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Giorgio Vasari's Neptune as Cosimo I de' Medici: The Element of Water as a Political Symbol

Quum subito Triton ore recondit aquam
[After the rain the mouth of a Triton hides the water]
Sextus Propertius, *Elegies*, 32, 111, b.2

Symbolic allusions about water are complex in sixteenth-century Florentine art. They include aspects of the physical and metaphysical realms. Aspects of the physical realm are associated with natural components and flow of the element water. The River Arno, for example, was the Florentines' main water supply and the bodies of water from the Ligurian Sea and the Tyrrhenian Sea delivered water and provided navigation Tuscan Archipelago inhabitants. At the metaphysical level, the signification is associated with artistic inventions and political renewals. The latter is the topic of this essay, focusing on Giorgio Vasari's *Birth of Venus* or *The Element of Water* (1555) in the *Sala degli Elementi* of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence **(fig. 1)**.

In Florentine art during the governance of Cosimo I de' Medici (1537–1569), representations of water were employed as a physical manifestation of a metaphysical realm. Artists under the tutelage of the Medicean patronage further explored metaphorically the visual connections between the physical power of water and the political power of the Medicean regime (Else 2013; Cheney 2009). These types of representations included two forms of imagery: one is a personification of water through the mythological aquatic

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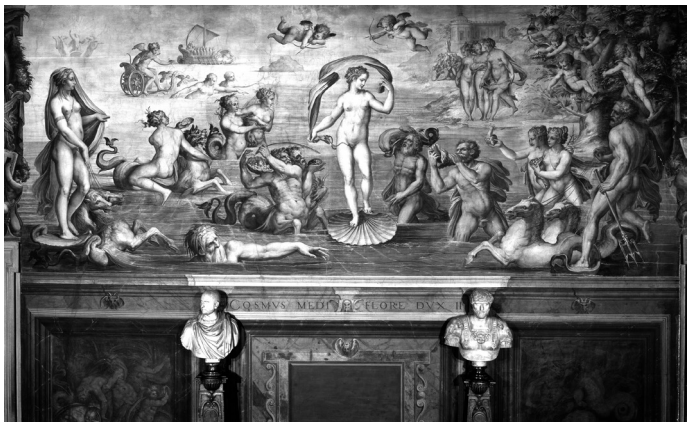
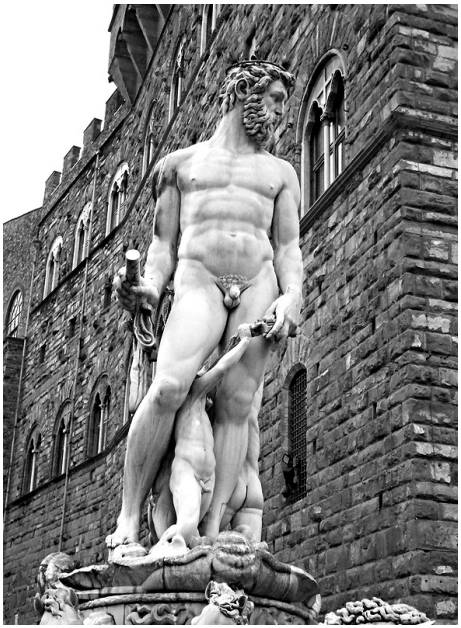


1 Giorgio Vasari and Cristofano Gherardi. *Birth of Venus* or *Element of Water*, 1555.
Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.
Url: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giorgio_Vasari_-_The_birth_of_Venus_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg. Public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



2 Bartolomeo Ammannati, *Fountain of Neptune*, 1563-1565.
Piazza della Signoria and Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.
Url: https://www.flickr.com/photos/70125105@N06/26011582885
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or sea gods (Neptune, Oceanus, Palaemon, Proteus) and sea goddesses (Amphitrite, Thetis, Venus). The second type of imagery focused on the portrayal of the Medicean ruler, Cosimo I, as a personification of a sea god such as Neptune. Artists employed the duke's physiognomy for the facial features of the sea god, thus identifying Cosimo I with Neptune, as seen in Vasari's *Birth of Venus* or *The Element of Water*, where Neptune is portrayed with the duke's face. This is similar to Bartolomeo Ammannati's *Neptune Fountain* (1567) **(fig. 2)**, a sculpted fountain adjacent to the Palazzo Vecchio where the facial features of the marble statue of Neptune also resemble those of Cosimo I. In turn, both artists were inspired by the numerous portraits by Agnolo Bronzino depicting Cosimo I, e.g., *Duke Cosimo I de' Medici* (1545) at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (compare figs. 1 and 3). Ammannati, a collaborator with Vasari at Villa Giulia in Rome, completed the sculpted fountain ten years after Vasari's painting, assimilating his emblematic interpretation of Cosimo I de' Medici as Neptune (Else 2003, 225–268; Ferretti 2011; Cheney 2009, 2014).

This essay consists of two parts. The first part deals with the Medicean commission for Vasari's *Birth of Venus*, an emblematic metaphor for the element of water as an aquatic symbol of power, while the second part focuses on the Medicean personification of power as depicted in a detail in this painting with the figure of Neptune, God of the Sea and Water, as Cosimo I de' Medici, Duke of Tuscany.

In 1555, Cristofano Gherardi collaborated with Vasari in designing and painting a mythological and cosmological theme in the *Sala degli Elementi*, an apartment belonging to Duke Cosimo I de' Medici in the Palazzo Vecchio (Allegri and Cecchi 1980, 63–73; Muccini 1997, 52–56; Orlandi 1977, 142–146)[1]. The *Sala degli Elementi* is dedicated to the four elements (air, earth, fire, and water), which in Antiquity were considered to be at the origin of the world or cosmos (Jones 2016). These are depicted in the ceiling with oils and in the walls in fresco. In a Venetian-like sunken ceiling the element of Air is personified: *Saturn Mutilating Heaven*. Surrounding this scene of Saturn (Chronos) castrating Uranus (Heaven) are the Chariots of the Sun and the Moon and the images of Day and Night. In the corners of the ceiling are depicted the virtues of Peace, Mercurial Justice, Fame, and Truth. On the walls of the chamber, there are personifications of the elements of Earth, Fire, and Water. The frescoes on the left-hand wall relate to the element of Earth: in the center of the scene, the first fruits of the Earth are offered to Saturn. On the adjacent wall, a scene above the fireplace relates to the element of Fire with the depiction of *Vulcan's Forge*. On the wall adjacent to that, the element of Water is symbolized by *The Birth of Venus*. On the window wall, large niches contain simulated painted sculptures of Mercury and Pluto, which thematically connect with the wall decoration of the elements and the pantheon of the gods in the ceiling.

