Imaginary Heraldry and Self-Portrayal in Fifteenth-Century Siena

by Alice Cavinato

In late medieval Italian Communes, heraldry became a universal symbolic code, used to advertise the role of the many political institutions involved in government.¹ In a Commune like Florence or Siena, coats of arms were everywhere: they were painted on the city walls, gates, and bridges, on banners and canopies, and inside and on the outside of civic buildings. Every institution and organization had its own device; new emblems were created to identify town districts, political parties, magistrates, and guilds. Moreover, as a result of the gradual shift of political power from feudal aristocracy to prosperous merchants, people from very different backgrounds could be granted a coat of arms or devise their own, especially if they were appointed to public offices. By the end of the fourteenth century, heraldry’s visual language had become familiar to citizens of all social classes and its use was so common that, in special circumstances, even people of lesser social standing could avail themselves of it.² This essay presents two examples of Sienese merchants who created their own coat of arms for personal aggrandizement, to celebrate themselves and their families. In both cases the coat of arms is sketched in a manuscript beside a portrait, as a unique means of self-representation.

Bindino da Travale’s Chronicle

The first example is from a Sienese chronicle written at the beginning of the fifteenth century and attested by a single manuscript now kept at the Siena State Archive, MS D 153.³ This book was a family work. The author, Bindino da Travale (1354–c.1418), composed the chronicle and dictated it to his two sons, Mariano († post 1429) and Giovanni (†1417), as it is stated at the beginning of most chapters: the opening sentence is often ‘scrive Giovanni secondo che Bindino pone’, or, in a few cases, ‘Iscrive Marianno secondo che Bindino pone’ (that is, Giovanni/Mariano is writing what Bindino tells him).⁴

The text is a narrative of the main political events in Siena between 1407 and 1417, with a few introductory chapters briefly relating crucial facts of the previous century. The main focus is on Siena and the Commune’s diplomatic relations with its neighbours, especially Florence, but the author also gives detailed accounts of major European events, and dedicates several chapters to the Council of Constance and Jan Hus’s trial, conviction, and execution.⁵ Although the chronicle is written in prose, it is easy to note the frequent use of rhymes according to a specific metrical pattern, the ottava rima, and the recurrence of formulaic expressions. Most probably, these stylistic features are due to the fact that Bindino resorted to contemporary political poems, the cantari, as main sources for his narrative: that would also explain how he ¹ See Peter Seiler, ‘Kommunale heraldik und die visibilität politischer ordnung: beobachtungen zu einem wenig beachteten phänomen der Stadtästhetik von Florenz, 1250–1400’, in La bellezza della città: Stadtrecht und Stadtgestaltung im Italien des Mittelalters und der Renaissance, ed. by Michael Stolleis and Ruth Wolff (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2004), pp. 205–40; Christoph Friedrich Weber, Zeichnen der ordnung und des aufruhrs: Heraldische symbolik in italienischen Stadtcommunen des Mittelalters (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2011); Alessandro Savorelli, ‘L’araldica per la storia: una fonte ausiliaria?’, in Nel laboratorio della storia: una guida alle fonti dell’età moderna, ed. by Maria Pia Paoli (Rome: Carocci, 2013), pp. 289–315, 292; Alessandro Savorelli, ‘Segni e simboli araldici nell’arte fiorentina dal Medioevo al Rinascimento’, in Dal Giglio al David: Arte civica a Firenze fra Medioevo e Rinascimento, ed. by Maria Monica Donato and Daniela Parenti (Florence: Giunti, 2013), pp. 73–7.
³ For this chronicle, its author, and its illustrator, see Alice Cavinato, ‘Scrive Giovanni secondo che Bindino pone: Su una cronaca figurata senese e i suoi autori’, in Opera Nomina Historiae, Giornale di cultura artistica, 7 (2012), pp. 113–54.
⁴ See for example fol. 89r, ‘Iscrive Marianno secondo che Bindino pone’; fol. 196r, ‘Scrive Giovanni di Bindino, secondo che Bindino […] pone’.
⁵ The only available edition of the text is La cronaca di Bindino da Travale, ed. by Vittorio Lusini (Florence: Seeber, 1903).
had access to such extensive and detailed information, since it is extremely unlikely that he ever had the chance to travel or to be involved in high-profile political matters.\textsuperscript{5}

In fact, although he is chiefly known for having composed this chronicle, Bindino da Travale was no professional writer or clerk: he was a painter and a paint seller.\textsuperscript{7} He was enrolled in the Arte dei Pittori, the Sienese Painters’ Guild, sometime after 1389, along with his two sons.\textsuperscript{8} Interestingly, his only surviving work is this chronicle; apart from that, we only know of one other work, this being the altarpiece he painted for the Siene church of San Pietro in Santa Marta. This altarpiece was lost in 1812, when the church was demolished.\textsuperscript{9} The details of Giovanni’s career are also unknown. A document dated 1412 states that he worked with Benedetto di Bindo (1380/1385–1417) decorating Siena Cathedral’s reliquary. It is therefore possible that the two artists worked together on some other occasion, but there is no further evidence of their collaboration.\textsuperscript{10}

