A Biography Written in Stone: Baccio Bandinelli's Tomb Monument in SS. Annunziata, Florence

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During the sixteenth century, a number of texts were penned by and about artists. The most famous of these is, of course, Giorgio Vasari's *Vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori*, but this category also includes biographies of single artists, autobiographies, and memoirs. It is essential to acknowledge the sometimes quite calculated intentions of the authors of such literature. Although ostensibly factual, these accounts are frequently composed of myths and propaganda. A certain amount of caution must be employed in consulting these sources, since with these often illuminating narratives come many misunderstandings. One of the most fascinating instances of a work distorted by prejudiced reportage is the tomb monument of the sixteenth-century Florentine sculptor, Baccio Bandinelli (Figure 1). Baccio himself discusses plans for his tomb in his *Memoriale*, written between 1552 and 1559.[1] In Benvenuto Cellini's *Autobiography*, amid a scathing, mudslinging tale about Bandinelli's wicked nature and flawed works of art, the work does not escape the author's caustic evaluation.[2] In the "Life of Baccio Bandinelli," the tomb operates as an emblem of Giorgio's Vasari's carefully constructed portrait of the artist.[3] His chronological review of Bandinelli's works implies a factual presentation, but his tale is a deliberately moralizing parable with the events surrounding the production of the tomb as its climax. For each of these writers, the tomb appears to have been a sort of signifier of Bandinelli, as well as an index of his worth as an artist and as a man.

Located in the church of Santissima Annunziata, Florence,[4] the extant monument consists of an inscribed marble sarcophagus with a projecting altar table that rests on two spindle-like supports. Two relief portraits, invisible to the spectator, are carved in the rear of this basement structure: a profile portrait of Baccio and one of his wife, Jacopa Doni. Above the sarcophagus, two skulls flank a rectangular box. At the front, coats of arms[5] decorate the two corners, and a third surmounts a garland gathered by banderoles. Carved on either side are two nearly identical reliefs depicting a falcon clutching a ring in one talon and a branch in the other.[6] This central block, in turn, acts as the base for a freestanding group of the pietà. The instruments of Christ's passion appear before the figures on a rocky ground. Stretching across the full length of this platform, Christ's monumental lifeless body is held up, not by the Madonna, but by a single male figure. The figure, identified as either Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea,[7] is considerably smaller than Christ.[8] His bearded face, lifted above that of the

I would like to acknowledge my professors Shelley E. Zuraw and Andrew Ladis for their patience, encouragement, and tireless help with this essay and with all things. My thanks also to the Lamar Dodd School of Art for their help in funding this endeavor.

1 Arduino Colasanti, "Il Memoriale di Baccio Bandinelli," *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* XXVIII, 407-443.

2 Benvenuto Cellini, *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, trans. George Bull (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1956).

3 Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Firenze: G. C. Sansoni, 1906), 6:133-195.

4 The tomb was installed in the chapel formerly owned by the Pazzi family according to Vasari, Milanesi 6:189 and Bandinelli himself, Colasanti 443. Johann Wilhelm Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'artisti dei secoli XIV, XV, XVI*, vol. III (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1968) includes a letter from Lelio Torelli to Cosimo I, dated 28 February 1559, in which he asks that Bandinelli's request that the Annunziata chapel dedicated to the Virgin be reconsidered as a chapel for the Bandinelli. To further support this request, Torelli emphasizes the inappropriateness of the existing tomb for its church setting, pointing out that it was a memorial to a soldier who had perished in a duel, 14.

5 These arms are a variation on that of the Order of the Knights of St. James. In his painted self-portrait in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, he wears this insignia on a chain around his neck. This badge was bestowed on Bandinelli in 1529 by the Emperor Charles V, Philip Hendy, *European and American Paintings in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum* (Boston: Trustees of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1974) 12-13.

6 The falcon and ring are commonly considered *imprese* of Piero de'Medici, but were described as Cosimo's devices in Vasari's account of Foppa's decoration of the Banco Mediceo, Milanesi 2:447-49. For a full description of the motif's use, see John T. Paoletti, "The Banco Mediceo in Milan: urban politics and family power," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24.2 (Spring 1994) 199-238.

