University of North Carolina at Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
December 2012

The Medici and their Etruscan Myth: Mythmaking in Renaissance Florence

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Abstract

While most of Renaissance Italy looked to the ancient Romans for inspiration in their art, the people of Tuscany focused on the Etruscans, an Italian culture that inhabited the area of Tuscany and predated the Roman civilization. The powerful Medici family who controlled the city-state of Florence especially drew inspiration from the Etruscans to suggest their own power and right to rule. They adopted a myth fabricated by the historian Annio da Viterbo (1432-1502) which elevated the Etruscans and their land, largely located in contemporary Tuscany, to the status of ancient Rome and the Holy Land. This legend inspired Medici sponsored artists to draw comparisons between their patrons and the glorious Etruscan past. The use of Etruscan motifs in Medici sponsored art is exemplified in Michelangelo's statuary, particularly the images of *Night* and *Morning* in the Medici chapel at the Basilica San Lorenzo in Florence and at Lorenzo de' Medici's villa at Poggio a Caiano. This research further investigates the political statements of the Medici through the use of Etruscan iconography and thematic content in the art they patronized. It examines Pontormo's lunette of Pomona and Vertumnus, an Etruscan god, at Poggio a Caiano and the figures of *Night* and *Morning*, both of which exhibit Etruscan characteristics, at the Medici Chapel. Based on these and other examples of Etruscan references in Medici art that can be observed in Tuscany, it becomes clear that this powerful Renaissance family justified their rule and Florentine expansion by reminding the people of a uniquely Tuscan history.

1. Introduction

It is well known amongst scholars that there was a conscious effort to study and duplicate the art of antiquity in Renaissance Italy. While most of Italy looked to the ancient Romans for inspiration, the people of Tuscany focused on the Etruscans, an Italian culture that predated the Roman civilization and indeed contributed many of the most important aspects of Roman art and architecture1[i]. In the early fifteenth century, the once fiercely independent city-states of medieval Tuscany began to form alliances and Florence rose to prominence as the cultural and political center of the region. As Tuscany became increasingly unified under Florentine control, the politicians and scholars of the region began to formulate a myth of Tuscan unity based on a shared Etruscan origin. This ever-changing myth was especially utilized by the Medici family who emerged as the de-facto rulers of Florence in the early years of the Cinquecento.

The Florentine-Etruscan myth began as an instrument of regionalism that assisted in uniting Florence and other Tuscan city-states against non-Tuscan rivals and later evolved into a powerful tool in enforcing Medici dominance. Changing from the late fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, the myth became an integral part of the Medici propaganda program. Medici sponsored art began exhibiting Etruscan thematic and stylistic influence. This influence can be seen in the artworks of many of the most famous artists of the period and is evidenced by Michelangelo's architectural work and sculpture in the Medici Chapel's New Sacristy as well as in Pontormo's

fresco of *Vertumnus and Pomona* in the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano. This paper will analyze Etruscan influence on the stylistic and thematic elements of Medici sponsored artwork in the context of the larger Medici-Etruscan ideology.

2. An Etruscan Past

In order to understand the influence of the Renaissance Etruscan myth in Medici sponsored art, it is necessary to trace the evolution of the renewed focus on the Etruscans. Etruscan motifs seem to have been referenced in Medieval Italy, and artists such as Giotto may have even been directly inspired by Etruscan demons like Charun when depicting satanic figures2. However, the Etruscans were almost never directly mentioned by scholars prior to the fourteenth century and instead were primarily referred to as the people adjacent to the Romans. King Porsenna of Chiusi (ruled c. 508 BCE), an Etruscan king who stubbornly resisted Roman occupation and eventually suffered defeat, is mentioned by various medieval Tuscan scholars of the thirteenth century but is called "Tuscan" rather than "Etruscan". The fact that medieval texts ignore King Porsenna's Etruscan heritage is strange because these scholars often used Livy, who refers to the Etruscans and Etruria by name, as their primary source3. This ignorance may be due to the fact that in light of the great admiration for the ancient Romans during the thirteenth century, the ancient Tuscans were seen as inferior and even as pollutants in the contemporary Tuscan bloodline. Dante, for example, attributes all the evil aspects of the Florentine nature to the deceitful blood of Fiesole, the Etruscan settlement that once stood on the site of Florence4. Before the late fourteenth century, an Etruscan culture separate from Rome is hardly ever acknowledged and was not thought of as anything more than an "ancient Tuscan" culture.

