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An Early Description of the Vatican *Meleager*

Clifford M. Brown

On 3 January 1614 Duke Ferdinando I Gonzaga learned that Giovanni Battista Crescenzo had

wasted no time in speaking with the owner of the Adonis [Meleager, Fig. 1], Signor Alessandro Pighini, concerning the asking price for the Adonis, the Venus and the dog. He quoted a figure of 10,000 scudi, the same price he once asked when you were still a cardinal and not yet Duke of Mantua. I told him that I was not interested in ancient history and urged him, since he professed to be a friend, to provide a more realistic figure. He told me that he wished to talk the matter over with his brothers and that I would be apprised of the outcome.¹

Unable to agree on the price satisfactory to both parties, the negotiations came to an abrupt halt on 1 March 1614. Unlike his brother Vincenzo, who fourteen years earlier had negotiated the purchase of thirty-six items from the Peranda collection, Ferdinando was unable to add further glories to the already notable collections of Roman antiques that his predecessors had founded in various locales within the confines of the sprawling Ducal Palace complex in Mantua. Accordingly, the *Meleager* remained in the Pighini collection until 1770, when it was acquired for the Vatican by Pope Clement XIV.² This

pope succeeded where Paul III (as shall be seen) and Ferdinando I had failed. The antique beloved by eighteenth-century artists and sculptors had finally been extricated from the Pighini who had inherited it by marriage into the Fusconi family.³

The *Meleager* is first documented in the collection of Maestro Francesco da Norcia (Fusconi) by Aldrovandi in his authoritative *Delle statue antiche* of 1550 and subsequently in the family inventory of 1593.⁴ “Maestro Francesco da Norcia medico” is familiar to readers of Benvenuto Cellini’s autobiography, where the author credits him with having once saved his life. In spite of conflicting evidence, scholars now agree that the statue was found in a garden the family owned near the Porta Portese in Rome. Some uncertainty exists as to the date when this occurred.

It may now be possible to pinpoint the time when the *Meleager* was unearthed through the publication of two documents which have passed unnoticed in the literature. The more important of these, like Crescenzo’s later correspondence, is found in the files of the Gonzaga family in the State Archives in Mantua. The other is contained in an undated letter (probably

¹ On 3 July 1967, I began research in the Mantua archives. In the intervening decade my work has benefited greatly from the sympathetic and knowledgeable assistance of the indefatigable Anna Maria Lorenzoni. Without her, many of my previous efforts would not have been possible. Accordingly, and in honour of the tenth anniversary of our collaboration, this note is affectionately dedicated to her.

For transcriptions of Crescenzo’s letters (Archivio di Stato di Mantova, Archivio Gonzaga, Busta 1006, cc. 365 [quoted *supra*], 389, 447) see A. Bertolotti, *Artisti in Relazioni coi Gonzaga* (Modena, 1885). The *Minute* (Busta 2283–84) do not contain copies of the relevant letters written by Duke Ferdinando.

² L. von Pastor, *The Lives of the Popes*, trans. by E.E. Peeler (London, 1951), xxxviii, 512; W. Helbig, *Führer durch die*

öffentlichen sammlungen klassischer altertümer in Rom, ed. by A. Speier (Tübingen, 1963), I, 74–75.

³ For the popularity of the *Meleager* see S. Howard, *A Classical Frieze by J.L. David* (Sacramento, 1975), 22. For mention by J.J. Winckelmann see his *Briefe*, ed. by W. Rehm (Berlin, 1954), II, 142. For a grisaille by Jacques Rousseau (1630–93) in the *Salon de Vénus* at Versailles (Fig. 2) see A. Marie, *Naissance de Versailles* (Paris, 1968), II, 293.

⁴ U. Aldrovandi, “Delle Statue antiche che per tutta Roma in diversi luoghi et case si vedono” (1550) in L. Mauro, *Le Antichità della città di Roma* (Venice, 1556), 167–68. For the 1593 inventory and other documentation on the *Meleager* see R. Lanciani, *Storia degli Scavi di Roma II* (Rome, 1902), 90–91.



FIGURE 1. *Meleager*. Rome, Vatican Museum (Photo: Anderson).

written towards 1550) by Antonio Francesco Doni which lists monuments worthy of attention.⁵ Not surprisingly Simon Carneseccchi, to whom the letter is addressed, is advised to see the Belvedere group in addition to the *Dioscuri*, the *Spinario*, and the *Antinous* which Pope Paul III had purchased for 1,000 gold ducats in February 1543. To this canonical list Doni added the Fusconi statue, which he argued portrayed Meleager rather than Adonis.

Doni's intelligent solution to the identity of the figure was not accepted in his time nor at the beginning of the seventeenth century when Crescenzo was in correspondence with the Duke of Mantua. It was only with the publication of the *Segmenta* of

⁵ "Il Doni a Messer Simon Carneseccchi," Document CXVI in G. Bottari and S. Ticozzi, *Raccolta di lettere* III (Milan, 1825), 348–50.

