

***QUI CAPUT SUPPONERE FONTIBUS
CLUSINIS AUDENT. RE-READING THE
INSCRIBED BRONZE VOTIVE HEADS
FROM BAGNO GRANDE AT SAN
CASCIANO DEI BAGNI***

QUI CAPUT SUPPONERE FONTIBUS CLUSINIS AUDENT.
RELEYENDO LAS CABEZAS VOTIVAS INSCRITAS DE BRONCE
EN EL BAGNO GRANDE DE SAN CASCIANO DEI BAGNI

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RESUMEN

Este breve artículo se centra en la dedicación de cabezas votivas de bronce dentro del depósito sagrado descubierto en el Bagno Grande de San Casciano dei Bagni (Toscana, Italia), en el antiguo territorio de la ciudad-estado de *Cleusi/Clusium*. A pesar de que la ofrenda de exvotos en forma de cabezas era extremadamente común en la Italia antigua (especialmente entre los siglos IV y I a.C.), las cabezas de bronce estratificadas dentro del estanque sagrado de aguas termo-minerales del Bagno Grande no pueden considerarse simplemente como exvotos anatómicos. Inscripciones excepcionales en el cuello de tres de estas cabezas, en etrusco y en latín, hacen referencia directa a la fuente termal. No es ciertamente casual que las cabezas fueran depositadas, al final de su biografía cultural, dentro de la fuente termal del Bagno Grande. El ritual de depositar cabezas de bronce bajo el agua caliente de la fuente, en forma de dedicación, evocaba indirectamente prácticas médicas y religiosas comunes, lo que confirma la importancia de analizar los contextos arqueológicos votivos en torno a las aguas termo-minerales.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Aguas termo-minerales; Bagno Grande; Cabezas votivas de bronce; Etruscos y Romanos; Exvotos de bronce; San Casciano dei Bagni

ABSTRACT

This short paper focuses on the dedication of bronze votive heads inside the sacred deposit discovered at Bagno Grande in San Casciano dei Bagni (Tuscany, Italy), in the ancient territory of the city-state of *Cleusi/Clusium*. Despite the fact that offering ex votos in the form of heads was extremely common in ancient Italy (especially between the 4th and the 1st centuries BCE), the stratified bronze heads inside the sacred thermo-mineral pool of Bagno Grande cannot be merely considered anatomical votives. Exceptional inscriptions on the neck of three heads, in Etruscan and in Latin, all referred to the Hot Spring. It is certainly not by chance that the heads were deposited, at the end of their cultural biography, inside the hot spring of Bagno Grande. The ritual of depositing bronze heads under the hot water of the Spring, in the form of dedications, indirectly echoed common medical and religious practices, thus confirming the importance of analysing the votive archaeological contexts among thermo-mineral springs.

KEYWORDS

Bagno Grande; Bronze Ex Votos; Bronze Votive Heads; Etruscans and Romans; San Casciano dei Bagni; Thermo-Mineral Waters

1. THE TRADITION OF THE “HEAD SHOWER” AMONG THERMO-MINERAL SPRINGS IN THE REGION OF *CLEUSI* / *CLUSIUM*

The well-known reference to *Fontes Clusini* in the first *Epistula* of Horace (I 15, 8-9) has been variously read in archaeological and historical literature.¹ The search for these *fontes* was often aimed to identify the precise location of the site(s), where, according to the medical doctor Antonius Musa, various pains in the head and in the stomach could have been – bravely – healed by a cold bath, similarly to the treatments that took place among the springs at *Gabii*. The identification of the *Fontes Clusini* with the thermo-mineral springs of San Casciano dei Bagni, following a long tradition,² was enhanced by Emanuele Repetti,³ based on the presence of one of the uppermost springs of the thermal system – made of numerous natural springs⁴ – namely the “cold” spring of Santa Lucia,⁵ which is in reality one of the minor pieces of evidence if compared to the more powerful “hot” springs of San Casciano dei Bagni. Nevertheless, once we establish that the rich and plural record of thermo-mineral complexes in the area of *Cleusi/Clusium* does not allow for an exact location of those mentioned by Horace (and it is indeed a false archaeological problem, being many of them represented in the plural *fontibus*), it is interesting to

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1. For a general overview see Chellini, 2002, p. 145; more recently Soren, 2006 (already in Soren, 1997); Osanna, 2024, pp. 3-4.
 2. See, for example, Bacci, 1623.
 3. Repetti, 1833-1846, I, p. 225.
 4. For the preliminary catalogue of over forty thermo-mineral springs in the area of San Casciano dei Bagni, see Tabolli & Mariotti, 2021.
 5. This spring has been recently discussed in Papini, Tabolli & Mariotti, 2024, p. 254.

focus here briefly on the action of *caput supponere fontibus* – placing the head under the springs – beyond the balneotherapeutic practices in antiquity.

