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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Politics in the street: the materiality of urban public spaces in Renaissance Italy

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Abstract

In Renaissance Italy, the political power of authorities found one of its expressions in material symbols of sovereignty. The placing of inscriptions, sculptures and columns and the commissioning of frescoes in streets, piazzas and public spaces, for example, were essential ways of communicating political or spiritual authority to the populace. Sometimes perceived as representations of a top-down form of communication, in the urban context these same material emblems of power became political objects through which to express dissent, as in the case of public loggias, speaking statues or graffiti on walls and civic palaces. Presenting case-studies from various cities in northern Italy, this article investigates the dialectics between the people and the authorities in the urban fabric, especially in everyday life. Combining a spatial and a material approach to politics, this article reveals the dynamic and relational nature of political public spaces.

Introduction

On 27 October 1547, the authorities in the Italian city of Brescia forced a lame poultry seller to remove his wooden stall from Piazza della Loggia. The vendor was accused of occupying a portion of the square with his cart; a problem, since at that time the square was undergoing a profound architectural renewal, which would turn it into the city's main civic and ceremonial public space. This modernization was commissioned by the local magistracies and the Venetian government, which since 1426 had ruled over Brescia by means of two patrician rectors, the *podestà* and the *capitano*. Such a process of monumental rationalization was common to many other Italian squares during the sixteenth century, but the itinerant seller reacted vehemently to the authority's urban project as it threatened his informal ownership of this public space. He cried out publicly:

> That it was necessary to rebel as [had happened] in Piacenza, to stand up and shout 'Empire! Empire! And kill the Venetian rectors!'. These words were reported to the podestà and [the poultry seller] was immediately imprisoned and once captured he confessed to having said those words and the following

> night, without a trial, [the authorities] had him hanged by the throat from the columns of the Monte di Pietà.[1]

This microhistorical incident of the Brescian poultry seller introduces and epitomizes two issues of historiographic relevance: the everyday dimension of politics and the materiality of public spaces. The former concerns social actors and the means of political communication 'from below' in the urban spaces of early modern Italy. In this specific case, what would soon be transformed into the *platea magna* of Brescia became the informal public urban space where a political message of supra-local value was conveyed through the voice of a humble street vendor. The poultry seller's reference to the conspiracy of the Anguissola, which had taken place on the previous 10 September in Piacenza with the assassination of the Duke Pier Luigi Farnese by the local nobility,[2] confirms an important realization of recent historiography: that political information in this era circulated rapidly among the curious, highly aware urban population, in the squares, on the streets and in the markets, and not only in institutional political spaces.[3] The lame poultry seller was well informed about recent political events and reinterpreted them in an anti-Venetian key, launching his cry of revolt against the local government of the Serenissima in the public square from his stall. His rebellious act was motivated by the threat to his daily commercial activity and to his quotidian and 'ephemeral' use of urban spaces, another theme that has been explored in recent historiography.[4]

The latter point concerns precisely the role played in the poultry seller's dramatic end. The physical and material dimension of urban space is in fact a crucial element here for several reasons. Firstly, because a pro-imperial – and anti-Venetian – cry was launched in a privileged site of the spoken word, making the piazza a 'resonating box' which amplified the threat to the authorities, as has been shown for early modern German cities;[5] secondly, because the routine management and use of this major public space was the basis of the protest. The paving of Brescia's Piazza della Loggia – commissioned in the mid-sixteenth century to augment the architectural decorum of the city, in what became its most representative public space, to the detriment of Piazza del Duomo – had in fact led to the removal of ephemeral food stalls, such as that of the poultry seller. As the material symbols of civic identity were placed in the square and some of the most famous architects of the Italian Renaissance (such as

[1]Archivio di Stato di Brescia (ASB), Opuscoli e Libretti, MS Op-Q, no. 18, Ludovico Caravaggi, *Chronica de Bressa*, fol. 77v.

[2]M.J. Bertomeu Masiá, *La guerra secreta de Carlos V contra el papa: la cuestión de Parma y Piacenza en la correspondencia del cardenal Granvela* (Murcia, 2009).

[3]On the Republic of Venice, see F. de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford, 2007); M. Rospocher and R. Salzberg, 'An evanescent public sphere: voices, spaces, and publics in Venice during the Italian Wars', in M. Rospocher (ed.), *Beyond the Public Sphere: Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe* (Bologna and Berlin, 2012), 93–114; C. Judde de Larivière, *The Revolt of Snowballs: Murano Confronts Venice, 1511*, trans. T.V. Cohen (London and New York, 2018); M. van Gelder and C. Judde de Larivière (eds.), *Popular Politics in an Aristocratic Republic: Political Conflict and Social Contestation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Venice* (London and New York, 2021).

[4]For example, relative to temporary stalls in eighteenth-century Britain: F. Purcell, 'Time and space in a dish: examining the relationship between materiality and space in the early modern saloop stall', *History of Retailing and Consumption*, currently published online (2023), DOI: 10.1080/2373518X.2023.2178813.

[5]D. Bellingradt, 'The early modern city as a resonating box: media, the public sphere and the urban space of the Holy Roman Empire. Cologne and Hamburg c. 1700', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 16 (2012), 201–40.

Jacopo Sansovino, Galeazzo Alessi and Andrea Palladio) were involved in the design, the construction works were catalysts for political dissent and subsequent summary justice.[6] The latter took place in the same square, beneath the columns of the Monte di Pietà, the charitable civic pawnshop, whose façade had been decorated at the end of the fifteenth century with the city's Roman epigraphs as a symbol of its political and historical identity. The story of the poultry seller, then, epitomizes the multifunctionality and the ambivalent meanings of this built environment:[7] an overlapping public space of consensus and discord and at the same time the setting for the display of power, the site of performative justice; a space charged with political agency and with potential dissent.

This is just one example, alongside others discussed below, through which we can analyse the uses of early modern urban spaces as sites for the exchange of opinions and political discussion; a topic to which the new political history and the history of communication have made important contributions. While traditional political history has paid scant attention to the built environment that framed the activities of different actors, more and more historical research has examined the agency of political space, considered as a social construct rather than a mere container. Drawing on the ideas of influential thinkers such as Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre or Martina Löw, early modern historians have thus focused not only on official or institutional political spaces (such as civic palaces, council halls or courtrooms), but also on what anthropologists like James Scott called 'informal' or 'vernacular political spaces' for the articulation of 'hidden transcripts' of dissent and subversion.[8] Alongside the 'official' political dimension of palaces and courts, recent historiography has highlighted the existence of political practices in those theatres of everyday life that were alehouses, barbershops, pharmacies, theatres, taverns, streets, squares, markets and bridges.[9] Within this broad historiographical framework, the city of Venice has been the focus of various analyses that have emphasized the political function of public and semi-public spaces of social interaction, where men – and occasionally women – could gather and exchange rumours, news and information or discuss politics.[10] The spatial approach to political history has delineated a new urban geography of the

[6]E. Valseriati, 'I deputati alle pubbliche fabbriche e gli architetti comunali (1538–1597)', in F. Piazza and E. Valseriati (eds.), *Brescia nel secondo Cinquecento: architettura, arte e società* (Brescia, 2016), 93–126.

[7]On the use of monuments as material places for the development of seditious actions or religious dissent, see the example of convents in the sixteenth-century Low Countries: P. Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots: The Political Culture of the Dutch Revolt* (Ithaca and London, 2008), 98–9.

[8]J.C. Scott, 'Preface', in B. Kümin (ed.), *Political Space in Pre-industrial Europe* (Farnham, 2009), 1–4; J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London, 1990), 120.

[9]There is now a vast literature on this topic. See, for example, B.A. Tlusty, *Bacchus and Civic Order: The Culture of Drink in Early Modern Germany* (Charlottesville and London, 2001); Y. Elet, 'Seats of power: the outdoor benches of early modern Florence', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 61 (2002), 444–69; S. Milner, 'The Florentine Piazza della Signoria as practised place', in R.J. Crumm and J.T. Paoletti (eds.), *Renaissance Florence: A Social History* (Cambridge, 2006), 83–103; M. Hailwood, 'Alehouses, popular politics and plebeian agency in early modern England', in F. Williamson (ed.), *Locating Agency: Space, Power and Popular Politics* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010); Kümin (ed.), *Political Space*; K. Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2016); T. Korneeva, *The Dramaturgy of the Spectator: Italian Theatre and the Public Sphere, 1600–1800* (Toronto, 2019).

