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## Finding matter out of place: Bologna's *fango* ("dirt") notary in the history of premodern public health\*

### *A tale of two Beatrices*

Before his exile from Florence, Dante used to walk that city's streets hoping to catch a glimpse of his muse, Beatrice Portinari. His quest for beauty and inspiration was a key pastime not limited to poets in love. For, in its broadest sense, *decus* was a major theme of medieval urban propaganda and a recently revived concern among urban physicians, pressured as they were by their clients' growing cosmetic needs.<sup>1</sup> Those who monitored streets professionally, however, had different objects, even if not objectives, in mind. For salaried observers of the medieval city were entrusted with looking after residents' wellbeing – their health and safety. In order to do their job, which allowed cities to thrive and become metropolises rather than implode and deteriorate into necropolises, various officials were trained to spot, not beauty and order, but blemishes and disorder. This constant and mutually defining tension between splendor and filth, order and chaos, indeed life and death, lies at the heart of a field plowed for decades by Francesca Bocchi. Accordingly, it seemed to me appropriate to

\* My thanks to Sarah Rubin Blanshei, Jamie Kreiner, and Sarah Blick for several references, and the University of Amsterdam's "Memory and Heritage of Conflict" Domain for their help in funding this ongoing project.

1. G. Fasoli, *La coscienza civica nelle Laudes civitatum*, in *La coscienza cittadina nei comuni italiani del Duecento*, Todi 1972, pp. 9-44; J. K. Hyde, *Medieval Descriptions of Cities*, in «Bulletin of The John Rylands Library», 48 (1966), pp. 308-340; L. Demaitre, *Skin and the City: Cosmetic Medicine as an Urban Concern*, in *Between Text and Patient: The Medical Enterprise in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by F. E. Glaze, B. K. Nance, Firenze 2011, pp. 97-120.

mark the retirement of this Virgil (or Beatrice?) of urban history by exploring the dynamics of premodern public health.

But why is it a tale of two "Beatrices"? So far we've encountered only one, a historical character from Florence, who embodied, at least for Dante, religious or indeed cosmic perfection. It is by turning our gaze from literary to archival fiction that we will meet a second Beatrice, an otherwise unknown woman, who in the eyes of some exemplified the other, dangerous pole of urban life. She hails, as would be apt in this context, from Bologna, and is described by an equally obscure resident of that city:

I, Bergamino di Farra, notary of the lord podestà, walking through the squares of the parish and gate of Ravennana...searching for what may appear to defy the statutes of the city of Bologna, saw that...donna Beatrice, wife of ser Guido Guinizelli, a magnate, of the parish of sant'Isaia, was in possession of a sow that, along with her babies, roamed the street.<sup>2</sup>

Pigs – or in this case a sow and her offspring – left unrestrained – here by Beatrice Guinizelli – were commonly considered a dangerous and hence unhealthy presence in cities, from medieval to very modern times.<sup>3</sup> Spotting pigs was therefore a staple responsibility given the Bolognese notary in charge of streets, waterways, and dirt (*fango*), an office created around the middle of the thirteenth century and filled in 1289 by Bergamino di Farra.

For Bergamino and his colleagues, health and safety were the essence of urban order and the prerogative of the city's government. Conversely, loose pigs, leaking drains, collapsed walls, and clogged canals were the result of ruinous action and sometimes inaction on the part of Bologna's residents and visitors. In their ignorance, neglect, or outright rejection of a perceived *bene comune*, the city's burgeoning population increased the pressures already burdening local infrastructures. Clean air and water, safe

2. «Eundo me, Bergaminus de Farra, notarius domini potestatis, per plateas capelle et porte Ravennatis [...] inquirendo quid factum reperiat contra statutum civitatis Bononie... inveni ut infra: [...] domina Beatrix uxor condam domini Guidonis de Guinizelli, magnani, capelle sancte Esaye, habebit porcham unam cum filiis qui erat in strata». Archivio di Stato di Bologna [hereafter ASBo], Podestà, Ufficio acque, strade e fango [hereafter Fango] 3, reg. 3 (1289 I), fols. 42v-43r.

