

# **La Verra Antiga – The Celebration of the 1421 Mock-Battle at Servi Bridge in Venice**

## **Alessandro Caravia's mock-heroic poem and Venetian stick fighting Part II**

**By Gianluca Zanini**

*“I am very fond of buying this sword  
More than I having got a castle  
I'm making a new sheath  
All furnished with golden tinplate  
And letters that say: 'This is what  
Takes my enemy's breath away:  
Its name is Bloodsucker  
Which slashes coat mail and crushes helmets.’”<sup>1</sup>  
- Alessandro Caravia, 1550*

### **Jeweler, Heretic Poet, or Chronicler?**

It is difficult to define briefly the complex character of the, Alessandro Caravia, author of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian chronicle, *La Verra Antiga*, “The Ancient War.” However, it is not relevant in this essay to establish if he was a heretic rather than a simple jeweler, gold-smith, and gem merchant. In truth, we can better prefer to know where his passion for the urban stick-fighting wars mock battle and underworld slang of his day comes from.

There is no evidence that Caravia was inspired to write about the cruel mock battles as a poet-swordsman such as Torquato Tasso. Nevertheless, the theories that *The Ancient War* was simply a poetic artifice to hide heretic messages inside a mock-heroic poem in burlesque Venetian vulgar, seem to often be used as an excuse not to see anything in it other than drunk workmen and artisans cudgeling each other on a bridge.

Most of the information about Caravia's life comes from the documents of the trial wherein the Inquisition charged him with heresies after the publication of *The Ancient War (Verra Antiga)*, and from the long correspondence he held with Cosimo I De Medici, who bought precious stones and jewels from him. Alessandro was born in Venice on the 10th of July 1503. He grew up in a middle-class and well-off family, although some of his relative's problems made his life difficult. After his brother's death he had to undertake his family' support. From a young age he attended to the *Guilds of the Jewelers* located in Rialto. Here Eastern and Western merchants frequented a locale where business was conducted as well as not just goods but ideas and philosophies were exchanged.

Carvers, jewelers, and chisellers gathered in the heart of this trading of religious ideas while working their precious stones and metals, which were often attributed beneficial powers and magic meaning. One of these high-regarded jewelers was Alessandro Caravia. Bound indissolubly to the corporation, he shared its original spirit and respected unflinchingly its regulations. He ran a workshop in Rialto, and thanks to his rectitude, he practiced his profession successfully. Naturally, after such success, toward the end of his career Caravia acquired the position of personal jeweler of the De Medici family.

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<sup>1</sup> Caravia, *Naspo bizaro* cit. canto I, L III, 1-4 e LIV.

The correspondence with Cosimo I provides interesting information about our author's life and personality. Caravia was a man of melancholic nature. Besides his economic concern due to his profession and family, he suffered from attacks of melancholia since childhood. Although he was let off the charge of heresy by the Inquisition, it further marked this restless spirit with psychosomatic manifestations and tendencies of self-pity.

In 1541 he wrote, *Sogno dil Caravia* ("Caravia's Dream"), in which his portrait appears.<sup>2</sup> In 1550, he wrote the *Verra Antiga de Castellani, Canaruoli e Gnatti con la morte di Giurco e Gnani*, and finally in 1557 sent his, *Naspo bizaro*, to press. This last work, in which he deal with gold and stones in different metaphors, became famous and was re-printed several times. Caravia's will dates back to the 1st of May, 1563, though he died at the age of sixty-five in 1568.

### **The Ancient War**

The *Verra Antiga* is a mock-heroic poem of 184 octaves. The work begins with a dedication to "my very honourable patron Piero Aretin." Here the author says that he is inspired by the discovery of an ancient manuscript of, *Pantalon da ca Litroppia*, who recorded the wars of that time. The poem tells the chronicle of the mock battle held, according to the poetic pretense, at Servi bridge in Venice, the 28th of October, San Simon, 1421. In truth, there are several elements that make us doubt the reliability of this date. It is proven that the construction of the bridge is later than 1421 and from the evidence of the trial, Caravia confessed to be inspired by the discovery of others papers about the chronicle of the mock battle held at San Marziale bridge in 1521.