The word "Etruria" did not even appear until 1336, when Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) wrote about the land as a beautiful paradise and let it serve as the backdrop for his literary work *Filocolo.* Shortly thereafter in 1383, the Florentine chancellor Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) referenced the Etruscans in a letter to the city of Perugia as he argued for an alliance in the wars against Milan. In the letter, Salutati brought attention to the shared Etruscan past of Perugia and Florence and compared the struggle of the Tuscans against Milan to that of the Etruscans against Roman colonization. In response to Milanese criticism that the Florentines were not true Roman descendents, Salutati proudly replied that the roots of Florence went back to Fiesole which predated any Roman city in the region5.

The succeeding Florentine chancellor, Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), expanded on the Etruscan history of Florence and, again using Livy as a primary source, put a positive spin on Tuscany's Etruscan roots. He hailed Etruscan military prowess and religious devotion, and (not incorrectly) claimed them as the literary and political inspiration for many of the greatest aspects of ancient Rome. He then identified Florence as the modern successor to ancient Etruria6. Such newfound patriotism was no doubt due in part to the newfound Florentine stability brought about by Cosimo the Elder (1389-1464) who, while rarely seeking a political title, nevertheless used his considerable wealth to influence most of the state's affairs7. Cosimo Vecchio's reign saw many excavations unearth new Etruscan artifacts. Indeed, the Medici quickly recognized the important role ancient Etruria could have in their political program. They began to identify with King Porsenna of Chiusi and ignored the fact that the Etruscan city-states were ruled by different magistrates and only rarely united against Roman expansion. Lorenzo "Il Magnifico" de' Medici had a particular interest in Etruscan antiquities and incorporated Etruscan architecture in his villa at Poggio a Caiano. He collected several Arretine vases, red-glaze pottery found in the once Etruscan town of Arrezzo8.

Etruscan influence on Florentine political and artistic thought waned briefly during the Medici expulsion when the monk Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) conspired with the invading King Charles VIII of France and drove the Medici from the city. When the Medici returned to power after the election of Lorenzo the Magnificent's son, Giovanni de' Medici (1475-1521) as pope Leo X, they began to focus on the Etruscan past with a new intensity and paid particular attention to the works of the monk Annio da Viterbo (1432-1502)9. His *Antiquitates*, published in 1498, drew from Latin, Longobard, Greek and pseudo-Etruscan inscriptions to tell the history of Tuscany10. Many of these inscriptions were only partially true and many were merely derived from Viterbo's own imagination. Viterbo, like everyone else at the time, could not decipher Etruscan and many doubted the truthfulness of his works even as they gained popularity11. His ideas, however, did serve the Medici family perfectly.

After securing Rome under Medici power, Pope Leo X, formerly Giovanni de' Medici (1475-1521), was keen to espouse the greatness of the Etruscans as a way to unite Florence and Rome. In *Antiquitates*, Viterbo compared Tuscany to the Roman Empire and the Holy Land in its political and religious importance, and spun an elaborate legend that would justify this importance. According to Viterbo, the Etruscans (and therefore all Tuscans) were descended from Noah, who sailed to Italy after the great flood and adopted the Latin name Janus. Viterbo claimed

that the translation of "Janus" into Etruscan was "Vertumno". According to the Roman scholar Varro, Vertumno, or Vertumnus, was the primary Etruscan deity and a fertility god who later featured in Pontormo's fresco at Poggio a Caiano12. Such a story would have had a particular appeal to Leo X, who had always been interested in the Etruscans and had even participated in several archaeological excavations at Arezzo13.