3. F. Ruhland, *Schweinehaltung in und vor der Stadt*, in *Nürnberg: Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte*, ed. by B. Friedel, C. Fischer, Büchenbach 1999, pp. 319-325; J. Schäffer, 'Sweme sine swin siech sint...': *Das Hausschwein an gesunden und kranken Tagen*, in *Der sassen speyghel: Sachsenspiegel, Recht, Alltag*, 2 vol., Oldenburg 1995, pp. 189-201; H. Hartog, *Pigs and Positivism*, in «Wisconsin Law Review», 4 (1985), pp. 899-935.

streets and work environments, fresh food and drink had to be maintained, protected, and constantly supplied rather than assumed to be available as a matter of course. Much work had to be done, in other words, to allow those lofty *Laudes civitatum* to have a true ring about them. Indeed, left to their own devices, artisans and merchants, soldiers and priests, laundresses and aristocratic women like Beatrice Guinizelli, attended to their own needs first, that of their neighbors perhaps later, and those of the city haphazardly at best. The ubiquity of Beatrices of the latter kind was the working assumption of urban regimes, and it is they – in their presence as well as in their absence – who helped define not only the city's *nettezza* but also its *sanità*.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, like many of his colleagues past and present, Bergamino had limited means to address this situation. He fought ignorance on one hand by informing urban residents about best practices (personally, and through the commune's heralds), and on the other by providing steady reminders that pursuing one's narrow interests and relative comfort had a price. Environmental vigilance, however, could also have its rewards, as when an individual lodged a complaint against offenders who were successfully prosecuted in court. Keeping an eye (and ear, and nose) on the streets of Bologna and encouraging others to do the same was thus an essential part of the fango notary's job, long before Jane Jacobs suggested it as a bottom-up solution to the modern city's problems.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly for urban historians, in their enthusiasm to report their efforts, fango officials have left us a very rich source for studying what late-medieval people perceived as the main forces undermining urban hygiene, and the methods they devised to struggle against them.

The Bolognese office of the fango has had a fair share of modern observers, especially among local historians, from Gina Fasoli and Francesca Bocchi, to Roberto Greci and Bruno Breveglieri, to, most recently, Elisa

4. *Statuti di Bologna dell'anno 1288*, ed. by G. Fasoli, P. Sella, Città del Vaticano 1937, II, pp. 135-165; excerpted translation in *The Towns of Medieval Italy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. by T. Dean, Manchester 2000, pp. 50-54. Nor was the nexus of beauty, honor, cleanliness, and health unique to Bologna. See, among others, *Statuta Ferrariae Anno MCCLXXXVII*, ed. by W. Montorsi, Ferrara 1955, V: xxxii; *Gli Statuti Veronesi del 1276 colle correzioni e le aggiunte fino al 1323*, ed. by G. Sandri, Venezia 1940, IV: clxxvii; and see below.

5. J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York 1992 [orig. publ. 1961]); and below.

Tosi Brandi and Germana Albertani.<sup>6</sup> These scholars have variously underscored the fango's usefulness as a way to trace processes of political centralization, as an inroad to understanding communal and post-communal ideologies, and as a source for studying urban social marginality. Some of these studies have been substantially based on the statutes prescribing the office's norms, while others have delicately tapped its rich documents of practice, that is the records of its daily activities, be they onsite inspections, commissioned *gride*, expenditures, or court-based procedures. But while the series has been neither neglected nor ignored, it has yet to be thoroughly studied, which, given its nearly 300 surviving registers, should come as no surprise. The present essay offers no more than a small step in that direction, being based on a significant sample of fango registers (in total 52; about a sixth of the extant series) from three different sub-periods (1285-1292, 1318-1338 and 1343-1359), and augmented by a further eight registers from the period 1376-1400, when the office came under the jurisdiction of the capitano del popolo.<sup>7</sup>

Relying on this expanded cadre, I would like to do two things. First, beyond engaging some themes raised and arguments made in earlier works, I would like to suggest that the fango illuminates yet another dimension of medieval urban life, namely popular ideas of disease contagion and public health concerns, that formed an arena for negotiating the boundaries between the private and public spheres. Secondly, I would like to link the office of the fango to broader regional and transregional approaches to population-level healthcare. In this I am once again inspired by the example of Francesca Bocchi, whose research so ably straddles the study 'della città' with that of 'la città', that is of course our dear Bologna. Ultimately, these observations must be assessed by the light of a thorough reading of all of the

6. R. Greci, *Il controllo della città: l'ufficio dei fanghi e strade a Bologna nel XIII secolo*, in «Nuova Rivista Storica», 75 (1991), pp. 650-661; B. Breveglieri *Il notaio del fango*, in «Atti e Memorie della Deputazione di storia patria per le province de Romagna», 55 (2005), pp. 95-152; E. Tosi Brandi, *Igiene e decoro: Bologna e Rimini tra XIII e XIV secolo*, in «Storia Urbana», 116 (2007), pp. 7-18; G. Albertani, *Igiene e decoro: Bologna secondo il registro del 'notaio del fango' (1285)*, in «Storia Urbana», 116 (2007), pp. 19-36. And see note 8 below.

