

# LA VERRA ANTIGA

THE CELEBRATION OF THE 1421 MOCK-BATTLE AT  
SERVI BRIDGE IN VENICE



Alessandro Caravia's mock-heroic poem<sup>1</sup> and Venetian stick fighting

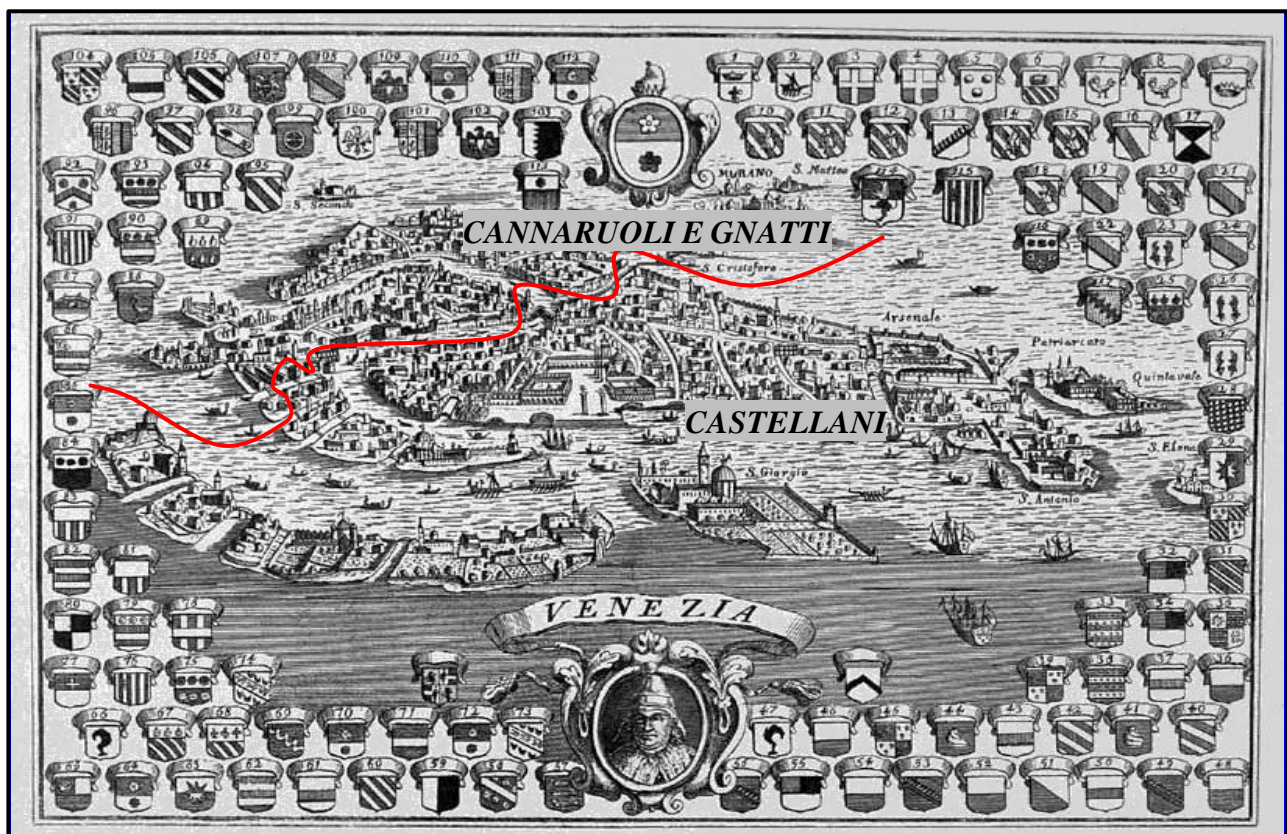
<sup>1</sup> "La verra antiga dei Castellani, Canaruoli, e Gnatti" di Alessandro Caravia - Venice, 1550.

## Introduction

*Because of some thousand-years-old brawls,  
A big war is held every year  
Between Gnatti, Canaruoli and Castellani  
On the bridges made of wood, sometime of stone  
A tremendous cudgelling can be seen<sup>2</sup>*

- "La verra antiga dei Castellani, Canaruoli, e Gnatti"  
Alessandro Caravia, Venice, 1550

Venice is a famous and well-know city: its history, its art as well as its charm attract many scholars, and not just tourists. Everything and more has already been written about Venice, and it seems there remains almost nothing to say that is not already well known. Yet, few know the valiant "martial" past of Venice with its *battaglie* ("mock battles") or *verre* ("wars").



