THE MEDICI COAT OF ARMS AND ETRUSCAN VOTIVE SCULPTURE

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Abstract

The origin of the Medici emblem has been a source of much speculation over the centuries. It has been suggested that the distinctive balls, or palle, represent either dents on a shield, medicinal pills, cupping-glasses, oranges, or coins. None of these objects, however, are accurately represented by smooth, red spheres. It is here proposed that the Medici symbol was designed to represent the virility and fecundity of the Medici family, using symbols drawn from Etruscan votive offerings.

> *'In the name of God and of His Mother the Virgin Mary: grant us a good beginning and good fortune, and our salvation, and the salvation of those born of us.'*
>
> Giuliano di Giovencho de' Medici, 1421[1]

The Medici emblem is prominently displayed on buildings around Tuscany. This simple yet imposing symbol is commonly depicted in the round with red spheres against a gold background. There has been much speculation over the centuries as to its origins. The distinctive balls, or *palle*, have been postulated to represent dents on a shield, medicinal pills, cupping-glasses, the heads of slain enemies, oranges, and coins.[2] In addition, Roy Brogan suggests that the symbol was inspired by the shield of the *Arte del Cambio*, the Florentine guild of Bankers and Moneychangers.[3] None of these objects, however, are accurately represented by smooth, red spheres, nor do they explain the various iterations of the family crest. I propose that the different forms of the coat of arms were designed to represent the virility and fecundity of the Medici family, using symbols drawn from Etruscan votive offerings. Tuscany was named after its pre-Roman title, Etruria, and

[1] Philip Gavitt, *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410–1536* (Michigan, 1990) pp.239 and 268 (note 176). Gavitt cites this sentence from the Medici MS., fol. 13r, 22 September 1421 (Baker Library, Harvard Business School).

[2] For the *palle* as either dents on a shield, medicinal pills, cupping-glasses, or the heads of slain enemies, see R. Brogan, *A Signature of Power and Patronage: The Medici Coat of Arms, 1299–1492, Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures,* vol. 20 (New York, 1993) pp.33–34.; for the spheres as citrus fruits, see D. Kent: *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance* (New Haven and London, 2000) pp. 157 and 299.; for the Medici balls as coins, see J.R. Hale, ed., *A Concise Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance* (Oxford, 1981) p.207.

[3] Brogan, op. cit. pp.37–38.

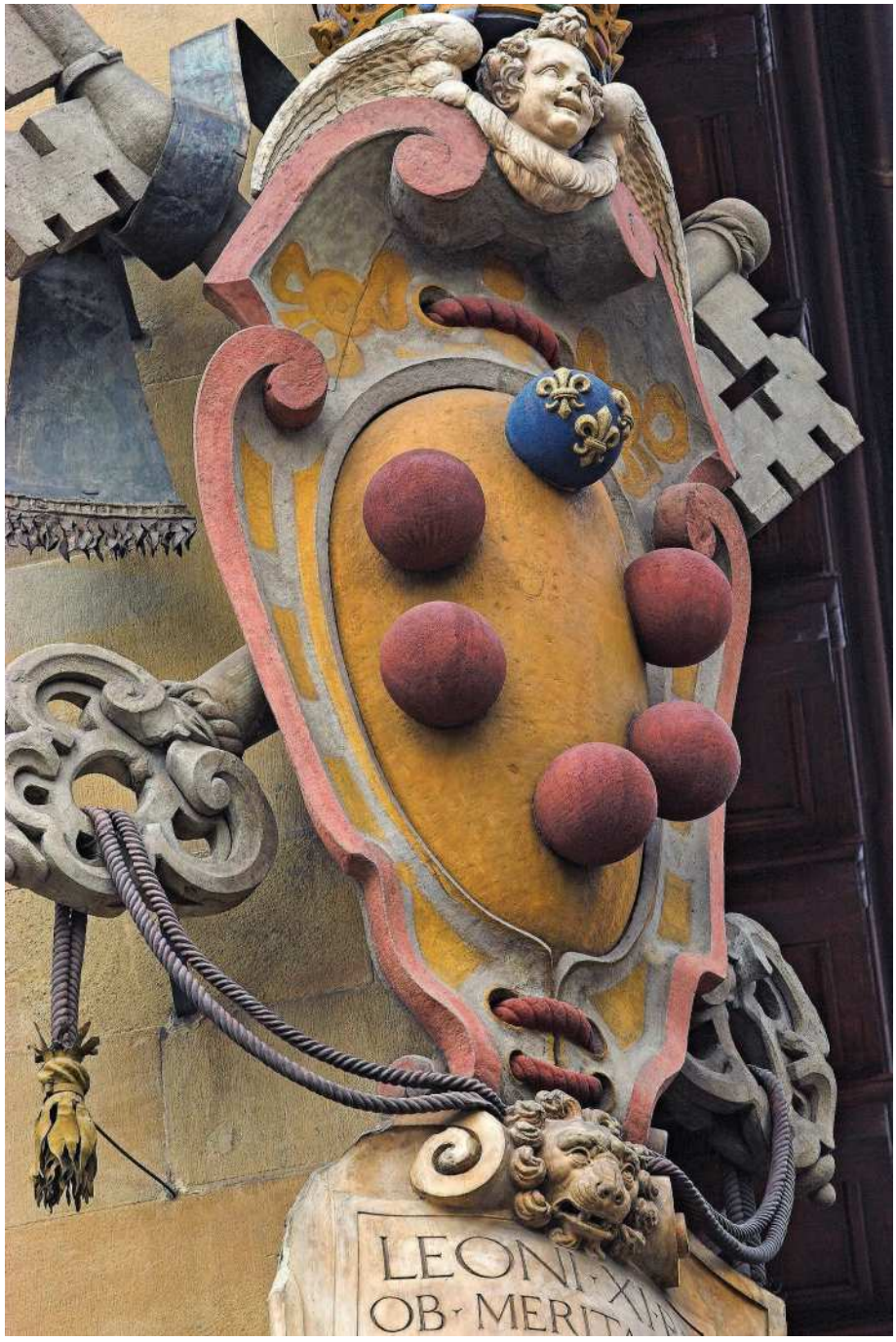

Figure 1: Arms of the fourth Medici Pope, Leo XI (ruled 1605). Shield on the corner of the Palazzo Arcivescoville, Florence. Source: Wikimedia.

Figure 2: Medici coat of arms as a domed 'shield', the Medici fortress in Grosseto, Tuscany. This fortress was acquired by Cosimo I de' Medici in the sixteenth century. Source: Alamy.

its illustrious history was mined by later inhabitants – including the Medici – to help recreate a sense of its former glory. The Medici also took part in the religious custom of offering up votive statues, a practice that recalled the ancient Etruscan convention of donating anatomical sculptures in the hope of, or gratitude for, divine favour.

