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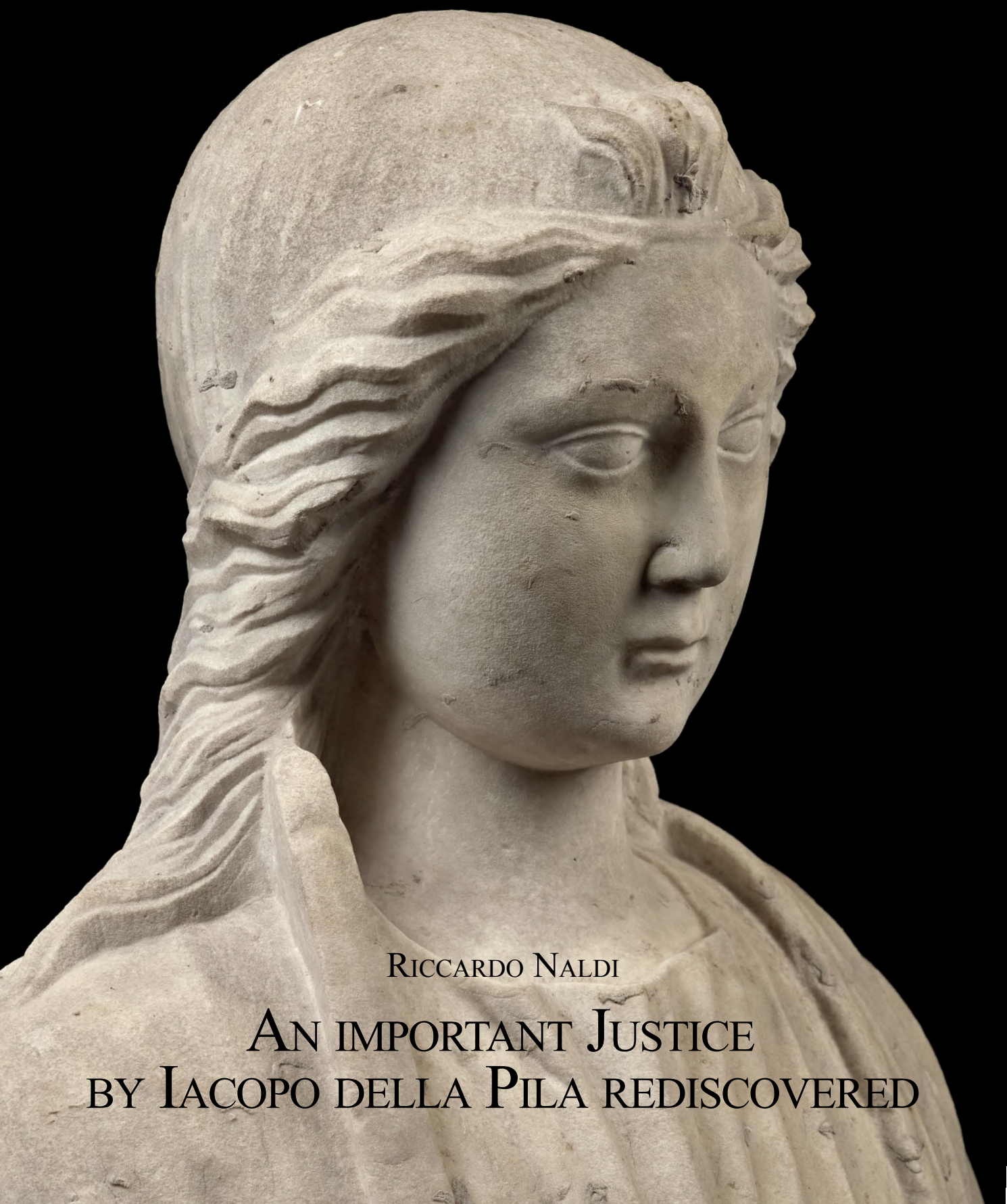

RICCARDO NALDI

AN IMPORTANT JUSTICE BY IACOPO DELLA PILA REDISCOVERED

Iacopo della Pila da Milano
(Documented in Naples from 1471 to 1502)
Justice, 1473 c.
Marble, height 108 cm