7. ASBo, Fango, 1-4, 16-21; ASBo, Comune, Capitano del popolo, Giudici [hereafter *Giudici*], 806, 809, 813-15, 820, 846, 848. Earlier registers from the latter series are also highly relevant to the study of public health in Bologna, as they demonstrate the complementary activities of the capitano's own roads notary.

extant registers, and that is indeed my long-term goal. For now, however, I offer this paper as a preliminary exploration of another Beatrice one could observe along the medieval city's streets, and the role she played in promoting the sometimes conflicting agendas of her neighbors and rulers.

### *The fango notary*

Public wellbeing in the Middle Ages was closely related to the presence and quality of water. Water's costly infrastructure, both above and below ground, reflected the integral role it played in the nourishment, health, safety, and hygiene of urban society, well beyond its significance to local economies.<sup>8</sup> Bologna was no exception. In order to protect the city's watercourses, Book XI of the statutes of 1256 called for the establishment of «soprastantes [...] ad fangum per civitatem». In the late thirteenth century this notary operated under the aegis of the podestà and later, around 1376, moved under that of the capitano del popolo.<sup>9</sup> It was from here that its broader environmental jurisdiction stemmed. Most broadly defined, the fango notary became responsible for the collection and disposal of waste throughout the city's streets, overseeing public works, examining market stalls and produce, inventorying the presence of animals, curbing the accumulation of firewood, and even investigating the presence of social undesirables such as false beggars, gamblers, vagabonds, and prostitutes. Bologna's waterways, streets, bridges, ditches, pavements, and all forms of clutter, litter or 'mud' thus became physical foci of this office, constituting the places and spaces in which environmental deviance was sought and detected. All this happened in lockstep with an ongoing negotiation of a

8. F. Bocchi, *Regulation of the Urban Environment by the Italian Communes from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century*, in «Bulletin of the John Rylands Library», 72 (1990), pp. 63-78; F. Bocchi, *Attraverso le città italiane nel Medioevo*, Casalecchio di Reno 1987, pp. 107-127; D. Balestracci, *The Regulation of Public Health in Italian Medieval Towns*, in *Die Vielfalt der Dinge: Neue Wege zur Analyse mittelalterlicher Sachkultur*, ed. by H. Kühnel et alii, Wien 1998, pp. 345-357; R. E. Zupko, R. A. Laures, *Straws in the Wind: Medieval Urban Environmental Law*, Boulder CO 1996, pp. 59-72; R. Greci, *Il problema dello smaltimento dei rifiuti nei centri urbani dell'Italia medievale*, in *Città e servizi sociali nell'Italia dei secoli XII-XV*, Pistoia 1990, pp. 439-464; T. Szabò, *La politica stradale dei comuni medievali italiani*, in «Quaderni Storici», 21 (1986), pp. 77-115.

9. Greci, *Il controllo della città*, pp. 650-663.

public/private divide, since population-level health concerns legitimated the regime's incursions into otherwise private or corporate spaces, thereby rewriting the city's political map.

The fango official's mandate, however, was neither secure nor its development linear, as Breveglieri demonstrates. By the late thirteenth century some of his responsibilities were devolved onto (or reassumed by) the representatives of each of the city's quarters, leaving the central body's officials to deal with pertinent violations and policing rather than maintain the streets or other public works directly. However, the boundaries between each jurisdiction remained in flux and were contingent upon individual or political agendas and the context in which cases were concealed from or brought to the attention of the fango officials. For instance, on 21 July 1323, the podestà had the fango notary mobilize the residents of via Castiglione «cum ipsa strata purgationem indigeat». And a day later, those living near the church of San Giovanni in Monte were instructed to clean the drain behind it.<sup>10</sup> These and other cases, dating to a period in which the notary's reach should have been limited to central locations that were undisputedly 'public', suggests that the fango's trajectory may have been less linear than is sometimes thought, be it due to an attempt to challenge policy by the government, or the inability of local agents to mobilize without threats from above.