Viterbo's myth had a profound impact on Medici propaganda. In 1513 Giuliano (1479-1516) and Lorenzo de' Medici (1492-1519) were given Roman citizenship by their respective brother and uncle Leo X. For the occasion, a wooden theater was erected on the Capitoline Hill in which ancient and contemporary comedies were performed. The theater was decorated with various Medici symbols and symbolism depicting the "pure line of the Medici" and the historical ties between Etruria and Latium. Through such ceremonies, Leo X and other powerful Medici were able to compare the greatness of the Etruscan past with that of the Roman past while linking their family name to both14.

3. The New Sacristy Tombs

It was under Leo X that some of the most notable artworks featuring Etruscan themes and motifs were commissioned. Michelangelo's work on the tombs of Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici in the New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel is particularly notable for its Etruscan influence. Intended for Lorenzo the Magnificent's son, Giuliano, Duke of Nemours (1479-1516) and for his grandson, Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino (1492-1519) respectively, the tombs feature the seated dukes presiding over their tombs on top of which recline personifications of the different times of day. The New Sacristy was commissioned by Leo X and his cousin, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, who later succeeded him as Pope Clement VII. The tombs were intended to honor four of the most well-known and revered Medici at the time. Their choice in architect was a practical one, as Michelangelo had had a personal relationship with both Lorenzo the Magnificent and his son Giovanni. Michelangelo had in fact been discovered as a sculptor by Lorenzo at an early age and had even lived in the Medici household for a period of five years15. Michelangelo would therefore have been familiar with Medici ideology and propaganda and would have considered their Etruscan myth in his planning of their commissions. Michelangelo was also well acquainted with Etruscan urns and sarcophagi and had possibly even explored Etruscan tombs and studied Etruscan tomb paintings. Evidence of his studies includes a drawing of the Etruscan underworld deity Aita which resembles Etruscan depictions of the god16.

In its current form, the New Sacristy is a square room which features the tombs of Giuliano de Medici and Lorenzo de Medici on either side of the room, facing each other. On an adjacent wall is the unfinished double tomb of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother, Giuliano de Medici which faces a simple altar. The sacristy is topped by a coffered dome that recalls the Pantheon and is bedecked with multiple engaged columns with Corinthian capitals. It is dominated by marble and stone and is not brightly colored. However, this was not the original plan for the sacristy. Michelangelo had originally intended for the tombs to be placed in the center of the chapel, but this idea was rejected by Cardinal Giulio who clearly had a vested interest in the project. In many ways, the involvement of the Medici in the considerable planning of this commission is a testament to the importance of the work not just as a memorial but also as a political statement. After this, Michelangelo planned to place the tombs against the walls. Still, the tombs were to have been more ornate and the walls were to have been decorated with frescoes. There were also supposed to have been more statues in the sacristy which were to be placed in recesses in the walls and which would have helped define the allegorical content of the building in conjunction with the frescoes. However, this too met various roadblocks to construction including a siege of Florence and finally Michelangelo was summoned to Rome in 1534, leaving his work incomplete17.

Michelangelo's use of Etruscan artistic motifs is best noted in the New Sacristy in his statues of personified times of day (Fig. 1 & 2). The very fact that they are reclining on top of tombs is itself a poignant reminder of Etruscan sarcophagi, on which images of the deceased recline in an almost identical manner (Fig. 4). While Michelangelo's figures are more anatomically accurate and thus do not display the dramatic and at times physically impossible turn at the waist found on many Etruscan sarcophagi, their leg positions do echo those of their Etruscan predecessors. Their bent knees, with one leg held higher than the other, mirror those of Etruscan sarcophagi (Figures 4&5). Although Etruscan sculptures are draped in the folds of their robes, making it more difficult to study their exact body movements, the bend of their knees is clearly similar to that of Michelangelo's heroic nudes. Michelangelo's nudes also resemble Etruscan reclining sarcophagi because of the way they are lounging, propped up by their arms or other materials such as with *Evening* (Fig. 1) and on the Etruscan sarcophagus (Fig. 6).

