



Police forces in late medieval Italy: Bologna, 1340–1480

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ABSTRACT

Police forces (*birri*) in Italian cities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were composed of outsiders, non-natives, employed on short-term contracts, usually of six months' duration. There was therefore a huge circulating pool of these patrolmen, sergeants and constables, moving from city to city. These groups have been little studied, and are often assumed to be vile, odious and little better than criminals. This article draws on surviving records in one city of northern Italy (Bologna), to analyse the composition of these groups and especially their cosmopolitan, international memberships, which grew consistently across the period before tailing off towards the end of the fifteenth century. The article uses frames of reference from migration studies, particularly the large Balkan migrations of the fifteenth century, and from identity studies, to chart and assess the trajectory and reception of non-Italians among these groups. The article thus extends what is known about the integration of migrants in late medieval Italy, goes beyond what is known about the documentation of identity in the Middle Ages and raises questions about the quality of policing provided by multinational groups.

KEYWORDS

Bologna; medieval; police; migration; personal identity

This article presents an unexplored part of the history of late medieval migrations and its intersection with the history of policing. A singularity of law-enforcement in late medieval Italy was the employment by cities on short-term contracts of a peripatetic judiciary (headed by the *podestà*), and of their inspectors, sergeants, constables and patrolmen (known as *berroarii/berrovieri*, or by the modern term *birri*). This entailed a massive circulation of police troops among Italian cities. This may have been unique in medieval Europe, and certainly contrasted strongly to England, where constables were local, elected and unpaid, and to France, where *sergents* were also local, but were paid and exercised their office as a lucrative *métier*.¹ The same period saw large-scale

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¹J.G. Bellamy, *Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1973), 23–5; S. Hamel, 'Être sergent du roi de la prévôté de Saint Quentin à la fin du Moyen Âge' in C. Dolan (ed.), *Entre justice et justiciables: les auxiliaires de la justice du Moyen Âge au XXe siècle* (Quebec, 2005), 55–68, at 58; V. Toureille, 'Les sergents du Châtelet ou la naissance de la police parisienne à la fin du Moyen Âge', *ibid.*, 69–83, at 74–5; C. Gauvard, 'La police avant la police, la paix publique au Moyen Âge' in M. Aubouin, A. Teyssier and J. Julard (eds), *Histoire et dictionnaire de la police* (n.p., 2005), 4–146, at 127, 135.

migration from the eastern Mediterranean into Italy, partly under the pressure of Turkish military advance, though the study of the integration of migrants and refugees has focused mainly on their employment as agricultural, commercial and artisanal labour.² The use of Slavs as patrolmen or military guardsmen has certainly been noted in Venice, Florence and the Marche,³ but deeper and broader analysis of migrants in policing squads across the Italian peninsula has been lacking. To date, research in this area has largely contented itself with the regulations on police numbers and duties,⁴ and where diverse geographical origins has been noted, it has remained unexplored and unexplained.⁵ Among the circulating judiciary, which by contrast remained solidly Italian, there certainly has been intensive study, albeit for an earlier period. Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur's massive, multi-authored prosopographical study of the podestà of communal Italy (1250–1350) examined, city by city and region by region, the recruitment patterns of the aristocrats and lawyers who held the posts of podestà. Yet he explicitly excluded from his study the podestà's wider personnel, 'given the almost total silence' of office-holding lists about them.⁶ Vittorio Giorgetti's lists of judges and their staff in Perugia exclude the *birri* on what seem overly pessimistic grounds.⁷ Massimo Vallerani, in recently looking below the level of the podestà at the subordinate judges and notaries, asserted that data on recruitment is rare, because staff lists exist for few cities.⁸ These judgements of silence and rarity seem to have deterred historians from searching for police staff-lists covering the later medieval period (1350–1500). Yet certainly for Bologna, Siena, Perugia and Orvieto, these lists survive, sometimes kept in separate registers (Orvieto's *Mostre del podestà*), sometimes kept in the records of the army contracts office (Siena) and sometimes inserted into the

²S. Anselmi, 'Aspetti economici dell'emigrazione balcanica nell'Italia centro-orientale del Quattrocento', *Società e storia*, 4 (1979), 1–15; S. Anselmi, 'Slavi e albanesi nell'Italia centro-orientale' in S. Anselmi, *Adriatico: studi di storia secoli XIV–XIX* (Ancona, 1991); F. Gestrin, 'Le migrazioni degli Slavi in Italia: risultati della storiografia jugoslava' in F. Gestrin (ed.), *Migracije slovanov v Italijo* (Ljubljana, 1978), 1–38, at 14–18; D. Durissini, 'L'immigrazione da Capodistria a Trieste nei secoli XIV e XV: una prima indagine sui documenti triestini', *Atti e memorie della Società istriana di archeologia e storia patria*, 107 (2007), 27–40. The bibliography on late-medieval migrations is now very large: I refer here only to works that support specific statements in the text.

³F. Thiriet, 'Sur les communautés grecque et albanaise à Venise' in H.-G. Beck, M. Manoussacas and A. Pertusi (eds), *Venezia centro di mediazione tra oriente e occidente (secoli XV–XVI): aspetti e problemi* (Florence, 1977), 217–31, at 221; E. Orlando, *Migrazioni mediterranee: migranti, minoranze e matrimoni a Venezia nel basso Medioevo* (Bologna, 2014), 180; Anselmi, 'Aspetti economici', *op.cit.*, 10; Gestrin, *op. cit.*, 16; G. Masi, *Il sindacato delle magistrature comunali nel sec XIV* (Rome, 1930), 46.

⁴V. Franchini, *Saggio di ricerche su l'istituto del podestà* (Bologna, 1912); W.M. Bowsky, 'The medieval commune and internal violence: police power and public safety in Siena, 1287–1355', *American Historical Review*, 73 (1967), 1–17, at 7–10; H. Manikowska, 'Polizia e servizi d'ordine a Firenze nella seconda metà del XIV secolo', *Ricerche storiche*, 16 (1986), 17–38; A. Zorzi, 'Contrôle social, ordre public et répression judiciaire à Florence à l'époque communale: éléments et problèmes', *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 45 (1990), 1169–88, at 1180.

⁵H. Manikowska, 'Il controllo sulle città: le istituzioni dell'ordine pubblico nelle città italiane dei secoli XIV e XV' in *Città e servizi sociali nell'Italia dei secoli XII–XV* (Pistoia, 1990), 481–511, at 494. Her study there of 6000 *sbirri* in the second half of the fourteenth century is brief and undeveloped.

⁶J.-C. Maire Vigueur, *I podestà dell'Italia comunale* (Rome, 2000), 4.

⁷V. Giorgetti, *Podestà, capitani del popolo e loro ufficiali a Perugia (1195–1500)* (Spoleto, 1993), 4.

⁸M. Vallerani, 'La familia du podestat: à propos de la mobilité des officiers et de la culture juridique dans l'Italie communale' in *Des sociétés en mouvement: migrations et mobilité au Moyen Age* (Paris, 2010), 326.

deliberations (*reformaggioni*) of governing civic councils (Spoleto, Orvieto). The aim of this article is to use the lists for Bologna to investigate the following questions. What were the geographical origins of the podestà's staff, below the level of the judges and notaries? How did recruitment evolve across the period, and what was the chronology, extent and incidence of the 'Balkanization'? Does this evolution correlate with political developments and changes in judicial policy? What are the implications of foreign recruitment for the study of pre-modern policing? In addressing these questions, the article will draw on recent trends in the history of military labour, such as the advantageous opportunities and benefits of an internationalized labour supply, while at the same time drawing attention to the practical problems that this posed.

Bologna has one of the richest surviving judicial archives in Italy for the later Middle Ages. This includes over 400 *buste* (large folders) of trial-registers under secular inquisition procedure, as well as separate series for accusations, sentences, court papers and court journals. The very last *busta* of the trial registers, number 434, contains the staff lists for 73 podestà in the period 1355–1478, clustered in three sub-periods, 1355–1371, 1404–1435, and 1445–1478. These three clusters relate closely to the material and structural character of these documents and so to their origins and purposes, which will be examined below. Other lists survive in diverse archival series in Bologna: some in the end-of-term appraisal of the podestà (sindacation),⁹ and some in government registers of *proviggioni*.¹⁰ Already by the late thirteenth century, there was a requirement for the podestà's staff to be listed in writing, as part of the 'government by list' and of the documentary revolution of popular regimes in the Italian cities.¹¹ These lists have not been investigated for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Part of the role of this article is therefore to establish for the first time the typological range of these documents and their evidentiary value. At the same time, this level of public servant, below the podestà, has not featured in recent studies of appointments to office, with their emphasis on the documentary forms as reflections of and vehicles for different relations of power in different regimes, republican and princely.¹² Bologna is well-known as a city of great political turbulence, with many changes of regime in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As a city in the papal state yet targeted for occupation by the Visconti dukes of Milan, the city swung from republican self-rule to papal

⁹Archivio di Stato, Bologna [henceforth ASB], Curia del podestà, Ufficio del giudice al sindacato: very few of the podestà's staff-lists contained in these registers include the *sbirri*, most being limited to the major officers (judges, knights, notaries). Full lists survive for 1395 (*busta* 24, reg. 1395–6, fol. 43) and 1396 (reg. 1396, fols. 6–7).

¹⁰ASB, Comune, Governo, *busta* 273 (Atti del vicario, 1337–1350), reg. 2 (1348).