The fuzziness around the public/private divide can be detected elsewhere in the fango's extant sources. Whatever the official's stated competences were, he was relentless about trying to extend his physical and political reach. Breveglieri noted the frequency with which the notary prowled the city, also at night, in the late thirteenth century. It was on one of those occasions that our Bergamino came across Beatrice Guinizelli and her sow. The same holds for the fourteenth century: between December 1329 and June 1330, the notary recorded 78 visits to commercial and production sites and 12 inspections of waterways – a total of 90 excursions, or one every other day. The following semester that number rose to 94 visits.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, these inspections are explicitly recorded as 'uneventful', that is, excursions during which nothing extraordinary was detected; when the opposite was true the record usually contains a follow-up in the

10. ASBo, Fango 17, reg. 1, fol. 23r-v (21 and 22 July 1323).

11. ASBo, Fango, 18, reg. 4, fols. 16r-21v (December 1329-June 1330); reg. 5, fols. 17r-20v and 22r-25r (June-December 1330).



form of a summons, a fine, or an inquest. Subsequent registers covering seven semesters in the period 1334-1337 chart a modest decline, but onsite inspections remain frequent nonetheless, as the notaries averaged nearly 67 'uneventful' visits per semester.<sup>12</sup> The mountain, however, also came to Muhammad. Accusations (*accusationes*) brought before the fango official appear in the earliest registers, suggesting that, at least in some instances, local residents considered it to be preferable to resolving the dispute privately.<sup>13</sup> Attention to the fortunes of the *accusatio* procedure in environmental cases during the fourteenth century is thus crucial for mapping approaches to the fango's perceived public role.

As Albertani correctly points out, the authors of Bologna's 1288 statutes were clearly concerned with safeguarding public health, since they promulgated measures to keep air, water, and noise pollution in check. She joins Greci, Zupko and Laures, and Tosi Brandi in characterizing the regime's efforts as well-intentioned but ultimately geared towards finding «soluzioni di compromesso, molto spesso non risolutive».<sup>14</sup> It is true that the fango officials faced an uphill battle. But the normative statutes, combined with modern perspectives on social medicine, often obscure our view of what urban residents at that time deemed and pursued as successful interventions. Empirical analysis of success or failure is difficult, even impossible. But without examining the records of the fango thoroughly, it is too early to pass judgment, as some historians of public health have done, on the medieval city as a demographic black hole.<sup>15</sup> Whatever they yield in terms of documenting the fango's achievements, the notary's documents of practice illustrate what the government and local residents were trying to promote, and how they defined their environmental problems and potential solutions in their own terms.

12. ASBo, Fango, 19, reg. 10, fols. 17r-20r (June-December 1334) (74 visits); 20, reg. 1, fols. 17v-18v (December 1334-June 1335) (86); reg. 2, fols. 16r-18r (June-December 1335) (70); reg. 3, fols. 21r-23v (December 1335-June 1336) (65); reg. 4, fols. 17r-19v (June-December 1336) (56); reg. 5, fols. 19r-21v (December 1336-June 1337) (60); reg. 6, fols. 25r-27v (June-December 1337) (57).

13. ASBo, Fango, 1, reg. 1, fols. 7v (31 July 1285), 9r (2 August 1285); 3, reg. 6, fol. 29r (26 March 1290).

14. Albertani, *Igiene e decoro*, p. 21.

15. G. Sjöberg, *The Preindustrial City: Past and Present*, New York 1960, p. 94; P. M. Hohenberg, L. Hollen Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000-1950*, Cambridge (MA) 1985, p. 132.

In other words, the fango notary's records are useful also because they offer us a glimpse of popular medical thinking at the basis of public health policies. For instance, in 1288 fango officials made numerous parish representatives swear an oath that they will vigilantly protect Bologna's infrastructure, specifically stating that they will report any violation concerning:

[...] filth and wells that are not cleaned and lack chains and buckets, or if the latter are broken; and those keeping un-walled ditches; and those who throw feces or dung in public roads; or those cooking fat or grease, during the day or the night, in that parish or neighborhood; and those burying bones or having them buried in the city or rural settlements of Bologna; and those placing or leaving cloths to soften in a non-draining ditch; and those directing mill waste or its water into public roads; and those possessing lime kilns in the city or its rural settlements; and those stretching hides in front of their shops; [...] and those having clogged ditches; and those throwing dung or carcasses into public ditches or who keep buckets or any other vessel containing putrid or otherwise dangerous matter.<sup>16</sup>