7 Although Vasari describes the figure as Nicodemus, the man represented could be Joseph of Arimathea, also present in many of these scenes. Valentiner 260, accepts this identification. As Joseph of Arimathea, the reading actually takes on an even more pious interpretation, since he donated his own tomb for Christ's interment. For a discussion of these questions of identity and their meanings, see Wolfgang Stechow, "Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus?" *Studien zür toskanischen Kunst: Festschrift für Ludwig Heinrich Heydenreich* ed. W. Lotz and L. Möller (München: Prestel-Verlag, 1964) 289-302.

8 Although it is not apparent in photographs, when standing before the monument, one is struck by the distinct, almost hieratic size discrepancy between the Joseph / Nicodemus figure and Christ.

Savior in a direct appeal to the viewer, is recognizable as a portrait of Bandinelli himself. Inscribed on a small marble block is both the artist's name and the titular subject of the tomb: "The Divine Pietà: Here Baccio Bandinelli made his tomb."[9]

The sculpture is a striking image in its own right. The marble is beautifully finished. The body of Christ is elegantly displayed with languid beauty and remarkable grace in the depiction of his wrists and hands. The attention to anatomy and torsion heightens Christ's very physical presence. Bandinelli's virtuosity is shown in his careful attention to details and his ability to support the massive figures which project freely from the block. Yet most of the modern critical attention has focused on the similarities of the subject matter with the more famous Florentine *Pietà* produced by Michelangelo, also intended for the artist's tomb.[10] The conflicts and frustrations of Michelangelo's late career are embodied in this unfinished, damaged, and eventually abandoned work of personal piety, so visually dissimilar to Baccio's meticulously finished sculpture. Crowning the whole is a shrouded image of Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea, whose features have been identified as both a physical and spiritual self-portrait. Michelangelo's preference for the transforming portrait—most famously his self-identification with *David*[11] and with the skin held by St. Bartholomew on the Sistine Chapel altar wall[12]—is here adopted by Baccio, who even represents himself in a similar guise.

Unlike Michelangelo, who never produced a direct self-portrait, Baccio reproduced his likeness in profusion, in engravings, paintings and sculptures. Most have features which are remarkably similar to the visage in the *Pietà*. These may be seen as further documentation of the artist's self-image; he depicts himself grandly as the ideal teacher in his studio,[13] as the perfect courtier,[14] or as the heroic, almost Herculean sage.[15] Especially in his bearded, profile relief portraits, the bust-length format and the "antique" dress reveal his attempt to portray something more than just his likeness. These elements proclaim the artist's wish to be seen in a classical mode, in the guise of an emperor or ancient hero. Further evidence of his self-promotion may be found in his adoption of the surname of an important Sienese family[16] and his multiple references to his membership in the Order of the Knights of St. James.[17]

The *Memoriale* acts as yet another self-portrait of Bandinelli, where he was again able to depict himself in a very calculated manner. Bandinelli's purpose in writing an autobiographical account of his life was to extol his name, his deeds, and the greatness of his family. Or, as Cellini says in the beginning of his account, "I must do what I find others do. . .to tell the story of my life with a certain amount of pride."[18] Bandinelli describes the genesis of the tomb monument in two places in this document. According to him, the *Pietà* for his tomb was made in large part with the help of his son, Clemente, who if he had not died, would have achieved fame comparable to that of the Greeks. He claims that Michelangelo, too, had praised the talents of his son. Although Baccio had great hope for his son's future, he suggests that it was Clemente's intemperate character as much as his early death that kept him from becoming an exceptional sculptor.[19] Much later in his *Memoriale*, Baccio returns to the *Pietà*, instructing his surviving family about his wishes for his tomb should he die before its completion.[20] In this enlightening passage, no mention is made of Clemente or his role in the work.

As a lasting monument to himself, the tomb marks Bandinelli's most important self-portrait. Like any tomb monument, this sculpture would exist as a permanent record of Baccio's life, accomplishments, and fame for later generations, and as a plea for the salvation of his soul. As a sculptor, the tomb could also document his artistic prowess. Like the other

9 The actual inscription reads "Divinae. Piet./B. Bandinelli./H. Sibi Sepul./ Fabref."

10 See Kathleen Weil-Garris, "Bandinelli and Michelangelo: A Problem of Artistic Identity," *Art the Ape of Nature (Studies in Honor of H. W. Janson)*, ed. Moshe Barasch and Lucy Freeman Sandler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981) 223-251; Irving Lavin, "The Sculptor's 'Last Will and Testament,'" *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* XXXV, no. 1-2 (1977-1978) 4-39; W.R. Valentiner, "Bandinelli, Rival of Michelangelo," *Art Quarterly* XVII, no. 3 (1955) 241-263.

