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Much ado about nothing

Leonardo's *Fight for the Standard**

The Sala del Consiglio Maggiore, an appendix to the time-honored Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, is the major architectural remnant of Savonarola's theocratic regime. After the prophet's inglorious end, the Great Hall became the parliament of the renewed republic. Decisions to decorate it with a republican program included an altar, the throne of the head of government, the Gonfaloniere della Giustizia or banner-bearer of justice, sculptures, and two colossal wall paintings. These paintings should intensify republican feelings through their subjects: two historical battles, glorious victories of the city before the Medici took more and more command. The government was lucky to commission the first part of the work to the most famous painter of Italy, the Florentine Leonardo da Vinci, who just turned from Milan, where he spent about eighteen years, ultimately expelled by the troops of the French King in 1499. The other battle piece should have been painted by a most promising young artist, Michelangelo, whose colossal marble David was at about the same time decided to adorn the façade wall of the town hall, as a republican symbol of fearless youth overcoming the giant. The execution of the battle pieces was staged as a competition between the two very different artists.[1]

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* In many conversations, often over our Saturday lunch „Süppchen" in the Oranienburger Straße, Horst Bredekamp aroused my interest in the connections between art and warfare. As for bibliographic and linguistic advice, I wish to express my gratitude to Rebecca Müller, Beatrice Kitzinger, David Y. Kim, and Michael Cole.

1 The most important studies on Leonardo's battle piece are: Johannes Wilde: The Hall of the Great Council of Florence, in: Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 7, 1944, 65–81; Gunther Neufeld: Leonardo da Vinci's Battle of Anghiari: A Genetic Reconstruction, in: Art Bulletin 31, 1949, 170–183; Cecil Gould: Leonardo's Great Battle Piece. A Conjectural Reconstruction, in: Art Bulletin 36, 1954, 117–129; Olle Cederlöf: Leonardo's *Kampen om standaret*. En ikonografisk undersökning, in: Konsthistorisk Tidskrift 28, 1959, 73–98 and 30, 1961, 61–94; Christian Adolf Isermeyer: Die Arbeiten Leonardos und Michelangelos für den großen Ratssaal in Florenz, in: Studien zur Toskanischen Kunst. Festschrift für Ludwig Heinrich Heydenreich, Munich 1964, 83–130; Carlo Pedretti: Nuovi documenti riguardanti

While Michelangelo's task was to represent an episode in the war between Florence and Pisa in 1364, the battle of Cascina, Leonardo's wall painting had to depict the victory of the Florentines over the Milanese troops in the Eastern part of Tuscany, in Anghiari (1440). Both victories were due to the exceptional alertness of the republican troops and therefore particularly apt for a moment in which Florence was surrounded by dangerous enemies, among them the Medici who restlessness tried to restore their power.

What was intended to become the two largest non-religious paintings of Italy, both ca. 7 × 18 meters, turned out to be a disaster. Michelangelo abandoned the work after the completion of his cartoon, in order to work in Rome for Pope Julius II. Later, Vasari insists, the cartoon was destroyed by the envious sculptor Baccio Bandinelli.[2] Leonardo abandoned the work in 1506, after having cashed large sums of money by the commissioners, and turned back to Milan. According to Vasari, he was fooled by a dealer who sold him bad linseed oil, thus putting an abrupt end to Leonardo's experiments with new fresco media. However, it is doubtful if Leonardo ever began to paint on the wall, and if so, Vasari himself destroyed most likely the little which was there, covering it with his own declamatory battle paintings some sixty-five years later. For many years, however, both cartoons testified the skills of the artists and were regarded, again according to Vasari, as an entire academy for the painters of Italy. A number of copies after Leonardo's composition survived, most prominently a beautiful drawing supposed to be reworked by Peter Paul Rubens around 1600