It would be rash to conclude on the basis of this formulaic text that local residents kept their oaths to the letter; in this sense official records offer no better proof for the success (or for that matter failure) of stated policies than the statutes. Nor do they spell out why fecal matter, grease, and industrial waste were considered to be dangerous (*periculosum*); they simply take it for granted that they are and that contemporaries understood why. Furthermore, as my sampling of this series' court records suggests, there is little to no explication of the relations between violations and increased health risks. Wagon handlers allowing their oxen to roam free, laundresses toiling upstream, wine merchants fiddling with weights,

16. «Quibus preceptum fuit [...] quod ab hodie in antea denuntient et accuse[n]t mihi [...] putredines et omnes puteos non rimondatos et non habentes catenas et situlas vel si haberent ruptas; et habentes andronas non muratas; et proiecentes vinactiam vel letamen in viis publicis; et coquentes grassam vel sepum de die vel de nocte in dicta cappella vel vicinia; et sepelientes vel facientes sepelliri ossa in civitate vel burgis Bononie; et mittentes vel ponentes linum ad macerandum in fossato circle; et proiecentes moltictium vel eius aquam in viis aquam in viis publicis; et tenentes calcinariam in civitate vel burgis; et battentes pelles ante stations eorum [...] et habentes andronas clausas; et proiecentes latamen vel rusum in andronis comunibus vel tenentes situlas vel aliud quod habeat in se putritudinem vel quod esset periculosum in aliquo casu». Translated from the Latin quotation in Breveglieri, *Il notaio del fango*, pp. 110-111.



and residents diverting or blocking ditches are routinely cited for the damage (*dampnum*) or outright destruction (*ruinatio*, *devastatio*) they have or could have caused; but the harm itself remains mostly unstated, or else is expressed in material rather than medical terms.

On rare occasions, however, we do come across descriptions that are somewhat more explicit – at least from a modern perspective – regarding the public-health threat of a violation. In early July, 1320, for instance, Guido de Calcaria of San Tommaso was accused of having thrown «dung and other trash and filth» (*lectamen et aliam imunditiam et putredinem*) near and into a local well, «harmfully and maliciously, and to the damage and disgrace of the men and people of that parish». <sup>17</sup> And on 8 August 1376, a certain woman testified that her neighbor blocked a nearby drain, and in so doing afflicted the entire area with a stench (*fetor*) and an outrage (*pudor*). <sup>18</sup> While the language of these complaints (or its rendering by court officials) falls short of employing medical theory explicitly, it does combine two complementary and well-documented strands of medieval thinking about contracting illness. The first concerns a growing consensus among medieval Western surgeons and physicians, namely that unpleasant odors could trigger disease by compounding an already deteriorated atmosphere. The odors' origins could be diverse: sick people, rotting carcasses, stagnant ponds, exposed latrines – all of which were to be avoided, for instance through minimizing contact, applying ointment to the nose and mouth, carefully disposing of dangerous substances, and doing so downwind. <sup>19</sup> The second and closely related approach possibly reflects the influence of optics theories of emission as well as intromission, according to which the observing or perceiving eye can absorb an object's qualities, including illness or impairment. <sup>20</sup>

Precisely how such mechanisms worked continued to be debated among scholars and practitioners. Yet it would be safe to say, even at this early stage of examining Bologna's records, that some contemporaries

17. ASBo, Fango, 16, reg. 6, fol. 17r: «iniuriosse et maliciosse et in dampnum et obrobrium hominum et personarum dicte capelle, proiecit et immisit et proieci et immisi fecit, iuxta puteum et etiam in puteo quodam vicinali positum et existentem in dicta capella, lectamen et aliam imunditiam et putredinem».