THE MEDICI ARMS

In the early Renaissance, the Medici were considered the most successful banking family, with commercial branches established in a number of Italian cities.[4] 1397 can be regarded as the founding date of the great Medici Bank as this was the year that Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (c.1360–1429) transferred his headquarters from Rome to Florence.[5] It was probably the case, however, that members of the family were already in Florence at that point. Records show that Giovanni's cousin, Salvestro de' Medici, became *gonfaloniere* in 1378, which strongly suggests that the family had been in the city for several decades before that date.[6] Giovanni's son, Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), built on his father's success and in the second half of the fifteenth century the family gained substantial power in Florence. The road to success was not smooth and until the late thirteenth century, the most influential family in Florence were the Albizzi. In 1433, Rinaldo Albizzi succeeded in having Cosimo de' Medici exiled, but one year later he returned, and over the next few decades managed to establish the Medici as the city's principle family.[7] Under the control of Cosimo de' Medici, the Medici eventually became bankers to the Vatican.

The Medici coat of arms has remained something of a Florentine riddle. In the Renaissance it had two main styles of public presentation, a shield with an arrangement of balls, or *palle* (**Figure 1 and 2**), and a rarer triangular form containing six circles, as seen on the floor of the Florentine Duomo (**Figure 7b**).[8] The *palle* were usually red in colour and were often placed on a golden field. In addition, there was a version of the symbol created from a simple grid structure, a tear shape, and a group of small circles (**Figure 8**).[9] This fifteenth-century form of the insignia was used for authenticating documents in the Medici Bank.[10]

The exact date at which the Medici coat of arms first appeared is not known, but it only appears to have become a prominent feature in Tuscany during the establishment of the Medici Bank. There are several fourteenth-century Medici funerary monuments bearing the family emblem in the crypt of Florence Cathedral; both tombs and notices of funerary rituals are documented for the Medici in the cathedral records from 1352–

[4] R.S. Lopez, J. Le Goff, T.W. Blomquist, M. Prestwich, J.-F. Bergier, M. Riu, J.H. Munro, B. Krekić, A.L. Udovitch and H.A. Miskimin, *The Dawn of Modern Banking* (New Haven and London, 1979) p.106.

[5] P. Strathern,*The Medici: Power, Money, and Ambition in the Italian Renaissance* (New York, 2016) pp.25–26.

[6] Strathern, op. cit. p.21.

[7] R.J. Crum, 'Severing the Neck of Pride: Donatello's "Judith and Holofernes" and the Recollection of Albizzi Shame in Medicean Florence', *Artibus et Historiae* vol. 22 (2001) p.23.

[8] Further examples of this triangular Medici symbol containing six *palle* can be found in Florence, including: in the basilica of Santa Croce; in the Room of Lorenzo il Magnifico, Palazzo Vecchio; and in the cortile of the Palazzo Medici. For images of the latter two examples, see Brogan, op. cit. pp.326–27, figures 42 and 43.

[9] For a detailed description of the manuscript, see S. Pelle, A.M. Russo, D. Speranzi and S. Zamponi, eds, *I manoscritti datati della Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze*, III (Florence, 2011) p.120.

[10] Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence MS. Palatino Panciatichiano 71, fol. 1r. This folio contains the following colophon: '*In Christi nomine, amen. A dì primo di dicembre 1416. Questo libro è d'Antonio di messer Francesco da Pescia, sul quale scriverò modi e forme che si deono tenere in merchantie e chambi in ongni luogo dove fosse* [...] *Chominciato per me Antonio sopra dedo, a dì primo di dicembre 1416, nel tempo che stavo e ero fattore di Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici in Firenze*'. I am indebted to David Speranzi from the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale for this information.

1440.[11] Brogan traces the Medici coat of arms slightly further back, to the sarcophagus of Guccio di Bonagiunta de' Medici who appears to have died in the early 1300s.[12] Guccio formed a moneychanging company with his brothers and was made *gonfaloniere* in 1299.[13] Raymond de Roover suggests that the Medici family probably used their armorial bearings long before it became connected with banking, but he provides no supporting evidence for this assertion.[14] If the Medici did have a coat of arms before Guccio di Bonagiunta de' Medici's rise to success at the end of the thirteenth century, its design may have taken a different form. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the number of *palle* on the Medici shield appears to have varied from five to eleven.[15] During the second half of the fifteenth century, however, the number of balls stabilised at six. The various iterations of the symbol, and its eventual standardisation, suggest that the focus for the design and development of the emblem occurred between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also coincided with the Tuscan interest in the ancient Etruscans and their art. In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, Etruscan sites were being searched for relics of the illustrious past. Fragments of their sculpture were found in rural burial sites and, due to the rapid expansion of towns, many antiquities once again saw the light of day.[16] Amanda Collins argues that descriptions in Dante's *Inferno*, and the geographical speculations of Boccaccio and Petrarch, reinforce the theory that there was an interest in an Etruscan past as early as 1300, or even before.[17] Collins also notes the influence of the visual arts, reporting that in 1282 Arnolfo da Cambio depicted the Madonna at San Domenico wearing jewellery like that unearthed from Etruscan funerary finds, and that Etruscan motifs may be found throughout the work of fifteenth-century architects, sculptors and painters[18]. Eric Schoonhoven observes that artists such as Donatello (1386–1466), Leon Batttista Alberti (1404–72) and Antonio del Pollaiuolo

[11] J.T. Paoletti,'Medici Funerary Monuments in the Duomo of Florence during the Fourteenth Century: A Prologue to "The Early Medici"', *Renaissance Quarterly,* vol. 59 (Winter 2006) p.1130.

[12] Brogan, op. cit. pp.36–37 and 223. Roy Brogan notes that Guccio was entombed in an ancient Roman sarcophagus which presently resides in the Baptistry of San Giovanni. Two Medici shields – one containing six *palle* and the other, nine – have been carved into the sarcophagus cover.

[13] Brogan, op. cit. pp.36–37. One of Guccio's brothers was Ardingo, the first Medici to become Prior of Florence.

[14] R. de Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank: 1397–1494* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1963) p.15.

[15] For one of the oldest shields of the Medici containing eleven *palle*, see Brogan, op. cit. p.34.

[16] E. Schoonhoven, 'A Literary Invention: The Etruscan Myth in Early Renaissance Florence', *Renaissance Studies* vol. 24 (September 2010) p.459.

[17] A.L. Collins, 'The Etruscans in the Renaissance: The Sacred Destiny of Rome and the "Historia Viginti Saeculorum" of Giles of Viterbo (c.1469–1532)', *Historical Reflections/ Réflexions Historiques* vol. 27 (Spring 2001) p.110.

[18] Collins, op. cit. p.110.; See also A.M. Gáldy,*Cosimo I de' Medici as Collector: Antiques and Archaeology in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009) p.58 (note 136). Andrea Gáldy cites a source for the interest in Etruscans and Etruscan art in the 1400s, G. Cipriani, *Il mito etrusco nel rinascimento fiorentino* (Florence, 1980) pp.15–36.

