



*1 – G. Berti, Portrait of Alessandro Galilei, signed and dated 1735
(courtesy Irish Georgian Society; photograph: David Davison)*

A memorial tablet for Alessandro Galilei in S. Giovanni in Laterano, 1737

MICHAEL McCARTHY

THE MUSEUM OF THE BASILICA OF S. GIOVANNI IN LATERANO IN ROME IS HOUSED in two wide corridors at right angles to each other that frame the space of the apse. They form part of the rearrangement of the structure at that end, effected from 1884 to 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. At the turn of the corridors, set at a height of six feet in the left-hand wall, is the memorial tablet of white marble, 66cm by 160cm, framed in a bolection moulding of grey marble 11cm in width, erected by his family to honour Alessandro Galilei (Plate 3). The inscription in Latin may be translated as follows:

To Alexander Galileo of the Florentine nation
Outstanding mathematician and architect
Who spent seven years in Britain with the greatest distinction
Who by Cosimo III and John Gaston the most excellent Dukes of Tuscany
Was entrusted with the royal edifices of his native land
Who was called to Rome by the Supreme Pontiff Clement XII
Where he raised the façade of the church of the Florentine nation
And the chapel of the Corsini family in this Lateran basilica
And the majestic façade and portico of this same basilica
Which were scarcely completed when he was taken by death
Regretted deeply by his countrymen and foreigners alike
He died at Rome on December 22 1737 at the age of forty-six.

The circumstances of the placing of the memorial tablet are well documented thanks to the waspish commentary on contemporary Rome of the diarist Francesco Valesio, who noted the death of Galilei on 22 December 1737. The cause of death was



2 – H. Rossi after A. David, *Portrait of Cardinal Neri Corsini*, 1730 (courtesy Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana)

3 – Memorial tablet to *Alessandro Galilei in S. Giovanni in Laterano*, 1737. (photograph: fotogioberti, SRL, Rome)



reported to be a fit of apoplexy, and the architect was said to have left a legacy of over 40,000 *scudi*. On 25 January 1738 he recorded the petition of the Galilei family, who had the support of the archpriest of the Lateran basilica, Cardinal Neri Corsini (1685-1770), to erect the memorial tablet. The canons of the chapter agreed to give the space for the tablet free of charge, but specified that the marble and its inscription and the setting of the tablet should be entirely at the family's expense. Valesio remarked that Galilei had designed the façade of the basilica, 'which however is not much praised'.¹

The inscription was recorded fully by Forcella in 1876, and the tablet was then in its current location.² Its presence is noted in the current guidebook to the museum, and the circumstances of its erection are outlined in the most recent history of the basilica, which also provides, on page 255, a colour photograph of the *portico leoniano* before it was furnished as a museum for the basilica.³ It has not been photographed nor translated elsewhere, however, and is published here as an item of some interest to readers familiar with the quality of Galilei's architectural achievements from their acquaintance with Castletown House, home to the Irish Georgian Society. There the architect is honoured by the hanging of his portrait, by Giuseppe Berti (Plate 1), to the right of the chimney-piece of the entrance hall.⁴

The basilica does not, however, contain the tomb of Alessandro Galilei, which was in his parish church, S. Nicola in Arcione, demolished in road-widening by the Comune di Roma in 1906. Its presence there is noted in Lombardo Ferruccio's *Roma: le Chiese Scomparse*, which has illustrations of the church but no description of the tomb.⁵

Valesio's comment on the lack of appreciation of the majestic façade which Galilei provided for the Lateran basilica must be understood in the context of the opposition that Galilei and his fellow Florentines faced from supporters of Roman architects when Cardinal Neri Corsini effectively became the distributor of papal patronage, and the *arbiter elegantiarum* of Rome at the accession of his uncle Pope Clement XII in 1730 (Plate 2). Neri Corsini had been ambassador to London and Paris for the court of Tuscany, and it was he who had invited Galilei to return from Britain in 1719 to become court architect in Florence. His patronage continued after his move to Rome, and most of the important commissions went to the Florentines Galilei and Ferdinando Fuga. The theoretical differences behind this conflict have been treated by Elizabeth Kieven, who quotes an opposing judgement of the façade by an unnamed English visitor to Rome in 1733:

The present Pope's Architect Alex.o Galileo has with success imitated the noble simplicity to be met with in the works of the Ancients, which gives a lustre and grandeur to his performance above those of his contemporaries.⁶

How deeply the architectural division ran is, however, revealed by Pascoli, who treats the work of Galilei as a mere footnote to the life of Juvarra in his *Vite dei pittori, scultori ed architetti viventi*, and characterises him as ‘*un novello professore piccolo, e minuto di mente non meno che di statura, ne altrettanto grande di presunzione e d’ardire*’ (a little new professor, as small in intelligence as in his stature though full of presumption and ambition).⁷

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the major assistance given by his colleague Dr Joseph McDonnell in the research in Rome, and particularly in the commissioning of the photography there. He has also been reader and discussant of the paper, and has supplied the portrait of Cardinal Neri Corsini. Prof Andrew Smith of the Classics Department at UCD kindly corrected my translation of the inscription seen in Plate 3.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Francesco Valesio, *Diario di Roma (1729-1742)*, G.Scano (ed.), 2 vols (Rome 1979) II, 104, 111.
- ² Vincenzo Forcella, *Iscrizioni delle Chiese e d’altri edifici di Roma dal secolo XI fino ai giorni nostri*, VIII (Rome 1876) 83, no. 227. Dr McParland has kindly drawn my attention to note 1 of Ilaria Toesca, ‘Alessandro Galilei in Inghilterra’, in Mario Praz (ed.), *English Miscellany* (Rome 1952), which refers to a comparable inscription in S. Croce in Florence, and states that a third version had been placed on Galilei’s tomb in S. Nicola in Arcione in Rome. The example in Florence bore the name ‘Ticciati’, whose workshop may therefore have been responsible for all three.
- ³ Rossana Buono (ed.), *Il Museo di San Giovanni in Laterano* (Rome 1986) 11. Liliana Borrero, ‘La Basilica dal Cinquecento ai nostri giorni’, in Carlo Pietrangeli (ed.), *San Giovanni in Laterano* (Florence 1997) 145-268.
- ⁴ Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1660-1840* (New Haven and London 1995) 384-85. I am grateful to the Hon Desmond Guinness for information on the portrait, purchased by the Irish Georgian Society in memory of Brian Molloy. It was purchased around 1968 from Parke Bernet of New York, and had formerly been with a family of the name of Barton. David Griffin kindly provided the illustration of the portrait, which shows clearly in the background the façade of S. Giovanni with the dome and lantern of the Corsini Chapel to the left.
- ⁵ Lombardo Ferruccio, *Roma: le Chiese Scomparse* (Rome 1996) 125.
- ⁶ Elizabeth Kieven, ‘Roma tra il 1730 e il 1758’, in G. Curcio and E. Kieven (eds), *Storia dell’Architettura italiana* (Milan 1999) 191.
- ⁷ Quoted from T. Manfredi, ‘Il Mercante e l’architetto. Aspetti inediti dell’attività di Ferdinando Fuga e Alessandro Galilei da una corrispondenza commerciale tra Firenze e Roma (1733-1735)’, *Rivista Storia del Lazio*, n.4 (1996) 125 ff.