¹¹G. Milani, 'Il governo delle liste nel comune di Bologna: premesse e genesi di un libro di proscrizione duecentesco', *Rivista storica italiana*, 108 (1996), 149–229; J.-C. Maire Vigueur, 'Révolution documentaire et révolution scriptuaire: le cas de l'Italie médiévale', *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, 153 (1995), 177–85.

¹²I. Lazzarini, 'Gli ufficiali del marchesato di Mantova', *Annali della Scuola normale superiore di Pisa, Quaderni* 1 (1997), 79–97; 'La nomination des officiers dans les états italiens du bas Moyen Age', *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, 159 (2001), 389–412.

government to Visconti control and back, experiencing native and foreign lordships (the Pepoli in the 1340s, the Bentivoglio in 1401–1402 and from 1462, the Visconti in the 1350s and 1438–1443), direct papal rule via legates and governors (1360–7136, 1382–1401, 1403–1411) and free republican rule under the banner of ‘liberty’.

The successive versions of the Bolognese statutes between the late-thirteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries show the evolution of the legal definitions and requirements of the various components of the podestà’s *familia*. In the 1288 statutes, the podestà was to retain 5 judges, 3 knights, 7 notaries, 12 *domicelli* (squires) and 20 ‘berrovieri’.¹³ They were all to originate from the podestà’s home town or its dependent territory (*contado*). For the judges, knights and notaries, there were requirements in terms of age, qualifications and experience; none such for the *berrovieri*, except that they were not to have unspent criminal convictions and were to be supporters of the Church (or Guelph) party. The role of the *berrovieri* is made plain in the rules regarding their pay: guarding the city and suburbs, performing expeditions, distraints and arrests, and capturing bandits and condemned criminals – in other words, all the functions of policing, both preventative (guarding, patrolling) and executive (sequestering, pursuing and apprehending).¹⁴ Subsequent editions of the statutes elaborated on these rules in five main directions: increasing the numbers of staff, requiring them to wear differentiated uniforms, monitoring them more closely, specifying and developing their roles and recasting the requirement regarding their geographical origin. Already in an ordinance of 1295, the number of *birri* was doubled from 20 to 40, ‘in order that the podestà can better pursue malefactors in the city and suburbs, and more diligently inquire into arms-carrying’.¹⁵ By 1335 the number had increased again, to 60 – they were to carry arms (*armigeros*) and to be ‘well-armed’ – and they were now supplemented by eight ‘boys’ (*ragacios*).¹⁶ That number was maintained in the immediate post-plague years, despite the severe reduction in the population,¹⁷ and despite an attempt to reduce it, successfully resisted by podestà Guelfo Gerardini in 1363.¹⁸ However, in revised statutes in 1376 and 1389 the number did fall back, to 50, although keeping the eight boys.¹⁹

¹³G. Fasoli and P. Sella (eds), *Statuti di Bologna dell'anno 1288*, 2 vols (Vatican, 1937), I, 7, 11–14.

¹⁴For the activities of the *birri* in the earlier period, see G.C. Roberts, ‘Vendetta, violence and police power in thirteenth-century Bologna’ in S. Rubin Blanshei (ed.), *Violence and Justice in Bologna, 1250–1700* (Lanham, MD, 2018), 3–26.

¹⁵*Statuti di Bologna dell'anno 1288*, I, 581.

¹⁶A.L. Trombetti Budriesi (ed.), *Lo statuto del comune di Bologna dell'anno 1335*, 2 vols (Rome, 2008), I, 8.

¹⁷V. Braidì (ed.), *Gli statuti del comune di Bologna degli anni 1352, 1357; 1376, 1389 (Libri I-III)*, 2 vols (Bologna, 2002), I, 7. As also in Florence: U. Dorini, *Il diritto penale e la delinquenza in Firenze nel sec. XIV* (Lucca, n.d.), 203.

¹⁸The podestà for the first semester of 1363, Ridolfo Ciaccioni da San Miniato, ‘fu lo primo a chui fu chalato salario et famigli, zudesi, notai et cavalieri’, but the government gave way to Guelfo Gerardini’s threat not to come, for the second semester, if the cuts were not reversed: A. Sorbelli (ed.), *Corpus chronicorum bononiensium*, in *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, 2nd series, vol. 18, pt 1 (Città di Castello and Bologna, 1906–40), III, 153, 174–5.

¹⁹*Gli statuti del comune di Bologna degli anni 1352, 1357; 1376, 1389*, II, 545–6.

Finally, in the 1454 statutes, the *berrovieri* were maintained at the same number, but the boys were reduced to four, and the *domicelli* to eight.²⁰

‘L’uniforme fait ... le sergent.’²¹ The requirement for the knights, *domicelli*, *berrovieri* and boys each to wear clothing of different colours first appears in the statutes of 1335,²² and was clearly part of a policy both to increase the visibility and visual impact of the podestà’s entourage, and to monitor and control their conduct: among the podestà’s obligatory equipment were now a specific number of banners and shields,²³ bearing his heraldic arms, and there was a prohibition on the *birri* visiting taverns and brothels, unless on duty, or eating and drinking in private houses in city or countryside. Monitoring of the *familia* took several forms: lists, musters and penalties. The 1295 ordinance stipulated that there was to be an ‘inquest’ of all the *berrovieri* by representatives of the civic authorities every fortnight, ‘having the names of the *berrovieri* read out and viewing each of them personally’,²⁴ though frequency of the muster was later reduced.²⁵ The reading out of names presupposes the existence of a list, though the legal requirement on the podestà to deliver his staff-list within days of his arrival appears only later.²⁶ To encourage the wearing of uniforms, it was also enacted that if *birri* were found without them, then injuries against them would not be punished (1352) or would receive reduced penalty (1376).²⁷ The roles of the various components of the *familia* were also spelt out in greater detail in successive versions of the statutes. The 1335 statutes make it clear that their function was to act as instruments of judicial power: staying in the podestà’s residence, accompanying him and his officers, executing whatever orders they were given.²⁸ Later statutes add references to daily patrolling, to accompanying the officers in searching for gamblers or arms-carriers and in inquiring into crimes and pursuing criminals, and to guarding the annual October fair.²⁹ Lastly, the requirement for all to come from the podestà’s home town was soon abandoned, and replaced by a series of exclusions: the *familia* was not to include any immediate male relative of the podestà himself or of his major officers, it was not to include anyone who had recently held office in Bologna, or studied at the University, it was not to include anyone from

²⁰ASB, Comune, Governo, 51 (Statuti, 18), fols. 4-v.

²¹Hamel, *op. cit.*, 62.

²²*Lo statuto del comune di Bologna dell'anno 1335*, I, 9. Compare with London, where livery for the serjeants is not mentioned until 1377: A.F. Sutton, ‘Civic livery in medieval London: the serjeants’, *Costume*, 29 (1995), 12–24, at 15–16. Official uniform at this level seems to be a largely unwritten chapter in the history of dress.

²³Four *banderias* and one *penellum* and *pavexios* for all the *beroarri*, in 1335: *Lo statuto del comune di Bologna dell'anno 1335*, I, 8–9; *Gli statuti del comune di Bologna degli anni 1352, 1357; 1376, 1389*, I, 7; Comune, Governo, 51 (Statuti, 18), fol. 4v.

²⁴*Statuti di Bologna dell'anno 1288*, I, 581.

²⁵*Gli statuti del comune di Bologna degli anni 1352, 1357; 1376, 1389*, II, 551.

²⁶*ibid.*, I, 550.

²⁷*ibid.*, I, 7; II, 547.

²⁸*Lo statuto del comune di Bologna dell'anno 1335*, I, 47.

²⁹*Gli statuti del comune di Bologna degli anni 1352, 1357; 1376, 1389*, I, 39–40, 46–7, 711–13; II, 1096–1100.

Bologna or anyone banned from Bologna for any cause, and the major officers were not to come from any place within 50 miles of the city.³⁰

The staff lists gathered in the Bolognese judicial archive form three distinct groups. The first group are almost all on paper, and have the appearance of working documents, as some have names crossed out, or gaps unfilled, or references to officials or servants who had left or been dismissed and replaced: signs of an attempt to make the lists full and accurate. In this they resemble the muster registers in Orvieto and Siena. However, the Bolognese lists also bear the physical sign of having been ‘spiked’ – a small irregularly-shaped hole in the centre of the folio – and they would have been threaded onto a cord, forming stringed piles as mentioned in inventories, and as still survive in other parts of the Bolognese judicial archive.³¹ Further consultation of the lists was thereby made impossible: the list’s work was complete before it was spiked. The second and third clusters, as forms of document, are peculiar to Bologna: un-spiked lists on parchment or paper, some of them comprising only the major office-holders, and some copies of the statutory regulations regarding the appointment and duties of the podestà and his staff; and a group of parchment documents at some point sewn together in (imperfect) chronological order into a sort of ill-shaped register. These are clearly more formal and final, not working, documents, a certification perhaps of the correct appointment, processing and monitoring of the podestà.

