

The provenance and context of the Giustiniani Medicine Chest

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Abstract

In autumn 2019 the Science Museum will open its new Medicine Gallery, which is an opportunity to redisplay and reinterpret items from the collection. One object selected as a centrepiece for the new space is the Giustiniani Medicine Chest, which dates from the mid-sixteenth century. This object came into the Science Museum Collection in 1946 having originally been bought in Italy in 1924 by an agent of Sir Henry Wellcome for his medical collection. This article assesses its provenance and history.

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Keywords

Science Museum, Giustiniani, Interpretation, Provenance, Medicine Chest, Naval Medicine Chest, Medicine, *Materia Medica*, Wellcome Collection, Genoa, Italian, Turk, Ottoman, Suleiman the Magnificent 1494–1566, John Burdett, Chios, *podestà*, Venetian, Furniture

The provenance and acquisition context of the Giustiniani Medicine Chest

In autumn 2019 the Science Museum will open its new Medicine Gallery, which is an opportunity to redisplay and reinterpret items from the collection. One object selected as a centre piece for the new space is the Giustiniani Medicine Chest, believed to have been manufactured in the mid-sixteenth century. It gains its name from the Giustiniani family, who are credited as its original commissioners and owners. This identification has been accepted as part of its current cataloguing, within the Science Museum Wellcome Collection, due to its purchase directly from members of the Giustiniani family as well as internal and external motifs derived from the family coat of arms. Previous research and publications focusing on the object have discussed its medicinal contents and construction. There has been very little consideration of provenance. I would therefore like to

address this omission within this article.

Figure 1



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Genoese medicine chest, c. 1565

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The chest is part of the Wellcome Collection of medical objects which was originally founded by Sir Henry Solomon Wellcome FRS (1853–1936). He made his fortune from pharmaceutical development and, as money was plentiful and his interest in the subject of health was extensive, he began to piece together an extensive collection of artefacts illustrating human health and medical treatment from different ages and continents. His holdings became so extensive that he opened a public museum, first in Wigmore Street and then in Euston, central London. Eventually, even this space was insufficient to contain the collection and so after his death some of the artefacts were moved on a long-term loan to the Science Museum. An exploration of the acquisition paperwork for the object, held within the Wellcome Collection archives, clearly illustrates how artefacts brought into museum collections by early twentieth century collectors arrived with a well-developed history. This narrative added a veneer of romance to the object and subsequently increased its desirability for museum purchase. For agents who were working on a retainer, or commission, generating interest in an artefact ensured continued employment and income through subsequent sales; it was therefore an essential skill. In the case of the Wellcome Collection, agents, based around the world, regularly provided a bulletin regarding material of interest which was either on the open market or belonged to a private owner who may be induced to sell. Before the advent of cheap and easily available photographic images, encouragement for a museum to outlay the purchase cost of an item was generated through the agent's ability to create interest in an artefact through a written description. This was undertaken through the relation of the history of the artefact which had been researched and generated by the agent. In the case of this particular medicine chest, when the story provided by the purchasing agent is linked to the known facts of the Giustiniani family, the supplied narrative begins to break down. Does this therefore make the narrative wholly redundant or does the story of the chest's purchase by an agent and subsequent transportation from Italy to the UK indicate a new narrative which is as much part of the article's heritage as anything which happened to it in the early modern period? Can museums exploit this more recent history in an effort to make objects more accessible and to prompt questions from visitors

regarding provenance and the ethics of collecting?

Figure 2



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Genoese medicine chest, c. 1565

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The Giustiniani Medicine Chest has been part of the Wellcome Collection since 1924, residing first at the Henry Wellcome exhibition and then moving, in 1946, to the Science Museum, London. Within the Science Museum the chest is catalogued as being Genoese and dating from 1562–1566 ([Science Museum, A641515, on-line](#)). It was sourced for the collection by Dr Carlo Rossi, an agent for the Wellcome Museum based in Italy, on behalf of the curator of the collection, Dr C J S Thompson. Rossi purchased it from a branch of the Giustiniani family based in Serravallo near Norcia, 40 miles south east of Perugia ([Rossi, 16 March 1924, unpublished correspondence](#)). The purchase price was 10,500 lire, which is approximately £416 at the 1924 exchange rate^[1] ([Rossi, 16 March 1924, unpublished correspondence](#)). The chest was packed by Cook's Agency on 15 March 1924, ready for dispatch to London (Rossi, 23 November 1924, unpublished correspondence). The item's provenance, which

