

## A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

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# Gendered Allegories of Power and Warfare: Warrior Women as Personifications in Early Modern Art

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**Abstract** Geographical personifications during the early modern period, focusing on sixteenth-century Italian painting. It analyses, through case studies, the ancient origin of these predominantly feminine allegories, the circumstances in which they appeared in painting and the role played by warfare in their proliferation. Additionally, the study delves into the gender dynamics at play, emphasizing how the visual portrayal of cities, countries, and republics as women, metaphorically positioned them as mothers, lovers, wives, or maidens within rhetorical discourses and propagandistic imagery.

**Keywords** Geographical personifications. Allegory. Sixteenth-century Italian art. Gendered bodies. Politics. Warfare. Iconography.

**Summary** 1 *Roma(e) Resurgen(te)s: Vasari's Cities in Palazzo Vecchio, 'Rediscovery' and Reinterpretation of an Ancient Phenomenon.* – 2 Valiant Soldiers and Virgin Lands: Geographical Personifications in Titian's *Religion Saved by Spain.* – 3 Power, Governance, and Erotic Allegory: Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli's *Parma Embraces Alessandro Farnese.* – 4 Conclusions.

## 1 *Roma(e) Resurgen(te)s: Vasari's Cities in Palazzo Vecchio, 'Rediscovery' and Reinterpretation of an Ancient Phenomenon*

In 1554 Cosimo I de' Medici commissioned Giorgio Vasari to renovate the Palazzo Vecchio. A few years later, Vasari completed *I ragionamenti*, a text in which the artist described the newly decorated rooms of the palace through a fictional dialogue between himself and the

young Francesco de' Medici, son of Cosimo I (Le Mollé 2007, 24; Manucci 2014, 19-33). In this narrative, Vasari acts as a cicerone, guiding both the prince and the reader through the palace for three days. He sheds light on the artistry behind his compositions and the allegorical meanings of his paintings, all of which were ultimately intended to honour the Medici family. During the second day of the tour, when Vasari and Francesco reach the Sala di Cosimo I, the prince draws the attention of the reader to an unusual detail of the ceiling decoration, saying:

Or venite qua a dirmi quello [che] avete fatto in questi ottangoli, che non mi pare ci aviate fatto Virtù come in quelli della camera del signor Giovanni, anzi ci veggo una femmina ginocchioni dinanzi al duca. (Vasari [1567] 1906, 192)

Come over here now and tell me what you have done in these octagonal spaces. It does not seem to me that you have painted Virtues, as you did in those of the room of Sir Giovanni, instead, I see a woman kneeling before the Duke.<sup>1</sup>

This passage introduces a long iconographic description of the eight corners, where Vasari deliberately chose not to paint Virtues, deviating from the usual conventions. Instead, he portrayed personifications of the cities under Cosimo's rule: Arezzo, Borgo San Sepolcro, Cortona, Pisa, Pistoia, Prato, Fivizzano, and Volterra, each appearing in one of the corner sections of the ceiling, kneeling or sitting before a youthful Cosimo armed *all'antica* [fig. 1].

To differentiate the eight cities, the artist incorporated significant elements of their history into the depiction. He explains this in *I ragionamenti*, where he tells his interlocutor that Volterra is portrayed as aged to represent the city's antiquity and that Pistoia is half-armed to reflect its history of enduring conflicts between opposing factions (Vasari [1567] 1906, 194). The cities' attributes are also carefully chosen. Arezzo, for instance, wears the ancient augur's headband, a reference to the Etruscan rites once practiced there. Arezzo, Cortona and Volterra are depicted while receiving the mural crown by Cosimo, who had reconstructed their walls (193-4).

Although Vasari carefully explains details of the cities' appearances and attires to Francesco de' Medici, the decision to depict them as men or women requires no explanation. This choice follows the ancient convention of assigning gender to personifications based on the grammatical gender of the corresponding noun (Gombrich 1971, 247-57; Warner 1985). For this reason, Pisa is depicted as a woman while Arezzo appears as a man.

<sup>1</sup> If not indicated otherwise, all the translations are by the Author.



**Figure 1** Giorgio Vasari, *Allegory of the city of Pisa with Cosimo I*. 1556-59. Mural painting. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. © Catalogo generale dei beni culturali

In Ancient Greek, Latin, and Romance languages, abstract concepts are often given the feminine gender. As a result, in literature and art, female personifications are predominant (Warner 1985). For example, the Latin word *virtus*, despite etymologically deriving from the masculine word for man (*vir*), grammatically takes the feminine gender and is thus visualised as a woman.