[10]F. de Vivo, 'Pharmacies as centres of communication in early modern Venice', *Renaissance Studies*, 21 (2007), 505–21; C. Judde de Larivière, 'Du Broglio à Rialto: cris et chuchotements dans l'espace public à Venise, au XVIe siècle', in P. Boucheron and N. Offenstadt (eds.), *L'espace public au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2011),

public sphere in Renaissance Europe, a topography that included even more ephemeral public spaces such as benches or makeshift wooden loggias, coaches or gondolas. And it has done this not only for Europe, if we take into account also the recent literature on Persian theatres and bazaars or on Ottoman public baths, streets and coffeehouses, and on the role of these spaces in the formation of various manifestations of the public sphere.[11]

This approach has sharpened the focus on the material – and not just symbolic – dimension of pre-modern political spaces where exchanges took place and opinions flowed. Focusing its analysis upon a series of objects and physical public spaces, this article explores the material evidence of the uses of (informal) political spaces in various Italian Renaissance cities (including not only major centres such as Bologna, Milan and Venice, but also less studied towns such as Bergamo, Brescia, Crema, Cremona, Ferrara, Trento and Verona), aiming to offer a street-level view of politics in this period. By street politics, we do not mean just a general view of politics from below or an exclusive association with the – often ambiguous – notion of popular politics.[12] Rather, we aim to illustrate how ordinary people could interact with power in their daily lives, where these interactions could take place, and through which communicative means. We focus on informal political actions taking place in urban public spaces (mostly open and outdoor spaces), incorporating material objects and social actors not usually included in traditional political narratives. Considering politics as a structural part of street life, this article aims to show how urban public spaces are still political even when they are not the setting of riots and protests or a ceremonial stage of authority.[13] We argue that streets, piazzas, churches, balconies or loggias are also political spaces when they are the primary arena of 'infrapolitical' (to use James Scott's term) and less openly confrontational actions that take place on an everyday basis.[14]

In Renaissance Italy, as in other European cities, streets and other public spaces were not just the container for social, political or legislative interactions,[15] but also the product of these everyday forms of socio-political exchange.[16] We also want to emphasize how public spaces shaped political actions by their materiality and not just by their symbolism. The analysis of the materiality of urban public spaces makes

119–30; R. Salzberg, 'Spaces of unrest? Policing hospitality sites in early modern Venice', in van Gelder and Judde de Larivière (eds.), *Popular Politics*, 105–28.

[11]T. Grallert, 'To whom belong the streets? Investment in public space and popular contentions in late Ottoman Damascus', *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 61 (2012), 327–59; B. Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590–1641* (Boston and Leiden, 2012); and Ö. Çaykent and D.G. Tarbuck, 'Coffeehouse sociability: themes, problems and directions', *Journal of Ottoman Studies*, 49 (2017), 203–29.

[12]For a historiographic overview, see M. van Gelder and C. Judde de Larivière, 'Introduction', in van Gelder and Judde de Larivière (eds.), *Popular Politics*, 1–13. See now M. van Gelder, 'Street politics', in D. van den Heuvel, *Early Modern Streets. A European Perspective* (Abingdon and New York, 2023), 111–33.

[13]For a similar approach to contemporary European cities, see L. Jerram, *Streetlife: The Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2011), 14–100.

[14]J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

[15]See R. Laitinen and D. Lindström, 'Urban order and street regulation in seventeenth-century Sweden', in R. Laitinen and T. Cohen (eds.), *Cultural History of Early Modern European Streets* (London and Leiden, 2008), 63–93.

[16]F. Nevola, *Street Life in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, 2020).

it possible to reconstruct the political practices of social actors that written sources tend to obscure.

Material iconoclasm

Chronicles and judicial records of early modern Italian cities provide an enormous amount of information about how people interacted with political objects and material symbols of power on a daily basis within urban public spaces. A great many of these testimonies concern manifestations of violent or 'disciplined dissent' against authority,[17] or the factional affiliation and loyalty of the population during moments of political change, revolts and riots.[18] The pulling down of the stone emblems of sovereignty is one of the most evident and well-documented political actions, especially in the convulsive first phase of the Italian Wars (1494–1516). Statues of rulers or allegories of authority – both political and religious – placed in the most iconic and representative places of power were often the target of collective discontent, which could culminate in acts of vilification, destruction, removal or *damnatio memoriae*.[19] This practice of material iconoclasm targeting architectural symbols is still very relevant today, as we witness statues falling, being defaced or beheaded as demonstrative political actions all around the world, for example as part of the Black Lives Matter protests.[20]

In Renaissance Italy, one of the most resounding episodes of this form of political participation took place in Bologna at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Immediately after the papal reconquest of the city in autumn 1506,[21] a three-metre-high bronze statue of Pope Julius II was commissioned from the artist Michelangelo by the pontiff himself. This was mounted on the main door of the Church of San Petronio in late 1508, while a more ephemeral statue of the pope (made out of stucco) had been placed on the *ringhiera* (raised dais) of the civic palace (Palazzo del Podestà) a few months earlier.[22] Both represented symbols of control over the city's main public space. In the months following the brief return of the Bentivoglio family, who previously ruled the city, in February 1511, both papal statues were attacked and pulled down by the population to celebrate the change of regime. In May of that year, a group of citizens spontaneously desecrated the stucco pope placed on the Palazzo del Podestà; its arms were broken, the papal keys removed, and finally its head was burnt in the piazza. If the local authorities disapproved of this political action – its

[17]For the definition of 'disciplined dissent' in early modern Europe, see F. Titone (ed.), *Disciplined Dissent in Western Europe, 1200–1600: Political Action between Submission and Defiance* (Turnhout, 2022).

[18]Riots and popular protests in Renaissance Italy have recently been the subject of various studies: A. De Benedictis, *Neither Disobedients nor Rebels: Lawful Resistance in Early Modern Italy* (Rome, 2018); R. Sabbatini, *La sollevazione degli Straccioni. Lucca 1531: politica e mercato* (Rome, 2021); C. Taviani, *Lotte di parte: rivolte di popolo e conflitti di fazione nelle guerre d'Italia, 1494–1531* (Rome, 2021); and S.K. Cohn Jr, *Popular Protest and Ideals of Democracy in Late Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 2021).

[19]Referring, for example, to iconoclasm in the sixteenth-century Low Countries, see A.-L. van Bruaene, K. Jonckheere and R. Suykerbuyk (eds.), *Beeldenstorm: Iconoclasm in the Low Countries*, special issue of *Low Countries Historical Review*, 131/1 (2016).

[20]G. D'Ottavio, E. Gallo and S. Luzzi (eds.), *Global Perspectives on Iconoclasm*, special issue of *Contemporanea*, 24/4 (2021).

[21]A. De Benedictis, *Una guerra d'Italia, una resistenza di popolo: Bologna 1506* (Bologna, 2004).

[22]M. Butzek, *Die kommunalen Repräsentationsstatuen der Päpste des 16. Jahrhunderts in Bologna, Perugia und Rom* (Bad Honef, 1978), 77–101.

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authors were executed in the same public space of Piazza Maggiore, a few months later – the same local government approved the removal of Michelangelo's statue. The pope's image cast in bronze was uprooted, decapitated and dragged around while children rolled the head about in Piazza Maggiore and paraded it through the streets. The statue was then sent to the duke of Ferrara and melted down to make a cannon, caustically named 'La Giulia', soon to be used against the papal armies (the head, instead, was apparently kept in Ferrara as a trophy and then disappeared). And this was not the first time this same bronze was reused, consciously investing this material element with political meaning. Ironically, it seems that to cast the pope's statue, Michelangelo made use of the bronze bell from the tower adjacent to the magnificent Bentivoglio Palace, demolished by order of Julius II in 1507 as an act of *damnatio memoriae*.[23] The only material trace left by the pope's statue in today's Bologna is a nineteenth-century stone inscription on a building facing Piazza Galvani, right behind the main piazza, testifying that Michelangelo created his masterpiece in a foundry near the Church of San Petronio ('In queste case della Fabbriceria di San Petronio in una grande stanza a piano terra Michelangelo nel 1506 fuse la statua di Giulio II').

