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Geltner, Guy. Roads to Health: Infrastructure and Urban Wellbeing in Later Medieval Italy

Sharon Strocchia

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Geltner, Guy.

Roads to Health: Infrastructure and Urban Wellbeing in Later Medieval Italy. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. x, 259 + 14 ill., 4 maps. ISBN 978-0-8122-5135-7 (hardcover) US\$65.

This study of public health measures undertaken by civic governments in late medieval Italy has important implications for our understanding of both medieval urban history and the broader history of public health. Focusing on the development and implementation of preventive health measures—fighting infectious disease, controlling food quality, providing clean water and sanitation—in Italian cities between roughly 1250 and 1500, the author argues that a concept of communal health already existed by the mid-thirteenth century and that Italian municipal governments were expected to advance it. They did so by “promoting hygiene at the population level through the upkeep of shared spaces and infrastructures”—a process that he terms “healthscaping” (2). Using three extended case studies, comparative analyses, and powerful theoretical constructs, Geltner demonstrates that preventive health initiatives predated the Black Death by almost a century; these measures formed part of an engrained prophylactic mindset aimed at harm reduction rather than a singular response to catastrophe. In establishing a fresh timeline for the advent of health and safety interventions in Italian cities, the author simultaneously displaces the Black Death as a watershed moment in population-level healthcare and successfully unhooks the origins of public health from modernity.

The first chapter explores governmental concerns with infrastructure, particularly roads and streets. Tapping abundant administrative sources, Geltner shows that medieval Italians invested considerable resources in urban plans, municipal offices, physical infrastructures, and legal procedures to keep their cities healthy. At the heart of many of these projects was the public functionary called the *viarius*, or roads master, whose remit included regular inspections of roads, bridges, gates, gutters, sewage canals, and other public facilities. A staple of daily life, road masters promoted the flow of traffic, reduced stench that created harmful miasmas, and ensured the quality of produce, air, and water that nourished urban life. Their frequent reports counter the conventional view that preventive health programs focused mainly on emergency activities like flood control and responses to epidemics. Instead, they depict the dynamism

of medieval urban dwellers who possessed significant health literacy and were actively concerned with communal wellbeing.

Chapter 2 introduces a case study of Lucca's road masters, created as a functioning magistracy by 1321. Tasked with keeping the city clean, these officials heard complaints about health hazards, gathered evidence on-site, and fined offenders "for the health and benefit" of the city's residents (68). Their tribunal enjoyed a wide remit over the city's artisanal-industrial sector, including butchers, tanners, candlemakers, and innkeepers. Analyzing thirteen volumes of extant records left by this tribunal for the fourteenth century, Geltner shows how the *viarii* helped shape local power relations when pursuing environmental offenders while at the same time demarcating conceptual boundaries between communal and private spheres. Put another way, their activities reveal "how biopower was negotiated on a daily basis" (86).

The following chapter examines the comparable magistracy of "dirt masters" in the thriving university town of Bologna during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Here, too, preventative measures far pre-dated the Black Death; the documentary legacy left by these officials is probably the richest of its kind in Italy, permitting a granular view of their healthscaping and prosecutorial activities. Bolognese dirt masters were charged with "the overall upkeep of urban infrastructure related to health, safety, and cleanliness," which gave them purview not only over streets, wells, and bridges but also over domestic waste disposal, building activities, and the human and animal behaviours that impacted them (86). Geltner's keen focus on the ways urban infrastructure promoted public hygiene yields major dividends here by shifting our gaze beyond hospitals as defining features of the Italian public health system. This analysis also showcases the extent to which premodern health emphasized prevention, not simply cure.

Chapter 4 provides a welcome look at public health measures enacted in small towns and villages in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Using the sparser evidence left by "field masters" in the small Piedmont town of Pinerolo from 1292 to 1329, Geltner finds similar preventative policies and healthscaping practices as were apparent in the bustling urban centres of Lucca and Bologna. Despite Pinerolo's smaller size, officials there also monitored roadways, maintained crucial infrastructure, supervised communal spaces, safeguarded the quality of food supplies, and fined environmental offenders both within the city walls and beyond them. These myriad activities offer

convincing evidence that this modest but ubiquitous magistracy was critical to protecting both the health and livelihood of local populations.

The final chapter moves beyond the Italian peninsula to examine healthscaping practices in medieval Europe and the premodern world. Geltner rightly argues that the lack of broad regional studies, paralleling modern nation-states or major linguistic groups, hampers our ability to undertake meaningful comparative work. To address that situation, he brings the three Italian case studies noted above into conversation with findings from more distant geographical locales, ranging from western Europe to Byzantium and the Islamic world. Although the resulting analysis necessarily remains partial, the author persuasively argues that “healthscaping was both common and diverse in earlier societies” (131). Geltner not only does the scholarly community a service in assembling the available evidence; he also decisively cuts the Gordian knot tying public health to modernity. In documenting the investments medieval societies made in their own wellbeing, this book opens new ways of thinking about the long history of public health.

SHARON STROCCHIA

Emory University

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Guidi, Andrea.

Books, People, and Military Thought: Machiavelli’s Art of War and the Fortune of the Militia in Sixteenth-Century Florence and Europe.

Thinking in Extremes: Machiavellian Studies 3. Leiden: Brill, 2020. Pp. x, 304 + 7 col. ill. ISBN 978-90-04-43209-3 (hardcover) €119.

Andrea Guidi’s *Books, People, and Military Thought* is a sterling contribution to the historiography of the Florentine Renaissance militias and Machiavelli’s *Art of War*. In this study, Guidi reassesses the little-studied Florentine militia of 1527 and provides the first comprehensive and systematic account of the diffusion of Machiavelli’s military thought into Europe. Following the tradition established by scholars such as John Pocock and Quentin Skinner, who have linked Machiavelli’s discourse on the militia to the foundations of republican