While this is not the case for Vasari's description, which includes an equal number of masculine and feminine city names, in general, this female predominance applies to geographical personifications as well.<sup>2</sup> Some of the most important cities of antiquity, for instance Athens, Rome, Constantinople and Antioch, have grammatically feminine names.

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, some exceptions to this rule. For what concerns geographical personifications, for example, the city of Fivizzano, while being described as a man in Vasari's *Ragionamenti*, is then depicted as a woman (Scorza 1995-96, 64-74). Again, in Giambologna's sculpture *Florence Triumphant over Pisa*, Pisa is represented as a man. See Baskins (2017, 91-104).

From the outset, these cities were endowed with patron deities. The Homeric poems suggest that by the second half of the eighth century BC, Athens was already under the divine protection of the goddess Athena, from whom the city derived its name (Broucke 1994, 34). This goddess provided the iconographic model for several geographical personifications, including that of Dea Roma and Britannia. Other civic divinities included Tychai, localised versions of the goddess of chance, Tyche, who governed the prosperity and fortune of a city.

Vasari was probably familiar with Enea Vico's *Imagines*, a set of prints representing the medals issued by the first twelve Roman emperors. In the iconographic programme for the cities under Cosimo I's rule, he made several references to these goddesses and personifications, widely employed in Roman coinage (Scorza 1995-96, 66).

Firstly, his arrangement of figures was directly inspired by a classical motif, that of the *Roma resurgens* (Rome rising again). In this motif, emperors were symbolically portrayed as reviving the personification of Rome, who would kneel before them. Through this imagery, the city was depicted as being reborn and restored by the emperor after times of turmoil or neglect, a homage that Vasari clearly thought his patron deserved (Scorza 1995-96, 66).

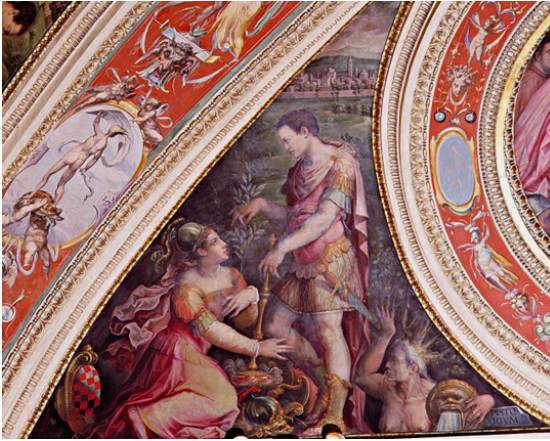
Secondly, a number of details in the iconographic programme drew inspiration from antiquity. The mural crowns of Arezzo, Cortona and Volterra, despite holding ideological significance within the context of Cosimo I's domain, were modelled after the primary attribute that identified Tychai in antiquity. Tychai often appeared in art wearing a turreted crown resembling the city walls and carrying a cornucopia symbolising abundance and prosperity (Broucke 1994, 34-49).

Vasari also incorporated the cornucopia into his cycle, in the representation of Pisa [fig. 1]. Described in the *Ragionamenti* as wearing a helmet *all'antica* crested with a fox (Vasari [1567] 1906, 192), Pisa was then depicted by Vasari without her helmet, which found its place at her feet.<sup>3</sup> With her breast-revealing dress however, she still had something of the Amazonian lore that also characterised ancient depictions of Dea Roma.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly more warlike than Pisa is the personification of Pistoia, described in the *Ragionamenti* as *mezza armata* or half-armed and depicted wearing a Roman helmet and armour (Vasari [1567] 1906, 194) [fig. 2]. While her martial aspect was employed as a reference to the tumultuous situation experienced by the city before Cosimo restored peace, her warlike appearance, combined with the olive branch

<sup>3</sup> Scorza states that while the helmet is found in a drawing of Pisa now at the Louvre Museum, it is not visible in the mural painting (1995-96, 69). However, there is a helmet depicted on the ground near Cosimo's feet.

<sup>4</sup> For the iconography of Dea Roma see Joyce (2014-15).



**Figure 2**  
 Giorgio Vasari, *Allegory of the city of Pistoia with Cosimo I*, 1556-59. Mural painting. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. © Catalogo generale dei beni culturali

gifted to her by the duke, presented Pistoia as a figure akin to the peace-bringing Athena.

