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Bernini's *Triton Fountain*

War and Fountains in the Rome of Urban VIII

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Introduction

[1] Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Triton Fountain* (figure 1) in the Piazza Barberini, Rome has long been interpreted as a monument to Pope Urban VIII as a poet and humanist. As many authors have noted Triton is a symbol of "immortality achieved through literary study," and thus appropriate for Urban because he was a poet of some note. There may be, however, more to the story. This paper reconsiders the *Triton Fountain* within its larger social and political context, arguing that Bernini used the story of Triton in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a metaphor explaining papal involvement in the Thirty Years War a reading consistent with three of Bernini's other Roman fountains. In Ovid's deluge, and other mythological stories, Triton appears as a participant in the defeat of rebellion and herald of a newly created world, and Triton iconography suggests the legitimacy of divinely sanctioned warfare, thus making

the *Triton Fountain* an appropriate venue for expressing official papal commentary on the Thirty Years War.

Fountains

[2] The *Triton Fountain* was commissioned by Pope Urban VIII Barberini (1568-1644) and built by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) beginning in the spring of 1642 and completed in August 1643. Tod Marder theorizes that the *Triton Fountain* was likely unveiled in 1643 as part of the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Urban's election as pope, which occurred on 6 August 1623 (Marder 1998: 92). Sitting at the center of the piazza, the fountain displays the sea god with anthropomorphic body and fish tail, kneeling on an open shell supported by the tails of four dolphins. The dolphins, oriented towards each of the four cardinal directions, open their mouths to gulp the water of the surrounding pool, suggesting that they drink up all the waters of the world. The fins of the dolphins grasp the crest of Urban VIII, with papal tiara, keys of St. Peter, and Barberini bees.

[3] Triton as the subject of an urban fountain is an interesting choice, and it calls for investigation. Urban was an accomplished poet, known for his pursuits

Figure 1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Triton Fountain*, Piazza Barberini, Rome, 1642-43.

in this field, and Triton was an established Renaissance symbol of "Immortality Acquired by Literary Study."[1] Thus, the Triton was an appropriate civic monument to Urban's well-known literary endeavors. Yet this interpretation falls short of a full explanation. John Beldon Scott has demonstrated that Urban was wary of pagan imagery for fear it might lead the faithful astray (Scott: 176). This suggests that the *Triton Fountain* may allude to something more significant than the literary emblem. At least three of Bernini's Roman fountains have been related to the Thirty Years War: *Neptune and Triton*, *La Barcaccia*, and the *Four Rivers Fountain*. This paper seeks to add a fourth, the *Triton Fountain*, following a suggested first offered by Tod Marder (1998: 92).

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[1] Triton as a symbol of immortality achieved through literary study dates to at least 1531; see Henkel and Schöne, s.v. Triton. For a seventeenth-century source, see Alciati: 568-71. This standard interpretation of the *Triton Fountain* is repeated in the basic literature: see Avery: 188; Hibbard: 112; and Wittkower: 175.

[4] Political interpretations have been offered for the iconography of at least three of Bernini's other fountains, including the *Neptune and Triton Fountain* (figure 2) executed between 1622 and 1623 and originally installed in the gardens of the Villa Montalto in Rome and today in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. William Collier contends that the fountain represents the beginning of the story of the great deluge in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* when Neptune unleashes the waters of the world. Collier contends that in displaying two characters initiating the cataclysmic flood, the *Neptune and Triton* represents the Battle of White Mountain (1620), an early Catholic victory in the Thirty Years War that many in Rome hoped marked the beginning of the end of Protestantism (Collier: 440). More recently, Marder argues against Collier's textual interpretation and asserts instead that the fountain's textual source is the famous "*Quos ego*" passage from Virgil's *Aeneid*, which Marder notes "signified the divine intervention by which the dominion of Christianity was prepared" (2004: 126). In both interpretations, the fountain can be used to explain seventeenth-century political events.

Figure 2. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Neptune and Triton*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1622-23.