Regardless of the location of the *Fontes Clusini*, we easily observe the resilience of “head showering” at San Casciano dei Bagni in antiquity and throughout history, although associated to springs characterised by hot and not by cold water. The thermal “head shower” survives, for example, in the toponym of one of the most important votive deposit – or sanctuary – in Etruscan and Roman times in the area: Doccia della Testa.⁶ In the site of Bagno Grande, on top of the Etruscan and Roman sanctuary currently under excavation,⁷ in the modern complex rebuilt after the earthquake of 1575, at the time of the ruling Medici of Florence,⁸ the “head shower” took place inside a sector of the new bath. In 1688, the medical doctor Giovanni Bottarelli described how this treatment functioned, with the help of a beautiful and incised illustration (Fig. 1): hot water was flowing from a lead tube deriving from one of the walls of the bath.⁹ The patient remained dressed, laying on a special bed “made of canvas and ropes”. A peculiar hat with a large hole in the central part allowed for the access of thermal water, onto an area of the head where the hair had previously been “shaved in a spherical circle of a plate”.¹⁰ It was a common medical practice that took place in a large number of thermo-mineral spas, with different postures of the patients. Already in 1417, Ugolino da Montecatini, while describing the head shower at the hot baths of Bagni di Petriolo,¹¹ stated:

“They are useful for sciatica and for those who have a head full of fluids. The treatment is done by keeping the bare head under the water that comes out of a lion’s mouth. The water must fall first on the front of the head, then on the back, without force, thus drying the fluids of the head itself”.¹²

6. Iozzo, 2013 and most recently Arbeid, 2023; for the modern history of Doccia della Testa, see Guarducci, 2021, pp. 691-692, with a photograph of the complex before renovations in the Eighties at p. 808.

7. Mariotti & Tabolli, 2021; Mariotti, Salvi & Tabolli, 2023a; 2023b; 2025; Osanna & Tabolli, 2024.

8. Manni, 1617, p. 20; Fortini, Ledda & Morelli, 2023. See most recently J. Tabolli in Papini, Tabolli & Mariotti, 2024, pp. 225-226.

9. Two pipes are represented, the lower allowing for a different access of the water and to reduce the pressure and volume of the flow.

10. Bottarelli, 1688, p. 148.

11. Guarducci, 2021, pp. 609-626. On the Roman archaeological evidence, see Chellini, 2002, pp. 165-166.

12. Translation by the Author. For the original text see Nardi, 1950, pp. 51-52.

The act of *caput supponere fontibus* remained a constant medical ritual in the area as we keep observing among those that still bathe in the public open-air baths of Bagno Grande at San Casciano, within the archaeological site, and still using for medical purposes the same spring that in Etruscan and Roman times constituted the core of the sanctuary (or at least of a part of it).¹³

2. THE HOT SPRING OF BAGNO GRANDE AND ITS HEADS

In the new reading of the bilingual inscription “*fons caldus – flere havens*”, carved on the *donarium* discovered in 2023 at Bagno Grande, we have suggested, that at least at the beginning of the 1st century CE, at the time when the inscription was made in both languages, there was a clear identification between *fons* in Latin and *flere* in Etruscan, on the basis that *caldus* and *havens* both refer, in their roots, to the meaning of “hot”.¹⁴ The implications of rethinking at *flere* as *fons* instead of the unanimously accepted *numen* are impressive in Etruscan archaeology and deserve to be discussed extensively in a dedicated study.¹⁵ The first consequence of this “late” meaning of *flere* at Bagno Grande is to rethink at the other inscriptions that locally mentioned *flere havens*. Among the four cases in which a dedication to *flere havens* appeared either in the form of *fleres.havensl*¹⁶ or *fleres.havensl*,¹⁷ two occurred on the neck of bronze male votive heads. The two heads and their inscriptions have been variously dated, ranging between the beginning of the 1st century BCE to the first thirty years of the 1st century CE.¹⁸ Regardless of the proposed chronologies, if our understanding of the bilingual inscription is correct, we can adjust our understanding of the two texts as follows:

13. As part of the Bagno Grande project, the anthropologist Fulvio Cozza is currently conducting participant observation of the agencies frequenting the Bagno Grande, in order to collect current practices and narratives.