Vasari's ceiling, with its depictions of cities, is only one of the numerous examples of the early modern reinterpretation of civic personifications. In the early modern period, geographical allegories armed *all'antica*, visually deriving from the Athena/Roma prototype, became increasingly common in literature and art. The proliferation of these allegorical representations may be attributed, in part, to the widespread violence that affected Italy and Europe in the sixteenth century and beyond. Wars, invasions, and political conflicts were common occurrences at the time, and artists and writers often sought to convey the impact of these events through their works. By personifying cities and countries as warlike figures, they often represented the fortitude of these places and their people in the face of adversity. But if it is no surprise that warfare was at the heart of the political and religious discourse, it is interesting to notice how often gender was implicated in it.<sup>5</sup> The traditional personification of a territory as a woman meant that the metaphors used to refer to that territory were linked to femininity and the sphere of female sexuality. A land could be pure and unconquered like a maiden, fecund like a mother and faithful like a wife. The case studies that follow analyse, through an iconographic lens, the ideological significance of warlike women personifying cities and counties and the importance of their gender roles in the rhetoric discourse of power.

<sup>5</sup> See Milligan (2018), who explores the role of women in warfare in early modern times and the widespread discussion around female militancy in literature.

## 2 Valiant Soldiers and Virgin Lands: Geographical Personifications in Titian's *Religion Saved by Spain*

Pallas Athena was, in ancient Greece, the virgin goddess of wisdom, justice, law, victory, handicraft and warfare. In war she was described as a prudent strategist in opposition to the bloodthirsty Ares (Homer, *Il.*, 10.503-14). She was also the protectress of the eponymous city, a role that extended from Athens to Rome. In Rome, with the name Minerva, she was venerated as the patron first of the Republic and then of the Empire. As the patron of the arts, she supervised Roman industry and as a martial goddess she provided the city with military protection (Hodapp 2019, 20).

Distinguished from Athena/Minerva for her Amazonian attire, Dea Roma, another warlike goddess venerated in the city, also embodied the martial qualities and military aspirations of the Romans (Joyce 2014-15, 6-9).

In accordance with these ancient models, the warlike look of some early modern personifications served as a generic reference to the military inclination of the people they embodied. Corsica, Marche and Liguria, three martial figures which feature, alongside other geographical personifications, in the third edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, are all described as having excellent and courageous soldiers (Ripa [1603] 2021, 204-41).<sup>6</sup>

However, depending on the historical and political circumstances, these belligerent women could carry more intricate and layered meanings, which extended beyond a generic reference to warfare. A well-known allegorical composition by Titian, which went through a series of alterations, perfectly exemplifies the multifaceted nature of these personifications.

In 1566, when visiting Titian's studio, Vasari recorded a painting that the artist had started many years earlier for Alfonso I, Duke of Ferrara, and which remained incomplete after the duke's death in 1534. The painting, briefly described by Vasari as showing a young, naked woman bowing before Minerva, was set in a seaside landscape, with a figure of Neptune in his chariot on the background (Vasari [1568] 1881, 458).<sup>7</sup> With such a brief description, the subject of this

<sup>6</sup> See for example Corsica: "Si dipinge che sia armata, e che con la destra mano tenga una corseca, per essere tali armi molto usate dalli Corsi, liquali sono stimati buoni, e valorosi soldati" (She should be depicted armed and holding a corseque in her right hand, as these weapons are widely used by the Corsicans, who are esteemed as good and courageous soldiers) (Ripa [1603] 2021, 237).

<sup>7</sup> The entire quote is: "Cominciò anco, molti anni sono, per Alfonso primo, duca di Ferrara, un quadro d'una giovane ignuda che s'inchina a Minerva, con un'altra figura acanto, ed un mare; dove nel lontano è Nettunno in mezzo, sopra il suo carro: ma per la morte di quel signore, per cui si faceva quest' opera a suo capriccio, non fu finita e si

work, now lost, remains obscure.<sup>8</sup> However, the presence of Minerva and Neptune suggest that it depicted a mythological/allegorical scene.