#### *La Verra Antiga*

*Del mille e quattrocento e vintiun  
El di de Squarza vele San Simon  
A i Servi se redusse cadaun  
Con le so celladine el so baston  
Per far veder chi se bianco o brun  
E che nigun non è nianche minchion  
L'un pi de l'altro fazzando e'l valente  
Mostrando de stimar bastonae niente<sup>3</sup>*

#### *The Ancient War*

*In one thousand, four hundred and twenty one  
In the day of Sail-ripper San Simon  
Everyone meet at Servi (bridge)  
With his stick and helmet  
To show off who is white or brown  
And that no one is a simpleton  
Displaying to be skilful one better than the other  
and not to be afraid of stick blows*

Caravia handles the subject of The Ancient Wars in an unvaried manner. The incessant series of challenges, menaces, and curses among the participants are sometimes confused and prevent us

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<sup>2</sup> The first two pictures of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Caravia, *La Verra antiga*, VI ottava.

from understanding the effective course of the fight. Only by analyzing the succession of the fighters' names, can we see how the Castellani faction, after the first individual duels, advanced until the border of the Cannaruoli's territory. The opponents repelled them twice when they were almost across the canal reaching the base of the bridge to the other side.

Then a *squarcina*, or bravos' knife, is suddenly flashed. The accident, avoided by a gentleman's reconciliatory interference, seems to be completely averted, but Sier Grinta's "pugnal" (fiigher) stabs a Castellano's abdomen. Panic strikes! The *squarcine* re-appear and no longer will they now be sheathed back. The fighters pass instinctively from sticks to a diverse armoury of cut and thrust weapons such as daggers, side swords, two-handers, small knives, spontoons, gisarmes, partizens, steckes, stortas, axes, and even bows and arrows. The mock war with sticks is now a real battle with real weapons.

The general scuffle turns into a slaughter: the supporters of both sides change from spectators to players. They throw rocks and tiles from terraces, windows, and roof tops down onto the fighters' heads. Only the eventual intervention of a hundred gendarmes ends the massacre. On the ground two champions lie injured: the Cannaruolo Gnagni and the Castellano Giurco, whose confessions, will and deaths Caravia narrates at the end of his chronicle.

### Caravia's Text

In *Verra Antiga* the most sensational moments of the *battagliola* ("battle") are underlined in a mock-heroic way, as if to sweeten the ferocity of the rampant violence. However the *battagliola* itself was not only a general brawl without rules, as it may seem. Indeed, the players were not inexperienced swordsmen, but very skilful at *Scrimia* ("fencing"), which as we know, in those times was already considered a "science."

The *battagliole* on the bridges, privileged places of initiation, come from the very ancient roman rites of purification and expiation, and from Medieval chivalric legends of *Orlando innamorato*<sup>4</sup> and *Orlando Furioso*.<sup>5</sup> The choice of the day is not accidental: *the San Simon Day*, the 28th of October, marks a very delicate period of change, inaugurating a new season where the sea manifests its most fearsome and insidious nature for navigation. It impossible really to say what this meant for a seafaring people like the Venetians, while it is helpful to point out how the *War* was under the protection of this Saint, *sails ripper/rip-sails*, to whom popular religion had always connected to storms, hurricanes and floods.

Caravia's expressions, such as comparing the champions' scrambles to the sea surges of storms, half-reveal the outline of a ritual action: propitiatory fight between initiated groups. As symbol of the esoteric journey, of crossings and difficult passages, and a medium of the world of dead, the bridge itself is the most typical place for these spectacle-rites, which follow after the critical stage of the transition to a new season. In this sense, the bridge *Wars* belong to the cycle of the Carnival feasts, where the images of slaughter and massacre, recurring obsessively in the 184 octaves, are those connected to the banquet. In fact, in the Carnival feast death and laughter live together, associating the images of the dismembering of the body to those of the cuisine.

Thus, in *The Ancient War*, under the spectators' laughing, we read how the blood flows like wine from a spigot, heads are broken like eggs, crumbled like biscuits, livers and lungs stick like eels,

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<sup>4</sup> Libro II, canto II, VII, XVII.

<sup>5</sup> See the duel on the bridge between Orlando and Rodomonte, XXIX, p. 47.

legs and arms are cut like leeks, brains are pulped like buttermilk and skin stripped off as done with frogs. Finally, the relation between slaughter and cuisine becomes more than metaphoric as during the battle the wine really mixed with the blood and the banquet followed the massacre.<sup>6</sup>

*I feel stronger than Orlando  
Now that I drank a jug  
Go here to the store immediately  
And drink five or six jugs*

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<sup>6</sup> English editing of this version by John Clements.