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HEFT I

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Augustus, the Strong Box of Mark Antony, and Vincenzo Danti’s *Cassaforte* Relief for Duke Cosimo I of Tuscany



1 Vincenzo Danti, bronze relief
for the door of the safe of
Cosimo I, 1559/60. Florence,
Museo Nazionale del Bargello

Augustus, the Strong Box of Mark Antony, and Vincenzo Danti's *Cassaforte* Relief for Duke Cosimo I of Tuscany

Patrick Kragelund

The Museo Nazionale del Bargello holds a rectangular bronze with a splendid relief that once ornamented the door of the strong box in the studiolo of Duke Cosimo I of Tuscany (Fig. 1).¹ In this safe, the duke kept “important documents” (“scritture d’importanza”)² – a circumstance of the utmost relevance for the so-called *sportello*’s iconography. The reliefs were modelled by Vincenzo Danti (1530–1576), probably under the guidance of Vasari, in 1559/60.³

The central relief of the door to Duke Cosimo’s safe is framed by allegorical figures, to the left probably Temperance and to the right Prudence,⁴ while the panel beneath this central field holds an avowedly Augustan motif, Peace (*pax*) enthroned, olive branch in her right and a torch turned downwards in her left, the latter kindling fires beneath a heap of captured arms (Fig. 2). These details as well as the besieged enemies, their hands tied behind their backs, are elements of Cosimo’s

Augustan peace imagery which are also found in a prominent position in Salviati’s frescoes in the Sala dell’Udienza of the Palazzo Vecchio, high above the central gateway to the Sala del Giglio (Fig. 3).

In the central relief, it will here be argued, this Augustan narrative is continued. At the bottom, the reclining Tiber with Romulus and Remus at his back locates the episode in Rome. In the relief’s centre, a laureate ruler sits on a dais surrounded by ten Roman civilians and four soldiers. Two attendants to the right approach him with heaps of bound documents, which the seated figure with the staff in his right is seemingly consigning to a fire at his feet.⁵ The episode has been claimed to refer to a passage in the Roman historian Suetonius⁶ concerning Augustus’ burning of spurious Sibylline books, the ten Romans surrounding the emperor supposedly being the *decemviri* (“The Ten Men”), who controlled the consultation of these sacred prophetic scripts.⁷

¹ For the location of the studiolo in what today is called the Tesoretto, see Charles Davis, “Working for Vasari: Vincenzo Danti in Palazzo Vecchio”, in: *Giorgio Vasari: tra decorazione ambientale e storiografia artistica*, conference proceedings Arezzo 1981, ed. by Gian Carlo Garfagnini, Florence 1985, pp. 205–271: 209. Alternatively, Ettore Allegri/Alessandro Cecchi, *Palazzo Vecchio e i Medici: guida storica*, Florence 1980, pp. 189f., suggest it was in the “stanzino del Duca”, later to become the studiolo of Francesco I.

² Davis (note 1), p. 208.

³ *Idem*, “Bassorilievi in bronzo e in marmo di Vincenzo Danti”, in: *I grandi bronzi del Battistero: l’arte di Vincenzo Danti, discepolo di Michelangelo*, exh. cat., ed. by *idem*/Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, Florence 2008, pp. 87–147: 106.

⁴ For the identification as Temperance and Prudence, see Davis (note 1), p. 239. The figures above and below the central scene perhaps represent

Egeria and *Ceres legifera* respectively (*idem* [note 3], pp. 110f.). Alternatively, Giovan Battista Fianza, *Vincenzo Danti: 1530–1576*, Florence 1996, pp. 76f., opts for Diana to the left and Minerva to the right, but Davis’ reading seems better corroborated.

⁵ As for the ruler’s identity, Michael W. Cole, *Ambitious Form: Giambologna, Ammanati, and Danti in Florence*, Princeton 2011, p. 81, remains uncommitted.

⁶ Suetonius, *Augustus*, 31, 1.