la Battaglia d'Anghiari, in: id., Leonardo inedito. Tre saggi, Florence 1968, 53–78; Peter Meller: La Battaglia d'Anghiari, in: Leonardo. La pittura, Florence 1977, 187–194; Martin Kemp: Leonardo da Vinci. The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man, Cambridge MA 1981, 234–247; Frederik Hartt: Leonardo and the Second Florentine Republic, in: Journal of the Walters Art Gallery 41, 1983, 95–116; Paul Joannides: Leonardo da Vinci, Peter Paul Rubens, Pierre-Nolasque Bergeret and the Fight for the Standard, in: Achademia Leonardi Vinci 1, 1988, 76–86; Nicolai Rubinstein: Machiavelli and the Mural Decoration of the Hall of the Great Council of Florence, in: Ronald G. Kecks (ed.), Musagetes. Festschrift für Wolfgang Prinz, Berlin 1991, 275–285; Frank Zöllner: Rubens Reworks Leonardo: The Fight for the Standard, in: Achademia Leonardi Vinci 4, 1991, 177–190; Gigetta Dalli Regoli: Leonardo e Michelangelo. Il tema della *Battaglia* agli inizi del Cinquecento, in: Achademia Leonardi Vinci 7, 1994, 98–106; Claire J. Farago: The *Battle of Anghiari*: A Speculative Reconstruction of Leonardo's Design Process, in: Achademia Leonardi Vinci 9, 1996, 73–86; Alessandro Cecchi: Niccolò Machiavelli o Marcello Virgilio Adriani? Sul programma e l'assetto compositivo delle ,battaglie' di Leonardo e di Michelangelo per la Sala del Consiglio Maggiore in Palazzo Vecchio, in: Prospettiva, 83–84, 1997, 102–115; Daniel Arasse: Léonard de Vinci. Le rythme du monde, Paris 1997, 428–442; Frank Zöllner: La *Battaglia di Anghiari* di Leonardo da Vinci fra mitologia e politica (XXXVII Lettura Vinciana), Florence 1998; Carmen C. Bambach (ed.): Leonardo da Vinci. Master Draftsman, New York 2003, 477–488, 500–508.

2   Giorgio Vasari: Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568, ed. Rosanna Bettarini, comm. Paola Barocchi, 9 vols., Florence 1966–1987, vol. V, 241.

Ill. 1: Anonymous and Peter Paul Rubens (after Leonardo da Vinci), *The Battle of Anghiari*, 16th century and beginning of 17th century, mixed media, 45,2 × 63,7 cm. Paris, Département des Arts Graphiques du Musée du Louvre

(ill. 1).[3] Held together with some drawings by Leonardo we know fairly well what the artist intended to complete, at least as the central group of his monumental fresco.

A memorandum in Leonardo's Codex Atlanticus (fol. 202), probably written by one of the government secretaries, records the events of the battle of Anghiari meticulously, evidently providing a thematic outline for the painter. Astonishingly enough, however, the subject of Leonardo's monumental *Fight for the Standard* does not appear at all in this summary. This is all the more surprising, since the tone set by the author of the notes is imperative. The very first word – „Begin with" (*cominciasi*) – is soon to be followed by a „Then let it be shown" (*di poi si faccia*) in the second sentence. Altogether, the text suggests a lot of details that might have been fascinating for Leonardo's „personal whims" (Martin Kemp) as a painter – a fierce fight for a bridge, giant dust clouds, and, towards the end, the Patriarch of Aquila's, a Florentine ally, ingenious idea to shoot with ordnance from the hillside into the infantry of the Milanese enemy, creating that kind of *disordine* which finally forced Niccolò Piccinino to retreat, allowing the

3   See Zöllner 1991 (see note 1); Anne-Marie Logan: Entry cat. no. 135, in Bambach 2003 (see note 1), 671–678.

Florentine troops to have „a great slaughter of men" (*una grande strage d'uomini*). These indications would have allowed Leonardo to realize his ideas on „How to depict a battle", celebrated in his notebooks some ten years before he received the Florentine commission, with their phantasmagoria of fighting bodies in the dust and horses storming through sputtering water.[4]

Besides the memorandum's somewhat cryptical last hint – „and afterwards the Patriarch gathered the trophies" (*e da poi ne fece uno trofeo*) – the principal subject Leonardo chose is, instead, described in detail by Vasari:

> „ […] wherein [Leonardo] designed a group of horsemen who were fighting for a standard […] among which [battle] two [horses] with the fore-legs interlocked are fighting no less fiercely with their teeth than those who are riding them do in fighting for that standard, which has been grasped by a soldier, who seeks by the strength of his shoulders, as he spurs his horse to flight, having turned his body backwards and seized the staff of the standard, to wrest it by force from the hands of four others, of whom two are defending it, each with one hand, and, raising their swords in the other, are trying to sever the staff; while an old soldier in a red cap, crying out, grips the staff with one hand, and, raising a scimitar with the other, furiously aims a blow in order to cut off both the hands of those who, gnashing their teeth in the struggle, are striving in attitudes of the utmost fierceness to defend their banner".[5]

Scholars already discovered that the main subject does neither refer to other major descriptions of the battle as Leonardo Bruni's *Rerum suo tempore gestarum commentarius*, Flavio Biondo's *Decadi*, Leonardo Dati's poem *Trophaeum Anglaricum*, or Poggio Bracciolino's *Historia Fiorentina*. These texts just mention the fact that the Milanese standards (in the plural: *signa inimica*) were conquered by the Florentines and by their allies, in order to be sent to Florence.[6] There, as documents like the diary of the so-called Cronista Dei confirm, the most important flags – the leopard banner of Niccolò Piccinino and the standard of the Duke of Milan – were first publicly displayed in the cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore, and later in the *camera* of the *Banner Bearer of Justice*, the top ranking authority of republican Florence. Only the commentary of the eye-witness Neri di Gino Capponi refers to a battle for one standard: „Our captain rushed forward from the other side with circa four hundred war horses, he went to con-