1 This short essay will not address scholars' debates and interpretations about Vasari's assistants, such as Marco da Faenza and Giovanni Stradano.

The iconography of the program for this *sala* is such that the ceiling's depictions relate to the *istorie* [narrative scenes or history paintings] in the walls, and in turn, the *istorie* of the walls relate to each other, forming not only a *camera picta* [illusionistic painted room] but also a *camera intellecta* [an emblematic and intellectual room] (Cheney 2009, 2; 2014, 3). The most significant primary source for decoding the meaning of the imagery of the *Birth of Venus* is found in Vasari's own writings, *I Ragionamenti*, edited and published after Vasari's death in 1574 by the Florentine literati Vincenzo Borghini, Cosimo Bartoli, and Vasari's nephew, also called Giorgio Vasari (Vasari-Milanesi; Draper 1973, 106–110; Tinagli 2001; Veen 2014; Passignat 2007, 2009, 2014).

The *istoria* in the *Birth of Venus* unveils the meaning of the cosmic event in the following manner. In the center of the wall is the mythological legend of the birth of Venus, created by Saturn castrating Uranus. In the ceiling, just above the birth, the Moon Goddess Diana in her chariot inaugurates the event with her celestial passage. She also controls the fluctuation and movement of the water tides in the sea through the phases of the moon (Green 2012, 116–118). Other celebratory virtues such as *Mercurial Justice* and *Fame* frame the celestial event. The lateral oval cartouches framing the central *istoria* of *The Birth of Venus* depict in an *all'antica* stories mode about the love between Venus and Adonis and the Worshiping of Venus. These are Venus's undertakings after her birth. Below the central wall, in the *dado* [basement block] of the wall's lower section and inside the rectangular format, there are also *all'antica* designs depicting marine battles between centaurs and sea creatures. Below the central scene of the painting, a dedicatory Latin inscription, *Cosimo Medi, Flor. Dux*, on the lintel of the fireplace acknowledges the Medicean patronage.

In Vasari's painting, the celebrated functions and richness of the River Arno, the Ligurian Sea and Tyrrhenian Sea for the Florentine population regarding transportation and water supply are mythologized through a classical *istoria* about the aquatic events surrounding the birth of Venus. The imagery in the *Birth of Venus* or *The Element of Water* (vid. fig. 1) reveals a multifaceted symbolism of water focusing only on the sea and not a river, since the theme is related to classical mythology. The water allusions are associated with two types of aquatic richness: the marine divinities; and their offerings as fruits of the sea (*frutti di mare*). The divine reign of the sea is composed of sea gods and sea goddesses, nereids, sea nymphs, seahorses, sea monsters, and tritons, who provide as gifts corals, pearls, conchs, shells as well as dolphins, lobsters, snails, and other types of fish in celebration of a beautiful new *frutto di mare*: Venus, the newborn sea goddess (Draper 1973, 106–110).

In the composition depicting the *Birth of Venus* or the personification of Water, Vasari further conflated two mythological sagas associated with water: one is the birth of Venus; the other is the governance of the sea by Neptune, God of the Sea and also of Freshwater, and by Thetis, Goddess of the Sea. In the painting, Neptune, son of Saturn, partakes of a sea ceremony in honor of Venus's birth. The sea festivity is to celebrate Saturn's action, which resulted in the creation of a beautiful *frutto di mare*: Venus. Vasari

depicted a sea ceremony where all the sea creatures rejoice at Venus's impromptu arrival. They express their joy with multiple sea offerings of *frutti di mare*.

The mythological *istoria* unfolds in a panoramic view. On a luminous summer morning, the beautiful sea goddess Venus arises from the waves on a scallop shell. Inhabitants of the sea welcome her with natural delicacies and precious gifts from the sea (*frutti di mare*). Guarded by flying cupids with bows and arrows, Venus navigates toward her sacred island of Cyprus. At the seashore, Three Graces eagerly await her arrival. Accompanying the sea entourage for the reception of the new advent are Neptune, Oceanus, and Thetis. The enthusiasm for this extraordinary event is not only shown at the seashore by the sea creatures but also on land by the cupids. A cluster of robust trees shows cupids climbing up through the myrtle branches to see the event. They are also making crowns of myrtle with tree branches and flowers and throwing them toward the sea as a welcoming gesture toward the new deity. In *I Ragionamenti*, Vasari elaborated on the description of the scene.

> Prince: The more one looks, the more there is to see. I really like those cupids shooting arrows at the gods! I like even better the myrtle trees filled with putti who compete in gathering flowers and making garlands, and then toss them to the nymphs or to the sea. (Vasari-Milanesi 109)[2]

In the *Birth of Venus*, Vasari depicted an early morning sunrise during the springtime at sea, where an unusual event is occurring. The deities and sea creatures surface from the depths of the sea to experience at the shore the triumphal entrance of Venus (Aphrodite), a sea goddess born from heavenly white foam. The over-tonality of the fresco painting is composed with variations of blue colors and tints referring to the natural colorations of the Ligurian Sea and the Tyrrhenian Sea. The overall luminosity with gradations of atmospheric light effects suggests the time of daybreak. In the distance, emerging from the sky in a reddish golden light, appears Aurora (Goddess of Dawn) riding her chariot pulled by two horses, inaugurating the new day with the special event. Also on the horizon, the ship of Argus can be seen sailing in calm blue waters, while Amor hurriedly rides the chariot pulled by white doves to traverse toward Venus in order to transport her to Cyprus. On the left of the painting, in the middle ground, several aquatic female deities are depicted: Galatea riding on a seahorse, next to her are Pistro (Pherosa, a nereid) and Leucothea (Goddess Mater Matuta or White Goddess of the Ionian Sea) embracing with joy at the event. Behind them, two nereids swim swiftly to observe the event closely. In the extreme left corner of the painting, the majestic Thetis, Queen of the Sea, enters the scene with great flair, on a scallop shell pulled by seahorses.

In the background of the right side of the painting, the island of Cyprus is in view. At the shore, the Three Graces, crowned with myrtle, Venus's sacred plant, are carrying

2 Author's translation.

her attributes: a mirror, to reflect Venus's beauty and light; a purple mantle, acknowledging her role as a deity; and a cithara, a musical instrument for love songs. In the far distance, uphill, the temple of Paphos reminds the viewer of Venus's sanctuary.