⁷ John D. Summers, “The Chronology of Vincenzo Danti’s First Works in Florence”, in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XVI (1972), pp. 185–198: 198; *idem*, *The Sculpture of Vincenzo Danti: A Study in the Influence of Michelangelo and the Ideals of the Maniera*, New York 1979, pp. 94–97; identification accepted by Marco Collareta, in: *Palazzo Vecchio: committenza e collezionismo mediceo*, exh. cat., ed. by Claudia Beltramo Ceppi/Nicoletta Con-



2 Vincenzo Danti, bronze relief
for the door of the safe of Cosimo I,
detail of Fig. 1 with *Pax* flanked
by chained opponents



3 Francesco Salviati, *Pax*
flanked by chained opponents,
1543-1547. Florence, Palazzo
Vecchio, Sala dell'Udienza



4 Vincenzo Danti, bronze relief for the door of the safe of Cosimo I, detail of Fig. 1 with profile of Augustus



5 Silver denarius with portrait of Augustus, 27 BC. London, British Museum, inv. 1865,0809.3.

However, as it is repeatedly attested, long before Augustus' day the Priesthood of Ten had been expanded to fifteen members (and sometimes more) and was invariably being called the Priesthood of Fifteen (*quindecimviri sacris faciundis*).⁸ Numbers apart, it is hard to see the point in depicting this episode on Cosimo's safe.

As an alternative, scholars have argued for a reference to another Roman book burning: that of the books of the legendary king Numa, found in a sealed and buried box in 181 BC. The finders handed them over to the magistrates, but the praetor in charge, variously named Quintus Petilius Spurinus or Gnaeus Terentius, conceived them as potentially subversive. In accordance with a decree of the Senate he had the books consigned to the flames.⁹

fuorto, Florence 1980, p. 326, and quoted tentatively by Allegri/Cecchi (note 1), pp. 189f. Fianza (note 4), pp. 76f., stresses that the identification is difficult but seems to follow Summers, without, however, excluding the reading of Davis (see *infra*, note 9).

⁸ Maurus Servius Honoratus, *Commentarii in Vergilii Aeneidos libros*, VI, 73; Suetonius, *Caesar*, 79, 3; Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, I, 19, II; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LIII, 1, 5.

⁹ The story of Numa's books is widely attested: Livius, *Ab urbe condita*, XL, 29, 3f.; Valerius Maximus, *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri IX*, I, 1, 12; Pliny the Elder, *Historia naturalis*, XIII, 84–88; Plutarch, *Numa*, 22; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, VII, 37. It has been proposed as the subject of Danti's relief by Davis (note 1), pp. 231–234, Francesco Santi, *Vincenzo Danti (1530–1579)*, Bologna 1989, p. 40, and Davis (note 3), pp. 106f.

However, the magistrate portrayed by Danti is not a mere praetor, his laurels confirming that he is a victorious general. The soldiers in the background seem to stress this military aspect. And, as Louis A. Waldman has rightly insisted, the laureate general's clean-shaven, idealised profile with the long and very straight nose is unmistakably that of Augustus as it is known from his coinage (Figs. 4, 5),¹⁰ so readings have to start from there.

Given this context, there is a hitherto undiscussed passage in a Roman author that seems highly relevant. A third century AD senator and historian, Cassius Dio provides the longest, most detailed and continuous surviving ancient narrative of the downfall of the Roman republic, the ensuing civil wars, and the rise of the Augustan monarchy.¹¹ Dealing as he was with such

¹⁰ Louis A. Waldman, "The recent Vincenzo Danti Exhibition in Florence", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, CL (2008), pp. 680–686: 683. For Davis (note 3), p. 110, the ruler is generically "Roman", without clear identity. Santi (note 9), pp. 40f., rightly points out similarities in a fresco in Mantua by Giulio Romano from ca. 1540 showing a laureate ruler, *in casu Caesar burning the letters of Pompey* (cf. Stefania Massari, in: *Giulio Romano pinxit et delineavit: opere grafiche autografe di collaborazione e bottega*, exh. cat., ed. by eadem, Rome 1993, p. 88, no. 80); this is likewise a motif from Cassius Dio's *Roman History* (XLI, 63, 6; cf. *infra*, note 16), but in Danti's relief, the portrayed is clearly the young Augustus, not the elderly Caesar.

