

**THE PROBLEM OF THE URBAN PIG: VIOLENCE AND CIVIC ORDER IN
THE LATE MEDIEVAL ITALIAN CITY-STATE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how medieval Italian city-states attempted to control the presence and potential violence of real pigs on urban streets. How various city-states responded to this issue reveals their concerns about the civic order as well as their ambivalence about animals that were both feared and needed. In turn, this discussion can illuminate the connections between violence and order in the medieval commune.

KEYWORDS

Pig, medieval Italian communes, violence, civic order.

In 1373 the humanist and poet Francesco Petrarca wrote to Francesco da Carrara, lord of Padua, on “the qualities of one who rules a state”¹. While praising him for his abilities as a leader, Petrarca also takes the time to reprove him for his failure to control this disorderly city, causing it to be viewed poorly by citizens and strangers alike. Among many other problems, Petrarca notes the “herds of pigs which you can hear everywhere” and recommends that the streets be cleared of those “filthy unruly creature(s)” which were turning Padua into a pigsty². Later in the same letter he discusses what he believes to be another problem which contributes to the disorder and violence of this virtuous and ancient city: the practice of public funerals when “a crowd of women bursts forth” with their “loud shrieks” and public weeping and wailing, causing, as he claims, some to think that “the city had been captured by the enemy”³. Not surprisingly, Petrarca provides advice for ridding the city of both pigs and mourning women, something he claims other cities had done already: to restore honor to the “patria” pigs and wailing women must be kept off the streets. Pigs should be penned up and mourning women should stay in their homes where they can “weep ... to [their] heart’s content and not sadden the public places”⁴.

Petrarca complained to Padua’s ruler about the actions of weeping, wailing women and grunting, roving pigs because he viewed them as “contrary to a decent, honorable society” revealing his aversion to a medieval civilization he saw as both a

¹ Petrarca, *Letters of Old Age*, vol. 2, Baltimore, 1992, 533-534.

² Petrarca, *op. cit.*, 533-534.

³ Petrarca, *op. cit.*, 552.

⁴ Petrarca, *op. cit.*, 552.

literal and metaphorical pigsty⁵. For him, an honorable and noble city must possess an “outward decorum” so that citizens and strangers alike may enjoy the improved looks of the city; pigs and women did not fit into this plan. Cities must get rid of those visible signs of potential violence and threats to public health.

Petrarca’s comments may seem harsh but he was not alone in his desire to rid many medieval city streets of pigs and women. While these two groups may not appear to go together, in his mind their actions embodied dishonor and their public presence was a sign of potential violence and danger to what he perceived as a “civilized” state. In medieval Italy, as elsewhere, pigs were equated with women (even prostitutes), Jews, and other marginalized groups, often seen as the domestic or internal enemy who needed to be controlled for fear of the disorder they could create⁶. The honor of the city-state and its citizens depended upon the city’s ability to control and dominate those groups that appeared to challenge the civic values of peace and order⁷. Pigs were both desired and feared so controlling or forcing them into specific locations, rather than getting rid of them, was good economic and political policy and helped these city-states achieve the “decent, honorable society” that Petrarca desired for Padua.

Urban pigs became the focus of various medieval Italian city-states in their quest to repress violence and promote peace and order. Much has been written about the presence of various marginalized groups in medieval Italian city-states, particularly Jews, women, prostitutes, among others, and how they were viewed as dangers to society. Scholars have noted how and why medieval people made connections between pigs and these groups yet much less have been devoted to the presence of pigs on city streets⁸. This paper will discuss the presence and potential violence of real pigs on medieval urban streets. How various Italian city-states attempted to control these animals reveals their concerns about the civic order as well as their ambivalence about animals that were both feared and needed. In turn, this discussion can illuminate the connections made between violence and order in the medieval commune.

Real pigs were both big business and big concerns in medieval Florence and elsewhere⁹. In his well-known *Cronica*, the Florentine Giovanni Villani reports that approximately 30,000 pigs were needed each year in early fourteenth-century Florence; second only to the 60,000 sheep that were required annually¹⁰. Many pigs brought into

⁵ István Bejczy, “The State as a Work of Art: Petrarch and His *Speculum Principis* (*Sen.* 14.1)”, *History of Political Thought*, 15.3, 1994, 320 and Diane Owen Hughes, “Mourning Rites, Memory, and Civilization in Premodern Italy”, in J. Chiffolleau – L. Martines – A. Paravicini Bagliani (edd.), *Riti e Rituali nelle Società Medievali*, Spoleto, 1994, 25.