In the foreground, Venus, a beautiful nude figure in *contrapposto* stance, rides on a large scallop shell while holding a win-blown veil. She is surrounded by male sea-gods: Glaucus, Proteus, Palaemon, and Triton, who carry precious gifts from the sea. Near them, two more nereids approach Venus with sea gifts of snails, corals, and pearls. Behind them at the shore, on a cluster of trees, playful cupids are composing crowns of laurel and flowers: a few are scattering the flowers, preparing the path for Venus; while others in joyous excitement are flying around Venus, throwing darts of love. On the extreme left side of the painting, the sea god Neptune makes his dramatic entrance riding two valiant seahorses and carrying his attribute, the trident, made of silver and gold. His purple mantel honors his royal status. In the center of the foreground, Oceanus, Terror of Sea, sea deity and ruler of all types of water elements, surfaces and majestically signals to all present the arrival of Venus. Not by accident, Vasari paralleled Oceanus's rule and power at sea with Cosimo's political power in Florence, as depicted by the placement of Oceanus with his arm extended horizontally, parallel to the picture plane and to the mantle of the fireplace, where the abbreviated name of Cosimo Duke of Florence is inscribed in large letters: *Cosimo Medi, Flor. Dux*.

Vasari captured the power of water through the depiction of an immense scenic view of the sea, the rainbow coloration, and light effects while populating the surface of the sea with mythological personages. They are associated with the formation of the sea, its natural components, and its fruitfulness. At a physical level, Vasari has invented a theatrical stage using the sea as a *platea*, an open, common area where, through water, people interact. They are transported and receive benefits from residing in the sea. At the metaphysical level, the sea becomes a metaphor for conviviality and peaceful gathering of an important event – in this instance the birth of a deity, but abstractly the birth of a new state, Tuscany. Vasari here alluded to the new Medicean regime of peace and future prosperity under the hegemony of Cosimo I.

Vasari's *invenzione* in this *camera intellecta* on the symbolism of water through Venus's birth conflates with several astral notions associated with alchemy (Maresca 2017, 37–61; 2012, 67–83) as well as planetary, mythological, and emblematic references to the patron, Cosimo I, as Saturn (Earth God and Capricorn as earth zodiac sign), Neptune (Water God), and *patria pater* of Florence. The symbolism reveals several levels of conceits associated not only with the political role of Cosimo I de' Medici as Duke of Florence, then of Siena, and ultimately of Tuscany but also with the signification of his name: Cosimo as cosmos (Muccini 1997, 57; Rosen 2004; Cassirer 1961; Veen 2006). Thus these conceits are metaphors for the duke's persona as a cosmic ruler (Rousseau 1983, 124; Cox-Rearick 1984).

The many levels of symbolism are connected with literary writings as well as *all'antica* imagery. Both manifestations reveal Vasari's manner of – as well as sixteenth-century

Italians' taste for – combining mythology with artistic and emblematic conceits in the pursuit of glorifying political power as well as aggrandizing artistic invention and virtuosity. The sixteenth-century emblematic sources also drew from and integrated in their literary constructions and poetical allusions mythological accounts that were available in printed books such as Boccaccio's *Geneologia de gli Dei* composed in 1360 (Florence: Anton Francesco Doni, 1547; Solomon 2011), Natali Conti's *Mythologiae* (Venice: Aldine Press, 1551; Mulryan 2006), Lilio Gregorio Giraldi's *De deis gentium* (Basel: J. Oporin, 1548/1567), and Vincenzo Cartari's *Imagini delli Dei degl' Antichi* (Venice: Francesco Marcolini, 1556). These manuals were compilations of medieval mythographies, hieroglyphs, and numismatic sources[3]. They also served as commonplace books for sixteenth-century humanists and artists – a kind of figurative encyclopedia or dictionary-album for easy consultation when time was lacking for reading the primary texts in their entirety or when familiarity with them was lacking. These manuals became so well known to sixteenth-century artists and literati that humanists copied information directly from them without feeling the need to credit their sources (Seznec 1961/1963, 296).

Throughout the Italian sixteenth-century, secular paintings were often guided by the instructions of humanists who assembled, assimilated, and adapted subjects from classical mythology into complex and allusive schemes as indicated. For example, Cosimo Bartoli, a literato and advisor to Cosimo I, dedicated his book on *I Ragionamenti accademici* to the duke (Bartoli 1567). Alobrando Cerratini received a commission from the duke to translate into the Tuscan language Vergil's *Aeneid*, where in Book IV Anchises prophesized the reigns under the sign of Saturn in Latium and Tuscany (Etruscan land) under a Cosmo (Veen 2006, 31). Moreover, Vincenzo Borghini, a Benedictine monk, art collector, philologist and also a close friend of Vasari, assisted him in the thematic formation of the *Sala degli Elementi* (Scroza 2003; Williams 2014). Borghini encouraged Vasari's emblematic, symbolic, and mythical visualization of Cosimo I's political power through numerous aspects of natural elements and phenomena. Namely, as cosmos, the duke was eulogized and deified as Apollo, the Sun God, who ruled the universe. As Saturn, the God of Agriculture who ruled the natural growth on Earth (Tuscany) and whose earth zodiac sign was Capricorn – the sea goat – Cosimo I acquired this as his birth sign to emulate the Roman Emperor Augustus (Crum 1989). As Vulcan, the God of Forges who ruled the combustive formations on Earth, Cosimo I's foundries in the Palazzo Vecchio were evoked. And as Neptune, the God of the Sea who ruled over freshwater and the sea navigation and naval battles, Cosimo I's naval victories were associated with Neptune's benevolent forces (Veen 2006, 31).

3 See Seznec 1961/1963 for a study of the manuals available in the sixteenth century in Italy and for a specific account of the sources that Vincenzo Cartari drew upon in his book, particularly from Pausanias, Apuleius, Macrobius, and Martianus Capella. Seznec also pointed out how Giorgio Vasari read and used Cartari.

