



**William Caferro.** *Petrarch's War: Florence and the Black Death in Context.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 238 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-42401-1.

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**Published on** H-War (December, 2021)

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In his new book, William Caferro, one of the leading experts on late medieval military history, provides an excellent example of how focusing on the short-term and more contingent aspects of the past can highlight the complexities of doing historical work more broadly. The work focuses on a relatively small military action by the city of Florence against an enemy group of nearby nobility, the Ubaldini. There are no grand battles that made their mark in our imagination, such as those of the Hundred Years' War. However, Caferro argues forcefully for the many different ways that this small conflict can influence our larger narratives about the fourteenth century, narratives that include the political involvement of famous writers, notably, Boccaccio and Petrarch (for whom the book is titled), the identity of mercenaries, the role of warfare in urban finances and budgeting, and especially the influence of the Black Death on wages and the economy.

The overarching argument of the work is that this narrower focus can and should influence how we understand the past, specifically by complicating larger syntheses. He is writing specifically to counter the lionization of long time spans of history championed initially by the Annales school, as well as more recent authors like Jo Guldi and David Armitage who have warned of the dangers of "short-termism" (p. 15). As Caferro ably demon-

strates, we have a lot to learn from the short term. Each chapter is thus dedicated to one of the broader lessons Florence's war against the Ubaldini has to offer. The later chapters, especially, focus in on the myriad problems that arise in economic history when scholars focus too much on sources that lend themselves nicely to statistical analysis.

The first chapter offers a more nuanced take on the political engagement of the famous literary figures, Boccaccio and Petrarch. The war took place just as the two began corresponding. Their letters, full of references to Dante, Florentine political debates, and poetic traditions, stake out their positions on politics in general. Boccaccio supports the war in part to demonstrate Florence's generous good will toward Petrarch, hoping to lure the poet to relocate (unsuccessfully) to Florence to work at the new university, the *Studio*. The background of the war especially recontextualizes Petrarch. In his own published versions of the letters, Petrarch broke up references to the war and the plague, separating them into different letters, removing personal details, and obscuring his own participation in Florentine politics of the time. Caferro shows how much of the instigation for the war came from Petrarch himself after the attack on two of his friends who were traveling in the mountains near Florence when they were robbed and ultimately murdered by members of the

Ubal dini clan. His calls for violence conflict with his cultivated image of a contemplative person, unsullied by politics. This was not, in fact, the way he always lived, especially during the emotional shock of the brazen murders.

The second and third chapters turn to the actual execution of the war by the Florentine bureaucracy, including the makeup of the fighting force, the logistical and economic demands of combat, and the systems used to supply the army in the field. Chapter 2 begins with a short overview of the war with an accounting of battles fought, depiction of some of the castles Florence besieged and conquered, and a description of the territory and terrain of the war. The main argument of the chapter concerns the complicated place of mercenaries in the Florentine military. Despite the reputation of Italian city-states relying only on hired fighters rather than men from their own cities, Caferro shows how while the cavalry forces were made up entirely of mercenary forces (many from Germany, but some from Italy), the infantry drew on numerous professional captains, shield-bearers, and crossbowmen from the territory around Florence. The core of the fighting force fought as much for their allegiance to the city as for their paychecks. Even within the ranks of the German cavalry, the men did not live up to their sour reputation as greedy or brutal warlords (more like the mercenary John Hawkwood, studied in detail by Caferro himself in an earlier work, *John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy* [2007]) but often fought for long periods for a single employer, providing further stability within the fighting force.

