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**27, 2019, 4**

*V čast Claudiu Povolu*  
*In onore di Claudio Povoło*  
*In honour of Claudio Povoło*

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## VIOLENCE AND SACRED SPACE IN EARLY MODERN VENICE

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Republic of Venice had comparatively high rates of violence by early modern European standards. This article presents new archival evidence which details one facet of the problem – sacred space. Churches were not immune from violence because of their social and political functions. The research explores the multiple uses of sacred space – as places of asylum, theatres for the display of honour, pick-up joints and magnets for paid assassins – and points the way to further research.*

*Keywords: sacred space, honour, violence, asylum, policing*

## LA VIOLENZA E LO SPAZIO SACRO NELLA VENEZIA DELLA PRIMA ETÀ MODERNA

**SINTESI**

*Secondo i criteri europei della prima età moderna, la Repubblica di Venezia registrava alti tassi di violenza. Il contributo presenta nuove testimonianze archivistiche che descrivono in dettaglio un aspetto del problema: lo spazio sacro. Data la loro funzione sociale e politica, le chiese non erano immuni dalla violenza. Questo studio esplora i vari usi dello spazio sacro – come luoghi di rifugio, teatri per le prove d'onore, luoghi di incontro tra i due generi e calamite per sicari –, indicando la strada verso ulteriori ricerche.*

*Parole chiave: spazio sacro, onore, violenza, rifugio, sorveglianza*

Visitors to Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth century frequently recorded their shock at the levels of violence they witnessed.<sup>1</sup> The memoir of Sir John Reresby, a 22 year-old Yorkshireman and exile from the English Republic when he arrived in Italy in 1656, is no exception. Like many English gentlemen before him he was attracted by the possibility of polishing his manners at the University of Padua. In October he crossed into Venetian territory at Edolo and headed for Bergamo. It was here that he came across something that he had encountered nowhere else on his European travels – bandits:

*But by good fortune many of them had been kild [sic] the day we passed near Bergamo, in a combate between them and the country that had risen on purpose to disperse them, soe that we passed safe without injurie either to our persons or purses, which few had done that way for some time before* (Browning, 1936, 12).

From Bergamo Reresby travelled to Brescia, Verona and Vicenza, arriving in Padua on 13 November. Here, and at Venice, he passed the winter, studying Italian and mathematics and perfecting his fencing and dancing. In Spring 1657 he travelled to Florence and returned to Venice in the summer before leaving for Austria. Reresby's six months in the Venetian Republic left a strong impression of the Italian predilection for violence:

*They never forgive injuries, which if they cannot revenge themselves, they entail them upon their posterities. The manner of revenge is base and cowardly, usually taken upon advantage by their bravos, a sort of desperate criminals, entertained by gentlemen having feuds, that protect them from the law, and so have them at their devotion, to practise whatever they enjoin them upon their adversaries* (Ivatt, 1904, 90).

These impressions were informed by the locals he encountered. He was told by a member of the degli Oddi family in Padua that he had been unable to leave his house for years because of a feud, 'for fear of being shot, for he knew ambush had often been laid by his adversary to take away his life' (Ivatt, 1904, 91). Another Paduan gentlemen had made peace with his enemy. But he told Reresby that his mother importuned him to ignore it, telling him it was shameful to forgive an injury 'and showing the bloody shirt worn by his dead father when killed, the more to incite his enmity' (Ivatt, 1904, 91). Some doubt has been cast on the veracity of Reresby's observations.<sup>2</sup> But his impressions are given credence by the statistical evidence. Around the time that Reresby stayed in Padua the *Podestà*, in one of his regular reports to the Council of Ten, recorded fifty homicides in the region (October 1654–May 1655) (Borgherini-Scarabellin, 1917, 34). The population of the Padovano was

1 The authors would like thank Mark Roodhouse and Annamaria Valent for help with the data inputting and Helen Goodchild for plotting the GIS map.

2 On the varying editions: Browning, 1936, xi–xvii.

no more than 200,000, equating to a homicide rate of 43 per 100,000, a high rate of homicide by European standards at the time, but not unusual in Italy.<sup>3</sup>

The Padovano was by no means an exception in the Republic. Other parts of the *Terraferma* experienced even higher homicide rates in the seventeenth century (Carroll, 2016, 101–142). The quantitative evidence and Resesby's eyewitness testimony lends support to the remarkable body of work of Claudio Povolo, who has demonstrated that aristocratic violence and feuding were dominating features of social and political life in the Republic in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. He was also one of the first historians to identify that the problem of violence was not receding. The very high rates of violence in the Veneto, one of Europe's most economically advanced and civilized regions, contradicted the received wisdom that the state progressively pacified the social elite (Povolo, 1997). We now know that the trend in the Veneto is part of a European pattern of rising violence from the end of the sixteenth century (Carroll, 2006; Roth, 2009, 27–60; Rose, 2016). In many respects this should come as little surprise in the *Terraferma*, where Venetian control was predicated on the co-option of local aristocrats, who were largely left in control of urban institutions. The excesses of nobles and their *bravi* was not an invention of nineteenth-century romanticism. The villainous Don Rodrigo in Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi* is a composite figure, but one rooted, as Povolo has shown, in historical truth and real events in the Veneto (Povolo, 2014). The Republic tolerated its Don Rodrigos because they were aristocrats and because their services were required for the defence of the Empire.