In his writing, *I Ragionamenti*, Vasari identified all the creatures of the sea, explaining their aquatic role and significance in the painting (Draper 1973, 106–11; Gianni 2011, 26–28)[4]. His description about the symbolism of water in the *Sala degli Elementi* assists in identifying the sea imagery in the wall fresco painting. Vasari began the dialogue with recalling the death of his artistic friend and collaborator Cristofano Gherardi, known as Il Doceno, and the conversation concludes with a thanksgiving for an enjoyable day. The text begins with Vasari lamenting his artistic mate:

> Giorgio (Giorgio Vasari): These were painted by our Doceno dal Borgo. He excelled in this profession through his deed. He deserves to be thought of as a living [artist] by the world, since whoever knew him realized that death stole him from this work too soon.
> Prince (Duke of Florence): May God forgive [bless] him. His death is surely a loss. Now let's view this wall where Venus stands with a multitude of figures. I don't think that I have ever seen a more charming or better composed story. What is it about? (Draper 1973, 107)

> Prince: Thanks to you, this is turning out to be a very pleasant day for me, because by hearing about and seeing these things, which are so lifelike and real, I can almost feel them in my hand. So much time would be needed to consider every detail but now proceed (if it is not tedious for you). (Draper 1973, 107–08)

In *I Ragionamenti*, Vasari as a painter responds to the questions posed by his patron, the Medici prince. In one passage referring to the *Element of Water*, for example, the dialogue commences in this manner:

> Prince: What is this painting about?
> Giorgio: I shall explain, Your Excellency. After the genitals of Father Heaven (Uranus) fell into the sea, Venus was born. She stands on a seashell and holds in both hands a veil that, blown by the wind, forms a circle over her head. About her is the Sea in all its pomp, with all the sea gods and goddesses who present her. (Draper 1973, 107)

In the depiction of Venus, Vasari continued to appropriate from the visual classical and Renaissance traditions in representing the nude female body as well as the scallop shell; namely, from antique marble sculptures or copies, e.g., Praxiteles' *Aphrodite* (IV BCE, Vatican Museum, Rome), the *Medici Venus* (I BCE, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), the *Capitoline Venus* (II BCE, Capitoline Museum, Rome), and from Renaissance paintings, e.g., Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1485) at the Galleria degli Uffizi (Burroughs 2018), as well as Titian's *Venus Anadyomene* (1520) at the Scottish National Gallery (Edinburgh).

Vasari was particularly inspired by the visual tradition of sixteenth-century emblematic and mythographic illustrated books; namely, Vincenzo Cartari's *Imagini degli Dei Antichi* (1987, 272–273). In the *Birth of Venus*, Vasari's image of the nude figure of Venus in classical *contrapposto* stance, riding on a scallop shell and holding a windblown veil,

4 In reference to the content of Vasari's *I Ragionamenti*, I am citing the translation of Draper 1973, while consulting with Vasari's text and other scholars' studies on the subject, in particular Giani 2011.

3 Vincenzo Cartari, *Galatea*, *Imagini…* (Venice: Tomassini Press, 1647, facsimile edition Genoa: Nuova Stile Regina, 1987), 131.
Url: https://www.flickr.com/photos/126377022@N07/14746657085
Source: Flickr.

4 Agnolo Bronzino, *Cosimo I de' Medici in Armour*, 1545. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
Url: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Agnolo_Bronzino_-_Cosimo_I_de%27_Medici_in_armour_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg
Public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

derives from Cartari's depiction of Galatea **(fig. 3)**, the Goddess of the White Sea Foam (compare figs. 1 and 3)[5].

In *I Ragionamenti*, Vasari's dialogue is designed to explaining the iconography of the imagery. Hence, ingenuously, the Prince asks questions and the cultivated artist responds by giving an erudite explanation about the scene. For example, the Prince asks: "Who is the [old] man with the trident driving two sea horses?" and Vasari replies: "That is Neptune, God of the Sea, who is lost in wonder and motionless at seeing so beautiful a goddess rise from the waves" (Draper 1973, 107).

In the painting, Vasari placed Neptune entering the scene from the right side of the picture (vid. fig. 1). The sea god is depicted with a classical nude body reminiscent of Michelangelo's nude figures, e.g., the marble relief of the *Battle of the Centaurs* (1492 in Casa Buonarroti in Florence) and with the facial features of Cosimo I as seen in Bronzino's *Portrait of Duke Cosimo I* at the Uffizi **(fig. 4)**. Neptune energetically rides

5 Cartari 1987, 131, explained that Galatea's name means "pure white" (*bianchezza*), similar to the white color of sea foam, and also noted that Hesiod referred to Galatea as having a "face of milky-white and white tresses".

to the seahorses greeting the entrance of Venus. Around him are aquatic creatures announcing the appearance of Venus by blowing their conch and providing treasures from the sea such as dolphins, snails, pearls, and corals.

From his classical education and his collaboration with the Florentine classicists and humanists Bartoli and Borghini, Vasari was familiar with classical mythology. In Roman mythology, Neptune was the son of Saturn, God of the Cosmos and Time, and of Ops, Mother Earth. In Latin, Neptune's name means "moist substance," associating him with water as well as "nuptus" or "nuptiae," meaning a "marriage of Heaven and Earth"[6]. Not by accident, Vasari depicted Neptune next to a type of myrtle tree, an attribute of "conjugal fidelity" (Hall 1974, 219) and "sacred to Neptune as the power of the waters" (Cooper 1978, 110)[7]. In classical and Renaissance art, Neptune is usually depicted as a mature bearded man, holding a trident while riding a chariot pulled by seahorses and surrounded by creatures of the sea, similar to Vasari's portrayal in the fresco of *Birth of Venus* and in a beautiful drawing by him of *Jupiter and Neptune* (1557, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig, Germany) (Härb 2015, 61, 384) **(fig. 5)**. In his *Imagini*, Cartari noted that Neptune's trident is symbolic of the types of water in the cosmos: "salty like the sea; fresh or sweet water like the rivers; and bitter like those in the deep lakes" (Cartari 1987, 129). Vasari appropriated Cartari's descriptive attributes about Neptune's trident. He depicted an elaborate trident within a shimmery silver pitch-fork associated with water's reflections as well as evoking the traditional reference to the roots of things. Hence the three prongs of the fork also imply the essence of nature; namely, birth, life, death, mind, body, spirit, and past, present, future (Biedermann 1994, 354).