[5] Howard Hibbard and Irma Jaffe argue for a political interpretation of Bernini's *La Barcaccia* (1627-29) in Piazza di Spagna (figure 3). International communities dominated the area: the Spanish embassy and the French church of Santissima Trinità dei Monti were located on the piazza.[2] There, amidst the buildings of these two European rivals, Urban commissioned Bernini to build *La Barcaccia*. Baldinucci suggests that the boat represents the Ship of the Church floating between France and Spain, or Urban as mediator between the Bourbons and Hapsburgs. Urban himself furthered this *concetto* by offering the following lines:

> The papal war machine shoots forth not flames, but waters sweet that quench the fires of war (Baldinucci: 18).[3]

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[2] The literature on *piazze* and urban space generally as venues for political expression is extensive (see Connors; Krautheimer; and Nussdorfer).

[3] The dissemination of Urban's lines must have been widespread, as Baldinucci goes on to relate that "outside Rome" the following distich appeared: "The Urban Poet has made a fountain of poems, Not poems of a fountain; thus poets please themselves." Indeed, these lines are of the precise form one would expect from

Figure 3. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *La Barcaccia*, Piazza di Spagna, Rome 1627-29.

[6] Finally, Bernini's *Four Rivers Fountain* (1648-1651) in Piazza Navona is layered in political meaning (figure 4; see Huse; Marder 1998: 93-100, especially 97; and Preimesgerger). Cesare D'Onofrio argues that the fountain's iconography deals with the politically troubled years following the conclusion of the Thirty Years War (1977: 450-57). Following this lead, Mary Christian notes that the choice of the Danube as one of the four rivers of the world instead of the Rhine or Tiber is curious, and argues that the Danube was chosen because according to the terms of the Treaty of Westphalia, Protestant strongholds in Austria and Bohemia, lands through which the Danube runs, reverted to Catholic control. Thus the Danube River God turns and reaches to support the papal crest, symbolically representing the return of south-central Europe to Catholicism.

Urban VIII

[7] The connection between war and fountains begins with the biography of Urban VIII Barberini, from which can be extracted evidence that Urban often advocated a militant political posture that found expression both in rhetoric and in art. Urban VIII was the first pope born after the Council of Trent and was the very model of the Tridentine priest and prince (Kirwin: 12). Deeply religious, Urban was dedicated to the veneration of saints, and in addition to creating them, built several churches to commemorate them. Urban was stalwart in the promotion of Catholicism, sending missionaries throughout the world and founding

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pasquinades in the city, and so one might conjecture that Urban's words and the response to them were known in Rome, as well. Thus, *La Barcaccia* as a metaphor for Urban's foreign policy was clear to contemporaries. Franco Mormando notes that Urban's lines may have been written a decade earlier, but the fact remains that Urban and his contemporaries recognized and utilized the capacity of fountains to express political messages (Bernini: 329, n. 5).

the *Collegium Urbanum*, an institution dedicated to educating missionaries for foreign countries. Urban was well-educated: his formal education began under the Jesuits in Florence, continued at the *Collegio Romano* in Rome, and concluded with a doctorate *in utroque jure* from Pisa (Schütze: 13).

Throughout his life, Urban maintained an affinity for the Jesuits: on the first day of his papacy he issued the Bulls of Canonization for Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier, and canonized Francis Borgia himself.[4] Urban shared the Jesuit zeal for defending and promoting the Church: Urban's nuncio to Paris was instructed that a primary goal of the Barberini papacy was "the conservation of the Catholic religion where it is, and its restitution and propagation where it is not."[5]

[8] Urban reigned in bellicose times, occupying the throne of St. Peter for the middle 21 years of the Thirty Years War. When Cardinal Maffeo Barberini was elected pope in 1623 in the early years of that war, he took as his pontifical name Urban, becoming the eighth pontiff to bear that name. This decision indicates his vision for the papacy: of the previous seven men who chose that name, all but Urban VII (who ruled for but two weeks)

Figure 4. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Four Rivers Fountain*, Piazza Navona, Rome, 1648-51.

