

Bell on Trial: The Struggle for Sound after Savonarola

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In June 1498, the Florentine government publicly punished and exiled the Piagnona, the lone bell of the church of San Marco, for its role in defending Girolamo Savonarola during the April siege that led to the preacher's execution. Drawing on new evidence, this essay offers the most complete account of this still poorly understood chapter in Renaissance history, examining its complex and conflicting motives. At the same time, the punishment of the Piagnona, and struggle for its return, affords uncommon insight into the culture's deepest structures of thinking about what bells were, and who had the legal authority to adjudicate their fate.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE SPRING of 1498, the tide of popular opinion that had ushered Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) onto Florence's political stage began to turn. During the previous four years, following the exile of the Medici in 1494, the Dominican preacher had magnetized the attention of a city plagued by political and economic instability with his program of spiritual and moral renewal. While the republic's nine-member executive body, the Signoria, had occasionally supported Savonarola, and even condoned the rise of his reform movement, this changed when a new group of priors dominated by his adversaries took office on 1 March 1498, leading to an abrupt chilling of his relations with the government. Despite the fervent support that Savonarola continued to garner from his followers, his authority collapsed on 7 April 1498, during the

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so-called Trial by Fire, when he failed to produce the miracle that many expected.¹

Tensions came to a head the following day, Palm Sunday, when a mob rallied by Savonarola's enemies, the Arrabbiati (angry ones) and Compagnacci (rude or ugly companions), converged on the square before the church and convent of San Marco, baying for the Frate's death.² A surge of violence followed, with the crowds targeting leading Frateschi (pro-Savonarolans), including the former gonfaloniere Francesco Valori (1439–98), who was struck dead while fleeing to his house. Shortly after midnight, fighting spilled into the convent and church, Savonarola's antagonists having gained entry by setting fire to San Marco's doors and scaling its walls.³ As the conflict escalated, one or more of San Marco's brothers ascended the campanile and took to hammering the institution's lone bell in alarm (*a martello*; literally, "with a hammer"), an acoustic *cri de coeur* meant to summon government troops to San Marco's defense.⁴ Because the Frateschi "lacked the courage to speak [for fear that] they would [be] killed," as the chronicler Luca Landucci (1436–1516) later put it, the bell was their last available means of defense.⁵ But the brothers' pleas went unheeded. And when the Signoria's representatives finally arrived it was with armed guards, who escorted Savonarola and two of his most dedicated friars to the government palace, setting in motion the series of forced confessions and trials that culminated in the trio's fiery deaths, six weeks later, on 23 May 1498.

If scholars have treated the April 8 siege and its consequences for Savonarola with forensic scrutiny, they have lingered less on the bell's controversial role in the affair (figs. 1–3). For years Savonarola had sounded the bell daily to call his followers, the Piagnoni (wailers), to prayer, an affiliation registered in the object's popular sobriquet: Piagnona, or Lady Wailer.⁶ Only on this one

¹ The Trial by Fire is discussed extensively in Weinstein, 267–76.

² Our description of the event draws on Filipepi, 488; Landucci, 169–72; Parenti, 2:162–68; Cerretani, 245–49; Guicciardini, 1998, 270–80; Cambi, 2:119–21; Nardi, 1:121–24.

³ Landucci, 171.

⁴ See Cerretani, 247. Cf. Gherardi, 312; and Marchese, 272, who claim that the bell rang *a stormo*, a frequent reference to the tocsin, or alarm bell, which warned of imminent danger and called men to arms. The use of *a martello* and *a stormo* likely overlapped, but for a possible distinction between the two rings, as well as a third, *a distesa* (a swinging, celebratory ring), see Atkinson, 2016, 226n57.

⁵ Landucci, 170. See Landucci, 181, for first mention of the bell in the June 30 entry.

⁶ As its inscription plainly attests, Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464) commissioned the bell, likely during his campaign to rebuild San Marco beginning in 1439. Given the scope of our paper, we do not discuss this connection, though on the rebuilding project, see Paatz and Paatz, 3:40, 3:75n233. On the contested topic of the bell's attribution to Verrocchio, see Butterfield, 11–15; to Donatello, see Bennett and Wilkins, 60–61; to Michelozzo, see Caplow, 520.



Figure 1. Piagnona, late 1440s. Bronze. Museo di San Marco, Florence. Photo: Lorenzo Acciai.

occasion did the bell break habit. Its ringing, at that time and in that manner, was as telling an index as any of San Marco's desperation. Until this point the republic had protected Savonarola, a precedent that must have encouraged the friars' confidence that ringing the bell *a martello*, in accordance with a well-established acoustic messaging system, would bring civic forces rushing to their defense. Yet the Signoria's dilatory arrival, and ensuing arrest of Savonarola, made clear just how completely the republic had turned on the preacher.

More remarkable still was the government's subsequent decision to put the bell itself on trial. On June 29 and 30 the Signoria assembled itself into an ad hoc committee (*balia*), and ruled that the bell had been the "weapon" used by San Marco's brothers to incite a revolt against the government, with the April



Figure 2. Piagnona, late 1440s. Bronze. Museo di San Marco, Florence. Photo: Lorenzo Acciai.

clash at San Marco, in a stunning reversal, now interpreted as an “insurrection.”⁷ The bell was thus a tool of discord, and could face harsh penalties.⁸ Following a series of decrees issued that day and the next, the committee had the Piagnona removed from San Marco’s bell tower, paraded through the city

⁷ The Signoria explicitly calls the bell the “weapon of [the Dominicans’] insurrection” (“arma suae seditionis”) in a letter dated July 21, found in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter ASF), Registro di Lettere della Signoria (hereafter Registro di Lettere), Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v. In Gherardi, 321–22. On the Signoria’s questioning about weapons collected within San Marco, see Villari, 2:ccxx–cclxxxvi. See also Villari, 2:181, for the belief that these weapons, recovered from the convent, were thrown onto a cart and paraded through the city. Translations of primary sources are our own.

⁸ See Atkinson, 2016, esp. 182–93.



Figure 3. Bell tower of convent church of San Marco, Florence, mid-1400s. Photo: Lorenzo Acciai.

on a cart, flogged all the while with a whip and instruments of torture, and finally brought to the Franciscan convent of San Salvatore al Monte, just outside the walls of Florence, where it was to remain for a period of fifty years.⁹

Within modern scholarship, it has been the episode's strangeness, and less its significance, to receive attention.¹⁰ Anchored by words like "ridiculous," "grotesque," and their cognates, this critical literature has, on the whole, equated the sensationalism of the event with its irrational character, a position remarkably at odds with what the sources tell us.¹¹ To read these documents is to see that the Piagnona's punishment was not only exquisitely calculated, and thoroughly rationalized, but that it carried devastating consequences of which the primary actors involved—the republic and the Dominicans—were deeply aware.

⁹ Appendix, Docs. 1a, 1b, 1c, 2a, 2b. Each document in the appendix is divided into lettered sections, with the letter applying to both the original text and our translation.

¹⁰ The scholarly literature on the event is relatively sparse. See Scotti; Carocci; Ferretti; Ridolfi, 246; Schnitzer, 2:431–33; Scudieri and Rasario, 103–07; Martines, 2006, 237, 278; Weinstein, 275; Polizzotto, esp. 170–71, 208. For reconstructions based on archival documents, see Marchese; Villari; Gherardi. The best account to date is the most recent: Atkinson, 2016, 39–41, 63–64.