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4 Leonardo da Vinci: Libro di Pittura, ch. 148 (c. 1492).
5 Vasari 1966–1987 (see note 2), vol. IV, 32 f.
6 „[…] et lamaggior parte degli stendardi del Ducha che furono portati afirenze per testimonio della victoria"; Poggio Bracciolini: Historia Fiorentina, Florence 1492, book VIII, 102. – For the main documents see Cecchi 1997 (see note 1).

quer the Standard [sic] of the enemy, and having taken it, the enemies were destroyed, and out of twenty-six troop leaders twenty-two were captured, and four hundred armed men, all in all circa three thousand horses, and circa one thousand five hundred and forty hostages."[7] Capponi's sequence of the events – first the conquest of the standard, then the victory over the enemy – is significant. I will come back to that point later on.

But why did Leonardo highlight just that particular episode of the war? Up to now, only few art historians asked this question, while the majority was mainly interested in the reconstruction of the hall's program, the development of Leonardo's ideas in the mirror of the extant sketches and copies, the identification of the two parties, or the importance of the two historic battles for the extremely difficult political situation of Florence around 1500. Nicolai Rubinstein, for instance, connected the *Fight for the Standard* with the effort of the state secretary, Niccolò Machiavelli, to create a Florentine militia, an anti-mercenary project mirrored in Leonardo's choice of lightly armed, ‚modern' cavalry.[8] This view was challenged by Alessandro Cecchi who emphasised the fact that both battles were won by competent *condottieri* and, at least, in part, by mercenary troops.[9] For Machiavelli, Cecchi insists, the historic battle of Anghiari was explicitly a paradigm for the traditional way of warfare, directed by hired generals in an almost ceremonial style, trying to avoid any loss of manpower and materials; a behaviour which in the case of our battle resulted, as Machiavelli wrongly believed, in only one dead soldier trampled to death in the turmoil.[10] In Cecchi's argument instead, both battles depict victories of the traditionally anti-medicean Guelph party, who dominated the ruling circle of Republican Florence around the Banner-bearer, Piero Soderini.

However, Machiavelli's main purpose in these years was the strengthening of Florentine patriotism – *amor patriae* – and a flag could serve very well as a symbol for that civic passion. It was Martin Kemp who insisted on the point.[11] He related the main subject to the concepts of patriotism and of loyalty to the institution of the *Banner-bearer of Justice*, or more precisely, to Piero Soderini, since

7   „Il Capitano nostro corse dall'altro lato con circa 400 cavalli in battaglia, andò ad assaltare lo Stendardo inimico, e presolo, e furono rotti, e presi di 26 capi di squadra de'nemici 22, e 400 uomini d'arme, in tutto circa di 3000 cavalli, e prigioni da taglia circa 1540, e furono i nemici seguitati da'nostri fino in su' fossi alli alloggiamenti." Commentari di Neri di Gino Capponi di cose seguite in Italia dal 1419 al 1456. Alle quali imprese si trovò il detto Neri in persona, in: Ludovico Antonio Muratori (ed.), Rerum Italicarum scriptores, Sala Bolognese 1975–1990 (reprint of the edition 1723–1750), vol. XVIII, col. 1158–1216 (1195).

8   See Rubinstein 1991 (see note 1).

9   Cecchi 1997 (see note 1).

10   On the history of the battle see Charles Calvert Bayley: War and society in Renaissance Florence. The ‚De Militia' of Leonardo Bruni, Toronto 1961, 169.

11   See Kemp 1981 (see note 1), 244

1502 *Perpetual Banner-bearer* (*gonfaloniere perpetuo*).[12] In this view, the *Fight for the Standard* gains metaphorical dimensions, showing how the flag, the *gonfalone*, which signifies the Florentine Republic and its main exponent, Piero Soderini, had to be defended against enemies.

There is additional evidence to support Kemp's interpretation. Machiavelli later on connected the raising of the standard literally and metaphorically to the preparedness of the troops (*Dell'arte della guerra*, III). And in his *Istorie Fiorentine* (II, 12), Machiavelli almost identifies the *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* with his flag (*gonfalone*) and with the soldiers he commands.[13] As already mentioned, the standards which Florence captured as war trophies were kept in the Gonfaloniere's apartment, identifying again the man, his office, its title, and the material symbols – flags. Right in front of the Gonfaloniere's raised throne in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio, Fra Bartolommeo's altarpiece would have prominently displayed the metaphorical link between victory and standard, attributing Saint Victor with a *gonfalone*. To amplify Kemp's argument further: Leonardo's *Fight for the Standard* would have underlined the need to stand united, expressing pictorially the burning desire, as Piero Parenti reports, of moderate Florentines that the continuous struggle inside the government between Soderini and his opponents should come to an end.[14] Leonardo might have had even personal reasons to affirm a subject quite easily understandable as a political metaphor. In addition to be honored with the most prestigious commission Leonardo ever received, Piero Soderini had also been, shortly before, a strong supporter of Leonardo's project to divert the Arno in order to cut off Pisa from the sea, an extremely expensive enterprise that turned out to be a disaster, damaging the authority of Soderini considerably.[15]