The destruction of Michelangelo's statue is only the most striking episode of the type of secular and material iconoclasm that was common in Bologna after the reconquest of the city by Julius II. As part of a campaign to cancel all the material symbols of the Bentivoglio, coins with effigies of the former lords were withdrawn from circulation and replaced with others depicting the pope, while the family's emblems were removed from exterior walls and façades of all buildings in the city. A proclamation issued by the council of the *Quaranta* prohibited the wearing of any garment that recalled the uniform of the Bentivoglio.[24] Finally, between November and December 1506, Julius himself issued various edicts expressly ordering that any emblems of the Bentivoglio, wherever painted or sculpted, in the city and suburbs, should be erased or destroyed.[25] Only a few bas-reliefs survived these operations: in particular, those displayed over two metres above the ground on some of Bologna's palaces, shops or pharmacies, as well as some sculptures located inside sacred buildings.[26] Anonymous followers of the Bentivoglio faction, probably led by the notary Ercole Ugolotti, treated the papal insignia in the same way, with a large number of those attached to buildings vandalized or defaced during nocturnal raids.[27] Attacks against Bentivoglio symbols of power in Bologna continued at least until the mid-sixteenth century. Not even commonplace objects displaying such political emblems

[23]On the destruction of the Bentivoglio Palace, see M.T. Sambin De Norcen and R. Schofield, *Palazzo Bentivoglio a Bologna: studi su un'architettura scomparsa* (Bologna, 2018); on the (re)use of the bell by Michelangelo to cast Julius' statue, see M. Rospocher, 'Giulio II e Bologna: arte, politica e religione', in D. Benati, M.L. Pacelli and E. Rossoni (eds.), *Giulio II e Raffaello. Una nuova stagione del Rinascimento a Bologna* (Milan, 2022), 26–36; S. Hendler, '"Broken into pieces and its head thrown into the square": the numerous failures of Michelangelo's bronze statue of Pope Julius II', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 63 (2021), 114–25.

[24]Biblioteca Riccardiana Firenze (BRF), MS 1841, *Cronica Bianchini*, fol. 307r.

[25]Fileno Dalla Tuata (or Delle Tuate), *Istoria di Bologna*, 3 vols., ed. B. Fortunato (Bologna, 2005), vol. II, 494.

[26]On the permanence of images of the Bentivoglio family on the walls facing public spaces, see De Norcen and Schofield, *Palazzo Bentivoglio*, 185–7.

[27]Biblioteca Universitaria Bologna, MS 430, Friano degli Ubaldini, *Cronica bolognese*, bk. III (1492–1513), fol. 779r.

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were spared, especially when they moved from the private sphere to the public one. In October 1537, for instance, some pottery traders from Faenza were arrested for selling majolica plates and cups decorated with the Bentivoglio symbol (a saw) at the San Petronio fair, while in May 1541 a carpenter was tortured with the rope for carving the Bentivoglio insignia into the case of an arquebus.[28] In both cases, the objects were seized and destroyed.

Symbolic destructive acts characterized the entire period of the Italian Wars, often as a direct consequence of the regime changes that these conflicts brought about. In the cities subject to Venice, after the Republic's defeat at Agnadello in May 1509, statues and effigies of St Mark in the form of a lion, which dominated the cityscape and symbolized the authority of the Serenissima, were damaged, pulled down or smeared with excrement by the population.[29] The merchant Girolamo Priuli recounts how, in many places in the summer of 1509, Venetian lions – whether made of stone, wood or marble – 'were decapitated, in other [places] their eyes were gouged out, in others their wings were clipped, their legs cut off, their hair and tails ripped off, and finally their testicles cut off or removed'.[30] For example, a lion in gilded marble by Pietro Lombardo that stood in Ravenna's main piazza was first emasculated with weapons and then knocked down by the pope's followers.[31] The sculpture was subsequently sent to the papal legate in Bologna, where its wings were amputated and it was publicly displayed on a column and bound to a wall with a chain placed around its neck in front of the civic palace. It was only after the peace treaty with Venice had been signed that the lion was removed from the piazza to a less public location.[32] A similar episode happened in Vicenza, where a Venetian lion overlooking the main piazza was taken down and broken into pieces; however, there the local faction of the 'popolari' (common people) gathered up the fragments and tried to save them in order to show their loyalty to the Republic.[33]

Following the defeat of the Serenissima in 1509, other demolitions of statues and symbolic destructions occurred in the Lombard cities formerly belonging to Venice and now ruled by the king of France, Louis XII. In Brescia, while French soldiers were engaged in an operation of *damnatio memoriae* destroying and defacing Venetian emblems and inscriptions, the epigraph celebrating the laying of the first stone of the Loggia, the new seat of civic institutions overlooking the main square, was also deliberately damaged by the population.[34] The bronze lion of the *platea magna*, placed on the column of St Mark, was also thrown to the ground. The French king himself prevented the lion from being destroyed and ordered it to be transported and displayed as a war trophy in Milan, where the king wanted to make a public show of

[28]O. Guerrini and C. Ricci (eds.), *Diario bolognese di Jacopo Rainieri* (Bologna, 1887), 32, 61.

[29]A. Rizzi, *I leoni di San Marco: il simbolo della Repubblica Veneta nella scultura e nella piturra*, 3 vols. (Venice and Verona, 2012), vol. II, *Catalogo*.

[30]G. Priuli, *I diarii [AA. 1499–1512]*, 3 vols., ed. R. Cessi (Bologna, 1940), vol. IV (*Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, tomo XXIV, parte III), 56.

[31]G. Fantaguzzi, *Caos*, 2 vols., ed. M.A. Pistocchi (Rome, 2012), vol. I, 492.

[32]BRF, MS 1841, *Cronica Bianchini*, fols. 386r, 399v; Venezia, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, MS Prov. Div. 252-c, Priuli, *I diarii*, vol. V, fols. 261v–262r.

[33]E.W. Muir, 'Was there republicanism in the Renaissance Republics? Venice after Agnadello', in J. Martin and D. Romano (eds.), *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797* (Baltimore, 2000), 149–50.

[34]C. Pasero, *Francia Spagna Impero a Brescia, 1509–1516* (Brescia, 1958), 44.

the denigration of many Venetian symbols at various urban locations, including the Duomo.[35] Upon the lion's departure from Brescia, a mocking voice was raised in the crowded square: 'Go with good speed, O Saint Mark, you will become lord of Milan!' ('Vai di buona lena, o San Marco, che diventerai signore di Milano!').[36] The vilification of the symbols of Venetian sovereignty could take on even more sarcastic connotations. After the terrible Sack of Brescia by French troops (19 February 1512), the elderly nobleman Francesco Cazzago proposed the demolition of the stone lion on the entrance door of the Broletto Palace, the main seat of the Venetian magistracy, in the city's Piazza del Duomo. After gathering a handful of people, Cazzago had a rope put around St Mark's neck and declared: 'Let's throw this cow down' ('Tiremo zoso questa vacha'). In the days following the destruction, inscriptions appeared on the city's busiest street corners ('cantoni'), comparing the pro-French Cazzago to the evangelical traitor Cyrene who 'dragged Jesus Christ by the rope'.[37]

Also in Bergamo, during the French occupation of the city, actions to remove Venetian emblems took place repeatedly, although less spontaneously and often commissioned by the local authorities. Between 1509 and 1510, the marble lion, the doge's statue and the coats of arms of the Venetian rectors placed on the façade of the Palazzo della Ragione were removed.[38] In 1511, acts of obliteration became more systematic and – quite unusually for the time – we know precisely which and how many emblems or symbols were erased. As well as the demolition of a gold statue bearing the inscription 'You have loved justice and hated iniquity' ('Dilexisti iustitiam et odisti iniquitatem'),[39] the councillors of the Comune commissioned a stonemason named Agostino to erase all the rectors' coats of arms and all the lions still publicly displayed in the city. On 28 February 1511, they ordered the same craftsman to remove another 25 stone insignia and a lion that was still standing. The operations were completed between 30 May and 11 July, when the order was given first to pull down the lion on one city gate (Porta del Pantano) and then to deface the Venetian symbols, replacing them with the French insignia.[40] The scale of this planned destruction gives an idea of the symbolic importance and emotional power of these material forms of political representation.

Even after the restoration of Venetian authority in 1516–17, material representations of the power of Venice were the focus of the city dwellers' attention, now not as

[35]As reported by Marin Sanudo, *Diarii* (henceforth DMS), 58 vols., ed. F. Stefani, G. Berchet and N. Barozzi (Venice, 1879–1903), vol. VIII, col. 511: 'Et che quel caro triumphal, li è sta portà quando el intrò in Milan, è sta apichato soto il tecto dil Domo, dove è uno lion ferito in mar, qual un drago el caza, et è a la riva di tera, dove un gallo li cava li ochii, poi è una bandiera d'oro di San Marco, apichata a le ruode di ditto charo.'

[36]Pasero, *Francia Spagna*, 45.

[37]Biblioteca Queriniana di Brescia, MS C. I. 15, Pandolfo Nassino, *Registro di molte cose seguite*, fol. 70v. See also V. Frati, I. Gianfranceschi, F. Bonali Fiquet *et al.* (eds.), *Il sacco di Brescia: testimonianze, croanche, diari, atti del processo e memorie storiche della 'presa memoranda et crudele' della città nel 1512*, 3 vols. (Brescia, 1989), vol. I, 152.

