

Daniel Jaquet | Iason-Eleftherios Tzouridis | Regula Schmid (eds.)

# MARTIAL CULTURE IN MEDIEVAL TOWNS

AN ANTHOLOGY



SCHWABE VERLAG





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Regula Schmid (eds.)**

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# Foreword – Martial Culture in Medieval Towns

*Daniel Jaquet, Regula Schmid, Iason-Eleftherios Tzouriadis*

Today, the use of institutionalised violence is the territory of professionals like police officers or soldiers. Unsanctioned interpersonal violence is punishable by law. Therefore, the possession, education and training in the use of arms by private individuals or groups is considered, with few exceptions, as aberrant or even bad. In Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, however, things were different. This book presents stories defining the boundaries of what we can identify as ‘martial culture’. The notion of martial culture encompasses all activities pertaining to the use of weapons, even in times of peace, and not always in order to inflict injuries to others.

The possession and use of weapons were not restricted to noblemen and knights, but were accessible to all social strata, to men, women, children and, depending on the region, to members of religious orders, and to Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. In western Europe, however, Christian, adult, able-bodied men were the main participants in martial culture and the main producers of this culture. For example, craftsmen within city walls were not, in principle, meant to take up arms and fight in wars. However, they knew how to wield a sword and how to use a crossbow. They had to be ready to defend the walls if the circumstances called for it. They acquired the necessary expertise during regular practice with their comrades in the shooting guilds and had the opportunity to show their fellow citizens their martial skills during public competitions. They played physical games during festivities and taught their children how to wrestle. They inherited old armour pieces from their ancestors and had to acquire a new helmet and a halberd, which they then had to present during reviews held by the city. This practice demonstrated martial continuity as well as the conduct, maintenance and importance of martial matters under the auspices of public authorities.

These craftsmen were not warriors in the modern sense of the word but lived in a world where martial activities were common. To acquire their right of citizenship and practise their craft as members of a guild, they had to pos-

sess armour and show their martial skills, even if they rarely used them against others and only when their lives and the lives of others were in danger. They also contributed to the display and celebration of the town's martial culture in stone. This occurred when guilds paid for the sculpted banner bearers embellishing the fountains in their town's streets or when their taxes were used to finance the construction and maintenance of the walls, gates and towers protecting the town.

This anthology assembles selected reworked contributions from established and younger scholars, as well as from independent researchers – often practitioners of European martial arts – to the research blog “Martial Culture in Medieval Towns”, a publication of the Swiss National Science Foundation project of the same name, hosted by the University of Bern, Switzerland. This blog brings together specialists from all over Europe and beyond. English, the academic *lingua franca*, was therefore used for both the blog and this publication. The contributions emphasise the urban contexts where European martial culture developed. Towns regulated and organised martial activities and played a central role in local and superregional conflicts, serving as hubs of war-related services, information and manpower. They appear as places for experimentation, construction and the development of martial culture. Each section is introduced by a short abstract of the subject matter delineating the common framework of the essays and contextualising the themes discussed.

# I. Cities as Incubators of War and Civic Defence

*Daniel Jaquet, Regula Schmid, Iason-Eleftherios Tzouriadis*

The town lies within and around its defences. Walls, towers, doors and bridges are the bones of a living organism, filled with inhabitants and travellers going in and out. The town's safeguards are its physical, natural or constructed, defences and the people manning them. Towns had to constantly adapt their defences to the evolution of warfare and especially to siege technology. Furthermore, they had to provide a reservoir of able warriors to take part in local, regional or even international conflicts. A large amount of their wealth was therefore dedicated to martial endeavours in (re)building defences, acquiring weapons and training citizens.

External dangers were a constant reality. Gates had to be closed and guarded, and the walls had to be defended in order to protect the inhabitants of the town. Citizens organised the guarding duties on the level of guilds, neighbourhoods or quarters. Some dangers could also be internal, in the form of fire, or any disturbance of the peace. Policing against the latter, guarding and firefighting were among the duties of the people manning the defences. The town's citizen-soldiers had to be equipped, trained and managed.

Towns could also be called to arms by their allies and had to provide troops for common expeditions or for securing the safety of events such as shooting competitions, tournaments, princely entries or large markets. The authorities had to check regularly if their men were armed and trained for these tasks. Citizens were obligated to show up with their own armour and weapons during reviews. In many cases, all households had to own armour which would be put into service in case of an imminent threat.

The mechanisms that ensured that a town was defended and able to provide fighting men were similar, but specific at the same time. In the next pages, several examples taken from a range of different towns in western Europe will show how these processes unfolded.



Fig. 1. With cannons and a superior fighting force, confederate troops force the abandonment of a town. Diebold Schilling, *Amtliche Berner Chronik*, 1478–83 (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.I.3, vol. 3, p. 150).