Rossi relates in one of his letters to Thompson, identifies the chest as originally 'with no doubt', being in the ownership of Vincenzo or Cencio Giustiniani who was the 'governor or King of Scio [the island of Chios] from 1546 to 1560' ([Rossi, 23 November 1924, unpublished correspondence](#)). How much of the provenance information in the letter is oral history gained from the vendor and how much is a result of additional research by Rossi is unclear, but it does make a romantic story for the origins of the chest. Unfortunately it appears to be factually incorrect on certain points. Oral history passed down from generation to generation can be misleading, and in this case whilst the chest may have belonged to a Giustiniani who was a distant relative of the vendors, who still bore the family name, there appear to be flaws in this particular history posited for a specific owner of the chest.

Chios, where the chest's original owner apparently resided, is the fifth largest Greek island, situated in the Aegean Sea, seven miles from the Anatolian coast. The prevalence of the name Giustiniani on the island is a direct result of the formation of the Chios trading company by individuals from Genoa in 1157. This was termed the *Maona di Chio e di Focea* and was undertaken by twelve Genoese patricians from a variety of families. They made a pact to act, in trading and life, on the island, as if 'they were born from the same father and the same mother' (Giustiniani, a, on-line). To facilitate this and obliterate any lingering family loyalty to their birth families back in Italy the group eschewed their own family names in favour of adopting the joint surname of 'Giustiniani' (Giustiniani, a, on-line). The name Vincenzo Giustiniani is extremely common as a result and, whilst the item in question may have been owned by a 'Vincenzo Giustiniani', it may well not have been the one who has been termed the 'governor or King' of Chios by Rossi ([Rossi, 23 November 1924, unpublished correspondence](#)). When creating an enticing narrative for an item, it is only human to want to identify the most illustrious forebear when creating a family history for objects and this is what may have occurred here, with the highest ranking Giustiniani on Chios being chosen as the chest's owner.

Whilst Rossi refers to the title of the administrator of Chios as 'King', the most commonly used term in documentation of the early modern period is that of *podestà* ([Rossi, 23 November 1924, unpublished correspondence](#)). Each of the twelve branches of the Giustiniani family had a role in nominating a man from the family for this role who would serve for a fixed length of time to govern their affairs. John Burnett, in the most comprehensive review of the chest's history and contents to date, acknowledges that there is the capacity for confusion regarding the ownership of the chest. He warns that the chest's owner Vincenzo Giustiniani should not be confused with 'his kinsman and contemporary, Cardinal Vincenzo Giustiniani', who was born on Chios on the 28 August 1519, became Master General of the Dominican Order, and died in Rome on 28 October 1582 ([Burnett, 1982, p 325](#)). Burnett's Vincenzo died in 1570 ([Burnett, 1982, p 325](#)). A more plausible candidate for ownership is identifiable in the work of Kenneth Michael Setton, in his work *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204–1571*. He identifies a *Marchese* Vincenzo Giustiniani whom he indicates was the last *podestà* of Chios and who served for four years in the role from 1562 to 1566 ([Setton, 1984, p 893 and p 895](#)). If the chest did belong to a *podestà* of this name then this may well be the correct individual. Rossi states that his *podestà* ruled on behalf of the family for fourteen years, from 1546 through to 1560, but this is probably incorrect as the role was normally only held for a term of three years ([Giustiniani, 1943, p xx](#)). The Vincenzo awarded the office in 1562 may, however, have held it a year longer than normal in order to address a difficult situation which the island faced in 1566 when the Ottoman Turks challenged the Genoese for ownership of the island ([Setton, 1984, p 893 and p 895](#)).