¹¹ Marchese, 272; Villari, 2:249.

To appreciate the full measure of this claim requires undertaking a renewed analysis of the episode: one that marshals all known information in the service of a clarified narrative, examining step by step the spectacle's mechanics, its motivations, and its impact on the communities involved. In pursuing these tasks, the present essay draws on two groups of documentary evidence. The first comprises the trial decrees themselves, found among the *Deliberazioni dei Signori e Collegi* in Florence's state archives (Appendix, Documents 1–2). Serving as an internal record of legal decisions, these entries document the empirical facts of the bell's punishment, but rarely seek to justify these choices. If the decrees are studied structurally, however—for their inconsistencies and shifts in tone, but also alongside concurrent rulings involving San Marco—it becomes possible to perceive underlying political agendas, biases, and even ambiguities attending the bell's trial and punishment. Aiding such efforts is a second documentary group that registers varied reactions to the bell's fate within the Florentine commune. As news of the Piagnona's banishment spread across the city's information networks, numerous individuals were compelled to speak for and against the government's actions, circulating their opinions in channels official (e.g., letters, legal complaints, chronicles) and less so (e.g., anecdotes, rumors). Because the *balia* involved no collective discussion and no public presentation of the facts, with the bell's guilt already presumed, defenses could only be mounted after the official sentencing, most notably by partisans of San Marco who needed to be convinced of the Signoria's legal right to punish the bell.

Only after establishing a full picture of these events and their aftermath does the essay inquire into the broader implications of putting an object, and particularly a church bell, on trial. It is our claim that the contentious nature of the episode stems from competing understandings of what the bell was, and thus how, or even whether, it could be tried by a secular authority. This distinction aligns with, and complicates, a fundamental insight from recent work on the early modern soundscape—and particularly Niall Atkinson's studies of the “acoustic topography” of Florence—that the regulation of bells was never impetuous, but painstakingly methodical because always aimed at social and political control.¹² It also recasts the entire affair as more than a fight over a bell, but as a key battle in a larger struggle over the bounds of republican authority, at a moment when the government's control of Florence was profoundly in doubt.

¹² Atkinson, 2013 and 2016. Also highly informative is Trachtenberg's work on the ability of Florence's civic and sacred towers to define and control space; see, in particular, Trachtenberg, 167–70, for Palazzo Vecchio's campanile.

THE TRIAL AND PUNISHMENT

An initial consideration, to set us on our way, is why the municipal authorities waited almost twelve weeks to act upon the Piagnona's alleged transgression of April 8 and 9. Timing mattered here. It is no coincidence that the bell's punishment, on June 29 and 30, transpired on the last two days of the Signoria's two-month term, with elections for its successor occurring on the afternoon of June 30. As is well known, this particular group's election had been a matter of much controversy. Fearing that an election left to chance might tip the ideological balance of the government, leading to a Frateschi majority and thus to Savonarola's acquittal, the previous Signoria, from March and April, had tampered with the process.¹³ This ensured that when the commissioners drew names, the new gonfaloniere of justice, Vieri de' Medici, and each of the eight priors, were all Arrabbiati.¹⁴

If one of the first actions of this new Signoria had been to carry out plans for Savonarola's execution, the bell's trial and punishment was its last. Surely aware that the June 30 elections would draw increased scrutiny, and perhaps yield another Frateschi government, the Signoria was preoccupied with how best to inflict long-lasting harm on the convent. This logic explains why the priors targeted the convent's bell in particular. The Piagnona was not only an emblem of institutional pride, but the very means by which San Marco governed space and participated in the collective life of the commune. Requisitioning the bell would thus strip the brothers of their ability to assert authority, locally and in the city's soundscape more generally, while enhancing the Signoria's own acoustic influence (more on which later). That the priors issued their most enduring punishment, that the bell remain "outside the city of Florence" for fifty years, mere hours before the selection of their replacements further suggests that they were thinking along these lines.¹⁵

The priors' need to act quickly, and with a particular outcome in mind, also elucidates their chosen format for the trial, a *balia*. Assembled to address problems that required immediate action, as in wartime, *balie* were vested with the power to issue executive decisions without the approval of the Great Council, a group that might slow, or even overturn, the Signoria's verdict. *Balie* also differed from another judicial method, the inquisitorial trial, which entrusted a

¹³ With candidates convened in the town hall, the priors dismissed roughly two hundred Piagnoni eligible for election, thereby restricting the pool to Savonarola's opponents. See Nardi, 1:127, an eyewitness; Parenti, 2:167–68.

¹⁴ Despite his surname, Vieri de' Medici had no relation to the banking family. A complete list of the May–June members of the Signoria, and of their two advisory councils, is in Rastrelli, 84.

¹⁵ Appendix, Doc. 2b.

judge with the task of establishing the objective facts about a crime, a risk that the Signoria could not afford. In a *balia*, by contrast, a simple six-vote majority would suffice to impose sentences of death, exile, and imprisonment, which could be carried out swiftly and decisively under the extraordinary authority granted to the Signoria; the advisory councils, the colleges, were often expected to aid in the decision-making process. As was customary, the Signoria held its deliberations privately in the town hall, effectively limiting input to its nine voting members.¹⁶

It does not follow that the trial was without debate.¹⁷ This is registered in the fact that the Signoria entertained two initial scenarios for the bell's punishment before settling on a third. At stake in these revisions was not the longevity of the bell's sentence, which arrived later, but how to ensure that the spectacle of its removal and transfer was unforgettably humiliating. The first decree mandated simply that San Marco's brothers deliver the Piagnona to the nearby basilica of San Lorenzo.¹⁸ The second, also struck down, would have them march the object instead to San Salvatore, an Observant Franciscan church situated on the hill to the south of the city (fig. 4).¹⁹ The third decree, while upholding San Salvatore as the bell's recipient, ruled that the friars would no longer transport the Piagnona. Rather, a "high-ranking leader of the Franciscans" ("Signorino Francisci") was to go to San Marco and "seize" the bell.²⁰ Nor would he act alone. He was to enlist "other prominent members of his order," who together with a hangman would escort the Piagnona to San Salvatore "with whips, instruments of torture, and a cart" drawn by an ass.²¹ This convergence of elements strongly implies that the Signoria expected the hangman, and perhaps the Franciscans, to scourge the bell, with the decree even specifying that their compliance would occur "under pain of [the

¹⁶ On the private nature of government deliberations, see Guicciardini, 1932, 218–59, esp. 230–31, from his so-called "Discorso di Logrognò" (27 August 1512). For the executive power to make summary decisions, bypassing juridical procedure, especially in the face of threats to the republic, see Martines, 1968, 123–27, 233; Stern, 177–78.

¹⁷ This same group had taken more than three weeks to carry out Savonarola's execution, in part owing to internal differences about where his trial should occur. See Villari, 2:182–87.

¹⁸ Appendix, Doc. 1a.

¹⁹ Appendix, Doc. 1b.

