## The Medici coat of arms and Etruscan votive sculpture.

*Stephen Humphreys writes*: I found Rebecca Jelbert's article (*CoA* no.237, 2020 pp. 190–208) to be most interesting, but could not feel wholly convinced by it, mainly because of her commencing position which, inexplicably, simply dismisses the principal tradition in which the Medici balls, or *palle*, have been postulated to represent medicinal pills. In fact, there are numerous theories about the origins of the Medici arms and whilst her new theory is as good as, if not better than, many of them, I still feel I might be more convinced of her arguments if she would care to elaborate on why she says: "None of these objects, however, are accurately represented by smooth, red spheres" I was surprised to read this because I have been given to understand that pills at the time were indeed rolled up as balls and that apothecaries would often colour them with cochineal partly to distinguish them but also even to suggest the effectiveness of their preparations.

*Ines Mercedes de Larrinaga writes*:
In the course of 18 pages, Jelbert proposes a radically original theory for the roots of the Medici Coat of Arms; that the different forms of the Medici coat of arms were designed to represent the virility and fecundity of the Medici family, using symbols drawn from Etruscan votive uteri. Jelbert argues that the votive uteri fit within the broader phenomenon of the renewed interest during the 1400s by the Medici and Florentines in the Etruscans drawn from their patriotic desire to evoke the former glory of the Etruscans. Jelbert's methodology is based heavily on visual comparison, with a striking Warburgian influence.[1] Warburg himself, notably linked 15th-century Florentine figurative ex-votos with the Etruscans, a fact that Jelbert cites in her support.[2] Aby Warburg (1866–1929)[3] is most renowned for his methodology, the creation of the Atlas of Images (*Bilderatlas*), the transformation of symbols, and the idea of the social memory *(soziales Geddchtnis*) of iconography within art history. Jelbert is particularly influenced by Warburg's idea of the transcendent expressions of human memory transmitted through symbols from antiquity[4] and his analysis of *"the transformation of symbols, in particular, the transformation of their function from magical-associative symbols to logical-dissociative allegorical sign"*.[5]

[1] Jelbert for instance, quotes in support on page 196 Warburg's comments that "*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*".

[2] A.M.Warburg, K.W.Forster, and D.Britt, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity : Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles, CA, 1999), pp. 184–221.

[3] For an overview of Warburg's art theory see M. Rampley,'From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg's Theory of Art'. *The Art Bulletin,* vol. 79/1 (1997), pp. 41–55.

[4] See A. Confino, 'Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method', *The American Historical Review,* vol.102/5 (1997), pp. 1386–1403 for a general appraisal, as well as critique, on Warburg's approach to memory; but also P. Burke, 'Aby Warburg as Historical Anthropologist', *Aby Warburg: Akten des internationalen Symposiums* edd. Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, and Charlotte Schoell-Glass (Weinheim, 1991), pp. 39–44.

[5] Rampley op.cit., p. 55.

Jelbert presents an interesting theory, but largely lacks the consistent evidence, relying substantially on speculation to create a narrative leaving many archaeological issues un-addressed. Jelbert's article may be partitioned into two main topics of concern: the establishment of the Medici Coat of Arms and Etruscan votive uteri (particularly their interpretation). There is neither literary nor material evidence of any direct association between any of the Medici and the votive uteri similar to that which Baggieri analysed from Vulci in 1999. Moreover, there is a lack of direct evidence that results in a mainly speculative article founded upon generally erroneous reasoning. The argument fails to consider the concept of the votive uteri with sophistication, beyond projecting the votive and uterine interpretation of more modern scholarship onto a hypothesised Florentine perception. Jelbert seems to suppose the representation of the uterus/womb and ball of the votives as a Warburgian symbol that continues into the 1400s, and forms an argument formed on this premise regarding Medici *palle*.