faced religious controversies and/or political instability in Italy, and sought to defend the church, often through force of arms (further on the selection of the name "Urban," see Lavin 2007: 15 and 26 n. 2). Notable among this group of popes was Urban II who called for the First Crusade. Urban VIII viewed himself as the successor of these martial popes, and conceived of his place in history, as well as an essential reason for his placement on the throne of St. Peter, to be militant in nature. Urban committed himself to rearming the Papal States, opposing Protestantism in Europe, reining in rebellious princes

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[4] Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier were canonized by Gregory XV in 1622, but because of his death the bull of canonization was not published until the following year by Urban VIII who did so on his day of election, 6 August 1623 (see Mormando and Thomas: 19).

[5] ". . . la conservatione della religione cattolica dove ella è, e la restitutione e propagatione dove non è . . ." (Leman: 89).

in Italy, and to quashing heresy. Like his namesakes, Urban VIII would accomplish these goals through force of arms. As Urban explained to the Venetian ambassador in 1627, "We have been set up by God in this holy seat, we will have as our purpose its decorum, its reputation; our nature is to carry matters out with ardor and vehemence."[6]

[9] Urban chose 29 September, the feast day of St. Michael the Archangel, for his coronation in 1623, reaffirming the militant character of his papacy. Michael, known for his role in the defeat of Lucifer and the Rebel Angels, emerged during the Counter-Reformation as a champion of the militant Catholic Church in its battle against Protestantism: the defeat of Lucifer was equated with dispelling heresy (Rice: 428). Michael was also celebrated as a defender of Rome, and was regularly invoked for protection against famine, disease, and war. Panegyrics were written hailing Urban as a new Michael, a new defender of the Church and protector of Rome:

> How fitting it is, most Holy Father, that it was on this day sacred to Michael, Prince of the Blessed Spirits, that Divine Providence bestowed on you the triple-crowned tiara! For was it not appropriate that you, URBAN, were crowned with the sacred tiara and proclaimed Prince of the Church Militant on St. Michael's Day, when, with a courage equal to that of Michael, you undertook to crush the enemies of the Church? And shall we not proclaim with holy fervor that the insignia of the Sacred Commonwealth were deservedly conferred on you on this day, when you, like another Michael, accepted the task of defending this city, the Heart of the World–nay, virtually the entire Holy Empire from the contagion of plague, the hardship of famine, and the cruelty of war?[7]

The visual arts also were employed in casting Urban as a new Michael. Shortly after his election in 1623, Urban initiated plans for the apse altar of St. Peter's to be dedicated to Michael, a decorative scheme that would have been a forceful and very public statement connecting Urban to the warrior-angel forwarding the image of Urban "as an aggressive defender of Rome and a guarantor of peace and prosperity for the city of Rome" (Rice: 429).[8] Throughout the Barberini papacy, medals depicting Michael and Urban were struck, suggesting Urban's proposed connection with Michael, and Guido Reni painted *The Archangel Michael Defeating Lucifer* (1635) for the Barberini's Church of Santa Maria della Concezione.

[10] Urban believed from the outset of his papacy that a strong military policy would be required for a successful rule. As many popes in the past had contended, for the Church to

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[6] Venice, Archivio di Stato, Senato III, dispacci, filza 96, fol. 141, 5 June 1627: "Siamo constituti da Dio in questa santa sede, haveremo per mira il suo decoro, la sua riputatione, la nostra natura è di portar I negotij con ardore, et vehementia."

[7] This anonymous writing (BAV, Barb. Lat. 2152, 212-130) is quoted from Rice: 429, and translated by Rice, James Hankins, and William Harris. For similar rhetoric, see Taurelli: 13-14. See also, BAV, Barb. Lat. 1772, *De S. Michaele ad Urbanum VIII Carmen*, n.d.