²⁰ Appendix, Doc. 1c. Though not named explicitly in the decrees, a hangman likely accompanied the cart, this being the norm. Marchese, 273; and Villari, 2:249, note the hangman's presence, but overlook that of the "Signorino Francisci." To our knowledge every subsequent account of the episode has followed this precedent, and thereby missed a consequential dimension of the event. See also Schnitzer, 2:432, who alleges that the architect Simone del Pollaiuolo was responsible for the bell's transportation.

²¹ Appendix, Doc. 1c.



Figure 4. Façade of church of San Salvatore al Monte, fifteenth century. Photo: Lorenzo Acciai.

Signoria’s] indignation.” The decree concludes that the unnamed Franciscan had done “all of the things ordered,” evidence—corroborated by subsequent eyewitness testimonies—that this last plot had indeed transpired.²²

Taken in sequence, the three decrees reveal an escalating severity in the Signoria’s plans for punishing the bell, from simple forfeiture to full-fledged theater. In practice, the Signoria’s tactical adjustments orbited two basic concerns: the bell’s destination and its means of transport, both adapted in the interest of amplifying San Marco’s shame. In the former case, the change of site—from San Lorenzo to San Salvatore—redirected the bell toward a church affiliated with Florence’s other predominant mendicant order, the Franciscans, a clear affront to the Dominicans that we will consider below.²³ It also enlarged the event’s topographic scope considerably. While San Lorenzo was less than a kilometer from the convent, the trek to San Salvatore was considerably longer, ensuring that the punishment would unfold not in a single neighborhood, but

²² Appendix, Doc. 1c.

²³ That San Lorenzo was the family church of the Medici—who, being in exile, were enemies of the republic—may have also factored into this decision. In practical terms, San Lorenzo had installed a pair of bells in its campanile six weeks prior, so may not have needed an additional bell. See Landucci, 176 (entry of 14 May 1498).

across an entire cityscape.²⁴ At the same time, the bell fulfilled a practical need, for San Salvatore's brothers had recently rebuilt their campanile, which reportedly lacked just such an instrument.²⁵

Also devastating was the Signoria's decision to have the Franciscans confiscate the bell. The symbolic overtones of this maneuver are inescapable. Having San Marco's brothers surrender their bell (*consignetur*), as was proposed in the first two decrees, would allow them to retain their agency, however partially. But making them witnesses to the Piagnona's seizure, by a rival order no less, confirmed their abject powerlessness: visually, spectacularly, and in full view of the populace. Indeed, one can well imagine the utter indignity that the *frati* must have felt as they watched their institution's lone bell hefted from its home by their Observant counterparts, helpless to intervene.

By conscripting the Franciscans into the event, moreover, the Signoria was choreographing something reminiscent of a military triumph, with one order assuming the role of victor, the bell their trophy, and the other conquered. The decrees themselves capture this. Indeed, the verb that the priors used to describe the bell's apprehension, *seize* (*capiō*), almost always connoted acts of military plunder.²⁶ What is more, the Signoria would acknowledge this martial framework explicitly in its only written explanation of the Piagnona's punishment, a letter dated 21 July 1498, three weeks after the bell's relocation, noting that San Marco's brothers had been scandalized not just by the bell's surrender, but by the manner in which it was taken: "extracted . . . as though it were the booty of some war."²⁷

The precise substance of this letter, and its subtle legal maneuvering, will concern us later, but for now one observation must suffice: that the bell's seizure had induced in the Dominicans a sense of loss so intense that it could only be expressed in the language of conquest and spoliation. This would support Landucci's later observation that by confiscating the bell the Signoria had intended to destroy, literally to "undo" ("disfare") San Marco.²⁸ It also aligns with the assertion of another chronicler, Giovanni Cambi (1458–1535), that

²⁴ Perhaps recognizing that this new route would oblige the friars to traverse the city center, and conscious of the violence that they continued to suffer at the hands of angry mobs, the Signoria allowed that a "mace-bearer be given if needed." Appendix, Doc. 1b.

²⁵ Cambi, 2:134: "the friars of San Salvatore did not yet have a bell, since the bell tower had been recently built, as had the church."

²⁶ Appendix, Doc. 1c.

²⁷ ASF, Registro di Lettere, Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v: "quasi ex alicuius belli praeda, campanam excerpssisse." In Gherardi, 321–22.

²⁸ Landucci, 294: "Those in power would have willingly destroyed [San Marco] out of their great hatred for this Fra Girolamo: for which, it seemed to some that this bell ought to be banished outside of Florence."

the Signoria's removal of the bell was an "act of persecution" so inhumane that not even the "Moors [or the] Turks would have done similar things."²⁹

While Cambi's remark may have been exaggerated in the interest of polemic, its conceptual framework was on the mark. The distinction that Cambi drew between the Signoria and its foreign counterparts' treatment of church bells, in particular, had a basis in relatively recent history. In an event that still lingered in collective European memory, the Spanish Moors, having sacked Santiago de Compostela in 997, brought the church's bells to the Great Mosque in Córdoba, where they were hung as lamps for three centuries; in 1236, the Christian king Ferdinand would have the bells returned on the backs of Moorish prisoners.³⁰ Equally familiar to Cambi was the practice among Turks, witnessed by Europeans in the late fifteenth century, of recasting church bells from "conquered Christian lands" into cannons and arms to be used against this same enemy.³¹ If both practices amounted to a species of conversion, both literal and symbolic, and the second to destruction, the Signoria's "persecution" of the Piagnona had been far worse, Cambi implied, in part because of how prolonged and intricate its triumph was.

This persecution occurred, first, in the act of seizing the bell, an object usually experienced by strictly auditory means, and re-presenting it as a material thing, and more precisely as plunder. Considering the recent past, the move was unsurprising. For decades, the Signoria had made it something of a custom to take trophies from those who had infringed upon their power, once the threat was subdued. Those who had witnessed the terrifying aftermath of Piero de' Medici's (1472–1503) exile four years earlier, for example, may have recalled the fate of another large bronze object that embodied its owner's authority, Donatello's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, mounted atop a column in the garden of that family's palace.³² One of the Signoria's first measures, following the family's expulsion, had been to remove the metallic ensemble from its elevated position—as it did with the bell—and parade it to the town hall, where the statue was displayed, and symbolically recoded, as an emblem of the republic's suppression of Medici tyranny (fig. 5). In both instances, the activity of commandeering a multi-ton metal object, and what it stood for, would have been unmistakable to spectators.³³

²⁹ Cambi, 2:134.

³⁰ Necipoglu, 118–19, 425. See also Dodds, 17–18, 24; Alibhai. Our gratitude to Robin Thomas for pointing us to the first reference.

³¹ Necipoglu, 118. See also Ćurčić, esp. 68n43.

³² For a comprehensive inventory of Medici possessions confiscated by the Signoria, including the iconic instance of Donatello's *Judith*, see Caglioti, 2:441–52.

³³ For those familiar with the Piagnona's inscription—pronouncing its maker as Cosimo de' Medici—the bell's removal may have summoned memories of the earlier confiscations.



Figure 5. Piazza della Signoria, Florence, with replica of Donatello's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Photo: Lorenzo Acciai.