In *I Ragionamenti* the fictitious dialogue continues, commenting on other aquatic personages. For example, the Prince inquires "[Who is] The nude female standing opposite Neptune?" Vasari responds that it is Thetis (Draper 1973, 107). In the left side of the painting, balancing the entrance of Neptune at the opposite end, Thetis enters on a scallop shell and riding two seahorses. Her name means "sea-fed" or "sea-born," as Venus's birth (Ovid, *Meta.* II. 404; Homer, *Il.* xx. 207). Her beautiful nude figure is partially covered by a windblown golden veil held together by a strap decorated with pearls that match the pearls in her hairdo (vid. fig. 1). According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Homer's *Iliad*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Thetis was not only the supreme sea goddess but also the leader of the Nereids. In addition, Thetis's role as the Mother Sea Goddess secured her a special place in the sea in honoring and receiving Venus at her birth; hence her prominent

6 See Marcus Terrentius Varro, *De lingua latina*, V.72: "Neptunus, quod mare terras obnubuit ut nubes caelum, ab nuptu, id est opertione, ut antiqui, a quo nuptiae, nuptus dictus" [Neptune, because the sea veils the lands as the clouds veil the sky, gets his name from *nuptus* 'veiling,' that is, *opertio* 'covering,' as the ancients said; from which *nuptiae* 'wedding,' *nuptus* 'wedlock' are derived." English translation is from Kent 1938, 69.

7 Myrtle was also Venus's sacred plant because of the aroma and the purple flowers. In describing the painting, Vasari refers to many passages in which the color purple is used, e.g., the flowers in the myrtle tree and the veil worn by one of the Tree Graces. Unfortunately, today we are unable to see these colors.

5 Giorgio Vasari, *Jupiter and Neptune*, 1557. Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig (No. 234 verso).
Photo credit: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, Germany.

6 Vincenzo Cartari, *Neptune and Amphitrite*, *Imagini…* (Venice: Tomassini Press, 1647, facsimile edition Genoa: Nuova Stile Regina, 1987), 135.
Url: https://www.flickr.com/photos/internetarchivebookimages/14723660406/.
Source: Flickr.

appearance on the opposite side of Neptune. Although he appropriated Thetis's imagery from Cartari's *Imagini* **(fig. 6)** (compare figs. 1 and 6), Vasari also depicted visual similarities between Venus and Thetis, e.g., the treatment of their beautiful nude bodies, their classical *contrapposto* stances, elaborate coiffures of blond stresses ornamented with gems or flowers, windblown veils as sailing props, and both riding on a large scallop shell for their aquatic and dramatic appearance at the scene. But Vasari also indicated differences in their appearance, as in the treatment of their hairdos. Thetis is crowned with pearls as the Queen of the Sea, while Venus is decorated with Spring flowers as the Goddess of Spring. Another difference is the goddesses' handling their veils – a royal veil versus a sail veil – differentiating their actions and roles. Venus, riding on a scallop shell, billows the veil to form a sailing veil to gain assistance from the wind to quickly surface across the waves. Thetis, in contrast, uses the veil to show her royal status: the veil partially covers her head and envelops her nude body as an ancient Roman goddess

– similar to the veiled Roman Goddess of Peace in the relief of the Ara Pacis Augustae (I BCE) in Rome. Thus Thetis's appearance and presence at sea is as Queen of the Sea, while Venus's arrival at sea through a divine birth (from Uranus's testicles) makes her a precious gift of the sea and a product of the sky and the sea.

In the painting, Vasari staged the birth of Venus by framing on either side of the picture frame Thetis and Neptune arriving separately at the amazing event while riding their seahorses. But conforming to the classical literary tradition, Vasari placed Thetis close to Oceanus her husband (vid. fig. 1). Although familiar with classical and visual mythological traditions, Vasari interpreted and transformed some of the events in order to fit his own *istoria* in the *Birth of Venus*, hence taking artistic license to emphasize his artistic creativity and the merits of his finished work. For example, in classical mythology, there are discrepancies about the actual wife of Neptune. According to Greek mythology it is Amphitrite (Pseudo-Apollodorus, 1:2.7, in Hard 1997; Frazer 1921) but according to Roman legend, it is Salacia (Varro, *De lingua latina*, V.72: "Salacia Neptuni ab salo" [Salacia, wife of Neptune], in Kent 1938, 69). In the imagery of mosaics, emblems, sarcophagi, mosaic, and Cinquecento art, Neptune is usually accompanied by Amphitrite; see, for example, Benvenuto Cellini's saltshaker of 1560 for Francis I, king of France, portraying the gods of the sea, Neptune and Amphitrite (Cartari 1987, 135) (vid. fig. 6). Vasari's cognizance of Cartari was established in Seznec's writings (1961, 300–323). Amphitrite, who gifted salt to humans, is a metaphor for the sea (Ovid, *Meta*. I.14)[8]. She is driving seahorses, navigating through and parading around in the deep sea with fabulous creatures such as tritons and nereids. But Vasari invented his own conceit in pairing Neptune with Thetis (Goddess of Sea-Water and Oceanus's wife) rather than with his wife, Amphitrite. Still visually, Vasari appropriated Cartari's imagery of Amphitrite for the depiction of Thetis, showing her riding on a scallop shell pulled by seahorses like her counterpart Neptune (compare figs. 1 and 6).

In the iconography of the *Birth of Venus*, Vasari demonstrated his classical erudition from his schooling as well as his familiarity with the humanistic tradition of consulting emblematic and mythographic sources; namely, his encounter with Andrea Alciato in Bologna, in 1538. When Vasari was decorating the refectory of San Michele in Bosco, Alciato, while teaching jurisprudence at the University of Bologna, wrote a Latin poem honoring Vasari's artistic accomplishments. The poem was inscribed on a plaque at the refectory's entrance (Cheney 2011, 142). Thus the writings and images of Alciato and Cartari were compelling sources for Vasari.

To visualize Venus's impromptu appearance and a good omen for the aquatic world, for example, Vasari borrowed Alciato's Emblem 133 from his *Diverse Imprese*

8 See Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3:13.5; and Cartari 1987, 135, representing Neptune and Amphitrite together riding on a scallop shell pulled by sea horses. Elsewhere (1987, 138) Cartari referred to Thetis as an old and sage woman married to Oceanus and Goddess of all Sea-Gods of Rivers, Bodies of Waters, and Nymphs usually riding on a chariot pulled by whales.

7 Andrea Alciato, *Opportunity or Good Fortu*ne, Emblem 133. *Diverse Imprese* (Lyons: Macé Bonhomme for Guillaume Rouille, 1551), 119. Photo credit: Permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.