[38]See P. Cavalieri, *'Qui sunt guelfi et partiales nostri': comunità, patriziato e fazioni a Bergamo fra XV e XVI secolo* (Milan, 2008), 110. On public dissent in Bergamo, see E. Carminati, 'Rituali e cerimoniali civici nella Terraferma veneziana. Il caso della città di Bergamo (secc. XVII–XVIII)', Università di Padova and École Pratique des Hautes Études Ph.D. thesis, 2016, 217–43.

[39]Cavalieri, *'Qui sunt guelfi et partiales nostri'*, 110.

[40]Biblioteca Civica A. Mai di Bergamo, Archivio Storico del Comune, Azioni del Consiglio, 1.2.3.1–11 (reg. 11), fol. 55r–v (28 Feb. 1511), fol. 102r (30 May 1511) and fol. 123r (11 Jul. 1511).

objects to be destroyed, but rather as symbols of identity to be preserved and claimed. On 15 January 1517, for example, the return of Verona under Venetian sovereignty was greeted with great enthusiasm by the local inhabitants. To celebrate the moment, 'the bell of the tower in the main square was rung for three continuous days and fires were lit for three days in the square and in all the various neighbourhoods'.[41] According to Marin Sanudo's undoubtedly partial version, the celebrations were extremely joyous: all public spaces were filled materially and acoustically with pro-Venetian emblems and sounds. After a solemn mass and public pardon, the citizens shouted the name of the evangelist Mark in the crowded cathedral and the streets became so full that it was impossible to move. Also 'some lions of St Mark made of stone, which had previously been hidden under the ground', were hoisted onto boards covered in carpets, to be transported to the cathedral and through the streets. The sculptures had 'signs on them saying *veritas de terra orta est et justicia de coelo prospexit*' (Psalm 84:12).[42] This is a significant case of the apotropaic value that early modern common people attributed to material emblems: stone lions, previously protected underground from destruction, were unearthed and eventually paraded in the streets in order to exorcize the harsh imperial rule over the city and to celebrate, at the same time, what they considered to be just Venetian sovereignty.

The devotion of the subject communities to the materiality of Venetian symbols lasted well after the conclusion of the War of Cambrai. When the city of Crema was conquered by the French in 1509, the most significant emblems of Venetian identity were immediately stolen, both from civic palaces and public spaces. Firstly, Vincenzo Civerchio's painting of *St Mark with Justice and Temperance* (1507) was removed from the Council Chamber to be sent to France.[43] Later, the Milanese *podestà* Ludovico Gallarate ordered that a lion dating back to the end of the fifteenth century be removed from Porta Ripalta: 'the beautiful image of St Mark, made of white marble…was sent to Milan and from Milan to Asti, to be then taken to France, but because of its great weight it was left there until 1557'.[44] Under pressure from the population, the lion was finally returned to Crema, where in 1558 it was placed on the tower of Palazzo Pretorio, overlooking the main square. Despite being damaged during the Jacobin uprisings of 1797, the lion is still preserved in the same aedicule as in 1558, later restored at the end of the nineteenth century (Figure 1).[45]

Speaking stones

In Italian cities during the early modern period, as in many other European urban centres at this time, statues, stone inscriptions and coats of arms continued to be vilified, destroyed and sometimes relocated and restored by citizens or authorities, for

[41]Archivio di Stato di Verona, Antico Archivio del Comune, Ducali, vol. 16, fol. 196r.

[42]DMS, vol. XXIII, col. 500.

[43]Pietro da Terno, *Historia di Crema, 570–1557*, ed. M. Verga and C. Verga (Crema, 1964), 268. The painting is lost, as reported by M. Marubbi, *Vincenzo Civerchio: contributo alla cultura figurativa cremasca nel primo Cinquecento* (Milan, 1986), 149.

[44]Da Terno, *Historia di Crema*, 269–70.

[45]The 1558 inscription says: 'Obductus a Gallis Astae obscurus / iacui, nunc restitutus patriae insignis maneo. / Const. Priuli pr. opera. / M. D. LXIII'. See also M. Perolini, *Vicende degli edifici monumentali e storici di Crema* (Crema, 1975), 116–17; and Rizzi, *I leoni di San Marco*, 220.

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Figure 1. Lion of St Mark. Botticino stone, Crema, Palazzo Pretorio (formerly at Porta Ripalta), 1490. © Filippo Piazza.

their function as political or religious symbols.[46] However, political participation was not only expressed through the offence and defence of sculptures or images. In some cases, statues could materially epitomize the people's many voices. The well-known 'talking statues' or 'speaking sculptures', for example, were positioned in cities' busiest public locations and represented intermedia cultural objects, involving – thanks to the pasquinades posted on them – written, architectural, oral and visual forms of political communication.[47] These statues, and other objects discussed below, embodied the intermediality of early modern political interactions and acted as urban nodes of complex communication networks.[48] In Venice, for instance, the marble statue of the Gobbo and the low column which stands beside it (the *pietra del bando*) were simultaneously an example of intermedia functionality and of the multiple meanings of public spaces. Located in the campo San Giacomo near the Rialto bridge, this architectural element was used by town criers for making their announcements or by street singers working the busy market area for their aural performances, while

[46]A. Spicer, 'After iconoclasm: reconciliation and resacralization in the Southern Netherlands, ca. 1566–85', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 44 (2013), 411–33; and S. Thiry, 'The emblazoned kingdom ablaze: heraldic iconoclasm and armorial recovery during the French Wars of Religion, 1588–95', *French History*, 27 (2013), 323–50.

[47]On pasquinades as a form of public communication of dissent, most recently see C.J. Gilbert, 'If this statue could talk: statuary satire in the pasquinade tradition', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 18 (2015), 79–112; M. Faini, '"E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino": Pasquino, Aretino, and the concealed self', *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme*, 40 (2017), 161–85; and A. Romano (ed.), *Celio Secondo Curione e la satira pasquinesca* (Manziana, 2021).

[48]D. Bellingradt and M. Rospocher (eds.), *The Intermediality of Early Modern Communication*, special issue of *Cheiron*, 6/2 (2021).

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also being the location for displaying official printed proclamations and for posting anonymous manuscript pasquinades.[49]

While posted-up writings, slanderous placards or infamous libels are documented in various early modern European cities,[50] talking statues were mainly used in Italy, particularly where the level of internal conflict and the 'graphic' culture of dissent were highly developed. In this sense, the Pasquino in papal Rome (along with other Roman talking statues such as Marforio, Facchino, Madama Lucrezia and Babuino) is certainly the most striking and renowned example, partly because it retained this function over the centuries up to the present day.[51] And yet, while the talking statues of Rome or Venice are well studied (most often only through literary sources),[52] their materiality and their setting in public space have received less attention, as has the existence of many other speaking statues in other urban contexts, large and small, throughout the Italian peninsula. Such is the case of one such statue in Brescia, for example. When the construction of Brescia's Loggia was completed in the second half of the sixteenth century, a statue depicting the allegory of Charity was omitted from the final decoration and left at the foot of the civic building. From that moment until the end of the nineteenth century, this sculptural fragment – which in the eighteenth century was given the popular name of *Lodoìga* (Lodovica) *della Loggia* – was reused as a local Pasquino for posting texts of political or social criticism (Figure 2).[53] Other examples of talking statues are documented in contemporary literary sources in Modena (*Bona de Modena*) and Pavia (*Regisole*), while a similar use of the *Omm de preja* in Milan is only attested by the nineteenth century.[54] This indicates the widespread use of these urban elements for communicative purposes throughout the Italian peninsula and beyond the major communication centres of Rome and Venice.

While the aforementioned statues are still visible in today's urban fabric, other speaking stone monuments had a shorter lifespan and left no traces of their presence. This is the case of the Venetian lion sent from Ravenna to Bologna in 1509 and positioned on the main piazza as a sort of war trophy by the papal government. The lion's wings were detached and in this mutilated state, restrained with a chain around its neck, it was displayed in front of the main civic palace where local people began to

[49]A. Marzo, 'Pasquino e il Gobbo di Rialto', in Ch. Damianaki, P. Procaccioli and A. Romano (eds.), *Ex marmore: Pasquini, pasquinisti, pasquinate nell'Europa moderna* (Manziana, 2006), 121–34; R. Salzberg and M. Rospocher, 'Street singers in Italian Renaissance urban culture and communication', *Cultural & Social History*, 9 (2012), 9–26.

[50]See, for instance, A. Castillo Gómez, 'Words on walls: an approach to exposed writing in early modern Europe', *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, 9 (2020), 57–82; *idem*, 'Writings on the streets: ephemeral texts and public space in the early modern Hispanic world', in M. Lyons and R. Marquilhas (eds.), *Approaches to the History of Written Culture* (London, 2017), 73–96.