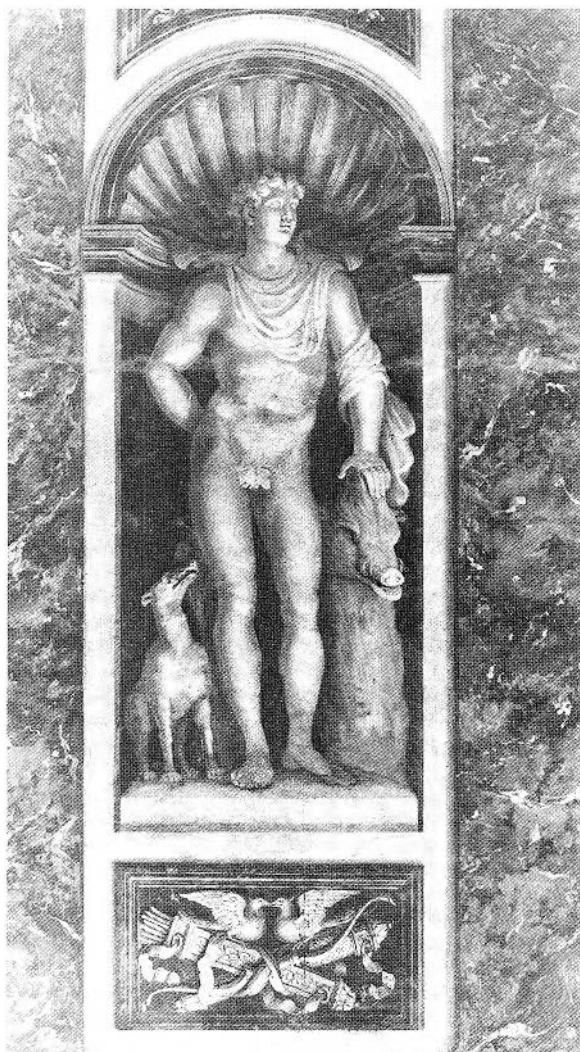


FIGURE 2. Jacques Rousseau, *Meleager*. Versailles, Salon de Vénus (Photo: Cliché des Musées Nationaux).

Perrier in 1638 that this error was finally laid to rest.⁶ It may be possible to speculate on the motives behind the persistent misidentification of the *Meleager* as Adonis. According to Aldrovandi, the statue had been juxtaposed with one of Venus. The iconography of the decoration of the room of the Fusconi palace evidently depended on establishing a meaningful relationship between this goddess and her companion.

At the very moment that Aldrovandi was completing his manuscript, and about the same time that Doni was giving advice to Carneseccchi, the Fusconi *Meleager* was the subject of a lengthy description in a letter written on 6 February 1550 by Giovanni Francesco Arrivabene.⁷ In this communication to Sabino Calandra, secretary to Duke Francesco III Gonzaga, Arrivabene also referred to the expertise provided the owner by none other than Michelangelo Buonarroti. This letter proves that the statue was discovered during the reign of Paul III (*il Papa di bon memoria*), the pope having died in 1549 without being able to persuade Fusconi to permit its installation in the Vatican. Since Arrivabene specifies that the statue was unearthed *poch'anni prima*, it can be conjectured that this occurred towards 1547–48. The value of Arrivabene's letter lies in part in the fact that it proves a more secure *terminus post quem* than was afforded by Aldrovandi's publication. In addition to pointing up the special value of the Gonzaga *carteggi* in documenting the various Italian collections and collectors of antiques, this letter also contains a precious notice of a hitherto overlooked moment in Michelangelo's life.

⁶ J. Baptista Cavaleri, *Antiquarum statuarum Urbis Romae* (Rome, 1594), plate 95; G. Franzini, *Icones Statuarum Antiquarum Urbis Romae* (Rome, 1599), 2 (where the image is engraved in reverse); F. Perrier, *Segmenta nobilitum signorum e statuarii* (Rome, 1638), pls. 51, 52. Although the statue was not included among Pirro Ligorio's sketches (E. Mandowsky and C. Mitchell, *Pirro Ligorio's Roman Antiquities* [London, 1963]) nor in the work compiled by Pierre Jacques between 1572 and 1577 (S. Reinach, *L'Album de Pierre Jacques sculpteur de Reims dessiné à Rome de 1572–1577* [Paris, 1902]), it was found earlier in the anonymous collection now in Cambridge. A. Michaelis, "Romische Skizzenbücher Marten van Heemskercks und anderer nordischer Künstler des XVI. Jahrhunderts," *Deutsches archäologischen Institut, Jahrbuch*, VII (1892), 99. E. Dhanens ("De Romeinse eraring van Giovanni Bologna," *Bulletin de l'Institut historique belge de Rome*, XXXV [1963], 185) attributes these drawings to Bologna and dates them ca. 1550–53.

⁷ Giovanni Francesco Arrivabene to Sabino Calandra, 6 February 1550, Archivio di Stato di Mantova, Archivio Gonzaga, Busta 888. The letter concludes with a description of the Isola Tiberina which he visited *per far un voto ad Esculpio* on behalf of Duke Francesco who died several weeks later on 21 February. Arrivabene's account is based on B. Marliani, *Topographia antiquae Romae* (1534; ed. consulted, Venice, 1558), 123–24, and on L. Fauno, *Delle antichità della città di Roma* (Venice, 1548; ed. consulted, Venice, 1552), 146–47.