A Lombard sculptor in the Aragonese Naples

The rediscovered statue that we present for the first time here is carved in the round and shows a female figure holding in her right hand a sword, kept upright along her chest This image is immediately recognisable as a personification of the virtue of *Justice*[1].
It is the work of a sculptor of great ability and rich figurative culture, who knows how to combine the classicist firmness of the structure of the figure with the refined treatment of the surface of the marble. This is made vibrant through the numerous and elaborate folds of the thin draperies, and through the gentle flowing of the hair, combed in elegant strands that wrap the neck until the shoulders. The marble is carved with the virtuosity of an engraver. The relief of the draperies is light and gentle, moved by waves similar to those of the water of a pond in which a stone has been thrown, and it allows us to perceive the anatomy of the body underneath. The surface is defined by the expert use of a thin chisel to delicately carve the hair, the traits of the face – almost abstract, as in an archaic mask – the details of the robes. This gives to the statue an arcane elegance and a preciousness of late Gothic descent. We can observe a peak of the ability of the sculptor along the proper left side of the figure, where, in the lower part of the cape, he enjoyed tracing with the chisel flowing, vibrating folds which in their succession convey the fascinating decorative richness of the Autumn of the Middle Ages. Further down, the tunic falls to the feet in straight, thick lines carved in deep relief and emulating the solid modelling of classical statuary.

The character of the figure, the style, the similar state of conservation of the marble, with the surface modified by a probable temporary outdoor collocation, establish an immediate link between this and another two *Virtues* (*Prudence* and *Temperance*) recently acquired by the Museo Nazionale di San Martino in Naples (figs. 3, 5). They are typical works of Iacopo della Pila, sculptor of Lombard origin working in Naples in the second half of the 15th century. He is documented there between 1471 and 1502, and is a protagonist of the Aragonese Renaissance in the second half of the Quattrocento, together with the other great Northern sculptor active in the Kingdom, Domenico Gagini[2]. In the three images of *Virtues* – corresponding also for their height between 107 and 108 cm – we find the same manner of defining the monumental pose, of carving the folds, of describing the hair (figs. 3-5). The physiognomy too is the same: the high forehead, the elongated eyes with well defined eyelids, the straight and cutting nose, the small mouth (figs. 1-2). Some idiosyncratic stylistic features return in the three statues: the rounded shoulders, the shape of the thin fingers, the underlining of the details of the draperies and of the accessories. The original expressive features are more readable in the *Justice*, compared to the other two figures, because of the lively modelling of the surface and of the hair, of the depth of the chiaroscuro of the undercutting, and of the unbroken neck.

The two statues today in the Museo di San Martino, together with the third that has now come to surface again, are strictly related to the allegories of *Prudence*, *Justice*, and *Temperance* holding the sarcophagus of Diego Cavaniglia, first Count of Montella, member of the Cabanillas family from Valencia (their name was later Italianised as Cabaniglia or Cavaniglia), settled in the Kingdom of Naples around the mid-15th century, at the time of Alfonso of Aragon[3]. The Cavaniglia distinguished themselves through their military valour, which earned them lands and titles. The tomb of Diego Cavaniglia, realised between 1481 and 1492, is in the church of San Francesco in Folloni (province of Avellino) and is universally accepted as a work by Iacopo della Pila (fig. 6)[4]. Despite having been moved and readapted over the centuries, this monument kept its original structure and allows us to imagine how the three Virtues that we reunite here in a single group were displayed. This type of tomb had a great success with the high nobility of the Kingdom of Naples, because of the combination of an architecture influenced by Renaissance classicism with elements like the canopy, which recalled the magnificence of 14th century Anjou sepulchres.

The remains of another tomb in the third chapel of the left nave of the church of Santa Maria di Monte Oliveto (today Sant'Anna dei Lombardi) in Naples have been attributed to Iacopo della Pila. This is the tomb of Giovanni Cavaniglia, second Count of Troia and Lord of Montella, elder brother of Diego and deceased before him in 1473[5]. We can reconstruct the story of the dismantling and redisplay of the various parts of this important monument, which the historic sources describe as an "imposing sepulchre" ("maestoso sepolcro")[6], and as a "burial of the