[51]M. Spagnolo, *Pasquino in piazza: una statua a Roma tra arte e vituperio* (Rome, 2019).

[52]This is the case, for example, of the book by O. Bauer, *Pasquille in den Fuggerzeitungen. Spott- und Schmähgedichte zwischen Polemik und Kritik (1568–1605)* (Vienna, 2008).

[53]F. Robecchi, *Lodoìga, la statua aliena di Piazza della Loggia in Brescia: misteri, storia, ripristino* (Roccafranca, 2009); and E. Valseriati, *Tra Venezia e l'Impero: dissenso e conflitto politico a Brescia nell'età di Carlo V* (Milan, 2016), 32–48.

[54]E. Garavelli, *La bona di Modena e la sua corrispondenza inedita con Pasquino*, in Damianaki, Procaccioli and Romano (eds.), *Ex marmore*, 135–49; C. Saletti, *Il Regisole di Pavia* (Como, 1997); Nevola, *Street Life*, 98.

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Figure 2. Unknown artist, *Lodovica della Loggia.* Botticino stone, Brescia, Piazza della Loggia, second half of the sixteenth century. © Enrico Valseriati.

paint satirical verses.[55] After the marble lion was removed from the main public space, this mutilated and 'talking' sculpture disappeared, and the social life of this political object ended there.

When the presence of talking statues is not documented, other architectural elements, placed at strategic urban junctions, performed a similar function in representing the voice of the people. Through messages posted on the columns of the arcades of civic buildings or at street intersections, on the outer walls of public buildings or the doors of private homes, citizens could express their dissent or slander

[55]Archivio di Stato di Mantova (ASM), Archivio Gonzaga, busta 1242, letter from Bernardino Prosperi to Isabella d'Este, 6 Jan. 1510: 'el San Marco de marmoro dorato lo quale fo portato da Ravena al pede de la scala del palazo de la ragione incadenato cum una catena al collo et alle 2 la diadema ge le hano levate et postole lì supra nel muro et tutavia ge depingevano certi motti'.

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eminent social figures and political enemies.[56] In these instances, it is mainly the stones of the walls and the marble of the columns that replace the function of talking statues. This is the case of the columns of the loggia of the Palazzo Comunale in Udine, which overlooked the main square and which, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, were repeatedly used to post bulletins inciting urban violence and sedition.[57] The same applies, as we shall see, to the columns of the Palazzo Ducale in Venice or of its equivalent in Ferrara, or to those of the loggia in the main squares of Milan and Brescia, or to the one in the busiest street corner of the city of Trento (the so-called Canton).

The political and communicative effectiveness of these ephemeral public texts was guaranteed by their easy accessibility to the entire population, facilitated by the different modes of circulation and their location in busy outdoor spaces, which accelerated the circulation of messages.[58] An example of this kind of media exchange between orality and public writing is the violent attack on Antonio Grimani in 1499, who was then the Venetian *capitano generale da mar* (captain general of the sea). After the Ottomans' defeat of the Venetians in the naval battle of Zonchio, popular discontent was so widespread that young children ran around the streets of Venice singing the following caustic verses: 'Antonio Grimani, / ruin of the Christians / rebel against the Venetians!' ('Antonio Grimani, / ruina de' cristiani / rebello de' venetiani!'). The oral message against the Venetian capitano was echoed in writings posted on walls and shop doors: 'Antonio Grimani, / rebel against the Venetians!' ('Antonio Grimani, / rebello de' venitiani!').[59]

The material evidence of these ephemeral texts, preserved in judicial records or reported by chroniclers, gives us a precise idea of how they were perceived by rulers and presented to the eyes of the population, posted up in public spaces. It was with great concern that on 9 August 1548, for instance, the *podestà* of Brescia Giovanni Antonio Valier sent a small paper note, no bigger than a postcard, glued to its accompanying letter, to the heads of the Council of Ten in Venice. This *bollettino*, signed by 'Pasquino' in person, was one of three inflammatory texts found posted in unspecified public places, probably on the columns of the Loggia or the main gate of the Palazzo del Broletto. In these pasquinades, the population was encouraged to 'cut to pieces' the *podestà* Valier and the councillors of the Comune, all accused of having increased the price of cereals, causing famine and poverty in the city (Figure 3).[60]

[56]See C. Evangelisti, 'Libelli famosi: processi per scritte infamanti nella Bologna di fine '500', *Annali della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*, 26 (1992), 181–239.

[57]See, for example, Biblioteca Civica V. Joppi di Udine, Archivio Comunale Antico, Acta Civitatis Utini, Annales, tomo 44, Udine, 7 Feb. 1523 ('Item ancora hanno posti alle collonne del pallazo de Comun de la cità nostra de Udene alcuni bollettini cum lettere contrafacte, cum parolle scripte incentive de seditione, rixe et homicidii').

[58]According to the definition of public writings given by Armando Petrucci, as 'any type of writing conceived for use in outdoor spaces, or even in enclosed spaces, to allow multiple readings (by a group or a crowd) of a written text on an exposed surface at a distance'; A. Petrucci, *La scrittura: ideologia e rappresentazione* (Turin, 1986), xx.

[59]'Antonio Grimani, / ruina de' cristiani / rebello de' venetiani, / puòstu esser manzà da' canni, / da' canni, da' cagnolli, / ti e toi fiulli!'; DMS, III, col. 5.

[60]Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Capi del Consiglio di Dieci, Dispacci (lettere) dei rettori e pubblici rappresentanti, busta 21, Brescia, 9 Aug. 1548. For other examples, see Valseriati, *Tra Venezia e l'Impero*, 32–48.

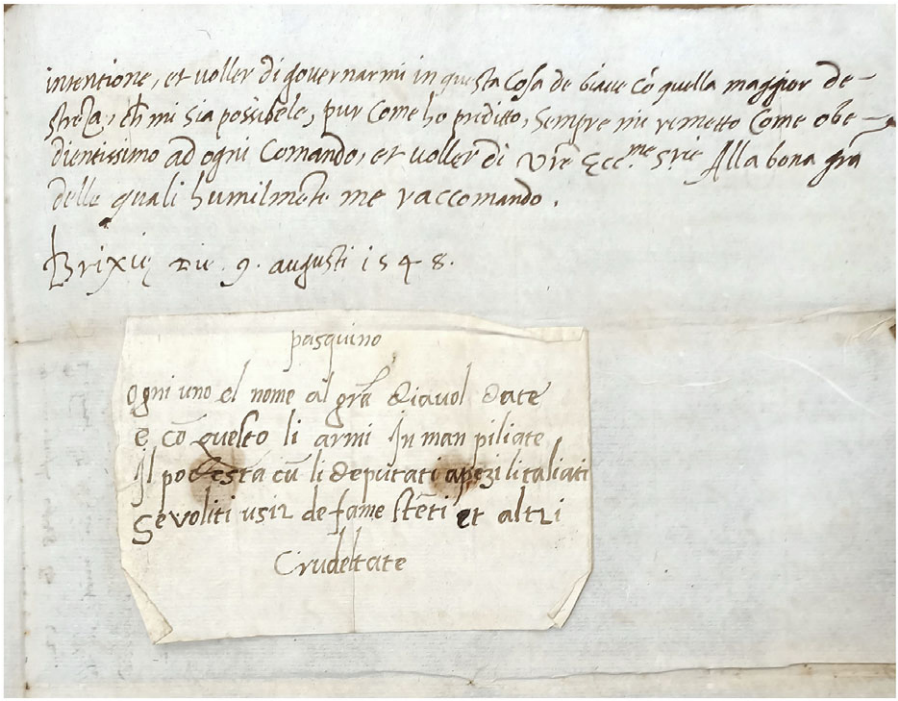

Figure 3. Pasquinade against the *podestà* and councillors of the municipality of Brescia. ASV, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci, Dispacci (lettere) dei rettori e pubblici rappresentanti, busta 21, Brescia, 9 August 1548.