The staff lists have framing texts which have no consistency and evolve over the period. By far the most common is a simple heading ‘The following are the officials of [name] podestà of Bologna’, or a longer variant.³² Sometimes, in the 1360s and 1370s, the podestà takes the subject position and the document is a record of his action in formally appointing his staff. These formats, in which the podestà or his notary takes the initiative, are superseded in the fifteenth century by formats in which the Bolognese authorities address the podestà or other office-holders. The earliest of these (1418) opens with a copy of the podestà’s letter of appointment from the Anziani, and continues with the full terms and conditions of the office, before concluding with the list of the podestà’s staff.³³ A second form of fifteenth-century document is one that opens with a mandate from the authorities – by this stage the executive council of XVI, a ruling group instituted in 1394 – to the Pay Office (*banca*

³⁰*Lo statuto del comune di Bologna dell’anno 1335*, I, 9; *Gli statuti del comune di Bologna degli anni 1352, 1357, 1376, 1389*, I, 7; II, 547–8; *Comune, Governo*, 51 (Statuti, 18), fol. 5.

³¹On spiking of documents: A. Silvestri, ‘Ruling from afar: government and information management in late medieval Sicily’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 42 (2016), 357–381; 367. ‘Inventories of study contents frequently list needles “for threading papers” and strings of bills are often mentioned’: D. Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study. Ownership and experience in renaissance Italy* (New Haven, 1997), 56. I thank Kate Lowe for this reference. For examples in Bologna: ASB, Curia del podestà, Carte di corredo, throughout.

³²For example, ASB, Curia del podestà, Libri inquisitionum, busta 434, Aug. 1356, Aug. 1357, Aug. 1358, Feb. 1359.

³³*ibid.*, Jan. 1418, Aug. 1418, Aug. 1419, Aug. 1423, Sep. 1428, Nov. 1431, Nov. 1432, July 1433, Nov. 1433, Aug. 1434, Oct. 1435, Nov. 1435.

stipendiariorum) to start paying the podestà his salary from a given date, and this payment order is then followed by the staff list.³⁴ Lastly, there is one example of a record of a different moment in the installation of the podestà and his chief officials: their oaths of office in the hands of the president of the Council of Anziani, but without a full staff list.³⁵ The surviving Bolognese documentation is thus heterogeneous, with various purposes: what was archived shifts from a record of podestarial agency as the representative of an external overlord, to one of incorporation of incoming podestà into the civic bureaucracy. Bureaucratization is an evident theme in the evolution of these lists, as shown below.

The lists of officers and names all follow the same basic, hierarchical sequence, starting with the podestà himself and his judges, and ending with the stable lads and the horses. Within that schema are numerous variations. After the judges, the notaries, 'knights' and squires, various groups with specific competencies are sometimes separated, sometimes mixed together. Thus in 1420, the list for Matteo degli Ubaldi from Perugia has 8 boys ('ragatii'), 13 servants ('familiares', including a stable-master, a cook and a victualler), 2 trumpeters ('tubicene'), and then the police squad-leaders (*conestabiles*) and their 33 men; whereas the staff-list for the Sienese Tomaso da Agazaria in 1417 includes, in an undifferentiated list of 45 names headed 'Berrovieri', one 'boy', two cooks, a victualler and three pipers (*pifferi*). Some lists are more subdivided than others, and reveal more of the inner structuring of the podestà's staff, showing that it was a complete, temporary household. Thus Francesco Salimbeni from Siena arrived in Bologna in 1436 with a total entourage of 72, in which the list of 14 domestic staff included a bursar (*expensor domus*), a dispenser (*credenciaris*), a doorman (*portanarius*), a cook, a sous-chef (*subcocus*), and chamberlain (*camarius* [sic]), a stable-master and three stable-hands. He also had a majordomo (*magister domus*) among his other servants. Some podestà included a bell-ringer (*campanarius*),³⁶ others had a drummer.³⁷ This range of domestic and official servants shows how the podestà took responsibility for purchasing, preserving and preparing food, for managing a stable, for controlling access to his residence, and for the sonic rituals of his official duties.

Despite the inconsistencies in classifying the lower levels of the entourage, there was evolution in the numbers and balance of these various categories of servants: the group that becomes more regularly recorded are the domestic servants, numbering between 10 and 18, while the number of the *berrovieri* was fairly consistent, varying mostly between 45 and 55, in addition to their 'constables', usually two in number. The staff lists thus give a much more precise allocation of roles than was prescribed in the statutes. This is

³⁴*ibid.*, July 1459, Jan. 1460, July 1460, 1471, Aug. 1478.

³⁵*ibid.*, Feb. 1441.

³⁶*ibid.*, 1471, Aug. 1478.

³⁷*ibid.*, Dec. 1355; Comune, Governo, 276, May 1351.

illustrated by the roles of musician and executioner. The statutes say nothing about pipers, trumpeters or drummers, but podestà often had them, and from the early fifteenth century the trumpeters were often Bolognese.³⁸ This impression of increasing variety and specificity of role is confirmed by the appearance among the *berrovieri* of a decapitator ('spicator') in 1460 and of an executioner (*magister* or *minister iustitie*) in 1461, 1471 and 1478, usually recruited from non-Italians ('Jacobus albanenx', James the Albanian, and 'Johannes de Frega de Tunix', John from Tunis?).³⁹ This was a different solution to that adopted earlier in the century, in Bologna as well as in other cities, of pressing condemned criminals into the role of executioner in return for sparing their lives or remitting their penalties (thus at Bologna in 1415, at Siena, 1417 and 1419, at Florence, 1425, at Pisa, 1439), or hiring 'maestri di giustizia' ad hoc (as at Ferrara, 1452).⁴⁰ It was also a different solution to that proposed by Bolognese government itself in 1384 when it declared that 'it is necessary and appropriate for there to be continuously in the city a "master of justice" to put into effect the corporal sentences and other personal penalties pronounced against criminals', at a salary of 4 lire per month.⁴¹ Migrants thus allowed for a new solution to the problem of finding and funding a specialist in legal killing.

The bureaucracy around the certification of identity also developed as the tide of immigrants flowed into policing. The level of detail in the name-lists increased significantly over time. Some of the earliest lists – those from the 1340s for example – barely record more than forenames and fathers' names. The list from 1345, perhaps the earliest surviving full staff-list, records the home towns of only a quarter of the *birri*.⁴² By the 1350s three elements – forename, father's name and home-town – were consistently noted. More layers of identity were subsequently added, though not consistently. The recording of nicknames ('the Mantuan', 'Smash', 'Welcome') suggests a desire for nominal completeness, or a need for easy differentiation between men with the same forename.⁴³ More surprising is the recording of mothers' names, in addition to fathers'

³⁸Thus in April and Oct. 1408, Jan. and July 1410, May 1411, Feb. and July 1417, July and Aug. 1418, Jan. 1419, April and Oct. 1424, April 1425, Dec. 1426., May 1432. See, by way of contrast, the Italian drummer in a garrison of Spanish and German soldiers in 1464: G. Zippel, 'Documenti per la storia del Castel Sant'Angelo', *Archivio della Società romana di storia patria*, 35 (1912), 152–218, at 199.

³⁹For Albanians and exemption from the role of executioner at Recanati 1452: A. Ducellier, B. Doumerc, B. Imhaus and J. de Miceli, *Les Chemins de l'exil: bouleversements de l'Est européen et migrations vers l'Ouest à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1992), 291. Likewise for Slavonians at Ancona, 1426 ('inhonestum officium manigularie'): Anselmi, 'Aspetti economici', *op. cit.*, 11.

⁴⁰ASB, Curia del podestà, Inquisitiones, 286, reg. 4, fol. 117 (15 April 1405); E. Guerra, *Una eterna condanna: la figura del carnefice nella società tardomedievale* (Milan, 2003), 105–7, 144–6, 173.

⁴¹ASB, Comune, Governo, 289, Riformaggioni e provvigioni cartacee, reg. 56, fol. 13 (13 Aug. 1384). Contrast the appointment of 'Jacobum de Rusia' as 'spiculatorem et ministrum Justitie comunis Bononie' at a monthly salary of 5 lire: Libri partiturore, 1, fol. 192 (23 Jan. 1455).

⁴²ASB, Comune, Governo, busta 272, reg. 3.

⁴³Many of the forenames with only one instance look more like nicknames: 'Caccia', 'Clericus', 'Noncemedo', 'Orsellus', 'Prete', 'Ragacius', 'Scaramuccia', 'Signore', 'Tamborinus', 'Trovalusio', etc.

names, which suggests a new level of bureaucratic demand.⁴⁴ These appear already in some fourteenth-century lists (September 1362, July 1365, May 1370), and became more common in the fifteenth century, being present in 20 lists between 1406 and 1460.⁴⁵ The inclusion of maternal genealogical information was rare in medieval documentation,⁴⁶ is hard to explain and is not mentioned in recent histories of personal identification.⁴⁷ It was not associated with the recruitment of non-Italians, as the first staff list to include mothers' names was composed entirely of Italians: constables from Civita di Penne, Narni, Reggio and Florence, who enrolled 22 of their compatriots, as well as 26 others from Tuscany, Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna. Nor is it likely that it was required of men born illegitimately, who knew who their mothers were but not their fathers, as maternal names are taken consistently of whole squads (and 'Bastard' is only occasionally recorded as a (nick)name).⁴⁸ Yet it must have served a function in securing the identity of the *birri* at the point of registration and muster. As the historian of pre-modern identities, Valentin Groebner, has stated, 'there has been no real history of premodern practices of the verification and control of identification'.⁴⁹ The taking of mothers' names has no parallel.