whitest marble" ("sepoltura di bianchissimo marmo")[7]. In this manner, we can formulate a very solid and credible hypothesis that the three *Virtues* (the two in the Museo di San Martino, together with this one just rediscovered) all come from the tomb of Giovanni Cavaniglia. Today, in the church of Monte Oliveto remain only the lying figure of the deceased, a slab that was front of the sarcophagus, with three clipei containing from the left to the right *Saint John the Evangelist*, the *Virgin and Child*, and *Saint Jerome*, and two heraldic shields that were mounted to the sides of the coffin. Although fragmentary, these remains suggest a structure similar to that of Folloni, with the deceased lying over a sarcophagus decorated on the front with three figures and on the sides with two slabs with the arms of the family. The typology and the dimensions of the three Virtues induce us to believe that also in this tomb they were underneath the sarcophagus, following the specific characteristics of the burials designed by Iacopo della Pila. The statue at the centre of this study fits perfectly with those from the Museo di San Martino for its iconography too: an image of *Justice*, composing with *Prudence* and *Temperance* the same trio of Virtues holding the sarcophagus of Diego Cavaniglia in Folloni (figs. 3-6).

The hypothesis of the provenance of the two Virtues (and consequentially of our *Justice*) from the tomb of Monte Oliveto has been convincingly advanced by scholars in more than one instance[8]. The architectural history of the Neapolitan church explains the current fragmentary condition of the monument of Giovanni Cavaniglia. We know that the building was radically refurbished in the penultimate decade of the 17th century, for the decision of the Abbot, Silvestro Chiocca, who had the structure of the side chapels and of their Renaissance marble decoration modified[9]. Altars and tombs were dismembered by the architect Gennaro Sacco, relocated and often reassembled in fragmentary or arbitrary form in different parts of the building. The reshaping of the Cavaniglia chapel was certainly done at the time of Abbott Chiocca, because the late Baroque altar placed in it copies the general structure of those of the other chapels of the nave, designed by Sacco[10]. We must therefore draw the conclusion that the burial of Giovanni Cavaniglia was dismantled at the end of the 17th century and that, as in the case of other monuments from the church of Monte Oliveto, the Virtues underneath the sarcophagus were not part of the new display and went missing at an early stage. The reassembling of the Cavaniglia tomb is in any case registered already in the mid 19th century[11]. The style, too, supports this hypothesis of a provenance of the three Virtues from the Cavaniglia tomb. The tone of the statues, still intensely Lombard and at the same time delicately Late Gothic, fits perfectly with the date of 1473, the year of death of Count Giovanni II. This date is also very early in the Neapolitan career of Iacopo della Pila, who is documented in the city from 1471.

The different state of conservation of the skin of the marble of the three Virtues and of the parts of the Cavaniglia tomb left in the church of Monte Oliveto can be justified by the fact that they were, for a moment of their life, placed in an outdoors location. It has actually been suggested that the Virtues were reused to decorate the base of the spire (a "guglia", an architectural structure built in the centre of a square or cloister) where the *Virgin and Child* attributed to Domenico Gagini, originally part of the Vassallo chapel of the church of Monte Oliveto, was placed. A rich evidence from epigraphs and literature shows that the base had eight pedestals with eight statues, described in more than one instance as "antique" and coming from dismembered tombs from the church[12]. The spire was built in the middle of the cloister so called "of the columns" (the oldest of the monastery, adjacent to the church) according to a design by the architect Muzio Nauclerio in 1738 – as witnessed by the dedicatory epigraph – and was donated, between 1820 and 1826, to the convent of the Immaculate Conception near the church of Sant' Eframo Nuovo[13].

If, as it seems logical to suggest, the statues coming from the tomb of Giovanni Cavaniglia were mounted on the basement of the spire[14], the outdoor location would explain the different state of conservation from the parts that remained inside the church. The reuse in a late Baroque devotional and decorative scheme of different typology and function would also justify another peculiarity which, besides the style and the condition, links the three statues, which is that their attributes have been reworked. *Temperence* has been transformed in *Faith*, *Prudence* has lost the snake, and the globe in the left hand of the rediscovered *Justice* has been modified. The sphere has been reshaped in a knot of fabric, with a hole drilled in it to fix a new attribute, now lost.