The communicative power of defamatory placards could be greatly increased when the authors used images to complement their texts. In Venice, a city where graphic culture was highly developed at all social levels,[61] bulletins were sometimes accompanied by drawings, most often obscene and provocative. In November 1505, for example, the bookbinder Alberto da Padua was arrested with the accusation of composing a violent illustrated pasquinade against the doge Leonardo Loredan and his son, although he was subsequently released. The text aurguring the decapitation of Loredan was illustrated with a depiction of the Virgin Mary desperately complaining to St Mark about the doge. The manifesto was found stuck on a column in front of the Church of San Giacomo at Rialto, under the clock and right in the square. Once again it is a speaking column that voices the criticism of authority, the very same architectural element ('la colona di le cride') used by the authorities to post laws and official proclamations.[62] While the defamatory manifesto against Loredan has been lost, a placard raging against the papal legate, found in May 1569, is preserved in the archives of the Council of Ten. The papal *nuncio* was accused of having sexual relations with women, men, minors, animals and high prelates. The text is broken up

[61]Thanks to the extensive presence of writings for public display, graffiti and ephemeral printed texts: R. Salzberg, *Ephemeral City: Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice* (Manchester, 2014), 61–5; R. Ferguson, *Venetian Inscriptions: Vernacular Writing for Public Display in Medieval and Renaissance Venice* (Manchester, 2021); and now D. Marangon and A. Toso Fei, *I graffiti di Venezia* (Venice, 2022).

[62]G. Priuli, *I diarii*, 3 vols., ed R. Cessi (Bologna, 1937), vol. II, 394; and DMS, VI, cols. 257–9.

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by a drawing, which leaves little room to the imagination: the *nuncio*'s penis with the words 'His cock that he fucked with' ('il suo cazzo che ha fottuto') inscribed on it.[63] Sometimes such a combination of texts and images could convey even more threatening meanings, impacting on the population and institutions. On 13 May 1531, the *podestà* of Verona, Pietro Tron, sent the Council of Ten a placard addressed to Girolamo Galizi, a Venetian citizen employed in Verona's Camera Fiscale. Because of disputes concerning rents and boundaries, Galizi had previously been threatened in the public square, and later found a disturbing sheet on the door of his house. Like many contemporary bulletins, this one is in the local dialect and contains a death threat. The most relevant fact, however, is what lies beneath the text, where the possible deaths of the official are accurately drawn: fire and a stab wound to the heart.[64]

The public spaces and buildings of Italian cities in the early modern age were dotted with graffiti, charcoal drawings, posters and manifestos with images. After the battle of Polesella in December 1509, for example, the people of Ferrara greeted the naval victory of the Duke Alfonso d'Este over the ships of the Republic of Venice with sonnets and *frottole* recited and distributed to the population, but above all with mocking drawings, described as 'marchonate', ridiculing the Venetians. Between January and February 1510, several copies of these drawings were repeatedly affixed to the columns of the Palazzo Ducale in Ferrara. Most of the sheets depicted an allegorical representation showing St Mark held in a press, operated by the French cockerel and the imperial eagle, while black and white eagles – the symbol of the Este family – attacked the evangelist and a sword descended from the sky 'in vilification of the Venetians' ('in vilipendio dei veneziani').[65]

Looking at similar case-studies, Armando Petrucci wrote about the authorities' 'graphic occupation' of urban public spaces, underlining an intended use of these communicative spaces to convey messages to citizens through writing.[66] However, at the same time, the urban population made extensive, informal and spontaneous graphic use of those same spaces and the architectural elements that populated them, which could sometimes result in forms of 'graphic rebellion'.[67] All these examples show how physical objects displayed in public spaces, such as sculptures, statues or written artefacts, become politically charged in Renaissance Italy. They also offer material evidence of the dual character of public political spaces at this time, as places for the display of power and authority, but also as sites charged with political agency, where ordinary men and women could express their participation in politics.

Political public spaces

Under loggias, outside churches, on street corners, in taverns or squares of Renaissance Italy, it was not only the urban elite who gathered to exchange political opinions

[63]ASV, Consiglio di Dieci, Secrete, filza 13, 23 Maggio 1569. See M. van Gelder, 'Graffiti in Venetië: teksten, tekeningen en posters in een vroegmoderne Italiaanse stad', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 131 (2018), 73–94, at 93.

[64]ASV, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci, Dispacci (lettere) dei rettori e pubblici rappresentanti, busta 192, Verona, 13 May 1531.

[65]ASM, Archivio Gonzaga, busta 1242, letters from Bernardino Prosperi to Isabella d'Este, 17 Jan. and 10 Feb. 1510. See also V. Farinella, *Alfonso I d'Este: le immagini e il potere* (Milan, 2014), 172 and 801.

[66]Petrucci, *La scrittura*.

[67]Castillo Gómez, 'Writings on the streets', 74.

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or to express dissent. Men and women from all social backgrounds congregated in outdoor spaces to share political news or express their discontent with the authorities. As seen in the previous pages, in those same public spaces a wide range of graphic and oral communication forms were available to diverse audiences composed of everyone from artisans, merchants and shopkeepers, to peddlers and beggars. The result was a complex interplay between buildings, media and different social actors.

In many Italian cities, institutions attempted to monitor and regulate public political discourse through various forms of surveillance and spatial control, in order to avoid crowds gathering and possible uprisings. In Milan, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, one of these attempts to regulate street politics concerned the materiality of urban spaces. To prevent the proliferation of subversive opinions, for instance, the ruler Ludovico il Moro issued a series of proclamations aimed at the demolition of the so-called 'coperti'.[68] These were overhanging wooden structures, covered by a projecting roof and similar to loggias, but whose nature was eminently ephemeral.[69] The 'coperti' were scattered in practically every neighbourhood of the city, in the squares or at street corners. They were conceived merely as shelter from the weather but could spontaneously become outdoor and public spaces used for political discussions and the circulation of news or information. The presence of 'coperti' in Milan is attested at least since the second half of the fifteenth century. The numerous legislative measures taken to demolish them in the following couple of hundred years demonstrate the continuity of their political use, but also the ineffectiveness of these measures.[70] In some cases, these covered structures were designed to last over time, as public meeting and conversation places overlooking the squares. This is the case of the Loggia dei Figini, built in stone in 1467 in Piazza del Duomo and demolished only in 1864 (Figure 4). A series of nineteenth-century paintings and even some photographs of the Loggia give an idea of the 'vernacular' use of these covered spaces during the early modern and modern periods, where people could meet to shelter from bad weather, but also read and comment on *avvisi*, illustrated posters or proclamations posted on the columns of the arcade. The 'coperto' was in Piazza del Duomo, in the city's main civic, religious and transit space. Instead of being an orderly model of urban decorum, the main square was a noisy and crowded 'centre of popular activity', an architectonic site congested by the ephemeral stalls of 'haberdashers, innkeepers, bakers, druggists and fruit sellers' or by the benches where 'mountebanks and charlatans' performed.[71] Milan's ephemeral structures are but one of many examples of how the materiality of spaces influenced the exchange of political information and vice versa.

Renaissance chronicles, treatises and literary works offer insight into the street life of cities, including detailed lists of the public or semi-public places where people met daily to discuss or listen to the news. In the weeks after the battle of Agnadello, for

[68]G.P. Bognetti, 'Aspetti politici, sociali e istituzionali della prima dominazione straniera', in *Storia di Milano*, vol. VIII (Milan, 1957), 6; and L. Arcangeli, 'Milano durante le guerre d'Italia: esperimenti di rappresentanza e identità cittadina', *Società e Storia*, 104 (2004), 225–66.

[69]On similar coeval ephemeral structures in Venice, see D. Abdon, 'Sheltering refugees: ephemeral architecture and mass migration in early modern Venice', *Urban History*, 48 (2021), 1–21.

[70]See L. Patetta, 'Milano, XV–XVII secolo: la difficoltà di costruire piazze', in D. Calabi (ed.), *Fabbriche, piazze, mercati: la città italiana nel Rinascimento* (Rome, 1997), 63; and Nevola, *Street Life*, 58.

[71]S. D'Amico, 'An ephemeral king: political power and urban space in Spanish Milan', *Cheiron*, 6 (2021), 13–38, at 29.

Figure 4. Angelo Inganni, *View of the Piazza del Duomo with the Loggia dei Figini*, 1838. Oil on canvas, Milano, Palazzo Morando – Costume Moda Immagine, inv. 832.

example, Girolamo Priuli noted how in various Italian cities, Venice's political adversaries launched a polemical offensive against the Republic, targeting public spaces such as piazzas, barbershops and brothels, where people gathered to get up to speed on the latest political news.[72] In his well-known encyclopaedia of professions, *Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (1585), Tomaso Garzoni stigmatized those people who 'spend all of their time strolling in the square, going from the taverns to the fishmongers and from the palace to the loggia, doing nothing else all day but wandering here and there, now hearing singing among the stalls…now

[72]Priuli, *I diarii*, vol. IV, 56–7.