One further layer of personal identification – this one with parallel uses among other mobile groups – was then added: the description of distinguishing physical marks. For *birri* in Bologna this is found only in the fifteenth century, even though it is found earlier among other groups in Tuscany (lists of garrison soldiers, of wool guild servants, of domestic slaves).⁵⁰ The recording notary for podestà Rogerio da Perugia, count of Antignalle, in 1406 started to make notes on the physique of the *birri*, getting as far as noting that Parigino da Perugia, the son of Magio and Bartola, was 'of common build, elderly, with joined eyebrows',

⁴⁴It is necessary here to put to rest the notion, stated by Ducellier et al., *Les Chemins de l'exil*, *op. cit.*, 293, that the lists contain both men and women, as if the female names refer to the companions of the *birri*. Though the way in which some names were written (for example 'Elisabet') accidentally supports this notion, the grammatical case of the vast majority (genitives, for example 'Marie') refutes it.

⁴⁵ASB, Libri inquisitionum, 434, April 1406, Oct. 1408, Jan. 1410, Jan. 1419, July 1419, Aug. 1419, Feb. 1423, Aug. 1423, April 1424, Oct. 1424, June 1426, Dec. 1426, Dec. 1427, Nov. 1433, Oct. 1444, May [?] 1447, June 1451, July 1459, Jan. 1460, July 1460.

⁴⁶It did occur in recording the parentage of babies delivered to the Florentine founding hospital, but in those cases the father's name was often concealed: P. Gavitt, *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence. The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410–1536* (Ann Arbor, 1990), 187. Mothers' names – category II a 21 and 22 in the medieval onomastic classification – have occasionally been found in eleventh- and twelfth-century documents, but not apparently in those of the fourteenth and fifteenth: J.-M. Martin, 'Introduction', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, Moyen Age*, 106 (1994), 319–24, at 321; O. Guyotjeannin, 'L'onmastique émilienne (Xle – milieu XIIIe siècle)', *ibid.*, 381–446, at 433, 435; P. Jansen, 'L'anthroponymie dans les Marches du milieu du XIIIe siècle à la fin du XVe siècle: archaïsme ou régression?', *ibid.*, 201–25, at 207.

⁴⁷V. Groebner, 'Describing the person, reading the signs in late medieval and Renaissance Europe: identity papers, vested figures and the limits of identification, 1400–1600' in J. Caplan and J. Torpey (eds), *Documenting Individual Identity. The development of state practices in the modern world* (Princeton, 2001), 15–27; E. Hubert, 'Una et eadem persona sive aliae personae: certifier l'identité dans une société mobile (à propos de l'Italie communale)' in C. Quertier, R. Chilà and N. Pluchot (eds), *Arriver en ville: les migrants en milieu urbain au Moyen Age* (Paris, 2013), 51–64.

⁴⁸Four instances of 'Bastardus' as a forename, and four instances of 'Bastardinus', all in the period 1351–1370.

⁴⁹Groebner, *op. cit.*, 19. Groebner here deals with authenticating objects such as passes, badges and clothes. There is little on the format of names in his *Who Are You? Identification, deception and surveillance in early modern Europe* (New York, 2007), 67–72.

⁵⁰Hubert, *op. cit.*, 62.

and that Giovanni da Volterra, the son of Matteo and Lapa, was ‘a small man with a scar on his forehead’.⁵¹ Much more focused was the recording of features in the later lists of podestà Carlo de’ Muti from Rome in July 1459 and Angelo Vitelloni from Corneto in July 1460. In 1459 the notary was exclusively focused on the faces and hands of the *birri*: this one was ‘marked’ under the right eye, that one ‘between the eyebrows’, a third ‘on the thumb of his right hand’, and so on. He was evidently careful to find marks on different parts of the body for each *birro*, noting marks above, on or under the eyes, eyebrows, cheeks, nose, chin, lip and forehead, as well as on the hands. The notary in 1460 recorded the scars, broken teeth, moles and warts of all the *birri*, with the exception only of the beheader, ‘Master Thomas’, and one of the constables. Thus Federico di Federico from Germany had a ‘scar on the small finger of his left hand’, Giovanni di Giuliano from France was pock-marked (*varolosus*) and Lorenzo from Nivelles (Brabant) had a ‘broken front tooth’. This level of bodily description was not unique to Bologna,⁵² nor to *birri*: it is found also for foreign soldiers,⁵³ and for slaves. In fact descriptions of slaves in sale documents use many of the same marks: eyebrows ‘joined together’, missing teeth, pockmarks, warts and moles on all parts of the face, scarring on hands and fingers.⁵⁴ ‘Scars in the face’, as has recently been pointed out, ‘were one of the recommended aspects useful to the identification and registration of the foot soldier’,⁵⁵ and it has been suggested that there were models or formularies for this spread of physiognomic record-taking.⁵⁶ These parallels between the identification-marks of *birri*, slaves and soldiers suggests that attitudes to *birri* shared something Aristotelian with contemporary attitudes to human and animal servants: that they were viewed as animate tools, hired muscle. This harmonizes with the representation of *birri* in late-medieval fiction – for example, the tales of Giovanni Boccaccio and Franco Sacchetti – in which they never speak but receive simple orders and take routine actions.⁵⁷

The 75 Bolognese staff lists contain the names of 3,772 *birri* and their constables. Of these the majority (3,149 = 84%) are registered by name and identifiable place-name.⁵⁸ Of the rest, 371 (10%) have unclear, uncertain or

⁵¹‘homo comunis senes ciliis juntis’, and ‘homo parvus cum cicatrice in fronte’.

⁵²For examples at Spoleto: Archivio di Stato, Spoleto, Riformanze, 30 (1440), 29 Nov.; 31 (1441), fols. 29-v. Manikowska, *op. cit.*, 491, mentions only the scars.

⁵³Ducellier, Doumerc, Imhaus and de Miceli, *Les Chemins de l’exil*, *op.cit.*, 286; V. Groebner, ‘Complexio/complexion: categorizing individual natures, 1250–1600’ in L. Dalston and F. Vidal (eds), *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago, 2004), 361–83, at 375–6.

⁵⁴S.A. Epstein, *Speaking of Slavery. Color, ethnicity and human bondage in Italy* (Ithaca, 2001), 103, 108–11.

⁵⁵G. Morosini, ‘The body of the condottiero: a link between physical pain and military virtue as it was interpreted in Renaissance Italy’ in J. Rogge (ed.), *Killing and Being Killed. Bodies in battle, perspectives on fighters in the Middle Ages* (Bielefeld, 2017), 165–98, at 178.

⁵⁶Hubert, *op. cit.*, 63.

⁵⁷G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, II.1; IV.6; V.5; F. Sacchetti, *Il Trecento Novelle*, nos 110, 171, 209.

⁵⁸I have read ‘Messe’ as Metz (as K.H. Schäfer, *Deutschen Ritter und Edelknechte in Italien während des 14 Jahrhunderts*, 7 vols (Paderborn, 1911–14), III, 430), ‘Madruso’ and its variants as modern Modruš (Croatia), and ‘Petua’ as Pettau/Ptuj, pronounced Petue (L. Stegena (ed.), *Lazarus Secretarius. The first Hungarian mapmaker and his work* (Budapest, 1982), 61).

untraceable place-names,⁵⁹ and 251 (6%) are listed without place-name. Within Italy, the largest numbers came from the major cities of Florence and Milan, and from Bologna's neighbours in northern Italy such as Imola, Modena, Padua and Ferrara (see Figure 1). Only Florence and Milan provided over 100 *birri* across the period. Seven cities, in descending order Ascoli, Padua, Venice, Verona, Piacenza, Modena and Reggio (Emilia) provided over 50, and a further seven provided over 25, all but one of them in Lombardy-Veneto-Emilia. At the lower end of the scale, there are surprisingly low numbers from cities such as Perugia (17), Naples (14), Arezzo (12), Pisa (9) and Rome (5). So, despite the fact that the range of home-towns for Italian *birri* in Bologna stretches from Alessandria to Udine and from Salerno to Bari, the major recruiting grounds were in the cities of the north, and in a small number of cities in Tuscany. In ones and twos *birri* also came from many small towns and villages scattered up and down the Italian peninsula. From outside Italy, they came from five main areas. The largest of these was Germany, accounting for 469 *birri* simply described as from 'Alamania', and a further 46 from specific cities or regions. Other origins were the Balkans, mainly Zagreb (90) and Zara/Zedar (58), but also 11 other towns, as well as 'Slavonia'; the Low Countries (114 *birri* mainly from Brabant and Flanders or specific cities such as Bruges or Brussels); Hungary (113) and France (85, including regions and cities of the north, centre and south). From further afield, *birri* also came from Mediterranean islands (Corsica, Crete, Cyprus), Greece, Spain, Britain (England and Scotland) and the Black Sea (Tana/Azov).

Place-names could be untraceable because they were misheard, mis-recorded or miscopied by the notary, or even because fabricated by the *birro*, the constable or the podestà. The possibility of invented names is surely suggested by the very measures taken to obtain extensive identity details of the *birri*: 'the whole of public documentation was directed against possible fraud.'⁶⁰ One Milanese official insisted on the accurate recording of 'name and surname, skin and features' at musters as a guard against fraud.⁶¹ Yet John the son of John and of Johanna, from an unidentifiable place called 'Blagaria' (December 1427), surely sounds like a false name. The possibility of falsehood is confirmed by the striking number of occasions on which two men with the same name are recorded in the same cohort of *birri*: two called Guglielmo di Pietro from Germany in February 1417, two called Guglielmo di Giovanni from Gascony in January 1419, two called Arrigo di Simone da Slavonia in 1422, two called Pietro di Antonio da Sicilia in November 1431, and so on. There are 18 instances of such duplication in the fifteenth-century lists, and

⁵⁹Some place-names could refer to one of several places (for example 'Valentia', 'Asia', 'Segna', Castelfranco, Monte, Montevocchio); and some though they look Italian (Binigliano, Brugianello, Dendosola) or German (Giosadin, Glaber, Osimbergo) are unidentifiable.