Figure 1: *Evening* and *Dawn*, Michelangelo, <http://www.friendsofart.net/en/art/michelangelo-buonarroti/twilight-and-dawn>

Figure 2: *Night*, Michelangelo <http://italophiles.com/brownings.htm>

Figure 3: *Day*, Michelangelo, http://italophiles.com/brownings.htm

Figure 4: Hellenistic sarcophagus (no inv. #), Etruscan, Museo Archeologico, Florence, Author's Photo

Figure 5: Hellenistic sarcophagus (no inv. #), Etruscan, Museo Archeologico, Florence, Author's Photo

Figure 6: Hellenistic sarcophagus (no inv. #), Etruscan, Museo Archeologico, Florence, Author's Photo

The female statues of *Night* and *Dawn* are particularly notable for their similarity to female Etruscan funerary sculpture. As Weil-Garris Posner points out in her article "Comments on the Medici Chapel and Pontormo's Lunette at Poggio a Caiano", the quality of the statues' movements are similar to those of reclining Etruscan effigies18. Indeed, the manner in which *Night* rests her head on her fist and *Dawn* tugs on her veil are reminiscent of a common Etruscan convention on female sarcophagi in which the figures pull back the veils atop their heads (Fig. 7). The headwear of *Dawn* and *Night* also display Etruscan influence. *Dawn* wears a veil similar to many seen on Etruscan sarcophagi and also sports a ribbon tied under her breasts, another common feature of Etruscan dress (Fig. 8)19. *Night*'s headpiece bears resemblance to circlets on the effigies of Etruscan women (Fig. 9) and her long braid that cascades over her shoulder was a preferred Etruscan hairstyle.

Figure 7: Hellenistic sarcophagus (no inv. #), Etruscan, Museo Archeologico, Florence, Author's Photo

Figure 8: Detail, Hellenistic sarcophagus (no inv. #), Etruscan, Museo Archeologico, Florence, Author's Photo

Figure 9: Detail, Hellenistic sarcophagus (no inv. #), Etruscan, Museo Archeologico, Florence, Author's Photo

Figure 10: Bronze Mirror (no inv. #), Etruscan, Museo Archeologico, Florence, Author's Photo

Although the allegories of the times of day are strikingly similar to Etruscan sculpture, they are by no means the only Etruscan allusion to be found in the New Sacristy. The seated sculptures of *Duke Giuliano* and *Duke Lorenzo* also display some Etruscan influence. They bear resemblance to Etruscan grave guardians sometimes found on sarcophagi and mirrors, called *Lasas*, who often wield baton-like torches20. The central figure on an Etruscan mirror (fig. 10) bears a resemblance to both the statues of the *Dukes*. The innovative architecture of the sacristy may also have Etruscan connotations. According to Elam in her article "Tuscan Dispositions: Michelangelo's Florentine Architectural Vocabulary and its Reception", Michelangelo's innovative architecture may be quoting what he knew of Etruscan architecture. His style, which in this case seems to be unique and does not belong strictly to one of the well-known classical forms, is likely to have arisen from his devoted study of Vitruvius who wrote about the Etruscan architectural style as a variation on the Doric in *De Architectura21*. When the various parallels between Michelangelo's work in the New Sacristy and Etruscan artistic motifs are considered, it seems doubtful that this resemblance is coincidence. It is logical to assume that Michelangelo, under close supervision by Cardinal Giulio

and Pope Leo X, intentionally alluded to the Tuscan's Etruscan heritage. This would have been an appropriate way to honor four of the most famous Medici of his time period in their final resting place.