In our example, however, the loss was especially injurious because of the Piagnona's practical role at the convent. Unlike the cathedral, San Marco had just this one *campana*, which acted as the pivotal voice around which life, and bodies, at the institution revolved. Absent that formidable organ, the community was rendered voiceless, as it were, both to itself and to others. This acoustic suppression became all the more pronounced when, as a later decree attests, the Signoria had the bell's clapper removed, in all probability before the bell was mounted on its cart.³⁴ Even allowing that this was a practical measure, to

³⁴ The details of the removal are unclear, but see ASF, Signori e Collegi (hereafter Sig. e Coll.), *Deliberazioni in forza di ordinaria autorità dal 1494 al 1502* (hereafter *Deliberazioni Ord. Aut.*), 100, fol. 74^v, for a July 6 decree specifying that the clapper, which now lay "unused" on "San Salvatore's balcony," should be reunited with its bell "within two days' time." In Gherardi, 313–14.

prevent the bell from clamoring in transit, the action carried implications. It muted, and even emasculated, the bell, and in this it paralleled countless other steps that the Signoria had taken to silence Savonarola's regime. In the hours before they took to debating the Piagnona's fate, for example, the magistrates had divested San Marco's brothers of their right to perform weekly masses at the government palace, transferring that privilege, tellingly, to the brothers of San Salvatore.³⁵ And in the weeks prior, they had prohibited this same group—under penalty of death—from preaching, singing hymns, or praying together, all rituals by which the brothers had audibly distinguished themselves throughout the city.

Just as disgraceful, and symbolically charged, was the Signoria's introduction of a hangman into the spectacle, who whipped and tortured the bell while the Franciscans processed it to their order's church. The act smacked of satire, to be sure, and its particulars were anything but arbitrary. In a culture deeply attuned to public performances of justice, it was imperative that the punishment not only avenge the crime, but that it mirror—and thus make visibly intelligible—the specific offense. This is why municipal authorities in Florence and elsewhere had, from the late Middle Ages, developed a series of broadly recognizable punishments for crimes against state, some of these distinguished by the instruments involved, and others designed to mark, often brutally, the specific body part that had performed the crime: blasphemers might have their tongues bridled or removed, for example; vandals or forgers their hand cut off; and heretics like Savonarola their bodies burned in a refiguration of the flames of hell.³⁶ It is significant in this regard that the particular ensemble of elements involved in the bell's punishment—raised cart, ass, hangman, whip—was reserved specifically for social deviants: those whose transgressions, ranging from murder to treason, gambling, theft, and sodomy, had threatened the order and prosperity of the republic.

While the specific act of whipping signified first and foremost a shaming, it was also a familiar gesture of atonement. Within the Christian moral economy of Florence, flagellation was a means of purging the guilty party of her or his transgressions, and also of cleansing the city of the crime committed, as when

³⁵ ASF, Sig. e Coll., *Deliberazioni Ord. Aut.*, 100, fol. 68^r: "On each Saturday . . . in the future, one of the Observant friars of Saint Francis . . . can come to celebrate Mass in the chapel of the [Signoria] . . . in the place of a friar of San Marco." In Gherardi, 311–12. The privilege was restored on 7 September 1499.

³⁶ That criminals were frequently disciplined in a manner that mirrored their crimes is a mainstay of the vast—and still growing—historiography on corporal punishment in early modern Italy. See Edgerton, 126–42, for dozens of examples of this mirror logic. See also Terpstra's recent work on rituals of execution: Terpstra, 2008; Terpstra, 2015, esp. 7, 35, 45–46. See also Locke, esp. 7, 24, 61, 77–78, 206.

the culprit was processed through the city, as the bell had been.³⁷ In the Piagnona's case, the act may have had an additional resonance, for it recalled, and perhaps caricatured, one of Savonarola's most cherished millenarian prophecies—namely, that God would punish Florence with a “great scourge” in order to redeem the city and its people.³⁸ Here Savonarola's *flagello* was both literalized and parodied in the whipping of the bell, which was to undergo a renewal of its own, ritually decontaminated of its association with the preacher.

If the punishment mirrored the crime, so too did the route that the procession followed. As Nicholas Terpstra has demonstrated in a different context, performances of justice placed profound weight on the places and spaces in which the spectacle occurred.³⁹ Often this meant revisiting particular sites of the body politic that had been violated by the crime, or traveling to institutions that were vested with official authority. For example, just two days before the bell's trial, on June 27, the Signoria had a murderer bundled into a cart and processed “throughout the whole city” as his flesh was torn with red-hot pincers, ultimately hanging him “in [the] very site where he committed the crime [a day earlier].” According to Landucci, to whom we owe our knowledge of the execution, the ritual amounted to a “beautiful and swift [display] of justice.”⁴⁰ And as with other cases, its itinerary demonstrated an intimate grasp of the symbolism of Florentine topography, and how that symbolism might be exploited to teach lessons in public retribution.⁴¹

Though thin on particulars, the primary sources related to the Piagnona's punishment would appear to conform to this pattern. An anonymous eyewitness notes, for instance, that the bell was “conducted toward the square of the Signori, and sent to San Salvatore on the mount.”⁴² This reference alone drives at a probable itinerary. Leaving San Marco, the parade must have first traveled the length of Via Larga and Martelli en route to the city's charismatic core, the

³⁷ In similar cases of punitive flagellation, the act was further sensationalized through the addition of accoutrements like a miter, the traditional headwear of bishops that could double as a foolscap: Rocke, 77–78. See also Edgerton, 65.

³⁸ See Savonarola, 1974, 8, 12.

³⁹ Terpstra, 2008 and 2015.

⁴⁰ Landucci, 181: “fu inpiccato . . . in quello luogo proprio dove fece el male, e fu attanagliato per tutta la città. . . . Fu fatto una bella giustizia e presto.”

⁴¹ On the state-prescribed route for criminals administered by the comforting confraternity of S. Maria della Croce al Tempio, see Terpstra, 2015, 20–21; and Terpstra, 2015, 35–45, for the importance attached to a punishment's location. For additional routes, see M. Conti, esp. 166–67; in the case of Savonarola, see Weinstein, 296. Central locations were often reserved for special cases: see Davidsohn, 5:603–15.

⁴² Baluze, 4:549: “così fu strascinata sopra d'un carro & condotta per la piazza de signori, & mandata a San Salvatore al monte.”

cathedral and government palace, where the bell would have faced the admonitory gazes of religious and civic officials (fig. 6). This latter site, the Piazza della Signoria, had an especially strong resonance with Savonarola, having served as the location of the preacher's infamous bonfires of 1497 and 1498, his Trial by Fire, and his execution. Carted into this same space, the Piagnona, in keeping with the state's circular logic of punishment, would have repaid the debt created by Savonarola's earlier crimes. Fittingly, it also would have been subjected to the ominous toll of the city's largest communal bell, Il Leone, whose *tocchus iuris*, or ring of justice, typically accompanied criminal processions. While the cavalcade eventually exited the city through the gate of San Miniato—the principal path to San Salvatore—it likely visited other places beforehand. Spectacles of punishment were demonstrations of authority, after all, and adding sites to the bell's journey increased the probability that justice was seen by all.

