

A Shrunken Head (*Tsantsa*) In The Gonzaga of Mantua Collections, In 1627?

Stefano L'Occaso *

Palazzo Ducale di Mantova, Italy; Accademia Nazionale Virgiliana, Mantova.

*Corresponding author

Stefano L'Occaso, Palazzo Ducale di Mantova, Italy, Accademia Nazionale Virgiliana, Mantova

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Mantua, a North-Italian Po Valley city sided by the Mincio river spreading into three lakes, was ruled by the Gonzaga family from 1328 to 1707. The Gonzaga were famous all around Europe for the marvellous palace they had built: the Ducal Palace, that could more properly be described as a city-scale architectural complex, made up by a number of different buildings. Gardens, squares and galleries, huge halls and precious cabinets make it a unique creation worldwide. The Gonzaga were also renowned for the rich and variety of the collections they had there gathered.

During the Renaissance, Mantua thus became the elected destination for scholars and princes, artists and travellers, who admired those treasures with no reserve.

The Gonzaga collections were unluckily dispersed between 1627 and 1631. In 1627 the family was compelled to sell many of the owned artworks. Furthermore, the city suffered a Sack from the Imperial troops on 1630–31. In this handful of years, part of their eclectic collection was bought or forcibly seized, and surely the most part of the paintings, the ancient marbles, the gems and the jewels were then lost. Side by side with canvases and panels by Andrea Mantegna and Caravaggio, Raphael and Titian, the Gonzaga could also boast an impressive collection of *naturalia* and *mirabilia*, gathered in a large *Wunderkammer*, called Metamorphoses Gallery (*Galleria delle Metamorfosi*), constituted by a sequence of four rooms, rhythmized by arches and doorways and richly decorated with stuccoed, gilt and painted ceilings, designed c. 1600, by the artist and architect Antonio Maria Viani.

The *naturalia* and *mirabilia* collection attracted visitors astonished by the rarity and curiosity of the items there exposed; five crocodiles, a stuffed hippopotamus, “monsters”, fossils, rare stones and plants were part of one of the richest “three-dimensional encyclopaedias” [1]. that the European Late Renaissance could count.

Among the few known descriptions of the *Galleria delle Metamorfosi*, two deserve special consideration: the one by Benedetto Ceruti and Andrea Chiocco, 1622, and the one we will concentrate on, by Joseph Fürtembach, who visited Mantua in 1626 and dedicated to the Mantuan naturalistic cabinet four pages in

his *Newes Itinerarium Italiae* (1627) [2]. The Palazzo Ducale was then at its apex, immediately prior to the beginning of the collections dispersal.

Among the four pages description of rarities that struck Fürtembach's imagination, I will concentrate on a single item there described: «Ein Inpalfamierter Kopff von einem Menschen, der gar völlig in ein Schüssel ligt» [3]. The entry has been translated into Italian as «la testa imbalsamata di un uomo, completamente contenuta in un piatto»; this version would sound in English as «an embalmed head of a man, completely kept inside a dish», but we will need to analyse in detail the last word [4]. This description has been considered a description of a man head «condita all'egiziana» (“treated” in the Egyptian way) [5]. In the Museo Cospiano, Lorenzo Legati dedicated the first Chapter to *De' Corpi Humani Conditi, e dele varie sorti di Mumia* (Treated human corpses and various sorts of mummies) [6]. Among the exhibited items, we read about item number 5: «Testa d'huomo di grandezza più che ordinaria, che qui si vede condita all'Egiziana, e fasciata giusta l'usanza antica di quella Provincia». Hence, a «human head larger than normal and bandaged in the Egyptian way, as according to the use in that Province».

The head described by Fürtembach in Mantua was apparently not larger than normal, if anything it was smaller, nor bandaged: the German traveller does not state it was covered with anything. Hence, I would exclude that it was really an Egyptian mummified head. The *Musaeum Francisci Calceolarii* by Ceruti and Chiocco (dedicated to Ferdinando Gonzaga in 1622) also tells about mummies. At the time, so many mummies were taken away from Mid-Eastern sites, that severe punishments were ordered: «tandem deprehensio furto, et furibus Arabes Cadavera in tutiori loco sepelienda curarunt, et capitalem penam, aduersus huiusmodi fures sanxerunt» [7].