The role of the *podestà* was to oversee the collection of taxes on the island which were then invested in the infrastructure of the families' company, to purchase ships for trade and ensure that the island and port was defended and remained a Genoese outpost. He was also responsible for ensuring the payment of the annual fee to the Turks for use of the island ([Setton, 1984, p 894](#)). This agreement was originally negotiated on 8 June 1363, with the Emperor of Byzantium, John V Paleologos (1332–1391), who granted the island to the Giustiniani family in return for an annual payment of 500 gold hyperpera ([Giustiniani, 1943, p x](#)). The payment of this annual fee was not always straightforward. According to a letter from a patriarch of the Giustiniani to the Genoese government which was written sometime after March 1567, in a previous year the Gran Vizier, Mehmed Sokolli, required the family to pay the tribute due to the Ottoman court twice. This was 'because he [Sokolli] had ordered the treasurer at the Porte to withhold their receipt for payment' ([Setton, 1984, p 894](#)). This figure was then raised to three years' back payment after the Giustiniani protested at the injustice. The perceived default on this payment to the Ottoman Turks from the Giustiniani was ostensibly the reason why the Turks retook the island on the 14 April 1566.

At the time of the invasion when the Turks deposed the Giustiniani, Rossi identifies that:

This CENCIO [Vincenzo] GIUSTINIANI was sent as a prisoner to Caffa by the Turks and was freed after having taken part, as it was believed, in the battle of Lepanto ([Rossi, 23 November 1924, unpublished correspondence](#)).

Setton, in writing about the Vincenzo whose career he followed, confirms Rossi's claims that after the Turks resumed control of the island the 'lives of the *podestà* and the twelve *governatori mahonesi*' were to be spared but 'Sultan Suleiman' (Suleiman the Magnificent, 1494–1566) 'stressed that they must "go into exile", which would soon mean confinement at Caffa'[2] ([Setton, 1984, p 897](#)). If Burnett's date of death for Vincenzo of 1570 is correct then this individual cannot be the same as the one identified by Rossi, as the battle of Lepanto, which Rossi's Vincenzo was part of, took place on 7 October 1571 ([Burnett, 1982, p 325](#)). Here it seems likely that, over the years through retelling and embroidery, a major international event has been grafted onto the provenance story of the chest. It has been estimated by Angus Konstam that there were up to 37,000 slaves utilized as oarsmen by the Turks in this battle ([Konstam, 2003, pp 20–21](#)). The majority of these were Christians who had been captured in previous attacks and conquests outside of Turkish held lands. If Vincenzo had been a slave at this point, owned by the Turks, he would in all probability have been manning the oars of a galley in this battle and his survival would not have been guaranteed. Rossi, however, indicates that he did indeed survive and became a free man again.

Setton does not mention the possibility of Vincenzo's inclusion in Lepanto but instead states that he and his compatriots were held for nearly a year at Caffa, before they were released after the intercession of the French ambassador, Monsieur de Grantrie de Grandchamp (see [Guilmartin, 1974, pp 222–225](#)). There is a Hieronimo Giustiniani who wrote a *History of the Island of Chios* in 1586 and Philip Argenti, a twentieth-century historian of Chios who edited the 1943 edition, claims that this is Vincenzo the *podestà*'s son ([Giustiniani, 1943, p x](#)). According to Hieronimo, Vincenzo ended up in France serving Charles IX (1550–1574). He was elevated to the role of 'Knight of the Order' of Charles IX, and then joined the 'Council of State' and the 'Privy Council' ([Giustiniani, 1943, p x](#)). Ironically, if this is the same Vincenzo who was held in chains by the Turks, he was then made 'Ambassador Extraordinary to the Sultan Selim, the Great Lord of Constantinople' (Selim II, 1524–1574) and so ended up negotiating once again with the Turks and living in Turkish controlled lands ([Giustiniani, 1943, p x](#)). To further confuse the identity of the Giustiniani being discussed, Argenti does not indicate that this *podestà* Vincenzo was taken captive from Chios to Caffa, but that he was responsible for negotiating the captives' release. With the above in mind an attempt to reconstruct the original ownership of the chest and attribute its purchase and use by one specific member of the Giustiniani family seems to be a fruitless endeavour. It is unlikely to be made any more accurate unless additional documentation, specifically referring to the chest, is discovered and this is unlikely as the Giustiniani archives were destroyed when the Turks retook Chios.