[8] The plans for an apse altar dedicated to Michael were halted, but five years later Urban re-consecrated a chapel in the northwest corner of St. Peters dedicated to Michael on the fifth anniversary of his pontificate.

be an unchallenged spiritual leader it had to be an independent secular power. In 1507, Giles of Viterbo, preaching before Julius II and speaking on the temporal power of the Church, said, "Christ is head of heaven, Rome head of earth; Rome sovereign, Christ sovereign" (Stinger: 192). This traditional conception of the power of the papacy was still valid for Urban over a century later (Pastor: 360). Urban therefore undertook a military rearmament in order to secure the Church and Papal States from foreign domination (for more on Urban's armament program, see Kirwin: 41-78). In his *Life of Pope Urban VIII* Andrea Nicoletti argued that:

> In this armament the Pope had no other plan than to secure beforehand the Apostolic See for the defense of Rome and the Ecclesiastical State without it being necessitated that there be mediations by foreign princes, which some earlier Pontiffs, reduced to a calamitous state, were constrained to beg for from others.[9]

[11] Urban spent heavily on military architecture in Rome and throughout the Papal States. At the Castel Sant'Angelo, Urban ordered the construction of star-pattern bastions and redoubts, and added 80 cannon. Meanwhile, an armory was established under the Vatican Library by 1639, and by 1640 defensive fortifications were added to the Palazzo del Quirinale. Urban also completed the circuit of city walls running along the crest of the Janiculum, immuring Trastevere within walls "truly necessary and most useful to Rome, worthy of the greatest praise and the glory of Pope Urban" (Gigli: 374).[10] Outside of Rome, the Forte Urbano at Castelfranco Emilia was built at the northern border of the Papal States near Bologna between 1628 and 1634, while south of Rome the feudal Castel Gandolfo was transformed into an imposing monument to centralized absolutism (Whitman: 24). Urban continued work at Civitavecchia, improving the harbor's defenses. Urban invested in training reliable troops and succeeded in raising papal military strength to perhaps its highest level ever. Urban also strengthened the papal navy with several new galleys, producing an armada that was largely successful in deterring raids by Barbary pirates. Urban expanded the Papal States to their largest extent, when he successfully negotiated with Francesco Maria II della Rovere Duke of Urbino to bequeath Urbino to the Papal States, bringing about the final enlargement of the Pope's domains.

War

[12] Throughout the century that preceded Urban's pontificate, the Catholic Church viewed the Protestant Reformation as rebellion: the Bull of Convocation of the Council of Trent explains that "Whilst we deemed it necessary for the integrity of the Christian religion . . . that there be *one fold and one shepherd* for the Lord's flock, the unity of the Christian name was well-nigh rent and torn asunder by schisms, dissensions, and heresies" (Schoeder: 1). Remedying this was the goal of the Catholic Reformation. Pope Gregory XV Ludovisi (1554-1623), Urban's predecessor, viewed a Catholic victory in the Thirty Years War as a way to bring back many nations lost to Protestantism and assure papal hegemony

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[9] "Della vita di Papa Urbano VIII. e historia del suo pontificato, scritta da Adnrea Nicoletti." Barb. Lat. 4731, 850.

[10] "opera veramente necessaria, utilissima a Roma, et degna di grandissima lode, e di gloria a Papa Urbano."

throughout Europe (Lutz: 371-86). A little more than a month after Gregory's election to the papacy in 1621 he called for a holy war in a papal brief beseeching Arnoux to persuade King Louis XIII of France to "make war on the heretics for the glory of God and the greater peace of his kingdom" (quoted in Prat: 4:299, n. 1). In advising Gregory, the philosopher Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639) reminded the pope, "The people of Romagna and the March are naturally inclined to Arms," but they serve others because "the pope is not a warrior" (quoted in Ranke: 325). Campanella recommends that the Pope become warlike and raise two armies: "one of St. Peter for the sea and the other of St. Paul for the land." Gregory did not take this advice, but he did spend vast sums in support of Ferdinand II and the Catholic League.