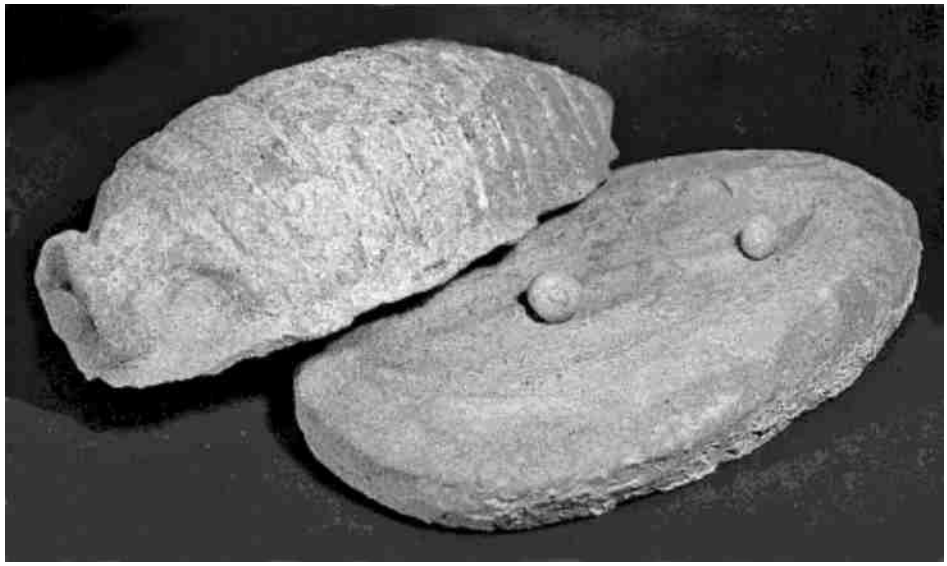

Figure 3: Terracotta models of a uterus with two balls from the Etruscan site of Vulci, Italy. (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Tuscania). Illustration from G.Baggieri, ed., *L'antica anatomia nell'arte dei donaria* (Rome, 1999) fig. 69. Reproduced courtesy of Gaspare Baggieri.

(1429–98), among others, also responded to the new discovery of Etruscan artefacts.[19] In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, representations of the Etruscan past were also presented to scholars and rulers, first by Annio of Viterbo (1432/7–1502), and then by Giles of Virterbo (c.1469–1532).[20]

It is known that Florentine Medici rulers drew on Etruria's influential history to bolster the notion of Tuscan superiority, and of an imperial splendour restored.[21] Etruria, as an ancient civilisation, flourished between the eighth and third century BC. The Etruscans were an important influence on the Romans, who drew on their success as a noble and militaristic civilisation, as well as their art, their divinatory practices, and their political and religious symbols.[22] The Medici were patrons of the sciences and the arts, and succeeded in creating superb collections of instruments and artefacts. By the middle of the fifteenth century Etruscan archeological finds were enhancing the antiquarian collection of the new Medici power-brokers.[23] The books listed in the fifteenth-century Medici inventories also attest to the family's interest in history and classical antiquity,

[19] Schoonhoven, op. cit. p.462.

[20] Collins, op. cit. p.109.

[21] Schoonhoven, op. cit. pp.459 and 462–63; and Collins pp.111–12.

[22] Collins pp.108–10.

[23] Schoonhoven, op. cit. p.462. Erik Schoonhoven comments that Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92) incorporated Etruscan antiques in his collection and demanded all important new finds.; and Collins, op. cit.p.111.

with Etruscan history and remains receiving some attention.[24] When Giovanni di Bicci died in 1429, the Medici even observed the ancient Etruscan tradition of carrying out the body of the head of the household through a hole made in the wall of the home, before placing it in a coffin at the head of the funeral procession.[25]

Ancient Etruscan votive models were made in a variety of forms and were once offered up to the gods by supplicants in the hope that they would receive divine favour, such as the cure for a disease, the relief from pain and disability, or protection during pregnancy and childbirth. These objects were also presented as gifts by way of thanksgiving for a recovery to health, or for the safe delivery of a baby. The shape of votive objects reflected the body part that required healing or protection[26], and the offerings could be made by the supplicants themselves or on behalf of their loved ones.

In 1902, the pioneering art historian, Aby Warburg, described the Renaissance Florentine tradition of associating votive offerings with sacred Christian images as 'a spontaneous reversion to a popular pagan custom'.[27] Specifically, Warburg linked the fifteenth-century donation of figurative ex votos with the practices of ancient Etruria: 'The Florentines, descendants of the superstitious Etruscans, cultivated this magical use of images in the most unblushing form, right down to the seventeenth century; and the most significant instance of this (hitherto unnoticed by art historians) invites examination in some detail'.[28]

In Florence, between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the donation of votive offerings became so popular that a veritable industry grew up around the production of objects being presented in churches.[29] These sculptures took the form of life-size wax statutes and anatomical body parts made from wax or silver. According to Giorgio Vasari,

[24] Gáldy, op. cit. pp.46–47, and 58 (notes 136 and 141). Andrea Gáldy writes that an inventory was compiled at Lorenzo de' Medici's death in 1492: R. Stapleford, *Lorenzo de' Medici at Home: The Inventory of the Palazzo Medici in 1492* (Pennsylvania, 2013) pp.8, 18 and 23. Reports on the 1512 copy of the inventory made of Lorenzo de' Medici's estate. Lorenzo had in his possession 35 sculptures, a number of which were made of terracotta. His collection tended to focus on ancient vases and sculpture rather than contemporary art, but unfortunately there appears to be no explicit description of the Etruscan art collected by the Medici.

[25] Strathern, op. cit. p.44.

[26] For a discussion of anatomical votive objects in ancient Italy, see J. Draycott and E.-J. Graham, eds., *Medicine and the Body in Antiquity: Bodies of Evidence: Ancient Anatomical Votives Past, Present and Future* (Oxford and New York, 2017) pp.45–76 and 112–146.; R. Scopacasa: 'Moulding Cultural Change: A Contextual Approach to Anatomical Votive Terracottas in Central Italy, Fourth-Second Centuries BC', *Papers of the British School at Rome* vol. 83 (2015), pp.1–27 and 343–344; and S.M. Oberhelman, 'Anatomical Votive Reliefs as Evidence for Specialization at Healing Sanctuaries in the Ancient Mediterranean World', *Athens Journal of Health* (March 2014), pp.47–62.

[27] A. Warburg, 'The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie: Domenico Ghirlandaio in Santa Trinita: The Portraits of Lorenzo de' Medici and his Household' (1902), in D. Britt, trans., *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles, 1999) p.207.

[28] Warburg, op. cit. p.189.

[29] L. Eagles, 'Warburg's Etruscan Florentines', *Sequitur* vol.4 (Spring 2018) pp.3–8; R. Ballestriero, 'Anatomical models and wax Venuses: art masterpieces or scientific craft works?', *Journal of Anatomy* vol.216 (February 2010), pp.223–34; M. Holmes, 'Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory, and Cult', in M.W. Cole and R. Zorach, eds., *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World* (Oxford and New York, 2009) pp.159–82; and Warburg, op. cit. pp.184–221.

