

### **Bernabò Visconti's Equestrian Tomb: Political Power and Plague**

Born into the ruling family of Milan, Bernabò Visconti inherited nearly full power over Milan in 1354 following the death of his uncle.<sup>1</sup> Visconti was a generous benefactor, creating a network of hospitals and commissioning manuscripts, cathedrals, doors, and other works of art for public beautification and betterment.<sup>2</sup> This equestrian monument, which became his tomb following his death, is one such commission. In spite of this generosity, Visconti was a ferocious and feared ruler, and stressed his personal authority, which was tenuous at best, over dynastic legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Visconti is referenced in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as a notorious "Tyraunt," the "scourge of Lombardy."<sup>4</sup> Technically, his rule was shared with his cousin, Gian Galeazzo, who retained rights to over half the city of Milan and all of Pavia. Gian Galeazzo also held courts, fortresses, and appointed officials in both areas, although he mainly kept to Pavia.<sup>5</sup> However, Gian Galeazzo still worked to undermine the authority of his cousin in Milan by contrasting his leniency to Bernabò's fierceness and planting the seeds of a revolutionary transition.<sup>6</sup> This idea came to fruition when Bernabò Visconti was killed in 1386; Gian Galeazzo had invited his cousin to meet him outside Milan for a pilgrimage to Madonna del Monte at Varese, at which point Bernabò was forcibly seized and murdered. Gian Galeazzo won the popular election held soon after and became Milan's sole ruler. In death, Visconti's tomb granted

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles M Rosenberg, *The Court Cities of Northern Italy*. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Hardman, "Chaucer's Tyrants of Lombardy." 174.

<sup>5</sup> Charles M Rosenberg, *The Court Cities of Northern Italy*. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

him a level of popularity that he did not achieve in life. The tomb of Bernabò Visconti glorifies him in the Western tradition of equestrian monuments, establishes his authority and legitimacy to rule over Milan, and provides a sentiment of protection; although the tomb is certainly a testament to personal power, it also served a religious function, and the plague saints who decorate it receive Milanese prayers for health during the repeated waves of death.

The equestrian tomb monument of Bernabò Visconti was commissioned from Bonino da Campione, a Lombard sculptor, before 1363.<sup>7</sup> This marble statue of a triumphant Visconti on horseback was originally painted gold and silver and located at the high altar of the palace church, San Giovanni in Conca in Milan.<sup>8</sup> After the church was demolished, it moved to its current location at the Museo di Arte Antica in Castello Sforzesco, also in Milan.<sup>9</sup> The man and rider are on top of the sarcophagus and the whole structure is supported on a pedestal by twelve carved columns.<sup>10</sup> The columns show scenes of protection, intercession, and salvation, themes repeated throughout the body of the work.<sup>11</sup> Visconti's armor is elaborately carved, with details of steel mesh and leather reinforcements. His chest bears the Visconti emblem, a horned, scaly, jagged-toothed dragon with a half-eaten human in its mouth, done in red stone inlay.<sup>12</sup> Visconti's figure is flanked on the left by Fortitude, as a young girl accompanied by a lion, and on his right by Justice with her characteristic scale.<sup>13</sup> Directly under the horse and rider sits the Four Evangelists with Saint Gregory the Great and Saint Jerome.<sup>14</sup> Although some of the figures were included without a specific purpose, most are affiliated with the plague, Milan, or the Visconti

---

<sup>7</sup> John T. Paoletti, *Art in Renaissance Italy / John T. Paoletti & Gary M. Radke*. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Palmer, "Bonino Da Campione's Equestrian Monument of Bernabo Visconti and Popular Piety in the Late Middle Ages." 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Tomb of Bernabo Visconti*.