4. Poggio a Caiano

While Etruscan artistic motifs had a major impact on Medici sponsored art, Etruscan themes also worked their way into the artistic consciousness of Renaissance Tuscany. Pontormo's lunette in the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano (1520-21), completed around the same time as the New Sacristy, seems to directly display elements of the Medici-Etruscan myth. The villa was begun by Lorenzo 'Il Magnifico' around 1490, but was not finished by the time of his death in 1492. The building was abandoned shortly after during the Medici expulsion from Florence in 1494 and construction was not resumed until after the return of the Medici in 151222. The villa itself is a trove of classical allusions and in fact rests on the site of the setting of one of Lorenzo the Magnificent's Ovidian poems. Many Renaissance poets at the time looked to the Augustan period poet Ovid for inspiration, and Lorenzo de' Medici was no exception. In the poem *Ambra*, which takes place on the land where Poggio a Caiano now stands, the nymph Ambra is pursued by a river god and transforms into a rock in order to escape. Her lover Lauro, a hero who is undoubtedly meant to represent Lorenzo, is left alone and distraught. By constructing this poem, Lorenzo incorporated both himself and his new villa into an Ovidian mythology23.

For Lorenzo *'il magnifico*' de' Medici to make parallels between himself and classical heroes and even deities was not uncommon. He identified particularly with nature deities who appeared in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* including Apollo and Pan. Such comparisons fit into Medici ideology well because they viewed contemporary Florence as a rebirth of the classical golden age. The regeneration of nature became a metaphor for Medici rule, and Lorenzo de' Medici adopted the motto *le temps revient* or "the time returns". By the time of Lorenzo's death in 1492 the villa was unfinished but already bore marks of an Etruscan reference. The architecture of the pediment and columns seems to echo that of an Etruscan temple, a style described by Vitruvius (Fig. 11)24. The serpent-bearing figure in the frieze above the colonnade also has much in common with images of Etruscan demons (Fig. 12)25. Considering the already Etruscanizing influence at Poggio a Caiano, it is no surprise that the Pontormo fresco in the *Sala di Leone X* commissioned by Leo X after the Medici return to Florence features the primary Etruscan deity, Vertumnus.

Figure 11: Medici Villa at Poggio a Caiano

Figure 12: Detail, original frieze above the colonnade at Poggio a Caiano, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Villa_di_poggio_a_caiano,_fregio_10.JPG

Figure 13: *Vertumnus and Pomona*, Pontormo, ttp://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacopo_Pontormo_048.jpg

Pontormo's fresco *Vertumnus and Pomona* centers around a lunette and features a bucolic scene in which peasants and *putti* frolic beneath the branches of trees (Fig. 13). The fresco is based on the myth in Book XIV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that centers on the beautiful nymph Pomona who continuously rejects her many suitors, including the shape-shifting Vertumnus. In order to win Pomona's trust, Vertumnus transforms himself into an elderly woman and lectures her on the dangers of always rejecting her suitors. After this, he reveals himself in his true form and is so beautiful that Pomona instantly falls in love with him26. Weil-Garris Posner points out the similarity between the Etruscan-style effigies of Michelangelo's tombs and Pontormo's reclining figures in *Vertumnus and Pomona*, and indeed these works were created around the same time. While Pontormo may have gained some inspiration from Michelangelo's work, it is likely that Pontormo would have understood the Etruscan inspiration behind it and the choice of such postures for his subjects would have enforced the Etruscan theme of his own work27.

At the time of the fresco's commission, the Florentine-Etruscan myth begun by Annio da Viterbo was gaining popularity and had certainly caught the attention of the Medici. Vertumnus also fit nicely into the Medici imagery of Florence's metaphorical spring in an age of classical rebirth. The god also would have appealed to Lorenzo de' Medici, whose memory would no doubt have been considered when planning the fresco. A nature deity, Vertumnus is featured in *Metamorphoses*, which would have appealed to Lorenzo's Ovidian obsession. Vertumnus' Latin name according to Annio da Viterbo, Janus, also would have had interesting parallels to Lorenzo who identified with the god as the deity of January, his birth month. He was also said to have bee able to transform into any god, including Apollo to whom Lorenzo often compared himself28. In Pontormo's fresco *Vertumnus and Pomona*, there is not only a reference to the Medici-Etruscan myth but probably also an indirect comparison of Lorenzo to Vertumnus. The most famous Medici who brought the fortune and fame the family now enjoyed was being compared to the chief Etruscan deity.

