a realization of Cosimo I's conception. The structure was not finished until 1737 and the decoration of the cupola was completed only in 1836. Work on interior decoration in “*pietre colorate*” started at the end of the 16th century (stemmi of Tuscan cities) and continued into the 20th (pavement by Edoardo Marchionni and the altar).

Inlaid in squares of flowering jasper from Sicily, made in a combination of alabaster, marble, coral, jasper,

agate, mother-of-pearl and lapis lazuli, on architecturally pronounced elements (parapet) are the coats-of-arms of the 16 Tuscan cities subject to the Grand Duchy: Pienza, Chiusi, Sovana, Montalcino, Grosseto, Pisa, Massa, Siena, Fiesole, Pistoia, Firenze, San Sepolcro, Volterra, Arezzo, Montepulciano and Cortona. They are of considerable size, 98 by 60 centimeters (cm), and encircled in a vase shape with flowering stems.

In addition, there are 12 vases in red Barga jasper that measure 130 by 71.5 cm and four larger ones measuring 150 by 168 cm that are placed in lateral tribunes (with handles of Sicilian jasper, leaves of Corsican jasper and the top of the lids, ball-shaped with Medici stemma of lapis lazuli with lilies of Sicilian jasper; the background is of Belgian black marble).

Sixteen green vases of Corsican jasper (130 by 65 cm) are placed on the upper level (handles and top of the lid in Sicilian jasper, little lid collar in lapis lazuli, leaves of Saxon jasper, background of Belgian black marble). All these formelle are surrounded by a square cornice in purple jasper from Flanders.

Iconographically and symbolically, the position of the Etruscan vase is relatively independent of Medici persona(s). It neither collides with, nor is it incorporated in, their traditional family stemma, but becomes a part of national symbolism, and only as such finds its place in state, ducal rather than personal, or family, emblemata. Lidded vases formed a large part of Cosimo's personal collection of antiquities. As the Medici capitalized on the generally promoted ideal of the past of the region, they appropriated both the mythological and archeological remains of Tuscany/Etruria. Of necessity, Cosimo chose to connect Florentine pride for her republican tradition with the loose association of city-states of ancient Etruria in building the political ideal of modern Tuscany. The incorporation of the state vase is a representation of the collective, republican, communal, as opposed to the personal power of the Medici. Cosimo acquired and institutionalized the urn/vase as a statal symbol with his proclamation as *Magnus Dux Aetruriae*. The symbol belongs to the narrative of the history of the land and of the people, recalling the glory of pre-Roman Etruria. Simultaneously, the Chapel itself evokes the round, lidded hut-urns as well as their containers, but also corresponds to the baptistery and the duomo.

Examining this ubiquitous object in architectural setting — the Etruscan urn/vase — which is so often taken for granted, I have hoped to introduce one of the categories belonging to the “system of Etruscan architectural objects” originally intended for a subtler, more spatial glorification of the magnificence and cultural peculiarity of “Ancient Etruria.” This discussion does not confine itself to “history” but intends to reopen the issues of the social role and the territoriality of the ornament, and draws attention to their resonance in the appropriation of space.

The dissemination of the application of these artifices is a natural “part II” of the subject. In the context of the majority of the presentations in the Berlin conference on politics and architecture, and of the general spirit of current building in Berlin, I did find the question of the ornament, and myself with it, rather isolated. My vases

were neither post-modern, nor post-colonial, let alone modern. They seem to have colonized architecture long ago and so completely that nobody paid attention any more. Walking down from Kaiserin-Augusta subway station, I suddenly looked up, and there they were — four floor-size, lidded vases, covered with “etruscheria,” fully incorporated in this eight story ex-warehouse. The 19th century transformation? I understood: We were connected with Berlin.

NOTES

- ¹ Axel Boethius, *Etruscan and Early Roman Architecture* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p.20.
- ² Nancy Thompson de Grummond, *Rediscovery, in Etruscan Life and Afterlife*, ed. Larissa Bonfante, (Wayne State University Press, 1986), p. 20.
- ³ *Ibid.* p. 21, quoted from *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, p. 176.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Numerous examples of giant single vases placed on the pedestal are depicted on Volterranean type cinerary sarcophagi and seem to be interchangeable with other “objects” of Etruscan veneration as well as with heroes. Giant vessels figure prominently in Etruscan painting.
- ⁶ The best known example is a sizable urn from Montescudaio (from a “pozzo” type tomb) in the Archeological Museum of Florence, with a banqueting scene sculptured on its lid where

the deceased is being served in the presence of another huge vessel.

- ⁷ Ristoro D'Arezzo, fifth chapter of the eighth part of the second book of *Composizione dell Mondo*, published in Enrico Narducci, *La composizione dell Mondo di Ristoro D'Arezzo*, *Tipografia delle scienze matematiche e fisiche* (Roma, 1859), pp. 136-7.
- ⁸ Thompson de Grummond. *Idem.* p. 25-6.
- ⁹ Marcial, *Book XIV*, p. 98.
- ¹⁰ Tafuri, M. and Fiore, F. P. ed(s), *Francesco di Giorgio Arcitetto* (Milano: Electa, 1993), p. 352, pl. XX 33.
- ¹¹ Il libro da Giuliano da Sangallo, Codice Vaticano Berberino Latino 4424, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, vol. 39.
- ¹² Baif, Lazare de, 1496?-1547. [Annotationum in L. vestis, ff. de auro & argento leg.] Eruditissimi viri Lazari Bayfii Opus de re uestimentaria/ ab authore ipso diligenter recognitum; eiusdem. De uasculorum materiis ac uarietate tractatus, antehac nunquam excusus. Venetiis: Per Ioan. Anto. de Nicolinis de Sabio, sumptu vero & requisitione D. Melchioris Sessae, 1535, mense September.
- ¹³ The word is defined in the *Webster Universal Dictionary* as “the place in a church where sacred vessels etc. are kept.”
- ¹⁴ It seems appropriate here to remind of the original meaning of the Latin *cripta* from the Greek *kryptein*, to hide, to cover; *krypte*, a vault, crypt.
- ¹⁵ The site of the grave of Bianca Capello's, who the Medici never saw as “one of theirs,” is unknown.