[13] Like Gregory, Urban was intent on returning all lands to the Catholic Church (Unger: 27). Urban realized that the Papal States would not be able to send troops into combat outside of Italy, but the papacy could still affect the war by rallying to the Catholic cause countries that could project military force, namely France and Spain. Urban's efforts in this regard were stymied, however, as these two nations, ostensibly allies in the war against Protestantism, more often than not were enemies in a war for dominance in Europe. By mandating the personal sanctity of the pope, the Counter-Reformation had restored the moral authority of the office, and Urban hoped to employ it to secure the peace in Italy and Europe by acting as a mediator among the Catholic states.[11] Urban considered himself the *padre commune*, one who would "work for reconciliation of the Catholic States, especially France and Spain" (Bireley: 65). With a degree in Law from Pisa, and having spent significant time in Paris as papal nuncio, Urban believed that he would be able to coax both France and Spain into pursuing strategies that would benefit the Church. Such was not to be the case, as France and Spain consistently ignored Urban in the pursuit of their own agendas, finally engaging in the Franco-Spanish War from 1635-59. Four years after Urban's death, the Thirty Years War finally came to an end in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia, an accord that ended the Council of Trent's hope for an exclusively Catholic Europe.

Triton

[14] It is significant that Triton, a subject normally found only in garden fountains and grottos, would be transported to an urban piazza.[12] Using Triton in an urban context was a new and dramatic step, and indicates that Urban and Bernini needed Triton imagery in particular to express a message beyond the generic use of water gods in fountains or the

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[11] Nicoletti repeatedly discusses mediation ("*Della Vita di Papa Urbano VIII*," BV, Barb. Lat. 4732, 1635). See also, Kirwin: 41; Nussdorfer: 33-35; and Pastor: 28:67.

[12] Several authors note that Bernini's Triton Fountain is of a garden fountain type, and it is unusual that such a fountain would appear in an urban context. A typology of Roman fountains is given by Avery and Finn: 179. Franco Borsi places the Triton outside of "customary morphology" and credits Bernini with a creating a fountain "dashingly free and uninhibited" (194). Meanwhile, Hibbard notes that Roman fountains before Bernini were essentially "architectonic" (10) and that Bernini's genius was taking Triton from the "rural grotto" and "transplanting the familiar sea-god into a Roman piazza" (112).

common literary emblem.[13] Bernini's biographer, Filippo Baldinucci, notes that Bernini argued that "the good architect had to give [fountains] some real significance or, at least, an allusion to something noble . . . and he put this principle into practice in the beautiful fountain [*The Triton Fountain*] in Piazza Barberini" (19). Baldinucci, unfortunately, is silent on what that "real significance" was, but Franco Mormando notes that this likely meant "an historical conceit" (Bernini: 331 n. 13).[14] In his biography of his father, Domenico Bernini relates that the fountain "earned fame for Bernini from all those who marveled at how rich his mind was in beautiful ideas," suggesting that Triton was in fact a complex and multivalent image (Bernini: 139). A polysemic Triton could be an example of adapting pagan imagery to a Christian message, a common practice in Barberini artistic patronage (Rietbergen: 107). In the Piazza Barberini, Bernini would use Triton as an allegory for Rome's position in the Thirty Years War, actions that would defeat rebellion and herald a new Catholic world.

[15] Triton figures prominently in four classical tales of rebellion. Early in Virgil's *Aeneid*, as Aeneas is fleeing Troy, Juno spurs the East and West Winds to whip the ocean waters to drive the Trojan ships into rocks. When Neptune learns that the Winds had usurped his authority over the waters of the world, he exclaims "Quos ego" and calms the waters (1.132).[15] Neptune then banishes the Winds while Triton is sent to dislodge the ships from the rocks, freeing Aeneas to continue on his voyage that ultimately results in the founding of Rome. Later in the *Aeneid*, Misenus, the son of Aeolus and the Trojan's great trumpeter, rashly challenges Triton to a contest of the blowing of horns. Outraged by the hubris, Triton "snatched up Misenus, dashing him in foaming shoals and breakers" (6.238-41). Triton also appears in accounts of the *Gigantomachy*, a story reinterpreted in the Counter-Reformation as an allegory of the suppression of heresy. In it, Mother Earth incites the Giants to rebel against the Olympian gods, initiating an cosmic battle. Triton fights against the Giants and sounds his horn to frighten the Giants, who flee and are defeated.