The text of the chronicle is very long, and, at first, the two brothers took it in turn to write it down.\textsuperscript{11} But soon Mariano left the work to Giovanni, who also decorated the manuscript with pen-work historiated initials and some drawings. Since only the second half of the book is decorated, it is likely that the decision of adding the initials was made after the first chapters had already been completed. Most interestingly, the historiated initials usually do not depict scenes or characters from the chronicle, but the author himself. The only exception is the illustration on fol. 213\textsuperscript{v}, which depicts King Ladislaus of Naples and his court. In the loops of Ps and Ds, Bindino is portrayed several times, in different attitudes; a caption reading ‘Bindino’ or a capital B usually complements the portrait (Fig. 1).

At fol. 148\textsuperscript{r} the capital P is the most fascinating example of how Giovanni turned the manuscript into a memorial to his father and his work (Fig. 2). The historiated initial, with its noticeable size, cannot fail to attract the reader's attention. In the loop, Giovanni depicts his father and himself in the very act of writing the chronicle. Bindino, sitting on the left, is pointing at his son, with the usual iconographic gesture indicating speech; Giovanni, on the right, is sitting at a desk and writing down his father's words in an open book. The letters B and G above leave no doubt as to their identity (Fig. 3). It is worth mentioning that this illustration does not follow the conventional iconography of the author or a copyist, but it is a realistic portrayal, a faithful representation of the actual collaboration between father and son.\textsuperscript{12} Bindino is depicted as an old man, with a beard and glasses, while Giovanni wears a high-collared robe and a smart haircut, as appropriate to a younger man. Between the two men there is a shield in red ink, as if it were hung or painted on the wall behind them. The shield is blazoned as Argent sensy of rye ears gules, a branch lying fess-wise and a capital B gules above.\textsuperscript{13} The branch and ears

\textsuperscript{5} Cavinato, ‘Scrive Giovanni secondo che Bindino pone’, pp. 134–47.
\textsuperscript{7} Gaetano Milanesi, Documenti per la Storia dell’Arte Senese (Siena: Porri, 1854), I, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{8} Since in the chronicle Bindino declares himself to be sixty in 1414, he was born around 1354. Further information about Bindino and Giovanni can be found in Milanesi, Documenti per la storia dell’Arte Senese, I, p. 46, and in Peleo Bacci, Fonti e commenti per la storia dell’arte senese (Siena: Accademia degli Intronati, 1944), pp. 217–18. See also Giulio Prunai, ‘Bindino da Travale’, in Dizionario biografico degli Italiani, 10 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1968), pp. 494–95.
\textsuperscript{11} The hands of the two brothers are very similar; nevertheless, thanks to a few distinctive features I have isolated, I have been able to attribute each chapter to one scribe or the other. Cavinato, ‘Scrive Giovanni secondo che Bindino pone’, pp. 118–19, 126–28.
\textsuperscript{13} Since the capital B and the ears appear again in the book and are always drawn in red ink, I have interpreted the colour as indicating the actual tincture gules. However, it may be that the red ink is used simply to highlight the blazon.
allude to the author’s rural origins; as he declares several times in the chronicle, Bindino lived in Siena, but came from Travale, a country village in a nearby region ruled by the Pannocchieschi d’Elci family. His choice of ears as a charge plainly recalls the Pannocchieschi coat of arms, which featured one or two couples of ears, as is appropriate, since Pannocchieschi comes from Pannocchia, which means ‘ear’.

The same coat of arms appears again at fol. 224r, in the centre of a capital D. This time the shield is not connected with a portrait of Bindino; the coat of arms alone represents the author and his sons, as clearly stated by the caption, which reads ‘Arme di Bindino e su’ erede’ (that

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14 In the chronicle, Bindino is always called ‘Travalese’, that is, from Travale. La cronaca di Bindino, pp. xv–xvii.
15 The Pannocchieschi coat of arms is blazoned as Gules, a eagle displayed double-headed or, crowned or, in dexter and sinister base points a couple of ears or.
is, Bindino’s and his heir’s coat of arms). The shield is repeated a third time at fol. 248, under a capital I. Moreover, Giovanni treats the capital B and the ears as his father’s devices, drawing them at the beginning of chapters, for example at fol. 242, or in association with other portraits, as at fol. 160, where Bindino holds a red B in his right hand (Fig. 4). This device consequently becomes a signature — a mark of ownership and authorship.

