

Murder and Mystery: The Missing Medici Crown

CHRISTINA STRUNCK



Certainly not least among the many fond memories of my time at Villa I Tatti are the days spent at the Archivio di Stato in Florence – countless hours, sometimes tiring, but more often entertaining and even exciting. In this paper I would like to discuss one of my more intriguing findings: a document referring to a lost Medici crown.

In a document dated 8 February 1628 (modern style), under the heading “1627 / Ducal crowns made of gold and silver” (“MDCXXVII / Corone ducale doro e di Argiento”), an inventory of the Medici *guardaroba* records the receipt of 2.9 *libbre*, or about 934 grams, of gold obtained from “a golden ducal crown which was the one owned by Grand Duke Cosimo I, melted down in Iona Falchi’s Uffizi workshop in order to make works for the journey that His Most Serene Highness will undertake outside his State”.¹ The crown had been melted down “in sul corridore”, i.e. in the top-floor Uffizi workshop of the goldsmith Jonas Falchi (active in Florence from about 1610, d. 1643), who reused the material for unspecified “lavori” in the context of a forthcoming journey (“gita”) of the grand duke.²

1. “Una corona Ducale doro che era quella del Granduca Cosimo primo fattaci fondere in bottega di Iona Falchi in sul corridore per fare lavori per la gita da fare per S.A.S. fuori del suo stato addi 8 di febbraio come al quaderno A d°/2 244 ll. 2.9 – –”: Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter ASF), Guardaroba Medicea 435, fol. 196. “Fattaci” may also be read as “fattavi”. The latter part of the text refers to p. 244 of an as yet untraced “quaderno A secondo”. The document is dated in *stile fiorentino*; according to the *stile moderno*, it refers to 8 February 1628 (instead of 1627).

2. On Jonas Falchi, see KIRSTEN ASCHENGREEN PIACENTI, “Two Jewellers at the Grand Ducal Court of Florence around 1618”, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XII, 1965/66, pp. 113–120.

Although the word *corona* can be used as a synonym for “rosary”, the weight of the object leaves no doubt that this entry refers indeed to a crown. But *why* did the Medici sacrifice a key symbol of their sovereignty? Before an answer to this question can be given, the extant documentation about the various Medici crowns needs to be examined.³

In a ground-breaking article of 1970, Willemijn Fock established that at one point in time there had been at least three Medici crowns: the first crown was created for Cosimo I (1519–1574), described in an inventory of 1566 and depicted in the central tondo of the *Salone dei Cinquecento*; the second crown was produced in a hurry in 1569–70 following Cosimo’s rise to the rank of grand duke; and a third, much more sumptuous crown was ordered by Cosimo’s son, Francesco, and finished by Jacques Bylvelt in 1583.⁴ To complicate the matter further, the Medici also owned crowns made of semi-precious materials. In 1626, court artist Matteo Nigetti borrowed a gilt crown with gems and pearls (“*corona dorata con gioie e perle*”)⁵ – possibly the same that had been used in 1618 for a ballet⁶ and was recorded in 1744 as “a grand-ducal crown of gilt copper decorated all around with rosettes made from four emeralds and one ruby each with several other inset emeralds, topazes, amethysts, chrysoliths [?], opals, and garnets, with two rows of large irregular pearls”.⁷ None of these crowns still exists, but their form and decoration are known through descriptions and representations.

3. For a more detailed discussion of this intricate matter, see CHRISTINA STRUNCK, “Schuld und Sühne der Medici. Der Tod Großherzog Francescos I. und seine Folgen für die Kunst (1587–1628)”, *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, XXXVI, 2009, pp. 243–244, 265–266.

4. C. WILLEMIJN FOCK, “The Medici Crown: Work of the Delft Goldsmith Jacques Bylvelt”, *Oud Holland*, LXXXV, 1970, pp. 197–209 (with illustrations of these three crowns).

5. ASF, Guardaroba Medicea 365, fol. 79.

6. ASF, Guardaroba Medicea 365, fol. 18: Cristofano Allori received “una Corona ducale che servì per il granduca al balletto”.

7. “Una corona granducale di rame dorato con rosette attorno di quattro smeraldi e un rubino con piu altri castoni di smeraldi, topazzi, amatiste, girsolide, opales, e granati con due fila di perle grosse scamezze”: JOHN F HAYWARD, “An Eighteenth-Century Drawing of the Grand-Ducal Crown of Tuscany”, *The Burlington Magazine*, XCVII, 1955, p. 310 n. 17.