(Alciato 1551, 119). The emblem's motto is about Good Fortune or Opportunity (*Nella Occasione*) **(fig. 7)**. Alciato's image (*pictura*) shows a wide-open sea where a nude woman in *contrapposto* stance, carrying a windblown veil, navigates through the waves while standing on a wheel. In the depiction of Venus, Vasari has appropriated Alciato's image but substituted the wheel with a scallop shell (compare Figs. 1 and 7)**.** But most of all, Vasari assimilated from Alciato the emblematic conceit of a positive omen and of seizing good opportunities. For Vasari, the conceit of the birth of Venus and her navigation through water becomes associated with the birth of a new state in Florence under the guidance of Cosimo I. Using the land and sea platform for the vicissitudes of battles among the Florentines, Pisans, and Sienese, Vasari transformed them into an imaginary benevolent *platea* with bodies of water that connects with Tuscan terrain (Ligurian Sea and Tyrrhenian Sea). Historically, Cosimo I's political astuteness, determination, and persistence transformed a battleground into a peaceful and a prosperous estate for the Florentines (Masters 1998; Pitkin 1984). Vasari continued to visually dramatize this type of Medicean glorification in another *sala* of the Palazzo Vecchio, the *Salone dei Cinquecento* (1563–1570). Cosimo I's successful military strategies were depicted, showing the Florentines defending and protecting Florence and the Florentines from the neighboring city enemies of Pisa and Siena (Allegri and Cecchi 235–55).

In *I Ragionamenti*, Vasari also provided explanations of other sea figures in the painting, always seeking inspiration for the imagery in emblematic sources, especially Alciato.

> Giorgio: The ones with their heads covered with weeds playing the maritime instruments are the Tritons. Proteus, shepherd of the sea, who is part horse and part fish, presents her [Venus] with a shell full of pearls and coral. It is Glaucus you see offering her a dolphin. And likewise, the blue-eyed sea god Palaemon brings coral and a lobster to her. (Draper 1973, 108)

Alciato was fascinated with the triton Proteus, creating a unique emblem (Emblem 183) with a Latin motto, *Antiquissima quaeque commentitia* [Whatever is most ancient is a fabrication or The oldest things are all invented]. The epigram of the emblem explains that the triton Proteus is a prophetic old man (*halios gerón*). He was the first man of the sea, who avoided capture by camouflaging himself in various roles. Proteus sometimes appears on earth like a shepherd or as a man riding in a chariot drawn by Hippocampi. Other times he appears as a sea monster composed of a fish-tailed horse or a marine centaur. Like Thetis, Proteus transforms himself into many forms: "having the body of a man, or of a beast" (Daily 1985, vol. 1, Emblem 183). Alciato is making reference to the personification of power and magic as well as to inventive tactics needed to protect and defend oneself **(fig. 8).** Proteus's constant morphosis is also associated with Venus, who was born from the foam of the sea and transformed into a beautiful woman (Alciato 1550)[9].

8 Andrea Alciato, *Proteus*, Emblem 183.
Diverse Imprese (Lyons: Macé Bonhomme for Guillaume Rouille, 1551)
Photo credit: Permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.

9 Proteus's name in Greek, *protistos*, means "the very first." The epigram indicates this allusion, as Alciato noted (*Emblemata*, Emblem 183): "I (Proteus) offer symbols of antiquity and the very first times, concerning whichever everyone dreams up."

This magical power of change recalls Thetis's transformative abilities (Hesiod, *Theogony,* 240, 44, in Evelyn-White 1904). Thetis as Queen of the Sea, she was able to magically transform, giving refuge and saving her friends in the sea – e.g., Dionysus (Bacchus), Hephaestus (Vulcan), and her son Achilles – from Jupiter's fury and his allies. Vasari introduces a subtle invention and analogy among Proteus, Thetis, and Cosimo I by emphasizing Cosimo's transformation from a ruler of an area, Florence, to a duke of a region Tuscany, as well as a change from city-town of Florence into a Tuscan duchy.

Vasari's image showed Proteus navigating with Glaucus in order to welcome the arrival of Venus while offering gifts of pearls, corals, and a lobster. In the painting, Vasari portrayed Glaucus next to Proteus. Glaucus offers a dolphin to Venus. Vasari or Borghini confused the mythological story of Glaucus with Palaemon. In classical literature it is Palaemon who is associated with a dolphin. But Vasari depicted an old triton carrying a dolphin as a gift to Venus's birth and identified him as Glaucus (Draper 1973, 108). According to the classical tradition (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 240, 5–8, in Evelyn-White 1904; Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2.17, in Grant 1960), in order to conquer Amphitrite's love, Neptune sent a dolphin, her favorite sea creature, to entertain her. Victorious in this chore, the dolphin is rewarded by Neptune through the Olympian gods, who grant his request to be transformed into the constellation of Delphinus. In the painting, however, Vasari has substituted Amphitrite for Thetis, and Neptune's gift of a dolphin for Amphitrite is now given to Venus.

In classical and emblematic myths, Glaucus was a mortal fisherman who changed into a triton with a serpentine fishtail and a pair of equine forelegs after eating a magical herb (Cartari 1987, 130). In the *Imagini*, Cartari represented Glaucus **(fig. 9)** holding a

9 Vincenzo Cartari, *Glaucus. Imagini…* (Venice: Tomassini Press, 1647, facsimile edition Genoa: Nuova Stile Regina, 1987), 130.
Url: https://www.flickr.com/photos/internetarchivebookimages/14746366052/.
Source: Flickr.

laurel-like branch, and although familiar with Cartari's representation, Vasari selected to portray Glaucus holding in his right hand a large seashell filled with precious presents from the sea. And with his left hand Glaucus holds a long green plant, referring to his aquatic metamorphosis (compare Figs. 1 and 9)**:** "He [Glaucus] that ate the ever-living, imperishable grass" (Aeschylus, *Frag.* 13 on the lost play of *Glaucus Pontios* recounting the transformations of Glaucus [Sommerstein 2009]). On the other side of Venus, the triton Palaemon offers her a dolphin. Next to him another triton blows a conch-shell horn announcing the arrival of Neptune at the birth event. Like Glaucus, the triton is a marine divinity connected with the story of the Argonauts, which is seen in the background of the painting (Draper 1973, 108).

