

## STONES AND SHAME IN EARLY-MODERN ITALY

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**ABSTRACT**

*The ways in which men and women lay claim to honor in the eyes of their peers and their societies are closely linked to the ways in which they seek to dishonor or shame those whom they consider as transgressive, illegitimate, or excessive. In this context, historical, ethnographic, and literary studies have given considerable attention to the power of satire, ritual exclusion, insult and abusive language, and violence. The present contribution wishes to examine a particular form of shaming in early-modern Italy that brought together many of these factors in a highly flexible and readily accessible mode of expression - that of stone throwing. Stone and rocks as offensive weapons indeed date back to the dawn of human history, but more than other primitive weapons, rocks have also long carried with them significant overtones of casting out, scorning, even annihilation.*

*Key words: ethics, honour, punishment, stoning, Italy*

Closely linked to the ways in which men and women lay claim to honor in the eyes of their peers and their societies are the ways in which they seek to dishonor or shame those whom they consider as transgressive, illegitimate, or excessive. Scholars have already given considerable attention to the power of satire, ritual exclusion, insulting and abusive language, and violence in this context (Garrioch, 1987; Trexler, 1984; Lesnick, 1984; Davis, 1994, 63-64, 92-93). Here I would like to examine one form of shaming in early-modern Italy that brought together many of these factors in a highly flexible and readily accessible mode of expression - that of stone throwing. Since the dawn of human history rocks, more than other weapons, have carried with them significant overtones of casting out, scorning, even annihilation: many ancient societies prescribed death by stoning for those convicted of particularly odious

(especially sexually forbidden) acts. This sense that rocks were the appropriate means for punishing and casting out society's transgressors or interlopers - even to the point of death - was carried over into medieval and early-modern Europe: in Italy, in particular, one can find strong semiotic linkages between stoning as the means of scorning and social punishment and as the correct treatment for a wild animal, in particular a feral dog, to drive it out of the community and back into the wilderness where it belonged (ASR GC 2).

From Italian communal edicts and police records of the 1500s and 1600s it emerges that this sort of shaming with rocks was especially common, particularly among those same sorts of marginal boys and working-class youths whom scholars have already singled out throughout pre-modern Europe as adept in punishing deviance with their *charivari* and *mattinate* (Davis, 1975; Klapisch-Zuber, 1985). At times, the targets of these stones were not transgressive individuals, but their dwellings: in a ritual process that Elizabeth Cohen has dubbed "house scorning," disappointed suitors and clients in papal Rome might toss bricks and rocks against the door and shutters of the homes of their favorite prostitutes - possibly because the persons of these whores were safeguarded from such insult by the local government (Cohen, 1992). Other outsiders who transgressed perceived communal boundaries could also be targeted by *sassate*, however. Peasants and foreigners new to town were at risk, as were Jews, whose houses in Perugia were ritually stoned by the populace every Easter, until well into the sixteenth century (ASP EB 1).

At any given moment, in these crowded streets, almost anyone could be treated as an outsider or interloper and thus fall victim to a stoning, known throughout Italy as a *sassata*. Housewives or washerwomen who were judged as displaying themselves too visibly in public, overly vocal street musicians, querulous vendors could all find themselves targeted by rocks, either a few or a barrage (ASP EB 2; ASR GPC). Rocks thus fit well into what sociologists like David Apter have termed the discourse community of the poor; with them even small boys could carry on sometimes surprising subtle dialogues of scorning, contempt, revenge or abuse (Apter, 1997). But their targets were not only each other, for local youths often took aim at local symbols of authority. These included the city police, called the *birri* in Rome, who were as corrupt as they were vicious, and who were generally targeted from behind and at night. Youths also aimed their rocks at other figures or sites of local authority, however. Monasteries and convents were favorite targets, for example, and in Perugia the cardinal legate complained that so many stones were forever drumming onto the roofs of the religious houses located below Porta Sole that they were causing "damage to the said Reverend Fathers in disturbing their quiet... and those Reverend Mothers were coming [to complain of being] disturbed in their orations" (ASP EB 3-5). A favorite target in Rome, on the other hand, appears to have the large equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius situated on the Capitoline, which had the advantage of not

only representing the quintessential symbol of civic authority in the city, but also evidently made a very satisfying clang when hit by a rock (ASV 1).<sup>1</sup>