⁶⁰P.J. Jones, *The Italian City-State. From commune to signoria* (Oxford, 1997), 531.

⁶¹M.N. Covini, *L'esercito del duca: organizzazione militare e istituzioni al tempo degli Sforza (1450-1480)* (Rome, 1998), 158.

two of double duplication.⁶² Although, with a restricted name pool – in which eight Christian names (Antonio, Bartolomeo, Francesco, Giacomo, Giovanni, Georgio, Niccolò, Pietro) account for over one third of all the forenames – some of these coincidences can be expected (as in the ‘birthday paradox’), the frequency of this duplication suggests either notarial carelessness or a tolerated form of corruption, in which the podestà was paid for 50 *birri* but actually hired only 49, or 48.⁶³ Some governments took action to prevent impersonation,⁶⁴ or to protect the quality of staff against cost-cutting,⁶⁵ but it was only more serious forms of abuse that were investigated and penalized at the obligatory end-of-term inquest into the outgoing podestà’s conduct.⁶⁶

The thirteenth-century statutes required the podestà to draw his *familia* from his own town.⁶⁷ The remnants of that expectation are visible in the earliest extant lists. In the second semester of 1345, the podestà came from Monteleone (di Spoleto?) and so did 20 of the *birri*. A further eight came from Spoleto, and the whole group had a compactness of geographical origin, from just seven places in central Italy. A change was already evident in the first semester of 1348, when a podestà from Venice, Giovanni Sanudo, brought only two *birri* from that city and, though the bulk of his gendarmes came from the Veneto, they also originated from cities such as Cremona, Parma, Siena and Lucca, and from a total of 27 places.⁶⁸ This became the dominant pattern of the decade of Visconti rule that followed (1350–1360), and was in line with the Visconti practice of entrusting even minor offices to Lombards and Milanese.⁶⁹ In the nine staff lists from those years, only one podestà, Guglielmo Arimondi from Parma, brought many *birri* from his home town, 11 of them. More typical was the *familia* of Antonio Catanei from Ascona (Ticino), who served repeated terms of office from 1357 to 1360: he brought no *birro* from Ascona or Ticino; his staff came from around 30 different places across northern Italy, from Faenza and Treviso in the north-east to Milan and Alessandria in the north-west, with considerable numbers from other cities ruled by the Visconti,

⁶²Other instances in June 1361, 1362, 1396, May 1411, July 1418, Sep. 1420, Aug. 1422, June 1426, Dec. 1427, Nov. 1431, May 1432, Nov. 1432, April 1444, Oct. 1444, 1445, May 1447, March 1448, July 1459, Jan. 1461. Double duplications: Nov. 1431, June 1451.

⁶³The birthday paradox calculates the minimum number of people required in a room for a 50% chance of two of them having the same birthday. Among the *birri*, if eight names were the only ones available, it would need a group of 10 for there to be over 50% chance of two people having the same name, consisting of forename and father’s name.

⁶⁴Archivio di Stato, Orvieto, Riformanze, 189, fol. 208v (1410).

⁶⁵D.S. Chambers and T. Dean, *Clean Hands and Rough Justice. An investigating magistrate in Renaissance Italy* (Ann Arbor, 1997), 33.

⁶⁶For examples at Bologna in the 1360s that included forcing women into detention and torturing men to death: *Corpus chronicorum bononiensium*, III, 149, 195. Most of the examples in Masi, ‘Il sindacato’, *op.cit.*, 104–12, relate to arrest, imprisonment, violence and extortion, though improper composition of the *familia* does occur once, in 1385 (110).

⁶⁷As was the practice in Siena, c. 1300: D. Waley, *Siena and the Siennese in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1991), 44.

⁶⁸Giovanni Sanudo is not listed in E. Crouzet Pavan, ‘Venise et le monde communal: recherches sur les podestsats vénitiens, 1200–1350’, *Journal des savants*, 2 (1992), 277–315, at 310.

⁶⁹G. Lorenzoni, *Conquistare e governare la città: forme di potere e istituzioni nel primo anno della signoria viscontea a Bologna (ottobre 1350-novembre 1351)* (Bologna, 2008), 81–2.

although also with an occasional Tuscan; and he rarely brought more than four from the same place.⁷⁰ The lists from the decade following the restoration of papal rule in 1360, and the two lists from the 1390s show divergent tendencies, of clustered and dispersed recruitment. On the one hand, podestà from small places tended to recruit locally at least part of their staff: Ciappo de' Ciappi from Narni brought 11 men from Narni among his squad of 52 in September 1362, and several more came from other towns of central Italy; and Riccardo de' conti Guidi di Bagno (November 1395) brought 15 from Bagno di Romagna.⁷¹ On the other hand, podestà from major centres tended to recruit more thinly from a wider range of places: across three semesters in the mid-1360s, two Florentine podestà – Guelfo Gerardini and Rosso Ricci – brought between them a total of only 12 *birri* from Florence itself; while also recruiting from over 30 Italian cities from Asti and Venice to Ascoli and Matelica. Yet in both groups the pull towards more distant origins is unmistakable: the first German appears in November 1363 ('Johannes theotonicus'), and the first Croatian from Zara/Zadar in May 1370, while Riccardo de' conti Guidi had two Germans, a Frenchman and a Hungarian among his *birri* in 1395. Fourteenth-century recruitment in Bologna thus mirrors that in Florence: few *birri* from outside Italy, some from the podestà's home-town, most from the cities of the centre and north.⁷²

From the early years of the fifteenth century, the trend accentuates to hire more *birri* from further afield. This trend is neatly announced in March 1404 with a *birro* from Scotland – 'Pierus Johannis de Schocia' – in the *familia* of a podestà from Sassoferrato. The first Cretan appears in 1417, the first Albanian in 1419, the first Greek in 1424.⁷³ The first podestà to have no member from his home town in his entire 86-man *familia*, was Guido Galeazzi from Siena in April 1408. Instead he had *birri* from over 30 locations: from 20 Italian cities, and from cities, regions and countries of northern and eastern Europe (Brabant, Bruges, Germany, Locarno, Vienna and Zagreb), as well as officers, squires and stable-lads from nearly 30 more. He was not alone, being followed by other podestà such as Lodovico dal Carretto from Savona (February 1417), Bernabò Cimi from Cingoli (August 1419), Giovanni Salerni from Verona (February 1420) and Matteo degli Ubaldi from Perugia (September 1420), who had no *birri* from Savona, Verona, Cingoli or Perugia, but many from beyond Italy, namely Germany, the Low Countries, the Balkans and even England.⁷⁴

⁷⁰The fact that he was 'nephew' ('nepote') of the Visconti lord, Archbishop Giovanni, of course partly explains this 'Milanese' character of his *familia*: *Corpus chronicorum bononiensium*, III, 73.

⁷¹On Riccardo: S. Ammirato, *Albero e istoria della famiglia de conti Guidi* (Florence, 1640), 22–3 (not mentioning his term as podestà of Bologna).

⁷²Manikowska, *op.cit.*, 494.

⁷³On Greek migration to Italy mainly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453: J. Harris, *Greek Emigrés in the West, 1400–1520* (Camberley, 1995), 17–31. On Albanian migration to Venice and the Marche: Ducellier, Doumerc, Imhaus and de Miceli, *Les Chemins de l'exil*, *op.cit.*, 143–8, 252–62.

⁷⁴'Robertus Johannis' and 'Henrichus Petri' from 'Henghelterra'.

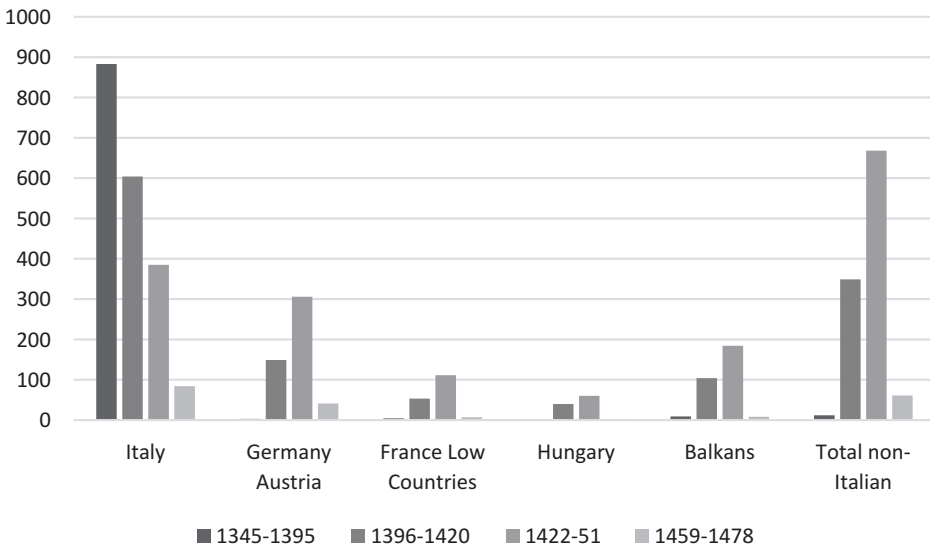


Figure 1. Origins of *sbirri* in Bologna, 1345–1478.