14. Tabolli, 2024a. See also Tabolli, 2025. On *Flere Havens* see Ambrosini, van Heems, 2025.

15. Most recently on *fleres* as *numen*, see Belfiore, 2010, p. 104. Revising the record implies to reconsider “classic” iconographies and identification. If we think, for example, of the well-known Borgia mirror at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples in which *flere* has been identified with the male figure emerging from the well (with *fleres* as *numen*), instead of the well itself, interestingly characterised by a snake at its bottom (see, recently, Roncalli, 2015, fig. 11).

16. Most recently, A. Maggiani in Tabolli & Maggiani, 2023, ns. 54 e 56, with previous bibliography.

17. Most recently, A. Maggiani in Tabolli & Maggiani, 2023, ns. 53 e 55, with previous bibliography.

18. See Maggiani, 2023; Papini, 2023.

nufreš.i.nufrznaš.ar:
persile.flereš.havensl
*tenine.tlenaxieis*¹⁹

“On behalf of Nufre, of the Nufrzna family, son of Ar(nth), the Perugian, to the Hot Spring, this is placed, for (a vow) to be fulfilled” (Fig. 2).

men.turce.flereš.havensl
*cver.au.marcni.clantisa*²⁰

“Aule Marcni Clantisa gave me to the Hot Spring as a sacred thing” (Fig. 3).²¹

Despite the different origin of the donors – in the first case from the territory of Perugia and in the second from Chiusi (with a gentilicial common especially at Chianciano), the hot spring mentioned in both texts is not a “simple” identification of the locality where the offering took place (*e.g.* among the hot spring of Bagno Grande, as it could have been hypothesised based on the *donarium*, with *fons caldus* – *flere havens* expressed in nominative),²² but it clearly appears as the sacred destination of the offering and its vow. The divine nature of the Hot Spring, among the deities attested at Bagno Grande,²³ appeared also among the bronze ex votos discovered in 2022, on the right leg of the statue offered by L. Marcius Grabillo, in the form of *Fonti Calidae*:²⁴

L. Marcius / L.f. Grabillo / hoc signu(m) / et signa / se[x] et / femina / ap (!) pedibus / ad inguen
/ sex Fonti / Calidae (!) / v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito).

The female occurrence of *Calidae* instead of *Calido*, discussed by Gian Luca Gregori,²⁵ may have also echoed the Etruscan nature of the Hot Spring as a goddess.

19. Most recently, A. Maggiani in Tabolli & Maggiani, 2023, n. 56.

20. Most recently, A. Maggiani in Tabolli & Maggiani, 2023, n. 56.

21. Both translations are by the Author. They were recently used in the exhibition *Gli dei ritornano. I Bronzi di San Casciano*, at the National Archaeological Museum of Reggio Calabria (see Osanna & Tabolli, 2024).

22. Tabolli, 2024a, with the identification of *havens* as a participle in nominative.

23. To Apollo, Asclepius, Hygeia, *Fons/Flere*, Fortuna, Fortuna *Primigenia*, Isis, thanks to the 2024 excavation we can also add the Nymphs (Mariotti & Tabolli, 2021; Mariotti, Salvi & Tabolli, 2023a and 2023b; most recently Osanna & Tabolli, 2024).

24. Gregori, 2023.

25. Gregori, 2023, p. 197; See also Tabolli, 2024b.

The mid-2nd century BCE crowned female bronze statue of the goddess with snake and patera and the inscription mentioning the dedication to *fleŕeś havensl* probably represented the goddess herself, the Hot Spring.²⁶

In the on-going excavation inside the votive deposit of the sacred pool, the 2024 campaign brought to light other two inscriptions in Latin on bronze ex votos, with dedication in Latin to *Fons*.²⁷ In one case (Fig. 4), the inscription runs on the neck of a male bronze head,²⁸ thus confirming the strong bond between the dedicated heads and the Spring. At the same time, this occurrence confirms the existence of multilingual communities that frequented the sanctuary between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE, being this of the main characteristics of this sacred area.

