Bernini's Memorial Plaque for Carlo Barberini*

IRVING LAVIN  The Institute for Advanced Study

CARLO BARBERINI, brother of Pope Urban VIII and commander of the papal armies (Generale di Santa Chiesa), died during a mission in Bologna on 25 February 1630. The event was commemorated in Rome by three major works in which Bernini had a hand. A monumental plaque designed by Bernini was placed on the interior façade of S. Maria in Aracoeli (Fig. 1); a magnificent temporary catafalque also designed by Bernini was erected in the same church for the obsequies that were held there on 3 August; and a life-size statue, an ancient torso restored by Bernini (who carved the portrait head) and Algardi, was placed in the Sala dei Capitani of the Palazzo dei Conservatori. This trio of monuments specifically echoed a tradition that had been established within living memory by the Conservators of Rome, in celebrating three previous commanders of the papal military

*This note is excerpted from an entry in a projected corpus of the terracotta sketches of Gianlorenzo Bernini, a work first envisioned by the writer in his doctoral dissertation written at Harvard in 1955 under John Coolidge's supervision.


works. Marcantonio Colonna (died 1584), Alessandro Farnese (died 1592) and Gian Francesco Aldobrandini (died 1601), had all been honored by splendid ceremonies and monumental commemorative plaques in the Aracoeli, and by statues in the guise of ancient Roman military commanders in the Sala dei Capitani. 3

Whether Bernini was familiar with the earlier temporary installations is not clear, but the permanent memorials were certainly significant, formally no less than conceptually. The Aldobrandini statue and inscription are specifically alluded to in the initial proposal made before the Conservators for commemorating Carlo Barberini. 4 The Bernini-Algardi statue is closely related to the earlier examples, recreating as they had the type of the victorious general of antiquity. 5 Similarly, throughout the development of his design for the memorial plaque Bernini made reference to its predecessors. 6 In both the Farnese and Aldobrandini memorials (Figs. 2, 3), the flat inscribed surface is surrounded by elaborate frames and surmounted by pediments upon which female allegories carved in high relief are seated; in

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4. 5 March 1630: "... fiant magnifica, et solemnia funeralia digna Romani Populi, ac tanti viri ... et simulacrum marmoreum eiusdem Ill.mi et Ex.mi D. Don Caroli in Palatio Capitolij una cum ornatissimis inscriptionibus, quemadmodum fuit factum fe: me: Joanne Franc.0 Aldobrandino ... ." Archivio Storico Capitolino, Decreti di Consiglì, Magistrati e Cittadini, 1625–1640, Cred. 1, vol. 33, fols. 73 verso – 74 recto.

Ippolito Buzio was responsible for the Farnese statue (Pecchiai, Campidoglio, 161, n. 212; the payment cited makes no specific reference to the head, however); it is not clear who executed that of Colonna (ibid., 161), nor did a search of the documents by the writer yield the author of the Aldobrandini figure.

5. The statues of Alessandro Farnese and Francesco Aldobrandini were also restored ancient fragments (cf. H. Stuart Jones, A Catalogue of the Ancient Sculptures Preserved in the Municipal Collections of Rome. The Sculptures of the Palazzo dei Conservatori, Oxford, 1926, 41–42).
the Farnese monument two female terms in low relief also flank the inscription laterally. A sketch in Leipzig (Fig. 4) shows that Bernini, while greatly simplifying the design, first adopted the traditional rectilinear shape and the flanking figures of the Farnese plaque, replacing the latter by winged personifications of Fame that seem at once to rest against the framed inscription tablet, and to carry it aloft. In the final work Bernini adopted the idea of seated allegories with complementary meanings that had also appeared on the earlier plaques.

The allegory on the left, identified as the Church in the early sources, has a shield bearing the papal arms; a huge snake, ancient symbol of heresy, is under her right foot, the tail (partly broken) curling around the front of the plaque. Between the forefinger and thumb of her right hand may be discerned a fragment of a thin rod, probably part of a staff (see below). The shield of the figure on the right contains a laurel wreath and lightning bolt, the significance of which is explained by a passage in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*, under the heading *Virtù in-superable*:

... for a crest she will carry a laurel plant, menaced but not struck by lightning. . . . Virtue, as a warrior who struggles continually with her enemy, is portrayed armed with lightning, which, as Pliny recounts, cannot with all its violence damage laurel....

Under her foot is a globe encircled by the band of the Zodiac, of which only the sign of Scorpio is visible. The scorpion as an astronomical sign is the attribute of Mars, God of War. The figures thus symbolize the Church’s victory over spiritual evil and virtue’s victory over earthly strife, both achieved through Carlo Barberini’s military prowess. Perhaps the best expression of their meaning is provided by the funeral oration delivered by Giulio Cenci at the obsequies in S. Maria in Aracoeli, in which Barberini is hailed as “defender of the public well-being and maker of Christian peace.”

Bernini’s explicit references to the earlier works provide a foil for the fundamental thematic and formal transformations he introduced. Neither Carlo Barberini nor the three others were actually interred in Aracoeli. Hence the funereal note sounded in Bernini’s final version, chiefly by the winged skull at the base of the inscription, and the melancholic pose of the figure on the right, was quite foreign to the purely commemorative import of the tradition. Perhaps this reinterpretation was motivated by the consideration that Barberini would not in fact have a public tomb; he was buried in an obscure and inaccessible niche adjoining the pediments of the Sforza tombs in S. Maria Maggiore (cf. G. Ferrari, *La tomba nell’arte italiana*, Milan, n.d., pl. XCI).