Another subtext of which the Signoria was undoubtedly aware was that the bell's route closely resembled Savonarola's own festive program. The preacher had concluded his bonfires in the Piazza della Signoria with an austere march past the cathedral complex and down the Via Martelli and Larga on the way back to San Marco.⁴³ These reformed Carnival parades traced the same path as Savonarola's Palm Sunday procession of 1496, which comprised upwards of five thousand of the preacher's devout children (*fanciulli*).⁴⁴ Noteworthy on such occasions was the privileged role of San Marco within the city's reconfigured sacred topography; on the Epiphany Day procession of 6 January 1498, for instance, the Signoria itself reenacted the traditional journey of the Magi by marching to the church—decorated as Bethlehem—and kissing “fra Girolamo's hand at the altar.”⁴⁵ Months before the bell's ordeal, Savonarola's enemies had parodied such rituals by directing their parades instead past the city's brothels and taverns en route to San Marco—evidence of how freighted these ephemeral topographies could become with meaning.⁴⁶

In view of these recent precedents, the Piagnona's procession must have struck many as the very embodiment of Florence's changed political fortunes, as the Signoria now paraded San Marco's bell along ritual routes that its own ringing had once brought to a close. Given the practice of overlaying space with biblical meaning, moreover, the procession may have possessed a tragicomic air,

⁴³ See Cerretani, 232–33; Landucci, 163; Burlamacchi, 127–35. More generally, see Martines, 2006, 184; Plaisance, 55–84; Weinstein, 115.

⁴⁴ Landucci, 128; Cerretani, 232–33; Parenti, 1:311–12; Parenti, 2:143–45; Nardi, 1:92–93; Plaisance, 55–100. Trexler, 1991, 339–40, 477–80.

⁴⁵ Landucci, 161: “la Signoria . . . baciorono la mano a frate Girolamo all'altare.” See also Hatfield, 140; Trexler, 1978, esp. 297; Trexler, 1991, esp. 483.

⁴⁶ Filipepi, 495–96; Plaisance, 73.



Figure 6. Map highlighting key sites involved in the Piagnona's procession. Authors' overlay of the Bonsignori map, 1584 (detail). Harvard College Library, Harvard Map Collection.

with the bell, Christlike, being brought to “the mount” outside the city walls.⁴⁷ In the absence of detailed eyewitness testimonies, one cannot know how temporally protracted the affair may have been, or how many people witnessed it.⁴⁸ If there is any truth to the remark of the historian Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540) that far more people attended Savonarola's execution than did his sermons, however, the exile of his bell would have had no shortage of spectators.⁴⁹ Judging from related events, the number may have been in the thousands.⁵⁰

Whatever its empirical particulars, the bell's punishment certainly befitted the chaotic spirit that pervaded Florence in late June 1498. Less than a week prior, on June 24, Florentines had revitalized the feast held in honor of the city's patron saint, Saint John, which had been dramatically reformed under

⁴⁷ Baluze, 4:549. For Savonarola's portrayal of Florence as the coming New Jerusalem, see Weinstein, 122, 132–47. Confraternities were likewise attuned to processional elements that invoked the Passion of Christ, and martyrdom more broadly. See Terpstra, 2008.

⁴⁸ For comparison's sake, the triumphal parade of King Charles VIII of France through Florence in 1494 took two hours. See Landucci, 80; Cerretani, 213; Parenti, 1:133–34; Guicciardini, 1998, 210–11. For the return of the Medici Pope Leo X, whose triumph lasted six hours, see Shearman.

⁴⁹ Guicciardini, 1998, 276.

⁵⁰ Landucci, 145, on Lent 1497, notes: “the crowds continued to grow to see the friar. His sermons regularly had 15,000 people.” Also see Landucci, 127, 163; Nardi, 1:90–91; Filipepi, 475, who places the average Savonarolan crowd between eight and ten thousand, in addition to an entourage of seventy to eighty men who accompanied Savonarola everywhere. See also Parenti, 2:159–61, for the Signoria's crowd control at the Trial by Fire.

the preacher's strict moral regime.⁵¹ During the previous four years, the Frate had railed against popular traditions of the feast, such as the *palio* (a horse race) and unruly neighborhood games, notoriously replacing the legions of merry-makers with his militant *fanciulli*.⁵² One could hardly imagine a greater contrast to this Savonarolan austerity than the Saint John's feast of 1498, when, in the language of Piero di Marco Parenti (1450–1519), Florentines threw off the “chains of [Savonarola] that had left them no earthly pleasures.”⁵³ Seizing the opportunity to mock the Frateschi openly, and without fear of reprisal, revelers poured into the streets—hurling excrement, screaming obscenities, circulating vulgar pictures of San Marco's friars, and even affixing the corpse of a donkey to the convent's doors.⁵⁴ The centerpiece of this charade was a float filled with grotesque puppets of local notables, including Francesco Valori and Savonarola, represented respectively as a dead giant and a pig, hardly a political statement that anyone could find cryptic.⁵⁵

The Piagnona's shaming five days later must be seen as continuing this explosive atmosphere. That the bell was debased from its sacred sphere, and vulgarized in the word's literal sense, made it the perfect object to placate the populace and elicit collective laughter.⁵⁶ Carnival festivities, in fact, frequently incorporated bells precisely because of the seriousness attributed to them in ordinary circumstances.⁵⁷ By staging the Piagnona's punishment within this charged moment of destruction and renewal, in other words, the Signoria effectively flattened any remnants of Savonarola's claims to authority. Indeed, parading the bell as a material body to be whipped and taunted rather than a sacred voice to be heeded was the ultimate index of the demise of Savonarola's movement. At the same time, the ritual was a means of political and social manipulation. Because by indulging, and even encouraging, the crowd's appetite for violence, and by implicitly condoning the return of popular Carnival rituals, the Signoria not only curried favor from a deeply factionalized public; it focused that public's aggression around an object whose desecration enforced the government's own aura of legitimacy and power. Thus the Signoria's punishment

⁵¹ On the atmosphere of Saint John's feast, see Trexler, 1991, 213–78; Davidsohn, 7:562–69.

⁵² See Savonarola, 1962, 1:270, 380, 382; Parenti, 1:245, 312. See also Plaisance, 28, 74. For eyewitness accounts, see Cerretani, 232; Parenti, 2:76; for a near-contemporary account, see Burlamacchi, 129–32.

⁵³ Parenti, 2:232: “catena da frate Ieronimo, il quale non li lasciava per niente pigliare mondani piaceri”; cf. Landucci, 181: “Hell seemed to open.” See also Cambi, 2:128; Filipepi, 490–98; Nardi, 1:132.

⁵⁴ See Martines, 2006, 277–78; Rocke, 223; Filipepi, esp. 490–92, 497.

⁵⁵ Landucci, 180; Martines, 2006, 278.

⁵⁶ The locus classicus for Carnival is Bakhtin.

⁵⁷ Bakhtin, 215.

was not only rational in its programmatic attention to the ceremony's symbolic meanings, but mindful of the irrational needs of the populace.

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

With the dust from the Piagnona's odyssey not yet settled, the Signoria reconvened the following day (June 30) to administer two additional decrees that added salt to open wounds. The first concerned not the Piagnona, but the bell that would hypothetically take its place at San Marco, which, following the priors' orders, was to adhere to a strict weight of 100 to 120 *libbre*, around 34 to 41 kilos.⁵⁸ The second decree ruled that the Piagnona, now at San Salvatore, remain "outside the city of Florence" for a period of fifty years.⁵⁹ In tandem, these decrees amounted to a campaign to perpetuate greatly San Marco's suffering, and to enhance the Signoria's own control over the airwaves of the city, and ultimately its power to shape, and to govern, space.