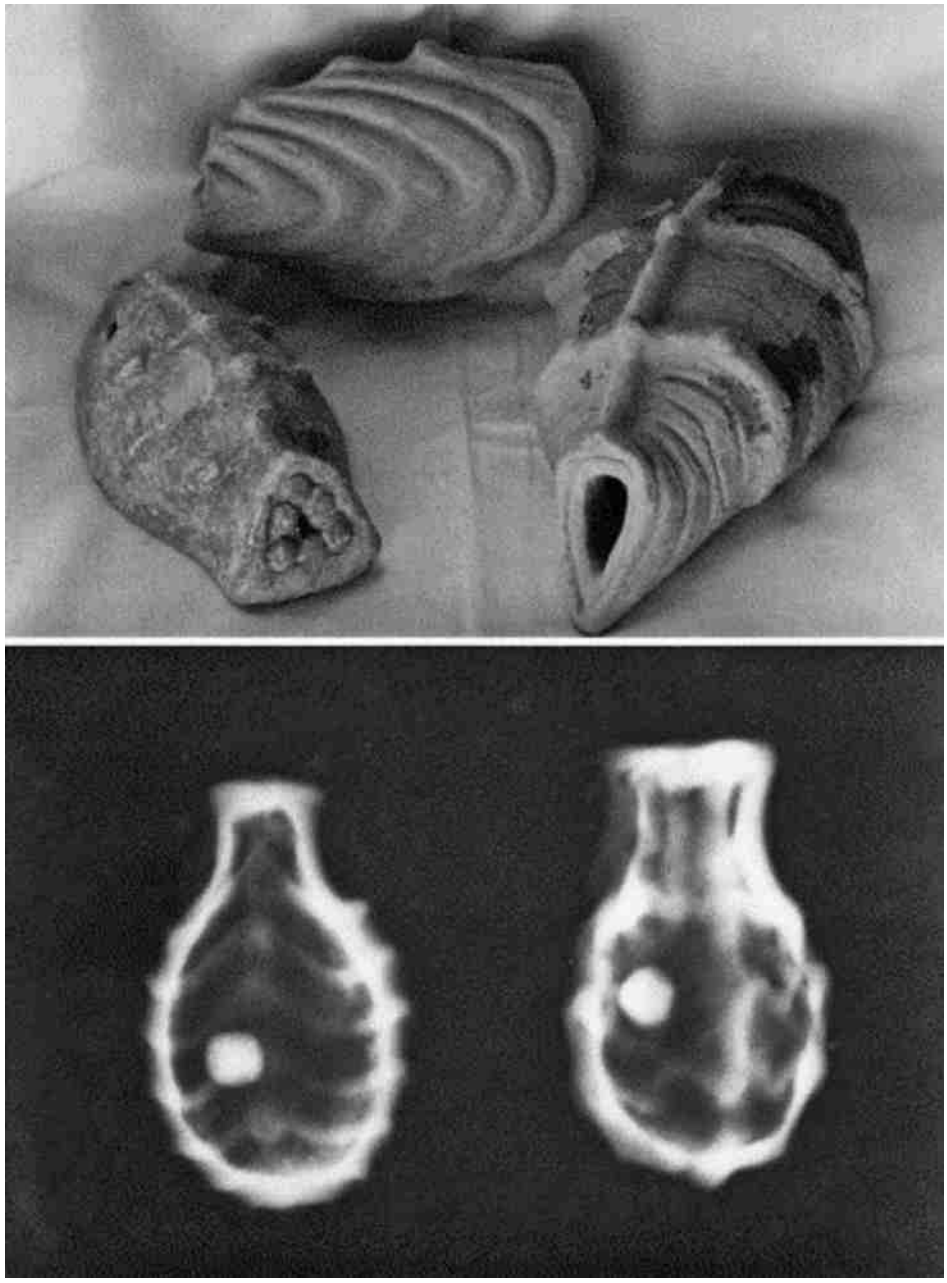

Figure 4: Examples of ancient Roman votive uteri from Etruscan site of Vulci, Tarquina, Italy. The average length of each terracotta uterus found was 20cm. Top: with open and closed entrances. Bottom: radiographs showing freely moving contents. Illustration from G. Baggieri, 'Entruscan Wombs', *The Lancet* vol.352 (September 1998), p.790, fig. 1.
Reproduced courtesy of Gaspare Baggieri.

the wax-worker Orsino Benintendi made several votive images of Lorenzo de' Medici and placed them in Florentine churches after Lorenzo survived the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478.[30] Wax as a modelling material carried with it powerful associations of identity and authority through its symbolic link to wax seals bearing the mark of office.[31] The link between votive sculptures and identifiable insignia was heightened through the tradition of encoding offerings with a coat of arms.[32]

The Medici amassed their wealth in part through usury, although they used their power carefully to avoid sanction from the Church.[33] Usury was considered a grave sin, and prohibitions against it could be found in the bible.[34] In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the production of money was steeped in metaphors of sexual generation. Robert Durling explains how Dante Alighieri drew on such analogies in the *Divine Comedy*, in which he referenced the idea of 'coining' as a form of reproduction.[35] In this particular analogy, the development of a foetus in the womb is linked to the shaping of metal coins through the striking of an image onto blank dies, thus recalling the Aristotelian theory that the father's seed leaves its impression on the mother's blood. The interrelated concepts of money and biological reproduction had a particular significance for usury, which was considered a sin against nature as it involved the accumulation of money without the requisite labour. For centuries, usury was thus understood as unnatural, as it forced money to 'breed'. As a result, the charging of interest on loans was associated with forbidden sexual appetite, and female fecundity – particularly the divinely sanctioned pregnancies of the Virgin Mary or Saint Anne – was understood as the antithesis of usury.[36] For those found guilty of committing this sin, the punishment could be severe. The draconian penalties included pouring molten metal into the body[37], a sanction presumably designed to evoke the notion of 'coining' as an internal, reproductive process.

In the early Renaissance, some votive donations of art took forms other than wax or silver effigies.[38] In the fourteenth century, for example, the banker Enrico Scrovegni made an offering of a church and its paintings as a votive gift to atone for his sin of usury,

[30] F. W. Kent, *Lorenzo de' Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore and London, 2004) p.76.

[31] Holmes, op. cit. p.161.

[32] Holmes p.163.

[33] De Roover, op. cit. pp.10–14 writes that in public the Medici vigorously disclaimed that they were usurers, but they were not so regarded by the public. Indeed, the Medici were on the very fringe of legitimate business,and went out of their way to skirt around the rules. Paradoxically, whilst smaller traders befell the dreadful fate of the usurer, being denied a Christian burial and the ability to make valid testaments, the more powerful companies used their power to avoid such punishments.

[34] Warnings about lending money for profit can be found in various books of the bible, including *Exodus* 22:25, *Leviticus* 25:36–37, *Deuteronomy* 23:19, and *Ezekiel* 18:13.

[35] R. Durling, ed. and trans., *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 1, Inferno* (Oxford, 1996) pp.479 and 558; and *Volume 2, Purgatorio* (Oxford, 2003) pp.434 and 436.

[36] A. Derbes and M. Sandona, 'Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb: The Program of Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua', *The Art Bulletin* vol.80 (June 1998), pp.274–291.

[37] A. Derbes and M. Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart: Giotto, Enrico Scrovegni, and the Arena Chapel in Padua* (University Park, PA. 2008) pp.69 and 183 (note 103). This punishment involved a form of force-feeding, or gavage.