I had no sooner arrived at the home of Francesco da Norsa, without doubt the most famous doctor and surgeon in Rome and one who is worth more than 80,000 scudi, than I was given Your Lordship's two letters which were written on the 26th and the 28th of last month. Although I was delighted to have them, I was unable to read them until after several kind nephews of the doctor had taken me to see not only the most beautiful statue in all of Rome but also the most beautiful voiceless and spiritless youth in the entire world. Your Lordship need not marvel at this since I am speaking of the beautiful Adonis which was found several years ago by accident in one of their vineyards. This large nude statue, set on a well designed base, is beautifully posed and his body does not show any of the wounds which will eventually disfigure his handsome person. He is draped in a cloth which falls over his right shoulder and which is shaped into a scalloped shell by the breeze which catches it as it flies away from the body behind the left forearm. The figure holds a poorly designed spear in his left hand, while the right hand is placed behind him. It is beautifully worked, according to those who are expert in such matters, showing as it does the veins (for that is what doctors call the muscles of the hand). The face is of the utmost beauty and the body so miraculously carved that it seems divine. The statue has the head of a ferocious boar, which seems almost alive, by his left side and the dog by his right of whom it could be said that he barks viciously. I was told that when Michelangelo was brought into the room in order to view the statue that he was at first completely overcome by the excellence of this work which he judged to have been fashioned by the same master responsible for the stupendous *Apollo Belvedere*.⁸ The now deceased Pope was willing to pay any amount for it, but his offer was rejected by the good doctor who keeps it in a room where it is always covered as if it were a beautiful gem or a revered relic.

Io era a punto in casa di Maestro Francesco da Norsa, piú famosa medico di Roma et, senza dubbio, piú fortunato poiché, venutovi mendico et chirurgico, hora si ritrova ne la stima ch'io dico con facultà d'ottantamilla scudi et piú, quando mi furno date le due lettere di Vostra Signoria, l'una di 26, l'altra di 28 di passato, le quali, benché mi fussero grate oltre ogni stima, non però potei leggere prima ch'io non sodisfacessi a la cortesia di alcuni nipoti del medico, che mi fecero contemplaro non solamente la piú bella statoa di Roma, ma il piú bel giovane senza voce et senza spirito che sia nel mondo, né questo stimo io parrà miracolo a Vostra Signoria poiché mi fecero vedere il bello Adoni, il quale poch'anni prima fu ritrovato in una vigna loro, a caso. Il quale, posto su una assai bella basi, stà in piedi con bellissima maniera, grande et ignudo. senza pur mostrar segnali di novelli fiori che venissero per far ingiuria a quel bel volto. Egli ha un sol velo che gli circonda la spalla destra e il petto sottilmente et gli esce sotto l'ascella sinistra, vagamente gonfiato dal vento in modo che viene formato a guisa d'una bella conca marina: tiene ne la mano sinistra un dardo, ma poco buono, et la destra volta così di dietro et così ben lavorata et con le linee così spiccate, sottili e vive et con que' monti (così chiamano i chiromanti i muscoli de la mano) tanto naturali che vi si potrebbe dar buon giudizio quando vi fusse chi sapesse di quell'arte cosa alcuna: il viso è bellissimo, il corpo miracoloso, i modi in che ei si trova sono divini. Egli ha, a lato manco, un teschio di cinghiale che spira e fa paura, al diritto, un cane che lo mira et si può dire che vi fa vezzi et v'abbaia, in modo che mi fu detto, allhorché quando Michelagnolo entrò ne la camera ov'è per vederlo a prima guiza restò attonito et vinto da così bell'opra et fu giudicato lavoro fatto dal medemo artefice che fecce ancho l'Apolline stupendo di Belvedere. Il Papa di bona memoria gli lo volle pagare per ogni danaro et non fu remedio che gli lo volesse dare il buon medico che lo tiene in sua camera et coperto sempre come se fusse una bella gioia et una venerabile reliquia.

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⁸ Modern critics assign the *Meleager* to Scopas and the *Apollo* to Leochares (M. Bieber, *The Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age* [New York, 1961], 24–25, 63). Arrivabene is neither the first nor the only writer to attempt to enhance the worth of an antique by invoking Michelangelo's name. The *Faustina* which Alessandro Gablonetta sent from Rome to Federico Gonzaga in 1519 (Busta 864, cc. 271–72) came with a similar recommendation: "Sto' in expectatione de intendere se quelle due teste antique marmore seranno piacute alla Excellentia Vostra. Quella de la Faustina da Michelangelo è sta laudato per cosa digna et fato da singular mastro." Michelangelo's opinion of the Cesi *Juno* is found in Aldrovandi's *Delle Statue*, 122–23, and his reaction to the Laocoön is the subject of several important letters which are summarized by A. Venturi. "Il Gruppo del Laocoonte e Raffaello." *Archivio Storico dell'Arte*, I (1888), 98–100.