## Assault on the Church: The Bellicosity of the Brescian Valleys' Inhabitants

*Paolo De Montis*

The passage commented on in this essay is taken from a chronicle written in the last years of the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the notary Iacopo Melga from Brescia. It demonstrates the bellicosity of the inhabitants of Brescia's valleys, in particular the Val del Garza and the Val Trompia. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the hermit Costanzo founded a church and a monastery on the mountain Conche that separates these two valleys. After his death around 1151, Costanza was canonised.<sup>1</sup> In 1443, following the transfer of the religious complex to the nuns of Santa Caterina in Brescia, the Dominican fathers set out in search of the remains of the holy founder, hidden inside the church. The remains were found only in 1481 and then brought to Brescia in the same year. This transfer was at risk of degenerating into a proper carnage, as Iacopo Melga reports:

[...] Men from neighbouring villages were involved in the transfer of the saint's body from the church of Conche. The inhabitants of the villages of Nave, Caino, Lumezzane and certain other villages had heard of the discovery, and many went to Conche, armed with *partesane* (partizans), *giaverine*, and even sticks. They had the support of some citizens of Brescia, such as the late Count Luigi Avogadro and others who had an interest in those lands. Their intention was to force the local friars to give up the relics. One of them, the Venetian Tommaso Donato – prior priest of the convent of San Domenico, a talented theologian, good preacher and currently patriarch of Venice – decided to hide the body inside the church tower, to ensure that

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<sup>1</sup> San Costanzo was born in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps in Niardo in Val Camonica. He was from a noble family and served in the *comune* of Brescia as an official and general, until he decided to walk away from his wealth and become a hermit. He retired and went to live in Conche, a locality between the villages of Nave (Val del Garza) and Lumezzane (Valtrompia). There, he devoted himself to the study of the sacred scriptures. Carlo Doneda, *Notizie di San Costanzo Eremita bresciano e Memorie storiche del monastero di S. Caterina di Brescia* (Brescia: Giammaria Rizzardi, 1755).



Fig. 2. The complex of the Santuario di Conche.

the villagers would not find it. It was a useless attempt because the villagers – furious – climbed the bell tower, damaged it and took the body from the friars by force. They carried it, kept inside a chest, down the mountain into the land of Nave. Some of these villagers animatedly discussed friar Tommaso inside the church, and also tried to kill him with the *ronche* (bills), but he managed to escape. The villagers acted like this out of devotion to the saint: they said that few would know him as long as his body remained in Conche. Some of them were imprisoned, but they came out of prison cursing the saint and swearing they never knew him.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, the passage quoted above shows all the bellicosity of the inhabitants of the valleys, driven into homicidal fury for several reasons. In addition, we should consider, at least in part, the religious devotion towards the saint and the willingness – reported also by the notary – to give his remains a more prestigious resting place. On the other hand, some noblemen supported the expedition. The counts of Avogadro, mentioned in the chroni-

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<sup>2</sup> *Cronaca del notaio Iacopo Melga, Le cronache inedite bresciane*, vol. I, ed. by Paolo Guerrini (Brescia: Moretto, 1922), pp. 35–36. The remains of San Costanzo were brought to the church of Santa Caterina di Brescia, apart from the bones of one of his arms, and afterwards were split between the church of San Domenico and the Duomo. The relics are currently kept inside the parish church of Nave. The saint is the patron of Nave and Niar-do, and he is celebrated on 12 February.

cle, had kept Lumezzane as a fiefdom since 1427 and had every interest in the glorification of a saint who had worked in the vicinity of their territories. The expedition was not that of a feudal army; these noblemen probably manipulated the commoners and created a kind of popular militia. The local rulers exploited the ferocity of the inhabitants of the two valleys on more than one occasion. In 1512, the people of Nave, under the leadership of the *condottiero* Valerio Paitone, heroically resisted the French assaults, at least until the sacking of their town on 26 July.<sup>3</sup> The Venetians integrated the inhabitants of the valleys into the *cernide*, the military corps recruited in the mainland of the *Serenissima*.<sup>4</sup> The militiamen of the valleys were harquebusiers, unlike those of the Brescia plain, who formed regiments of pikemen.<sup>5</sup> In their reports to the *Consiglio dei X*, the governors of Brescia repeatedly celebrated the value of these highlanders and their attachment to Venetian rule.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Carlo Pasero, *Francia, Spagna, Impero a Brescia (1509–1516)* (Brescia: Tipo-Lito Fratelli Geroldi, 1957). Sanuto claims that on 25 April 1512: “[...] the French had gone to loot the valley of Nave: they returned to Brescia wounded and humiliated, and many of them had died. San Marco wanted to show him that he was the defender and the protector of the Venetians”. *I diari di Sanuto*, vol. XIV (Venice: F. Visentini, 1886), p. 293.

4 Carlo Pasero, “Aspetti dell’ordinamento militare del territorio bresciano durante il dominio Veneto”, *Commentari dell’Ateneo di Brescia*, 1937, pp. 9–39; Francesco Rossi, “Le armature da munizione e l’organizzazione delle cernide nel bresciano”, *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 1971, pp. 169–186; John Halle, “Brescia and the Venetian Military System in the Cinquecento”, in *Armi e Cultura nel Bresciano 1420–1870* (Brescia: Tipo-Lito Fratelli Geroldi, 1981), pp. 97–119 (Italian translation: pp. 121–139).