Disorder led to a clamour for justice. Thanks to the Povolo's work, we have a better understanding of the Republic's legal system than probably any other Italian state (Povolo & Chiodi, 2004). The number of courts and their remit expanded during the 1530s in response to the violence and insecurity. Beyond the city, the Council of Ten asserted its sovereign jurisdiction over the heterogeneous courts and the local legal customs of Venetian possessions on land and overseas. It was kept well informed of local affairs through the regular reports of the local *Podestà*, who enjoyed wide judicial powers, and encouraged denunciations by private persons, which it could refer to a team of inquisitors. In 1580 the Council of Ten handed sweeping military powers to its governors to clean up the problem of banditry (Povolo, 1986). There was a desire to tackle aristocratic violence, and there were some high profile prosecutions. In particular, the trial and imprisonment of Paolo Orgiano (1605–1607) (Povolo, 2003).

The 'wild-west' style violence that characterized much of rural Veneto around 1600 was not therefore an indication of lawlessness. Far from it: the violence was the product of the ways in which powerful interest groups used the law and the

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3 43 is a conservative figure: Padua is estimated to have had a population of 150,000 in 1548 and 275,000 in 1766, but we must take into account the population collapse in the wake of the 1628–1631 plague: Fornasin & Zannini, 1999.

organs of the state to pursue their enemies.<sup>4</sup> Vendetta was widely seen as legitimate, as long it was conducted according to legal norms. Povolo has recently demonstrated the limits of punitive justice and just how far politicized factions maintained a grip on rural life. Intimidation and litigation went hand in hand. Rising rates of litigation and violence in the sixteenth century are both signifiers of increased social conflict. In the Veneto this was closely associated with social mobility and the attempts of the rural notability to use the law courts to defend their rights against the pretensions of the local nobility. Wealthy notables possessed the resources to use the law, but were also well armed and capable of deploying significant force. Bortolamio Pasqualin, for example, silk merchant and leader of the commune of Malo, twenty kilometres North of Vicenza, organized his village to resist the aristocratic repression. He appealed to the courts in Venice against judgments his enemies obtained in Vicenza. But the murder of Pasqualin's eldest son, a lawyer, in 1577, is both an indication of the threat he posed to the local aristocracy and the limits of the law. Pasqualin was not free to pursue the killers. He was forced to formally renounce (*rinuncia*) his legal pursuit and sign a peace pact (Povolo, 2010).

The very high rates of homicide recorded in early seventeenth century Brescia, where the *Podestà* recorded more than 2,800 homicides in 1609–1611, was partly a consequence of ways in which opposing factions supported and profited from banditry (Guerrini, 1930, 79). The Zanoni band, which operated in the region of Lake Garda, until peace was made in 1607, was involved in 100 homicides. In May 1610 the Venetian *Podestà* in Salò, Bernardino Ganassoni, was assassinated in the town's cathedral during Mass by former members of the Zanoni gang. It seems that Ganassoni had been intent on cleaning up the town and this threatened vested interests, who put a contract on his head. Ganassoni's murder was a direct challenge to the Venetian state and the assassins were hunted down and killed in a pitched battle in 1617. The victory was recorded in two ex-votos. But behind the propaganda there is good reason to believe that the problem had not been fully solved. The bandits were dead, but the faction leaders – the merchants, priests and money-lenders who had wanted Ganassoni dead – would continue to employ bandits so long as it was in their economic and political interest to do so (Povolo, 2011, 96–146).

The location of Ganassoni's assassination was by no means unusual. Assassinations inside churches or in their environs were a common occurrence in Italy. In 1612 Giorgio Pagliari dal Bosco lamented the custom of striking at an enemy during the elevation of the Host: 'in the kingdom [of Naples], in Abruzzo, the Marche and Romagna the most cruel vendetta and murders take place in Churches everyday' (Carroll, 2016, 114). Historians of early modern Italy have long underlined the ways in which space acted as a theatre for the display of social capital through the exchange of words and gestures (Weinstein, 1994). Verbal duelling and posturing was a way of winning honour and capital without spilling blood. Sacred spaces were not exempt from these dramas. Religious services brought together enemies who normally avoided each other and they engendered conflicts

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4 On legal pluralism and the use of the law: Bellabarba, 2008.

about precedence and competing claims to sacred space. Priests were not separate from factional and vendetta violence, and neither were their churches immune from it. Priests might even employ their own *bravi* (Perego, 2001). In Lake Garda the bandit gangs benefited from the protection of the clergy. Churches were also favoured sites for assassination. The symbolism of killing a tyrant during the sacrifice of the Mass has recently been explored by Carlo Guarienti (Guarienti, 2014, 53–86). In spite of these advances and the abundance of evidence, the problem of violence in sacred space remains largely unexplored. The rest of this paper explores the phenomenon of the Venetian Republic, shedding new light on Venetian society and the operation of the state.

### POLICING SACRED SPACE

In 1524 The Council of Ten responded to those ‘who have no respect for sacred spaces nor reverence for Our Lord, nor fear of punishment; they unsheathe arms, cross steel and kill each other’, issuing severe penalties:

*Henceforth, anyone who dares, intends or imagines it is possible to unsheathe a sword, knife or arm of any sort in church, or in any of the five Scuole, or in any monastery in our city, by that very act they will incur the irremissible penalty of 5 years of banishment from Venice and its district and a fine of 300 lire di piccoli. And if they transgress their banishment and they are caught they must remain a year in prison and then the banishment will be reapplied, however often it happens. And anyone who at anytime captures them will have 500 lire di piccoli from their goods, if the condemned has goods; if not, the captors are entitled to payment from the state (ASVe. CXDMR, 46, 174r–v).<sup>5</sup>*