In addition to this entirely convincing metaphorical reading of the fresco's subject as a plea for republican patriotism, unity and support of the Gonfaloniere's position, however, I would like to ask: What else could have made the subject so particularly appealing to Leonardo? Interpreters of the battle piece traditionally refer to Leonardo's imitative skills, his singular abilities to show bodies in movement, expressive physiognomies – not to mention Leonardo's particular interests in depicting overwhelming forces, or even „l'irrésistible pul-

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12　On the institution of the *gonfaloniere*, see Franco Cardini: Gonfaloniere, in: Lexikon des Mittelalters, Stuttgart 1977–1999, vol. 4, col. 1555. – Cellini's pride in an ancestor serving as a Florentine *signifer* is documented in: Vita di Benvenuto Cellini orefice e scultore Fiorentino, da lui medesimo scritta […], Cologne 1728, 68.

13　On negative judgments about Machiavelli's military ideas in the later 16th century see Frederique Verrier: Les armes de Minerve. L'Humanisme militaire dans l'Italie du XVIe siècle, Paris 1997, 253–56.

14　Cf. H. C. Butters: Governors and Government in Early Sixteenth-Century Florence 1502–1519, Oxford 1985, 85.

15　Cf. ibid. 91.

sion du monde au chaos".[16] However, as I already mentioned before, the main events of the battle would have allowed Leonardo to display even more of his virtuoso talents to mingle, blur, and accelerate bodies in motion, as some preparatory sketches and his own notes on the depiction of a battle demonstrate. How could Leonardo, for instance, have resisted to represent the spectacular and tactically decisive bombardment of the enemy troops by Florentine cannons?

Instead of referring to an entirely hypothetical commission, I would like to concentrate on the subject of the central group itself: four horsemen fighting for a standard. Surprisingly enough, besides the standard references to patriotism, nobody seems to have investigated into the semantics of the standard itself. It seems as if everyone knew enough about flags, banners, standards – a conventional world apparently alien to Leonardo's main artistic interest, a political subject apt for a rather simple metaphorical reading. But what did the banner really stand for, as an object worthy of the fiercest action of which men are capable? What could have made the issue so particularly interesting for Leonardo?

To my knowledge, up to now no comprehensive study on the cultural history of non-religious standards has been written. In 2004, Andreas Dehmer published his excellent dissertation on the banners and flags of medieval and Renaissance confraternities in Italy, a previously equally neglected subject.[17] Dehmer's insistence on the blurred boundaries between the religious and the profane use of flags makes his study particularly valuable for our purposes.

Following Percy Ernst Schramm's important chapter on the topic,[18] Dehmer confirms the military origins of ecclesiastical banners, which can be traced back into the 10th and 11th century. This blending of the sacred and the profane is mirrored by the oscillating terminology. *Stendardo* and *gonfalone* were used for both genres, although their actual shape differed insofar as religious banners were fixed to the pole by a horizontal bar, combining thereby the cross with a cloth, while the cloth of secular standards was directly fixed to the shaft. The military background of all types of flags, however, including the devices used by the church and the lay confraternities, was already evidenced by the Neapolitan historian of liturgy, Andrea Pescara Castaldo, who – writing in 1625 – traced ecclesiastical banners back to the *insignia* and *vexilla* of Roman antiquity.[19] In

16   See Arasse 1997 (see note 1), 442.
17   Andreas Dehmer: Italienische Bruderschaftsbanner des Mittelalters und der Renaissance, Munich/Berlin 2004.
18   Percy Ernst Schramm: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Fahnen und ihre Verwandten. Fahne, Banner, Wimpel, Feldzeichen, in: id., Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik, 3 vols., Stuttgart 1955, vol. 2, 643–684.
19   See Dehmer 2004 (see note 17), 256.

fact, rooting in Old High German *gund* = battle and *fano* = cloth, the *gonfalone* was a military device already used in Roman late antiquity. The most famous of these *vexilla* and the prototype of the future church banners was Constantine's *labarum*, a banner displaying the emperor's and his two sons' profile portraits together with the monogram of Christ. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the erected *labarum* referred to Constantine's vision of the flaming cross high in the sky before he defeated his competitor Maxentius.[20]