18. ASBo, Giudici 806, fol. 11r.

19. C. Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society*, London 1999, pp. 42-43.

20. J. K. Stearns, *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Premodern Islamic and Christian Thought in the Western Mediterranean*, Baltimore 2011, pp. 91-105.

considered certain sights and scents to have a potentially adverse effect on the health of individuals and populations. At the very least it could be argued that contemporaries considered it to be tactically useful to evoke sight and scent pollution when lodging an official complaint or promulgating an order. Accordingly, when the fango official faulted a group of residents for neglecting to maintain a latrine and canal, he ordered them to repair it specifically «quod putredo vel fetor ex eis non exeat [...] ac etiam ipsas sedilia et clavichas purgari facere et disgombrare [...] ita quod alia putredo non apareat».<sup>21</sup> That is, beyond the mechanical repair, it was paramount that the facility not emit harmful sights and scents. When urban governments translated such private concerns into social and legal action, it is possible to trace a link between medieval medical theory and public health policies. And when the records capture contemporary individuals who employ a similar discourse as part of an attempt to enforce such policies (for whatever reason), we can reasonably talk about the influence of certain ideas, either directly disseminated or otherwise present, and their adaptation or even manipulation by urban dwellers.<sup>22</sup>

### *Beyond Bologna*

Bologna's fango records, whose very surface this essay has managed to skim, offer a uniquely detailed view of government and popular approaches to urban public health in premodern times. To those – mostly modern – historians of public health who assume premodern cities were either ignorant or apathetic to the threats they faced from a medical perspective, the fango notary's documented activities, as well as the legislation governing them, present a serious if not altogether insurmountable challenge. This is all the more true since Bologna's case is hardly unique. Despite its idiosyncrasies, the fango had parallels in and beyond Italy. Among the better documented examples are Lucca's official in charge of the roads and public works (*Maggior ufficiale delle vie e de' pubblici*), whose activities left an equally substantial footprint in that city's archives, including statutes, payments for the maintenance of walls, roads, and waterways, and

21. ASBo, Fango, 16, reg. 6, fols. 45r-47v (10-16 July 1320).

22. J. Coomans, G. Geltner, *On the Street and in the Bathhouse: Medieval Galenism in Action?*, in «Anuario de Estudios Medievales», 43/1 (2013), pp. 53-82.

court protocols from the *Curia viarum* or court of roads, which handled an environmental caseload comparable to that of its Bolognese counterpart.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the main difference between the two organs is the relative modern obscurity of the Lucchese official, a state of affairs I am currently trying to change.<sup>24</sup>

But even in city-states where no dedicated organ was set up (or else remains undetected), government officials and individual residents took preventative and corrective action against threats to public health, often focused on protecting local water infrastructure. In Siena, for instance, where no river ran and where water had to be mobilized efficiently for drinking, laundry, industrial energy, and waste disposal before it was allowed to leave the city, residents ensured this precious substance was safely conducted both above and below street-level. In devising regulations to defend this water system, Siena's rulers cited lofty terms such as honor (*onore*), beauty (*bellezza*), and utility (*utilità*) – but they too knew that residents' very livelihood hung in the balance, especially during the long and hot summer months. Accordingly, along the streets, near gates, and on piazzas, where water gathered above the ground in troughs and fountains, the government placed guards, who were more highly paid the more strategic and multifunctional the location.<sup>25</sup> Here as elsewhere, water management was closely linked to the preservation of life's basic necessities, including nourishment, labor, and personal and collective hygiene, while simultaneously creating a blueprint for a regime's legitimate jurisdiction.

How communes put public health policies into practice and the extent to which citizens were willing to cooperate with urban governments, often at the price of hindering their own productivity and immediate comfort, remains largely unknown. Was our second Beatrice typical? Were officials beyond Bologna and Lucca capable of pursuing her? Numerous Italian archives, especially those whose councils' executive protocols and court records are well preserved, should yield abundant information on this aspect of premodern urban life. Whether through construction and maintenance work, prosecution of environmental offenders, hiring public doctors, mar-

23. Archivio di Stato di Lucca, Curia delle vie e de' pubblici, 1-13. See *Inventario del R. Archivio di Stato in Lucca*, ed. by S. Bongi, Lucca 1872, pp. 299-300.

24. G. Geltner, *Healthscaping a Medieval City: The Curia viarum of Lucca and the Future of Public Health History*, in «Urban History», 40 (2013), pp. 395-415.

