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SPECIAL ARTICLE

The “Capella Stenoniana” in Florence: The Tomb of Blessed Niels Stensen (1638–1686)



Frank Sobiech

Post-doctoral Researcher, Julius Maximilians University, Faculty of Catholic Theology, Sanderring 2, D-97070 Würzburg, Germany

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Abstract The “Capella Stenoniana” (Niels Stensen chapel) situated in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence is the tomb of the anatomist and founder of modern geology Niels Stensen (1638–1686). It displays commemorative plaques and contains a sarcophagus with Stensen's mortal remains. The tomb of Blessed Stensen, whose canonization process is under way, is always covered with papers with requests for intercession, prayers and thanks written by pilgrims from throughout the world, among them pupils, students, professors and other academics. They come to the tomb to seek Stensen's intercession to obtain God's graces.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Niels Stensen;
Conducto de Stenon;
Capella Stenoniana
(Capilla Stenoniana);
Ética de Stenon

La “Capilla Stenoniana” en Florencia: la tumba del Beato Niels Stensen (Nicolás Stenon) (1638–1686)

Resumen La “Capella Stenoniana” (Capilla Stenoniana) situada en la Basílica de San Lorenzo en Florencia, es la tumba del anatomista y fundador de la geología moderna Niels Stensen (1638–1686). Muestra placas conmemorativas y contiene un sarcófago con sus restos mortales. La tumba del Beato Stensen, cuyo proceso de canonización está en marcha, siempre está cubierta con oraciones y agradecimientos, escritos por fieles de todo el mundo, entre ellos alumnos, estudiantes, profesores y otros académicos. Llegan a la tumba a buscar la intercesión de Stensen para obtener la gracia de Dios.

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E-mail address: frank.sobiech@uni-wuerzburg.de

URL: <http://www.franksobiech.de>.

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Figure 1 “Capella Stenoniana” (Niels Stensen chapel), Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, Italy.

As the first scientist of the modern age to be raised to the honor of the altars, the anatomist and founder of modern geology Niels Ste(e)nsen (in Latin: Nicolaus Stenonis) (1638–1686) was beatified in Rome on World Mission Sunday, October 23, 1988 by Pope John Paul II (1978–2005). Stensen was the first to describe the parotid duct (Stensen’s duct) in Amsterdam in 1660 and recognized the heart’s muscle structure in Leiden in 1662/63. He was the first to describe the *Tetralogy of Fallot* in Copenhagen in 1673 and discovered the human ovary in Florence in 1666/67.¹ He died in Schwerin in Mecklenburg, Germany on November 25, 1686 on the Julian calendar. This date is the feast day of Blessed Stensen.

His tomb is situated in the Renaissance Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, the burial place of the grand ducal family of the House of Medici. The entrance to Stensen’s tomb is through a side entrance in the Northern part of the basilica, which is reserved for prayers. Turning right, one reaches the “Capella Stenoniana” (Niels Stensen chapel), a side chapel to the north of the basilica’s nave (Fig. 1).²

¹ De Micheli A, Izaguirre Ávila R. A saint in the history of Cardiology. *Arch Cardiol Méx.* 2014;84(1):47–50. Cf. the English translations of Stensen’s anatomical papers in Kardel T, Maquet P. Nicolaus Steno: Biography and Original Papers of a 17th Century Scientist. Berlin: Springer; 2013.

² Figs. 1–3 photographed by the author on July 19, 2014. Fig. 4 photographed by the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek



Figure 2 Stensen’s sarcophagus inside the chapel with requests for intercession.