The standards of Roman legions were kept in a shrine in the camp's center as sacred objects, regarded with religious awe. It is extremely important to recognize that these *insignia*, like later standards, were no signs, but things; they incorporated and guaranteed, like crowns and talismans, the power over a territory or an army. Therefore, they could not be substituted by a copy – even less than a sacred icon. After Varus lost three eagle standards in the battle of Teutoburg Forest, for instance, a special campaign was launched into Germany in order to recover the *insignia*. Without them, the legion lost its points of reference.[21]

Military standards as a specific genre are distinguished by a remarkable continuity in space and time. They were and are in use all over the world. The lack of typological developments may, perhaps, explain the lack of interest by historians of images. Being very close to reliquaries and actually often provided with relics, standards nevertheless offer fascinating insights into the transitions between image and thing, politics and religion.

The most famous standards bore proper names, as, for instance, the flag simply called *Angelus* which was used by the German emperors Henry I and Otto I in their battles against the Hungarians. The flag showed Arcangel Michael, but it did not merely ‚stand for' heavenly assistance on the battle ground, it ‚was' the place where the angel's power was transmitted to the troops. Similar sacred standards directly named, for example, *Soter* or *Theotokos*, existed in Byzantium.[22] It comes as no surprise that the relic-like status of this mixed genre allowed for the accusation of pagan worship, an argument already used by Tertullian. In the process against the Templars in 1307, it was precisely their main flag – a black head, called *chef*, on white ground – that served to insinuate the order's supposed worship of a mysterious black idol.[23]

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20 An excellent overview on the topic is provided by Helmut Nickel: Flags and standards, in: Jane Turner (ed.), The Dictionary of Art, New York 1996, vol. 11, 144–153.
21 Ibid., 150.
22 Cf. Carl Erdmann: Kaiserliche und päpstliche Fahnen im hohen Mittelalter, in: Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken, XXV, 1933–34, 1–48, esp. 20–21.
23 Cf. Nickel 1996 (see note 20), 148.

Public life in the Middle Ages was decisively marked by the ceremonial use of flags. The king, owner of the land, distributed it among his vassals as „banner feud" by handing out standards, while his own power was ensured by a standard given to him by God or, indirectly, by an angel. The Kings were in fact themselves *banner-bearers*. In France, they kept, as *Signifer de Saint Denis*, the sacred *Oriflamme*, a standard believed to be owned originally by St. Peter. Similarly, the Spanish kings were *Beati Jacobi Vexillifer*. A specific kind of standard, *Vexillum Sancti Petri*, was assigned by the Popes as a sanctification of war, transmitting the feud of the conquered territories in advance to the banner-bearing prince.[24]

The main standards, like acting persons, were blessed and the troops took an oath to never abandon them. Beginning in the 11th century, the main standard of northern Italian militia, often together with other *gonfaloni*, was erected on an extremely high pole on a large cart – the *carroccio* –, the military device of independent city republics.[25] With its *gonfalone*, the cart embodied the survival of the whole community. Dismantled in times of peace, its parts were kept in the cathedral and other main religious buildings; with its re-composition and exhibition in the market place (*extrahere carrocium*) war began. By capturing the most famous of these *carrocci*, Emperor Frederick II made the total defeat of Milan evident; the standard-cart was subsequently transported in triumph to Rome, its parts being exposed on a special monument on the Capitoline Hill.

Not surprisingly, in religious art after the 12th century the risen Christ was endowed with a *gonfalone* in its military form. On the other side, Christ was believed to be present in the „body" of a banner. In the laud of an Umbrian Disciplinati confraternity, we read: „O gonfalone, che staie palese / Perché te veda tutta gente, / El corpo suo en te destese / Cristo figluolo de Dio piagente."[26] The religious and secular use of standards continued to overlap. The conquest of Pisa by the Florentines in 1406, for instance, was followed by a very large religious procession of the entire population and twenty confraternities with their *stendardi*, to the sacred icon of Impruneta, almost a mirror of the moving troops with their banners.[27] Religious banners served as *imagines agentes*, the most famous ones being the plague banners which, during procession, attracted even more worship than the sacred relics themselves. Quite often, therefore, these banners were transformed into highly venerated, icon-like altar paintings, as, for instance, Benedetto Bonfigli's banner of San Bernardino in Perugia.[28]

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24 Ibid. 147; Erdmann 1933–34 (see note 22), 2–6.
25 Groundbreaking: Hannelore Zug Tucci: Il carroccio nella vita comunale italiana, in: Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken, 65, 1985, 1–104.
26 Dehmer 2004 (see note 17), 257.
27 Ibid., 97.
28 Ibid., 126.