11 See Irving Lavin, "David's Sling and Michelangelo's Bow: A Sign of Freedom," *Past-Present: Essays on Historicism in Art from Donatello to Picasso* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 29-61.

12 This argument was developed by Francesco La Cava, *Il volto di Michelangelo scoperto nel Giudizio Finale*, Bologna: 1925, and Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo, V: The Final Period*, Princeton: 1960. Frederick Hartt, "Michelangelo in Heaven," *artibus et historiae* XIII, no. 26, 191-209, contributes his theory of dual self-portraits on the Last Judgement wall, in both the skin and in the small figure of St. Lawrence, hovering just beneath Jonah.

13 Enea Vico's engraving of one of these images drawn by Bandinelli is N. 15955, in the Uffizi's Gabinetto dei disegni e delle stampe, reproduced in Weil-Garris 236.

14 A painted self-portrait of Bandinelli in this guise is in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. For a reproduction, see Hendy 13.

15 See Izabella Galicka and Hanna Sygietynska, "A Newly Discovered Self-Portrait of Baccio Bandinelli," *Burlington Magazine* 134 (1992): 805-807.

16 Vasari writes of Baccio's name change with considerable doubt cast on the sculptor's claim that he was descended from the Sienese Bandinelli, Milanesi 6:195.

17 See n. 5.

18 Cellini 15.

19 Colasanti 433.

20 Colasanti 442-443. He writes that the *Pietà* group, done for this purpose in the *Opera del Duomo*, should be placed atop the tomb with two other statues, one of St. John the Baptist, on which he was working in his house, and a St. Catherine of Siena. For further information on the identification of these statues and Bandinelli's other projects for the Opera, see the forthcoming dissertation by Louis Waldman, and the forthcoming publication of his lecture, "Bandinelli and the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore: Patronage, Privilege, Praxis, Pedagogy," given at the conference, *Santa Maria del Fiore: The Cathedral and Its Sculpture*, Florence, Villa I Tatti, June 5-6, 1997.

portraits of himself, the tomb may be understood as an aggressive countermeasure to the "bad press" circulating about the artist during his lifetime. Bandinelli was regularly characterized by his contemporaries as a deceitful, arrogant, and spiteful man and an obsessively competitive artist. Cellini bitingly portrays Bandinelli's negative personality traits and lack of artistic capabilities, recounting arguments between Baccio and himself and rehearsing the jeering criticisms of Bandinelli's *Hercules and Cacus* for his readers. While immensely entertaining in its vividly acrimonious tone, Cellini's narrative is clouded by personal animosity. Throughout Vasari's "Life," Baccio is described as fiercely competitive with Michelangelo; his rivalrous attitude is most famously embodied in the perception that his *Hercules and Cacus* was intended to outshine Michelangelo's *David*. Vasari even blames the envious artist for the destruction of Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* drawing.[21]

As a permanent memorial to both the artist and his sculpting abilities, it is not surprising that Bandinelli's tomb was a sort of lightning rod for his critics. This is evidenced by two claims that the tomb was derivative. Cellini accused Baccio of copying his own tomb plan, part of which was to include the "bel cristo," now in the Escorial.[22] Vasari manages to present Baccio's acknowledged debt to Michelangelo's inspiration in the creation of the *Pietà* as yet another example of Bandinelli's envious embezzling of the ideas of others.[23] While Cellini's narrative is a transparent attempt to discredit the artist, tainted by his admitted hatred of Bandinelli and therefore intentionally inflammatory, Vasari's narrative is deceptively impartial.