Around 1568, when Titian revised the painting after a span of over thirty years, he transformed its original mythological subject into a religious allegory dedicated to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II (Tietze-Conrat 1951, 130; Panofsky 1969, 190). Although this second painting has also been lost, an engraving of it by Giulio Fontana provides some insight into its content through an accompanying inscription [fig. 3].<sup>9</sup>

In the forefront, the youthful figure mentioned by Vasari now takes the form of a vulnerable young woman, identified as Religion by the presence of a cross at her feet. She is threatened by poisonous snakes, symbolising Heresy. Coming to her aid are Virtue, in the guise of Minerva, carrying a banner with the two-headed Habsburg eagle, and Peace, who holds an olive branch.

Only a few years after the production of this engraving, in the immediate aftermath of the battle of Lepanto's, Titian employed this composition for a third time, again changing its meaning according to the historical circumstances (Wittkower 1939a, 138-40). The third painting was created for Philip II of Spain to celebrate the victory of the Holy League against the Ottoman Empire [fig. 4].

In this version, Minerva/Virtue is transformed into a personification of Spain through some minor alterations. The shield, which in the engraving bore Medusa's head now bears Philip II's coat of arms, (Beroqui 1946, 61), while the gorgon on the breastplate has been replaced by a cherub. Accompanied by a cohort of female warriors, Spain approaches the distressed figure of Religion, threatened by Turkish forces. The character referred to by Vasari as "Neptune in his chariot", seen in the sea in the background, here assumes the guise of a Turk, leading an Ottoman armada (Wittkower 1939a, 140; Tietze-Conrat 1951, 131).

In the three allegories illustrated, while the compositions remained more or less unaltered, the iconographic attributes changed,

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rimase a Tiziano" (Vasari [1568] 1881, 458) (He also started many years ago a picture for Alfonso I Duke of Ferrara showing a young woman naked and bowing before Minerva, and another figure next to her; and the sea, where far away Neptune appears in his chariot. But, on account of the death of the Duke, according to whose idea he was executing the work, it was not finished and remained with Titian; Wittkower 1939, 138).

<sup>8</sup> Tietze-Conrat suggested that this painting, unfinished, could be the one, with the same subject, in the Doria Pamphilj Gallery in Rome (1951, 131).

<sup>9</sup> The inscription reads "Caearis invicti pia Religionis imago; Haeresis anguicoma, et saevus quam territat hostis Christigenfim; passura dolos (ut cernis) utrimque Virtuti, et Paci se se commendat amicae" (The pious likeness of the invincible emperor's Religion Which Heresy with serpent locks and the furious enemy of Christians threaten; She will, as you see, overcome the plots of both, Entrusting herself to Valor and Peace, both her friends; Tietze-Conrat 1951, 130).



Figure 3

Giulio Fontana, *Allegory of Religion*.  
Ca. 1568. Etching, laid paper,  
height: 405 mm; width: 312 mm.  
Madrid, Prado Museum

enriching the paintings with different political meanings. Among these changes, two are worth deeper scrutiny in the context of geographical personifications.

First, Spain is modelled on Minerva and represented as a warlike figure not just as a reference to the martial glory of the country, but also to its religious role. We have already noted that Athena/Minerva was a virgin goddess in antiquity. In the early modern period, this allowed her to be reinterpreted as a generic symbol of virtue as she began appearing in scenes depicting the struggle between 'good' and 'evil', known as Psychomachia. Despite being a pagan goddess, Minerva could thus be incorporated into artworks with religious undertones.<sup>10</sup> Her pure and militant character facilitated a connection between her and the Church (Wittkower 1939a,

<sup>10</sup> Wittkower goes as far as saying that the comparison between Minerva and Mary was a common convention (1939b, 204).





**Figure 4** Titian, *Religion saved by Spain*. ca 1575. Oil on canvas, 168 × 168 cm. Prado Museum, Madrid

139; Panofsky 1969, 189). The association between Minerva, the Church, and Spain is particularly meaningful in the context of Philip II's political role, as this king was a staunch supporter of militant Catholicism.