Sources: ASB, Curia del podestà, Libri inquisitionum, 434; Comune, Governo, 273, reg. 2; and Curia del podestà, Ufficio del giudice al sindacato, 24

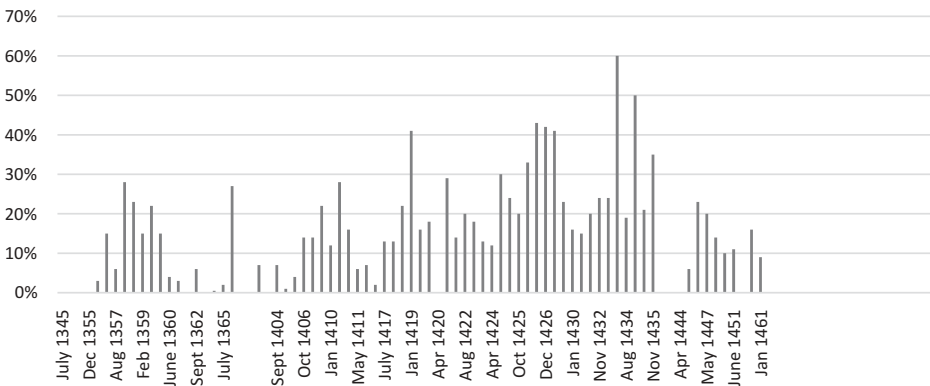


Figure 2. Repeat-posts as *sbirro*: percentages in each cohort.

Sources: ASB, Curia del podestà, Libri inquisitionum, 434; Comune, Governo, 273, reg. 2; and Curia del podestà, Ufficio del giudice al sindacato, 24.

This trend to recruit from places far removed from the podestà's home town became a trend to recruit from outside Italy and it followed a particular parabola, rising in the early fifteenth century, peaking in the 1430s, before suddenly falling back, as Figures 1 and 2 show. Between 1345 and 1395, the number of non-Italians was very low, mostly one or two per squad, though reaching six in 1395. The year 1396 seems to mark a watershed, as the number rose to 11, and for the next 25 years the number of non-Italians averaged 15, within a range from seven to 27 (in squads averaging 50). The year 1422 marked another upwards jump in foreign *birri*, rising to 22 (out of 50). The numbers continued to rise, reaching a peak of 42 out of 50 in 1447 (averaging 25 between 1422 and 1451). Across the

whole period, the number of Italians fell, from comprising almost all of the *birri* in the 1340s and 1350s,⁷⁵ to around half in the 1410s and 1420s, and to single figures in the 1440s. Geographical distance in the provenance of podestà and *birri* grew ever greater. In the *familia* of a podestà from Rome in November 1432, the *birro* whose home-town was closest, as the crow flies, to Rome came from Zagreb, as the four Italians came from Vicenza, Messina, Como and Verona. Multi-ethnic and multilingual bands of *birri* thus became the norm. For example, in May 1433 the 30 foreigners came from Germany, Hungary, the Low Countries (Holland, Brabant), the Balkans (Zara, Sibenik, Piran, Zagreb, Slavonia) and England; and in November 1436 a smaller squad of 21 came from Poland, Spain, Germany, France, the Low Countries (Brabant, Flanders, Brussels) and Slavonia. The two decades between 1459 and 1478 then saw a rather abrupt decline, though with only six staff-lists surviving for this period, and one of them incomplete, this trend needs to be treated with caution, especially as the squad size fell to an average of 32 in these years.⁷⁶ Nevertheless the decline was both absolute and relative: by the last full list, in 1471, the number of Italian *birri* accounted for 26 out of a total of 36. Not that podestà returned to hiring from their home-cities: among the podestà of these years, only Giovanni da Balbiano da Milano (January 1460) brought a single *birro* from his own city. Yet, at a time when immigration to Italy from Greece and the Balkans was rising strongly, Bolognese podestà returned to the heavily Italian composition of their *familie*. What could have caused this development?

This parabola, of rising and falling foreign recruitment, bears some relation to political context. The periods of greatest Italian recruitment of *birri* coincide with the two periods of rule by secular lords or leaders (the Pepoli and Visconti at the beginning of the period, and Giovanni II Bentivoglio at the end), whereas the middling period, 1408 to 1459, a period of growing oligarchical control of the city, saw the continued growth in numbers of foreign *birri*. This runs counter to the suggestion by Gino Masi that the use of foreign *birri* was corrosive of civic morale and constituted an army for tyrants.⁷⁷ Instead, it seems that the interests of oligarchy were served by police forces composed of men with few contacts among themselves and none with local populations. Nevertheless, the falling away of foreign recruitment in the 1460s to 1470s could also have had an external cause: the heavy military recruitment in these years by Venice, of thousands of infantry to conduct its Turkish war in Istria, Morea and Friuli, perhaps drawing off surplus sword-carrying manpower.⁷⁸

⁷⁵From 11 lists comprising 641 *birri*, 1345–59, there figure only two Capodistriani in 1348 and ‘Aymonetus begognonus’ in 1351.

⁷⁶The government had decided to reduce the size of the podestà’s *familia* from July 1455: ASB, Libri partitorum, 1, fol. 98v (6 June 1453). A ‘reduction of the usual familia’ by 1 judge and 10 *birri*, was also approved later the same year: *ibid.*, fol. 119v–20 (9 Nov. 1453).

⁷⁷Masi, ‘Il sindacato delle magistrature comunali’, 47.

⁷⁸M.E. Mallett and J.R. Hale, *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State: Venice, c. 1400–1617* (Cambridge, 1984), 45–50.

Two questions remain, regarding the causes and effects of this dispersed recruitment. What recruitment mechanism can have produced such heterogeneous results? How did these cohorts come together, and who was the organizing agent, if not the podestà? The obvious probable recruiter is the 'constable' (equivalent to a squad-leader), following the practice of military subcontracting. It is noticeable that the constables remained Italian for much longer than the rest of the *birri*, and some of them had prolonged careers in Bologna. With one exception,⁷⁹ foreigners filled this role only after 1430. Of the 123 constables, 18 appear more than once, and some fairly consistently: Andrea di Marino d'Ascoli, 11 times between 1406 and 1435; Milanino di Antonio da Milano, 10 times, 1419–1434; Lucchino 'de Lexia' 5 times, 1357–1359,⁸⁰ and Baldizzone d'Arezzo 5 times, 1357–1360. The constables came from a much more restricted pool of places than the *birri* (50 in total), with 12 coming from Ascoli and 8 from Florence. The presence of these leaders, serving a succession of podestà, suggests that the incoming podestà, instead of hiring servants himself, subcontracted this function to on-the-spot middlemen, who recruited from the labour market in and around Bologna. This would explain the change in patterns of continued service among the *birri* (see Figure 2). Using a narrow definition of repetition in office,⁸¹ the graph shows that repeated service among the *birri* grew during the periods of constables Lucchino and Baldizzone in the later 1350s serving one podestà (Antonio Catanei from Ascona), and of Andrea and Milanino between 1406 and 1435, serving nearly 20 podestà between them. It would also explain why, under Andrea and Milanino, the musicians were often Bolognese. Moreover, it finds confirmation in later records in which the government dispensed from the statutes, so as to allow an outgoing podestà's staff to serve his incoming successor.⁸² Men such as Andrea and Milanino acted as brokers between the podestà and the labour market, in similar ways to military *condottieri*.

Historians of military recruitment have recently re-examined the idea of a transition from 'feudal' to 'contract' armies in the later Middle Ages, reconceiving it in terms of forms of labour, and types or levels of recruitment. In terms which echo the evolution of the podestà's *familia*, these historians have discussed the transition from recruitment of a 'reciprocal form of labour', based on locality or kinship or patronage, to recruitment of

⁷⁹'Henrichus Henrici de Prussia', Feb. 1420.

⁸⁰I have not resolved the identity of this place name. Lucchino is an Italian name, but could also be Slavic. He is once recorded as coming from 'Laxia', twice from 'Lexia' and twice without a provenance. 'Laxia' could be Lascia in Liguria, but 'Lexia' might suggest Alessio/Lezhe (Albania), perhaps unlikely given the date.

⁸¹Same (or similar) forename and father's name and provenance, within a five-year period of first mention. This method has the effect of under-representing repeated office-holding in the 1340s to 1350s because all three elements are not consistently present then, so I have allowed some exceptions in the 1350s for *sbirri* with rare/unique forenames. By way of comparison, see the 'strict criteria' necessary in nominal linkage 'to prevent ... spurious inclusions': L.R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350–1525* (Cambridge, 1991), 116.

⁸²ASB, Libri partitorum, 2, fols. 26-v (7 June 1455), 30v (20 June 1455); 3, fol. 105v (2 Jan. 1459).

commodified labour, based on either individual or collective recruitment methods.⁸³ Likewise, the podestà in the early-to mid-fourteenth century acted more like landlords raising an army ‘from their own retinue and dependent peasantry’, whereas by the early fifteenth, they were recruiting heavily from supplies of international labour.⁸⁴ Moreover, this was just at the moment when the companies of mercenary soldiers employed by the lords and cities of Italy were moving in the opposite direction, from largely foreign components to men enrolled from the Italian aristocratic captain’s own lands and castles – military units which, it is argued were more flexible, more efficient and cheaper than foreign armies.⁸⁵ Explanations for this shift in the origin of military labour in Italy – from foreign to native – focus on the factors of the supply of labour, the status and opportunities offered by the employment, and the organizational needs of the employer.⁸⁶ Can a similar rota of causes lie behind the opposite shift in police labour? This would suggest that the supply of migrant labour remained strong, now channelled more into non-military sectors; that the status and opportunities of policing fell for Italians, but remained advantageous for foreigners; and that employers saw benefits in non-native recruitment.