Jelbert comments on the many prior theories about the *palle* and the origins of the Medici coat of arms, particularly as covered by Roy Brogan[6] and his preferred association of the Medici's arms as an inversion of that of the Arte del Campo.[7] Jelbert argues that these previous suggestions of the *palle* (such as shield dents, medicinal pills, coins, or oranges) cannot fully explain the different iterations or the form the smooth, red, spherical forms the *palle* take.[8] Moreover, the Medici family's engagement with offering votive statues and the funerary procession of Giovanni di Bicci is utilised as corroborating evidence for the Medici's keenness to associate with their Etruscan heritage which she ties in with previous studies on Florentine interest in the Etruscans.[9]

Jelbert seems to take for granted the assignment of the Etruscan objects as votive uteri both in their Etruscan context and when discovered by later antiquarians. Moreover, there is a lack of detailed discussion of their historiography or discussion as to how these objects may have been perceived within a late medieval Florentine understanding of the body and conception. Jelbert mentions Aristotelean theory in passing, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The copy of Aristotle's *Physics* from the Lorentian Library commissioned by Clement VII (born Giulio de' Medici, 1478–1534)[10], may suggest a Medici reverence for Aristotelean theory. Jelbert could have utilised a greater application of this in hypothesising the Medici's symbolic conceptualisation of the *palle.* Jelbert does not consider other notable works from Middle Ages/ early Renaissance that discuss issues on conception, foetal gestation, and birth. The works of Albert the Great and St Thomas in *Summa Theologine* on Aristotelean theory[11], as well as the various quotations of *De humana natura* such as Albertus Magnus' *De secretis mulierum*, or Michael

[6] R. Brogan, *A Signature of Power and Patronage: The Medici Coat of Arms, 1299–1492*. (New York,1993).

[7] Ibid, p. 43.

[8] Jelbert p. 190.

[9] Ibid. p. 196.

[10] See Richard Stemp, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance: Decoding the Hidden Symbolism of Italian Art* (London, 2006), p. 169.

[11] For an overview of this see P.H.Huby, 'Soul, Life, Sense, Intellect: Some 13th Century Problems', *The Human Embryo : Aristotle and the Arabic and European Traditions,* ed. G. R. Dunstan (Exeter, 1990), pp. 113–122.

Savonavola's *Speculum Physionomie* would have been valuable inclusions to explore the *palle* as embryo/foetus theory.[12] In addition, the lack of mention of Galen and the *Trotula* was surprising.

While Jelbert illustrates the Medici interest in the Etruscans, there is no evidence of any specificity of their interest towards Etruscan terracotta objects[13] materially similar to the votive uteri. Simply engaging in votive practices does not conclusively point towards these artefacts in particular. Moreover, votive objects are not a materially specific form. Any object may be a votive through the act of votive offering, and thus, its occurrence in the early Renaissance is not sufficient to suggest the transcendence of interpretation for the uteri (that can vary significantly in design) or the Medici's appreciation of them, as Jelbert assumes.[14]

Baggieri dates the uteri from Vulci to the 7th century BCE.[15] Anatomical votives appear in the archaeological record well into the Hellenistic period and thus exist within a broad temporal, cultural context within the Etruscan region and abroad.[16] Baggieri's 1999 study on votive uteri covers the artefacts particularly central to Jelbert's paper.[17] Baggieri observed the presence of clay spheres/ balls (mostly one per uterus) in nearly all the 400 uteri he studied.[18] However, the spheres of Baggieri's uteri are not a standard presence in all assemblages. Rather, they seem rare elsewhere, since Fraccaro (who Jelbert references) notes only five uteri with balls in the Tessennano assemblage and a complete absence in the assemblages at Punta della Vipera and Esquiline.[19] Jelbert seems to link the 16.5 cm length of some of the Punta della Vipera uteri with the length of the insignia on the Renaissance Medici Bank document, which is an unconvincing association if that is what is being inferred.[20] Further, it is important to note that the votive uteri and their balls/spheres are not interpretive certainties without contention; these are relatively obscure and understudied objects.[21] Additionally, it is important to highlight that the

[12] See C.S.F.Burnett,'The Planets, and the Development, of the Embryo' *The Human Embryo,* op.cit, pp. 95–112.

[13] Andrea M. Gáldy, *Cosimo I de'Medici as Collector : Antiquities and Archaeology in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Newcastle, 2009) p. 562. In his breakdown of the composition of the Medici Collection 1539–1574, terracotta is the least frequent material compared to bronze and marble.