Humorously Vasari depicted next to this triton blowing a conch two beautiful sea nymphs carrying precious gifts from the sea, one of which holds a snail. Hearing the thunderous noise made by this triton, the snail has promptly emerged from the conch and stands erect with pointed tentacles, overwhelmed by the sound. But on a serious note, Vasari alluded to the importance of fame and recognition in his rendering of this triton, as is visualized in Alciato's Emblem 144, with the motto "Ex literarum studiis immortaliatem acquiri" [Immortality won through literary pursuits]. Here Alciato praised the triton's energetic efforts to blow the conch to announce the arrival of Neptune, while in Vasari's imagery it refers to the arrival of Venus. Alciato's *pictura* [image] shows a triton beardless, nude to the waist, floating at sea while blowing a conch **(fig. 10).** He is encircled by a snake biting its own tail (*oroboros*). In the epigram, Alciato explained

10 Andrea Alciato, *Triton*, Emblem 144.
Diverse Imprese (Lyons: Macé Bonhomme for Guillaume Rouille, 1551), 130
Photo credit: Permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.

the triton's blowing action as an allusion to announcing fame: "The fame of men of outstanding intellect and their noble achievements. The encircled snake because of the circular shape alludes to the cosmos as well as to eternity (Knott and Manning 1996, 144, Emblem 144). Vasari continued to appropriate Alciato's conceits paralleling the arrival of Neptune at the cosmic event of the birth of Venus with Cosimo I's successful actions in achieving glory and fame, thus creating a benevolent governmental transformation throughout Florence (Allegri and Cecchi 1980).

In the fictive dialogue of *I Ragionamenti,* Vasari identified more aquatic figures in the scene, e.g., the beautiful Galatea as a sea nymph (Cartari 1987, 131).

> Prince asks: Who is the goddess with her back?
> Giorgio responds: "She is Galatea. Near her is Pistro [Pherosa, a nereid], a very beautiful maiden, although a monster from the waist down. Leuchotea is embraced by Pistro [Pherosa]. These Amphitrides offer shells, snail shells and mother of pearl to Venus. Further back are the Nereids, who are swimming to watch all the sea gods and goddesses. The other woman who rises up on the sea in the rose chariot drawn by two horses is Dawn [Aurora]. (Draper 1973, 107–108, Cartari 1987, 131)

> Prince: What ship is going by in the distance?
> Giorgio: It is the ship Argus. On the shore the three Graces are waiting for Venus. They all wear crowns of vermilion, pink and white roses, and one has plectrum, one a purple garment, and the third a mirror. On the water in the distance is the chariot of Venus, made ready by Amor and pulled by four white doves, which is coming to take Venus away. (Draper 1973, 109)

> Prince: Now tell me what temple is that in the distance and who are those virgins and other people standing waiting and watching on the shore?
> Giorgio: These are the people of Cyprus waiting for the Goddess. The temple is the very rich and beautiful one at Paphos. (Draper 1973, 109)

> Prince: The only one left for you to explain is that large, rather disheveled figure, stretching out his arm in the front of the story. His head, which is all he raises above the waves, is soaked with sea weeds and moss and no doubt has the odor of herbs. (Draper 1973, 109)

> Giorgio: My lord, he is the Terror of the Sea. (Draper 1973, 110)

The most dramatic and last image to be identified is Oceanus, the Terror of the Sea. "Hearing Triton's noise," Vasari explained: "He [Oceanus] hurried over to see what was happening in the sea, and lifting his arm in sign of quiet, he commands the proud gods of the sea to be still while this goddess is born" (Draper 1973, 110).

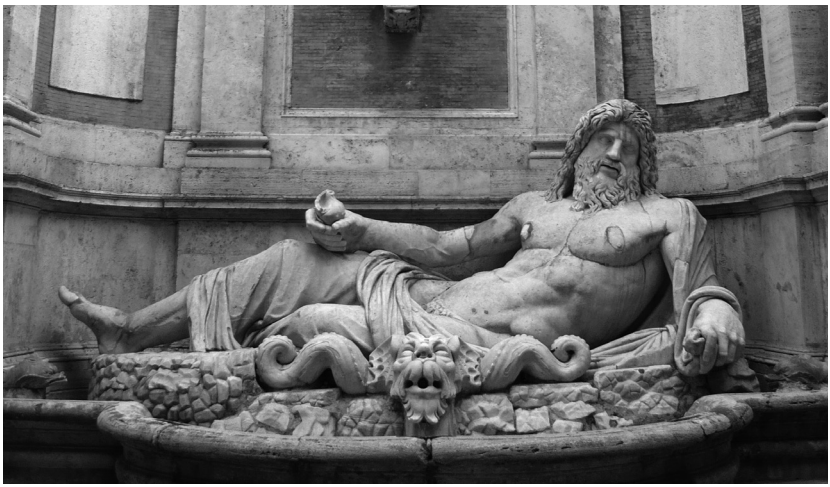
Vasari continued to be inspired by the ancient texts as well as by classical imagery. For Homer (*Il.* 18.14–200), for example, Oceanus is the eldest of the Titans, son of Uranus and Gaia. He married Thetis and fathers all the river gods and the sea nymphs, the Oceanids. In the visual arts, ancient Antioch's mosaics and Roman sculptures honored Oceanus as the River God. For example, the colossal marble statue known as *Marforio* or

Oceanus, of the second century at the Capitoline Museum in Rome (**fig. 11**), represents the River God reclining in a pool of water surrounded by aquatic elements; and the large tondo of a Roman marble relief nicknamed *Bocca della Verità* represents Oceanus. Rita Benini and Massimo Portolani (2017) composed a drawing reconstruction of the *Bocca della Verità* clarifying the worn-out scene on the old marble and indicating that Oceanus's horns are crab claws. His mustache is made of a fish, while two dolphins decorate the lower part of his beard.

Oceanus was a personification of water, and he was said to have unified all the rivers on earth as a symbol of goodness and peace. Vasari paralleled Oceanus's unifying actions with Cosmo I's unification of the territories in Tuscany (Pisa, Siena, and Florence) through battles in order to achieve peace. Another comparison is the metaphorical reference to the ancient Trojan War and the Florentine war with the Sienese (1556–1559).