[38] Holmes, op. cit. p.166. In 1448, Piero de' Medici commissioned an all'antica-style tabernacle to frame a fourteenth-century fresco of the Annunciation as a votive offering.

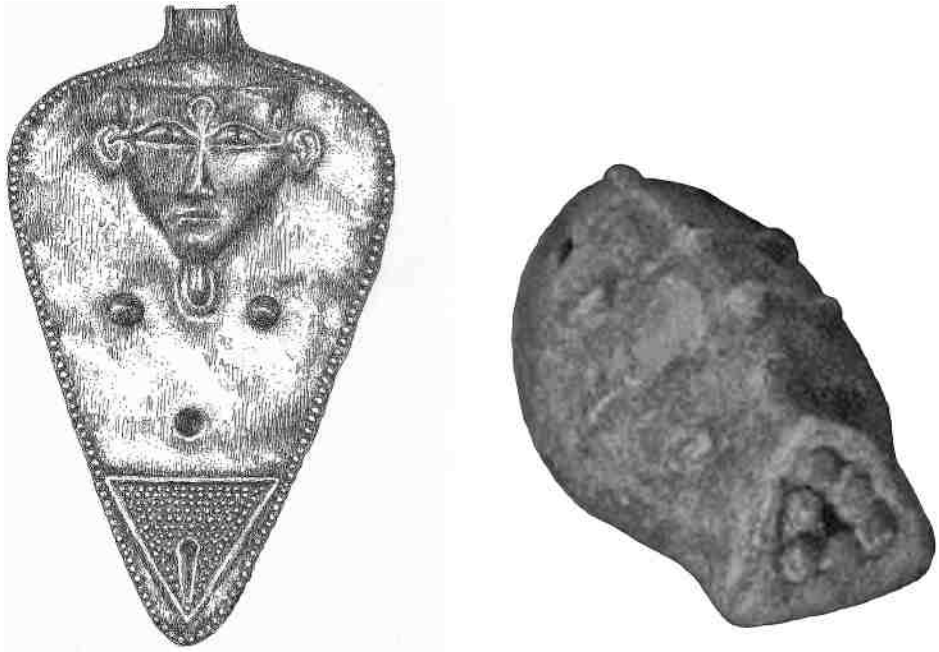

Figure 5: On the left a line drawing by the author of a Canaanite fertility amulet from Tell el-Ajjul featuring a nude goddess in Egyptian style. Gold plaque-pendant. c.1600 – 1400 BC. (Rockefeller Archaeological Museum, Jerusalem). On the right: this Etruscan uterus, with its external spheres and triangular cervix (detail from figure 4), evokes the embossed abdomen and vulva of the Canaanite fertility amulet.

in the hope that he would receive salvation.[39] Commissioned by Enrico to decorate his Scrovegni (or Arena) Chapel (1303–06), Giotto di Bondone (also a Florentine) included a depiction of his patron offering up a miniature version of the chapel to the Virgin Mary in the *Last Judgement*. Throughout Giotto's Paduan fresco cycle, we can see the counterbalancing of usury with the curative power of fecundity.[40] The Scrovegni family were well known in Padua for money lending and Enrico's father, Reginaldo degli Scrovegni, was even included in Dante's *Divine Comedy* as one of the sinful usurers.[41] As described by the poet, the Scrovegni coat of arms took the form of a pregnant sow. The name of the family – Scrovegni – was derived from the Italian word *scrofa* meaning sow, thus the depiction of swine on their heraldry. The reason why the Scrovegni bankers chose to depict the sow as pregnant, however, is less obvious but it is likely to have been

[39] R.H. Rough, 'Enrico Scrovegni, the Cavalieri Gaudenti, and the Arena Chapel in Padua', *The Art Bulletin* vol.62 (March 1980), p.26.

[40] Derbes and Sandona, op. cit.

[41] *Inferno* 17.53–66. Dante identified Reginaldo degli Scrovegni through his family emblem, a blue, pregnant sow on a white background.

a reference to the pig as a symbol of fertility and prosperity. Even today, we use a 'piggy bank' to save money.[42]

Florentine ex voto objects were frequently associated with maternity and babies.[43] This would have reflected the high mortality rate of infants, and of mothers in childbirth.[44] These particular votive images took a variety of forms, such as paintings of childbirth[45], wax anatomical models of breasts[46], and small reliefs of babies without personal features.[47] In central Italy, ancient maternal votive offerings took the form of swaddled babies, terracotta breasts, and model wombs. Modern-day archeologists have recovered thousands of anatomical votive objects, including terracotta pigs and uteri which were often made with small spherical balls inside. When found inside terracotta models of the uterus, it is likely that these balls symbolised the unborn child, or the wish for a healthy pregnancy and safe delivery.[48] As proposed by Véronique Dasen, the terracotta rattles shaped as pigs could have represented a similar notion.[49] Votive models of female genitalia were very common, reflecting the emphasis in the ancient world on female fertility. At the Etruscan site in Vulci, over 400 terracotta uteri were discovered.[50] Etruscan relics have been found in the agricultural Mugello Valley in Tuscany, the area in which the Medici family originated, and which is rich in archeological sites.[51]

Etruscan terracotta votive wombs tend to be generally realistic with regards to capturing the anatomy of the subject, but the details of the uteri can vary. The exterior decoration ranges from parallel lines to an exterior grid, and the number of spherical balls inside the object can vary from one to two (**Figures 3 and 4**). Most wombs were created to reflect normal physiology, but in some cases there seems to be an indication of a gynaecological condition. It may be the case that the external nodules relate to common growths such as cysts or fibroids, or to ectopic pregnancies. There is also a striking resemblance between some ancient Canaanite fertility amulets and some Etruscan votive wombs. There is evidence to suggest that the Etruscans were influenced by the Canaanite

[42] For the pig as a symbol of fertility and prosperity, see A. Ronnberg and K. Martin, eds, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, 2010) pp.324–27; and J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London, 1979) pp.166–67.

[43] Holmes, op. cit. p.164.

[44] W. Reif, 'Renaissance Women: Picture Perfect', *The Lancet* vol. 358 (December 2001) p.2003.

[45] M. Laven, 'Recording Miracles in Renaissance Italy', *Past & Present* vol.230 (November 2016) pp.196 and 198.

[46] Holmes, op. cit. pp.161–62.

[47] Laven, op. cit. p.192.

[48] Oberhelman, op. cit. pp.57–58; V. Dasen, 'Becoming Human: From the Embryo to the Newborn Child', in J.E. Grubbs, T. Parkin and R. Bell, eds.,*The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World* (Oxford, 2013) p.29.; and G. Baggieri, 'Etruscan Wombs', *The Lancet* vol.352 (1998) p.790.

[49] Dasen, op. cit. p.29.

[50] Oberhelman, op. cit. pp.57–58.

[51] M. Gleba and H. Becker, eds., *Votives, Places and Rituals in Etruscan Religion: Studies in Honor of Jean MacIntosh Turfa* (Leiden, 2009) p.109. The Mugello Valley Archaeological Project was set up to excavate and analyse this ancient Etruscan site.; and Strathern, op. cit. p.24.