3. BEFORE THE “HEAD SHOWER”

As we have no comparison either in Etruscan or Roman worlds of votive heads with inscriptions on their neck, these three “talking” bronze heads expressing their dedication to the Hot Spring were deposited, together with the other ex votos, in the complex ritual that occurred when the earlier oval sacred pool was sealed, at some time between the end of the reign of Tiberius and the beginning of the one of Claudius.²⁹ The closing of the dismantled pool by a thick layer of tiles associated with a bronze model of a lightning bolt and flint *kerania*, allowed us to hypothetically refer the complex sequence of depositions to the ritual of *fulgur conditum*.³⁰ All the bronze votive heads – that at the moment reach the number of nine³¹ – were collected and then deposited in the sequence of this ritual, in the central groups, close to wooden trunks. In parallel to the statues and to the other ex votos we have no evidence

26. Papini, 2023, pp. 119-121. See also Papini, 2024, pp. 82-83.

27. Gian Luca Gregori just published the text. See Gregori, 2025. On the chest of a bronze half male torso, we read *G(aius) Rosci(us) G(ai) f(ilius) Fonte Caldo d(onum) d(edit) l(ibens) m(erito)*. On the neck of a bronze male votive head, we read *P(ublius) Domitius P(ubli) f(ilius) Sabi(nus) Fonti d(onum) d(edit) l(ibens) m(erito)*.

28. The head, based on the portrait, dates to the end of the 1st century BCE. Massimiliano Papini is currently studying the “new” bronze votive heads discovered in the deposit in 2024.

29. On the possible connection between the restructuring of the sanctuary, consisting in the 1st century CE of a tetrastyle *sacellum*, and the cultural and religious policies of Claudius, see Mariotti, Salvi & Tabolli, 2023b; also, Tabolli, 2024a.

30. Tabolli, 2023, with discussion and previous bibliography.

31. To the complete list in Papini, 2023, pp. 130-131, one should add two new bronze heads discovered in 2024.

regarding the location of the bronze heads in the sanctuary, outside the pool, prior to the ritual burying within the sacred water. The holes on the necks suggest that they were anchored to bases, although at the moment no base in stone or other material have been found in the deposit and, more in general, inside the sanctuary.³²

The examples of well excavated and published sacred areas in central Italy, that include anatomical votives and that can provide secure comparanda for the ritual disposition of heads in the space of the sanctuaries, before being accumulated into deposits or *favissae*, are rare.³³ Nevertheless, considering the liminal location of San Casciano dei Bagni and its sanctuaries in respect of the entire territory under the control of *Cleusi/Clusium*,³⁴ it is fundamental to take into account the “nearby” evidence from the pan-Etruscan sanctuary of *Fanum Vultumnae* in *Velzna*. We have already stressed that despite the proximity between this southern part of the *Fines Clusinorum* and *Volsinii*, with the river Paglia marking a profound ecological barrier,³⁵ and although the links in material culture from funerary contexts of *Cleusi* and *Velzna* are deep thought Etruscan time,³⁶ the sanctuary of Bagno Grande have not revealed at the moment close links to the *Fanum* in the material culture, during late Etruscan and Roman times. One reason is certainly due to the different chronologies, with the earliest evidence at Bagno Grande dating from the mid-3rd century BCE onward, around the years that followed the 264 BCE partial destruction of the *Fanum*.³⁷ Despite the differences, a few but significant element may shed light on interconnections as the *Fanum* offers a funda-

32. Only a small travertine base for linear bronze figurines has been identified at the moment, in the area outside the *sacellum*. It is important to stress that some of the travertine blocks reused for the Imperial sacred pool, could have originally functioned as bases for some of the bronze ex votos. Their reuse in the late 3rd and 4th centuries, with footprints related to *vestigia* identified by Gasparini, 2023, makes it even harder to clearly separate traces of their original use from the final outcome.

33. This is the case of votive deposits associated to thermo-mineral springs from nearby territory; see for instance the site of Fonte Veneziana in Arezzo (see especially, Gamurrini, 1868 and 1869; Bocci Pacini, 1980; Zamarchi Grassi, 2021; and for a critical review of literature, Chellini, 2002, p. 54), or the sanctuary of Pozzarello at Bolsena (Bentz, 1992, p. 42, n. 19).