Within the chapel, Stensen’s marble sarcophagus is always covered with many requests for intercession written on scraps and sheets of papers, even on receipts and tickets, with which pilgrims from throughout the world, among them pupils, students, professors and other academics, express prayers and thanks for Stensen’s intercession to obtain God’s graces (Figs. 2 and 3). These notes in different languages, ca. 12,000 from 1990 to 2006 alone (among them 1,200 in Spanish and Portuguese, but also 500 in Japanese, Chinese, Russian and Arabic) and continuing in similar numbers, are collected with regard to Stensen’s canonization process which is already under way.³

The Early Christian marble sarcophagus, which was donated by the Italian Ministry of Education, dates from the 4th century. It had been found in the gravel bed of the river Arno in 1933, probably having been lost during a transport

– Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hannover, Germany, in 2012; signature: Ms XLII 1902, fol. 16v. Fig. 5 photographed by the Historical Archives of the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome; signature: APUG 576, folio 44 recto to 45 verso, here 45 verso.

³ Giannarelli E. La tomba in San Lorenzo tra misteri e biglietti. Supplement Niccolò Stenone: *Un uomo di scienza alla ricerca di Dio: 1988–2008: Ventennale della beatificazione* to no. 44 of *Toscana Oggi* (Firenze), December 7, 2008: 11–5; Gallifante MF. Le ossa di Stenone e quelle di Cartesio. *Toscana Oggi* (Firenze), December 1, 2013:22–3.

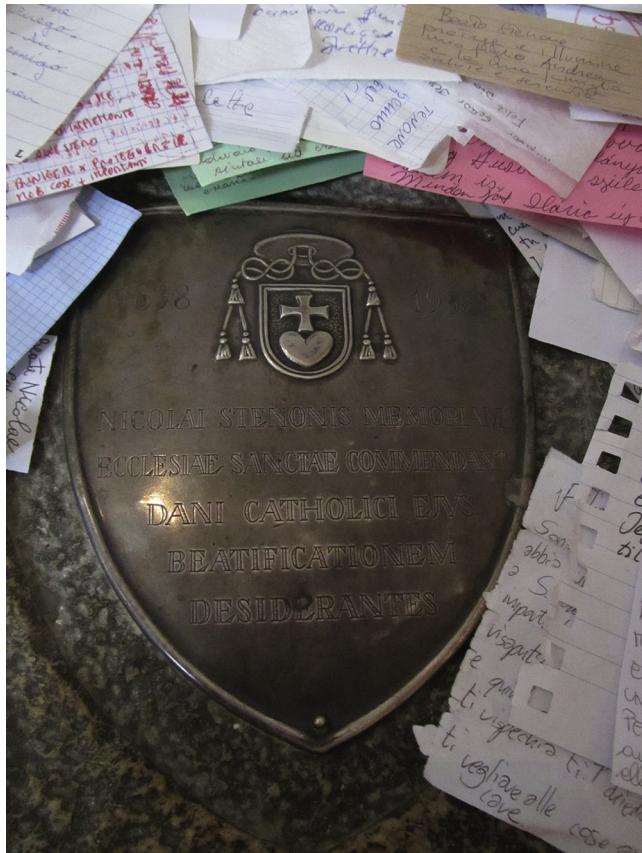


Figure 3 Silver badge on the sarcophagus lid.

from Rome via Pisa to Florence.⁴ On the left, one can see the three men in the fiery furnace who refuse to adore king Nabuchodonosor's statue (cf. Daniel 3:12-18), in the middle, Christ's farewell to his disciples after the Last Supper (cf. John 14-17), and on the right, the raising of Jairus' daughter (cf. Mark 5:21-43 parr.). On the opposite wall of the chapel is displayed a lid fragment of an antique sarcophagus used in 1687 to cover Stensen's original tomb in San Lorenzo's lower church, i.e. the crypt beneath the main aisle. The coffin with Stensen's mortal remains had finally been identified in the crypt on July 8, 1953. On October 25, 1953, Stensen's mortal remains were transferred to the nave in a solemn procession, and on October 28, 1953, they were finally entombed in the Early Christian sarcophagus.⁵ The white front of the altar stone next to the sarcophagus (Fig. 1) bears the heart-cross coat of arms of Stensen as researcher, which he modeled on an anatomically correct human heart with the cardiac apex at the time after his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith in Florence in

⁴ C. [abbreviation of author's name]. La nuova tomba di Nicola Stenone. *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome), October 12-13, 1953:3 (with a photo of the front of the sarcophagus).