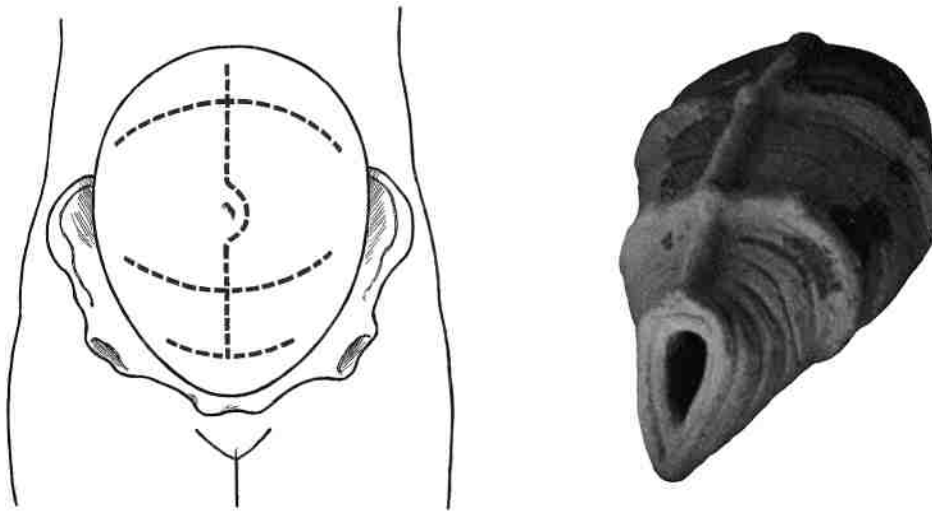

Figure 6: On the left a line drawing by the author, after a medical illustration by Jan Redden. This diagram demonstrates the various incisions used in modern day caesarean sections. On the right: the arrangement of obstetric incisions is comparable with the grid-like structure on some Etruscan votive uteri (detail from figure 4).

culture in terms of their art, alphabet, farming practices, fetishes and old remedies.[52] On the Canaanite pendant featured (**Figure 5a**), the rounded shapes of the breasts and pubic hair are an intrinsic part of the fertility symbolism encoded within the sculptural form. If the Etruscan sculptors had knowledge of these former Canaanite fertility objects, it may be the case that the later terracotta wombs featured embryonic balls on the outside in part to emulate their ancient predecessors. If this was indeed so, it is interesting to note that the Canaanite design was created by punching the shapes from the back, a process which recalls the theory that the Medici motif symbolised blows to a metal shield.

Ancient practitioners may have become familiar with the structure of the womb through the performing of caesarean sections and this, in turn, could account for the accuracy of these anatomical objects. I propose that the horizontal or vertical cut made by the surgeon during a caesarean operation might also account for the grid-like structure on the exterior of some terracotta uteri (**Figure 6b**). In Roman law it was prohibited to bury a pregnant woman who had died before delivering her baby without first removing the foetus, in order to give the baby every possible chance of survival.[53] The carrying out of post-mortem caesarean sections could account for the relatively accurate anatomical

[52] J.M. Turfa, *Divining the Etruscan World: The Brontoscopic Calendar and Religious Practice*, (Cambridge and New York 2012) pp.265–66; B.L. Ra'Ad, 'Primal Scenes of Globalization: Legacies of Canaan and Etruria', *PMLA* vol.116 (January 2001) pp.89–110, esp. 89–90 and 92–94; and J. Magness, 'A Near Eastern Ethnic Element Among the Etruscan Elite?', *Etruscan Studies: Journal of the Etruscan Foundation* vol.8 (2001) pp.92–94.

[53] Oberhelman, op. cit. p.59; and F.A. Chervenak and A. Kurjak, eds., *Fetal Medicine: The Clinical Care of the Fetus as a Patient* (New York and London, 1999) p.336.

depiction of votive uteri. It should be remembered, however, that all votive sculptures of a womb were intended to ensure a positive outcome: whatever the anxiety or physical ailment, the hope was for the delivery of a healthy baby.

For an understanding of the Medici coat of arms, I suggest we should start by considering what the Medici family would have wanted to convey through its design. A family would declare their power and status to the world through heraldry. Commonly these images included those of physical strength, for example a knight on horseback or a majestic lion, or those relating to biological reproduction, symbolising the hope for prosperity in terms of producing healthy offspring to carry on the family name. This generative aspect was reflected in imagery relating to new life, for example the acorns of the della Rovere family emblem. Della Rovere literally translates in Italian to 'of oak' which explains the coat of arms as a spreading oak tree. As with the Scrovegni emblem, however, there is an emphasis on the generative aspect of the heraldry, in this case through the depiction of both acorns and roots. The exposed pomegranate seeds of Katherine of Aragon's coat of arms represent a further example of a family emblem communicating the notion of fertility and biological generation.

When we compare the various forms of Etruscan votive uteri with the Medici emblem, there are some striking similarities. In **Figure 7** we can see how the shallow, domed oval of the terracotta uterus appears to prefigure the convex form of the Medici shield. Often the balls, or *palle,* on the family insignia were red, evoking the terracotta-coloured spheres inside the votive objects, as well as on their outer surface. In addition, the triangular neck of the clay womb is comparable to the triangular Medici symbol on the floor of the Duomo, both of which contain six red balls in the same configuration.

The fifteenth-century version of the family sign used in the Medici Bank shows a slightly different combination of elements, with the simple geometric grid recalling that on the outside of some uteri (**Figure 8**). The tear shape on the lower section of the emblem also evokes the tear shape of some openings to votive uteri. The dark circles in the diagram again recall the small spherical balls of the Etruscan terracotta models. The size of Etruscan terracotta uteri varied, but the average length of those found in the area of Vulci is 20 cm.[54] The length of the insignia on the Renaissance Medici Bank document is approximately 16.5 cm, which is comparable with the length of some votive uteri found in Punta della Vipera.[55] If the Medici insignia was drawn to recreate the dimensions of the actual votive object, then this might account for the enormous size of the symbol relative to the document. It is also of note that the Italian word Medici means

[54] Baggieri, op. cit. p.790. Gaspare Baggieri and his team examined more than 400 terracotta artefacts from the Etruscan area of Vulci.

[55] A. Comella, 'Il Santuario di Punta della Vipera. Santa Marinella comune di Civitavecchia. I. I materiali votivi. Corpus delle stipi votive in Italia XIII, Regio VII, 6' Archeologica vol.131 (Rome, 2001). Punta della Vipera is a small sanctuary deposit about thirty-two kilometres from the contemporaneous Etruscan city of Cerveteri. Annamaria Comella's findings with regard to ancient votive wombs are presented in E. Fraccaro: 'Social and Cultural Significance of Etruscan Female Anatomical Votives', dissertation for University College London, Institute of Archeology (2014). One model uterus is recorded as being 16 cm in length, and another as 17 cm.

Figure 7: Top Left an ancient votive uterus from the Etruscan city of Vulci (detail from figure 4). The small, round balls on the outside of this object are just visible. *Bottom left:* Triangular form of the Medici coat of arms on the floor of the Duomo, Florence Cathedral. The cathedral was built between 1296–1436. Source: florencewebguide.com. Right: Medici coat of arms as a domed 'shield' (detail from figure 2). The combined features of the Medici shield and triangular Medici symbol resemble the domed exterior of the terracotta uterus and its triangular neck containing six balls.

