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Cansignorio Della Scala Monument, Verona

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a tumultuous time in Italy. Disease and death were a constant threat to the population. The average life expectancy was in the mid-thirties. With such a short time on earth, people were fixated on their mortality. As fear of purgatory ran rampant through Italy, people became more concerned with trying to reduce their punishment as much as possible. As a result of this fear, Cansignorio Della Scala and his family attempted to lessen their time in purgatory through the creation of one of the best examples of Gothic sculpture in Italy.

The Della Scala family was one of the most prominent families in Verona, Italy during the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. As patrons of the city, their influence was widespread. Mastino became the chief magistrate, or podesta, following the death of Ezzelino da Romano. Mastino later gained the position of captain of the people. It is even believed that the Della Scala family hosted Dante during his time in Verona. After Mastino's death, the brothers Cansignorio, Cangrande II, and Paolo Albonio took power. Cangrande II was the effective ruler, but his rule was tyrannical. Cansignorio could not even enter the city during his brother's rule. In an attempt to

gain control, he is said to have taken the matters into his own hands, poisoning his brother Cangrande, which had remained unproven until recently<sup>1</sup>.

In 2004, Cangrande's body was exhumed from his tomb, and an autopsy was performed. After thorough testing, foxglove, a common poison, was discovered in the body. This was a monumental discovery, as the cause of his death was previously unknown. The discovery of foxglove within his body led to the conclusion that the cause of his death was deliberate poisoning, probably under the guise of a medical treatment<sup>2</sup>. This new discovery serves to further the theory that Cansignorio murdered his own brother. After Cangrande's death, Cansignorio was free to take over the rule of Verona.

Following their respective deaths, Cangrande, Mastino II, Cansignorio, and Alberto II were buried in a plot behind the church of Santa Maria Antica<sup>3</sup>. This church served as the family's private chapel. It was common for wealthy families to invest in private chapels during this time period, hoping that the money spent would show their devotion to the faith, and thus lessen their time in purgatory. These four tombs are in a line behind the chapel.

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<sup>1</sup> Fornaciari, Gino, Federica Bortolotti, Giacomo Gortenuiti, Gian Cesare Guido, Marco Marchesini, S Ilvia Martinucci, and Franco Tagliaro. "The Mummy of Cangrande Della Scala Lord of Verona (1291-1329) A Case of Medieval Acute Digitalis Intoxication." *Paleopatologia*. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.paleopatologia.it/Documenti/Conferenze/Cangrande.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Mummy of Cangrande Della Scala Lord of Verona (1291-1329) A Case of Medieval Acute Digitalis Intoxication."

<sup>3</sup> Baragli, Sandra. *European Art of the Fourteenth Century*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007. 216. Web.

The monuments of Cansignorio, Cangrande I, as well as Mastino II are fairly similar. Each tomb features a gisant, a sculptural representation of the deceased person, that is raised and placed beneath a canopy. The tops of the canopies are adorned with a statue of the ruler astride a horse<sup>4</sup>. This keeps with the longstanding tradition of equestrian statues of important figures in Italy, the earliest of which stem back to the ancient Romans. Alberto's tomb, in contrast to those of his family, is simply a sarcophagus without a canopy over it. A wrought-iron fence, decorated in a ladder pattern, surrounds the tombs. This is significant, as it directly references the family name; Della Scala can be translated to "of the ladder." This serves to make a clear connection between the monument and the family buried there.

Cansignorio's tomb, however, is the most notable of the four. It is richly decorated with narrative scenes, much more so than the tombs of his relatives. As he was dying, Cansignorio commissioned Bonino de Campione, an Italian sculptor who had completed multiple significant monuments, to sculpt his tomb some time before 1375<sup>5</sup>. He sculpted Cansignorio's tomb in the Gothic style, which is clearly recognizable in the pointed arches, and it's highly ornamental sculptural elements. This commission would have been costly, considering the artistry and amount of detail that went into it. As such, it is not unreasonable to assume that Cansignorio

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<sup>4</sup> Carson, Rebekah Anne. "Andrea Ricco's Della Torre Tomb Monument: Human and Antiquarianism in Padua and Verona." (n.d.): 84. Web. <[https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/24340/1/Carson\\_Rebekah\\_A\\_201003\\_PhD\\_thesis.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/24340/1/Carson_Rebekah_A_201003_PhD_thesis.pdf)>.

<sup>5</sup> Paoletti, John T., and Gary M. Radke. *Art in Renaissance Italy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997. 182. Print.

hoped that this expense would prove his faith and reduce his time spent in purgatory. This would have been a particularly taxing fear, in light of the fact that he committed fratricide by poisoning his own brother. Murder is bad enough, but to kill a member of one's own family is to commit one of the most heinous crimes imaginable. Cansignorio would surely have worried that he had just earned himself a place in purgatory, prompting him to commission this monument as a blatant display of his piety.

One of the most notable depictions is that of Cansignorio himself being presented to the Virgin and Child by Saint George<sup>6</sup>. This engraving is located on the short end of the tomb. St. George was an early Christian martyr, believed to have lived during the third century. Legend dictates that he was a warrior saint, and was often depicted as a young man in knight's armor. Although St. George is not the patron saint of Verona, Cansignorio may have selected him, hoping to reflect his prowess as a noble warrior. The Virgin and Child permeate Christian art, so it is no surprise that they would be included in the iconography of the tomb. Cansignorio is being delivered into the care of the Virgin and Child, which would then assure his entrance into heaven after his death<sup>7</sup>.

The coronation of the Virgin decorates the other short end of the tomb. This is a typical scene in Christian art. The regal scene of the coronation connects to

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<sup>6</sup> "Andrea Ricco's Della Torre Tomb Monument: Human and Antiquarianism in Padua and Verona."

<sup>7</sup> *Art in Renaissance Italy*

Cansignorio's own position as a noble of Verona. The long sides feature engravings of various passages from the life of Christ. These serve as a sort of instruction manual on how to reach salvation<sup>8</sup>. The abundance of religious imagery demonstrates a clear devotion to the faith.

Further ornamentation rises above the tomb, protecting it from the elements. The baldachin, or canopy, is situated above the gisant and actual tomb, exhibiting various sculptures of the Virtues, while six warrior saints are depicted in six tabernacles<sup>9</sup>. These saints serve a dual purpose; they reflect Cansignorio's prowess as a warrior, as well as guard his worldly remains. They also connect with the depiction of St. George presenting Cansignorio to the Virgin and Child.

At the top of the monument, there is a portrait statue of Cansignorio sitting proudly astride a horse. Equestrian statues were a common way to commemorate the lives of important political figures. This was part of a proud tradition, stemming all the way back to the ancient Romans. With the addition of Christian imagery, Cansignorio's tomb shows a profound connection and dedication to religion, which was a common practice during this period.

In a time when death was a constant threat, many people turned to religion as a means of comfort, giving hope for salvation. With the threat of purgatory looming over their heads, those who were wealthy enough sought to make

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<sup>8</sup> *Art in Renaissance Italy*

<sup>9</sup> "Andrea Ricco's Della Torre Tomb Monument: Human and Antiquarianism in Padua and Verona."

expensive displays of their devotion in hopes to lessen their time spent being punished for their sins in purgatory. Cansignorio Della Scala, patron of Verona, was no different. He spared no expense lavishly decorating his tomb with religious iconography. His legacy has lasted throughout the years, and is, without a doubt, one of the best examples of Gothic funerary monuments ever constructed.