⁵ Scherz G. Von der Krypta ins Kirchenschiff: Niels Stensens Überführung in die Basilika von S. Lorenzo. *Sanctificatio nostra* (Werl, Germany) 1954;19:68-71, 147-8, 231-5.



Figure 4 Stensen's seal on his letter written in Florence on September 2, 1670 to the German anatomist Heinrich Meibom Jr. (1638-1700) in Helmstedt.

November of 1667 (Fig. 4).⁶ With this heart-cross coat of arms Stensen continued to seal his letters as priest. Later on, as bishop, he added his episcopal insignia to the heart-cross (Fig. 5).⁷ A silver badge with Stensen's heart-cross coat of arms (in a simplified manner) with his episcopal insignia and the dates "1638-1938", donated by a group of Danish pilgrims on occasion of the tricentenary of Stensen's birth, is mounted on the sarcophagus lid (Fig. 3). It reads: "To the Holy Church her Danish Catholics confide the memory of Niels Stensen, yearning for his beatification".⁸

The white marble commemorative plaque originally situated in the crypt is affixed directly above the sarcophagus (Fig. 2). The inscription was composed by Jacob Toll († 1696), a Dutch scholar and convert, who arrived in Florence in 1687.⁹ It reads: "That which was mortal of Niels Stensen, bishop of Titopolis, a man imbued with God, lies here; Denmark bore him as a heterodox, Tuscany as an orthodox, Rome honored him, who was tested in virtue, with the sacred miter, Lower Saxony appreciated the brave defender of the

⁶ Bruun NW. Fem nyfundne Niels Stensen-breve. *Fund og forskning i Det Kongelige Biblioteks samlinger* (Copenhagen) 2008;47:115-65, here 144, footnote 77.

⁷ Scherz G. *Nicolai Stenonis epistolae et epistolae ad eum datae*. Vol. 1. København. Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck and Freiburg in the Breisgau. Herder, 1952. p. 376-7 (Epistola 150). Cf. Sobiech F. Herz, Gott, Kreuz: *Die Spiritualität des Anatomen, Geologen und Bischofs Dr. med. Niels Stensen (1638-86)* (Th. D. University of Münster 2003/04) (Westfalia sacra; 13). Münster. Aschendorff, 2004. p 234-40.

⁸ "Nicolai Stenonis memoriam / Ecclesiae Sanctae commendant / Dani Catholici ejus / beatificationem / desiderantes". Cf. Scherz G. *Im Rufe der Heiligkeit: Zeugnisse zur Fama sanctitatis Niels Stensens*. Freiburg in the Breisgau. Herder, 1953. p 64-5.

⁹ Concerning Tollius' stay in Italy cf. the entry *Tollius (Jacques)*. In: *De Chaupépié JG. Nouveau Dictionnaire historique et critique, pour servir de supplément ou de continuation au Dictionnaire historique et critique, de Mr. Pierre Bayle*. Vol. 4. Amsterdam. Z. Chatelain et Fils et al., 1756, p 460-5, here 464-5.



Figure 5 Stensen's seal on his letter written in Hanover, Germany, on April 19, 1678 on the Julian calendar to the Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimo III de' Medici (1642–1723).

gospel, finally Schwerin longed for him, who had been worn down by sustained labors and afflictions for Christ's sake, the Church mourned him, Florence wished he was returned to her at least in ashes, in the Year of the Lord 1687".¹⁰ After Stensen's remains had been transported from Schwerin to Florence, they were entombed in the crypt on October 13, 1687. Since 1883, a marble plaque in Stensen's honor is affixed to the wall in the cloisters of San Lorenzo, dedicated by the 2nd International Geological Congress, held in Bologna in 1881.¹¹ In 2004, another white marble plaque was affixed on the left side of the tomb in the "Capella Stenoniana" (Fig. 1). It reads: "The geologists gathered from all parts of the world in order to celebrate the 32nd Congress in large numbers again in Italy after 123 years commemorate gratefully in the month of August in the year of our