In the case of the first decree, a diminutive bell was not just disgraceful; it virtually guaranteed the convent's nonexistence in Florence's hierarchy of sounds. The weights of bells at other major Florentine churches help to bring the measure into perspective. There was the *campana grossa* (great bell) at Santa Croce (2,800 *libbre*), for example, and the so-called Colomba at Santo Spirito (4,210 *libbre*). The principal bell at Santa Maria del Fiore, meanwhile, hovered around 9,000 *libbre*; and its outsized sibling at Palazzo Vecchio—the Leone—nearly twice that.⁶⁰ Within an environment as crowded and resonant as this one, San Marco's bell would have had little hope of competing for acoustic influence, even in its own neighborhood.⁶¹ By insisting on this smaller size, in other words, the priors were knowingly diminishing San Marco's authority. And they were even threatening the convent's very capacity to maintain order within, for severely impaired was its ability to signal the hours, to bring the faithful together for prayer (also a source of revenue), and even to defend its walls from further breaches.

⁵⁸ Appendix, Doc. 2a. One Florentine *libbra* is equivalent to 339 grams. Although the weight of the Piagnona is nowhere recorded, there can be no doubt that 100 to 120 *libbre* represented a substantial diminishment in size. The reduced weight may have been intended to preempt San Marco's efforts to replace its orphaned bell with a replica.

⁵⁹ Appendix, Doc. 2b.

⁶⁰ See Giorgetti, esp. 34–35; Moisè, 93.

⁶¹ The ability of sound to define space and identity is an organizing concern in the recent literature on soundscapes—see, e.g., Schafer. For excellent discussions of this phenomenon in early modern Florence, see, in particular, Atkinson, 2016; Dennis; Garrioch. See also Davidsohn, 1:1088–89, 5:310–13, and 7:113, 487.

Of course, the Signoria was aware that a convent with no bell could not function at all, and the decree must be seen as a concession, however minimal, to that need. Still, a small bell strengthened the republic's sonic preeminence. For one thing, it ensured that any attempt by Savonarola's loyalists to use San Marco's new bell for subversive purposes would necessarily reach a limited audience. For another, it guaranteed that the Signoria's response to such a threat—issuing from a chorus of larger bells, and chiefly the sixteen-thousand-pound Leone—would encompass a much larger swathe of urban space, allowing the republic to mobilize its forces quickly and act decisively in quashing the rebellion.⁶²

Of all the decrees, however, the second of June 30 must have toppled San Marco's institutional confidence the most. The language of the decree—and particularly the clause “ad standum extra civitatem Florentie,” with its insistence on the bell's position “outside [Florentine] soil”—is unmistakably that of exile. Surely aware that this sentence would inspire outrage, the Signoria added that “during this period of time, the bell can be neither sent nor brought to the city of Florence, under the pain of being declared a rebel for whomever brings it or violates [this decree].”⁶³ This last detail brought the bell under the direct jurisdiction of the state, for *rebel* was a legal identity reserved for those who had perpetrated only the most hostile acts against the republic (“*rebellium Communis Florentie*” [“rebels of the Florentine commune”]), with accordingly harsh punishments, ranging from confiscation of property to death to perpetual infamy, which could extend to generations of descendants.⁶⁴ The severity of this measure goes a long way in conveying the Signoria's adamant that San Marco be deprived of its bell. To ensure that this fact was not lost on anyone, the priors concluded their deliberations, as the chronicler Simone Filipepi (1443–1512) would later attest, with a “public announcement,” or *bando*, of the bell's banishment, “as is done for rebels.”⁶⁵ According to city statutes, a town crier would have read the *bando* aloud a minimum of thirty-two times throughout the city.⁶⁶

⁶² This had been the strategy employed by the Signoria on 31 August 1378 in the Ciompi Revolt. See Atkinson, 2016, 182–99.

⁶³ Appendix, Doc. 2b.

⁶⁴ For an elaboration of these punishments see, Starn, 81–84; Martines, 1968, 233. The Signoria called the Medici “rebels of the Florentine commune” in an order from 31 May 1498 beseeching San Marco to hand over property that had once belonged to the family: Gherardi, 311.

⁶⁵ Filipepi, 490: “hebbe anco publico bando dagli Otto, come si fa à ribelli.” See also Landucci, 294: “it seemed . . . necessary to announce the bell's banishment outside of Florence.”

⁶⁶ See Milner, esp. 112–13.

While the public proclamation of the Piagnona's exile followed standard governmental procedure, the duration of the Signoria's sentence made the bell something of an outlier. Viewed with respect to juridical norms for exile, fifty years was most unusual, with the bulk of cases in the period being either less or more extreme: stints of one to ten years were not uncommon, for example, while lifetime banishment also occurred.⁶⁷ Naturally, the bell's status as an object, and not a person, may have rendered these precedents less relevant. And yet this same distinction perhaps sheds light on the Signoria's timeline, for the bell's artifactual nature, its status as bell, ensured that the effects of its sentence would be felt by the entire community that invested meaning in it, and especially those most closely associated with its offense. A term of fifty years allowed for the bell's return, in other words, but not until the majority of Savonarola's Piagnoni had drawn their last breaths. These unfortunate souls would spend the remainder of their lives with their bell just beyond reach—a persistent reminder of how they had been silenced by the commune.

AFTER LAUGHTER

Reading accounts of the bell's expulsion by the city's chroniclers, one might conclude that the San Marco community accepted its fate with resignation. Of the chronicles and diaries to mention the episode—many do not—not one suggests popular outcry or resistance.⁶⁸ Indeed, even individuals affiliated with San Marco described the event in only the most schematic terms. Luca Landucci for example—a diarist as sympathetic with Savonarola as any—noted simply that the Signoria “took the bell away . . . to the Observant [church] at San Miniato”;⁶⁹ while others like Burlamacchi mention the object's seizure and, in something of an ellipsis, its eventual return to San Marco in 1509.⁷⁰ Although the intent behind such lacunae may have varied considerably, together they invite the impression that San Marco's brothers, perhaps despondent from the traumas they had suffered, responded to the bell's exile with deafening silence.⁷¹

⁶⁷ See Starn, 111; Shaw, 66–70. See also Villari, 2:ccxc, for the lifetime ban against Maurelio Savonarola, Girolamo's brother, a unique instance among the San Marco penalties.

⁶⁸ Of the major Florentine chroniclers to write about Savonarola, Landucci, Nardi, Cambi, and Filipepi mention the exile. Others like Cerretani, Parenti, and Guicciardini, 1998, do not acknowledge the event.

⁶⁹ Landucci, 181; and for the bell's return, Landucci, 294.

⁷⁰ Burlamacchi, 146.

⁷¹ The silence of the Dominican chroniclers may have been calculated. It would hardly be surprising that those writing official Dominican histories would wish to downplay an event so disgraceful to their order.