In 1537, a new court, the *Esecutori sopra la Bestemmia*, was established to police the city’s numerous churches and ecclesiastical establishments. Its creation was also influenced by political considerations. The new court must be seen in the light of the long-term struggle of the Republic to limit Papal authority and ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The Church claimed jurisdiction over all sacred spaces, including canonries, clerical residences and monasteries, as well as churchyards. The immunity of churches from secular jurisdiction contributed to the jurisdictional labyrinth

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5 5 January 1524: ‘L’è divenuta ad tanto extrema insolentia la licentiosa audatia de la zoventù de questa terra, che al tuto l’è necessario refrenarla: maxime non se havendo respecto a i lochi sacri, dove senza reverentia del Signor Dio, né timor de la pena, desnudano arme, ferriscono et amazano, come la experientia l’ha demonstrato...che se alcuno decetero ardirà in chiesa, over in alcuna de le cinque Scuole, o in alcuno monasterio de questa nostra cità, desnudar spada, cortelo o arma de cadauna sorte, qual dir o imaginar se possi, ipso facto se intendi esser incorso in pena irrimissibile de bando per anni cinque de Venetia, et del destretto. Et ulterius de pagar livre 300 de pizoli. Et s’el contrafarà al bando et preso sarà, star debi anno uno in le preson serado, et poi sia remandado al bando, et hoc totiens quotiens. Et chi quello cadauna volta prenderà habi L 500 de pizoli de i boni soi, se ne saranno, sin minus, de i danari de la Signoria nostra’ (ASVe. CXDMR, 46, 174r–v).

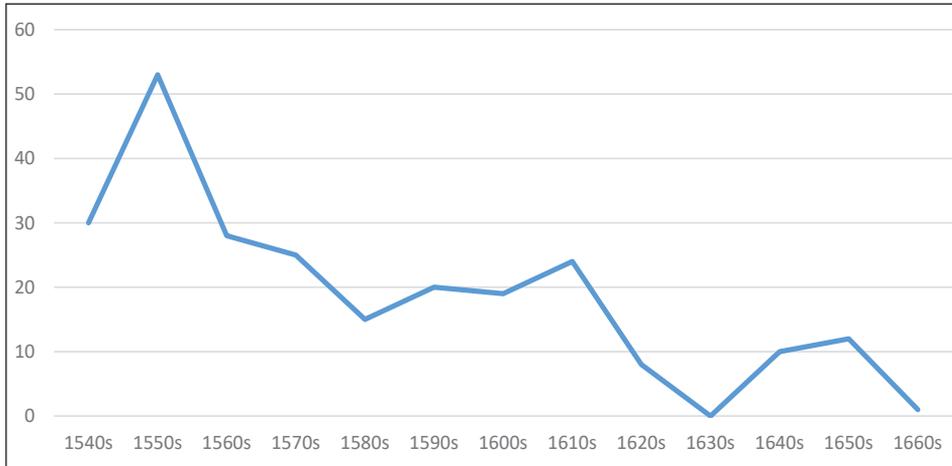


Fig. 1: *Esecutori sopra la Bestemmia, 1542–1669: Total Offences in Sacred Space.*

that characterized the exercise of justice in Italy. A good example of the pernicious consequences of ecclesiastical immunity is asylum. In many parts of Europe the right to sanctuary in sacred spaces had been restricted or abolished altogether in the Middle Ages. Already at the end of the fifteenth century there had been attempts by Italian states to restrict the practice. But following the Council of Trent successive Popes upheld clerical immunity and the right to sanctuary in sacred spaces, including churchyards, cemeteries, hospitals, confraternity houses, rectories and episcopal palaces (Perego, 2001, 158–159). Technically, magistrates had the right to enter them and arrest criminals, but asylum remained in widespread use and the conflict between civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction was a major factor in hampering justice into the mid-eighteenth century (Ajello, 1968, 23–68).

The records of the *Esecutori* offer a valuable insight into the levels and nature of violence in sacred space. Between 1542 and 1669 it issued 245 sentences against 284 people. Figure 1 shows that the 1550s were the most intense period of court activity. The number of cases then stabilised at around 20 per decade from the 1560s to the 1610s. There was a general decline from 1620 with no cases at all in the 1630s. The seventeenth century also shows qualitative changes with a decline in the involvement of weapons and more sentences involving verbal violence, and a growing concern for public morality, which is illustrated by the gender ratio of the offenders. Of the 171 sixteenth-century cases only three concerned a female felon, but of the 74 accused in the seventeenth century, 20 or 27 % were female. One explanation for this is the Counter-Reformation concern for morality and the polluting presence of prostitutes in sacred space, as they touted for business. In addition, there were women like Francesca, mistress of Vicario Fusi, accused in 1650 of ‘living scandalously ... going round dressed as a man not only in this city, but also in the



Fig. 2: *The Spatial Distribution of Offences.*

Church of the Madonna Grande in Treviso, and in San Niccolò' (ASVe. EB, 62, Raspa da 1649 a 1658, 34v). And Polonia Colerina, arrested in 1653, for placing a bag of magic ingredients under the altar table of the Madonna in San Fantino (ASVe. EB, 62, Raspa da 1649 a 1658, 112r). Whether these long terms trends indicate a decline of violence, or reflect the changing priorities of the court, warrants further investigation. Caution is required when making claims for the success of repression. Quite apart from the dark figure of cases which never reached court, the problem was not altogether cured even in the eighteenth century. For instance, San Barnaba had to be shut in 1749 in preparation for its re-consecration after blood was spilled (BMC. GD-NPD, 67.I, 28v).