¹⁰ "Nicolai Stenonis / episcopi Titopolitanus / viri Deo pleni / quicquid mortale fuit hic situm est / Dania illum genuit heterodoxum / Hettruria orthodoxum / Roma / virtute probatum sacris infulis insignivit / Saxonia inferior / fortior evangelii assertorem agnovit / demum / diuturnis pro Christo laboribus aerumnis[ue] confectum / Sverinum desideravit / Ecclesia deflevit / Florentia sibi restitui / saltem in cineribus voluit / A. D. MDCLXXXVII". Cf. *Sacra Congregatio pro Causis Sanctorum* (editor). Osnabrug: Beatificationis et canonizationis Servi Dei Nicolai Stenonis Episcopi Titopolitanus (1686): *Positio super introductione causae et super virtutibus ex officio concinnata* (*Sacra Congregatio pro Causis Sanctorum: Officium Historicum*; 38). Roma. *Sacra Congregatio pro Causis Sanctorum*, 1974. p 940, no. 14.

¹¹ Vai GB. The Second International Geological Congress, Bologna, 1881. *Episodes: J Int Geosci* (Bangalore) 2004;27:13–20, here 19.

Lord 2004 Niels Stensen, the researcher of natural things and beatified bishop, for his excellent merit that he as the first had discovered stratigraphy and crystallography in Florence".¹² Affixed above the sarcophagus, there exists also a bronze bas-relief of Stensen (Fig. 2), and above the altar one can see a stained-glass window, which depicts, against the background of Florence, Stensen as researcher and, above him, his heart-cross coat of arms with his episcopal insignia (Fig. 1).

The unpretentious interior of the Renaissance chapel with its dimmed light and its solemn, quiet atmosphere hints at Stensen's earnest character, his amiable humor, his precise, unpretentious scientific writings and his methodologically and spiritually exemplary ethos as a scientist.¹³ Six years before his death he noted in his diary: "God granted you that you discover much in natural things, necessary to fix many errors of philosophers and physicians. If in all these things you seek only yourself, that means your pleasure, your benefits, your honor, you seek the transitory, the vanity of vanities".¹⁴

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

¹² "Nicolaum Stenonem / rerum naturae investigatorem episcopum beatum / pro insigni merito quod Florentiae / stratigraphiam et crystallographiam primus invenit / geologi ex omnibus orbis partibus / ad XXXII conventum celebrandum / iterum in Italia post CXXXIII annos congressi / grati commemorant / mense Augusto A. D. MMIV". The translation corresponds to Sobiech F. Nicholas Steno's way from experience to faith: Geological evolution and the original sin of mankind. In: Rosenberg GD (editor). *The Revolution in Geology from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (GSA Memoir; 203). Boulder, CO. Geological Society of America, 2009, p 179–86, here 179.

¹³ Sobiech F. *Radius in manu Dei: Ethos und Bioethik in Werk und Rezeption des Anatomen Niels Stensen (1638–1686)* (Westfalia sacra; 17). 2nd ed. Münster. Aschendorff, 2014. p 186–7. – Both an English and a Spanish translation are in preparation.

¹⁴ Larsen K, Scherz G. (editors). *Nicolai Stenonis opera theologica cum prooemii ac notis Germanice scriptis*. Vol. 2. København. Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1947. p. 489 (Opusculum 9), l. 27–29, 31–33: "Dedit tibi Deus, [...] ut in naturalibus multa videres ad philosophorum et medicorum multos errores tollendos necessaria [...]. Si in omnibus te tantum quaeris, scilicet tuam voluptatem, tua commoda, tuum honorem, quaeris peritura, vanitatem vanitatum".