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wasting time at the barbershop telling tales, now reading the news'.[73] In his *Due dialoghi del modo di disegnare le piante delle fortezze* (1557), the engineer Giacomo Lantieri da Paratico expressed his disapproval of how crowded intersections and squares acted as poles of attraction around which political discourses intermingled. With regard to the training of architects, Lantieri complained about those young people who, instead of using their knowledge to work on urban planning, 'stand around all day with their hands at their belts…in the squares speaking badly of everyone'.[74] In early modern Italian cities, it was also apparently quite common to meet people on street corners and in the square 'talking about vulgar and filthy things, hearing which would have disgusted those who wish to live honestly'.[75]

The tightly woven urban fabric of the city of Venice had always favoured the rapid circulation of opinions and information among a wide public. At times of political and social tension, the government was particularly sensitive to the threat of disruptions and disorder in the main public spaces. In the early summer of 1509, during the post-Agnadello political and military crisis, it was feared that the doge would become the subject of protests at public ceremonies in St Mark's Square. In response to concerns about the emergence of dissent during the public celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi, exceptional measures were taken to maintain public order and to prevent seditious gatherings. To 'prevent any disturbances', the presence of guards was increased in all neighbourhoods and 'teams of armed men were placed at all the street corners to surround St Mark's Square and to guard the chief Venetian magistrate'.[76] The same occasionally happened in Florence, when the 'mouths' of the square (*bocche della piazza*), that is the narrow access streets, were closed for fear of riots: an obvious homology between the closure of physical space and the silencing of discordant voices.[77]

Civic authorities and magistrates showed a constant fear of crowds gathering in public or semi-public spaces, such as streets, inns or piazzas. Throughout the sixteenth century in Trento, at the Canton, the animated four-way intersection between the street of the German taverns (*Contrada delle osterie tedesche*) and the main street leading to the bishop's palace, numerous proclamations against gambling, noise, dirt and improper gatherings of people were posted on the columns of the low arcades. The reason for choosing this location was the large number of shops or businesses concentrated around this street corner and the several hospitality facilities in the vicinity, run by members of the local German community.[78] As a place of passage, a hub of daily life and urban sociability, the Canton was the public space where institutional and informal political communication overlapped. Street corners like this one were not only used for formal government communications by town

[73]T. Garzoni, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, ed. P. Cherchi and B. Collina (Turin, 1996), vol. II, 809, chapter *De gli otiosi in piazza.*

[74]G. Lantieri da Paratico, *Due dialoghi del modo di disegnare le piante delle fortezze secondo Euclide* (Venice, 1557), 47.

[75]*Ibid.*

[76]Pietro Assonica, *Fragmentum chronicae ab anno circiter 1509 ad 1512*, ed. G. Finazzi, in *Miscellanea di Storia italiana* (Turin, 1868), vol. V, 316.

[77]A. Molho and F. Sznura (eds.), *Alle bocche della piazza: diario di anonimo fiorentino (1382–1401)* (Florence, 1986), XXXV–XLVIII.

[78]See S. Luzzi, *Stranieri in città: presenza tedesca e società urbana a Trento (secoli XV–XVIII)* (Bologna, 2003), 147–60.

Figure 5. Stengel & Co., *View of the 'Canton' in Trento.* Photo, Biblioteca Comunale di Trento, n. TIC511–1475, 1897.

criers; they were also 'nodes in the networks of urban community', multifunctional spaces shared by locals and foreigners of various social classes in order to gather and discuss news, and to exchange gossip or ideas.[79] Moreover, the Canton was the site where political statements might be anonymously posted on the walls, sometimes attacking the ruling elites. Examples of this practice were the scandalous broadsheets criticizing local magistrates that were fixed to a column in the city's main square (Piazza del Duomo) and at the Canton in May 1545, just a few months before the great opening of Council of Trent.[80] The function of the Canton as a public political space persisted well into the twentieth century, when posters on the column at the street corner and newspaper vendors could still be seen in the same location (see Figure 5).

It is not surprising, therefore, that when it came to crowded and multifunctional places like the Canton, urban magistrates always paid close attention to the possibility of subversion and dissent. Sometimes, even the political opinion of a single person, communicated forcefully in crowded places such as street corners or squares, was enough to alarm the civic authorities in charge of controlling public order. Concern increased when those responsible for these public utterances were members of the *popolo*, potentially capable of stirring up large crowds. This was the

[79]On street corners, see Nevola, *Street Life*, 187–226.

[80]Trento, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Principesco Vescovile, Libri feudali, vol. 38, fols. 8v–9r. See also M. Rospocher and E. Valseriati, '"Trento, the last chance for a beer": mobility, material culture and urban space in an early modern transit city', in F. Nevola, D. Rosenthal and N. Terpstra (eds.), *Hidden Cities: Urban Space, Geolocated Apps and Public History in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon and New York, 2022), 125–49.

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case with the cry of the Brescian poultry seller mentioned at the beginning of this article. But it was also the case of Marco, a shoemaker from Treviso whose story was told by Francesco Guicciardini. In 1511, the shoemaker appeared in the city's main square, holding the flag of St Mark, and incited the assembled crowd to demonstrate against the local imperial government, prompting those present to shout in chorus the name of the evangelist protector of Venice. Only the intervention of an orator of the king of Hungary, who was passing through Treviso at the time, prevented the spontaneous movement from turning into a pro-Venetian rebellion against the imperial government.[81] Also in the Lombard city of Cremona – in the sixteenth century marked by a profound rift between the aristocratic ruling class and the merchant guilds – tensions continually erupted in the public square. As in other cases mentioned above, tax collection proved to be a field of open confrontation between the lower social strata and civic institutions. In July 1575, Sebastiano Nani – a 'pichapreda' (sculptor) who was also active in the cathedral's building site – withheld taxes on marble from the city's tax collectors. Nani first appealed to the deputy magistracy and then

> went to the square of the city and said publicly that he was certain that the said tax collectors had a dispute with him because they were collecting money unduly from his work, for which reason he filled the ears of the plebeians and made the tax collectors look like bad people…The words of the aforementioned Nani, reported to ignorant people publicly in the square, who heard them, insinuate evil words both against the officials of His Majesty [King Philip II of Spain] in the city, who tolerate this, and above all against the managers of the duties and in time could cause great disorders.[82]

The words of the sculptor from Cremona evidently disturbed the social and civic order; his behaviour was considered particularly threatening because it took place in the main urban space, which became a sounding board reverberating the protest among an 'ignorant and plebeian' public.

While the town square was a natural arena of street politics, sometimes institutional or sacred spaces also became the target for the material support of popular dissent, often expressed in powerful verbal, graphic and material forms. During the convulsive phase of the Interdict imposed by Pope Paul V on the Republic of Venice (1606–07), for example, there was no lack of spectacular demonstrations of dissent led by members of the *popolo minuto* both in Venice and its mainland cities.[83] Between December 1606 and February 1607, many slanderous placards, graffiti and drawings were found in Brescia, attacking the Venetian government and the local

[81]Francesco Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia*, 3 vols. ed. S. Seidel Menchi (Turin, 1971), vol. II, 737: 'Dietro a' quali sollevandosi la plebe affezionata allo imperio viniziano, e facendosene capo uno Marco calzolaio, il quale con concorso e grida immoderate della moltitudine portò in su la piazza principale la bandiera de' viniziani, cominciorono a chiamare unitamente il nome di san Marco, affermando non volere riconoscere né altro imperio né altro signore: la quale inclinazione aiutò non poco uno oratore del re d'Ungheria, che andando a Vinegia e passando per Trevisi, scontratosi a caso in questo tumulto, confortò il popolo a non si ribellare.'

[82]Archivio di Stato di Milano, Cancelleria dello Stato di Milano, Filippo II (1575), busta 295, 20 Jul. 1575. On this case, see also G. Politi, *Aristocrazia e potere politico nella Cremona di Filippo II* (Milan, 1976), 443.

[83]On Venice itself, see de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice*.

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clergy, guilty of celebrating mass against the dictates of Rome. These materials were posted mainly on the façades of churches and on the walls of public buildings.[84] The protest of a Milanese cleric – at that time defrocked – took on a scatological dimension. He was caught under the Loggia, in the main square, placing 'two clay jugs full of dung, painted with the likeness of the heads of the Preachers of St Joseph and that of St Dominic'. Arrested on 24 February 1607 and then tortured by the Venetian authorities, the former cleric confessed to having also 'made many slanderous writings on churches' walls' and two days later he was led to the gallows in Piazza Duomo. In front of an 'extraordinary crowd', the culprit was hanged by the executioner in the square, after which the corpse was stoned by children, who rendered his body 'a no longer human form'.[85] The main urban space was thus transformed from a place of dissent into the theatre of performative justice that aimed to restore established order.[86] The dual character of public spaces, as places for the display of power and as places where political dissent could be expressed, highlights once more the complexity and dynamic nature of Renaissance politics.