Certainly the supply of foreign labourers in Bologna was strong, some of them unemployed and some of them familiar with sword-handling. They cover all the categories, from the vagabond and marginal to the unskilled, the specialized and the professional.⁸⁷ In the few surviving jail registers, in addition to large numbers of Italians, foreigners from further afield turn up, detained for debts or offences. For example, the register for 1426 has 18 Germans, 5 Frenchmen, 4 from the Balkans and 1 Pole;⁸⁸ and the register for 1439 has 27 Germans, 3 Frenchmen, 3 Flemings, 2 Poles, and 1 man from each of Ragusa, Durazzo, Luxemburg and Athens.⁸⁹ Such men also turn up in the criminal trial registers. In one semester between 1425 and 1426, a man from Piran, and his companion from Udine, were involved in a brawl with two *contadini*; a Hungarian, with a Bolognese accomplice,

⁸³J. Lucassen and E.-J. Zürcher, ‘Conscription as military labour: the historical context’, *International Journal of Social History*, 43 (1998), 405–19; E.-J. Zürcher, ‘Introduction: understanding changes in military recruitment and employment worldwide’ in Zürcher (ed.), *Fighting for a Living. A comparative history of military labour 1500–2000* (Amsterdam, 2013), 19–21.

⁸⁴Cf. S. Govaerts, ‘“Mannen van Wapenen”: the Beisweiler campaign and the military labour market of the county of Loon in the fourteenth century’, *Viator*, 47 (2016), 297–342.

⁸⁵M. Del Treppo, ‘Gli aspetti organizzativi, economici e sociali di una compagnia di ventura italiana’, *Rivista storica italiana*, 85 (1973), 253–75, at 264, 272; F. Storti, *L’esercito napoletano nella seconda metà del Quattrocento* (Salerno, 2007), 31, 37, 50, 54; P. Grillo, ‘Una generazione in transizione. Capitani e condottieri fra Tre e Quattrocento’ in B. Del Bo and A.A. Settia (eds), *Facino Cane: predone, condottiero e politico* (Milan, 2014), 13–22.

⁸⁶*ibid.*

⁸⁷G. Pinto, ‘Gli stranieri nelle realtà locali dell’Italia bassa-medievale: alcuni percorsi’ in G. Rossetti (ed.), *Dentro la città: stranieri e realtà urbane nell’Italia dei secoli XII XVI* (Naples, 1989), 23–32, at 26–8.

⁸⁸ASB, Curia del podestà, Vacchettini, busta 4.

⁸⁹ASB, Soprastante alle prigioni, reg. for Dec. 1438–Nov. 1439.

assaulted a soldier with swords; a German vagabond attacked a Florentine with a knife; a German innkeeper stabbed a man from Zagreb in the throat; and a German weaver resident in Bologna was prosecuted for keeping a mistress.⁹⁰ Cases in the following years add to the catalogue: a group of Spanish murderers armed with swords, an Albanian thief, brawling German servants at the Lion Inn, and so on.⁹¹ Among the skilled labourers, there was a group of German weavers in Bologna, smaller doubtless than its better-known counterparts in Florence and Venice,⁹² and households of 'foreigners' (non-Bolognese) constituted one fifth of households in one quarter of the city.⁹³ French and German pimps and prostitutes, with the occasional Slav, populated the brothel, alongside their Italian peers. Students and, more relevantly, their servants came from all over Christian Europe. Moreover, there were always people passing through, as the records of the pass office show.⁹⁴ So there was never a shortage of foreign labour, and evidence from elsewhere shows that the authorities were keen to enrol suitable men newly arrived in the city.⁹⁵

To suggest that employment as *birri* could be seen as advantageous to foreign workers is to reverse the point of view from which *birri* have usually been judged. In this and later periods, they have been seen as 'barely distinguishable from criminals', their function vile and their reputation odious: 'rough and fierce', noted for 'avidity and rudeness'.⁹⁶ Jacques Chiffolleau saw the 'anarchic violence' of the sergeants in Avignon as functional to their intimidatory function.⁹⁷ However, such interpretations are one-sided and, as with foreign mercenary soldiers, other perspectives exist: were migrant *birri* really unemployed drifters hired for their rough appearance and behaviour, or rather opportunistic migrants seeking integration?⁹⁸ Some certainly were commended and rewarded by their employers, as for example a constable in

⁹⁰ASB, Curia del podestà, Libri inquisitionum, busta 321, fols. 33, 40, 63, 66, 139.

⁹¹*ibid.*, 330, reg. 1, fol. 36; reg. 2, fol. 64; 344, fol. 6.

⁹²S.K. Cohn, *The Laboring Classes of Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1980), 110–13, 127–8; F. Franceschi, 'I Tedeschi e l'Arte della Lana a Firenze fra Tre e Quattrocento' in Rossetti, *Dentro la città*, *op. cit.*, 257–78; P. Braunstein, 'Remarques sur la population allemande de Venise à la fin du Moyen Age' in *Venezia centro di mediazione*, *op. cit.*, 234–43, at 236.

⁹³U. Santini, 'Cenni statistici sulla popolazione del quartiere di S. Procolo in Bologna nel 1496', *Atti e memorie della Deputazione di storia patria per la Romagna*, 3rd series, 24 (1905–6), 327–413 at 329, 338.

⁹⁴On one day in 1412, taken at random, 28 people (with 16 companions or servants) were registered for passes, from up and down the Italian peninsula, Vercelli to Puglia, and from France, Savoy and Durazzo: ASB, Ufficio delle bollette, Libri delle presentazioni dei forestieri, reg. 1, fol. 14 (27 July).

⁹⁵Dean and Chambers, *op. cit.*, 47–8.

⁹⁶S. Hughes, 'Fear and loathing in Bologna and Rome: the papal police in perspective', *Journal of Social History*, 21 (1987–8), 97–104. See also, by way of comparison, R. Fédou, 'Les sergents à Lyon aux XIVe et XVe siècles', *Bulletin philologique et historique du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* (Paris, 1967, for 1964), 283–92; Dorini, *op. cit.*, 206–7.

⁹⁷J. Chiffolleau, *Les justices du pape: délinquance et criminalité dans la région d'Avignon au quatorzième siècle* (Paris, 1984), 66–7.

⁹⁸Compare P. Contamine, 'Scottish soldiers in France in the second half of the fifteenth century: mercenaries, immigrants or Frenchmen in the making?' in G.G. Simpson (ed.), *The Scottish Soldier Abroad, 1247–1967* (Edinburgh, 1992), 16–30.

Florence.⁹⁹ Police service, like military service, could therefore be considered as a 'resource', an 'instrument' providing both income and 'paths to social mobility',¹⁰⁰ except that those who served as *birri* had chosen an occupation that on the face of it resisted integration: socialization with the local populace was curtailed by law, and the situations in which they interacted with citizens were confrontational (making arrests, impounding goods, enforcing debts). However, recent research also attempts to see variety in the 'strategies of survival' of migrants' behaviour, as they differed in the ways they coped with 'displacement, loss and alienation'.¹⁰¹ Policing as a form of labour did provide wages, lodgings, food, clothing and comradeship: a lifestyle and mentality that perhaps suited men at certain stages in their life cycle. If the foreign *birri* were young men, which is likely given the historical connections between young adulthood and life-cycle migration/mobility,¹⁰² service in police forces may have provided them with a structure that allowed 'good migration' to occur, enabling the successful adaptation to new surroundings and the incorporation of new experiences.¹⁰³

As for the interests of their employers, it is noticeable how the shift in recruitment roughly coincides with the strengthening of the forces of surveillance, policing and repression in post-plague cities. As Sarah Rubin Blanshei has recently indicated, the legal and physical powers of the Bolognese podestà were extended in the later fourteenth century: numbers of *birri*, relative to the population, went up, and the podestà's authority to prosecute *ex officio* was expanded.¹⁰⁴ Pressure from the podestà in 1380 to relax the regulations on torture, on the grounds that the law was too restricting, led to a change in the law.¹⁰⁵ The increasing employment of *birri* who were more remote from local networks of influence harmonizes with the development of harsher, less rule-bound justice, such as the loosening of restrictions on torture, or the prorogation of procedural deadlines,¹⁰⁶ or the hiring of an official bandit-catcher (*bargello*), or the repeated enlargement of the podestà's arbitrary powers of inquiry, arrest, prosecution and punishment (as in 1418–1419 and the 1440s).¹⁰⁷ This harmonizes too with some findings of the Italian historiography on policing. Andrea

⁹⁹Lo strenuo huomo Cristoforo albanese è stato lungo tempo et è al presente nostro conestabile di tale fede et virtù che lo amiamo singularmente ...': Archivio di Stato, Firenze, Otto di Pratica, Legazioni e commissarie, 4, fol. 104 (1485). I thank Kate Lowe for this reference.

¹⁰⁰A. Fiore, 'L'attività militare come vettore di mobilità sociale' in S. Carocci (ed.), *La mobilità sociale nel Medioevo* (Rome, 2010), 381–407, at 405.

¹⁰¹G.G. Kroeker, 'Introduction' in T.G. Fehler, G.G. Kroeker, C.H. Parker and J. Ray (eds), *Religious Diaspora in Early Modern Europe. Strategies of exile* (London, 2014), 1–2.