According to Fock's original 1970 analysis, the grand-ducal crown created in 1569–70 (Fig. 1) had been melted down in order to reuse the materials for Bylivelt's crown of 1583.⁸ However, further documents published by Fock in 1974 contradict this assumption. The old crown melted down by Bylivelt in 1577 was characterized as a "royal crown with ten golden lilies and between them many posts on which to put pearls" ("corona reale con X gilli d'oro et aluna elatro tanti stiletti da mettere perle").⁹ The ten golden lilies correspond exactly to Cosimo's first crown, described in an inventory of 1566 and depicted in great detail by Giorgio Vasari (who even included the "stiletti da mettere perle").¹⁰ Although this crown was destroyed in 1577, the grand-ducal crown of 1569–70 continued to exist and was listed in an inventory of 1609, its weight being recorded as 2.9 *libbre*.¹¹ Since a golden crown with precisely the same weight reappears in the document quoted in the beginning of this article, it is confirmed that the crown melted down in 1628 was indeed the one commissioned by Cosimo I in 1569.¹² Francesco's crown weighed almost twice as much.¹³

If in 1628 the Medici needed gold for precious diplomatic gifts, they undoubtedly could have tapped into less conspicuous sources. It is therefore tempting to link the destruction of the crown to an image that depicts the offering of a Medici crown in a devotional context: the central section of the so-called *paliotto d'oro* (Fig. 2). This altar frontal made of gold and *pietre dure*, destined for the burial chapel of St. Carlo Borromeo in the cathedral of Milan, was begun no later than September 1617.¹⁴ It was commissioned by Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici (1590–1621), who had himself represented in the center of the *paliotto*, kneeling in front of a table on

8. FOCK (as in n. 4), p. 198.

9. C. WILLEMIJN FOCK, "Der Goldschmied Jaques Bylivelt aus Delft und sein Wirken in der medicaischen Hofwerkstatt in Florenz", *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, LXX, 1974, 157, n. 344; cf. *ibid.*, 170.

10. See the illustration in UGO MUCCINI, *The Salone dei Cinquecento of Palazzo Vecchio*, Florence 1990, p. 129. The inventory of 1566 is transcribed in *I gioielli dei Medici, dal vero e in ritratto*, ed. MARIA SFRAMELI, exh. cat. (Museo degli Argenti, Florence), Livorno 2003, pp. 183–185.

11. ASF, Guardaroba Medicea 289, fol. 1.

12. See n. 1.

13. FOCK (as in n. 4), p. 198.

14. ASCHENGREEN PIACENTI (as in n. 2), p. 117.

which a crown and scepter can be seen. Although still young, Cosimo had suffered from long periods of life-threatening illness since 1613, and in 1615 he had felt it necessary to draw up his last will.¹⁵ In the summer and autumn of 1617, his illness confined him to bed for five months.¹⁶ Since the *paliotto* bore an inscription labeling it as an “ex voto”¹⁷ and since an inventory of 1637 described its central image as “la storia del voto”,¹⁸ it is very likely that the scene represents the moment in which Cosimo made a solemn vow: God, if I am healed, I will offer you my crown.

In previous centuries, religiously motivated offerings of crowns had not been uncommon.¹⁹ However, this gesture may have had a special significance for Cosimo II, as the Medici crown was “tainted”: in order to secure this crown for himself in 1587, Cosimo’s father Ferdinando I had most probably killed his brother Francesco I, and he had severely violated the rights of Francesco’s son Antonio.²⁰ At the very outset of his reign, Cosimo II sought to make amends with Antonio.²¹ He was conscious of his father’s guilt, and he may have perceived his own illness, during which he continued to vomit blood, as God’s retribution.

Be this as it may, Cosimo died before the *paliotto* was finished. His ten-year-old son Ferdinando (1610–1670) succeeded him as Grand Duke in February 1621, supervised by his *tutrici* (his mother Maria Magdalena of Austria and his grandmother Christine of Lorraine). They not only faced the potential political instability inherent in any period of regency, but also had to deal with a typhoid epidemic that threatened the lives of the

15. FRANCO ANGIOLINI, “Il lungo Seicento (1609–1737). Declino o stabilità?”, in *Il Principato Mediceo*, ed. ELENA FASANO GUARINI, Florence 2003, p. 70.

16. GAETANO PIERACCINI, *La stirpe de’ Medici di Cafaggiolo. Saggio di ricerche sulla trasmissione ereditaria dei caratteri biologici*, II, Florence 1925, p. 336.

17. KIRSTEN ASCHENGREEN PIACENTI, “Un’immagine del Paliotto d’Oro restituitaci”, in *Studi di storia dell’arte in onore di Mina Gregori*, Milan 1994, pp. 229–231.

18. ASF, Guardaroba Medicea 522, fol. 17r.

19. PERCY ERNST SCHRAMM, “Herrschaftszeichen: Gestiftet, verschenkt, verkauft, verpfändet. Belege aus dem Mittelalter”, *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, I. Philologisch-historische Klasse*, 1957, V, pp. 161–226.

20. For a further discussion of these matters, see STRUNCK (as in n. 3), pp. 217–228.

21. GIUSEPPE VITTORIO PARIGINO, *Il tesoro del principe. Funzione pubblica e privata del patrimonio della famiglia Medici nel Cinquecento*, Florence 1999, pp. 144–145; FILIPPO LUTI, *Don Antonio de’ Medici e i suoi tempi*, Florence 2006, pp. 168, 178–179.