Whilst the lack of accurate family history of the Giustiniani hampers the identification of a definitive Vincenzo as owner of the chest there is no doubt, when the chest itself is examined, that this is a high status, high cost object. The fact that it did have links with the Giustiniani and the island of Chios is confirmed by an object contained in the lower level of the chest in the middle drawer, a gold covered box containing plasters which fits its storage space exactly. It has a coat of arms on top which Burnett states is 'an adaptation of the arms of the Giustiniani of Chios as described by Crollalanza'.[3] The arms have a black spread eagle, with wings and legs outstretched in the top half of the device, with a crown free floating over the eagle's head and a castle tower taking up the lower half of the lid space. Burnett claims that the depiction of the arms on this box is specifically that of the Giustiniani of Chios, which is 'distinct from those of the Giustiniani of Pesaro or Venice' ([Burnett, 1982, p 327](#)). As a result he claims that the box has a manufacture date of '1566 or earlier', assuming that the Chios arms were not used by the Giustiniani family after the Turk invasion ([Burnett, 1982, p 327](#)). As a result of this information the Science Museum has decided, in its description of the article, to adopt a very specific construction date for the chest of between 1562 and 1566 ([Science Museum, A641515, on-line](#)). This new date, when cross referenced with the original narrative of the Vincenzo's of the Giustiniani family, serves to further exclude certain potential owners from the timeline that was explored with regards to the chest's provenance. In addition to the coat of arms on the box the interior of the chest also contains additional spread eagle motifs in the middle drawer on two semi-circular recess covers situated at each end of the chest. These emblazoned items, as with the free standing plaster box, could be later interpolations onto and into the structure of the chest. The compartment lids are attached to the carcass using hinges whilst the plaster box is a loose structure which fits into a compartment and can be removed, thus the coat of arms could indicate not the original owner but a subsequent one. However, spread eagle motifs are also present on the carved external feet of the chest which are a more intrinsic part of the structure of the chest's carcass and are more likely to be contemporary with the original construction of the chest.

Figure 3



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Genoese medicine chest, c. 1565

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The Science Museum catalogues the chest at present as being 'Genoese'. I am unable to find any documented reference to this and can only assume that this is claimed since the Giustiniani family originated from Genoa ([Science Museum, A641515, on-line](#)). However, Rossi identifies the chest as being 'Venetian' in construction, and also states that it is 'certainly of the last half of the 16th century' post-dating the claimed construction timeline established by Burnett ([Rossi, 23 November 1924,](#)

[unpublished correspondence](#)). However, his reasons for this claim are not given and so cannot be verified. Confirmation that this is an Italian piece is provided by Burnett who, having consulted the V&A Furniture department, identifies the design of the handles, one on each side of the chest, as 'almost identical to one in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is also Italian and dates from the first half of the sixteenth century' ([Burnett, 1982, p 236](#)). They are beautifully cast with female heads in their centre and a dolphin on each side, whose tails attach to the body of the chest. The chest, together with its contents, weighs in at 37.5kg and the design of these handles makes it clear that they were not created as the main method of moving the chest. Any handling would require two people and significant team work made easier by larger and more substantial handle construction. Burnett also gains a date for the design of the 'single-warded lock' which is similar to others in the V&A collection and which he claims backs up the dating from the coat of arms giving a 'consistent [...] date of 1560–70' for the object ([Burnett, 1982, p 236](#)).

One question which has never been considered is: if the chest was resident on Chios, with the *podestà* or one of his extended family, when the island was regained by the Turks, how did it find its way back to a lesser branch of the family in Italy where it was tracked down and purchased by Rossi in Perugia in 1924? If the chest were on the Island of Chios when it was taken by the Turks it is doubtful that its Giustiniani owner would have been able to take it with them on leaving. This is because the Turks, on reoccupying the island, instructed the elite population to ransom themselves by paying 'a thousand, or at least five hundred, ducats apiece' ([Setton, 1984, p 898](#)). To raise the money they had to arrange "sales" of their houses, gardens, and vineyards to Piali', the admiral of the Turkish fleet and it is therefore unlikely that high status goods within each property would be released to the original owners. Instead they may well have had to have been sacrificed to make up this ransom ([Setton, 1984, p 898](#)). If individuals were allowed to take a selection of personal items with them on quitting the island then, bearing in mind the weight of the Giustiniani chest, moving the chest would be a challenge, especially in a post-invasion evacuation scenario. The chances are that, due to these pressures of invasion, if the chest was resident on the island then the chances of it returning to Italy and still residing within the Giustiniani family as late as 1924 would be extremely slim.