But if Minerva is turned into the Spanish Church, in its role as protector of Religion, who is the woman who accompanies her in this enterprise, sword in hand? The second relevant alteration of the painting could reveal a veiled reference to the religious significance of another city, Venice. Widely interpreted as Justice (Wittkower 1939a, 139) or Fortitude (Panofsky 1969, 189) this figure was associated with Venice by Frederick de Armas on the basis of text-image comparisons between the painting and Lope de Vega's *La Santa Liga* (1978, 346). In this play, which makes suggestive references to Titian's allegory, the battle of Lepanto is narrated by

the personifications of members of the Holy League: Spain, Venice, and Rome.<sup>11</sup>

Iconography could provide support to this theory. Less warlike than other geographical personifications, the republic of Venice was not normally associated with Minerva but compared to another virgin, Mary, the “Regina del cielo” (Queen of Heaven), as Luigi Detrico defined her in 1585 (Maissen 2013, 254). Venice was also frequently depicted carrying Justice’s sword (Rosand 2012, 31; Maissen 2013, 148-63). Occasionally, Venice is shown fighting in wars that involved the republic directly, for example in *The Allegory of the Victory over the League of Cambrai* by Palma il Giovane.

The sword is the only attribute of the woman following Spain in Titian’s painting. We can assume that the artist needed a reason to transform Peace’s olive branch into a weapon. That reason might have been to pay homage to the Republic of Venice for its crucial role in the battle of Lepanto. Perhaps the amazons who follow Spain and Venice are other countries and cities involved in the struggle, a crowd of chaste warriors ready to fight in the name of the Church.

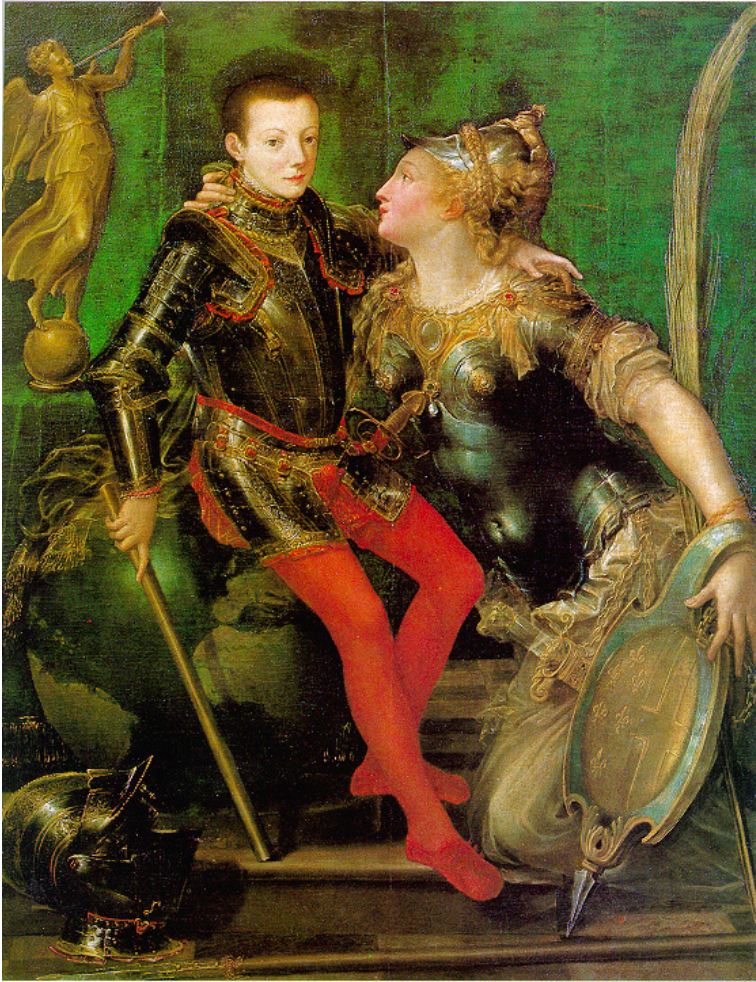
### 3 Power, Governance, and Erotic Allegory: Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli’s *Parma Embraces Alessandro Farnese*

One of the main virtues of the goddess Athena was, as noticed, her maidenhood. Such a feature allowed her to become a personification of Virtue itself and to be re-interpreted as a Christian symbol. Notwithstanding this, by virtue of being the nurturer of the Athenians, Athena was also invested with symbolic maternal qualities (Joyce 2014-15, 11). Something similar applied to Roma as well, who, with her exposed breast, could potentially become symbol of maternal nurture (22). Other stereotypical female roles of geographic personifications included that of lover or wife. A city like Venice, repeatedly compared to the virgin Mary, was metaphorically joined in a mystical marriage to the Doge (Maissen 2013, 116).<sup>12</sup>

Considering the overlapping of these roles, it can be difficult to unravel the symbolic meanings of an allegorical painting featuring geographical personifications. A particularly complex example is Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli’s *Parma Embraces Alessandro Farnese* [fig. 5].