Such an assessment is only partly true. While there is no evidence to suggest that San Marco's friars were outspoken about their objections to the bell's removal, such silence may have been strategic—"saying nothing" at his execution, according to Landucci, had been a sign of Savonarola's religious conviction.⁷² But the silence was more likely born out of fear. After all, the Signoria had imposed such severe prohibitions on the friar's speech—against saying mass, singing, and even saying Savonarola's name—that few could have wished to tempt fate.⁷³ This hush differed, however, from the roar of protest that issued from church elites. Not even a week had passed, in fact, when dissent began to swell in the Dominican order, most notably in the form of letters clamoring for the bell's return. Because the trial had been black boxed, its mechanisms imperceptible because transpiring in private, many felt perplexed by the Signoria's rationale, as well as its legitimacy. Some wrote to the Signoria directly, their missives caught between pride and powerlessness, anger and shame. This list included not only high-ranking Dominicans in Florence and elsewhere, but also members of the papal curia, numerous cardinals among them.⁷⁴ Indeed, before the year's end even the regent of Milan, Lodovico Sforza (1452–1508), had attempted to blandish the Signoria into returning the bell: evidence of how widely news of San Marco's misfortune echoed, and how many sectors of society it touched.⁷⁵

A mood of anguish permeates these letters. Of the dispatches to survive, none was more desperate—or more eloquent—than that written by the Dominican order's procurator general Francesco Mei (1460–1500) on July 8, roughly a week after the events in question. Being the leader "of the entire Order of Preachers," Mei professed that he was "obligated, as a public personality, to maintain and defend the honor of [his] Order."⁷⁶ As a child of the republic, Mei added that he felt "severe pain at the excessive and vituperative crimes against [his] Order; that is to say that, after many injurious acts against our Convent of San Marco, finally the lone bell was lifted from its bell tower,

⁷² Landucci, 177: at the friars' executions, "none of them said anything." See also Weinstein, 293, 295. At the same time, San Marco remained closed until July 4, a date duly noted in Landucci, 181.

⁷³ On the prohibition on speech and the suffering it caused, see Filipepi, 490.

⁷⁴ Gherardi, 314.

⁷⁵ For Lodovico's letter, see Marchese, 274–75. Other letters appear in Gherardi, 317–19.

⁷⁶ ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r: "Ritrovandomi adunque indegno Procuratore de tutto l'Ordine de' Predicatori, sono astricto, come persona publica, a mantenere et defendere l'honore d'epso Ordine." In Gherardi, 315–17; and Schnitzer, 2:432–33.

and given to the Friars Minor [of San Salvatore], not without great shame and insult to the entire Dominican Order.”⁷⁷

Formerly a brother of San Marco, Mei was as qualified an apologist as any, not least because he had bitterly opposed Savonarola from the start, moaning, as early as 1495, that the Frate’s actions grossly misrepresented the Dominican ethos and that he should be divested of all power.⁷⁸ This precedent granted Mei a certain moral authority, distinguishing him, in his words, from “many other citizens” who had been seduced by the “unholy fraudulence” of the priest, who was, Mei added, but “one prickly thorn [among the convent’s] many roses.”⁷⁹ That a majority of Dominicans had labored tirelessly to “eradicate that thorn,” and even helped to “author [his punishment],” Mei continued, was but one example of their loyalty to the republic. To punish “good and holy people” who had served the Signoria was therefore unwarranted, and Mei, for his part, interpreted the Piagnona’s seizure as a crime.⁸⁰

At this point the letter’s tone becomes less conciliatory in nature, with Mei outlining a legal rationale behind his demand for the bell’s return, and the steps that he and his fellow Dominicans had taken to ensure that this happened. Here Mei referred the Signoria to a privilege authored by Pope Clement IV (r. 1265–68) that had established the Dominicans’ right to tend to their affairs independently, without the intervention of secular governments, and which had mandated, in Mei’s language, “express excommunication [for whoever] broke [ecclesiastical] law [against] our convents.” This papal privilege ensured that “in truth [the Signoria] had not been allowed to enact such a major act of extortion and villainy [against San Marco],” and that by doing so the priors had imperiled their standing in the church. “So gravely scandalized” were Mei and “other dignified religious men of [his] Order,” in fact, that they had collectively filed a

⁷⁷ ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r: “[sono astricto a] condolermi con quelle de l’excesso et vituperio commisso costì contra dicto Ordine; intendendo che, doppo molte iniurie facte al Convento nostro di San Marco, ultimamente sia levata la campana unica del campanile d’epso loco, et data a’ Frati Minori, non senza grande ignominia et improprio de tutto l’Ordine di San Dominico.”

⁷⁸ Mei endeavored at length to expunge the memory of Savonarola, even banning the use of his name. See Gherardi, 329–37.

⁷⁹ ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r: “come etiam sono stati molti altri cittadini”; “la occulta fraude”; “fra molte rose sia nata una pungente spina di fra Hieronymo da Ferrara.”

⁸⁰ ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r: “siamo affatichati per evellere et eradicare dicta spina”; “Siamo stati . . . auctori della punitione de fra Hieronymo”; “buoni et sancti Relligiosi.”

“great complaint [*grande querela*] with the Highest Pontiff.”⁸¹ Lest his letter be dismissed as embittered browbeating, Mei concluded with a direct appeal to the Signoria’s conscience. Having already observed Dominicans “roused from every corner of the world against this thing [done against our Order], and seeing a great fire ignited,” Mei wrote, he feared that failure to return the bell would irreparably damage Florentine religious life. To wit, San Salvatore’s custody of the bell might trigger a “universal schism between the Minorites and [the Dominicans], [and] not without great fault and imputation of your Signoria.”⁸²

In the thrust and parry of his letter, Mei hit his targets with precision. It was hypocritical, after all, for the government to paralyze an entire community for the actions of a select few, especially when the republic’s own guiding lights—distinguished men of letters like Pico della Mirandola and Poliziano, for example, and even current members of the Signoria—had, at one time or another, been enchanted by Savonarola, sometimes preaching his creed more ardently than the Dominicans themselves.⁸³ On a rhetorical level, Mei was seeking to dissociate the deleterious effects of Savonarola’s voice from the sound of the bell, whose guilt and innocence, respectively, are implied by the active and passive roles they assume in his account. While the preacher’s acoustic persuasions, and those of his wailers, “tricked and seduced . . . exquisitely intelligent people,” the Piagnona “was taken from [San Marco’s] bell tower,” its silence a powerful counterpoint to the auditory dimensions of Savonarola’s crimes.⁸⁴ Equally salient was Mei’s conviction in the bell’s sacred, and not secular, status. This is manifest not only in his appeals to canon law, but also in the legal vocabulary punctuating his letter. Here he opposed the Signoria’s desire to “judge” (“iudicare”) the Dominicans “unworthy” of the bell’s return to the “testimony”

⁸¹ ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r: “per privilegio de Clemente 4.º, speciale et espresa excommunicatione papale contra li violatori de’ Conventi nostri: chè invero maggiore extorsione et villania di questa non se gli poteva fare”; “el reverendo Provirtuale . . . intendendo tale villania della campana dicta, et altri degni relligiosi de l’Ordine nostro, se sono gravemente scandalizati, facendone grande querela al Summo Pontifice.” The *querela* has yet to be found, perhaps because the Dominicans had delivered their complaint orally, as sometimes happened.

