Martoccio on Caferro, 'Petrarch's War: Florence and the Black Death in Context'

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Generalists are in vogue today. “Our greatest strength is the exact opposite of narrow specialization. It is the ability to integrate broadly,” suggests a recent book encouraging us to lessen our specialist training, embrace big trends, and accept that in today’s global economy, small findings produce small conclusions.[1] So too has this drift toward breadth over depth crept into the study of history. “A spectre is haunting our time: the spectre of the short term,” declare Jo Guldi and David Armitage in the opening line of *The History Manifesto*, their call-to-arms for historians to deploy mass communication, automation, and “Big Data” to return the discipline to the study of the *longue durée* and, in turn, political importance.[2]

It thus seems like an inopportune time for this (admittedly short) book on a famed humanist, an obscure war he helped launch in 1349, and the soldiers who fought in it. What can only 199 pages about a squabble over sixteen months between a few thousand men in an out-of-the-way corner of a small peninsula on the edge of Eurasia hope to accomplish in an age of global history, big history, and deep history? As it turns out, quite a lot. William Caferro’s *Petrarch’s War* is not just an unashamed celebration of short-termism and history along the “edges,” but a vital call for historians to embrace the anomalous, the unusual, and the contradictory in the hope that it will not only correct numerous errors in our understanding of late medieval literature, war, public finance, wages, and work, but the very methods we use to study the past in this age of the general.

Caferro begins by reconstructing the close connection between Petrarch and his titular war, a tongue-in-cheek nod to the humanist’s famed pacifism. The conflagration all started in the spring of 1349 when members of the Ubaldini, a rural clan whose string of fortresses straddled key trade routes over the Apennines, robbed and brutally beat two of Petrarch’s friends as they traveled to meet the humanist in Padua. “A bunch of gallows birds, murderers, and cavemen” (p. 27), Petrarch excoriated the family, launching a call for all-out war in a diatribe that (as Caferro notes) serendipitously contains the humanist’s description of the Black Death raging during that same year. From here, the conflict quickly escalated as other advocates of the war took up Petrarch’s call, none more important than Boccaccio, who intervened on behalf of the exiled Petrarch and attempted to lure him into accepting a professorship at Florence’s soon-to-be-established university. But the connections between the war and humanism do not stop there. Caferro carefully reconstructs Petrarch’s connections with the network of men on the committee in charge of the new university as well as Boccaccio and Petrarch’s communications before their famous meeting in October 1350,
exchanges in which both luminaries drew heavily on Dante. What appears then is a far more contextulized, historicized, and politically active Petrarch than even the humanist would have preferred, trying as he often did to deliberately exclude real people and events from his epistles in order to give them a more timeless feel.

With the war’s causes and objectives firmly embedded in their context, Caferro in chapter 2 turns to its prosecution by reconstructing from the ground up the Florentine army. Starting from the day-to-day records of the extraordinary committee (balie) charged with prosecuting the war, Caferro provides vivid detail of the approximately three thousand men fighting for Florence, from the vanguard of feditori (or “wounders”) led by the German commander Burckhard di Toro to the long train this force brought with it of messengers, artisans, spies, paymasters, troop inspectors, sutlers, musicians, and no fewer than fifty barattieri, or ribalds, who ritually humiliated opposing troops by blaring music loudly outside their castle gates. This close look at the campaign’s preparation, organization, and logistics points to the fluidity of the pacific and martial crafts as Florentine chamberlains and bureaucrats moved effortlessly from communal offices into the field. More importantly, by paying close attention to the unit size, composition, recruitment, and national origins of these men, Caferro overturns the conventional understanding of the Florentine army as a “backward” or impermanent force out to exploit its paymasters for profit. Instead, Florence recruited from a core of seasoned men, complementing its contingent of foreign (largely German) cavalry with local Italian infantry and crossbowmen specialized in alpine combat.