Between private and public space

Not only men from all social strata, but also women of varying ranks – and even children – were an active presence in the public spaces of early modern European cities.[87] In the streets and squares, patrician and plebeian women, businesswomen and commoners also expressed their political opinions and sometimes played a leading role in urban uprisings.[88] There is no lack of evidence of women making seditious speeches in public places such as churches and squares, or singing political songs in public or liminal spaces such as streets or hospitals, [89] or participating in acts of political violence, house-scorning and posting defamatory signs.[90] The historiographical reconsideration of women's presence in public spaces and in the political sphere has contributed to rethinking the public/private paradigm and redefining the

[84]Giovanni Battista Bianchi, *I diari dei Bianchi*, in P. Guerrini (ed.), *Le cronache bresciane inedite dei secoli XIV–XIX*, 5 vols. (Brescia, 1930), vol. IV, 66–8.

[85]*Ibid.*, 69.

[86]Even if it should be noted that official deliberations are completely silent on this episode of summary justice; see ASB, Archivio Storico Civico, reg. 568, *Provvisioni*, 1606–07.

[87]On the gendering of urban public space in early modern cities, see the NWO-funded project www.freedomofthestreets.org, accessed 28 Oct. 2023.

[88]See S.K. Cohn Jr, 'Women in revolt in medieval and early modern Europe', in J. Firnhaber-Baker and D. Schoenaers (eds.), *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt* (London, 2017), 208–19.

[89]For example, in Augsburg a weaver's wife, Anna Fassnacht, was banished and tortured in 1524 for a seditious talk in the main church and in 1588 Sabina Preiss was interrogated for singing a banned political song in a hospital. See B.A. Tlusty (ed.), *Augsburg during the Reformation Era: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis, 2012), 15–16, 52–3; and M. Lewis, 'Women, family and sexuality', in B.A. Tlusty and M. Häberlein (eds.), *A Companion to Late Medieval and Early Modern Augsburg* (Leiden and Boston, 2020), 311–12.

[90]Research on early modern Rome has shown that two-thirds of violence cases involving women happened in public spaces and a good percentage of them included episodes of house-scorning, writing on doors or affixing of defamatory notes: E.S. Cohen, 'Honor and gender in the streets of early modern Rome', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 22 (1992), 597–625; C. Vasta, 'Per una topografia della violenza femminile (Roma, secoli XVI–XVII)', *Genesis*, 14 (2015), 59–81.

traditional urban geography in early modern Europe that confined women to the private sphere.[91]

In Italian Renaissance cities, too, there are documented cases in which the female population demonstrated a high degree of awareness of local and supra-local political discourses, manifesting this knowledge in various public or semi-public spaces. During the Italian Wars, in particular, women appeared to be more frequently involved in urban protests and in everyday political actions.[92] Quoting a letter from the *Provveditore* Pietro Marcello dated 10 February 1510, Marin Sanudo reports an episode that took place in Verona in which the materiality of public spaces was instrumental for the political involvement of the local townswomen. Verona had been occupied for months by the imperial army and the Spanish militia then stationed in the city. The imperial government was trying to break up the pro-Venetian faction in order to stem the collective discontent with the military occupation. To do this, on the night of 8 February 1510, Spanish soldiers used a deceptive voice call made in the city streets. Passing from house to house, they shouted the name of St Mark, to which 'many women from their houses' replied in chorus 'Marco, Marco'. After locating the houses from which the voices of support for Venice came, the soldiers marked the doors and looted them the following morning.[93]

The pro-Venetian responses of the citizens of Verona came from the windows or balconies of their private homes, transformed here into 'indoor public spaces'.[94] If the balconies and railings of public buildings have always represented a top-down space of political communication, the external façades of private residences also were often used to publicly express political opinions and affiliations, exploiting the visibility of material emblems from the streets or squares and showing the porosity of public and domestic spaces. A similar case to the Veronese one is reported again by Marin Sanudo: in the summer of 1509, after Padua suffered a sacking by the imperial army, numerous flags of St Mark appeared on the balconies of the city's houses. Paper symbols of the evangelist could also be seen on the doors of houses and shops, while citizens poured out into the streets in shock and women hid in churches.[95] It can be assumed that in this case the female population actively participated in the composition and display of the Venetian symbols, especially when these actions involved the use of 'domestic' spaces facing the public street. Balconies acted as filters between outdoor and indoor space, offering women a visual and aural contact with the public realm of street. As has also been demonstrated for the Venetian case, windows and terraces were hybrid spaces, between public and private, and so considered proper to women.[96] These liminal spaces were therefore exploited as places and material objects of communication, information and dissent.

[91]R. Laitinen and T. Cohen, 'Cultural history of early modern European streets: an introduction', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 12 (2008), 195–204; D. van den Heuvel, 'Gender in the streets of the premodern city', *Journal of Urban History*, 45 (2019), 693–710.

[92]Cohn Jr, *Popular Protest*, 71–92.

[93]DMS, vol. IX, col. 525.

[94]For the use of this expression in another context, see Corbellini and Hoogvliet's article in this special issue.

[95]DMS, vol. VIII, col. 527. On this and other similar cases, see Judde de Larivière, *The Revolt of Snowballs*, 63–4.

[96]See A. Cowan, 'Seeing is believing: urban gossip and the balcony in early modern Venice', *Gender & History*, 23 (2011), 721–38.

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Conclusion

We have seen in the previous pages how a variety of political objects – a marble Venetian lion, a colossal statue by Michelangelo, a huge bronze bell, but also a food stall or a wooden loggia, and even more ephemeral objects such as majolica plates or decorated mugs – could become vectors of political messages, even as their roles and meanings constantly changed. All the cases examined in this article remind us of the unique emotional and communicative power of statues, graffiti, images, sculptures and political symbols located in urban public spaces. This strong emotional aspect of political communication is one of the features that an investigation of urban politics through material objects allows us to approach.[97] However, material objects were not just media to convey political messages, sometimes they *were* the messages. The 'material agency' of these architectural elements and objects helped to create informal political spaces where early modern publics came together and exchanged opinions.[98]

As it has been argued, the concept of material agency enables us 'to focus upon the way in which people and things are mutually related'.[99] Objects and urban architecture did not serve as mere containers for political actions, but the mutual relationship between people, material environment and space shaped popular politics. Conversely, social and political interactions remodelled the architectural urban setting, sometimes changing the intended function of representative sites into loci of discussion and contestation. Thus, it was a combination of 'materiality, social structures, and actions'[100] that shaped political public spaces in Renaissance Italy. Focusing on politics at street level and on the material dimension of public spaces has the heuristic value of highlighting the political role and the agency of ordinary people in their everyday lives. Although usually formally excluded from the (closed) spaces of institutionalized urban politics, a wide range of historical actors from across the social spectrum – such as artisans, barbers, clerics, friars, labourers, merchants, notaries, shopkeepers or shoemakers, but also women and children – populated the early modern public spaces of political debate.

The street-level dimensions of politics are clearly not just a peculiarity of Italian Renaissance cities, but rather seem to be a defining and long-term feature of European urban culture.[101] Even at the turn of the twenty-first century, when 'a torrent of manifestos' have 'declared our imminent liberation from space and locality

[97]On the agency of political objects, see E. Francia and C. Sorba, 'Political objects in motion across 19th-century Europe', in L. Biasiori, F. Mazzini and C. Rabbiosi (eds.), *Reimagining Mobilities across the Humanities,* vol. II: *Objects, People and Texts* (London, 2023), 40–53; C. Fletcher (ed.), *Everyday Political Objects: From the Middle Ages to the Contemporary World* (Abingdon, 2023).

[98]For the concept of 'material agency', see C. Knappett and L. Malafouris (eds.), *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (Berlin, 2008); A. Meirion Jones and N. Boivin, 'The malice of inanimate objects: material agency', in D. Hicks and M.C. Beaudry (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford, 2010), 333–51. On the agency of objects more generally, the classical reference is of course A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).

[99]Meirion Jones and Boivin, 'The malice of inanimate objects', 351.

[100]M. Löw, *The Sociology of Space. Materiality, Social Structures, and Action* (New York, 2016).

[101]Jerram, *Streetlife.*

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and even materiality',[102] and despite a pervasive rhetoric that argues that digital social media represent our new public sphere, Renaissance street politics reminds us of the enduring power of material objects and of physical space.

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[102]B. Ladd, *The Streets of Europe: The Sights, Sounds, and Smells that Shaped Its Great Cities* (Chicago, 2020), 3; on the political power of physical space, see also J.R. Parkinson, *Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance* (Oxford, 2012).

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