<sup>2</sup> Lett. "da cani" (like dogs): idiomatic form which underlines the animal instinct or condition of something or someone.

The *battagliole*—sometimes called *guerre di canne, di pugni*, “wars of the canes” or “fists”—were a sort of mock battle engaged in Venice for the control of a bridge at the border of the territory between the two factions of the *Castellani* and *Nicolotti* (also called the *Caravia* and *Gnatti*). The combats origin is considered to be very old, the first record dates back to an edict by the council of ten in 1369. The “game” developed and lasted for several centuries, eventually abandoning the use of sticks, shields and protective cloths by the end of the 16th century. The less bloody bare-hand fighting, called *pugni* or *pugilatus venetius*, then replaced the stick fighting.

The *battagliola*'s cult likely belongs to the *giochi d'arme*, or “games of arms,” which were very popular in Italy since the 12th century. The *Pugna* of Siena, the *battaglia dei sassi* (rock throwing battle) of Perugia, the *mazzascudo*, and the *gioco del ponte* of Pisa, were some of the other wargames waged by people in the peninsula during the communal era. These games were staged regularly during the winter season or arranged on occasions of a religious or commemorating festivity. The reason behind the birth and development of such war games comes probably from the necessity to always keep townspeople trained in some manner, since the defence of the city walls was completely up to the urban militia—an aspect of the era considered an Italian anomaly.<sup>3</sup>

In almost every town of Italy there are many records of this continuous effort in maintaining and improving the fighting skills among these urban forces. In the *statuti del popolo* of Cremona of 1229 is written the instruction:

*“Every Captain must take his men out of Porta Mosa every month during a feast day in the place called the Ceppo. There he must train the men of his district or Porta in the handling of arms, practising both offence and defence. This is done as exercise of this society, as to be vigilant and skilful with arms.”*<sup>4</sup>

The infantry of Pavia in the 14<sup>th</sup> century trained in the same way, and even here the general battle was preceded by individual duels:

*“...spectacles which are vulgarly named battagliola, but called bellicula in Latin. They divided the town in two parts: the superior part is called Aquilonara, while the inferior is named Meridiana;...They fight alternatively with wooden weapons, sometime all together, sometime two apart, running up to each other from a distance and striking on the shields.”* (*Liber de laudibus civitatis Ticinensis. Opicino de Canistris, Pavia 1330*).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> D. Nicolle. *Italian Militiaman 1260-1392*. Osprey Publishing, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> “IX. Che ogni mese ciascun capitano in giorno di festa, sia obbligato do po il disnare condur li huomini a lui assignati al luoco detto il Ceppo fuori di port a Mosa e là facci esercitare li huomini del suo quartiere o porta, nel manegiare l'armi et quelli si provino si all'offendere et diffendere et questo si facci per esercizio di questa socieà, acciò siino nell'armi vigilanti et esperti.”

<sup>5</sup> “...quaedam spectacula faciunt, quae vulgo battagliolae, sed latine convenientius bellicula nuncupantur. Dividunt enim civitatem in partes duas, quarum Aquilonaris pars superior dicitur, Meridiana vero inferior;...Pugnant autem ad invicem ligneis armis, aliquando simul omnes, aliquando duo seorsum, se per occursum a longe clypeis ferientes alterutri obviando.”



In Florence youths also waged these mock battles upon bridges. Their pastime expressed the same factionalism and rivalry of the Venetian *battagliole*. Here the factions were the *Guelfi* and *Ghibellini*.

*“The twelfth of April is held a battle between Florentine youths at the Santa Trinita bridge. One side from the quarters of Santa Maria Novella, the other from the quarter of Sancto Spirito formed by the Chaponi, the other by the Strocchi e altoviti and other families... Moreover [the battle] lasted until the three hours of the night at the torch light, and at the end they fought with staffs and rocks...” From the manuscript, Diario di un anonimo fiorentino (1382-1401).*<sup>6</sup>

The people began to appreciate these war games, developing a sense of competition around them. Now even the common citizen could display his own valour and aim to that honour and glory, which had always been a Noble's and Knight's privilege in the tournaments and jousts.

Robert Davis's work, *The War of fists*, analysed superbly the world of the *Battagliole*.<sup>7</sup> This study can be regarded as one of the deepest on the subject. It is the most complete analyse of the *Battagliole* employing different approaches: social geography of the factionalism, the general structure of the combat and the rule of the government and other Venetian classes. However Davis does not delve into Caravia's mock epic, *“La Verra antiga dei Castellani, Canaruoli, e Gnatti”*, itself exploring early modern Venetian society mainly through the *wars of fist*. Thus he could not analyse the technique of the *schermia di baston* hidden in the octaves of Caravia's poem. Indeed Davis is not interested in any description of the Venetian fighting or methods of doing so. He does not even go into the techniques of the *art of fists*, considering width of his bibliography. Had Davis been more familiar with the treatises of the great Renaissance Masters of Defence printed in Venice and Bologna, he would not have missed the understanding importance of this little mock-heroic poem.