But such a force was not cheap, and in chapter 3 Caferro turns to how the Florentine commune paid for the Ubaldini War, coming as it did immediately after the catastrophic loss of the Florentine tax base brought about by the plague. Once again, Caferro wows with granular details. The nominal daily wages of noncombatants, for example, disclose some obvious findings (the advisors to the captain of war were paid the most), some surprises (doctors made less than stonemasons), and some curiosities (a military supplier with a mule made double that with a donkey). Of even greater interest are the costs the Florentine government paid for basic military supplies like iron (rather cheap), wood and hemp (pricey), crossbow bolts (plentiful), and the rather gruesome corde pisane, a tough wire used for torture. Yet waging such a brutal conflict in a time of a devastating epidemic stretched the Florentine public fisc to its limits. Soon after launching the campaign in summer 1349, the commune exhausted typical revenue streams from customs duties (gabelles) and soon shifted to more unusual ones like forced loans from their soldiers, fines on delinquent citizens, and a massive advance from the confraternity of Orsanmichele (the chief Florentine institution for poor and indigent relief) before the situation stabilized somewhat during the second campaign the next year. Of particular interest is a never-before-studied tax, the dirittura, that deducted a set amount of money from all communal financial transactions (including soldier’s salaries) for public building works and university sponsorships, thus converting public expenditures on war into good, Christian endeavors.

Throughout, Caferro shows how war was at best economically neutral. Yes, the money the Florentines spent on the conflict modestly recycled itself back in the form of tax exemptions to the artisans and blacksmiths the Florentines employed, wages to the commune’s infantry (many of whom spent their wealth in the nearby Apennine communities from which they originated), and communal debt (monte) credits held by wealthier commanders. But these monetary circulations never produced the sort of self-sustaining, protomodern military-industrial complex some historians have imagined; rather, it pulled bankers’ credit toward public loans and away from better financial returns, drew artisans...
toward building fortifications rather than civic projects, and, late in the war, even took money away from dirittura funds directed toward the university, slowing its launch.

At this point in the book, the findings are already significant. The famously contemplative Petrarch is shown to be more belligerent, the Florentine army more professionalized, and the city’s fisc less market-driven than previous scholars have thought. But it is what Caferro discovers in chapters 4 and 5, his study of wages, that elevates the work to the level of necessary reading for all historians.

Caferro begins this section with a simple observation: the pay of infantry and cavalry employed by Florence in 1349-50 diverged sharply, the nominal wages (pay unadjusted for purchasing power) of the former growing while the latter’s salaries remained stuck. These findings are puzzling for several reasons. First, it is curious that cavalry wages stayed static when these men should have been (if we listen to classical economics) the most mobile and (if we listen to Machiavelli) greedy element of the Florentine army. Put simply, the very men whose pay should have moved the most, changed the least. Second, and more vitally, Caferro’s findings contradict a large, well-developed literature in history and economics on the impact of the plague on European wages. Since James E. Thorold Rogers first claimed in his 1866 *A History of Agriculture and Price in England* that the plague’s unintended result was “to double the wages of labour,” scholars have come to see the Black Death as a critical juncture in the history of wages.[3] As workers’ pay rose, so too did standards of living, consumerism, and industrialization, a process that ultimately diverged led to the Great Divergence between West and East.[4] Indeed, the logic seems impregnable; fewer workers should mean higher wages for those who remained. Yet as Caferro notes, these numbers contain fatal flaws, based as they are on privately employed day laborers from the building industry rather than the sorts of public employees (soldiers included) he examines here.

But if not catastrophic demographic collapse, what explains soldiers’ wages during the Ubaldini War, fought as it was during the plague’s worst years? Many answers are possible. Was it perhaps some legislation capping pay? No, the city never enacted wage controls like the English Statute of Laborers or the French *Grande Ordonnance*. How about changes in the length of mercenary contracts (condotte) or seasonal variation? Again, no. Soldiers’ pay stayed the same regardless of both their length of service and the weather. Perhaps then changes in personnel? That cannot be it; as noted above, Florence employed a stable group of soldiers. What about an expansion of the labor supply of cavalry? But the evidence does not cooperate; rather than a flood of out-of-work aristocrats filling the army’s ranks due to decreased rents or the rising price of labor, cavalry numbers in fact shrank.