5. The Dukes of Etruria

Of course, the Medici family was not only interested in honoring the Medici of the past, but also in establishing the power of current Medici nobles. This would have been particularly important in establishing the prestige of a different Medici branch which had come to power after the death of Alessandro de' Medici (1510-1537), Duke of Florence after the Savonarolan interlude. These members of the Medici family were not paternally related to their counterparts who held power before their expulsion from Florence, so connecting to their predecessors' success was crucial in their propaganda program. The Medici-Etruscan myth proved important in this respect as well. After Alessandro's successor, Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574), was proclaimed Grand Duke of Tuscany by Pope Pius V (1504-1572) after defeating Siena, Medici sponsored art began to refer to them as 'leaders of Etruria'29. An example of this title's display can be seen in the *Sala di Leone X* in Poggio a Caiano. Next to Pontormo's fresco is another fresco by Alessandro Allori (1535-1607) which features three winged figures seated under a Medici family crest being held aloft by playful putti (Fig. 14). A Latin inscription underfoot of the central figure proclaims that "Francesco de' Medici, second leader of Etruria, watched over this work after its creation," (Fig. 15). Francesco de' Medici, the son of Cosimo I, no doubt inherited his father's Etruscan obsession. In many ways, the Medici-Etruscan myth reached its height under the rule of Cosimo I.

Figure 14: Detail, Fresco in the *sala di Leone X* at Poggio a Caiano, Alessandro Allori

Figure 15: Detail, Fresco in the *sala di Leone X* at Poggio a Caiano, Alessandro Allori

Cosimo I became Grand Duke of Florence in January 1537, succeeding his cousin Alessandro who had been assassinated. Although he was only seventeen at the time of his ascension, he seemed to grasp early in his reign the importance of propaganda in validating his rule30. Under Cosimo, the Etruscan focus which had waned during the Medici expulsion in Florence saw resurgence. In the Academia Fiorentina, renewed speculations by various scholars on Tuscany's glorious past revived the Medici-Etruscan myth. Scholars like Giambattista Gelli (1498–1563) and Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) traced the Tuscan language and history back to the Etruscans. They again claimed the Etruscans were descendants of Noah and spoke a tongue derived from Aramaic. Their writings expanded on those of Annio da Viterbo, attributing Tuscan place names to Etruscan rather than Latin origins31. Cosimo

instructed his personal librarian at the Biblioteca Laurenziana, Pierfrancesco Giambullari (1495-1555) to study the linguistic origins of Tuscany. According to Giambullari, the Etruscan civilization was the "verissima origine della Toscana" or the "true origin of Tuscany". Cosimo seems to have taken this claim to heart, for in 1577, Cosimo's duchy was rounded off to twelve towns after the fall of Siena. According to Cosimo, these twelve towns revived the twelve Etruscan city-states. It is telling that after securing his rule over these twelve Tuscan towns, Cosimo ceased his focus on territorial expansion and instead turned his attention to the acquisition of a royal title32.

The Etruscan imagery in the political art commissioned by Cosimo I is surprisingly vast. He employed Georgio Vasari (1511-1574), himself an art historian who was familiar with many of the most influential Renaissance artists including Michelangelo and Pontormo, in overseeing many of the most important parts of Cosimo's political program. These included both impermanent structures erected for festivities and triumphs as well as permanent monuments33. An example of a monument erected for Cosimo I can be seen in the Piazza Santa Trinita in Florence (Fig 16.), where *The Column of Justice* bears an inscription proclaiming him as the "duke of Etruria," (Fig 17).