Most of the secular *vexilla* were made of silk, and quite often they showed very simple devices and contrasting colors. The Milanese *gonfalone*, for example, displayed a red cross on a white field; the Florentine a white lily on red (when ruled by the Ghibellin party) or – as today – a red lily on white (for the Guelph party). More and more, Italian cities identified themselves by single main standards – the Roman *commune*, for instance, by the banner of St. George, which was kept, again in a typical blending of religion and politics, in S. Giorgio in Velabro but used as a political *signum* that represented and guaranteed civic power.[29]

In battle, the main standard had to be protected with the outmost dedication. In fact, the whole progression of the battle depended on the safekeeping of the *gonfalone*. Anything that happened to the *gonfalone* in the preparation of the battle was taken as good or bad omen. Already Roman soldiers refused, for instance, to go to war when their *vexillum* stuck fast in the ground while breaking camp, in order to wait for a better omen.[30] In 1284, the Pisans lost the sea-battle near the island of Meloria after the loss of their main standard to the Genoese. However, already before the battle an omen promised bad luck to the Pisans, as Giovanni Villani reports.[31] Preparing the *gonfalone*, the ball (*mela*) and the cross on top of the pole fell down and caused a shock among the soldiers – like in similar cases, the incident turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

An erect, visible banner allowed the army to orientate and also to perform the main tactical device of pre-modern warfare – to keep a closely packed formation, in order to break the opponent's impetus.[32] Often surrounded by elite troops (the *Compagnia di Morte* in Milan, for instance) who took the oath of sacrificing their life to protect the *gonfalone*, the office of the standard-bearer (*vexillifer, signifer*) had a literally unsurpassed significance. Already Alcuin states that if the *signifer* flies, the army loses its very center.[33] Later manuals define the *gonfaloniere's* main duty: to prevent, by any way, that the enemy gets hold of the standard. In the last resort, the standard-bearer should rather destroy the *gonfalone* himself than ceding it to the adversary.[34] Being in charge to protect the

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29 Cf. Schramm 1955 (see note 18), 671.

30 See Nickel 1996 (see note 20), 150–151.

31 Cf. Rebecca Müller: Sic hostes Ianua frangit. Spolien und Trophäen im mittelalterlichen Genua, Weimar 2002, 232–234.

32 Cf. Bert S. Hall: Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe. Gunpowder, Technology, and Tactics, Baltimore/London 1997, 12. See also John R. Hale: War and Society in Renaissance Europe 1450–1620, New York 1985, 53 ff., and Tommaso Argiolas: Armi ed eserciti del Rinascimento italiano, Rome 1991.

33 Cf. Schramm 1955 (see note 22), 654.

34 See Ottfried Neubecker: Fahne (militärisch), in: Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte, vol. VI, Stuttgart 1973, col. 1060–1168 (1144 ff.)

Ill. 2: Flags won by the Empress Maria Theresa, Vienna, Heeresgeschichtliches Museum

materialized spirit of the community, a *gonfaloniere* who was found guilty for having abandoned the standard was often perpetually banned from all further public offices and sometimes publicly humiliated. In the battle of Montaperti (1260), Bocca degli Abati, as an act of utmost treachery, cut off the hands of the Florentine *gonfaloniere*; consequently he had to suffer in the lowest parts of hell (Dante, Inf. 32, 106).

Ironically, historic war standards survived almost exclusively as trophies, well kept as votive offerings in the churches or in the town halls of the victor (ill. 2), and sometimes eternalised in sumptuously illustrated *Fahnenbücher*.[35] Captured standards were part of detailed ceremonies to abase the defeated (*dedecus*), a ritual still impressively reflected, for instance, in the Red Army's ‚humiliation' of the conquered Nazi flags (ill. 3). The victorious standards, instead, ensuring success in the battles to come, were used until they literally decomposed. Being just a sheer cloth, but signifying and protecting ‚everything' – the survival of the army or the civic community – they turned in the end, if successful, into ‚nothing'. They became, in short, literally the *velum filo tenuissimo et rare textum*

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35   So as part of the so-called „Burgunderbeute" after the Swiss-Burgundian wars (1476–77); the *Fahnenbücher* illustrate captured flags painted by – among others – Dieric Bouts, Pierre Coustain, Hugo van der Goes. Cf. Nickel 1996 (see note 20), 149.
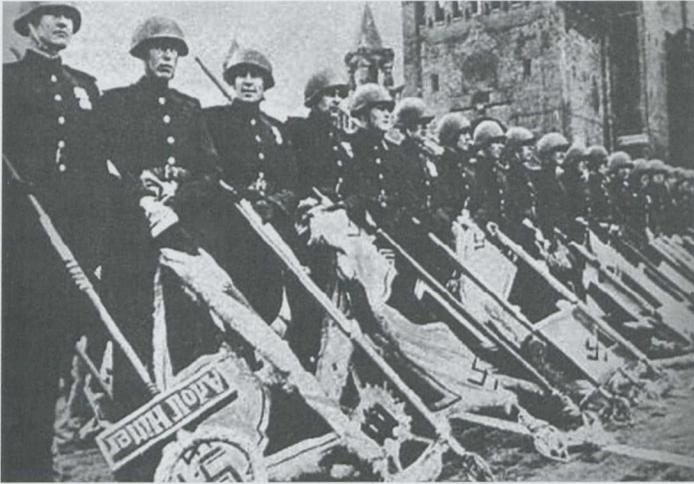
Ill. 3: Abasement of Nazi flags by the Red Army, end of World War II

