

Galeazzo da Montova: Portrait of a Condottiero Captain in the Late Trecento

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I will now recall and name some of my students who had to fight in the lists. First among them was the noble and hardy knight Piero dal Verde, who had to fight Piero della Corona. Both of them were German, and the contest had to take place in Perugia. ... Another was the famous, gallant and hardy knight Galeazzo di Capitani da Grimello, better known as Galeazzo da Mantova; he had to cross weapons with the famous French knight Boucicault in Padua.

....

None of my students, in particular the ones I have mentioned, have ever possessed a book on the art of combat, with the exception of Galeazzo da Mantova. Galeazzo used to say that without books, nobody can truly be a Master or student in this art. I, Fiore, agree with this.

- Fiore dei Liberi, *Il Fior di Battaglia*

The city-state culture of late medieval Italy produced a unique military structure. Initially, each city produced a local militia under the command of its aristocracy, in which the lower classes from the city and its subject territories served as infantry, while the upper classes served as knightly cavalry. But by the early 1300s this system was collapsing. Increased inter-state violence, a growing preference amongst wealthy townsmen to hire others to fulfill their military duties, and the princes' often justified distrust of arming their own subjects led to an almost complete reliance on paid mercenaries, the *condottieri*.

Named for the *condotta*, a contract specifying the terms of military service, the *condottiero* was the consummate professional; well armed, highly trained, and able to remain in the field indefinitely... Or at least as long as his employer could make good on his payments. It was quite common for a military captain to switch sides as soon as his contract was either fulfilled or negated. Equally part knight and part bandit, the profession of *condottiero* created opportunity and social mobility unlike anything seen in the rest of Europe. Throughout the 15th century, these "merchants of war" would paradoxically defend Italy's borders against German, Spanish, French, and Turkish incursions, while they themselves contributed to the internal feuding and destabilization that would ultimately lead to the peninsula's fall to outside invasion in the century that followed.

In the prologue to his 1409 treatise on knightly martial arts, Maestro Fiore dei Liberi da Premariaco writes, "*many and many times many Signori, Knights, and Squires have asked to learn this art of fighting and of combat in the lists to the death, from the aforementioned Fiore.*" Perhaps the most notable of Fiore dei Liberi's students was the short but powerfully built Sir Galeazzo da Mantova, Captain of Grimello. Dei Liberi tells us that this is the only other student to whom he had ever given a book of his art: "*As he [Galeazzo] has said that without books there will never be any good master or scholar in this art. And I Fiore confirm this truth, for this art is so vast that there is not a man with a good enough memory to retain the quarter part of it without books.*"¹ It is no surprise that he chose to

¹ Getty Ms. 4v.

Galeazzo da Montova

give him this gift; for while we may have few details of Fiore dei Liberi's life, we know a great deal about his student Galeazzo da Mantova, who was considered one of the most fearless and stalwart military commanders of his day, and whose life epitomizes the ideal career of a *condottiero* at the turn of the 15th century.

A cadet of the famed Gonzaghe family of Mantua, Galeazzo fought in service of both Milan and Venice and became famed for his martial exploits on the field and in the lists. One of the earliest records of his life was a tournament victory before the King of France in 1392. The young Italian knight met an Englishman, "Rubbiano", in mounted combat and used a mace to drive his opponent into the ground; the King was so impressed he awarded him a yearly stipend of sixty ducats.

But the young *condottiero*'s greatest fame in the lists would come by crossing spears with a Frenchman on two occasions, the renowned Marshal Boucicault of France himself.² The first of these feats of arms was fought on foot with spears, and is specifically mentioned in the prologue of *Il Fior di Battaglia*.³ The combat occurred in Padua on 22 August, 1395. Some months prior, Boucicault is said to have accused Italian knights of cowardice during a banquet held at the court of the French king, and Galeazzo, who was a guest, at once challenged him to combat. After wrangling to find a patron willing to grant a field, the challenge finally took place before both the lord of Padua, Francesco Novello di Carrara, and Galeazzo's kinsman, Francesco Gonzaga, the lord of Mantua.