⁶ For example, the city of York in England connected pigs with prostitutes and attempted to control the movement of both groups; P. J. P. Goldberg, “Pigs and Prostitutes: Streetwalking in Comparative Perspective”, in K. Lewis – N. J. Menuge – K. M. Phillips (edd.), *Young Medieval Women*, New York, 1999, 172-193.

⁷ Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, New York, 1991, 19, 27.

⁸ For connections made between Jews and pigs see Claudine Fabre-Vassas, *The Singular Beast: Jews, Christians, and the Pig*, New York, 1997. In her recent article D. Jørgensen discusses the presence of pigs in late medieval English cities; Dolly Jørgensen, “Running Amuck? Urban Swine Management in Late Medieval England”, *Agricultural History* 87.4, 2013, 429-451.

⁹ Jørgensen notes that pigs were the focus of battles about civic reform in late medieval English cities because they were so numerous and were raised and slaughtered in the cities for their meat; Jørgensen, loc. cit., 431, 440.

¹⁰ Giovanni Villani, “Cronica” in *Croniche di Giovanni, Matteo, e Filippo Villani*, Trieste, 1867, vol. 1, 420. Perhaps relying upon Villani, Benedetto Dei also reports that a list of *entrate* from 1338 Florence “voleva 4000 vitelle e 60 mila chastroni e 30 mila porci e 20 mila becchi drento”; Benedetto Dei, *La Cronica dall’anno 1400 all’anno 1500*, Florence, 1984, 179.

the city were intended for other markets while, as Villani indicates, many were slaughtered and consumed in Florence. This massive butchering of pigs within the city walls was considered so noxious and so dangerous to public health that in 1319 Florence passed a statute prohibiting the killing of these and other animals inside the city walls in any public street unless done within certain enclosed spaces established by the priors, specifically in the area of Borgo Santi Apostoli, near the Arno River¹¹. Only six years later, in 1325, the threat of roaming pigs prompted the Florentine podestà, or chief law enforcer, to pass a statute forbidding anyone from having pigs, sows, or piglets within the city walls for more than fifteen days¹². These statutes suggest that issues of danger, public health, and concerns about the economic benefits of pigs existed in an uneasy balance¹³.

Some pigs were deemed more of a problem than others. Those pigs marked with a blue T on their chests, known as *porci di Sant'Antonio* or Saint Anthony's pigs because they were owned by the Antonine canons, were thought to be a particular problem because they could wander the streets freely and were not to be touched or harmed¹⁴. Antonine pigs were the cause of so much frustration and fear for their attacks on people that they, along with their clerical owners, became the focal point of jokes, folktales, and bawdy stories that are preserved in many of Florence's greatest literary works. In *Paradiso* 29 of his *Commedia* Dante Alighieri comments upon dishonest preachers who ply their trade simply to inflate their own egos and pocketbooks, thus, as he notes so crudely, "fattening Saint Anthony's pig"¹⁵.

Dante's near contemporary, Giovanni Boccaccio, also connects pigs to deceptive friars. A story from the *Decameron* describes how some citizens discovered one friar's treachery and, as a result, he was tied up and dressed like a wild pig and paraded through the streets of Venice during Carnival¹⁶. The violent chasing and killing of pigs during Venice's Carnival was common, as Peter Burke notes, yet pigs were also the source of food and pleasure during this time of excess before Lent – the "carne" in Carnival¹⁷. In his famous introduction to the *Decameron*, Boccaccio tells the disturbing story of two pigs that chewed the clothes of a plague victim and, soon thereafter, die of the dreaded disease. The 14th-century Florentine writer, Franco Sacchetti, tells a story in which the famous painter, Giotto, gets trampled by a roving Antonine pig in Via Cocomero (now Via Ricasoli) and survives to tell what he perceives to be an amusing story¹⁸. All of these stories reveal complex emotions toward these animals: hatred, fear, desire, and even delight.

¹¹ Robert Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, Florence, 1962, vol. 4, 285.

¹² Romolo Caggese, "Statuti del Podestà", *Statuti della repubblica Fiorentina dell'anno 1325*, vol. 2, Florence, 1921, 188.

¹³ Jørgensen asserts that some English cities tried to maintain civic order and cleanliness by controlling the raising and butchering of pigs but this was challenging because these animals were so desired; Jørgensen, "Running Amuck?...", 447.

¹⁴ Franco Sacchetti, *Il Trecentonovelle*, Florence, 1946, 245.

¹⁵ "Di questo ingrassa il porco di Sant'Antonio / e altri assai che sono ancor più porci / pagando di moneta senza conio"; Dante Alighieri, "Paradiso", in *Commedia* (ed. Niccolò Tommaseo), Venice, 1838, 224.