of Alberti's picture surface[36] or the „nothing" (*nulla*) of the point that creates, according to Leonardo, by its movement the image surface.[37]

In a famous passage intended to be part of his planned book on painting, Leonardo wrote:

„Do we not see that paintings which represent divine deities are continuously kept covered with the most expensive textiles, and that when they are uncovered first great ecclesiastical solemnities are held, with various songs accompanied by different instruments? At the moment of unveiling, the great multitude of people who have assembled there immediately throw themselves to the ground, worshiping the painting and praying to the one who is figured in it, in order to acquire the health that they have lost and for their eternal salvation, as if in their minds such a god were alive and present. This does not happen with any other science or other works of man, and if you would claim that this is not due to the virtue of the painter, but to the inherent virtue of the thing imitated, it may be implied that if that were the case, the minds of men could be satisfied by staying in bed, rather than going either to tiring and dangerous places or on pilgrimages as one continually sees being done. Now if these pilgrimages continue to take place, who moves [people] without necessity? Certainly you will confess that this is the simulacrum which does what all the writings cannot do – to figure in effigy and in power such a Deity." (figurar […] in effiggia, e in virtu tale Iddea).[38]

36 Leon Battista Albert: De pictura II, 31.
37 Libro di Pittura ch. 1 (c. 1500–1505).
38 Ibid., ch. 8.

Many other notes of Leonardo can be added to this statement, most of them written in the context of his claims for the superiority of painting over all the other arts. Quite often, Leonardo claims the power of images to move the soul of the spectators much as reality itself does („Often the lover kisses the effigy and speaks to it, which he would not do if the same beauties were put in front of him by the writer.").[39] This adoption of the rhetorical concept of *enargeia* is set into a larger theoretical framework that allows Leonardo to identify painting with the most noble of sensory organs, the eye (against music and poetry which are related to the auditory faculty). At the same time, Leonardo links culture in all its major aspects to the activity of the eye. „The science of painting" thereby gains the status of the only true foundation of human culture as a whole, and also of its visual symbols. „The characters by which different languages are expressed were discovered by [painting], and this has given ciphers to the arithmeticians, this teaches figuration to geometry, and this teaches perspectivists and astrologers and makers of machines and engineers."[40]

Leonardo's view on the eye and painting is completed by his (traditional) convictions in optics, namely that illuminated objects emit by themselves *simulacra* or *spetie*, twodimensional ‚paintings' of their true form and colors which ‚perspectively' diminish to a point at every point of the transparent medium, and therefore also in the eye. ‚Painting' rules in fact culture *and* nature. There's no art that moves people as much as painting does – as is revealed by the ‚procession' of Florentines who, according to Vasari, came like participants in a religious ceremony to visit Leonardo's cartoon of the Madonna with Child and St. Anne in the artist's studio.[41]

The *Fight for the Standard* fits perfectly well into this art theoretical framework. The event which takes place is nothing else than the deadly fight for a *painting* – a colored silk cloth that moves large armies and incorporates the fate of entire populations. To be sure: War banners are normally ‚paintings' completely alien to any artistic ambition. Their power, however, both before and in the battle, is still entirely related to visuality. Terminologically, the close connection to painting is emphasised by *gonfalone* synonyms, like *pennello* or *pennone*.[42] In short, standards are evidence of the power of images at the very origin of painting – just color on cloth.

In Leonardo's times, the genre of church banners – again: terminologically and functional intimately connected to secular *gonfaloni* – reached its quantitative and artistic climax. Andreas Dehmer demonstrated that the genre itself became thoroughly esthetic in the late 15th and 16th century. Confraternities com-

39 Ibid., ch. 25.
40 Ibid., ch. 23.
41 Vasari 1966–1987 (see note 2), vol. IV, 29.
42 Cf. Dehmer 2004 (see note 17), 42.

peted not only for the most venerated and powerful, but also more and more for the most beautiful standards. Vasari's *Lives* document this profound transition. Andrea del Castagno, for instance, painted „a standard to be borne in processions, which is held very beautiful, for the Company of the Evangelist".[43] Painters like Cosimo Rosselli, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Botticelli, Bartolomeo della Gatta, Sodoma, Raffael, Luca Signorelli, and Vasari himself produced highly estimated church *gonfaloni*. Actually, Vasari related the career of painting on canvas to its antecedents in religious *gonfaloni*.[44]