¹¹ For a lucid introduction to the historian, see Jesper Majbom Madsen, *Cassius Dio*, London 2019.

highly debated issues as republicanism versus monarchy, it is no wonder that Dio was a bestseller in sixteenth-century Italy. Years before the original Greek text (which survives partly *in extenso*, partly in Byzantine excerpts) was edited, it had first been made accessible in an illustrated Italian translation from 1533,¹² which was reprinted in 1542 and 1548 and even translated into French in 1542. Only then came the *editio princeps* of the Greek text (Paris 1548), followed by a new and more accurate translation in Latin by Guglielmus Xylander published in 1558 and repeatedly reprinted.¹³ Clearly, there was an audience for Cassius Dio's Roman history, not content to await the Greek original.

And for the advisors of Danti, be it Vasari or some other party, there was a passage in Dio's famous Book 52 about documents in a *cassaforte* that would have stood out. In this book, Dio – in an absolutely fictive but pertinent scene – lets Augustus' two closest supporters, Agrippa and Maecenas, advise the young ruler which constitutional model to adopt: the republican or monarchical.¹⁴ Maecenas had the winning argument: go for monarchy but show discretion, “so that you will enjoy fully the reality of the kingship without the odium which attaches to the name of ‘king’.”¹⁵

Following this debate, Dio offers instances of the way Augustus set about camouflaging his intentions of establishing a monarchy in order to reconcile his opponents. One such instance involved the documents found in the strong boxes of his

defeated opponent, Mark Antony in Alexandria: “And since he saw that many of the senators and others who had been partisans of Antony were still inclined to be suspicious of him, and was fearful lest they might set a revolution on foot, he announced that all the letters that had been found in Antony's strong boxes had been burned.”¹⁶ Crucially, Dio then continues: “And it is quite true that he had destroyed some of them, but he was very careful to keep the larger part, and afterwards he did not scruple to make use of them, either.”¹⁷ Here, to be sure, was the prudent ploy of a notoriously shrewd and cunning politician.

What Dio describes as an announcement is visualised in Danti's relief as a scene that shows Augustus actually overseeing the burning of the documents. The episode is, as in the literary account, situated in Rome, and acute, even apprehensive public awareness is clearly in evidence.

By 1559, when the *sportello* was designed, the panegyric links between Augustus and Cosimo had long since been firmly established. As he was the successor to Duke Alessandro, who had been assassinated by a self-proclaimed Brutus, Cosimo's comparison with Augustus, who had succeeded the assassinated Caesar was, as it were, already in the air.¹⁸ What made the parallel all the more conspicuous was the fact that Cosimo came to power on the same days in January that in the ancient Roman calendar marked the solemn proclamation of Octavian as Augustus.¹⁹ Cosimo's choice of such typical Augustan emblems

¹² *Dione storico delle guerre et fatti de romani: tradotto di greco in lingua vulgare, per m. Nicolo Leonico*, Venice 1533.

¹³ *Dionis Cassii Nicaei Romanae historiae libri (tot enim bodie extant) XXV. nimirum à XXXVI. ad LXI. [...]*, Basel 1558. A new and complete Italian translation by Francesco Baldelli was first edited in Venice in 1565 and frequently reprinted.

¹⁴ The dialogue between Agrippa and Maecenas was also edited separately: Caelius Secundus Curio, *Selectarum epistolarum Libri duo; ejusdem orationum (inter quas et Agrippae contra monarchiam, et Meecenatis pro monarchia, adversariae orationes duae, lectu dignissimae, ex Dione latinitate donatae, continentur liber unus*, Basel 1553.