Notes

1. Marble, 108 cm. high. The statue comes from the collection of Raymond Regnault (1902-1966), President of the Société d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de la Manche from 1951 to 1959. The collection, kept in the Manor of Bois Marcel in Saint-Lô, was auctioned on 16-18 September 2017 (lot 59, as «Italy, 15th century»).
2. R. Naldi, *Due Virtù, e qualche notizia, di Iacopo della Pila*, in *Percorsi di conoscenza e di tutela. Studi in onore di Michele D'Elia*, edited by F. Abbate, Naples 2008, pp. 111-126.
3. F. Scandone, *I Cavaniglia, conti di Troia e di Montella*, in «Archivio storico per le province napoletane», XLVIII, 1923, pp. 136-218.
4. R. Naldi, *Iacopo della Pila e collaboratore, Sepolcro di Diego Cavaniglia, I conte di Montella. Montella (Avellino), chiesa del convento di San Francesco a Folloni*, in *Capolavori della Terra di Mezzo. Opere d'arte dal Medioevo al Barocco*, exhibition catalogue (Avellino, Complesso Monumentale ex Carcere Borbonico, 28 April-30 November 2012), edited by A. Cucciniello, Naples 2012, pp. 89-92, n. 15, with complete bibliography.
5. R. Causa, *Contributi alla conoscenza della scultura del '400 a Napoli*, in *Sculture lignee nella Campania*, exhibition catalogue in Naples, edited by F. Bologna e R. Causa, (Naples, Palazzo Reale 1950), Napoli 1950, pp. 105-150 (p. 119). Fundamental for a stylistic analysis of the tomb is H.R. Leppien, *Die neapolitanische Skulptur des späteren Quattrocento*, doctoral thesis, University of Tübingen, 1960, I, pp. 111-112.
6. C. de Lellis, *Aggiunta alla Napoli Sacra dell'Engenio* [...], IV, Biblioteca Nazionale of Naples, manuscript X.B.23., c. 56*r*.
7. S. Ammirato, *Delle famiglie nobili napoletane*, I, Florence 1580, p. 41.
8. R. Naldi, *Due Virtù,* cit.; M. Tarallo, *Santa Maria di Monteoliveto a Napoli, dalla fondazione (1411) alla soppressione monastica: topografia e allestimenti liturgici*, doctoral thesis, XXVI cycle, University of Naples «Federico II», 2013/2014, pp. 262-263.
9. G. Ceci, *Nella chiesa di Monteoliveto*, in «Rassegna storica napoletana», II, 1934, pp. 205-212.
10. C. Cundari, *I rilievi*, in C. Cundari (a cura di), *Il complesso di Monteoliveto a Napoli. Analisi, rilievi, documenti*, with an historical essay by A. Venditti, Rome 1999, p. 331; M. Tarallo, *op.cit.*, pp. 254-264.
11. L. Catalani, *Le chiese di Napoli*, II, Naples 1853, pp. 58-59, remarks that the tomb had been restored in a period later than the date of its construction ("ristaurata in epoca posteriore").
12. M. Tarallo, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-117. A manuscript of 1778 by Marcello Oretti (Bologna, Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio, M. Oretti, ms. B.165, [documents relating to Monte Oliveto]), describes the spire: "Pyramid with numerous marble statuettes *removed from the sepulchres of the church*". ("Piramide con varie statuette di marmo *levate da' mausulei della chiesa*"); another description by G. Sigismondo, *Descrizione della città di Napoli e suoi borghi* , II, Naples 1788, p. 240, says:" a small spire of white marble, *with various antique statuettes* around" ("una piccola guglia di bianchi marmi, *con varie antiche statuette di marmo* all'intorno").
13. F. Divenuto, *Un inedito del Settecento: il Ritiro della Concezione a Materdei*, in «Napoli nobilissima», III s., XXI, 1982, pp. 94-100 (pp. 98-99).
14. As argued by M. Tarallo, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115, note 194.

Credits

Figs. 1-2, 6: Author archive
Figs. 3, 5: Fabio Speranza, Naples
Fig. 4: Matthew Hollow, figs. pp. 1, 2, 5, 8

Fig. 1 - **Iacopo della Pila**
Temeperance (reworked as *Faith*)
Detail. Naples, Museo Nazionale di San Martino

Fig. 2 - **Iacopo della Pila**
Prudence
Detail. Naples, Museo Nazionale di San Martino

Fig. 3 - **Iacopo della Pila**
Temperance (reworked as *Faith*)
Naples, Museo Nazionale di San Martino

Fig. 4 - **Iacopo della Pila**
Justice
Private collection

Fig. 5 - **Iacopo della Pila**
Prudence
Naples, Museo Nazionale di San Martino

Fig. 6 - **Iacopo della Pila**
Tomb of Diego Cavaniglia, First Count of Montella
Montella (Avellino), church of the convent of San Francesco a Folloni

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