The end of chapter 2 and chapter 3 focus on the logistics and financing of the war effort. The description offers an excellent reminder that logistics have always been as important to war as actual combat, and the corresponding influence of war on bureaucracy and budgeting is immense. Florence embarked on these expenditures and consumed significant energy and resources des-

pite the looming recent disaster of the Black Death. Caferro also notes that the divisions between the military and pacific branches of the Florentine bureaucracy were highly porous with numerous officials serving in both fields. Bolstering the argument from chapter 2, many soldiers additionally invested in the debt the city sold to finance the conflict (similar to war bonds), further binding themselves financially to the city and its fortunes. Finally, the huge amount of resources drawn into the war effort (craftsmen of many stripes like masons, carpenters, and smiths but also musicians, couriers, and others) took workers away from many projects within the city itself. The construction of the Church of Sant'Anna, initially financed by the confraternity of cloth merchants at Orsanmichele, lost several master builders to the effort to make war machines at one of the main battlefields; the church was ultimately never completed.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to Caferro's most sustained argument, concerning the natures of wages and professions in Florence after the Black Death. Caferro decries the lack of inclusion of military wages in most economic studies of the time period. He notes how the wages in the war, both for fighting men and support staff, demonstrate the huge complexity and variety of ways people could receive compensation. Unexpectedly, infantry wages increased to help enlist extra men (a question of supply and demand), but cavalry wages remained static, especially those of the highest paid cavalymen. Instead, cavalry accepted rewards for victory in their contracts, enshrining the idea that good service deserved good reward. This further qualifies our understanding of mercenaries, as the mounted men seemed to understand their profession as ennobling rather than as base as we sometimes portray them. Other public wages show multiple influences beyond supply and demand, including the effects of budgeting, wage stickiness, and even prestige or public service. Within the city, jobs like urban guards or policemen sometimes received different wages depending on

where they worked and who they guarded. Chapter 5 further elaborates on the ramifications of diverse wage structures and individual jobs. Notably, most people did not have fixed professions. In the wake of the Black Death, the lack of manpower meant that the city sometimes sent people from other positions on important urban political tasks. Public cooks and bell ringers acted as ambassadors, sometimes earning two or three times their normal wage for the work. Converting wages from gold to silver (as happened to some of the crossbowmen in the army) could increase their nominal wages even as the city saved money because gold gained in value relative to the silver they paid out. The final chapter paints a highly diverse image of labor, with tasks and work changing regularly, compensation rendered as much in social connections and prestige or in the promise of future earnings as in actual measurable wages. This situation, as Caferro rightly points out, certainly resembles what we know about wages more broadly and should not, in fact, be surprising. Such diversity, however, does undermine longer-term studies and makes systemic claims about wages and the economy far more difficult to sustain.

Overall, *Petrarch's War* is an excellent study. The work is built on an intensely detailed look at the financial records of the city during the few years of the conflict, and Caferro is constantly aware of the subtleties and contradictions in the source material. The close readings buttress his contention that historical details do not always support the larger narratives we expect of them. As he states: "archives are subversive" (p. 13). His conclusions forcefully support his observation that reliance only on those numbers and evidence that fit neatly in the analyses we want to run risks its own teleology. Relying, for instance, on the wages of building trades because their pay structures are easiest to compare to later periods leaves out significant and common wage practices in the fourteenth century. While these arguments are both readily supported and well summarized, Ca-

ferro has largely left out of his conclusions further arguments about how the war should change our understanding of figures like Boccaccio and Petrarch. The observations he begins with in chapter 1 do not return later in the text. Instead, we return multiple times to the sources around military wages—a subject that he returns to in virtually every chapter. The work fulfills the promise of the introduction with regard to military and economic history, but the consequences for literary studies and social history feel less fulfilled.

Despite these small criticisms, the work is a fantastic example of the effectiveness of close contextual studies based on diverse archival material. Caferro knows the Florentine sources as well as anyone and provides a masterful demonstration of subtle close readings. The technique argues as forcefully as the text itself for how economic history is still ultimately no better than its source criticism. He also has an eye for the complexities of military history, its relationship to economic and social history, and ultimately its importance to the overall project of understanding the past. Caferro is surely right that military history needs a more routine place in studies of past economies. Overall the work is absorbing and excellently argued; there is something to learn in every chapter and the historiographic conclusions are worth contemplating at length for anyone interested in our use and study of the past.

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**Citation:** Adam Franklin-Lyons. Review of Caferro, William. *Petrarch's War: Florence and the Black Death in Context*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55930>



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