25. M. Kucher, *The Use of Water and its Regulation in Medieval Siena*, in «Journal of Urban History», 31 (2005), pp. 504-536.

ket inspection, trash removal, or supervising public bath houses – each city and each community has a story to tell. At a regional level, a comprehensive study of peninsular parallels, even if limited to the richer archives of the center-north, is bound to attest a great variety of organs or mechanisms to safeguard public health, especially if such a study will focus on social practices rather than limit itself to normative texts. In contrast to earlier generations of public health historians, our working hypothesis should be that contemporaries cared about environmental health and sought to improve it in their own terms rather than in modern-epidemiological ones. The question is how and why, not if.<sup>26</sup>

And before we isolate Italy as an exception or rush to celebrate the ‘precociousness’ of its city-states, it is worth underscoring that they too were not unique in this respect. The extant records of London’s Assize of Nuisance, among numerous other sources, show how another major city dealt with and thus helped define public-health threats and the boundary between tolerable and intolerable behaviors by conducting on-site inspections, collecting eyewitness testimonies, and fining offenders.<sup>27</sup> Nor was London exceptional in its region. Recent studies by Carole Rawcliffe and Dolly Jørgensen have repeatedly shown the resources which urban government dedicated to devising and implementing environmental policies on water cleanliness, trash disposal, and labor safety.<sup>28</sup> While there is no need to reduce such interventions to a common toolkit across medieval Europe, some parallels are truly suggestive. For instance, in both England and Italy municipalities put up crosses

26. G. Geltner, *Public Health and the Pre-Modern City: A Research Agenda*, in «History Compass», 10 (2010), pp. 231-245.

27. *London Assize of Nuisance 1301-1431 - A Calendar*, ed. by H. M. Chew, W. Kellaway, London, 1973. And see C. M. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People 1200-1500*, Oxford 2006, pp. 237-266; E. L. Sabine, *Butchering in Mediaeval London*, in «Speculum», 8 (1933), pp. 335-353; E. L. Sabine, *Latrines and Cesspools of Mediaeval London*, in «Speculum», 9 (1934), pp. 303-321; and Id., *City Cleaning in Mediaeval London*, in «Speculum», 12 (1937), pp. 19-43; G. T. Salusbury, *Street Life in Medieval England*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1948.

28. C. Rawcliffe, *Health and Safety at Work in East Anglia*, in *Medieval East Anglia*, ed. by C. Harper-Bell, Woodbridge-Suffolk-Rochester (NY) 2005, pp. 130-151; C. Rawcliffe, *Sources for the Study of Public Health in the Medieval City*, in *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe*, ed. by J. T. Rosenthal, London-New York 2012, pp. 177-195; D. Jørgensen, *Cooperative Sanitation: Managing Streets and Gutters in Late Medieval England and Scandinavia*, in «Technology and Culture», 49 (2008), pp. 547-567.

in various places where urban residents were wont to urinate – a prophylactic measure received with varying degrees of success.<sup>29</sup>

Venturing farther afield to study premodern approaches to public health is similarly rewarding. One major parallel, or indeed perhaps even a link, between European and non-European practices is offered by the Islamic religious office of the *hisba*, headed by the market inspector or *muhtasib*. Virtually anyone studying or commenting on this office, which in certain areas was active from around the ninth to the nineteenth centuries, acknowledges its relevance to the study of premodern public health.<sup>30</sup> Despite variations across space and time, the *muhtasib* was commonly charged with supervising street cleaning and illumination, weights and measures, and the correct preparation of food as moral but also explicitly preventative measures, for, as one nomination charter put it, «most diseases usually result from [bad] food and beverages».<sup>31</sup> Preventative public-health activities remain a neglected aspect of this organ's history but not for lack of evidence, especially as we move towards the later Middle Ages and focus our attention on the Maghreb and re-Christianized Iberia. The *hisba* offers a particularly useful point of comparison with western Europe

29. R. C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, New York 1980, pp. 9-10, 54; M. Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Laws Against Images*, Oxford 1988, p. 26.

30. K. Stilt, *The Muhtasib, Law and Society in Early Mamluk Cairo and Fustat (642-802/1250-1400)* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2004); K. Stilt, *Recognizing the Individual: The Muhtasibs of Early Mamluk Cairo and Fustat*, in «Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review», 7 (2006), pp. 63-84; R. Mottahedeh, K. Stilt, *Public and Private as Viewed through the Work of the Muhtasib*, in «Social Research», 70 (2003), pp. 735-748; P. Chalmeta Gendro, *El señor del zoco en España: edades media y moderna*, Madrid 1973; T. F. Glick, *Muhtasib and Mustasaf: A Case of Institutional Diffusion*, in «Viator», 2 (1971), pp. 59-81; T. F. Glick, *New Perspectives on the Hisba and its Hispanic Derivatives*, in «Al-Qantara», 13 (1992), pp. 475-489; S. Hamarneh, *Origin and Function of the Hisbah System in Islam and its Impact on the Health Profession*, in «Sudhoffs Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften», 48 (1964), pp. 157-173; F. A. Roca Traver, *El Mustaçaf de Castellón y el "Libre de la Mustaçaffia"*, Castellón de la Plana 1973; F. Sevillano Colom, *Valencia urbana medieval a través del oficio de Mustaçaf. Estudio y edición de textos*, Valencia 1957; G. J. Bildstein, *Muhtasib and Shoter – The Shape of Cultural Diffusion*, in *Sobre la vida y obra de Maimonides. I Congresso Internacional (Córdoba, 1985)*, ed. by J. Pelaez del Rosal, Córdoba 1985, pp. 37-43; C. Lange, *Changes in the Office of Hisba under the Seljuqs*, in *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society and Culture*, ed. by C. Lange, S. Mecit, Edinburgh 2011, pp. 157-181.