The heraldry included here resembles the Pannocchieschi coat of arms. This led the Sienese historian and grammarian Celso Cittadini (1553–1627) to the wrong conclusion that Bindino was a member of the Pannocchieschi d’Elci family. His opinion was widely accepted until the nineteenth century, when scholars who studied the chronicle argued that this was not likely, since Bindino declares several times that he was of humble origins and worked as a herdsman in his youth.

16 Cittadini, who received the manuscript as a gift, left several marginal sketches and notes. One of these notes, written at the beginning of the text, at fol. 41, reads ‘Historia del conte Giovanni del conte Bindino d’Elci. Composta in prima da lui in versi e poi da lui medesimo ridotta in prosa’ (that is, Historical narrative by count Giovanni, son of count Bindino d’Elci, first composed in verse and later converted into prose). This note by Cittadini is probably the origin of the tradition about Bindino’s supposed noble descent. Cavinato, ‘Scribe Giovanni secondo che Bindino pone’, pp. 115–16.

17 Milanesi, Documenti per la Storia dell’Arte Senese, I, 46; La cronaca di Bindino, pp. xvi–xviii.
It is evident from the choice of charges that Bindino, and probably Giovanni as well, had a good knowledge of the conventions of heraldic language. As artists, they had to be aware of the significance and use of heraldic bearings in visual communication. In two initials, for instance, Giovanni impaled the coat of arms of Florence and Siena, thus using the heraldic code to visualize the repeated attempts, related in the chronicle, to enforce a peace treaty between the two rival towns. The fact that Bindino invented a new emblem in order to ennoble his work — and, through his work, himself and his family — is therefore quite remarkable; it means that he felt entitled to some form of public recognition of his efforts. However, it is unlikely that Bindino

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18 Siena, Archivio di Stato, MS D 153, ff. 242r, 248v. The negotiations were successful and the treaty was signed on 7 June 1416: La cronaca di Bindino, pp. 355–9.
ever used this coat of arms, except in this manuscript; without external evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that it was created as a very private form of self-celebration intended for the narrow family circle and justified by the great achievement of having written a book.

Nicolò di Giovanni’s Self-Portrait

The second example is from a manuscript which contains a copy of the *Storia di Troia* by Filippo Ceffi, a vernacular translation of Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia destructionis Troiae*, a thirteenth-century romance on the Trojan war (Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, MS I.VII.12). The text is illustrated with a series of pen and watercolour drawings; the same person is responsible for both the copy and the illustrations. One cannot fail to notice that the scribe and artist is a Nicolò di Giovanni di Francesco di Ventura: his name is repeated many times both at the beginning and at the end of the book. Nicolò was a *pizzicaiuolo*, a retailer who dealt chiefly in paint, spices, and wax; he was a leading member of his guild, the *Arte dei pizzicaiuoli*, and in 1428 he was enrolled in the *Arte dei Pittori* as well. His date of birth is unknown, but, since his death is recorded in 1464, he probably was very young at the time of his working at this manuscript.

Our attention will focus on fol. 1v of the manuscript. Here, before the beginning of the romance, Nicolò devotes an entire page to his quite remarkable multiple signatures (Fig. 5). Below the date, on top of the page, Nicolò states his name twice, first in the vernacular and then in Latin. The first sentence reads ‘Nicolò di Giovanni da Siena à fatto questo libro di sua propia mano e di sua spontana voluntà’ (that is, ‘Nicolò di Giovanni from Siena wrote this book by his own hand and of his own will’). This statement is followed by a sort of dedication to himself, written in quite incorrect Latin: ‘ad virum egregio amicorum ottimum Nicholaus Iohannes Franciscus Venture de Senis’ (that is, ‘To the excellent man and best friend Nicolò di Giovanni di Francesco di Ventura from Siena’). The second signature initially follows — with some difficulties — the very common Latin formula ‘Iste liber fecit Nicolaus Franciscus Venture de Senis anno domini MCCCCIII’, but then Nicolò feels the need to add, in the vernacular, ‘el quale à fatto per non prestare’ (that is, ‘and this book is not meant to be lent to anyone’).

Below the signatures Nicolò drew his self-portrait. He appears dressed in a brown tunic with a long, red cap on his shoulder. In his left hand he holds a scroll with the couplet ‘Signori io vi prego per lo vostro onore / che non facciate beffe dello scrittore’ (that is, ‘I beg you, gentlemen, for your honour’s sake, not to mock the writer’). The ‘writer’ here means Nicolò, who actually only copied the text. Next to the portrait a shield is drawn, blazoned as ‘Quarterly a cross and in first and second quarters a eight-pointed estoile’ — the tinctures are not indicated. Since there is no other hint as to the identity of the holder, the easiest conclusion is that the coat of arms is intended to represent Nicolò himself (Fig. 6).