[16] With the *Triton Fountain*, Bernini was specifically recounting Ovid's story of a great flood in *Metamorphoses*. In order to punish Lycaon and his followers who had mocked the placating of the gods, Jove commanded Neptune to unleash the waters of the world on humankind. Then:

> . . . when Jove saw the world was one great ocean,
> Only one woman left of all those thousands,
> And only one man left of all those thousands,
> Both innocent and worshipful, he parted
> The clouds, turned loose the North-winds, swept them off,

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[13] Vitzthum cautions against uncritical recourse to Urban's literary activity to explain Barberini artistic patronage, specifically in discussions of the *Triumph of the Barberini*, arguing against reading the fresco as a monument to Urban's literary endeavors (428).

[14] Elsewhere, Mormando notes that "Baldinucci . . . quotes Bernini to the effect that the "good architect" will always endow his fountains with a concetto (conceit) – some distinctive and noble poetic theme or historical allusion." (Bernini: 329 n. 5).

[15] This is likely the subject of Bernini's *Neptune and Triton Fountain* (see Marder 2004)

> Showed earth to heaven again, and sky to land,
> And the sea's anger dwindled, and King Neptune
> Put down his trident, calmed the waves, and Triton,
> Summoned from far down under, with his shoulders,
> Barnacle-strewn, loomed up above the waters,
> The blue-green sea-god, whose resounding horn
> I heard from shore to shore. Wet-bearded Triton
> Set lip to that great shell, as Neptune ordered,
> Sounding retreat, and all the lands and waters
> Heard and obeyed. The sea has shores; the rivers,
> Still running high, have channels; the floods dwindle,
> Hilltops are seen again; the trees, long buried,
> Rise with their leaves still muddy. The world returns (1:324-48).

Triton, as participant in the defeat of rebellion, superimposed over the backdrop of the bellicose times in which Urban reigned compels us to consider the *Triton Fountain* as a more complex visual statement than was previously understood. Ovid's story of the deluge parallels the biblical story of Noah and easily lent its meaning to "positive Christian ends" (Scott: 176), allowing the *Triton* to be adapted to express a Catholic message. Both stories are about sin and fidelity, punishment and redemption, morals not lost on the *Triton Fountain's* planners or intended audience. As an analogy for the Thirty Years War, the Protestant forces of Europe assume the role of Lycaon and his followers who had abandoned their duty to the gods. The great flood unleashed by Jove as punishment is the war itself, a cataclysmic event that would destroy Protestantism and wash away heresy. The new world Triton announces is the new Europe achieved through a Catholic victory.

[17] The pre-Modern visitor to the Piazza Barberini, who traversed the long Strada Felice or ascended the Via del Tritone to encounter the space was provided a view of a stage, fashioned from the very topography of Rome, whereupon the drama of Barberini military policies was enacted in the guise of Ovid's great deluge.[16] Would this message, expressed through the simple figure of Triton, have been clear to its intended audience? Perhaps. Ovid was quite popular in the seventeenth century and Triton would have been a well-known figure from the *Metamorphoses*. A popular ancient author's cataclysmic story of sin and redemption that closely parallels a Biblical story would have been much more accessible than comparatively obscure emblem, all the more so if superimposed over the backdrop of a current war.

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[16] While Bernini did not build the piazza, he did orient it with the positioning of his fountains (For the significance or orienting piazze, see Connors). In terms of making it a stage, his fountains are the "actors" in the Barberini drama, and moreover, he made use of the "shared scenery" of the eastern Roman hills and trees. For more on Bernini's interest in sight lines and piazze, see Marder 1997. Bernini's library contained texts discussing vision by Euclid, Vitruvius, Palladio, Sebastiano Serlio, and Francesco Sansovino (see McPhee). For Roman piazze as theaters, see Krautheimer.

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