However, it did end up back in Italy and the reason for this could be linked with the terminology which Rossi uses to describe it in one of the letters to Thompson. He uses the phrase 'naval medicine chest'; underlining the term to indicate that it is important ([Rossi, 23 November 1924, unpublished correspondence](#)). This description, together with its weight and large dimensions, indicates that the chest may plausibly have been resident on board one of the Giustiniani ships. In this way it would have found its way back to Italy, and stayed within the Giustiniani family, being inherited through the generations until it was eventually sold to Rossi. The Giustiniani family owned a fleet of ships which enabled them to control the export and trade of a natural medicinal remedy grown only on Chios: the gum of the mastic tree. This lucrative trade meant a regular transportation route from the island to Genoa and other Italian ports. As a ship travelling this route would cover over 1,200 nautical miles, having medical treatment permanently stocked on a ship would be eminently sensible. Argenti indicates that as well as the trade route back to Italy the connection between 'the Giustiniani resident in Chios and those in Genoa [...] continued to be close' ([Giustiniani, 1943, p xx](#)). This was because the families resident on Chios regularly returned their children to Italy to undertake 'their education' ([Giustiniani, 1943, p xx](#)). The provision of medical treatment contained within the chest, for administration to the valuable children of the elite Giustiniani, would therefore be both understandable and desirable.

Whatever environment the chest was used in, and however it arrived in the ownership of the Giustiniani family in Italy, the construction and finish of the object indicate that this is a high status, high cost object. The lack of chipping and wearing, other than aging, of the gilding on the highly carved feet of the chest also confirm that this elite item has been cared for and was a prestige object to be looked after rather than stood on potentially damaging surfaces or mistreated.^[4] Its exterior is covered in leather which, as Thomasin Summerford points out, was originally stained red to match the un-faded red velvet interior where bottles and boxes containing expensive medicinal material are securely held in individual cells to guard against breakages during transportation ([Summerford, 3 May 2011, unpublished dissertation, p 90](#)). Whilst this is a well-crafted and attractive object this is not a piece of furniture or a conversation piece. The *materia medica*, plant, animal and mineral ingredients from which medicinal cures can be created are really what is special about this object and why it was created for its original owner. It is very easy to be distracted by the object itself and assess it solely on its external value as an early modern piece of furniture. However, it is significant that its contents were more costly than the carcass, which merely acts to safeguard the expensive desiccated medicinal compounds and ensure that they are kept dry and secure.

My research work so far on the object in question, together with its ancillary paperwork, has demonstrated that it may be

impossible to establish a solid provenance for the chest. It undoubtedly has connections with the Giustiniani family, but whether it was commissioned by them and remained in their unbroken ownership between the 1500s and 1924 cannot be ascertained. The coat of arms of the family may well have been later interpolations and the narrative concerning the Giustiniani ownership which has been created around the object is not strictly accurate. However, in exploring the possible origination of the chest the existence of stories of potential ownership clearly demonstrate the need by those in contact with it to set it within a wider context. These stories attempt to link the item to significant events and personalities and consequently serve in an attempt to affirm its status as a precious object, rather than just a repository for expensive and essential medical treatments. These narratives also help to ensure that, despite the fact that its contents are no longer viable as medicinal treatments and have not been for some time, the item has been cared for and given enough prestige to gain a place in a national museum collection.

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Tags

- [Material culture](#)
- [History of medicine](#)
- [Museum collections](#)
- [Sixteenth century](#)
- [Object biography](#)

Footnotes

1. The *Financial Times*, 1 March 1924, p 1, Column 1, gives an exchange rate of Italian Lire to English Pound of 25.22 ½. This makes 10,500 lira approximately £416. Using the 'Historic inflation calculator' on-line, the purchase price of the chest in the current market would be equivalent to £22,500.
2. Now known as Theodosia/Feodosia on the Crimea Peninsula, Ukraine.
3. The coat of arms is described as: 'Di rosso, al castello d'argento sormonto da tre torri, quella di mezzo piu elevata, aperto e fenestro del campo; col capo d'oro, all' aquila nascente di nero, coronata del campo.' Crollalanza, G.B. di, cited in Burnett, 1982, p 327. This translates as: 'Gules, a castle of silver overlay by three towers, the middle one higher, open field and fenestro; the Golden head, at the nascent Black Eagle, crowned of the field.'
4. However, caution must be exercised when assessing the general condition of the chest. It entered the Wellcome Collection at a time when extensive restoration of items was not uncommon and no documentation exists to indicate if this particular object was restored and if so how much was undertaken.

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