¹⁶ Giovanni Boccaccio, "Decameron", in *Opere* (ed. Cesare Segre), Milan, 1966, 276-277. In the third *novella* of the third day, G. Boccaccio equates clergy with pigs, saying that the clergy are so inept and incapable of taking care of themselves that "si rifuggono dove aver possano da mangiar, come il porco"; Boccaccio, op. cit., 189.

¹⁷ Peter Burke, "The Carnival of Venice", in *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge, 1987, 184.

¹⁸ Sacchetti, op. cit., 165.

These stories, while humorous, reveal the ambiguous relationship many city-states and their citizens had with pigs. Desired for their meat, seen as “private” property, and kept almost as pets in urban households, pigs were considered “table companion[s] who [were] kept yet feared for [their] potential savagery,” as Fabre-Vassas notes¹⁹. They were the focus of Carnival and its various public rituals (like pig racing in Venice) and the terms “porco” and “troia” were used as public insults that verbally attacked people and their honor. These stories also reveal problems that urban pigs caused as possible sources of plague and threats to people on city streets. Even Sacchetti’s story about Giotto ends with the painter laughing about being trampled by a pig, as if this were a common occurrence on busy city streets.

The pig that trampled Giotto was an Antonine pig yet statutes and laws discuss the problems that all pigs posed to the urban environment. As city-states began to establish and define themselves as unique entities, the process and location of raising pigs were changing, with more and more pigs being penned up and fed scraps from people’s tables rather than foraging for acorns and other food in rural areas²⁰. As a result, more pigs were being brought into urban areas where their movement came into conflict with the growing populations of the city-states and the communal and patriarchal goals of peace, order, and public justice²¹. Indeed, contemporary sources seem to note the increased presence of pigs on the streets at the same time city-states were growing in population and defining themselves as political entities, as Lansing notes, and becoming more concerned with issues of peace and order in general²².

The presence of Antonine pigs on Italian city streets date as early as the 12th century when the Antonine Hospital Order became popular in Italy, although specific dates of foundations vary considerably; the order in Florence was founded in 1333, for example²³. In her study of the Antonine Order in Italy, Fenelli notes that the cities without Antonine priories tended to prohibit the public presence of all pigs while those with priories tended to allow exceptions to these laws; the Antonines were traditionally allowed to raise pigs as potential food for the poor and could have a limited number of pigs within city walls²⁴. Pigs were not only good for the economy but also good for religious charity.

In 1335 the city of Brescia, under Bernabò Visconti, passed a law restricting what times of the year citizens could have pigs in the city²⁵. Apparently the pigs caused so many problems due to their large number that only fifty years later, in 1385, the city passed even stricter laws. Under Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the city passed an ordinance which reduced the number of pigs that the Antonines could have to 38 (down from 400) and prohibited their pigs from wandering the streets for fear that they would harm or

¹⁹ C. Fabre-Vassas, *The Singular Beast...*, 3.

²⁰ John Aberth, *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages: The Crucible of Nature*, London, 2013, 158.

²¹ In her work on gender and authority in medieval Italian city-states, Lansing argues that the “patriarchal nature of the state” should be considered; Carol Lansing, “Gender and Civic Authority: Sexual Control in a Medieval Italian Town”, *Journal of Social History* 31.1, 1997, 34.

²² C. Lansing sees a connection between establishing peace and order and developing state authority; C. Lansing, “Gender and Civic Authority...”, 37.

²³ Marina Baruzzi – Massimo Montanari (edd.), *Porci e porcari nel medioevo*, San Marino di Bentivoglio, 1981, 64.

²⁴ Laura Fenelli, *Il tau, il fuoco, il maiale: i canonici regolari di sant’Antonio Abate tra assistenza e devozione*, Spoleto, 2006, 155-156.

²⁵ A. Zanelli, “I porci di Sant’Antonio in Brescia”, *Archivio Storico Lombardo* 3.17, 1902, 378-379.

mutilate young children²⁶. Clearly the city was concerned about the potential violence that the pigs could inflict upon children walking the streets. As a concession to the order, however, the city allowed it to have two castrated male piglets in each quarter, all of whom were marked to identify them: their right ears were clipped and they were required to wear bells²⁷. As Fenelli notes, these ear markings were supposed to prevent abuses by the Antonines, who might be tempted to add pigs to their restricted number, but were also imposed to prevent any thefts²⁸. The placing of bells or rattles on the pigs' necks was also intended to alert people, even children, to the presence of pigs on busy streets, preventing the collisions and injuries that we saw with Giotto in Sacchetti's story.