In his book on the family in Vasari's *Lives*, Barolsky significantly identifies familial piety as an overarching motif in the three-part cycle of lives, and cites the Bandinelli story as an example of Vasari's emphasis on the bond between father and son.[24] In Vasari's version of events, around 1555, Clemente departed from Florence without his father's blessing or financial support. Vasari writes that the young sculptor left behind two fine works: an almost-finished portrait of Duke Cosimo de'Medici and a "well-advanced" *Pietà* containing the figures of the dead Christ and Nicodemus, the latter a portrait of his father from life.[25] Within a year of his departure, Clemente died in Rome "both from overstudy and from wild living," and, again according to Vasari, Baccio mourned the loss greatly.[26] Then, when Baccio heard of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, he decided to use Clemente's *Pietà* on his own tomb in the Annunziata.[27] The emphatic link between Clemente's labor and Baccio's tomb highlights Vasari's true intentions.

At first glance, Vasari seems to encourage his audience to read these events as a very sentimental, even didactic, story. The hard-working, devoted Clemente flees to Rome to escape his ruthless father. When Clemente dies, Baccio sees the error of his ways and completes his son's sculpture for his own burial site. Vasari's outwardly romantic story has been absorbed into the modern scholarship on the tomb, thereby relegating it to an arena of sentimentality and penitence. The viewer sees Baccio himself, mourning over the body of his own son, depicted in the body of Christ sculpted by Clemente. And thus, Bandinelli's last monument has come to be described as the work of a man haunted by guilt and remorse, who represents himself "as the grieving father who mourns the death of his young and best-loved son."[28]

But Baccio, "the pathetic father," is not the subject of Vasari's biography. When placed in the context of the entire "Life," Baccio's behavior does not enact repentance, but exposes his self-aggrandizing and impious motives. Vasari's description of the father and son implies a deeply injurious relationship, not the beneficial union between father and son which Vasari constructs as a parallel to the bond between teacher and apprentice.[29] A condemnatory characterization of Baccio Bandinelli is embedded in every detail of the story. Clemente was forced to escape "*le stranezze del padre*."[30] Within the pages preceding the discussion of Clemente's flight, Vasari discusses Duke Cosimo de'Medici's reluctance even to speak to Baccio, much less patronize his work. Then, when Clemente decides to leave for Rome, Vasari writes that the Duke promised his support to the young artist.[31] Clemente had become an actual competitor with his father. After citing Duke Cosimo's response to Clemente, "he said he would not fail him," Vasari proceeds to describe Baccio's reaction to Clemente's departure: "he would not give him anything, although the young man had been a great help to him in Florence, and indeed Baccio's right hand in every matter, nevertheless, he thought nothing of getting rid of him."[32] By this intentional contrast between the Duke's response and that of Baccio, Vasari exposes Baccio's failing as a father, a teacher, and an artist and further evidences Baccio's almost

21 Milanesi 6:137-138.

22 Cellini 382.

23 Milanesi 6:188-189.

24 Paul Barolsky, *Giotto's Father and the Family in Vasari's* Lives (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992) 95-100.

25 Milanesi 6:185.

26 Milanesi 6:185-186.

27 Milanesi 6:188-189.

28 Weil-Garris 242.

29 Again see Barolsky's *Giotto's Father* for a thorough examination of this strong underlying theme in the *Lives*.

30 Milanesi 6:185.

31 Milanesi 6:185.

32 Milanesi 6:185; translation from Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects,* trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) 2:301.

pathological envy and rivalry. Although Vasari attributes Clemente's death to his excessive lifestyle, he provides the reason for the flight which resulted in Clemente's death. Clemente had to escape his father. Thus Vasari implies that Baccio was to blame for his son's demise. And the subsequent arrogation of the *Pietà* becomes an act, not of penitence, but of vainglory.

The theme of filial piety, or lack thereof, is doubly resonant in Vasari's biography because Bandinelli's relationship with his son is an echo, even an inversion, of his equally consuming ties to his own father, Michelangelo. According to Vasari, the first thing that Bandinelli did upon purchasing his tomb chapel in 1559 was to have his father's bones placed in "uno deposito" in the Annunziata, so that at a later date they could installed in the completed tomb.[33] Vasari then suggests that it was the shock of installing his father's bones in the finished sepulchre that so disturbed Baccio that he died eight days later.[34] It first appears that Bandinelli's dramatically devout actions resulted in his death. Yet Vasari once again subtly guides his reader to view this devotion with skepticism. Since Vasari certainly knew that Baccio had neglected to mention either Michelangelo Bandinelli or Clemente in the tomb's inscription, Bandinelli's horror over his father's bones, to say nothing of his grief over his son's demise, should ring hollow. Then, in the very last lines of the "Life," Vasari underscores this false piety by reminding the reader that Baccio rejected his father's name.[35] As Vasari would have it, Baccio repays his father's love with dishonor and multiplies this sin by the rejection of his son.