'doctors', which suggests that forefathers of the House of Medici were associated with the medical profession. The concept of votive objects being used to influence the healing process, or to affect a healthy outcome, would therefore be symbolic of such a link. In the case of the grid-like Medici emblem, with its possible allusion to caesarean operations, it could be considered that the bank insignia was designed to evoke the skills of the family in both medicine and banking.

If the balls on the domed Medici shield derive from the balls inside Etruscan votive wombs, their coat of arms can be seen to represent, like the votive sculptures, the hope for the arrival of healthy children. This follows the generally accepted hypothesis that the spherical balls inside the hollow Etruscan uteri represented embryonic life, as well as the wish for motherhood.[56] The idea of a small ball as a metaphor for pregnancy was also found in classical Greek texts about the property of stones, the most famous example being that of 'eagle stones' (*lithos aetites*) that ancient authors described as a

[56] Dasen, op. cit. p.29.

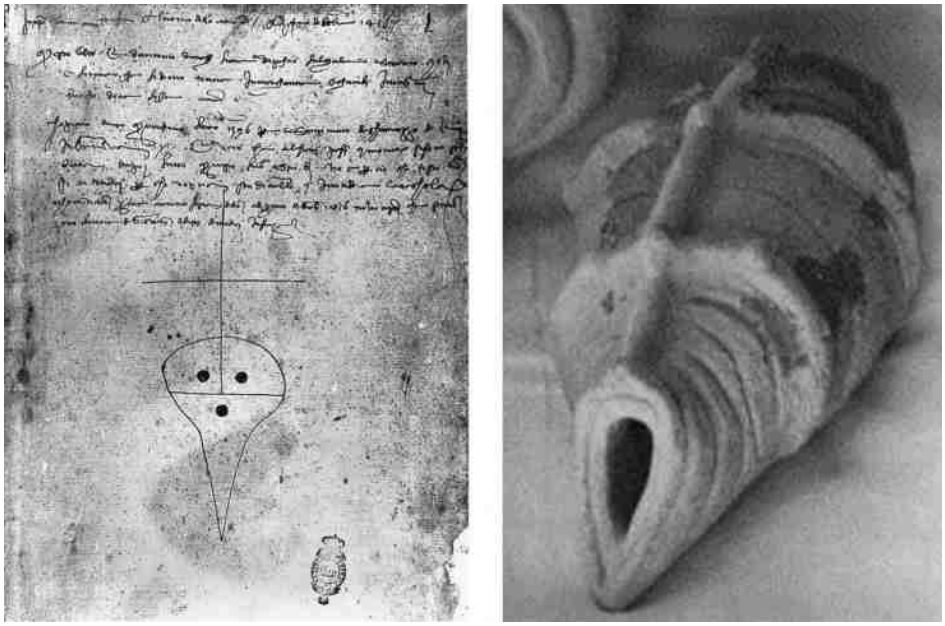

Figure 8: Left mark of the Medici Bank used for the authentication of documents. Fifteenth century. MS. Palatino Panciatichiano 71 fol. 1r. 29.1 by 21.5 cm. (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence). Reproduced by courtesy of Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali e per il turismo / Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze. Right: the linear grid and tear drop shape of the Medici Bank mark recall the features of some Etruscan votive uteri (detail from figure 4).

naturally occurring hollow stone pregnant with another smaller stone.[57] It may be the case that the number of balls on the Medici family crest was sometimes intentionally changed to reflect the number of children born to a particular member of the family at a particular moment in time. On the bank insignia there are three balls. The Medici Bank in Florence was founded by Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici who governed the family business between 1397 to 1429.[58] He sired three sons, twin brothers Cosimo and Damiano, and Lorenzo. Cosimo and Damiano were named after the sainted physician twins, Cosmas and Damian, but sadly Damiano died in 1390, only a few months after his birth.[59] If the three circles on the Medici Bank symbol did represent the three children of Giovanni di Bicci, this family emblem could have symbolised the future of their business through the guardianship of his sons. In Renaissance Tuscany, the average birth rate for one woman

[57] Ibid.

[58] De Roover, op. cit. pp. 39 and 51 writes that the leadership of the bank was transferred from Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (c.1360–1429) to his son, Cosimo de' Medici, or Cosimo the Elder (1389–1464), on his death.

[59] M. Hogan Camp, 'Visualizing dynasty and dissent in Jacopo Pontormo's *Portrait of Cosimo il Vecchio*', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 17 (December 2017) p.12.

Figure 9: Polychrome, brocaded velvet with a variation on a Medici emblem. Late fifteenth century. Woven silk, 78.7 by 53.3 cm. Italian, probably from Florence. Detail. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

was between four and seven children[60], with some mothers giving birth to ten or more babies. Although there appears to be no consistent correlation between the number of balls on the Medici shield and the number of children born to each Medici patriarch, the most often occurring number of *palle* – six – would be consistent with the average healthy birth rate in Renaissance Tuscany.

Giovanni di Bicci was by no means the only Medici to lose a child. Even in wealthy families, the mortality of infants and children was high, and the fragility of childhood lead to the concept of one's children being 'borrowed' from God.[61] Of the fifteen offspring born to Giuliano di Giovencho de' Medici and his wife Lionarda di Guido Deti, at least eight died in infancy or childhood.[62] It is interesting to see how the records of the family's affairs are integrated with those of the family's business in the *ricordanze* of Giuliano di Giovencho de' Medici, which he began in 1421 with the words that open this article: 'In the name of God and of His Mother the Virgin Mary: grant us a good beginning and good fortune, and our salvation, and the salvation of those born of us.'[63]

[60] C. Klapisch-Zuber, translated by L. Cochrane, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago and London, 1985) p.57 (note 45).

[61] Gavitt, op. cit. p.240.

[62] Gavitt, pp.240–41.

[63] Gavitt, pp.239 and 268 (note 176).

This powerful sentence, I suggest, demonstrates the close relationship for the Medici between the fortunes of business and the fortunes of the family line.