While the passage of this ordinance suggests that the city believed that the Antonines did not take much care in controlling their pigs and preventing them from inflicting harm, there may be other reasons why the city chose to take charge of these pigs' presence on the streets. In her article on civic order and gender, Lansing argues that medieval Italian city-states sought to control male sexual appetites in order to promote civic order and, I would argue, male honor²⁹. City-states, as she states, "linked violent disorder with gendered attributes"³⁰. While she focuses her attention on men and women and crimes involving sex, her idea could also be applied to the gender and sexual activity of animals. As the ordinance of Brescia notes, only two young, male, castrated pigs were allowed in each quarter of the city, suggesting that the pigs' sex, age, and inability to impregnate female pigs made them appear less physically dangerous to the public and, more importantly, less symbolically threatening to the male civic authority. Likewise, the medieval English city of Beverley outlawed wandering pigs except sows with piglets because, as Jørgensen surmises, they were seen as less aggressive and violent, perhaps due to their gender and age³¹. The pigs of Brescia were identified by their clipped ears and bells, labeling them as the physical property of the Antonines and, supposedly, under their (male) control. Controlling these pigs attempted to maintain civic order and, in turn, projected that order back to the city, to its citizens, and to outsiders.

The requirement that young, less threatening pigs wear bells recalls another well-known and problematic group of streetwalkers: female prostitutes. Like the pigs, female prostitutes in medieval Bologna were required to have bells to alert "honest" citizens to their presence on the streets and could be fined for not wearing them³². Similarly, in late fourteenth-century Florence public prostitutes were required to wear bells on their hats³³. These women were considered sources of potential disorder because, as Lansing notes, they – and others – had some freedom of movement and agency and were not under the direct control of men³⁴. Rather than rid the cities of these women, as Petrarca recommended to Padua about its mourning women, leaders of other city-states instead

²⁶ A. Zanelli, "I porci...", 379.

²⁷ A. Zanelli, loc. cit., 379. D. Jørgensen notes that the medieval English city of Bristol clipped the tails of pigs caught roaming the streets; D. Jørgensen, "Running Amuck?...", 433.

²⁸ L. Fenelli, op. cit., 162-163.

²⁹ C. Lansing, "Gender and Civic Authority...", 33-35.

³⁰ C. Lansing, loc. cit., 33.

³¹ D. Jørgensen, loc. cit., 433.

³² Diane Owen Hughes, "Earrings for Circumcision: Distinction and Purification in the Italian Renaissance City", in Richard C. Trexler (ed.), *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, Binghamton, 1985, 166-167.

³³ Gene Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, Toronto, 1971, 191.

³⁴ C. Lansing, loc. cit., 35.

wished to control the public presence of these potentially disruptive and disorderly women since these women, like pigs, contributed to the cities both socially and economically³⁵.

This connection between the potential for disorder of pigs and prostitutes is seen elsewhere in medieval Europe. In 1301 the English city of York passed an ordinance that outlawed the keeping of "...pigs which go in the streets by day or night" and, in the same ordinance, dictated that no "prostitute [shall] stay in the city"³⁶. The reason, as Goldberg states, was not the keeping of pigs in the city but rather their lack of control by the owners, hence the additional concern with controlling the female prostitutes' presence on the city streets³⁷. Goldberg also notes that this law was passed while the royal court was located temporarily in York, thus the city may have wished to present itself and its public streets as orderly, reputable, and worthy of the court's presence³⁸. Whether or not York allowed both pigs (male or female) and prostitutes on the streets after the court left remains to be explained. Certainly the passage of various statutes in Italy also suggests that medieval Italian city-states, like York, were concerned with controlling disorder and preserving civic order and decorum.

Both Antonine and "secular" pigs were such problems that many Italian city-states passed laws to control the movement and numbers of all pigs for reasons of hygiene, public and civic order, security of their citizens, and the general appearance of city streets. In the thirteenth-century Orvieto appointed several "pig officers" who regulated wanderings pigs by denouncing their owners in a court of law³⁹. In 1288, the Commune of Bologna passed a law on the "breeding and traffic of pigs" and ordered that "...no one could keep sows ["troie"] with piglets in the city of Bologna, or [sows] without piglets in the neighborhood of the city, up to a mile"⁴⁰. The statute continues by prohibiting people from allowing sows and pigs ["scrofe e maiali"] to wander the city and the boroughs unless they have nose rings and, in the case of the males, are castrated, just as we saw in Brescia⁴¹. Given that castrated male animals are less violent, city-states may have viewed these castrated pigs as less dangerous and less threatening to the male civic order. Governments in other cities like Lucca specified which streets, piazze, churches, and other public areas were off limits to wandering pigs, suggesting that certain places were considered more important for trade as well as civic identity and honor and were guarded more closely⁴².