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<sup>6</sup> “A Di XII d'Aprile si fe' una battaglia di giovani fiorentini al ponte Santa Trinita, l'una parte del quartiere di Santa Maria Novella, l'altra del quartiere di Sancto Spirito della quale furono chapo e' Chaponi, e de l'altra furono gli Strocchi e gli Altoviti e più famiglie.....Anche durò infino alle tre ore di notte a lume di torchi, e nel fine si cominciò a far cho' sasi e cho' bastoni,...”

<sup>7</sup> R. C. Davis. *The War of the Fists*. Jouvence, 1997. The records on the Venetian boxing contests are very rich in comparison to stick fighting battles they replaced. Davis focused his research mainly on these sources.

## The Wars of Sticks

*I can't wait to be in this dance  
In this scuffle ruffle a clot of Gnatti  
Break teeth and cripple knees  
Throw them in the canal like frogs  
V octave*

The wars of sticks, *guerra di canne*, were held regularly during the festivities—usually Sunday afternoons—and they were very often arranged in honour of kings, princes and foreign ambassadors, who visited the Republic of Venice. However, the *battaglie* by contrast were improvised and with even more attendance—because of the rising “itch of the hands” among the youth—on the bridges which became available almost every day of the year.

In the earliest times the *battaglie* were waged with canes of different shapes: the *canna*<sup>8</sup>, *baston*, or even *cornoler*.<sup>9</sup> Originally, ordinary straight canes of round or square section and some 3cm in width were used. Later, sticks with pointed ends hardened with boiled oil were used which were sharpened asymmetrically, specifically achieving a balance closer to a sword than an ordinary straight sticks.<sup>10</sup>



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<sup>8</sup> “*canne di Malacca*” or “*canna d’India*”: the flexible *Rotang*.

<sup>9</sup> Stick made in *Comiolo* wood ( bot.: *Cornus mas*), from latin *corneolus*: hard like a horn.

<sup>10</sup> One point is short tapered for 20 cm from the ends: it forms the handle and the “pommel”. The hand grasp the stick just over this 20 cm in the cylindrical part which continues for other 30 cm. Then in the middle the stick, supposed to be long 100 cm, start to be tapered obtaining a terrible 50 cm point.

Usually the stick was accompanied by small round shield, or *targhe o rotelle*, but more often the cloak, *caffettano*, or a heavy shirt, was rolled around the other arm for protection just before jumping onto the bridge for action. The equipment employed in these combats often included *zacco* (padded tunics of different types, sometimes covered with maile) and helms of different shapes, depending upon the availability of a particular style (*cellade, celade, celadine, mezze teste* and *morioni*).



The *battagliola* of 1574, held on the *ponte del carmine*, and staged in honor of the French King Enrico III, was probably one of the last waged with sticks. In fact by the end of the XVI century the *pugni* replaced completely the sticks and canes. Indeed there are no precise references, which explain the reasons of this changing. The decisive factor was very likely the bloody violence and cruelty of this war game, besides all the social disorders which a *guerra di canne* employed. The problems of public order and the social and economic consequences-most of the fighters were artisan, workers and tradesmen-were two plausible explanations of this evolution.

Although banned several times since the early of the XV century, the *battaglie* were tolerated, sometimes even pre-arranged by the Republic of Venice itself.



Despite the extreme violence of *frotte*, degenerating often in rock-throwing or use of steel weapons with the public's complicity, the players were not rough fighters without any elements of *schermia* (fencing). The descriptions of the combat in Caravia's *Verra antiga* are the certain proof of how the *schermia di baston* (stick fighting) was a refined fighting art. Even if the poem remains a literary chronicle of mock-heroic style, the terminology employed follows closely the characters of Italian fencing treatises from the period. The very *frotte* followed the *mostre*, fought by the best factional players, sometimes as individual duels, sometimes with two or three players at once. Here where the author begins to offer further descriptions of fencing actions, the reader can appreciate how much the *schermia di baston* was developed in those times among the lower classes outside of what could be learned from aristocratic masters of *Scrimia* (fighting).

*...to be continued in Part 2*

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By Gianluca Zanini, Messer Scossa