What makes stones especially interesting from the point of view of ritual shaming is their frequent association with the only slightly more organized mock battles known as *sassaiole*. We often find such mass affairs mentioned in the *bandi* of Italian communes, and not only in the medieval centuries (as some scholars have maintained), but also well into the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> They could transpire between a handful of neighborhood boys, but not infrequently "grown youths and bearded men (*giovani grandi et huomeni barbati*)" would end up joining in as well (ASP EB 6). Although the *sassaiole* were no doubt often just small, neighborhood affairs, they also developed as fully orchestrated festive events, usually staged on holidays after mass and often bringing into opposition major gangs representing the geographic polarities of a town. Thus, there might square off the *castellani* and the *nicolotti* from eastern and western parts of Venice, the *parte di sopra* against the *parte di sotto* in Perugia, or the *trasteverini* against the *montanari* from opposite banks of the Tiber in Rome (Davis, 1994, 19-25, 32-42; Heywood, 1969, 144; ASR GC 3).

In some towns these oppositions could imply class or occupational antagonisms based on residence - in Venice, for example, the division encompasses old rivalries between fishermen and shipbuilders - but in a center as cosmopolitan as Rome, all sorts of polarities might also manifest themselves (Davis, 1994, 38-42). There might, for example, be ethnic hostilities, as with the long-standing contests fought out between Christian and Jewish youths on Monte Testaccio or in the Forum (ASR GC 4). On the other hand, on Monte Citorio, during the 1600s, rocks also flew between groups designated as the *filo-spagnoli* (lackeys and dependents of the Spanish ambassador and his allies) and their opposite numbers, the *filo-francesi*: between them, they were battling out in miniature the same ongoing struggle that was going on between their masters all over Europe (Trinchieri Camiz, 1991).

If only to elude the attention of the *birri*, those who were planning to take part in a full-scale *sassaiola* seem to have generally kept their equipment extremely simple. Some might pack a sling, a *fionda* or *frombola* (or *fromba*), but typically it was enough just to have a cloak or cloth to wrap about the left arm, to defend against incoming stones, much in the way that knife fighters have protected themselves throughout the ages (ASP EB 7). Stones, of course, were everywhere and no where more so than in Rome, which helps explain why the Forum and Monte Testaccio were

1 The insulting and transgressive nature of these attacks on Marcus Aurelius are underscored by the fact that they were often accompanied by thrown mud and "affixed writings" (ASR BC; ASV 2; ASV 3).

2 Claims by scholars such as Heywood that rock throwing games were effectively banned in cities like Perugia after San Bernardino spoke out against them overlook the continuous edicts against such activities for the next century and a half (Heywood, 1969, 154-160).

so favored as battlegrounds, with the ready availability of rocks lying around that these open waste areas offered. Even in the more developed parts of towns, however, there were usually plenty of loose stones to be found - or, if none were readily at hand, they could always be pried loose at knife point from the pavement, as evidently happened regularly in Venice's encounters between the *castellani* and *nicolotti* (Davis, 1994, 145-146, note 65).

Such encounters, which could easily break out in densely populated city centers in the middle of the day, might turn into virtual urban guerrilla wars. Gangs of youths, ranging from a few dozen to hundreds on a side, stuffing their roomy work aprons with dozens of rocks, brick chunks or iron balls, turned entire sections of town into battlegrounds, such that "not even the carriages could pass, nor the nobility, for the rocks".<sup>3</sup> Participants usually fled when the authorities came to break up these *sassaiole*, which seem to have been regular occurrences in Piazza Navonna or the Campo de' Fiori in Rome, or right in front of the Rocca Paolina, the papal fortress bristling with soldiers in Perugia; on the other hand, these youths might also leave off fighting each other and turn their stones on the *birri* themselves (ASR GC 1).