A cursory examination of various collections of medieval statutes reveals that cities such as Bologna, Brescia, Chianciano, Florence, Orte (Lazio), Lucca, Bassano del Grappa (Veneto), Perugia, Pescia, Pistoia, and Rome all passed laws concerning the control of pigs and other animals on city streets and in piazze⁴³. Many of these early statutes date from the 12th, 13th, and early 14th centuries when cities were growing in population, solidifying their communal identities, and wishing to control the violence that was so endemic to their overcrowded public areas. As Philip Jones states in his work on Italian city-states, "families of statutes emerged" in many city-states and were

³⁵ See for example C. Lansing, "Gender and Civic Authority...", 33-34.

³⁶ Michael Prestwich, *York Civic Ordinances, 1301*, 49, York, 1976, 16.

³⁷ P. J. P. Goldberg, "Pigs and Prostitutes...", 172.

³⁸ P. J. P. Goldberg, loc. cit., 172-173.

³⁹ C. Lansing, loc. cit., 36.

⁴⁰ Gina Fasoli – Pietro Sella (edd.), *Statuti di Bologna dell'anno 1288*, Vatican City, 1939, 136-137.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² See L. Fenelli, "*Il tau, il fuoco, il maiale*", and A. Zanelli, "I porci...".

⁴³ Idem.

dependent upon major centers such as Bologna, Milan, and Padua, hence the similarity of laws about pigs between various cities⁴⁴. Certainly more work must be done to tease out all of the laws about pigs, what fines and punishments were implemented when these laws were broken, and what these laws reveal about how city-states negotiated the balance between economic necessity and public order.

What is most intriguing is how city-states perceived the violent acts of animals, particularly those against people in these medieval urban areas. As Aberth notes in his history of the environment in the Middle Ages, medieval scholars perceived animals as being without reason. Any violent act committed by an animal was the fault of the owner for having failed to control his or her beast⁴⁵. Lansing sees that male civic order and authority were linked to issues of sex and gender in the medieval Italian city-states, so too did city-states connect the presence of pigs to this sense of order. Failure to control one's pigs could lead to disorder and violence and threatened the civic peace and order that city-states were trying to maintain. However, ownership of pigs was a complex issue since both religious and lay people owned pigs. How did Italian city-states negotiate these thorny relationships with urban pigs and their owners? What does this suggest about how the city-state perceived itself and its sense of identity and order? More work must be done to analyze these complex relationships between humans and animals.

As wanderers, sources of potential violence against children and adults alike, and carriers of disease, pigs were seen as signs of social disorder, gluttony, filth, and often connected with those groups considered the "domestic enemy," that is, Jews, women, and other animals⁴⁶. While this paper focuses on the presence of real pigs as sources of potential physical violence, the term "pig" was also a source of potential verbal violence since it was, and continues to be, a widely used insult on one's honor. The symbolic presence of pigs in medieval urban environments also needs to be examined more closely since these insults evoked powerful and ambivalent emotions for both the attackers and the attacked.

This paper has outlined some of the critical sources that reveal the problems of urban pigs and how city-states attempted to address these issues. Determined to bring peace, order, and public justice to unruly streets where people and animals roamed, city-states established many rules about how they should appear and behave, both to themselves and to outsiders, as Petrarca notes about Padua. Pigs were only one source of violence on city-streets but they occupied a unique and problematic space in the medieval commune. They were desired and feared and, as Petrarca laments about Padua, they brought great dishonor and disorder to what he perceived as a "civilized" state and needed to be controlled properly. If, as Trexler proposes, the "good commune" meant that political males asserted their control over marginalized groups, then a failure to control such groups not only endangered the comune but also threatened to expose the tenuous nature of a narrowly defined sense of male, civic order⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ Philip Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria*, Oxford, 1997, 373-374.

⁴⁵ J. Aberth, *An Environmental History...*, 153. Court records from medieval England also show that people were fined for not controlling their pigs; D. Jørgensen, "Running Amuck? ...", 433-434.

⁴⁶ Peter Stallybrass – Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, 1986, 53. According to Tom Pettitt, there may be evidence from some fourteenth-century Italian *laude* to suggest an association made between sodomites and pigs but this remains to be ferreted out; T. Pettitt, "Skreaming like a pigge halfe stickt: Vernacular Topoi in the Carnavalesque Martydom of Edward II", *Orbis Litterarum* 60.2, 2005, 95.

⁴⁷ Trexler, *Public Life...*, 15-19.

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