

*La révolte des boules de neige: Murano face à Venise, 1511.* Claire Judde de Larivière.

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As snow fell on the afternoon of 27 January 1511, the inhabitants of the island of Murano gathered in the piazza in front of the church of Santi Maria e Donato to witness the transfer of the office of podestà from Venetian nobleman Vitale Vitturi to nobleman Giacomo Suriano. But things went badly awry when the cortege of officials exited the church and was bombarded with snowballs and assaulted with the derisory chant, “Surian, Surian / Caccia via questo can, / Che ha ruinato Muran” (“Suriano, Suriano, / chase away this dog, / who has ruined Murano”). Rather than make a final aquatic tour along the island’s Grand Canal and Rio dei Vetrai, Vitturi beat a hasty retreat to Venice where, as Marino Sanudo noted in his well-known diary, the next day he lodged a formal complaint with the government. In response, the *avogadori di comun* (state attorneys) opened an investigation, which resulted in the arrest and trial by the Council of Forty of six men. In the end, however, after a two-month investigation and numerous votes, the Forty acquitted the defendants.

In this book, Claire Judde de Larivière sets out to decipher the meaning of this episode, which she dubs the “snowball revolt.” The label is intentional since the author’s primary goal is “to re-politicize” (19) social history. Accordingly, much of the book is taken up with a detailed portrait and analysis of Muranese society and of its three principal occupational groups: glass-furnace owners and their workers who occupied the southern part of the island, fishermen who dominated the northern part, and boatmen who operated the ferries connecting Murano with Venice and the mainland. As to the causes of the skirmish itself, the author argues that numerous factors came together in a “complex alchemy” (144), including the usual bedlam of the Carnival season, the vagaries of the weather, the personality of Vitturi, and the fiscal and manpower demands that Venice placed on Murano and its other dominions as it fought the War of the League of Cambrai. As the author notes, only a month after the Muranese episode, the tumult known as the Crudel Zobia Grassa exploded in Friuli, another region under Venetian domination.

The author's effort to read the episode as a revolt, as a protest against Venetian domination, is hampered by the fact that no one at the time used such language to describe the event, including either the accused, who blamed it on youngsters and who insisted, even under torture, that the event had a charivari-like quality to it — that it was a moment of joyous, if rambunctious, celebration — or the Venetian authorities, including the state attorneys and the Forty, who chose to interpret the episode as simply a case of Carnavalesque disorder and the letting off of steam. But all of this constituted, in Judde de Larivière's view, a conspiracy of silence or, better yet, of nomenclature that served both constituencies. It got the accused off the hook, and it allowed the Venetian authorities to deny the political meaning behind such protests. Indeed, as she observes, the Venetian government never used the word *revolt* to describe protests by inhabitants of the lagoon, preferring instead such terms as “murmurings” and “cabals” (265).

Judde de Larivière's argument is an important one, and it should prompt anyone interested in popular protest and the lives of subalterns to think carefully about the role that language plays both in events themselves and how they are subsequently remembered. In this particular case, however, the reader feels a bit cheated since one reads on and on, waiting for the payoff that someone — anyone — will offer even one brief glimpse of the revolt's explicit political meaning. But after 280 pages of reading, it never comes. In the end, this reader believes that the author's fascinating point could have been made just as effectively and perhaps would have reached a larger audience if it had been presented in a tightly constructed article rather than in an at times frustratingly long book.

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