Florentines from October 1620 until the summer of 1621, and again for a whole year starting in the spring of 1622.²² In this difficult situation, on 28 April 1622, the two regents commissioned a silver reliquary for the new high altar of the Medici church of San Lorenzo (Fig. 3).²³ The urn, containing relics of Sts. Marcus, Amatus, and Concordia, is decorated with a silver relief that repeats the composition of the *paliotto d'oro* frontal (Figs. 2, 4). However, an inscription identifies its protagonist as Ferdinando II.²⁴ His piety is stressed by casting him as a “vessel” for the holy contents, while the composition modeled on the *paliotto d'oro* suggests that Ferdinando renewed the vow made by his father Cosimo II: God, if you protect me, I will offer you my crown.

Interestingly, the document quoted at the beginning of this article dates from 8 February 1628, only a few months before Ferdinando's eighteenth birthday, which marked the end of his minority.²⁵ The “gita” mentioned in the document was a long journey between the end of February and July 1628, a diplomatic mission, pilgrimage, and *Bildungsreise* all in one.²⁶ After passing through Rome, Loreto, Venice, Innsbruck, Munich, and Nuremberg, Ferdinando finally reached Prague, where he presented the emperor Ferdinand II with precious gifts.²⁷ As the said document reveals, the “lavori” made by Jonas Falchi with the gold of the destroyed Medici crown were expressly created for this “gita”. Upon his return, Ferdinando's coming of age was solemnly celebrated in order to mark

22. GIOVANNI PAGLIARULO, “Jacopo Vignali e gli anni della peste”, in *Artista. Critica dell'arte in Toscana*, 1994, pp. 138–198, esp. 140.

23. ELISABETTA NARDINOCCHI and LUDOVICA SEBREGONDI, *Il tesoro di San Lorenzo*, Florence 2007, p. 84.

24. Compare MASSIMILIANO ROSSI, “Francesco Bracciolini, Cosimo Merlini e il culto medico della croce. Ricostruzioni genealogiche, figurative, architettoniche”, *Studi Secenteschi*, XLII, 2001, p. 244.

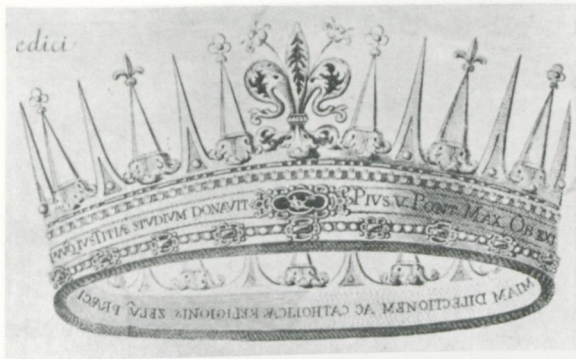
25. See n. 1.

26. MARGHERITA COSTA, *Istoria del viaggio d'Alemagna del Serenissimo Gran Duca di Toscana Ferdinando Secondo*, Venice [1630]; PAOLA BAROCCHI, “Ferdinando II da Firenze a Praga nel 1628”, *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Quaderni*, 1–2, 1996, pp. 305–323.

27. *Die Kunst des Steinschnitts. Prunkgefäße, Kameen und Commessi aus der Kammer*, ed. RUDOLF DISTELBERGER, exh. cat. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), Milan and Vienna 2002, p. 148, cat. 63; pp. 172–173, cat. 90.

the end of the regency, and he was hailed as the sole ruler of Tuscany – but, significantly, no coronation took place.²⁸ His vow had been fulfilled: through God's protection he had safely reached maturity; he was now able to govern his states by himself, and therefore this was the right moment to offer the Medici crown.²⁹ Just before Ferdinando II received the reins of government, he took the “tainted” gold outside his states, freeing Tuscany symbolically of the crown whose possession had been “poisoned” by his grandfather Ferdinando I.

28. ASF, Miscellanea Medicea 11, fols. 216r–220r.
 29. As outlined above, the destroyed crown was the one owned by Cosimo I, while the one executed for Francesco I remained intact. The sacrifice of the latter crown would have meant a *damnatio memoriae* of Francesco I, which would not have made sense if the melting down of the crown was intended as retribution for the injustice done to Francesco and his son Antonio.



1. The grand-ducal crown, engraving based on the drawing in the papal bull of 1569, from RIGUCCIO GALLUZZI, *Istoria del Granducato di Toscana*, Florence 1781.



2. COSIMO MERLINI, JONAS FALCHI, MICHELE CASTRUCCI, and GUALTIERI CECCHI after a design by GIULIO PARIGI, central section of the *paliotto d'oro*, 1617–24, hardstone inlay with carving in relief, 54.5 × 64.5 cm. Museo degli Argenti, Florence.



3. COSIMO MERLINI after a design by GIULIO PARIGI, silver reliquary containing relics of Sts. Marcus, Amatus, and Concordia.



4. Detail of Fig. 3.