[14] Jelbert pp. 198–199.

[15] E.Fraccaro, *Social and Cultural Significance of Etruscan Female Anatomical Votives*, dissertation for University College London, Institute of Archaeology (2014) p. 7.

[16] For an overview of anatomical votives beyond Etruria in Greece and Rome see J.Hughes, *Votive Body Parts in Greek and Roman Religion* (Cambridge, 2017).

[17] G.Baggieri, *L'antica anatomia nell'arte dei donaria* (Rome, 1999).

[18] As stated in G.Baggieri, 'Etruscan Wombs', *Lancet, 352* (1998). p. 790.

[19] Fraccaro, op.cit., pp. 27–33.

[20] Jelbert p. 202.

[21] E.-J.Graham, 'The Making of Infants in Hellenistic and Early Roman Italy: A Votive Perspective', *World Archaeology, 45*.2 (2013), pp. 215–231. Fraccaro, op.cit pp. 14–15 disagrees with Graham stating, "*To claim that these terracotta balls within the hollow uteri do not represent a foetus or intrauterine life purely because they do not take on the explicit shape of a foetus is to purposefully ignore the reality of anatomical knowledge and exploration in the Hellenistic world."* However, when compared to the other Etruscan anatomical models that are often visually explicit, the abstract forms of the 'uteri' and balls may be the unusual outlier. Therefore,

understanding of Etruscan medical theory and concepts of the body have primarily been based on secondary literary sources[22], with little Etruscan iconographic precedence for balls as symbols for the foetus.

Moreover, to write of 'Etruscan' is a very broad and too generalist term – city-states and chronological periods differed considerably, and to assume total transcendence over the full Etruscan (or even Renaissance and modern Tuscan) region regarding votive practices and beliefs would be an oversimplification. A more considerable overview of the distribution of the votive uteri would have been useful. Vulci is in Lazio which would have been under Papal control. This fact raises the question that if most of these objects were not within the territory of Florence, the Florentine Medici would probably not have felt sufficient kinship link to the votives to base the formation of *palle* on them. In this vein, there is generally a profound lack of evidence that can only produce unsubstantiated conjecture, which Jelbert seems to provide through channelling Warburg's transcendent symbol on a highly blasé linkage of Canaanite fertility pendants to the Etruscan votives, and then to the Medici *palle* based almost solely on a comparative visual analysis that gives no credence to wider archaeological evidence nor their very different temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts.[23] To put it bluntly, Jelbert employs the same theoretical reasoning that would argue that since bats and butterflies have wings, they must have inherited them from the same common ancestor – there is no allowance for parallel, unrelated convergence.

Jelbert's suggestion of a later Medici cover-up of the proposed Etruscan origin (because of the pagan and social controversy of the uterine implications and associations) is, at best intriguing speculation.[24] The absence of evidence for votive uteri within any record during the 13th to 16th centuries renders the suggestion that the *palle* would have been understood widely as a reference to the votives untenable. There may have been associations with fecundity if the *palle* were also linked with more widely known iconographic motifs such as pomegranates, but there is no literary or material evidence to substantiate any relation to the votives.[25] Jelbert recognises the lack of such objects in any Medici collection but then seems, in favour of the secrecy speculation, to hypothesise a cover-up which omitted the objects from display.[26] The ex-voto relief of Cosimo II de' Medici used by Jelbert to support the potential of votives is unreasonable since the terracotta votive uteri are not comparable in form, material, or function.

Furthermore, even if Jelbert had significant evidence for the acquisition of objects materially similar to Baggieri's uteri, and that their discoverers made the same deductions as later scholars that they represented uteri *and* had balls *and* were interpreted as votive

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to argue that intra-uterine life would more likely be conceptualised as a ball is a statement that ignores the overarching care to portray observable anatomical features seen in the votive sculptures, even Fraccaro observes in the female genitalia from Punta della Vipera the anatomically 'explicit' depiction of the vulva with labia major (Fraccaro, op.cit., p. 34).

[22] J.M.Turfa and M. J. Becker, 'Health and Medicine in Etruria', *The Etruscan World*, ed. T.J. MacIntosh and A.Tambe, (London, 2013), pp. 855–884.