The overwhelming majority of cases, were altercations (*tumulto*) between men, who had caused a public scandal (*scandolo*) often accompanied by insults, an exchange of punches, and the drawing of weapons, which are mentioned in 36 instances, usually a dagger or a 'naked blade', but in two cases a pistol was involved. And churches (172 instances) were overwhelming where these fights took place, which were much less common in convents and monasteries (16), the *scuole*, Venice's confraternity houses (12), and hospitals (1).

Figure 2 gives an indication of the spatial distribution of offences, which were fairly evenly distributed across the city's six *sestieri*. A substantial majority of estab-

	Nobles	Ecclesiastics	Officials /Soldiers	Professionals	Servants	Artisans/ Tradespeople
Offenders (187)	11 (6 %)	21 (11%)	28 (15%)	13 (7%)	5 (2%)	109 (59%)
Victims (93)	2 (2%)	31 (33%)	7 (7.5%)	3 (3%)	5 (5.3%)	45 (48%)

Fig. 3: *The Social Profile of Offenders and Victims.*

lishments recorded only between 1 to 3 incidents during the time period surveyed. Four major ecclesiastical institutions in the city in different *sestieri* top the list: San Giovanni e Paolo (Castello; 16 incidents), the Frari (San Polo; 7), Santo Stefano (San Marco; 7), and Santi Apostoli (Canareggio; 6). This undoubtedly reflects the propensity of large crowds to flock to them on feast days when their processions and music made for a great spectacle. The significance of San Giovanni e Paolo for disputants – it was the location of the Scuola Grande di San Marco, one of the most important Scuola in the city, and where from 1234 funerals of the doges were celebrated – requires further investigation.

The time and place of the fights is frequently noted. Just to note here the extent of the court's jurisdiction which extended, for example, to the Piazza San Marco and the manner in which space determined the gravity of the offence: most fights took place in the churchyard or portico and offences closer to the altar were treated more severely (ASVe. EB, 61, Raspa da 1593 a 1614, 26v, 179r). Easter, mentioned thirteen times, March (34) and May (31) were by far the most frequent times for a court appearance. If we take into account the court's holiday recess, this timing supports evidence from elsewhere that the high point of the Christian calendar was a particularly sensitive period as enemies attempted to get their revenge in before confession and communion (Carroll, 2016, 110).

The social status of offenders is more regularly recorded (187) than that of victims (93). Figure 3 shows that the social elite were over-represented, especially if one considers that the majority of soldiers here were officers of the law and the servants largely employed in the households of officials. At the end of the sixteenth century Venice had a population of 150,000, but only about 2,000 were citizens eligible for public office. Prostitutes notwithstanding, there is an almost complete absence of the Venetian underclass, although the status of the labouring and indigent poor may have gone unrecorded. The artisans and tradesmen were, on the whole, members of one of the city's 120 guilds and, while there were some low status trades, there were just as many high status artisans and merchants. So, for example, 8 tanners (a dishonourable trade) and 6 (unskilled) gondoliers appear alongside the more honourable, such as leathersellers (2), stonemasons (6) and a lens grinder (*occalier*). Among the profes-

sionals we find booksellers (3), apothecaries (4) and barber-surgeons (5) and the son of a physician. The large numbers of priests who appear as victims and offenders confirms the picture from rural Lombardy that they were part of local society and commonly involved in violent disputes and conflicts, either with each other or their parishioners (Perego, 2001).

What united all these men, high and low-born, was that they had honour and status to defend. Guilds had their own chapels and owned or rented pews for their members, often in prominent positions in the nave, and they provided protection and support when disputes occurred. A punch up between metal-workers (*scuola dei fabbri*) and leather-workers (*scuola dei pellizzeri*) in the Basilica of San Marco in 1556 resulted in a fine for the head (*gastaldo*) of the metal-workers guild. In addition, the court also stipulated that each offender should collectively pay 10 ducats, ‘and they should not force any other member of the guild to pay the fine’, suggesting the role that such collective responsibility played in forming a common identity (ASVe. EB, b. 56, Notatorio 1542–1560, 148v). Although we might expect violence in a sacred space to warrant more severe punishment, very few sentences resulted in corporal punishment (only one whipping and 3 sentences to the galleys). Most offenders received a fine (114 sentences), or a short term of imprisonment (85), or a mixture of the two. Fines were carefully calibrated from a relatively minor offence, such as an honourable punch-up between social equals in the churchyard, which merited a donation of candles, to the huge sum of 450 ducats imposed on the two prostitutes who caused an uproar (*rumore*) during Epiphany in the Madonna dei Miracoli in 1610 (ASVe. EB, 61, Raspa 1593–1614, 164r). Twenty offenders were banished for between a year and life. This was reserved for more heinous crimes and disproportionately applied to the social elite (5 nobles, three priests, an official and a barber surgeon), suggesting that the offences were part of a feud and a period of banishment necessary to let passions cool and permit negotiations. Corporal punishment was used sparingly: only three offenders were sentenced to the galleys.