If the head was not a mummified one, what may it have been? Fürtembach's *Inpalfamierter* adjective may stand for a peculiar treatment of the skin, with the elimination of the skull, of the soft tissues and of the inner parts, but, apparently, Gonzaga's head had little to do with an Egyptian mummified one; and it was displayed upon or better inside a *Schüssel*.

The presentation inside a crockery piece may hint to a peculiar iconography. It may have suggested to the late Renaissance observer a parallel with the Head of the Baptist, as painted or carved in many a Late Middle Ages artwork: an iconography that found special fortune in the German area, being there called *Johannesschüssel*. In this case, the head is normally shown on a dish, the large one where Salome put the severed head of St. John the Baptist.

The word *Schüssel* has been translated into Italian with *piatto*: a dish. A more precise term may be *scodella* or *bacile*: a bowl: «An embalmed head of a man that stands entire inside a bowl». The head we are talking about is lost and is not recorded in any other source, which may support us with a different point of view, with a parallel description. Unluckily, the item is not described in other texts, nor in the Gonzaga 1626–27 goods inventory, that gives little or no help to ideally reconstruct the court *Wunderkammer*. The only other known description, by Martin Zeiller («ein balsamierter Kopff von einem Menschen») is no more than simple copy and paste from Fürtembach, as the same author declares, so it offers no real insight; the date of the book, 1640, cannot be considered a proof that the described Gonzaga treasures survived the 1630 Sack [7].

Does the German term help to understand the size of the head that was completely kept inside?

The word *Schüssel* needs some deeper analysis, from an etymological point of view.

In a 16th to 17th century timespan, the word is widely present in cooking books. Max Rumpolt's *Ein new Kochbuch*, published in Frankfurt in 1581, uses the word *Schüssel* countless times, and there it stands for bowl, suitable for candies as well as for meat. So, it does not give any useful insight about the size of the crockery. In a three-languages dictionary printed in 1674, we read about a «Scodella, escuelle. It du potage, une escuellee de soupe, eine Schüssel» [8].

Fürtembach writes that the head was «völlig in ein(er) Schüssel», that is, inside the bowl and not laying above, and fully kept inside the bowl. If the head was laying on a dish, it might have been better described as *auf einer Platte*. Let's consider the hypothesis that the head was a small one, small enough as to be plainly noted as completely kept inside a medium size bowl.

The latter hypothesis leads to consider something far and different from Egyptian mummies. I would not disregard the idea that the item was a *tsantsa*: i.e. a Peruvian or Ecuadorian shrunken head, made in modern age by the Jivaro hinterland tribes. On the other hand, as a fist size is not so plainly stated, we cannot avoid to think that the item in Mantua might have been something else: although by instance, a European mummified head, rarely a nameless one, or a different kind of South American find, such as the Brazilian *munduruku* trophy heads. I proposed an interpretation of Fürtembach's description as possibly a *tsantsa*, en passant some years ago [9], but I have never further investigated it. I more or less dropped it, as it seemed in contrast with what James Lee Castner has written about these peculiar items: «Before 1860, almost no one in North America or Europe had heard of shrunken heads» [10].

We should however consider that, as the same Castner points out, *tsantsas* were realized in much earlier ages, as testified by pre-Columbian pottery decorations from Nasca [11]. We should also ask ourselves if we have any figurative or written document telling us that *tsantsas* were known in Europe. We can positively answer to both questions.

A first description of shrunken heads dates no later than 1527, when Miguel de Estete noted the very peculiar use of shrinking heads of won enemies. Estete's description was printed no earlier than the early 20th century, but a couple of decades later, Agustin de Zárate published a brief description on the topic [12]. Zárate, according to his 1555 *Historia del descubrimiento del Peru*, saw shrunken heads in his 1543 travel in South America. The fourth Chapter of his book is about *De la gente que habita debaxo de la linea equinocial, y otras cosas señaladas que alli ay* (People living below the Equinoctial line and more things noted), and these people «tenian [...] clavadas muchas cabeças de Indios, que con cierto cozimiento las consumen, hasta quedar como un puño» [13].