[23] Jelbert p. 201.

[24] Jelbert p. 206.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Jelbert p. 207.

objects – there is still a chronological issue with the Medici engagement with Etruscan material culture and the establishment of the *palle* on the coat of arms.

Schoonhoven highlights that, while scholarly interest in the Etruscans starts in the 14th century the acquisition of Etruscan antiquities only begins during the ascension of Cosimo il Vecchio (1389–1464) and peaks during the rule of Lorenzo il Magnifico (1449–1492), a period which postdates the earlier examples of the Medici Coat of Arms with the *palle*.[27] Guccio di Medici's sarcophagus showcasing the Medici *palle*[28] dating to the late 13th century is strong material evidence that the *palle* predate any potential encounter between the Medici and the votive uteri that occurred during the acquisition of Etruscan antiquities. Jelbert hypothesises that the sarcophagus only confirms the *palle* form of the Medici's arms after Guccio's death, and thus may have not featured beforehand.[29] Once again, Jelbert provides no substantive evidence nor reason that the *palle* would not have featured earlier, which is what Guccio's sarcophagus would suggest. Therefore, a causal linkage between the original *palle* of the Medici Coat of Arms and the votive uteri seems untenable; the most conceivable speculation is that if the Medici did encounter these objects and at the height of Etruscan interest in the 15th century, perhaps they may have had an influence. Even then, one must contend with the question of whether these objects would have been interpreted as votive uteri. In addition, as they are absent from any inventory, the most reasonable conclusion would be that these terracotta objects, which are more ambiguous than the anatomical votives depicting external features, did not align with the tastes for antiquities held by figures like Lorenzo de Medici, who for the most part collected pottery, cameos, sculpture, and other oggetti d'arte[30]– a category differentiated from the votive uteri.

Overall, Jelbert's article presents an interesting narrative without any significant historical or material evidence to substantiate its conclusion over more established theories such as the Arte del Cambio link suggested by Brogan.[31] Jelbert deals with the votive uteri very generally, only pinpointing the examples that visually fit her interpretation to the exclusion of any consideration of the objects' variability. This contradicts Jelbert's critique of prior theories' lack of integration of both shape and colour of the Medici *palle*. Furthermore, the absence of balls in many of the uteri beyond Baggieri's sample has implications for her interpretation. Moreover, the gold background of the Medici Coat of Arms is largely ignored. Jelbert rests her argument on the assumption of the transcendence of symbolism, that the interpretation of these objects as uteri with balls symbolic of the foetus/ fecundity was continuous, and that these objects were likely to have been seen and valued by Medici antiquarians solely based on their Etruscan associations and general interest in Etruscan objects. When the *palle* shown on Guccio

[27] E.Schoonhoven, 'A Literary Invention: The Etruscan Myth in Early Renaissance Florence', *Renaissance Studies,* 24.4 (2010), pp. 459–471(462).

[28] Brogan, op.cit, p. 37.

[29] Jelbert p. 194.

[30] The main categories of Lorenzo's collection see pp. 8,18, 23 in Stapleford, R. (2013). *Lorenzo De' Medici at Home : The Inventory of the Palazzo Medici in 1492 / Edited and Translated by Richard Stapleford*: University Park, Pennsylvania : Pennsylvania State University Press, [2013].

[31] Brogan 1993, pp. 43

de Medici's late 13th-century sarcophagus are considered, predating the start of Medici's active Etruscan antiquarianism, Jelbert's theory for the Medici *palle* becomes an inconceivable and unsustainable proposition.[32]

*Rebecca Jelbert responds*:
Taking first the comments of Dr Humphreys: with regard to the suggestion about the smooth red balls being pills, there is always the possibility of course that this feature could have had a double meaning. To summarise my case that the Medici coat of arms might have been influenced by the Etruscan votive womb, I contend that there was an important link between medicine, prayer and votive offerings. The oval form of the shield might allude to the body of the womb and the triangular form of the shield seen in some versions to the neck of the womb/cervix. The red balls are here emblematic of new life – red being the colour of terracotta. While I am no expert in medieval and ancient medicines, I contend that the majority of medicinal preparations would have taken the form of liquids, powders or food, rather than pills. Also, pills may have come in a variety of forms, with some spherical and some in the shape of discs etc., and the ingredients may well have caused the colour of the average pill to be more of a subdued brown, rather than red. Furthermore, if the Medici family was searching for something emblematic of the medical profession, there would have been more familiar choices than pills, for example imagery relating to herbal plants, leaches/blood letting, incision and drainage/surgical procedures, astronomy/astrology (and the Zodiac Man), or prayer/votive objects/amulets.