On the whole the violence was the product of an encounter between everyday enemies which could be dealt with by a fine or a spell in prison. Two men subsequently died from their wounds, but these were unintentional and not the work of hired assassins. Churches were also refuges. On 26 November 1547 Donato dall’Ogio, a customs official (*attende alla Ternaria*), was imprisoned and fined for pursuing Battista, a musician, ‘with a knife (*pistolese*) in his hand into Sant’Aponal church.’ (ASVe. EB, 61, Raspa 1593–1614, 79v–80r). According to a sentence of 14 November 1550, Gotardo di Piero Falger, sword in hand, ran after Camillo Masnada through Santa Maria dell’Orto ‘right into the cloisters of the friars’ (ASVe. EB, 56, Notatorio 1542–1560, 116r). On 12 August 1579 Francesco di Luca dal Campo was condemned for chasing Gasparo Beretin with a dagger in his hand into San Giovanni Evangelista ‘to stab him’ (ASVe. EB, 56, Notatorio 1542–1560, 151r). In February 1646 Alvisè Paganello detto Fracasso succeeded in finding refuge from brothers Donà e Giacomo Bompoverazzo, who followed him ‘through the door of San Cancian church, where

if he had not saved himself he would have been badly wounded' (ASVe. EB, 62, Raspa 1642–1649, 112r). Equally fortunate was Francesco Barozzi, pursued in 1658 by Benetto Fanton with a staff right up to the altar of Ognissanti church, where his attacker 'would have done his worst, if he had not been reprovved and scolded for lacking respect for the place he was in' (ASVe. EB, 62, Raspa 1657–1668, 18r). Refugees were not only escaping the anger of personal enemies, but also sought asylum from law enforcement officers. If a criminal could demonstrate that they had been arrested and removed from a sacred space, the *Esecutori* could punish the law officers, release the accused and return them to their place of asylum. On 4 December 1570 the *Esecutori* declared the arrest in Padua of Agostino de Pase, who had breached his sentence of banishment, illegal. His mother appeared several times at the court claiming violation of asylum and complaining that the arrest had occurred 'next to the chapel of Saint Anthony'. In escorting him out they had passed through the churchyard, 'where the dead were also buried' (ASVe. EB, 56, Notatorio 1561–1582, 73v–74r). Similar events happened in Venice. For example, at Carnival 1587 the *Esecutori* ordered that Giacometto da Venezia, arrested in the doorway Santi Giovanni e Paolo, should have his sequestered property returned, 12 *lire* and his 'masking costume', before being escorted back 'to the sacred space from where he was taken' (ASVe. EB, 57, Notatorio 1582, 63r).

Fugitives often tried to use religious services to avoid arrest. This tactic demonstrated a knowledge of jurisprudence, which forbade any attempt at arrest in the presence of the Holy Sacrament.<sup>6</sup> In October 1556 the magistrates condemned three officials to pay three ducats *ad pias causas* and serve four months' prison for causing a 'great scandal and tumult' in San Stae, having nabbed their man 'as he stood by the priest's side while he was turning to receive Holy Communion' (ASVe. EB, 56, Notatorio 1542–1560, 92v, 149r). In March 1569, 'on Sunday as they were solemnly singing vespers', Marco di Natal, captain in the office of the *sindaci* (circuit judges), ran with his sword right up to the main altar and launched blows at Adolfo da Liesena, who fled to avoid capture (ASVe. EB, 56, Notatorio 1561–1582, 49r).

## PRECEDENCE

Violence in churches was closely related to status and the contest over honorific rights. Pew disputes were very common across Europe in the early modern period – the English church courts dealt with thousands of cases. In England and Germany the violence seems to have been largely bloodless (Marsh, 2005, 3–26; Wex, 1984). Bloodshed was more apparent in France. In 1608 Paul de Montboucher calculated that there were currently 500 disputes over churches in Brittany alone and that 'not

6 As Lorenzo Priori makes clear in his *Prattica criminale*: 'Tutte le chiese, cimiterii etiam che fossero interdetti, purché siano fabricate con autorità del vescovo, hanno l'immunità, di modo che li delinquenti fuggiti in esse chiese non possono con violenza esser estratti et si salvano anche ricorrendo al sacerdote mentre che portasse il sacratissimo sacramento' (Povolo & Chioldi, 2004, 24).

a Sunday, nor a feast day during the year passes without an assembly of a noble lineage on this subject. ‘The principle case which moves the French nobility to quarrels, disputes and division’, he continued, was ‘pre-eminence in churches and the honours in them...who will be the loftiest in life and death...who shall lead processions... and who shall have the blessed bread first’ (Carroll, 2006, 65). It was not simply a matter of nobles. Social mobility created contention between old and new families: ‘In villages gentlemen and those who wish to become gentlemen have the audacity to claim for themselves pews and places in the choir for themselves, their wives and families, as being a dependency of their land...and in towns women of mediocre quality place pews in the nave or in chapels: which afterwards someone else claims, which results in a great quarrel or aggravating lawsuit’ (Halgouet, 1923, 43).

There has been less work on conflicts over church space in Italy. It was, however, a recognized problem: Scipione Maffei was moved to launch his ferocious attack on the *Scienza Cavalleresca* in part because of the feud his family had with the Emilei over the patronage of San Lorenzo and San Lorenzino in Verona (Carroll, 2016, 114). Two cases from the Veneto highlight the problem in the sixteenth century. The first was heard before the *Podestà* and captain of Treviso on 2 March 1596. On the previous day during Mass the Trevisan nobleman, Alvisè Tiretta, had slapped his fellow citizen, Alessandro Bosello. Until then both men had shared the same pew, an indication to the whole community of their friendship. On the day in question Bosello arrived in the church to listen to the homily and found Tiretta’s son already seated. He politely asked him to make room ‘so as not to have to climb over him’. On receiving no reply, he exclaimed ‘That’s nice! When I can’t sit down on my own pew!’ (ASTv. C, 1736, 1596, costituito di Alvisè Tiretta, 3 May 1596).<sup>7</sup> At which Alvisè jumped to his feet: ‘What are you on about?’ After a brief altercation and exchange Tiretta called him a buffoon, gave him the lie and a slap. Bosello did not respond, he told the judge, in respect for the surroundings. He claimed that he had been the owner of the pew and its franchise (*asio*) for more than 25 years and had welcomed many nobles into it, including ‘all those lords of Tiretta.’