Let us in the end turn back to Leonardo's painting itself, following John Shearman's invitation to be as accurate as possible in the reading of Renaissance narratives.[45] Obviously, there's much confusion about the things that do actually happen, and we could easily lean back with Daniel Arasse's argument that the very indeterminacy of the group mirrors the chaos of an actual battle much more than the fictive order of – to take a prominent example – Paolo Uccello's battlepieces.[46] On the other hand, unlike comparably ‚disordered' battle paintings, for instance Piero della Francesca's *Battle of Constantius and Chosroes*, Leonardo's is more favorable to a careful reading as a narrative.

Within the context of my argument, two observations seem particularly significant. First, if we identify – according to the consensus of the majority of *Leonardisti* – the riders on the right with the Florentines, the Milanese are related to the pole of the standard, the victorious party, instead, to the cloth, which Leonardo, as it seems, never executed.[47] This mirrors an internal hierarchy of the standard which is often mentioned in the documents, namely that, in the last resort, the cloth has to be saved instead of the pole. Leonardo would have been very much affirmative to that consensus which highlights again the superiority of ‚painting' to any threedimensional object.

Second, before Rubens reworked the sixteenth century drawing now in the Louvre, the shaft held by the right hand of the rider at the far right was *not*

43 Ibid., 280–283 (Vasari 1966–1987 (see note 2), vol. III, 354).

44 Cf. Dehmer 2004 (see note 17), 245 and the entry by J. Stephenson: Canvas, in: Turner 1996 (see note 20), vol. 5, 653–658.

45 Cf. John Shearman: Only connect ... Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance, Princeton 1992, passim.

46 Cf. Arasse 1997 (see note 1), 434–436.

47 In my dissertation, I overlooked (perhaps too much influenced by Vasari's generally very accurate description) the decisive detail in the center of the composition and was therefore misled; cf. Frank Fehrenbach: Licht und Wasser. Zur Dynamik naturphilosophischer Leitbilder im Werk Leonardo da Vincis, Tübingen 1997, 269–270. Thank goodness, I am not the only one who had to change his mind! See Kemp 1981 (see note 1), 244 f. and differently in the 1989 edition of his monograph (244 f.); Zöllner 1991 (see note 1), 180 („Milanese rider at the far right") and 187 („second rider from the right, i.e. the Florentine horseman in the background"). Additional iconographical evidence for the correct identification in Zöllner 1998 (see note 1).

Ill. 4: Lorenzo Zacchia the Younger, *The Fight for the Standard* (after Leonardo da Vinci), 1558, engraving, 37,4 × 47,0 cm, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina

identified as the top end of the standard, but as a lance, the tip of which still points to the central rider often identified as Niccolò Piccinino, general of the Milanese. Besides the Louvre drawing, this detail can be clearly seen in Lorenzo Zacchia's engraving (1558; ill. 4), as well as in painted copies like the one in the Widener Collection, New York, the so-called *Tavola Doria*, and the paintings in Florence (Palazzo Vecchio and Museo Horne), to refer only to some principal works.[48] In my view, this detail is of the outmost significance, since it allows for a reading in which the enormous strength of the riders on the left, caused by their combined, compact action will collapse in the next moment. Without almost any effort, only by a small movement of his right arm, and therefore thanks to the skills of his ‚aiming eye', the rider on the right will hit ‚Piccinino's' left eye. It is precisely at this point where, again, visuality becomes the subject of the battle. Only a spectator who is able to unfold the cluster of interwoven bodies by visually focusing on the constellation in the center of the group realizes that the enemy will soon be ‚blinded'. Consequently, his companion on the left – his

48   For the history of the copies, see Zöllner 1991 (see note 1).

dress alludes to the traditional lion- or bearskin drapery of an antique Roman standard-bearer[49] – will lose his support, ‚force' will be ‚blind', and the ‚painting' of the Milanese flag will be captured by the Florentines. – We should keep Leonardo's lesson in mind when we reflect upon the power of images to move people – and when we feel tempted to answer the ‚chirurgical' interventions of smart warfare mainly by manpower and brutal force.

List of Illustrations: Ill. 1: Paris, Département des Arts Graphiques du Musée du Louvre; Ill. 2: Vienna, Heeresgeschichtliches Museum; Ill. 3: Author's archive; Ill. 4: Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina.

49   This is more likely than the reference to a „soldier of St. John" in sheepskin carapace; cf. Kemp 1981 (note 1), 245. On the dress of a Roman *vexillifer* see Nickel 1996 (see note 20), 150.