Vasari further elucidated on the symbolism of water about this Medicean patron by stating:

> This whole interweaving of the elements of Water, it must be realized, pertains to the duke [Cosimo I], who came in anticipation from heaven to the troubled waters of this sea of government and made them tranquil and quiet. He accomplished this difficult task by stilling the spirits of the populace, made so agitated by the winds of passion in their hearts, which were oppressed by their own selfish interests. (Draper 1973, 110)



11 *Oceanus* (*Marphurius*), 2nd century CE. Capitoline Museum, Palazzo Nuovo, Rome.
Url: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Musei_Capitolini_Ocean.JPG.
Public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Conversant with Cosimo I's interests in botany, herbal medicine, gemology, and alchemy, Vasari made allusions to them in the *Birth of Venus* (Maresca 2017, 11–36; 2012, 87–103). Knowledgeable about the writings of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (before 79 CE) on gems and precious stones (Lefons 2000, 49 and section 62), Vasari incorporated the rich display of aquatic minerals in his interpretation of the gifts or fruits of the sea from the marine gods to Venus on her birthday. Moreover, he associated the symbolism of the *frutti di mare* – the gems of the sea, such as corals and pearls – in the imagery of Venus's birth with medical powers connected with "the fortification of the living spirits" (Biedermann 1994, 76). For example, the pearl is not only associated with the sea as its product (Lefons 2000, 49) but also is connected with the sky because of its luster, luminosity, and shape. Hence its symbolism is coupled with the moon, and not by accident is the Chariot of Diana depicted in the ceiling above the painting of *The Birth of Venus*. Since Antiquity, the moon has been an attribute of the virgin goddess Diana (Ovid, *Meta*. XV.196). This astral and nocturnal attribute is also connected to Venus, whose divine birth makes her the Star of the Sea or *stella maris* (Goodman 2000, 309)[10]. Like the pearl, the coral is also considered a precious gem because it is allied with the deity born from the sea: Venus, the Goddess of Love (Filipczak 1997, 117). The coral as *materia prima* forms from the ingredients of the sea, including the foam (thus its colors of white or red), just as Venus herself was born from the sea foam (Cheney 1998, 2–5). Coral, called the "tree of the sea" for its twiggy, vein-like shape, symbolizes the vividness of the marine world because of its red coloration like the outburst of aquatic movements created with the appearance of Venus from the sea (Ovid, *Meta*. IV.706). Vasari depicted several of the nereids with coral branches in their hairdos or holding branches of coral as a special gift for the beautiful goddess. Venus's hairdo is filled with white and red flowers, which are of the same colors of the pearls and corals offered to her by the marine gods.

The multilayer meanings of the symbolism of water as a mysterious sea element allude to its fluid physical nature as well as to its perpetual motion, an abstract signification for boundless and timeless revealed in ancient and Renaissance allegories and personifications. The symbolism of water is associated with the three aspects in the cosmos: a source of life, purification, and regeneration. In the imagery of the *Birth of Venu*s, Vasari incorporated these meanings and also considered the Florentine Marsilio Ficino's Neoplatonic theory about the transformation of forms from descending to ascending mutations, from chaotic disorder to rational order, from substance to metaphysical essence, and from inorganic matter to divine forms (Allen 2008, 66–70; Corrias 2012).

In the fresco wall painting *Birth of Venus*, the realms of water are depicted in an ascending movement, starting from the *dado* (the bottom layer of the wall): the chaotic

10 Goodman notes that the Virgin Mary is like Venus a *stella maris*: "Stella maris … Stella splendida et matutina est stella omnium fulgentissima, quae ab astrologis dicitur stella Veneris."

realm of the depth sea where the sea and monstrous battles occur. Ascending to the next level, the human realm is depicted, through the aquatic realm where rivers, seas, and ocean flow, which is revealed in the center of the wall. The vertical movement culminates in the ceiling into a divine realm. In the *dado*, Vasari visualized the formation of chaos or low marine forms with the depiction of aquatic sea battles among sea monsters, probably alluding to the rebellious nature of Cosimo I's enemies as well as to the prolonged battles between the Florentines and the Sienese. Moving upward to the center of the wall, the birth scene of Venus reveals several layers of transformations. The sea monsters and aquatic animals, for example, peacefully coexist; no marine battles are seen among them. On the contrary, these types of aquatic forms provide gifts from the sea such as precious gems, corals, and pearls as well as sea urchins, dolphins, and lobsters for the celebration of the historical event. Another level of positive mutation is the cooperation between the gods and the rulers of the sea – Neptune with Thetis and Oceanus – in welcoming the new goddess, Venus. With her arrival, the sea returns to a peaceful state; the creatures of the sea are now in a celebratory mood in calmer, placid, and blue waters that contrast with the dark and fetid waters created by the monsters in the battle scene at the *dado* level. The inventive transformation and ascension conclude with the perfect mutation: Saturn providing the divine foam (sperm) that joins the sky and the sea with the bliss of a perfect form, Venus. The transformation from organic matter to divine essence is now complete.

The philosophical analogy of the movement of water and its substance also can be applied to political transformation and the emergence of a moral state. Vasari *sotto voce* is commemorating Cosimo I's recent defeat of Siena after a prolonged and problematic war. With this victory Cosimo I conquered the territory of Siena, which later will grant him governance over Tuscany. Thus at one level (the political), the presence of Oceanus (a merger of the seas) and the presence of Neptune (ruler of the sea) at the birth of Venus symbolized metaphorically the new governance of Cosimo I through transformations: conquest, birth (new), and expansion in the formation of the Duchy of Tuscany. The *Birth of Venus* as an element of water personifies the political fluidity in which Cosimo I adroitly expanded the Florentine terra firma into a Tuscan territory in the same manner as Neptune conquered the governance of the sea from his father Saturn. The *frutti di mare* are the fruits of the new political achievements and honors bestowed on Cosimo I by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Thus Vasari visualized in metaphorical personifications the cosmic influences and proclivities of Cosimo I's political reign with physical elements and planetary interventions.

Saturn (also a God of the Sky, an element of Air) and Venus (an element of water) benefit the planet Earth (Cosimo's I residence on Florence). Vasari used their astral movement and flows to create a composition that allows the viewer to follow Cosimo I's destiny as a successful and benevolent ruler of Tuscany. Vasari cryptically expressed this thought by saying:

> My intention is not to appear to be trying to draw farfetched meanings about him in order to match the subject matter. For whoever understands, it is sufficient for me to point out only part of my invention since I am not trying to accommodate all the meanings appropriate to these stories … because never was there a lord [Medici] … who drove away more human beasts, full of vices, than this prince. And there are many other analogies that I omit in the interest of time. (Draper 1973, 110)

Thus water (the River Arno, Ligurian Sea, Tyrrhenian Sea) is a natural and physical force that inspires the Florentine artists (Ammannati and Vasari) to create mythological (*Fountain of Neptune* and *Birth of Venus*) and political (Cosimo I de' Medici) allusions with metaphysical significations of good fortune, peace, and prosperity. The benevolent Medicean government is compared with the gentle ripples of water in the river and at the sea, and the flourishing of the region is like the rich contents provided by water and found in the sea. Cosimo I de' Medici has plentifully provided for his beloved Florence and the citizens of Tuscany: a state of order, recognition, and tranquility – a conch of *frutti di mare*.

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