In his testimony Tiretta claimed that Bosello had publicly humiliated him by ‘speaking loudly’ in front of the congregation and giving him the lie: ‘You’re lying through your teeth!’ (*tu menti per la gola*). It was Bosello’s attempt to involve those around him that caused Tiretta to raise his hand; but he denied striking his opponent. The Tiretta family, he said, had shared the pew with Bosello for the past 10 years. Although he agreed that the furniture belonged to Bosello, it had been positioned in front of the railings of the altar of San Rocco with his consent, for the right to the space had been granted to the Tiretta by the cathedral treasurer. Witnesses were summoned to testify to the truth of his claim and in the margin their evidence was noted, as either ‘de loco nescit’ or ‘de loco non affirmat.’

7 [L]’è bella, che io non possi sentire sopra il mio banco!’ (ASTV-C, 1736, 1596, costituito di Alvisè Tiretta, 3 May 1596).

The case raises a number of issues. The social distinction between the two men mattered: Tiretta was a nobleman of pedigree, whereas Bosello only entered the local nobility after 1578.<sup>8</sup> Tiretta represented his enemy as a social climber. Bosello had placed his pew right in front of the chapel of San Rocco, a position of honour, ‘by favour of the [Tiretta], but now he wanted to be master, not only of the pew, but also of the place by right held by the Signor Alvise.’ There is no evidence of prior enmity between the men. But the altercation was serious: to call a gentleman a liar was the worst insult imaginable. Bosello had been slapped, a very public challenge to a duel that neither man could easily back away from without losing face. The fact that they did not fight is suggestive of the strong ties of amity between the two families. In such cases peace was relatively easy to make. Bosello told the court he wished to proceed no further and preferred to leave the matter ‘To the will of his Divine Majesty, as it happened in his house’ (ASTv. C, 1736, 1596, costituito di Alessandro Bosello, 2 March 1596). In any case, Bosello had had his status and honour confirmed. He had his day in court and he, the parvenu, rather than getting a beating from a lackey, had been deemed worthy of a formal challenge. Bosello’s status as a man of honour had been recognized and publicized.

The second case concerns a distant ancestor of Scipione Maffei. On the feast of the Immaculate Conception 1575, in the village of Ronco d’Adige near Verona, nobleman Nicodemo Maffei, left home to attend Mass. He had scarcely stepped outside when he was assaulted by Ottaviano, Giovanni and Lucio Boscaglia and a lackey, forcing him to retreat inside his house. The complaint he made to the *giudice del maleficio* in Verona on 10 December 1575 demonstrates that this was one episode in a feud between the Maffei and the Boscaglia. The principle cause of this, as Nicodemo explained to the judge, was that 18 months previously Pier Antonio Boscaglia and his wife wished to install in the church at Ronco ‘a specially made pew for women’ in front of the one used ‘by my lady’s kinsfolk.’ Nicodemo opposed it on the grounds that it was ‘very unusual to wish to occupy a place that was already in our possession.’ When he tried to confront Pier Antonio the latter refused to speak about it. So he confronted Pier Antonio’s wife, who told him that he had no exclusive right to the space. Nicodemo threatened to ‘remove the pew from the church in pieces’ if the Boscaglia did not do so. From that moment on the Boscaglia refused to speak to him. The failure to greet someone was considered a sign of enmity and, as Nicodemo reported, ‘henceforth they began to confederate with the Ungaretti, my enemies.’ Following a failed peace initiative, Alberto Ungaretti threatened Nicodemo with an arquebus, asking him sarcastically: ‘Misser Nicodemo, does not want to make peace?’ The assault on the feast of the Immaculate Conception was part of the same tactic of intimidating Nicodemo into a making peace (ASVr. M, 10, fasc. Processus super casu vulnerum illatorum domino Nicodemo de Mapheis, denuncia di Nicodemo Maffei, 10 December 1575).

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8 Bosello’s family entered the list of the Trevigian nobility only in 1600 (Renucci, 2017, 24–28, 166).

The version recounted to the judge by Ottavio Boscaglia on 6 January 1576 was entirely different. Ottavio claimed the accusation of assault was a complete fabrication. Rather, it was a matter of self-defence. Ottavio was on his way to Mass with two companions when Nicodemo burst out of his house. Ottavio recognized him and nodded his head. Nicodemo, ‘instead of exchanging a greeting’, said ‘Ah, Pussy!’ (*guaina*). Ottavio: ‘Sir, I am not a pussy, but a gentleman, and your friend’, to which Nicodemo drew his sword, obliging Ottavio and his companions to defend themselves. The judge, however, was not convinced by Ottavio’s story and asked whether there were differences between the families, for the word ‘pussy was neither one of friendship or kinship.’ He pressed Ottavio on the pew dispute: had it been placed in such a position as to prejudice the rights of the house of Maffei? Ottavio admitted this was the cause of their enmity. But he insisted that his mother only wanted to place the pew behind the Maffei women, who opposed it, and the offending seat had been removed at the beginning of December 1575, in order to stop ‘the great inconveniences they had had when going to Mass’ (ASVe. CCXD, ASVe, Maleficio, 10, fasc. Processus super casu vulnerum illatorum domino Nicodemo de Mapheis, costituito di Ottavio Boscaglia, 6 January 1576).