¹⁵ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, trans. by Earnest Cary, Cambridge, Mass., 1914–1917, p. 185 (LII, 40, 3).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 189 (LII, 42, 8). Cf. *Dione storico* (note 12), p. cxcviii: “Et perche lui [sc. Augustus] conosceva molti de Senatori, i quali havevano favoreggiato Antonio haverlo in sospetto, et per questo si dubitava che non facessino qualche novita, fece divulgare che haveva arso tutte le lettere, le quali si erano ritrovate negli scrigni et armarii di Antonio.” A similar gesture by Augustus, likewise obliterating evidence concerning civil war alliances, is reported by another author that was widely read in the Renaissance: Appianus, *Civil Wars*, V, 132. See Joseph A. Howey, “Book-Burning and the Uses of Writing in Ancient Rome: Destructive Practice between Literature and Document”, in: *The Journal of Roman Studies*, CVII (2017), pp. 213–236, who discusses this and similar episodes involving Caesar (cf. note 10), Caligula, and Claudius.

¹⁷ Dio (note 15), p. 189 (LII, 42, 8). In Leonico's *Dione storico* (note 12), p. cxcviii, which is based on a manuscript with various flaws, the statement that Augustus *actually did use* the documents he had not burnt is not made: “et in verita lui ne haveva guaste alcune, ma molte di esse ne haveva ritenute apresso di se, accioche ne potesse usare”. In contrast, Xylander's Latin translation from 1558 (note 13), which was based upon the *editio princeps* from 1548, is more correct: “nam re vera nonnullae erant perditae, at plerasque summo studio adservabat; quibus in posterum uti haud dubitavit.”

¹⁸ Cf. Anton Francesco Doni, *La fortuna di Cesare, tratta da gl'autori latini*, Venice 1550, fol. [Avv]: “[...] dopò Cesare segui Ottaviano sì buono et sì santo Imperatore, dopo Alessandro, Cosimo sì giusto Principe, et sì perfetto Duca”. I owe this reference to Vera-Simone Schulz, “Vom Tyrannenmörder zum Souverän: Umdeutungen des Brutuskultes im 16. Jahrhundert”, in: *Translatio nummorum: Römische Kaiser in der Renaissance*, conference proceedings Berlin 2011, ed. by Ulrike Peter/Bernhard Weisser, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 327–344: 331, note 18.

¹⁹ For the comparison between Cosimo and Augustus, see Kurt W. Forster, “Metaphors of Rule: Political Ideology and History in the Portraits of Cosimo I de' Medici”, in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XV (1971), pp. 65–104: 85–104; Janet Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art: Pontormo, Leo X, and the Two Cosimos*, Princeton 1984, pp. 257f.; Henk Th. van Veen, *Cosimo I de' Medici and His Self-Representation in Florentine Art and Culture*, Cambridge 2006, esp. pp. 24, 86, 95, 139.

as the Capricorn and the motto “Festina lente” are features everywhere present in the Medici refashioning of Florence as a ducal residence.²⁰ The (only later realised) plans to let the new ‘forum’ of the Uffizi imitate the way Augustus had provided space “in both porticoes of his forum” for statues of the most illustrious Romans of the past illustrates the pervasive energy with which this myth was propagated.²¹ Even in Cosimo’s funerary epitaph there is a (hitherto ignored) echo of the epitaphs found in the Mausoleum of Augustus.²²

What matters in the present context is that Cosimo’s first and crucial victory over his opponents in the battle of Montemurlo fell on 1 August 1537. For a ruler and a court conscious of flattering historical parallels, it obviously counted that 1 August was another sacred day in the Augustan calendar: it saw the defeat of Mark Antony and the conquest of Egypt – one of the reasons that the month later was renamed to bear Augustus’ name (as it still does).²³ Therefore, the link between Mark Antony and Cosimo’s enemies was another aspect already then in the air: Cosimo was the new Augustus, while his adversaries were headed by a latter-day Mark Antony.