Figure 16: Detail, *Column of Justice*, Piazza Santa Trinita, Florence

Figure 17: Detail, *Column of Justice*, Piazza Santa Trinita, Florence

Vasari also aided in the oversight of the decoration and renovation of the Palazzo Vecchio, where Cosimo kept a study furnished with antiquities and contemporary art from around the globe. The focus of the study however was on Etruscan antiquities which included several bronzes. Among these were several famous pieces from Arezzo including a large bronze *Minerva* which, along with such pieces as the famous *Chimera* statue, was actually discovered during Cosimo's time within Cosimo's territory. These antiquities were regarded as being matched in age only with Egyptian artifacts and were placed next to contemporary Tuscan artworks so viewers could draw comparisons between the Tuscan past and present. The artwork from other regions within the study was considered admirable, but was only meant to offset the superior quality of Tuscan art. Cosimo's study existed primarily to suggest that the artistic rebirth that had occurred in Florence was a resurrection of a former greatness that could have only happened in the heart of Etruria34. Although certainly not the only example of Cosimo's Etruscan fascination, his *scrittoio* is comprehensive proof of the respect he accorded to the Medici myth.

The Medici-Etruscan myth reached its zenith under Cosimo I in the sixteenth century. However, its connotations did not disappear after his death and instead followed the Medici dynasty in the following centuries. The art of Medici patronage, which was increasingly used as propaganda and was regarded less for its inherent artistic value

than for what purpose it might serve, continued to refer to the Grand Dukes of Tuscany as the "leaders of Etruria"35. Reminders of this title can be seen in Medici sponsored artwork throughout Tuscany. Two busts of Maria Magdalena (1589-1631), wife of Cosimo II de' Medici (1590-1621) (Fig. 18) and Vittoria della Rovere (1622-1694), wife of Ferdinando II de' Medici (1610-1670) (Fig. 19), which are now found in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence bear Latin inscriptions which proclaim them the wives of the "leaders of Etruria". In Pisa, the Medici shipyard is bedecked with plaques announcing the naval victories of Grand Duke Cosimo II against Ottomans and pirates. These plaques also reinforce the victory of the "Etruscan", not simply Tuscan, triremes (Fig. 20). These are but a few examples of the continued Etruscan influence in Medici family monuments in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Figure 18: Detail, pedestal for the bust of Vittoria de' Medici, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Figure 19: Detail, pedestal for the bust of Maria Magdalena de' Medici, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Figure 20: Triumphal Plaque, Medici Shipyards, Pisa

The political success and well-established power of the Medici can easily be attributed to their skillful use of propaganda. A central part of their propaganda program was the Medici-Etruscan myth, which allowed them to legitimize their rule of Florence and later Tuscany by claiming their ability to restore the land that was once ancient Etruria to its former greatness. Although it began as a tool to forge alliances between independent Tuscan city-states against foreign enemies, the myth evolved into a tool enforcing Medici dominance. In Medici sponsored art, particularly in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Etruscan themes and motifs became increasingly common. Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo and Pontormo were inspired by the Etruscan tomb paintings and artifacts being discovered at the time and utilized their inspiration to appease their Medici patrons. Leo X recognized the importance of the Medici-Etruscan myth and incorporated it into his efforts at restoring Medici prominence and honor after their expulsion from Florence. Under Cosimo I's aggressive propaganda campaign, Etruscan influence reached its height and ancient Etruria became recognized even over Rome as the "true origin of Tuscany". The Medici family adopted the writings of scholars who altered historical fact to give Tuscany a holy stature and equated their rule of Florence with a rebirth of Tuscany's Etruscan golden age. Medici leaders compared themselves with legendary Etruscan kings and even Etruscan gods, and the artists they patronized attempted to reinforce that imagery. While the rest of Italy looked to ancient Rome for classical inspiration, the "Dukes of Etruria" brought Tuscany's focus to their more localized ancient Etruscan roots.

6. References

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