What then explains (to borrow the language of economics) sticky cavalry wages after the Black Death? Here Caferro’s solution is to dive deep into the archives. Drawing on a stunning dataset of the nominal wages of 450 public employees working forty-four public jobs paid on a diverse schedule of payments (daily, monthly, biyearly, yearly) through the same accounting office that handed out soldiers’ wages, the Camera del Comune, Caferro finds that mercenary cavalry were not in fact the exception. Indeed, only two other types of public workers, communal musicians and part of the police force, saw their wages rise like infantrymen. The situation becomes even more complex when Caferro moves from the money of account found in these budgets to the actual physical payment of workers in Florence’s bimetallic coinage, an unequal monetary system in which desirable gold coins (*florins*) trumped often-debased silver ones (*grossi, quattrini, denari*). Again, the wages show few predictable patterns as both employees of significant social standing such as the chancellor of the commune were
paid in florins as well as lower-level officials like bell ringers and cooks. A similar level of complexity can be found for the taxation of workers; statutes exempted artisans and suppliers who supported the war effort, but not the soldiers who did the actual fighting.

Thus a narrow view of the wages of Florentine public employees in the two years of the Ubaldini War presents devilish complexity as some stipendiaries found their wages steady, but the actual coins owed them diminished in value from gold to silver; others had salaries increase, but coinage remained the same; still more found both wages and money static; and all of them paid back this money to the government through taxation, some more than others. This wage variety at times seems utterly chaotic. The wages of the police who guarded the priors (governors) of the city increased, but not the pay of those assigned to the city’s chief judge (podestà). Italian mercenary cavalrymen both made less and had it paid in worse coinage than their German counterparts. Even the men hired to ring the bells at different government offices had their wages paid in different specie! And while some patterns are noticeable such as social status (especially knightly rank), public budgeting procedures, the size of an official’s retinue, prevailing cultural notions of a “just wage,” and a belief that more dangerous work should be paid in gold, Caferro warns his readers to be wary of the all-seeing hand of the market. Indeed, he calls into question the very notion of nominal wages themselves as measures of yearly income; public employees so frequently enriched themselves through off-the-books bribes and side emoluments that estimating their yearly wage becomes nearly impossible.

Even more damningly, Caferro’s findings destabilize our very understanding of medieval occupations themselves. Few Florentines would have “conceived of wages in the yearly sense that we do today” (p. 167); in fact, due to the nature of statutory law, some public officials were explicitly forbidden from holding their jobs for a full year. Rather than public employees entering unique professions, these men held multiple posts, often at the same time. The results were at times comedic; one of the city’s ambassadors on a vital diplomatic mission in 1349 to the papal court in Avignon, for example, was a bell ringer of the palace of the priors nicknamed “little idiot” (il schocchino). But the fluidity of occupation is also vital for explaining the stability of public employees’ wages. Specifically, Florence’s soldiers offset their base salaries by ransoming captured prisoners, war booty, reparations (menda) for injured horses, and double pay for the seizure of castles. It was thus the opportunity for side work alongside the enduring sense of honor attached to fighting atop a steed that explains why cavalry captains were willing to accept stagnant nominal wage. In the end, the plague’s demographic contraction turned Florence not into a wage utopia for the laboring classes, but something akin to a medieval “gig economy” in which the city’s employees from castellans to town criers filled their pocketbooks with side hustles.

What Caferro has achieved in *Petrarch’s War* is a scathing rebuke of long-term wage studies so central to the cliometric school of economic history. Instead of saving the past from obscurity, Caferro argues forcefully that cliometricians’ anachronistic “consumer price indexes,” “baskets of goods,” “deflators,” “yearly salaries,” and “decennial wage movements” put the availability, usability, and translatability of their data above its accuracy. Rather than seeking out larger datasets and bigger conclusions, Caferro suggests economic historians return to the intellectual project of Karl Polanyi—that is, to treat statistics like texts, embedding them “in a social culture specific to that place and time” (p. 16).
Indeed, it is a testament to Caferro’s scholarly achievement that the only criticisms this reviewer can level consist of quibbling typographical slips in the work’s bibliography (Count Carlo Cipolla [d. 1916] and Carlo M. Cipolla [d. 2000] are made to be the same person), maps (Cesena is misspelled on map I.1), and tables (the nominal monthly wages of Ligurian/Lunigianian crossbow captains in figures 4.1 and 4.2 do not match their corresponding number in table 4.2). And at the risk of undermining this book’s intellectual objective, I think it is safe to say that here is one place where the little details do not matter. *Petrarch’s War* deserves not only to be read by economic historians and Florentinists, but should be added to historiographic syllabi as a useful caution against favoring the universal for the contextual, the broad for the detailed, the useful for the accurate, and the general for the specific.

Notes


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