<sup>10</sup> Palmer, "Bonino Da Campione's Equestrian Monument of Bernabo Visconti and Popular Piety in the Late Middle Ages." 57.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 57, 60.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* 60.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* 64.

family. On the back side of the monument, a scene shows the coronation of the Virgin surrounded by four angels playing music, Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine.<sup>15</sup> Saint Ambrose, the bishop of Milan at the time, holds a three-tailed whip.<sup>16</sup> The longer side panels depict more complex scenes, including the crucifixion of Christ and Christ as the Man of Sorrows. In its original position at the altarpiece, the panel to Visconti's right showing the crucifixion faced the congregation, while the other side was viewed by the choir.<sup>17</sup> The image of the crucifixion is arranged into three parts with three saints in each.<sup>18</sup> To the left, Saint Christopher stands with the Christ Child on his shoulder, followed by Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint George, who interacts with the central group.<sup>19</sup> In the middle, a crucified Christ stands flanked by the Virgin and the Evangelist while Visconti and Magdalene kneel at Christ's feet.<sup>20</sup> Behind Visconti stands Saint George in his armor, presenting the former to Christ with the Virgin above as an intercessor.<sup>21</sup> The right flank shows Saint Eugene, Saint Anthony and Job.<sup>22</sup> On the other side of the tomb monument, the Virgin and the Evangelist surround Christ as the Man of Sorrows behind his tomb.<sup>23</sup> Two hovering angels drape a burial shroud over Christ. Saint Barnabas, Saint Bernard and John the Baptist are to the left, while the right shows twin Saints Damiano and Cosmas around Saint Gottardo.<sup>24</sup>

Bernabò Visconti's tomb follows a long tradition of equestrian monuments. The post-classical Western form depicts a male, in this case Visconti, as a host or exemplar of social and

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 62, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 62.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 63.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 62.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 62.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 63.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 64.

political interests and authority.<sup>25</sup> The tradition comes from fourteenth century Lombard horse and rider tombs, such as this one, making it one of the oldest of its kind.<sup>26</sup> Equestrian monuments are based in the “male desire ‘to assert transcendence over immanence,’” that is, the power vested in the monument’s subject is meant to be interpreted as independent and divine.<sup>27</sup> In hierarchical societies, as Milan was in the 1300s, the “Great Chain of Being” theory places nobles and the ruling classes, such as the Visconti family, at the top; while the general populace, and in particular women and the poor, appear to desire subordination by their ruler.<sup>28</sup> According to the scholar Shwartz, the simple composition implies domination:

The association of royal or aristocratic power with horses enabled the monarch or the lord to appear more “erect,” more potent, more the rational and the spiritual master not merely of his own flesh, nor simply of its various analogs in political and natural worlds, but of death itself.<sup>29</sup>

Since Visconti stands upright in the saddle, this interpretation is even more persuasive, and his commission of the piece likely reflects his desire to be seen as an omnipotent autocrat. In the original placement, the monument was oriented at the high altar as if worshipers were praying to Visconti.<sup>30</sup> The view of him from the nave was in profile, reminiscent of his image on coins and medals, which reinforces the idea of authority.<sup>31</sup> His placement on horseback also makes reference to the ideal of a virtuous knight and implies the militaristic expansion of Milan that he

---

<sup>25</sup> Starn, “Reinventing Heroes in Renaissance Italy.” 67.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 77.

<sup>27</sup> Schwartz, “Equestrian Imagery in European and American Political Thought.” 653.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 654.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 657.

<sup>30</sup> Palmer, “Bonino Da Campione’s Equestrian Monument of Bernabo Visconti and Popular Piety in the Late Middle Ages.” 62.

<sup>31</sup> John T. Paoletti, *Art in Renaissance Italy / John T. Paoletti & Gary M. Radke*. 182.

desired.<sup>32</sup> Visconti's tomb serves within the tradition of equestrian monuments to establish his power and authority.

The majority of the iconography of power and protection is held in the identity and symbols of the figures carved around the sarcophagus. Most of the images feature the saints of the Visconti family and Milan, glorifying devotional references for the populace, like the former bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose.<sup>33</sup> Saint George was a patron saint of both Milan and the Visconti family, which is why he serves as Bernabò Visconti's intercessor to the Virgin while meeting Christ.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Saint George is known for his slaying of a dragon, much like Visconti's ancestor Uberto, so the saint and his association with the dragon is extremely popular in Visconti-commissioned works.<sup>35</sup> Saint Eugene, or Eugenius, of Lombardy, was the bishop of Milan and the heavy staff he carries is a symbol of the Visconti family's allegiance with the Lombard church.<sup>36</sup> Saint Anthony, known for curing ergotism, an illness from a poisonous fungus on rye bread made from damp grain, is appropriate in the image for his place in curing ailments, as is Job, the patron saint of hospitals.<sup>37</sup> Also in the crucifixion scene, Saint Christopher holds a flowering pilgrim staff, a symbol of plague protection<sup>38</sup>. When the plague hit Milan in 1361 and 1373, it encouraged worship, and the tomb was prominently placed to provide a message of salvation and hope in the face of disease.<sup>39</sup>