<sup>11</sup> They appear together, embracing, also in Giorgio Vasari’s *The Battle of Lepanto*, fresco in the Sala Regia in the Vatican Palace, dated 1572 (Strunck 2011, 219).

<sup>12</sup> As evident in a 1580 poem written after the election of a new Doge, which called him both “sposo”, namely bridegroom of the Republic (Maissen 2013, 116).



**Figure 5** Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli, *Parma embraces Alessandro Farnese*. ca 1556. Oil on canvas, height: 150 cm, width: 117 cm. Galleria Nazionale di Parma, Parma

In the “Life of Parmigianino”, Vasari mentioned that his cousin, Girolamo Bedoli

ritrasse, per madama Margherita d’Austria duchessa di Parma, il principe don Alessandro, suo figliolo, tutto armato con la spada sopra un mappamondo, et una Parma ginocchioni et armata dinanzi a lui. (Vasari [1568] 1759, 366)

portrayed, for Madama Margaret of Austria duchess of Parma, prince Don Alessandro, her son, all armed with a sword on a globe, and a Parma kneeling and armed before him.

While Vasari a few years later used the same expression – “una femina ginocchioni dinanzi al duca” (a figure of a woman kneeling before the duke) – to describe his Personification of Pisa in Palazzo Vecchio, a comparison between the two shows a clear difference in posture. Parma and the young Alessandro seem to enjoy a more intimate relationship than any of the cities depicted by Vasari with Cosimo I, as, unlike those, they are embracing.

Alessandro, only about eleven years old at the time of this portrait, produced in 1555-56, is depicted fully armed, sitting on a globe. He carries the baton of command in his right hand and throws his left arm around Parma. The city, helmeted and armoured, is identified by the coat of arms on her shield and by the bull, one of Parma’s symbols, mounted on her helmet and sword. She kneels on the duke’s side and, gazing into his eyes, returns his embrace. Resting on her arm, a palm branch symbolising glory decorates the right side of the picture (Giusto 1998, 68).

The difference in age between the two figures, and the fact that Alessandro is depicted as the son and the heir of the Farnese dynasty, could suggest that the embrace is a motherly one. As noted above, according to Vasari, the painting was commissioned by Alessandro’s mother Margherita of Austria (Vasari [1568] 1759, 366)

A few years later, Margherita was the sitter for an interesting medal designed by Jacques Jonghelinck, in which she appeared as an allegorical figure (Rossi 1888, 339), a sort of Minerva Pacifera-Justice, iconographically similar to Bedoli’s Parma.<sup>13</sup>

Like Parma, this allegory wears a dress with a Roman cuirass on top and carries the sword and the palm among other attributes.

However, unlike Jonghelinck’s allegory, Bedoli’s Parma is an idealised woman whose face cannot be mistaken for a portrait. Moreover, between Bedoli’s painting and this medal eleven years had passed and Margherita’s political role had changed. In 1559 her half-brother Philip II appointed her governor general of the Netherlands, where she faced growing discontent, insurrections and revolts (Steen 2013, 49-74). The medal inscribed *Favente deo* (if God so wishes) could then refer to her attempts to quell the riots in a country with growing Protestant influence, a country far away from Parma.

<sup>13</sup> The attribution to Jonghelinck is confirmed by the letter from Francesco Marchi, executor of the medal to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, Margherita’s brother-in-law, dated 7 July 1567. The letter also confirms the identification of the female figure on the reverse with Margherita (Rossi 1888, 339).

Less than two centuries after it was completed, Bedoli's artwork was moved to Naples. There it was seen and briefly mentioned among many others by Giuseppe Maria Galanti in his description of the city. Galanti refers to it as "il Quadro allegorico di una Parma in sembianza di amante che abbraccia Alessandro Farnese" (the allegorical painting of Parma in the guise of a lover embracing Alessandro Farnese) (Galanti [1792] 1838, 82). Later on, in a *Gazzetta Letteraria* dated 1883 we find the following description:

Alessandro Farnese, duca di Parma [...], era un bel giovane, e il Parmigianino gli fece il ritratto in questo modo: alla città di Parma diede la forma di un'amante e questa, bella, grecamente vestita, si accosta al giovane per abbracciarlo. (*Gazzetta Letteraria* 1883, 225)

Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma [...] was a handsome young man and Parmigianino painted his portrait in this way: he gave the city of Parma the form of a mistress, and this beautiful, Greek-toned mistress approaches the young lord to embrace him.