Such actions indicate stone's particularly interesting function as a connector between agonistic play and civil unrest. The ready availability of stones, their use at a distance (often against men armed with more limiting swords or clubs), and the opportunities their use provided for grown men to mimetically pass off their actions as those of (relatively) less culpable youths, made them the poor's ideal weapon against local elites and rulers. When a gathering crowd would "start make some trouble (*comincia a far qualche rumore*)" and someone in authority - the lieutenant of the *birri*, the captain of the guard, or even the papal legate himself - came by to send them home with kind words or threats, often as not "those disobedient and insolent ones" "the people.... that is, the poor, who are the artisans and peasants.... began to greet them with stones" (Crispoliti, 1887-1892). It often took no more than these few stones, thrown from the edge of the piazza, to galvanize a sullen crowd into a surging mob - of the sort that rampaged through Perugia in the famine spring of 1586, "a great multitude of the lower people (*populazzo*)" that caught the city's Cardinal Legate in his carriage and forced him to run on foot for his life. As one observer put it, "the plebes without number and of every age ran toward him more infuriated than ever to kill him... throwing rocks that rained down in the manner of the densest of hailstorms" (Crispoliti, 1887-1892).

The *populazzo* threw stones, according to onlookers, "because they did not have any other sort of arms," but through their ability to convey popular messages of contempt and scorn such stone barrages were perhaps sometimes more effective than

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3 Referring to a *sassaiola* that broke out near San Giacomo degli Incurabili on 8 January 1612: see ASR RB.

more sophisticated weapons, proclaiming as they did the people's desire to humiliate and cast out failed or adversarial rulers (Crispoli, 1887-1892). Yet, even as these encounters could be deadly dangerous and even insurrectionary, they maintained at their heart a quality that was more ludic than *intifada*, often displaying festive characteristics that harked back to their origins in the youthful *sassaiole* and medieval mock *battagliole* with which they obviously had so much in common.

Such tendencies are clear in the disturbances that rocked Rome in the summer of 1650 and recounted in the diary of Giacinto Gigli. After weeks of pressing and kidnapping Roman citizens to serve in the Spanish army fighting the French at Porto Longone, Spanish agents finally went too far when they began snatching their victims even in broad daylight. Individual Romans tried "to defend themselves as they could," but it was only when "*li Ragazzi cominciorno a tirar de' sassi* - the boys began to throw some stones -" that the whole city erupted against this oppressive and arrogant interlopers. Indeed, as Gigli put it, "in the blink of an eye there started up so many *sassajoli*, that were more than three hundred, between the big and little [ones]." But for many of these boys and youths this uprising remained something of a great game, and they went after the Spanish and their agents singing out "a certain proverb" that was apparently calculated to infuriate their oppressors: *Senza camiscia, guarda la miscia, guarda la miscia*. Indeed, even after the rioting had died down and the papacy had hastily moved to find some scapegoats among the over-eager press gangs, Spanish officers were still evidently annoyed enough with this ditty that for some weeks to come they went door-to-door to warn parents not to let their boys go about singing the song (Gigli, 1958, 27 July 1650; ASV 4).

These ludic underpinnings of the politically motivated *sassaiola* are underscored by another Roman popular uprising, which broke out in 1736 for almost identical reasons as that of 1650, and which was mentioned by another diarist, Francesco Valesio. On this occasion, the mobs of boys, men and women that assaulted Spanish troops and their papal flunkies had no chant like *guarda la miscia*, but instead shouted out *Viva Trastevere!* or *Viva i Monti!* as they went into action, just as if they were sporting squads, in the thick of one of their usual inter-neighborhood mock battles (Valesio, 1977, 23 March 1736). The authorities were evidently aware of the way in which local rock-throwing gangs worked their neighborhood identities and enthusiasms into a general insurrectionary fervor, for in suppressing the uprising of 1736 the state explicitly banned anyone thereafter from wearing "cockades, signs or other emblems of [their] party" (ASV 5). With their *sassate*, the governed reversed the usual downward flow of social discourse, to remind - indeed to shame - those in authority that they should remember their responsibilities for the common good. Stones thus represented a key bargaining chip for ordinary people, one of the few equalizers that they could bring to the political table. Whether engaged in small, spontaneous duels or in full-blown uprisings, those who bent down to pick up a rock

availed themselves of both a weapon and a tool capable of complex discourse. With stones always at hand, for defense or aggression, for shaming, teasing or for popular revolt, it is hardly surprising that youths in early-modern Italy were so fond of using them and it was so hard for the authorities to get them to stop. Indeed, to this day in Perugia one can still meet those who reminisce about the *sassaiole* in which they took part as boys, and they can still show the scars to prove it.