On the Man of Sorrows side of the tomb monument, it depicts Saint Barnabus, Bernabò Visconti's namesake, as well as the first bishop of Milan. He was able to cure patients by reading

---

<sup>32</sup> Palmer, "Bonino Da Campione's Equestrian Monument of Bernabo Visconti and Popular Piety in the Late Middle Ages." 60, 65.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 63.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 63.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 60, 63.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 63.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 63.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 63.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 63.

the Gospel of Saint Matthew, so he was another common saint in times of illness.<sup>40</sup> Saint Bernard provides the war reference of the panel, as he was favored by mercenaries and encouraged young men to go to battle for Christianity, or fight to protect Milan.<sup>41</sup> Since the monument was originally located in San Giovanni, it makes sense that John the Baptist is shown, as he was the patron saint of the church. Saints Damiano and Cosmas are shown as laymen, albeit doctors, and are patron saints of hospitals; their cult spread with the plague outbreaks during Visconti's reign.<sup>42</sup> Saint Gottardo, a bishop of Hildesheim, is included since he was favored by the Visconti for his northern European alliances.<sup>43</sup> Saint Ambrose, then a bishop of Milan, is shown flanking the Virgin's coronation and holds a three tailed whip as a sign of fierce authority to drive away enemies.<sup>44</sup> Nearly all of the iconography of Bernabò Visconti's equestrian tomb monument is related to the glorification of Bernabò, the Visconti family, Milan, or is associated with protection from the plague and other diseases.

The placement of the tyrant's tomb at the high altar is unprecedented and could be perceived by many as inappropriate. However, he legitimizes it by featuring symbols of more than just personal power and authority. Although Visconti certainly could have been suggesting his high morality and piety, the presence of "miracle man" saints and symbols of Milan's power as a state keep it from being interpreted as too egotistical. The themes of honor, grandeur and protection are for all Milanese, not just Visconti, and it was quite well received by the populace, especially during plague outbreaks.<sup>45</sup> The equestrian tomb monument of Bernabò Visconti is an early example of a long tradition of such monuments; it helps to legitimize his rule of Milan and

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid 64.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid 65.

provides a devotional object for prayer during the plague through the visual personification of protection, military might and the miracles of medicine.

#### Works Cited

- Charles M Rosenberg. *The Court Cities of Northern Italy : Milan, Parma, Piacenza, Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Urbino, Pesaro, and Rimini* / Edited by Charles M. Rosenberg. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Hardman, Phillipa. "Chaucer's Tyrants of Lombardy." *The Review of English Studies* 31, no. 122 (May 1, 1980): 172–178.
- John T. Paoletti. *Art in Renaissance Italy* / John T. Paoletti & Gary M. Radke. 4th ed.. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2012.
- Palmer, A.L. "Bonino Da Campione's Equestrian Monument of Bernabo Visconti and Popular Piety in the Late Middle Ages." *Arte Lombarda* 121 (1997): 57–67.
- Schwartz, Peter Hammond. "Equestrian Imagery in European and American Political Thought: Toward an Understanding of Symbols as Political Texts." *The Western Political Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 1988): 653–673.
- Starn, Randolph. "Reinventing Heroes in Renaissance Italy." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17, no. 1 (July 1, 1986): 67–84.
- Tomb of Bernabo Visconti. Official Milan Tourism, n.d.  
[http://www.turismo.milano.it/wps/portal/!ut/p/c0/04\\_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3hzS0O\\_QGcLEwMLFzcyjA08LAz8TH2cnAwMDI\\_3g1Dz9gmxHRQCFp8TT/?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=en/SITur/HOME/artecultura/capolavori/opere/opera226](http://www.turismo.milano.it/wps/portal/!ut/p/c0/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3hzS0O_QGcLEwMLFzcyjA08LAz8TH2cnAwMDI_3g1Dz9gmxHRQCFp8TT/?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=en/SITur/HOME/artecultura/capolavori/opere/opera226).