It is intriguing to note that other Renaissance artworks reflect this link between the Medici symbol and fecundity. In 1924, Giorgio Sangiorgi, a textile historian and collector, recognised that the Medici symbol had been included in the design of fabric made for the Medici, as seven circles arranged within the centre of a flower (**Figure 9**). In this fifteenth-century heraldic velvet, the Medici symbol actually represents the central seed-bearing pistil – the female reproductive element – of the flower.[64] This fabric was created for the Medici family, for church vestments or livery.[65] Through the combined allusion to female reproduction and the Medici, this design symbolises their strength and prosperity, both as bankers and as a thriving family. It also resonates with the notion that the Medici emblem was evolved from an ancient sculpture relating to maternity and the safe deliverance of infants. In addition, Sandro Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur* may have been painted on the occasion of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici's marriage. In this painting, Pallas' breasts are surrounded by the interlinked Medici rings and her nipples are positioned so they become the centre of the two prominent flowers on her chest (**Figure 10**). Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco hung *Pallas and the Centaur* alongside Botticelli's *Primavera* (c.1482; Uffizi) in his city palace, a painting famed for its celebration of female fecundity.[66]

So why, then, did the Medici shroud their family emblem in a cloak of secrecy? It should be considered that initially the references would have been understood. Later they may have been either forgotten or discreetly covered up by more prudish later generations, or in an effort to hide the pagan origins of the symbol. At this point it is important to acknowledge that Renaissance culture was replete with secrets, be they hidden symbols, allegorical images to be decoded, or complex riddles in music and literature.[67] This aside, it is possible that the family wished to avoid any misinterpretations of an image derived from such a feminine subject, particularly as they no doubt wished to portray themselves as powerful, male leaders in their field. Although the rallying cry of '*Palle*! *Palle*! *Palle*' was far from secret, it is possible that the Medici followers chanting these words understood them simply as an expression of support for these dominant, virile man – along the lines of 'Long live the Medici' – without any knowledge of the ancient sculpture and sexual metaphor that lay behind them. In addition, the Medici became the official bankers of the Church, which may have made them particularly reticent about proclaiming the pagan roots of their coat of arms. The family could also have been anxious to keep their family secret safe as, in the Renaissance, the use of ex votos came

[64] D.D. Poli, exhibition catalogue, *The Spirit of Tradition: Eight Centuries of Venetian Velvets at the Tessitura Bevilacqua* (Venice, 2004), p.75. In the twentieth century, a reproduction of this fascinating pattern was created by Ditta Bevilacqua in two monochromatic designs, beige and blue.

[65] I am indebted to Daniela Degl'Innocenti, Conservator at the Museo del Tessuto in Prato for this information.

[66] B. Deimling, *Botticelli* (Cologne, 2004) p.44.

[67] For a discussion on the enigmatic in Renaissance culture, see K. Schiltz, *Music and Riddle Culture in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, 2015); R. Stemp, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance: Decoding the Hidden Symbolism of Italian Art* (London, 2006); M. Ruvoldt, *The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration: Metaphors of Sex, Sleep, and Dreams* (Cambridge and New York, 2004); S.C. Chew, *The Pilgrim of Life* (New York and London, 1973); and D.C. Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London, 1970).

Figure 10: Pallas and the Centaur, by Sandro Botticelli. c.1482. Tempera on canvas, 207 by 148 cm. Detail. (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence). Source: Wikipedia. Reproduced with permission from Galleria degli Uffizi.

under attack from religious reformers, particularly the offering of anatomical sculptures because they were the most ubiquitous.[68]

Despite the quantity of terracotta votive wombs buried in Tuscany, and the Medici's interest in Etruscan artefacts, it appears that none of them managed to make their way into the official Medici collection of ancient artefacts. It could be the case that to maintain the secrecy surrounding the coat of arms, the family decided not to include such an item in their official public displays. In terms of votive objects in the Medici collection, there does remain, however, an ex voto relief of Cosimo II de' Medici offering symbols of power in order that he might be cured (1617–24; Uffizi).

To summarise, a more thorough understanding of the Medici coat of arms is only arrived at when the shield and triangular formats of the insignia are considered together. It is also crucial to recognise the significance of these forms in their historic context, with the popular Christian practice of donating votive offerings drawing on the earlier pagan custom in Etruria of offering up devotional sculptures. In parallel with the strong visual similarities between Etruscan terracotta wombs and the Medici emblems, there are also important underlying narratives that speak to the notion of a strong, successful family. Within this sophisticated framework of understanding, the positive symbolism of the Medici insignia takes several forms. First there is an allusion to power and advancement through the evocation of the former glory of the Etruscan age. Secondly, there is a subtle

[68] Holmes, op. cit. p.179.

allusion to the production of money, plus the curative antidote to usury, through the depiction of fecundity. The votive connection with healing and the protection of life might also recollect family roots in the medical profession. Lastly, the emblem gave form to the hope that this family would prosper and grow, with the *palle* symbolising the virility of the family and the notion that the Medici name would be carried forward by future generations of descendants.[69]

[69] I am indebted to Professor Christopher Kleinhenz, Paul Strathern and Susannah Charlton for their helpful comments and suggestions.

The Heraldry Society is an educational charity. Its purpose is to promote greater understanding and appreciation of heraldry and its related subjects. The society organises lectures, study days, congresses, dinners and other social activities. It offers a course in heraldry leading to examination for a diploma. It publishes a range of source material at modest cost. Members receive the *Coat of Arms* and the quarterly *Heraldry Gazette*.

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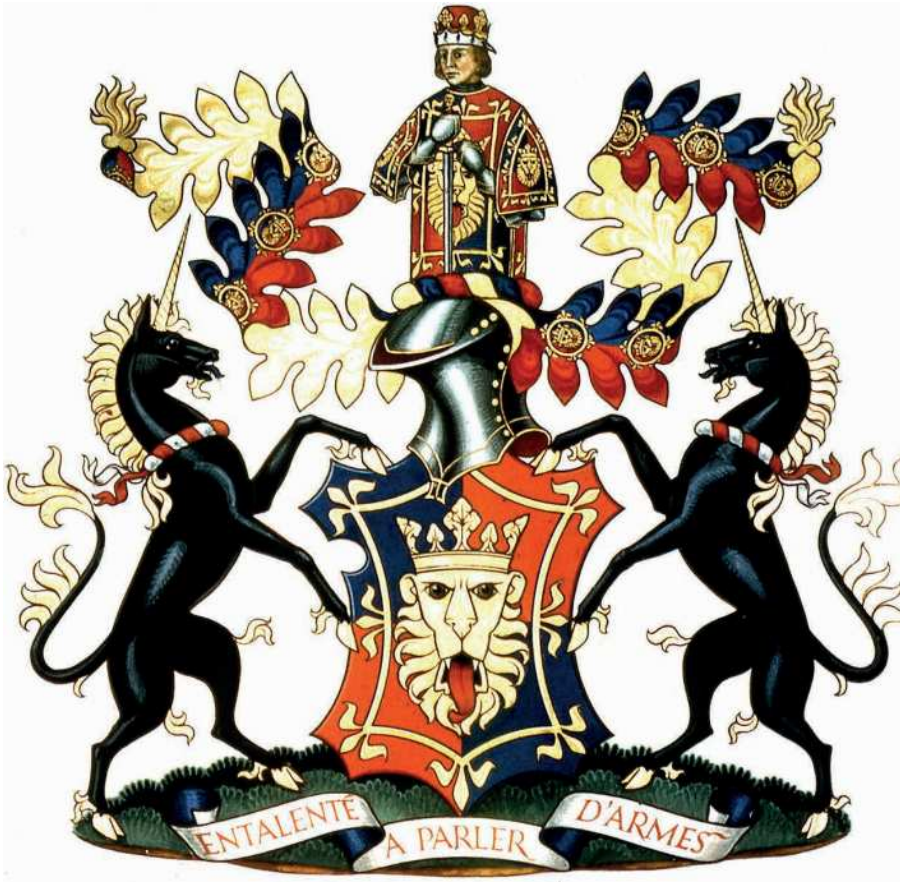

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