

Aldo A. Settia, *Battaglie medievali*, Bologna (Società editrice il Mulino) 2020, 355 p., ISBN 978-88-15-28644-4, EUR 25,00.

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The title *Battaglie medievali* with no lengthy explanatory subtitle could in itself alert readers that the expected discussions of troop strength, the decision to accept or refuse battle, a commander's probable, or possible, knowledge of specific tactics and how well or poorly they were executed is precisely what is not being offered in this relatively small book. Instead, Aldo A. Settia, professor emeritus of medieval history in the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at the University of Pavia, sets out to describe »the experience of men (*uomini*) in battle«. Readers will find the sources for Carcano, Legnano, Cortenuova, Benevento, Tagliacozzo, Montaperti, Campaldino, etc. alongside some less expected choices. The difference is less in the sources presented than in the questions being asked of them.

»The experience of men in battle« recalls John Keegan's description of Agincourt or, perhaps, J. F. Verbruggen's comparison of troubadour lyrics extolling the knightly love of war with sources telling of fear, desertion and flight. Settia, drawing on more than fifty years of experience writing about Italian military history, ranges wider, setting out what can be gleaned from sources for the myriad wars of the Italian communes, with comments on historiography and *Nachleben*, in four densely noted chapters broken down into forty-five subsections, on expected and unexpected topics, organized according to French sociologist Alain Joxes's dictum that battles, like stories, have a beginning, a middle and an end. Only a few can be noted here.

It seems unusual to open with a battle that never happened, the »virtual battle« of Mortara (774), but chapter 1, »Prelude«, sets out topics that do not fit the story framework and introduces the complexity and multiplicity of the sources. The focus is not Charlemagne's well-planned flanking operation but rather the process by which it morphed over time into a blood-soaked slaughter involving the paladins Roland and Oliver, Ogier the Dane and the warrior saints Amicus and Amelius, a rout that gave the Franks bragging rights and in Italy cried out for vengeance generations later. By 1074, Mortara, appropriately named and located along a busy route, had been labelled as the place of the battle, and the revised account taken up in histories and *chansons de geste*, surviving to be included in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. And, perhaps, in twentieth-century barbs about Italian military incompetence and French arrogance (16).

The next section presents the numerous words used for a battle, some familiar and some so obscure as to have escaped Niermeyer



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and Du Cange. Conclusion: it is not possible to categorize an engagement based on the word used to describe it. A third section describes the *battagliole*, ritual games involving all the male citizens of a commune that could result in injury and even death. They have been described as vestiges of prehistoric times, outlets for class tensions, a reflection of the overall level of violence in communal society and military training. They were also the common cultural background of the men who fought the battles.

The story proper begins in chapter 2, »Before the battle«, which discusses mobilization, the march and encampment as well as the less expected juxtaposition of »logistics and the stars«. Learned astrologers and an impressive supply train seem to go together. Sources boast of both the ability of their *città* to supply food and *matériel* and the use of astrology to determine optimum timing. Provisions included wine and the Italian sources even specify the varieties supplied (119), but Settia rejects that the *cittadini* were »fighting drunk« as Keegan suggested was the case at Agincourt.

Chapter 3, »Facing the enemy«, focuses on flight and the means taken to prevent it, such as appeals to patriotism and group solidarity backed up by heavy fines; this recalls the morale building function of the *battagliole*. The sources offer many examples of armies that fled and also distinguish between purposeful and fearful flight. The former is not shameful. Terrain – forest, river, and swamp – could also become an enemy to be faced.

Battle is finally joined in chapter 4, »In the heart of battle«, opening with Montaperti (1260), here described as a »ghost«, perhaps because the topic has been done to death. The chapter discusses the deployment of *schiere*, weather, fatigue, the weight of armor, technology, the slaughter of horses and solidity in units armed with *pavises*, polearms and axes. At San Procolo (1275), the infantry of Bologna held firm around the *carroccio* after the cavalry fled, only surrendering when faced with *machine* brought out from Faenza, an exemplar of »the boldness of infantry«.

Chapter 5, »After the battle«, includes the sharing out of booty, ransoms, greed and the disposition of the dead. Detailed descriptions of large numbers of human and animal dead emphasized the victory of the writer's side, somewhat like the boasts of miles-long supply trains in chapter 2. The importance and difficulty of removing large numbers of dead are vividly set out. The chapter closes with a return to the sources, »the remembrance of battles«; sources describing the wars of the Visconti reference a great, cruel and heart-rending battle that took place in the time of Charlemagne, the »virtual battle« of Mortara.

It is a small quibble, but non-Italian scholars are lightly represented in Settia's copious notes. Besides, Verbruggen, Chris Wickham John France, William Caferro and Bernard S. Bachrach come to mind.

The organization of the book, the succession of chapters and subsections, is less smooth than the story template suggests; it



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unfolds more like the course of a battle, somewhat chaotically. Readers will likely select topics of interest rather than read through, but the topics are as interdependent as the varied participants in battles, and scholars with equally varied interests will find the time spent well worth it, a long conversation with the author, over good wine.



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