Zárate's book must have raised high curiosity in European courts, scholars and scientists, exactly as happened with Hans Staden's relations about cannibalism, which gave birth to a sort of topic iconography of the new discovered lands. The New World was considered as a shrine of treasures, but altogether as a place of mysterious perils and peculiar habits.

In this context, cannibalism was considered by the way as a sort of tribal ferocious habit, by 16th century Europeans. We should however remind that in the same Old Continent the practise was sometimes used as outrage and offence to the hatred and defeated enemy, by directly tearing him into pieces and eating him [14], or by making him (her) eat his (her) children, as in the case of the ancient drama of Atreus and Thyestes or as in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (V,3).

A figurative source supports me, when stating that shrunken heads were not completely unknown to 16th century Europe. We have also at least one shrunken head depiction in a 16th century European artwork. I refer to a drawing by Hans Burgkmair the Elder, in London, British Museum (inv. SL,5218.129), representing a man, an "Indian", dressed with the usual bird feathers and holding a staff topped with a small head that can be doubtless identified with a *tsantsa*. (see figure next page) The drawing dates to 1520–30, and the early chronology of the drawing may hint to the early knowledge of shrunken heads in Europe [15].

Zárate's aforementioned book was also translated into Italian in 1563, in Venice (*appresso Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari*), and the formerly quoted passage sounds as follows: «teste d'Indiano, che con un certo cocimento le consumano finché divengono piccole come il pugno», a synthetic but precise description of the shrinking process of the heads, "cooked" or tanned until they become as large as a fist. Zárate's text was possibly also in the bookshelves of the Gonzaga court and – as it has been suggested – it was one of the texts known to the Mantuan pharmacist and court apothecary Evangelista Marcobruno, who left for Peru in 1609 for a quest on behalf of duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga [16].

The lord of Mantua wished to find an aphrodisiac remedy, called *gusano*, possibly a worm, apparently existing in Peru. Marco-bruno reached Peru in 1610 and there he stood several months, walking some 673 leagues («673 leghe») also in the treacherous hinterland; he managed to ship some items to Mantua, but the 25 October 1611 letter introducing the shipment, generally tells about some rare birds, accompanied by other curious things («altre cose curiose»), without providing further details [17]. We ignore, moreover, if Marco-bruno's exotic shopping reached Mantua or not, as his travel back was further complicated by a pirates' kidnapping and by a ransom payed by Ferdinando Gonzaga only on 11 June 1613. Duke Vincenzo had died one year before and, in the end, we ignore what happened to the drugs and curiosities that Marco-bruno brought with himself from South America; we ignore as well if they safely reached Mantua [18]. We should also consider that at the beginning of the 17th century, contacts with the Jivaro territory native populations were rare; the 1599 rebellion that led to the death of the governor of Macas and of some thousand Spanish settlers had complicated commercial trades [20].

Mantuan interest for exotic South America *naturalia* and *mirabilia* may have been fostered by a further case. Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas – author of the *Historia de los Hechos de los Castellanos en las Mas y Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano que llaman Indias Occidentales*, a chronicle printed in Madrid from 1601 to 1605 (in four volumes), and including a large amount of information about the indios – was in close relation with Vespasiano Gonzaga, lord of Sabbioneta, a small town South of Mantua [20].

In conclusion, we cannot disregard the idea that the Gonzaga of Mantua owned a shrunken head, small enough to be wholly kept inside a bowl and suitable with their taste for exotic and for the gruesome. We should remind that the *Galleria delle Metamorfosi* was also called *di Passerino* (Passerino's Gallery), because of the presence of the mummified body of Rinaldo Bonacolsi, called Passerino. Rinaldo had been defeated and slain by Luigi Gonzaga on 16 August 1328, and his corpse was displayed in the Gallery, on the back of a hippopotamus taxidermy. The latter animal, the most ancient mammal existing taxidermy, still exists in Pavia (Kosmos Museum), while the Gonzaga got rid of the mummified corpse in the late 17th century.

In the end, late 16th century and early 17th century taste for *natura-ralia* and *mirabilia* would surely have much appreciated a shrunken head of exotic origin, in a place exhibition more than a gruesome find.

Author's Note

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4. Dario Franchini (1979), ed., *La Scienza a Corte. Collezionismo eclettico, natura e immagine a Mantova fra Rinascimento e Manierismo*: 137 note 68.
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