This coat of arms is an enigma. So far, this is its only known occurrence; it is not recorded in the main Sienese armorial catalogues, either under Ventura or Venturi. The only other source for a similar coat of arms under the name Venturi or di Ventura is the *Raccolta Ceramelli Papiani*, an extensive catalogue of the heraldic bearings of the Tuscan families. The shield is presented in a slightly different manner, with the two eight-pointed estoiles in the third and fourth quarters.

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19 This is only one of the several witnesses of Ceffi’s translation, the only available edition of which is Guido delle Colonne, *Storia della guerra di Troia*, ed. by Michele Dello Russo (Naples: Ferrante, 1868).

20 Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, MS I.VII.12, fols. 1r, 89r.


23 This collection, gathered by Enrico Ceramelli Papiani (1896–1976), is now kept at the State Archive in Florence. The online catalogue is available at <http://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/keramlipapian2/index.php?page=Home>.

Fig. 5: Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, MS. I.VII.12, fol. 1'.
The compiler’s note identifies the source in an untitled seventeenth-century manuscript, but so far the author has not succeeded in tracking it down, and, consequently, cannot say whether this source is independent of Niccolò’s manuscript or not. Since this coat of arms is otherwise unattested in the Ventura family, it is likely that Niccolò, like Bindino, created it to complement his self-portrait.

A slightly different coat of arms appears in another manuscript copied and illustrated by Niccolò forty years later, in 1443, which contains a narrative of one of the most important and famous events in thirteenth-century Italy — the battle of Montaperti. The text is a fictionalized account of the great victory the Sienese achieved over a huge Florentine army on 4 September 1260. There are several versions of this account, probably originating in the second half of the fourteenth century. This one is the longest and most detailed, and the only illustrated one: thirty-nine watercolour drawings in the lower third of each page depict scenes from the chronicle. The drawing on fol. 5r shows the procession the Sienese authorities held the night before the battle, to secure the Virgin’s favour and assistance (Fig. 7). An image of the Madonna is carried under a canopy decorated with the devices of the main institutions and authorities — the Church, the Empire, the Commune, the Capitano del Popolo, the Pope.

Here, the second coat of arms from the left will be considered (Fig. 8): Quarterly azure a cross or, in third and fourth quarters a eight-pointed estoile or, in chief a mitre argent. The mitre in chief should mean that this is the archbishop’s coat of arms, but no Sienese archbishop ever bore a coat of arms like this. The coat of arms reappears in identical fashion at fol. 21v, on a similar canopy carried around the town in the great procession held in thanksgiving after the victory. It is possible that Niccolò invented this device, maybe because the manuscript he was copying was damaged and he could not make out the charges, or because there was no coat of arms for the archbishop in the model, and Niccolò thought there ought to have been. So Niccolò probably changed slightly the coat of arms he had imagined for himself forty years earlier. This is another reason why it is likely that the coat of arms beside Niccolò’s self-portrait is imaginary: had those really been his family’s heraldic bearings, he probably would not have used the same charges to create the archbishop’s device.

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26 The archbishop plays a very important role in the narrative: together with the lay authorities he performs a solemn ceremony of allegiance to the Virgin on the eve of the battle.
Fig. 7: Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, MS. A.IV.5, fol. 5r.
Conclusion
So why did these two men, who were neither noblemen nor public officers, but ordinary merchants and painters, create a coat of arms of their own and draw it on their books? What Bindino and Niccolò have in common is the fact that they both consider themselves as writers. Bindino keeps repeating that he is the author, the one who tells the story; as for Niccolò, with his self-portrait he introduces himself as 'lo scrittore', the writer. This may appear to be a trivial remark, but it is not, since being able to write a whole book was undoubtedly a great accomplishment for two artisans of their social status. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the literacy rate among the town dwellers in northern Italy rapidly increased, mainly because of the widespread need to keep accounts and communicate with business partners.\(^{27}\) Most artisans and merchants could record facts and figures and many could read vernacular literature; but only a few were able to copy a long text, let alone writing one.\(^{28}\) This kind of expertise was much more common among the clergy and the public officers, the notai, who received an education in Latin.\(^{29}\)

In consequence, Niccolò and Bindino probably felt that having written a book single-handed put them on a level with professional scribes and clerks. From their point of view, it was a remarkable feat for which they deserved to be remembered by posterity, even if that was limited to their descendants. Given the intensive use and display of arms in the late-medieval Commune, it is not surprising that Bindino and Niccolò chose to dignify their books by marking them with coats of arms of their own devising. They employed heraldry as the universal code used to celebrate individuals who achieved honour and fame, regardless of their social background.


\(^{29}\) Petrucci, *Storia e geografia delle culture scritte*, pp. 1221, 1224.