The modern interpretation of the tomb based on Vasari's account, a vision of a finally-repentant man honoring his dead sculptor son in a family monument, is not what Vasari really implies in his narrative. Vasari's theme of filial piety motivates the story of the tomb, but here as a moralizing commentary on the tragic relationship between father and son. Moreover, the perception that Baccio intended to commemorate his relationship with Clemente in the monument should be dismissed by Bandinelli's own account and actions. In his discussion of Clemente, Baccio portrays himself as the loving father who supported his son's endeavors as a sculptor. Yet while full of praise for his son in a few sentences of the *Memoriale*, Baccio neglects to mention Clemente in his later discussion of his tomb plans. There is no indication in the *Memoriale* of Clemente's internment in Florence, or of any attempt to have his bones sent back from Rome. Even the tomb itself carries no commemorative inscription of the son or any mention of his part in its execution. The epitaph claims that the work was carved solely by Baccio's own hand: "Baccio Bandinelli, Knight of the Order of St. James, rests with his wife, Jacopa Doni, beneath this image of the saviour, which he made himself in the year of salvation 1559." Baccio's excising of Clemente suggests a private rejection of his son's memory, akin to the very public lack of an inscription. The motifs on the tomb refer, not to his own son who sculpted the image, but to Bandinelli himself. His depiction of himself as Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea, becomes, for Bandinelli, a means of self-display. Baccio's bareheaded visage conspicuously confronts the viewer, as he alone effortlessly holds the ponderous body of Christ. He chooses to portray himself as a Biblical holy man. He elevates his own status as genius sculptor by portraying himself in the same guise Michelangelo chose. Although Baccio specifically acknowledges his debt to Michelangelo's precedent, to Renaissance eyes, and even to ours, the sense of hubris seems almost impossibly exaggerated. This self-glorification is confirmed by the multiple self-references on the tomb: Bandinelli's name appears twice, his portrait twice, and the coat of arms establishing his position as a Knight of St. James three times. The two side panels emphatically connect him to the Medici family and proclaim his pride over their patronage of his work. The foot of Nicodemus which extends into the chapel space behind the sculpture and which, like the side and back panels, cannot be seen in the current installation, proclaims that Bandinelli initially intended that the viewer be able to walk around the tomb. A free-standing monument of this size and format, comparable to a saint's *arca*,[36] again attests to Bandinelli's inflated sense of self-worth. Thus, Baccio intended the tomb to fulfill a very personal function: Bandinelli's tomb is a monument to himself, to his artistic stature, and to the greatness of his name.

It is crucial to recognize that the sentiments which color the sculpture in the above narratives are so intended by their authors. Cellini wants us to understand that Baccio was a thief of ideas and an inept sculptor. On closer reading, it seems Vasari wants us to see Bandinelli's role as father, son, and especially artist, as fraudulent and impotent. And Baccio himself wants his name to live on as the genius sculptor: one who could, with the help of his brilliant lineage, beautifully complete the sculpture Michelangelo could not. In each of these accounts this tomb sculpture is central to the portrayal of the artist. It forms the crux of both positive and negative evaluations of Bandinelli. Once these personal biases are recognized, the facts derived, and the propaganda dispelled, the sculpture may finally be free to receive its proper attention as a work distinct from the unsubstantiated legends which have surrounded it for centuries. This should open the door to a new examination of the sculpture, and to interpretations more fully in keeping with its formal innovations and distinctive iconography. Its centrality as the artist's public statement of self-memorialization in marble is unquestionable; its value as an extraordinary work of Renaissance sculpture begs a reappraisal.

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33 Milanesi 6:189.

34 Milanesi 6:190.

35 According to Vasari he was called Michelagnolo di Viviano da Gaiuole, Milanesi 6:133.

36 For a discussion of the Arca di San Domenico and its influences on ensuing tomb designs, see Anita Fiderer Moskowitz, *Nicola Pisano's Arca di San Domenico and Its Legacy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994).

Figure 1. Baccio Bandinelli, *Pietà*, marble, SS. Annunziata, Florence. Alinari.