Thousands of spectators attended this deed of arms, which was originally to have been fought with light lances (spears) on horseback. However, impatient for Galeazzo to mount, Boucicault himself dismounted and attacked. The ensuing fight was a rough clash of arms and unarmed blows, and within moments of the combat commencing, the two presiding lords intervened, and the antagonists were placated.⁴

In September of that same year, the young captain gained additional fame when he attended the elevation of Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan to the rank of Duke by the Emperor Wenceslas. Galeazzo participated in the celebratory tournament on the Piazza St. Ambrogio, and shared the first prize of one thousand florins with the Bohemian knight, Benezio di Cumsich. He entered and left Milanese service several times over the next four years, but by 1399 the Duke had enough

² Jean III le Meingre, known as Boucicaut/Boucicault, Marshal of France (c. 1366–1421) was famed for prowess in his own lifetime. Winning his spurs in battle, he took part in a crusade against the Turks that ended in the disastrous Battle of Nicopolis in 1396, and led to his capture by the Turks. After being ransomed from the Turks he returned to Italy and served as the Governor of Genoa from 1401–1407. Upon his return to France, he created the knightly Order of the White Lady and the Green Stag, dedicated to protecting the wives and daughters of absent knights. As Marshal of France, he was captured at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, and died an English prisoner in 1422.

³ At least, Renaissance historians such as Jakob Burckhardt have long asserted that both duels occurred against the French marshal. However, a contemporary author, Thomas III, Marquis of Saluzzo, claims in his *Le Livre du Chevalier Errant* that the spear duel was fought with Jean III's younger brother, so the issue remains unclear. Considering the celebrity which attended the first deed of arms, and the details which survive of its execution, it seems likely that both encounters were with the famed French hero.

⁴ For a more detailed account see Tom Leoni, *Fiore dei Liberi's Fior di Battaglia, Second English Edition*, p xxvii and xxviii.



Single combat with spears from the *Florius Luctandi* manuscript

confidence in him to send him as the commander of three thousand cavalry and fifteen hundred infantry, to invest the city of Pisa.

Galeazzo was at war almost continuously during the next seven years, and saw himself both victor and vanquished, but although he was captured in 1397 and again in 1400, his own prowess remained unquestioned. His fame in personal combat was cemented during a siege of Bologna in 1403, when he personally climbed the city walls and fought his way through the Papal forces to open the gates. He and his men killed twenty two of the enemy's troops in that exploit, gaining him great renown, although little wealth. In 1405 he led another night assault on a city, this time Verona, but he and his men were spotted by the city watch and were forced to retreat under heavy fire, costing the captain over two hundred men. Undaunted, he joined a Venetian fleet in an assault against the allied fortress of Castelcarro. The castle capitulated, and he parleyed his role in the attack into a new *condotta* with Venice.

Over the course of the year, Galeazzo's star rose in Venetian service, until he was given a chance to lead his own command against the city of Padua. In a dawn assault, Galeazzo moved on the city with over eight thousand men, leading the assault himself, but was wounded almost immediately as he scaled the walls. The Venetians were forced back to their trenches, and made little headway in the days that followed until a Venetian agent successfully bribed the barbican guards. Galeazzo's men then scaled the walls and entered the town easily.

Once in Padua, the captain persuaded Carrara, Lord of Padua, that Venice would offer him and his son Francesco leniency if he traveled to Venice to do homage to the Doge as his rightful overlord. No sooner did Carrara leave than Galeazzo had seized the castle and invested it with his own men. Once in Venice, both father and son were strangled to death, an all-too-common fate for those traveling to Venice under a supposed flag of truce.

Although it did not end well for the Lords of Padua, the combination of prowess and treachery used throughout the long campaign gained Galeazzo da Montova the coveted title of Captain-General of the Venetian armies as well as the castles of San Martino della Vanezza and Arlesega. For the capture of Padua itself, the Venetian Doge Michele Steno granted him the title of "noble



Galeazzo da Mantova presides as a judge in a 1408 deed of arms with poleaxes, fought in Verona between Richard de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, and Pandolfo Malatesta. From the Beauchamp Pageant.

of the Venetian Republic” and a yearly pension of one thousand ducats. The captain now had land, a pension, and command of one of the largest fighting forces on the Italian peninsula.

In 1406, eleven years after their first meeting, Galeazzo and Boucicault met one last time, this time with lances from horseback. Unlike the first meeting, Galeazzo was declared the victor. Out of shame, Boucicault took a vow never to wear a visor on his helmet again. It seemed that Dame Fortune had reserved all of her blessings for the new Venetian Captain-General. But Fortune is fickle, and Boucicault’s vow made Galeazzo’s victory particularly ironic. Only a month later, Galeazzo da Montova found himself preparing for battle outside the castle of Medolago. The defenders requested a parley, and when Galeazzo lifted his visor to negotiate, he was hit in the eye with a crossbow bolt shot from the castle. The bolt pierced his brain, killing him instantly. Battle ensued, and a number of the Captain-General’s men were lost while recovering his body. He was buried with Venetian and Milanese honors; a well-born, but not well-placed, knight who had climbed to the heights of his profession.

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