5 An interesting document found in Nave’s archive reports about a military drill which took place in the village on 24 October 1563. Captain Hieronimo Negro arrived that day in the village, along with his faithful sergeant Tamburino, to conduct the drill of the territorial ordinance. We know that the men who participated in the drill were harquebusiers from a specific reference in the document: “[...] so (the captain) distributed or had distributed to those equally powder for the harquebuses” (Nave Archive, Sezione Antico Regime [1509–post 1785], busta 1, fasc. 4, n. 65).

6 Report by the Captain of Brescia Marino Cavalli, 1554: “This second valley is the Val Trompia, crossed by the Mella. It has many good lands and about 18,000 souls, and they are men who are estimated to be more ferocious and more belligerent than all the others [...] They are very loyal to the *Serenissima*”. Report by the Captain of Brescia Antonio Lando, 1611: “I have visited the three valleys – Valcamonica, Val Trompia and Val Sabbia: they are worthy of all esteem. In these valleys there are 900 service soldiers,



Fig. 3. San Costanzo and Beato Innocenzo, Church of San Maurizio, Niardo (Val Camonica).

The reference to the arms used by the inhabitants is also quite interesting. Partizans, *chiaverine*, bills and even sticks are mentioned in the passage cited above.<sup>7</sup> Except for the bills, we do not know and cannot exactly establish the type of the first two arms described. There is no exact correspondence between the current terms and those used at the time in the territories of Bres-

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good and very well disciplined by Captain Giacomo Negroboni [...]”. *Relazioni dei rettori veneti in terraferma*, vol. XI: *Podestaria e capitanato di Brescia*, ed. by Amelio Tagliaferri (Varese: Dott. A. Giuffrè for the Istituto di Storia Economica, 1978), pp. 49, 211.

<sup>7</sup> According to current terminology: The *Chiaverina* is a type of spear with a wide blade and two wings on the haft. The partizan is a *Dagona*-shaped blade with two wings at the bottom. It derived from the *spiedo alla bolognese* towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century or in the first decades of the following century. It remained in use as a representative arm for most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Carlo De Vita, *Armi Bianche dal Medioevo all’Età Moderna* (Firenze: Centro Di, 1983), p. 30.



Fig. 4. Italian bill, c. 1500 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 14.25.159).

cia. They were certainly hafted arms, hardly distinguishable from improvised agricultural tools – especially in the case of bills.<sup>8</sup>

Curiously, the three villages mentioned in the testimony, Nave, Caino and Lumezzane, were all known for arms manufacturing. In 1609–1610, sword pommels were produced in Lumezzane and at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century flintlock mechanisms and bayonets.<sup>9</sup> Swords were produced in

<sup>8</sup> Mario Troso, *Le armi in asta delle fanterie europee dal 1000 al 1500* (Novara: Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 1988), pp. 137–253.

<sup>9</sup> *Il Catastico Bresciano di Giovanni de Lezze (1609–1610)*, vol. I, ed. by Carlo Pasero (Brescia: F. Apollonio, 1969), p. 190; Giovanni Battista Brocchi, *Trattato mineralogico e chimico sulle miniere di ferro del dipartimento del Mella con l'esposizione della costituzione fisica delle montagne metallifere della Val Trompia*, vol. I (Brescia: Nicolò Bettoni, 1808),

Caino from the end of the sixteenth to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> In Nave, the same production has been recorded starting from the fourth decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Two active forges are already attested at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> It is not known what exactly was produced in those forges in those earlier years, but we can speculate that it was either arms or agricultural tools.

In conclusion, the passage reported covers two important aspects of Brescian history relevant to modern research on martial culture: first, the (successful) attempt by Brescia noblemen to create a paramilitary force, exploiting the bellicosity of the valleys' inhabitants; second, the mention of the arms used by the villagers. It is indeed a peculiar fact, although not directly connected with the story, that the origins of the armed men could be traced to three cities known for their arms production. Nonetheless, as the Brescian illuminist Carlo Maggi wrote in 1781, the manufacture and use of arms were closely linked in the Brescia territories and this industrial production might indeed have contributed to making their inhabitants particularly predisposed to warfare.<sup>12</sup>

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p. 95. Lumezzane is also home to the *Erede Gnutti* company, famous throughout the world for the quality of its fencing foils.

10 Sandro Rossetti, *Le fucine della Valle del Garza* (Brescia: Grafo, 1996), pp. 52–59; *Caino*, ed. by Roberto Gotti (Brescia: Punto Marte, 2011).

11 Rossetti, *Le fucine della Valle de Garza*, pp. 39–47.

12 Carlo Maggi, *Del genio armigero del popolo bresciano. Saggio politico* (Brescia: Daniel Berlendis, 1781), pp. 23–24.