Given this background, Danti’s relief seems to take on a new, more sinister topicality. All the more so, since Cosimo after his recent victory in the battle of Scannagallo near Marciano – which incidentally was also fought in early August (2 August 1554) – had been able to confiscate the letters and entire archive

of the leader of the exiles, Piero Strozzi.²⁴ There is apparently no evidence that these documents were ever put to active use, but, then as now, knowledge is power.

This is where it becomes relevant that this bronze originally was not a public monument, but an object only to be seen by those having privileged access to the duke’s private quarters. On the face of it, it shows an Augustus (i.e. Cosimo) being conciliatory towards his one-time opponents. But Dio’s comment that this gesture was a façade and that Augustus in fact kept and later used some of the compromising documents against his opponents creates an intriguing ambiguity. To be sure, there were then and now conciliatory gestures. But the spectator might well ask: did Cosimo likewise keep such incriminating documents hidden in *his cassaforte*?

I am indebted to the editor and two anonymous peer reviewers for saving me from various errors as well as for some fruitful suggestions.

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Scala, Florence (courtesy of the Ministero per i beni e attività culturali e per il turismo): Figs. 1, 2, 4. – Eric Vandeville/akg-images: Fig. 3. – By permission of the Trustees of the British Museum, London: Fig. 5.

²⁰ For Cosimo’s choice of the Capricorn, cf. e.g. the account of his contemporary biographer Filippo Cavriani, in: Carmen Menchini, *Panegirici e vite di Cosimo I de’ Medici: tra storia e propaganda*, Florence 2005, p. 97. See also Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966–1997, VI, p. 311; van Veen (note 19), pp. 67, 138.

²¹ “in utraque fori sui portico” (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 31, 5). For Cosimo’s project see Filippo Cavriani, in: Menchini (note 20), p. 200; Leon Satkowski, *Giorgio Vasari: Architect and Courtier*, Princeton 1993, p. 43; Stefania Iacopozzi, “Il ciclo scultoreo degli Uffizi: genesi e sviluppo di un progetto non solo celebrativo”, in: *Gli uomini illustri del Loggiato degli Uffizi: storia e restauro*, ed. by Magnolia Scudieri, Florence 2001, pp. 15–33; 16f.; van Veen (note 19), pp. 82–88; Mogens Nykjær, *Mit Firenze: Bybistorie og billedkunst*, Copenhagen 2017, pp. 147–149 (with further bibliography). For the realisation of these plans in the early nineteenth century see Régine Bonnefoit, “Die Statuen der berühmten Toskaner im Hof der Uffizien”, in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XLIII (1999), pp. 103–187.

²² Cf. Patrick Kragelund, *The Latin Inscriptions of Medici Florence: Piety and Propaganda, Civic Pride and the Classical Past*, Rome 2021, pp. 198f., no. IX.45.

²³ Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, I, 12, 35, quotes the Senate’s motivation for renaming August: his first consulate, the victory in Egypt, the triple triumph, all of which happened in that same month.

²⁴ For the battle of Scannagallo (or Marciano), see Roberto Cantagalli, *La guerra di Siena (1552–1559) [...]*, Siena 1962, pp. 298–307; for its political context, see Marcello Simonetta, “Cosimo I versus the Strozzi, the Enemies of the State”, in: *A Companion to Cosimo I de’ Medici*, ed. by Alessio Assonitis/Henk Th. van Veen, Leiden/Boston 2021, pp. 187–211, in part. pp. 201–204. At least part of the confiscated papers is preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo del Principato, nos. 1859 and 1860, which still bear the original covers entitled *Roli de’ soldati trovati nella rotta dello Strozzi a Marciana* and *Lettere italiane trovate nelle scritture, quando si fuggì di Siena, del Signor Piero Strozzi dall’anno 51, al 1555*. I am grateful to one of the anonymous peer reviewers for pointing out the connection with the battle of Scannagallo and the seizure of the Strozzi papers and to Marcello Simonetta for providing bibliographic and archival references.

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