## KAMENJANJE IN SRAMOTENJE V NOVOVEŠKI ITALIJI

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### POVZETEK

Z načini, kako moški in ženske terjajo čast v očeh enakorodnih ljudi in svojih skupnosti, so tesno povezani načini, na katere poskušajo onečastiti ali osramotiti tiste, ki se po njihovem vedejo pregrešno, protizakonito ali ekscesno. V tem kontekstu so zgodovinske, etnografske in literarne študije posvetile že kar nekaj pozornosti moči satire, obrednega izobčenja, sramotenja, zmerjanja in nasilja. V pričujočem prispevku želi avtor preučiti eno izmed oblik sramotenja v novoveški Italiji, ki je združila mnoge od teh dejavnikov v izredno fleksibilnem in zlahka dosegljivem načinu izražanja – kamenjanju. Kamenje kot napadalno orožje je seveda v rabi že od samega začetku človekovega obstoja, vendar je kamenje bolj kot katero koli drugo preprosto orožje dolgo nosilo s seboj tudi pomembne prizvoke izobčenja, zasmehovanja in celo uničenja: v mnogih starodavnih skupnostih so na smrt s kamenjanjem obsojali tiste, ki so zagrešili še posebno gnusna (predvsem spolno pregrešna) dejanja. Po vsej verjetnosti gre tu za povezavo med klamenjanjem kot načinom omalovaževanja in družbenega kaznovanja in kot načinom, kako pravilno postopati z divjimi živalmi – na primer podivjanimi psi ali kakimi večjimi mrhovinarji, ki jih je treba z metanjem kamenja vanje pregnati iz družbe in najbrž nazaj v necivilizirani svet, ki mu pripadajo.

Novoveški Italijani so bili pravi izvedenci za to vrsto sramotenja s kamenjem. Še posebno so ji bili naklonjeni dečki in mladi možje, marginalci iste starosti in družbenega okolja, ki so jih že v prenovoveški Evropi poznali kot "strokovnjake" za kaznovanje deviantnosti s svojimi charivariji in mattinateji. O enem izmed vidikov njihovih dejavnosti v papeškem Rimu je pisala že Elizabeth Cohen, in sicer o tako imenovanem "hišnem preziranju", obredu, med katerim so v vrata in oknice prostitutk metali kamenje njihovi razočarani snubci. Toda tarče takšnih napadov so bili tudi drugi "outsiderji", in avtor se je v tem prispevku posvetil primerom, ki vključujejo kmete, tujce in Jude, še posebno v Rimu.

*Avtorja zanima tudi očitna povezava med dejanji sramotenja, ki so jih uprizarjali italijanski mladeniči, in njihovimi igrami, med katerimi so uporabljali kamenje, vključno z brezobzirnimi bitkami med geografsko določenimi oddelki, znanimi kot sassaiole. Te so pogosto združevale tekmovalne, ludistične in sramotilne elemente, še posebej, nas primer, ko so se skupine krščanskih in judovskih mladeničev bojevale za suverenost nad Monte Testacciom na robu Rima.*

*Nazadnje avtor obravnava načine, s katerimi je metanje kamnov lahko prineslo elemente sramotilnega obreda v politično areno. Zelo pogosto so večje in manjše socialne prevrate v italijanskih mestih, kot na primer nerede zaradi pomanjkanja kruha ali ksenofobične ekscese, povzročali mladi ljudje, ki so svoj gnev stresali na najbolj izpostavljene posameznike – vladne voditelje, tuje vojake in osumničene grabeljivce, ki so bili po njihovem krivi za vse javne delikte – in sicer s plohami kamenja. Ker so bili obredni neredi zaradi pomanjkanja kruha deležni že mnogih raziskav, želi avtor v tem prispevku izpostaviti le nekaj specifičnih načinov, pri katerih je metanje kamnov že v enem samem demonstrativnem dejanju združevalo elemente simboličnega sramočenja, izobčenja, tekmovalne igre in skupinske identitete.*

*Ključne besede: etika, čast, kazen, kamenjanje, Italija*

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