31. C. Lange, *Hisba and the Problem of Overlapping Jurisdiction: An Introduction to and Translation of Hisba Diplomas in Qalqashandī's Subh al-a'shā*, in «Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review», 7 (2006), pp. 85-107 at 90.

since it is formally a religious office, whose supervision of market activities is couched in terms of preserving the community's morality. *Prima facie* this would seem remote from Western practices, but an office combining the oversight of artisanal, commercial, and social/moral activities in fact returns us to our point of departure. For the *muhtasib*'s prosecution of social deviance in the context of market inspection should come as little surprise to those familiar with Bologna's notary of the fango who, along with other officials of the podestà and capitano, acted as the government's inspectors on matters of moral conduct. On 1 March 1320, for instance, the notary is instructed to investigate the presence in the city of persons of ill repute and their hosts: «omnes personas retinentes assessinos, meretrices, lenones, et homines male conditionis et fame et contra omnes hospitatores et receptatores predictos». And in late 1337 he helped prosecute a group of men for gambling.<sup>32</sup>

### Conclusion

Like their peers across and beyond late medieval Europe, Bologna's fango notaries were the noses, eyes, and ears of their regimes. The apparent multitasking approach to urban wellbeing, cutting across matters of health, safety, and morality, may be tentatively suggested as typical of premodern, "pre-professionalized" urban governance. But at the same time it illustrates the variety of tactics developed by officialdom and individuals in their continuous struggle over the public/private divide. For although littering and other environmental offenses are defined differently across space and time, they are premised on a shared notion of order that divides matter along a continuum between pure and filthy and behavior along an in/appropriate binary. As Mary Douglas has argued, there is no objective place in which matter ought to be and out of which it becomes dirt.<sup>33</sup> Groups, societies, states, civilizations – all develop their own sense of place and the order attendant

32. ASBo, Fango, 16, reg. 5, fol. 28v. And see *ibidem*, reg. 10, fol. 12r-v (19 July 1321); 17, reg. 3, fols. 10r (14 January 1323), 41r-43v (late March 1324); reg. 5, fol. 4v (16 August 1325); 20, reg. 6, fols. 72r-75r (late 1337). And see B. Breveglieri, *Il mondo dei marocchi e Bologna nei registri dell'ufficio Corone ed armi (secoli XIII-XIV)*, in «Strenna Storica Bolognese», 61 (2011), pp. 27-46.

33. M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1966, p. 35.



upon it, including the order of "things", that is, matter. Physical organization, much like social, political, moral, intellectual, and economic organization, reflects a certain civilization's preferences; violating these preferences, for instance by 'misplacing' waste, or undermining them, as by "deviating" from building or labor regulations, challenge order and authority, but can be construed in terms of endangering individual or public health.

In modern industrialized states the link between political power and public hygiene remains formidable even under intensifying privatization. Societies have forged this link over centuries, even millennia, and its locus, not surprisingly, has been the city. The Greek *agronomos*, the Roman *aedilis*, the Jewish *rav souk*, the Muslim *muhtasib* – to rehearse the well-known list of relevant functionaries – seem to reinforce a common view of cities as chaotic and hence in dire need of supervision. But at the same time, the very existence of such officials and duties illustrates the degree of awareness regarding public health concerns and the ways in which premodern societies defined and addressed them. The full half of the glass, in fine, is never far away, if one is only interested in looking for it. As Reg (John Cleese) summed it up in *Life of Brian* (1979): «All right, but apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?!» If this can be taken as an ironic plea for premodernity's contribution to urban wellbeing, I am happy to answer: indeed, not much.