As so often in such disputes the final sentence is missing. In all likelihood peace was made. After all, the two families were closely related. There were other noteworthy features typical of a feud. Nicodemo, we are informed, ‘in this town [of Ronco] was the *capo* of a faction.’ Clearly, he interpreted the pretensions of the Boscaglia as a challenge to his position. The threat to smash a pew was widely seen as a legitimate response to upstarts who wished to upset traditional rank and hierarchy.<sup>9</sup> The role played by women in the dispute is noteworthy. Nicodemo was under pressure from his womenfolk to uphold their rank. The armed confrontations and relatively bloodless encounters (*questione*), were typical of feuds in early modern Italy, in which there were rough rules of the game and honour could be displayed and satisfied (Carroll, 2016, 112–114). But the Maffei-Boscaglia case also points to what makes Italian disputes in and over sacred space different from elsewhere in Europe, with the possible exception of France. The town of Ronco was divided between politicized factions, the Maffei and the Ungaretti. Factionalism was common even in small towns and villages and the very high levels of violence in Italy suggest the ways in which the political environment encouraged or required the use of force in mundane disputes.

## VENDETTA AND SACRED SPACE

‘So well was the tyrant guarded that it was almost impossible to lay hands upon him elsewhere than at solemn services; and on no other occasion was the whole family to be found assembled together’ (Burckhardt, 1990, 54). Burckhardt identi-

9 This was a common threat. On 3 September 1575, Annibale aka “Farfazola” was denounced for breaking two pews in the parish church of Saint Bonifacio with an axe, and throwing a third pew out of the *sagrato*, breaking it in the process. Annibale thought the owners of the pews had moved his own pew (ASVr. M, 10, sub data).

fied long ago the utility of committing tyrannicide in a Church, which explains the attacks on the Sforza, Visconti and Medici in the fifteenth century. But Burckhardt and historians since have largely failed to acknowledge the spread of the practice in the sixteenth century, which targeted enemies across the social spectrum. This was a consequence of the violence generated by the Italian Wars, which was especially severe in many of the towns and cities of the *Terraferma* resistant to Venetian domination. In Venetian Lombardy civil war generated what Enrico Valseriati calls ‘a climate of terror’ among the urban patriciate (Valseriati, 2016). This resulted in clashes between pro- and anti-Venetian factions in the streets and churches of Brescia in the 1520s and culminated in the assassination of Achille Brembati in Bergamo cathedral in 1563 (Belotti, 1932, 1–109; Guerrini, 1930a, 271–277). The factional violence was reprised at the end of the century. A 1599 petition to the Ten in 1599 complained about the murder of nobleman Locullo Soardo in San Francesco in Brescia on 3 January. Locullo had just entered the church when ‘a person disguised as a beggar secretly hidden behind the door fired an harquebus and hit his victim in the back.’ The assassin was himself shot and killed during his escape. The Soardo family appealed to the Ten because they did not trust the local judges to pursue the case vigorously (ASVe. CCXSF, 2, supplica, presented on 13 January 1599).<sup>10</sup> In December 1617 street fighting in Brescia spilled into the episcopal palace and Sant’Agata; three years later the cathedral archdeacon was shot; in 1625 Conte Sforza Avogadro was shot by the Martinengo while he heard Mass in the cathedral; in 1628 there was a murder in Santa Giulia in Brescia and another in the Convent of Santa Maria dei Padri in Ghedi (Guerrini, 1930, 105, 131, 204, 303).

We are even better informed about the violence in Vicenza. The consequence of the Italian Wars was to create factions that were built on complex and volatile identities. For example, the Da Porto family, *capi* of the pro-Venetian faction in the city also had pro-Imperial members, either because of marriage ties or out of prudence to maintain the family’s interests (Clough, 1993, 100). It was the confusion of these identities and allegiances that undermined social trust and contributed to the lethal violence that characterized the Vicentino in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century (Zanazzo, 1964, 97–138; 1966, 259–279; 1969, 187–225). In these circumstances going to church was no simple matter. On 1 January 1531 the *Podestà* informed the Council of Ten of the enmity between the Trissino and the Capra, following the slap given by Bortholomio Capra to Bonifacio Trissino. Trissino issued a challenge to a duel, ‘a matter which had induced almost the whole city to take up arms, since these are among the principal families’ (ASVe. CCXD, 223, 157). On 3 July the *Podestà* reported that on the previous Sunday ‘both parties with others from their families and with many armed servants arrived in the cathedral, where the resort to arms was only narrowly avoided.’ The *Podestà* summoned the parties to negotiations, where ‘both parties exchanged insults, in such a manner that if I had not separated them and

<sup>10</sup> On the rite of the Ten see the article: Andreato, 2007.

constrained them to silence, a conflict between them would have begun which would have set off the whole city' (ASVe. CCXD, 223, 160).

Povolo has demonstrated the extent to which the grip of aristocratic factions extended into the *contado* and down the social scale. Some villages appointed special wardens to prevent people taking weapons into church (Zanazzo, 1964, 101–102). But violence in churches was often an explicit statement of the justice of one's cause. On 18 April 1545, for example, the Council of Ten was informed of 'the most dreadful crime in which a father and his two sons were slaughtered' at Poiana Maggiore. Sebastiano Riccoboni and his sons, Niccolò and Gerardo, citizens of Vicenza, had gone to church to hear Mass. His enemy, Pagan da Poiana, another *vicentino*, who was also at Mass, had laid a trap. At the end of the service 'four strangers armed with bucklers, partisans and pistols' entered the church from different entrances and, following a signal from Pagan, attacked Niccolò, who fought them off with his dagger and made a run for it. They pursued him into a nearby house and finish him off with his father, Sebastiano. The gang then returned to the church porch with their blooded weapons in order to threaten the witness: 'They had done what they had wanted, and anyone else who wanted some should step forward.' Having received no reply, they set off for the Riccoboni house to murder Gerardo, after which they returned once more to the church (ASVe. CCXD, 224, n. 8).