34. Most recently Tabolli, 2024c.

35. Tabolli & Vanni, 2025.

36. See for instance Paolucci, 1999.

37. Tabolli & Vanni, 2024 suggested an indirect link for the reorganization of transhumance and market routes caused by the 264 BCE events that affected the *Fanum Vultumnae*. At this time the route between *Cleusi/Clusium* and the sea, towards Vulci, certainly preferred the passage across the Upper Paglia Valley, between Centeno and Proceno (Michetti, 2003).

mental reference point. It is especially for the display of votive heads on their stone bases,³⁸ including the famous “*testina* Giontella” in bronze, a masterpiece of the 5th century BCE,³⁹ that the *Fanum Voltumnae* marks the beginning of a tradition. It has been widely discussed how at the *Fanum* even the orientation of the heads played a crucial role in the apparatus of the sanctuary, while in other examples in terracotta, heads were held in height.⁴⁰ These are definitely earlier comparisons but can provide images and references to unlock the complexity of the excavation within the votive deposits inside the sacred pool at Bango Grande.

In conclusion, regardless of the identification of the site of the *Fonti Clusinii* mentioned by Horace, which is definitely out of the scope of this paper, our bronze heads that were deposited, in their “second votive life”,⁴¹ under the lightning bolt, and especially under the constant flow of thermal water, with their inscriptions in Etruscan and Latin with clear dedications to the Hot Spring, provide medical and ritual evidence that could be linked to the definition of *caput supponere fontibus Clusinis*, dedicate a (bronze) head at the sacred Springs.

38. See Stopponi, 2020, pp. 119-113, with previous bibliography (see also Stopponi, 2021).

39. Giontella, 2012. See especially Roncalli, 2015 and 2022.

40. Roncalli, 2015, p. 1024.

41. Tabolli, 2024c.

LIST OF IMAGES

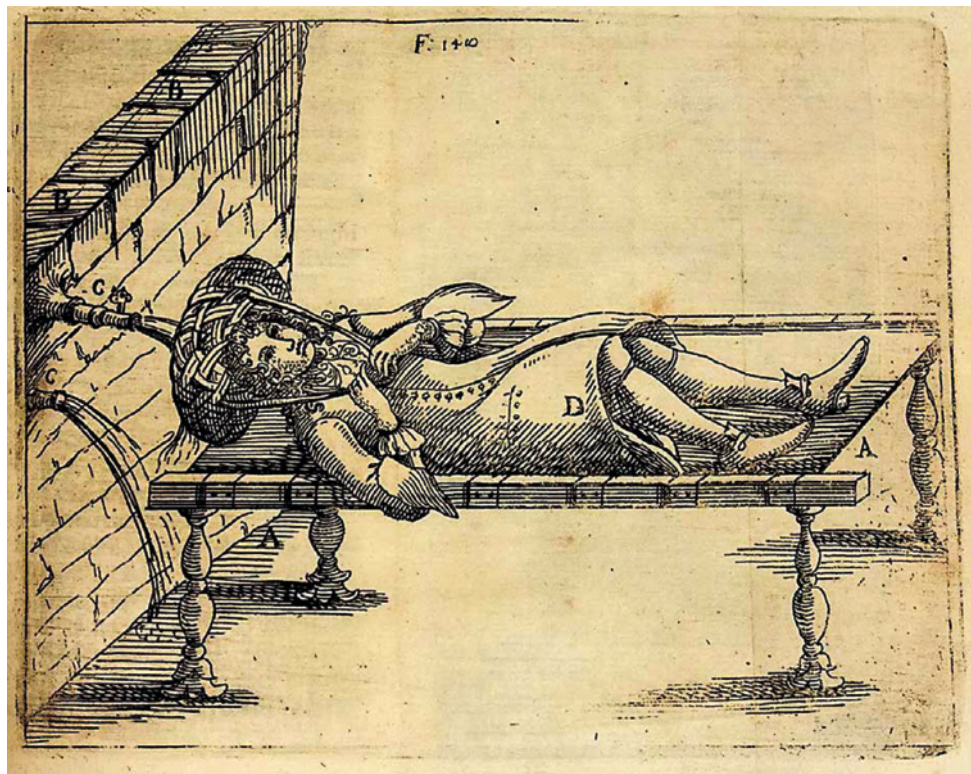


Fig. 1. The “head shower” at Bagno Grande in 1688. Incision by G. Botarelli (after Mariotti & Tabolli, 2021).



Fig. 2. Bronze male head offered to the Hot Spring on behalf of Nufre (after Papini, 2023).



Fig. 3. Bronze male head offered to the Hot Spring by Aule Marcni Clantisa (after Papini, 2023).



Fig. 4. Excavation photo of the bronze male head offered to *Fons* by Publius Domitius.

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