In response to I. M. de Larrinaga's comments: as there are no existing documents which describe the original inspiration behind the Medici coat of arms, any theories would inevitably involve some degree of conjecture and supposition. In my article I bring together ideas and sources from a variety of spheres – historical, artistic, medical, religious, and archeological – in order to consider the concept of the Medici emblem in the round. This both reflects the broad range of interests held by the Medici family and helps to give a fuller appreciation of the symbol in terms of the ideas and preoccupations of the time.

I suggest that the Medici coat of arms may have been based on Etruscan votive uteri, created from terracotta clay which has a reddish hue. This article does represent a radical departure from the traditional theories around the Medici insignia, for example that the red balls (or *palle)* were designed to represent coins, dents in a shield, pills, or oranges. These notions are heavily based on the aesthetics of the Medici coat of arms and are often mentioned without proper scrutiny. Why would coins or dents be represented as perfect spheres? Would the majority of plant-based pills really have been red in colour? If the balls were meant as oranges, why were they always created with a smooth surface and why were they never painted orange?

Whilst the traditional theories can be loosely linked to the activities of the Medici, they do not account for the various iterations of the family insignia, namely the domed shield,

[32] I sincerely wish to thank both Dr Simon Stoddart and Dr Francesca Fulminante for their helpful comments and insights.

the triangular form of the symbol, and the fifteenth-century, linear version of the emblem used for authenticating documents in the Medici Bank (MS. Palatino Panciatichiano 71). In my article I highlight the different forms of Etruscan votive uteri, some of which have spheres on the outside, some of which have a triangular element, and some of which have external, linear markings. I do not base my theory, however, purely on the strong visual resemblances between these Etruscan sculptures and the coat of arms in question. A large part of the piece is taken up with a discussion of how the Medici engaged with votive practices and Etruscan history, how they collected ancient sculpture, and how the family came to associate their symbol with aspects of female fertility. I also argue that a reference to Etruscan sculpture would have evoked the notion of an illustrious past, that other family emblems were also linked to fecundity, and that the notion of votive wombs may have been drawn up to communicate the family's strength and virility.

The exact date at which the Medici coat of arms first appeared is not known, but it is displayed on the sarcophagus of Guccio di Bonagiunta de' Medici. The fact that he was made *gonfaloniere* in 1299 suggests that this iconic emblem may have originated in the late thirteenth century. As mentioned in the article, there is evidence to suggest there may have been an interest in an Etruscan past as early as 1300, or even before. Although there appears to be no existing documentation to prove that Etruscan votive sculpture was found in the thirteenth century, we cannot rule out the possibility that examples were unearthed at that time. Indeed, so many votive uteri have subsequently been found in what was once the ancient region of Etruria that it seems likely that these objects did occasionally surface as medieval farmers and builders went about their daily business. De Larrinaga mentions that no votive uteri have been found in Florence, but there is nothing to say that the family's knowledge of such objects would have been limited to the discovery of votive sculpture from any one city.

It is true that no Etruscan votive uteri were noted in any surviving Medici inventories but there were books recorded in the inventories to show that the Medici were interested in Etruscan history. It could be the case that any early votive objects owned by the family were lost overtime, or that the Medici were aware of such sculpture but did not hold examples in their collections.

For the purposes of this article I did not feel it was necessary to have an in-depth discussion of Etruscan sculpture per se. It was always meant as an initial proposal of a new idea, and to provoke discussion around this deceptively simple design. I am pleased that the article is being read and that it is prompting people to think more deeply about this enigmatic coat of arms.