Despite not being indicative of the intentions of Margherita of Austria and Bedoli (in the *Gazzetta* mistaken for Parmigianino), these accounts suggest that from the late eighteenth century the embrace between Parma and Alessandro was seen as an erotic one.

A detail of the painting seems to confirm this hypothesis. In an emphatic position almost in the centre of the picture, the hilt of Alessandro's sword resembles an erect penis. It points to the centre of Parma's breasts and, more precisely, to a jewel set into the armour from which hangs a pearl, suggestive of semen. Phallus-like swords are not rare in Renaissance art and weapons are often used as sexual metaphors in literature (Barolsky 1978, 113). As we noticed, not uncommon too is the idea of a geographical personification as a lover. While some were presented as virgin territories, others were instead described as beautiful women who many wanted to possess.

In rhetoric and political speeches, the act of engaging in sexual relations with a city or a country was employed as a metaphor to symbolise power and governance. This metaphor was especially prevalent in Florence. For instance, in a song from the late fourteenth century, the city was depicted as a slumbering bride, embraced by council members during an era of oligarchical rule (Lazzaro 2015, 361; Randolph 2002, 69-71). As time passed and the Medici's power became hereditary, Michelangelo lamented in a madrigal that while the city should have many, even a thousand lovers - her citizens - she was instead taken by only one, all for himself (Saslow 1991, 423).

In other contexts, kings and rulers were portrayed as the bridegroom to their lands or communities. This portrayal aimed to

illustrate the close connection between the ruler and his people and legitimize his power (Maissen 2013, 93-120).

There is reason to believe that the union between Parma and Alessandro Farnese is a legitimate one. The shield that Parma holds in her right hand shows two coats of arms combined, bisected by a vertical line. This design, 'an impaled shield bisected in pale', was a heraldic convention to denote union, the most common one being marriage. Where the union *was* marriage, the husband's arms would be shown in the *dexter* half (on the right-hand side of someone standing behind the shield), being the place of honour, the wife's arms in the *sinister* half (Boutell 1863, 102). In Parma's shield, the Farnese coat of arms is shown in the *dexter* part while Parma's emblem in the *sinister*.

The painting could then suggest an allegorical marriage between Alessandro and Parma. It is noteworthy that the picture was made in the years of Alessandro's move to the Spanish court in Brussels, where he then stayed for several years (Giusto 1998, 68). In the painting, the statuette of Fame blows upon his future achievements, and even the gaze of the young man seems to be directed towards the future. However, Parma holds him close, observing him with a languid look, as if to demonstrate the loyalty of a conquered woman who will await her lover's return.

#### 4 Conclusions

Vasari's cities in Palazzo Vecchio, Titian's *Religion Saved by Spain* and Bedoli's *Parma Embraces Alessandro Farnese* are three interesting examples of how sixteenth-century artists interpreted geographical personifications to meet different communication objectives.

Through these case studies, the present article has attempted to examine a specific angle of a wide and complex phenomenon, that of personification, which lies in the interplay between language, art, politics and religious symbolism.

Vasari's depiction of different personified cities served as a starting point to focus on the roots of these predominantly feminine allegories, whose lineage can be traced back to ancient civilisations and cults, such as those of Athena and Roma. As martial goddesses, they provided primary prototypes for geographical personifications during the sixteenth century, a period characterised by wars, invasions, and political conflicts. Modelled on these martial figures, are, among many others, the personification of Spain in Titian's painting and that of Parma in Bedoli's work.

Within the article, the analysis intertwines the iconographic and symbolic examination of the military aspects of these personifications with an exploration of their gender roles. In rhetorical discourses and propagandistic imagery, these predominantly female

personifications are often referred to as maidens, wives, mothers, lovers, and widows. In Titian's intricate allegory, Spain is portrayed as a militant virgin who bravely rescues Religion from her enemies. On the other hand, Bedoli's painting depicts Parma as a loving wife, deeply enamoured with the heir of her sovereign.

While this analysis does not aim to be exhaustive, it endeavours to shed new light on the multifaceted nature of warlike geographical personifications and their significance within the broader socio-political context of sixteenth-century Italy. By examining these case studies, we gain a deeper understanding of how artists employed personification as a means to convey complex ideas, engage with historical and mythological origins, and participate in the political and religious discourses of their time.

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