

Guasti: Preventive Destruction during the Italian Wars

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Session Abstract:

Much of today's urban fabric sits upon a hidden history of early modern building erasures, deeply intertwined with the evolving needs of military architecture. Entire neighborhoods fell victim to peacetime demolitions to create space for bastions and forts, while approaching armies further accelerated the flattening of extensive built areas surrounding city walls.

The destruction of property by order of public authority, usually identified as *guasto*, was one of the most frequently used military strategies during the Italian Wars (1494–1559), implemented throughout the peninsula. This strategy displaced residential and religious communities and subsequently induced the reinstatement of their artistic heritage in new contexts.

Unlike natural disasters and catastrophes, whose timing is unpredictable, these demolitions were planned: people had time to react to the authorities' mandates and decided what to save from destruction. Hence, *guasti* serve as privileged points of observation to understand what displaced people valued as well as their strategies for salvaging architectural and artistic heritage.

This session focuses on preventive destruction as a military tactic and investigates how affected communities addressed it. Three case studies, from the Veneto, Perugia, and Messina will help to delve into this under-examined aspect of urban history, attempting a re-evaluation of the phenomenon, and providing new art-historical and architectural materials to assess how *guasti* fundamentally reshaped the social, religious, and physical landscape of Italian cities.

Alberto Pérez Negrete (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

The Guasto in the Veneto: Case Studies from the Time of the League of Cambrai

This paper challenges prevailing interpretations in the historiography on the *guasto*, by examining case studies from Treviso, Verona and Padua, under Venetian rule at the time of the League of Cambrai (1508–1516). Unlike most military operations, the *guasto* focused on demolition rather than construction, impacting both external and internal areas of affected cities. This study reevaluates this unique practice, highlighting its complex political, social, and artistic dimensions. Through an analysis of diverse sources, including chronicles published in the *Rerum Italicarum Studiorum*, siege diaries, visual materials, and various historical accounts, the paper reveals the close relationship between the *guasto*, temporary military architecture and the rebuilding of structures affected by demolition. One notable example is the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Padua, which underwent significant structural changes due to these policies. This contribution illuminates the varied contexts and consequences of the *guasto*, from the transformation of individual buildings to broader impacts on urban landscapes and communities, highlighting the Venetian government's role in shaping these processes. It will ultimately offer a more nuanced understanding of the *guasto* and its enduring legacy in the Veneto and beyond.

Anna Rebecca Sartore (Ghent University)*The Guasto of Perugia in 1517 and its Effects on the Cityscape*

In 1517, Perugia faced a military threat from Francesco Maria della Rovere. To prepare for a potential siege, city authorities ordered the demolition of homes and sections of the city walls in specific strategic areas, making way for temporary defensive bastions built in brick and stone over the following two decades. While most scholarship focuses on the later construction of the Rocca Paolina fortress in the 1540s, which permanently altered the urban landscape of Perugia by obliterating a central and densely populated neighbourhood, the impact of these earlier demolitions on the city's urban fabric has been largely overlooked. This study delves into this traumatic event and its lasting consequences, utilizing unpublished documents, city records, and visual sources.

Antonino Tranchina (University of Naples – Federico II)*The Rescue of Medieval Sacred Memories during the Sixteenth-Century Fortification of Messina*

Because of its key role in the protection of Sicily and the eponymous Straits, Messina endured considerable changes in its urban pattern and architectural fabric. Between 1532 and 1537, Hapsburg authorities pressured Messina's local authorities to strengthen the harbor defense and to build new walls and fortresses around the city. This fortification effort resulted in clearing the areas involved—churches and monuments included—while local aristocracy struggled between support and concern. In some cases, religious institutions managed to rescue their treasuries and palladia.

This paper aims to discuss objects and sources relating to those events. I specifically focus on the reshaping of the city's religious memory in the aftermath of the monuments' dissolution by highlighting the histories of particular monasteries and convents. The emphasis, and sometimes the reticence, on the rescuing of medieval sacred images (even mural mosaics) and epigraphic evidence unveil strategies and devices meant to relocate Messina, with its pan-Sicilian ambition, in the narrative of Sicily's religious primacy within the Hapsburg imperial domain.