¹⁰²L. Page Moch, *Moving Europeans. Migration in western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington, 1992), 71; D. Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe c. 1300–c. 1500* (Manchester, 2006), 108–15.

¹⁰³A. Varchevker, 'Introduction' in A. Varchevker and E. McGinley (eds), *Enduring Migration through the Life Cycle* (London, 2013), xvi–xvii.

¹⁰⁴S. Rubin Blanshei, 'Bolognese criminal justice: from medieval commune to Renaissance *signoria*' in Blanshei, *Violence and Justice*, op. cit., 55–82, at 65.

¹⁰⁵ASB, Comune, Governo, 286 (Riformagioni e provvigioni cartacee, reg.42), fol. 57 (15 June 1380).

¹⁰⁶For example: *ibid.*, reg. 45, fol. 38v; reg. 46, fol. 48.

¹⁰⁷T. Dean, 'Criminal justice in mid fifteenth-century Bologna' in T. Dean and K.J.P. Lowe (eds), *Crime, Society and the Law in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 1994), 16–39, at 30.

Zorzi has placed the growth in police numbers in the broader context of 'profound transformation' of judicial power: new judicial bodies, more flexible judicial procedures and the practice of negotiated penalty.¹⁰⁸ Sam Cohn argued that just as the nature of Florentine class conflict changed in the fifteenth century, from mass insurrections to individual attacks on the elite and on officials, so too the nature of surveillance changed from elected, unpaid parish officials to paid, centralized officers, such as the *birri*.¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Crouzet Pavan's study of policing in Venice argued that as the presence of agents of surveillance increased, so violence, especially nocturnal violence, was increasingly directed against those agents: the expansion of state policing generated resistance to it.¹¹⁰ Something of this is echoed in Bologna, most strikingly in the violent attacks on the *bargello* (bandit-catcher) of the mid-fifteenth century, Raffaele da Pistoia, who was the target of an assassination attempt and whose son was killed in a nocturnal confrontation with a band of armed men to shouts of 'Give it to the *bargello*! Kill the *bargello*!'¹¹¹ As a result of these assaults, the financial penalties for wounding the *bargello* or the podestà's staff were tripled.¹¹² Similarly, the social reaction to the podestà and his *birri* seems to have grown rougher. In the 1340s the range of violent resistance to official action, as represented in criminal prosecutions, focused on tax collectors and their agents, and on bailiffs distraining goods for private or public debt: debt and taxes were the triggers, not surveillance or policing.¹¹³ Records for selected years between 1425 and 1465 show a similar resistance to debt-dstraint, and injuries to bailiffs and the retrieval by force of distrained goods are still present.¹¹⁴ Yet violent responses to arrest are more evident. Resistance to arrest could be forceful enough to repel the podestà's knight and *birri*, or even lead to death, as in 1469, when the brother of an arrested man fatally shot a *birro* with a crossbow.¹¹⁵

From the point of view of their employers, nevertheless, one issue still remains: did the heterogeneous nature of the *familia* pose a problem? The squads of *birri* evolved from mono-lingual to multilingual, from familiar servants to unknown commodities. Unlike Parisian *sergents*, they had no local knowledge, of the streets and of the world of delinquency, which would have

¹⁰⁸A. Zorzi, 'Politiche giudiziarie e ordine pubblico' in M. Bourin, G. Cherubini and G. Pinto (eds), *Rivolte urbane e rivolte contadine nell'Europa del Trecento: un confronto* (Florence, 2008), 381–420, at 388–405.

¹⁰⁹S. Cohn, 'Criminality and the state in Renaissance Florence, 1344–146', *Journal of Social History*, 14 (1980), 211–33, at 218, 223–4.

¹¹⁰E. Crouzet Pavan, 'Violence, société et pouvoir à Venise (XIVe–XVe siècles): formes et evolution de rituels urbains', *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome, Moyen Age*, 96 (1984), 903–36, at 911–12, 924–7.

¹¹¹Dean, *op. cit.*, 30; ASB, Curia del podestà, Vacchettini, busta 5, reg. for July–Oct. 1456 (14 Sep.). For other attacks on the staff of Raffaele da Pistoia: *ibid.*, Inquisitiones, busta 365, fols. 136, 241; 367, fol. 148.

¹¹²S. Cucini, 'Legislation statutaire et gouvernement pontifical en Italie centrale: le cas de l'administration de la justice criminelle à Bologne, deuxième moitié du XV siècle' (Ph.D., Montpellier and Bologna, 2014), 260.

¹¹³ASB, Curia del podestà, Inquisitiones, busta 162, reg. 1, fol. 47; 162, reg. 2, fol. 33; reg. 6, fol. 50v; 163, reg. 8, fol. 16; 1, reg. 2, fols. 44, 50.

¹¹⁴ASB, Inquisitiones, 1430, reg. 3, fol. 10; 1440, fol. 251; 362, reg. 1, fol. 221 (1457); 370, reg. 1, fol. 122 (1468–9).

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, busta 361, reg. 1, fol. 40 (1456); 370, reg. 2, fol. 129 (1469).

sharpened their crime-controlling senses.¹¹⁶ If migrants from the Balkans in Italy were, as has been claimed, ‘total strangers, could not communicate, were mostly destitute’, how did they function as *birri*?¹¹⁷ Communication and coordination of multilingual groups of staff may have shaped how *birri* were used by podestà and his officials. Though scholarship on the circulation of judges and notaries has spoken positively of the intellectual benefits of the system as a ‘zone of meeting and exchange of discourses’,¹¹⁸ and though the scholarship on army composition speaks positively of a ‘melting pot’ and ‘ease of assimilation’,¹¹⁹ at a lower and more practical level, linguistic variety may have impeded policing, and it is difficult to believe that verbal and cultural misunderstandings would not have arisen or have needed constant correction. The very indecipherability of some of their recorded names suggests a failure of communication. Recruitment of international labour thus had ambiguous results: because they were unattached to the city and its inhabitants, they could act as ‘embodiments of civic law enforcement’, but that same quality meant that their operational rather than symbolic efficiency could be compromised.¹²⁰

Conclusions

This article has brought together two historiographical trends: migration studies and the history of policing. It has shown how the provenance of *birri* evolved across the period from wholly Italian to wholly foreign, and then suddenly back again, and how the countries of origin expanded in number, providing increasing numbers of *birri* to the Bolognese podestà. The character and motivations of the migratory flows varied. The ‘Slavonians’ were part of an intense movement of peoples from Greece and the Balkans under the pressure of Ottoman advance and conquest. The Germans, by contrast, had much longer-established patterns of specifically military service in Italy, as mercenaries, going back to the early thirteenth century – a practice that was presumably reinforced by their employers’ mental acceptance of the late-medieval stereotype of Germanic rough and cruel bellicosity, seeing those qualities as suitable for the role of *birro*.¹²¹ This

¹¹⁶Tourelle, *op. cit.*, 78.

¹¹⁷B. Krekic, ‘Dubrovnik as a pole of attraction and a point of transition from the hinterland population in the later Middle Ages’ in *Migrations in Balkan History* (Belgrade, 1989), 61–75, at 72. Compare the mocking of the ‘incoherent Greek’ spoken by the Scythian police force in classical Athens: B. Bäbler, ‘Bobbies or boobies? The Scythian police force in classical Athens’ in D. Braund (ed.), *Scythians and Greeks. Cultural interactions in Scythia, Athens and the early Roman empire* (Exeter, 2005), 114–22, at 117.

¹¹⁸‘Zone de rencontre et d’échange de langages’: E. Artifoni, ‘Notes sur les équipes des podestats et sur la circulation de modèles culturels dans l’Italie du XIIIe siècle’ in *Des sociétés en mouvement: migrations et mobilité au Moyen Age* (Paris, 2010), 315–24, at 319.

¹¹⁹Covini, *op. cit.*, 395–6, 400.

¹²⁰Bäbler, *op. cit.*, 122.

¹²¹Schäfer, *op. cit.*; D. Waley, ‘The army of the Florentine republic from the twelfth to the fourteenth century’ in N. Rubinstein (ed.), *Florentine Studies* (London, 1968), 70–108, at 73, 81, 106–7; G.M. Varanini, ‘Mercenari tedeschi in Italia nel Trecento: problemi e linee di ricerca’ in S. de Rachewiltz and J. Riedmann (eds), *Kommunikation und Mobilität in Mittelalter* (Sigmaringen, 1995), 159–78; P. Grillo, *Cavalieri e popolo in armi: le istituzioni militari nell’Italia medievale* (Bari, 2008), 155–7, 160, 162, 165–6; L.E. Scales, ‘German militiae: war and German identity in the late Middle Ages’, *Past and Present*, 180 (2003), 41–82.

study has concentrated on the flows of *birri*, their places of origin, their continuity and replacement. The bureaucratic registration of all the *birri* changes the understanding of their place: there was not just quantitative change (rising numbers, as previous research has shown), but qualitative change too, which focuses attention on *birri* as migrant workers and on policing as labour. This gives rise to two sets of implications. First, public order and policing: police forces with substantial, even majority, foreign components fit into the evolution of judicial and surveillance powers in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, yet also posed practical difficulties of local knowledge, of coordination and communication. Second, migration and integration: foreign migrants who entered the troops of *birri* chose a hard path to integration, where the benefits of accommodation and comradeship were accompanied by the risks of injury and precarious employment, but this may have suited their stage in the life cycle.

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