The church played a symbolic role in the vendetta: it was stage for the Poiana family to enact its own justice and display its power in front of the community assembled for Mass. The three victims were butchered while they were at their most vulnerable, as if they were sacrificial animals, in full view of the public. Following the initial strike, the murderers returned twice to the church, in order to demonstrate what they had done and to intimidate the rest of the congregation, 'bragging and threatening...with their weapons covered in blood.'

As in Brescia, factional violence in Vicenza increased around 1600 and churches once again became the theatres in which political contests were played out. In March 1604 the *Podestà* reported the murder of Don Francesco Ceneda, priest of Cresole, who was implicated in the feud between the Porta and the Capra. The priest was killed in church 'dressed in his priestly garments in front of everyone who had come to hear Mass' (Zanazzo, 1964, 101). In 1625 Ludovico da Schio was wounded in an encounter in Vicenza, but took revenge at Easter when he killed Zuanne Chiappini in San Rocco, as he heard Mass. In 1646 there was punch-up involving the Porta clan in Santa Maria Nova. In 1653 there was a sword-fight between Conte Sforza Bissari and Signor Giulio Marchesini at the beginning of the Corpus Christi procession in the cathedral (Zanazzo, 1964, 1966, 278; 1969, 209–210).

## CONCLUSION

'These factions amongst private families, though frequent throughout Italy, are most so within the state of Venice, where it is believed a piece of policy in the government not to endeavour their suppression as the gentry are less at leisure to pry into

state affairs, when embroiled in disputes with one another, or to unite themselves to the prejudice of the commonwealth' concluded Reresby following his travels (Ivatt, 1904, 91). Machiavelli had argued the same in the *Prince*. Venice fomented discord on the *Terraferma* as matter of state policy. Although Machiavelli claimed that it had brought little profit and had presently been abandoned, suppressing factional violence in the wake of the terror caused by the Italian Wars was no easy matter, especially in a Republic dominated by aristocratic oligarchs. The Council of Ten legitimized assassination and paid handsomely to have traitors liquidated. The secret deliberations of the Council of Ten reveal 27 approvals for the assassination of enemies, mainly by poisoning, between 1415 and 1495. But the effect of the Italian Wars can be seen in the approval of 44 assassinations between 1504 and 1596, and the list is not exhaustive (Lamansky, 1882, 105–120). Unsurprisingly churches were favoured by paid assassins and bounty hunters – the outlaw Antonio Savorgnan was murdered in a Villach church in 1518. But the same professional killers licensed by the state were also available for private hire.

However, the evidence presented here also demonstrates that the picture represented by Reresby requires nuancing. We have found no evidence of assassinations inside churches in the city itself.<sup>11</sup> The *Esecutori della Bestemmia* effectively policed the city's sacred sites. The evidence for violence in churches on the *Terraferma* is clustered in the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Although homicide rates were still comparatively high by European standards when Reresby arrived, the violence had peaked. The precise chronology and reasons behind it are worthy of further investigation.

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11 That is not to suggest that assassins did not stake out Venice's churches: Parks, 2004.

## NASILJE IN SVETI PROSTOR V BENETKAH ZGODNJEGA NOVEGA VEKA

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## POVZETEK

*Beneška republika je v primerjavi z drugimi evropskimi državami zgodnjega novega veka beležila razmeroma visoko stopnjo nasilja. Avtor v prispevku predstavi nove arhivske dokaze, ki podrobno opisujejo enega od aspektov problematike – sveti prostor –, in nakaže smer za nadaljnje raziskave.*

*Zaradi svoje družbene in politične vloge cerkve niso bile varne pred nasiljem. Na podlagi ohranjenih registrov prisilnih izvršitev odločb (Terminazioni) in prepisov kazenskih sodb (Raspe) sodnega organa Izvršiteljev proti bogokletnosti (Esecutori alla Bestemmia) so v prvem delu članka opisani različni vidiki nasilja, do katerega je prišlo v beneških cerkvah med letoma 1540 in 1660. Poudarek je na storilcih, času in krajih nasilnih dejanj, povodih zanje, uporabljenem orožju ter na oblikah dosojenih kazni.*

*Nasilna dejanja v cerkvah so bila tesno povezana z družbenim statusom in konflikti glede častnih pravic. Cerkevno okrasje in pohištvo so imeli močan simbolni pomen. To področje je v prispevku raziskano na primeru dveh sporov, povezanih z razporeditvijo cerkvenih klopi. Do prvega je prišlo v katedrali v Trevisu med priznanim plemičem in lokalnim povzpetnikom, v drugega pa sta se zapletli plemiški družini Maffei in Boscaglia v župnijski cerkvi v vasi Ronco d'Adige blizu Verone. Iz slednjega je razvidno, kako je politično sovraštvo še zaostrovalo spore o svetih prostorih.*

*Cerkev je bila tudi popoln kraj za umor. Ob praznikih je namreč morilec, skrit med množico, zlahka napadel svojo žrtev, poleg tega je bilo njegovo dejanje deležno pozornosti celotne skupnosti. Umori tiranov v cerkvah so bili za renesančno visoko politiko prav značilni. Kljub vsemu pa so zgodovinarji doslej povečini spregledali široko razširjenost te prakse. V zadnjem delu članka je osvetljenih nekaj novih primerov iz beneške Terraferme.*

*Ključne besede: sveti prostor, čast, nasilje, zatočišče, nadzor*

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- ASVe. CCXSF** – ASVe, Capi del Consiglio di dieci, Suppliche, Filze.
- ASVe. CXDMR** – ASVe, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Miste, Registri.
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