The Colonna inscription, on the façade wall over the main entrance just to the right of Bernini’s, has no allegorical figures (payment to Pietro Paolo Olivieri, authorized by della Porta, 29 September 1587; Arch. Stor. Capit., Registro di Mandati, Cred. vii, vol. 25, 95). Compare an inscription flanked by winged putti, by Camillo Mariani in S. Bernardo alle Terme (G. Fiocco, “Camillo Mariani,” *Le arti, III, 1940–1941, 84 and fig. 30); trumpeting figures of Fame are seated on the pediments of the Sforza tombs in S. Maria Maggiore (cf. G. Ferrari, *La tomba nell’arte italiana*, Milan, n.d., pl. XCI).


11. M. Jaffé has pointed out that the motif at the bottom in the Leipzig drawing is not a skull but a helmet (review of I. Lavin et al., *Drawings*, in *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 October, 1982, 1117). On the pose of
ing the family chapel in S. Andrea della Valle. In any case, the new figural type was evidently derived from a great catafalque that had been erected in the Cathedral of Ferrara for obsequies held in honor of Carlo Barberini on 13 May 1630 at the behest of Cardinal Lorenzo Magalotti, Archbishop of Ferrara, who was Carlo’s brother-in-law and a close friend and advisor of the Pope. The oration delivered on this occasion, by one Alfonso Pandolfi, was published along with an illustration of the catafalque (Figs. 5, 6).

Seated on the steps before the structure is an allegory of the Church wearing the papal tiara and carrying a long, crossed staff. Her costume, pose and heavy monumentality


Cardinal Antonio and Taddeo Barberini, both sons of Carlo, were present at the ceremony in Ferrara. Its date, 13 May, is evident from the following passages in letters written by Taddeo Barberini to Cardinal Francesco in Rome.

From Ferrara, 11 May 1630:

Qui in Ferrara me tratterò fino à Lunedì matt. pr. ma nella quale il S. Card. Magalotti vol fare l’ossequie al Sig. D. Carlo (Pr. di bo: me: (Biblioteca Vaticana, Ms. Barb. Lat. 9268, fol. 6 recto.)

From Ancona, 19 May 1630:

Io parti da Ferr. insieme con l’Ill. S. Car. Ant. nro. fratt. et mio S. il Lunedì, che fummo alle 13 assai tardi, ciò è alle 18 hore sonate. (Ibid., fol. 7 verso.)

The presence of Cardinal Antonio and Don Taddeo is also noted in a description of the obsequies by the contemporary chronicler C. Ubal­dini, Storia di Ferrara dall’anno 1597 a tutto l’anno 1633, Ferrara, Biblioteca Comunale, Ms. Cl. t. 418, fol. 80 verso ff.: Venne (Antonio) di Maggio ... a Ferrara ... alla cattedrale, essendovi anche D. Tadeo Barberini suo fratello, che era venuto da Roma, per ritrovarsi alle esequie di Carlo loro padre.
closely anticipate Bernini’s right-hand figure, and may have helped to determine his final treatment of the plaque.\(^15\)

The change in the meaning of the work was accompanied by a change in its design. In the Leipzig drawing the tablet was a closed, stable form, while the flanking figures were irregular and dynamic. The entire monument would have been flat on the wall and carved in low relief. In Bernini’s bozzetto in the Fogg Museum (Fig. 7), the roles of the principal elements tend to converge, the figure becoming solid and stable, while the tablet (I am indebted to Dr. L. Capra, Director of the Biblioteca Comunale in Ferrara for having transcribed the relevant passage for me.)

\(^15\) The Ferrarese ceremony is mentioned in the oration by Cenci in Aracoeli (above, n. 10). Its effect in Rome can be shown in another way. One of the early sources says that Alfonso Pandolfi’s oration at Ferrara was so impressive (naming Cardinal Antonio specifically) that it won for him the bishopric of Comacchio (A. Libanori, Ferrara d’oro imbrunito, 3 vols., Ferrara, 1665–1674, 1, 104). In fact, in a letter of 4 May 1630, i.e., before the obsequies, from Cardinal Magalotti to Cardinal Francesco reporting the imminent death of the bishop of Comacchio, Pandolfi is merely listed with several other candidates among whom the Pope and Cardinal Francesco might choose (Bibl. Vat., Ms. Barb. Lat. 8731, fol. 126 recto). Subsequently, in letters of 29 May, after the obsequies, Cardinal Antonio reports Pandolfi’s selection by the Pope and praises him (Bibl. Vat., Ms. Barb. Lat. 6045, fol. 14 recto, to Pandolfi; ibid., Ms. Barb. Lat. 6046, fol. 8 recto, to Cardinal Francesco).

\(^16\) Inv. No. 1937.75, 10 1/4 X 10 in.

\(^17\) Illustrated in Wittkower, Bernini, 206. The memorial to the Pope may be thought of as combining and developing elements from the early and final stages of the Carlo Barberini plaque into a fully dynamic design: the supporting figures are now angels in full flight and the inscription is wholly curvilinear.

\(^18\) Illustrated in Wittkower, Bernini, 196.


\(^20\) Cf. Wittkower, Bernini, 196.

\(^21\) Pp. 29–30 (cited above, n. 10).

\(^22\) Fraschetti, Bernini, 94, n. 1.