⁸² ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r: “vedendo questo essere uno seminario de concitare per tutte le parte del mondo contra questa cosa l’Ordine nostro, et vedendo accendersi gran fuocho . . . le prego degnino fare restituire al proprio loco dicta campana”; “Altrimenti . . . potria nascere inter Minores et Nos scisma per lo universo, non senza grave culpa et imputatione delle S.V.”

⁸³ See Guicciardini, 1998, 279, for prominent intellectuals who became friars under Savonarola.

⁸⁴ ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r: “inganati et seducti . . . altri cittadini et ingegni exquisiti”; “sia levata la campana unica del campanile.”

(“testimonio”) of God, the “authority” (“auctorità”) of their order, and the status of their “court” (“corte”).⁸⁵ In so presuming that it could adjudicate the Piagnona’s fate, Mei hinted, the Signoria not only mistook who owned the bell, but it also failed to perceive the potential consequences of its actions, namely a rift between the mendicant orders, or even in the church more broadly. That the government’s meddling had so quickly roused papal and peninsular leaders to action, Mei indicated, was a testament to the severity of the Signoria’s misunderstanding.

Yet even if Mei and his tribe of anti-Savonarolans could legitimately claim the moral and legal upper hand, and despite the sheer quantity of ink they spilled, their pleas fell on deaf ears. There is cause to believe, in fact, that the dissent from Dominican officials only encouraged the republic to hasten its efforts. Indeed, it can be no coincidence that on the following day, July 9, certain leaders of the Signoria granted the architect Cronaca (Simone del Pollaiuolo [1457–1508]) an advance for all repairs necessary “to hang the bell . . . in the campanile of [San Salvatore],” the same building whose reconstruction he was then overseeing.⁸⁶ The events of June 29 had left the Piagnona unfit for installation in its new home. As we saw earlier, the bell had been separated from its clapper, which now lay idle in San Salvatore’s belfry.⁸⁷ More prohibitive, though, was the considerable damage inflicted on the bell’s crown, the handles of which had been sharply severed, likely during initial efforts to free the Piagnona from its supporting structure in San Marco’s bell tower. In the days to come, Cronaca would craft an elaborate iron harness, still attached today, that yoked the vessel to an oak beam, thus allowing the mutilated Piagnona to be installed in San Salvatore’s bell tower, while also circumventing the costly and onerous task of recasting its broken crown (figs. 1 and 2).⁸⁸

Neither the architect nor the Signoria mentions when, or even whether, the renovated bell entered this new habitat.⁸⁹ If there is truth to one account,

⁸⁵ ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r.

⁸⁶ ASF, Archivio dell’Opera di S. Maria del Fiore, Registri di Deliberazioni, 1491–98, fol. 116^v: “impandat in appendenda campana . . . ad campanile fratrum S. Francisci observantie extra portam S. Miniatis.” In Carocci, 260. Pollaiuolo had been *capomaestro* of the Opera del Duomo since 1495, and he began working on San Salvatore’s renovations no later than 1497: see Pacciani, 22. On Cronaca’s renovation of San Salvatore, see Vasarri.

⁸⁷ ASF, Sig. e Coll., Deliberazioni Ord. Aut., 100, fol. 74^v.

⁸⁸ For a brief discussion of Cronaca’s repairs, see Ferretti, 378; for a modern conservator’s perspective, see Scudieri and Rasario, 107.

⁸⁹ If the bell did not ring, it may have been due to a dispute with the neighboring Benedictines at San Miniato, who issued a legal challenge against the range of the Franciscans’ bell. See Atkinson, 2016, 65.

however, any efforts to implement the Piagnona at San Salvatore must have been short-lived. This popular anecdote, recorded by Burlamacchi but reiterated by others, notes that the Signoria's plans were abruptly halted in late July, when Pope Alexander VI issued a "commandment" demanding that the bell be removed from San Salvatore's campanile.⁹⁰ If the pontiff had indeed made such a demand, the relevant archival document has yet to resurface. What does survive, though, is a letter dated July 7 that would seem to confirm the pontiff's desire that the bell be returned to San Marco.⁹¹ Penned by the Florentine ambassadors to Alexander VI's court in Rome, Domenico Bonsi (1430–1501) and Francesco Gualterotti (1456–1510), and addressed to the Ten of War (Dieci di balia), this short note presents itself as a response to the "complaint [made by the Dominicans] to his Holiness the Pope." Remarking that the Dominicans had found the Signoria's consignment of the Piagnona to San Salvatore "perpetually [shameful] to their entire Order," and that the Brothers "resented [this action] to their souls," Bonsi and Gualterotti then related that the pope "entrusted us [with the task that], on his behalf, we recommend to your Most Reverend Signoria honor and justice [for the Dominicans]."⁹²

That the *querela* referenced by the pope's ambassadors is identical to that mentioned in Francesco Mei's letter is without question. Likewise apparent is that Bonsi and Gualterotti's letter represents the pope's initial response to that complaint, which, now being a matter of foreign diplomacy, had to go through the Dieci, the republic's foreign policy committee. Notably, the pope's language, as channeled through his ambassadors, is couched as an appeal to ethics—a recommendation that "honor and justice" be served—and not as an authoritative command. Such semantic subtlety is understandable, for the pontiff can hardly have wished to intervene in the matter directly. After all, the pope had favored Savonarola's execution, and undermining the government's actions to stifle the preacher's movement would be hypocritical, and potentially inflammatory. The substance of the pope's recommendation, then, accounted for his earlier position, while also granting that the Dominicans' claims might be legitimate: that the privilege of a religious order to control its own affairs, not least in the use of bells, derived from divine authority that superseded any secular government.

⁹⁰ Burlamacchi, 229.

⁹¹ Gherardi, 315.

⁹² Gherardi, 315: "feciono . . . querela alla Sanctità del Papa, che costi si è dato la campana loro de' Frati di Sancto Marcho a' Frati Minori. Di che detti Frati di Sancto Dominico si risentono insino all'anima, parendo loro che sia ingominia et vergogna perpetua di tutto lo Hordine loro. . . . Et la Sanctità del Papa hyersera ci commisse, che per sua parte rachomandassimo alle S.V. lo honore et la iustitia di questi Frati."

Although the pope's letter did not result in the bell's repatriation, it did inspire the priors to compose a full-dress defense of their actions. Discussed earlier, this letter, dated July 21, is addressed to one Giovanni Antonio Sangiorgio (1439–1509), a cardinal who advised Alexander VI in legal matters.⁹³ Framed as a response to the *querela* that the Dominican order had lodged with Alexander, the brief has the character of a legal manifesto, evidence that the pontiff's position had struck a raw nerve with the Signoria, who worried that their actions would be overturned and their authority compromised. "We [do not want] our decisions [to be] weakened," they declared frankly at the letter's end: "We shall not permit, in fact, that our deeds or decrees, springing from such a great unanimity, be tampered with or overpowered."⁹⁴

There is a definite pathos in these claims. But this should not obscure the letter's strategic framing of the Signoria's version of events, nor the punctiliousness of its presentation, as though it were admissible evidence. That the priors were thinking along these lines explains why they sent the letter directly to Sangiorgio, Alexander VI's consultant in law, who would be expected to assess the legal grounds of the Signoria's case. At the broadest level, the Signoria's argument turned on its role as protector of the Florentine state and her citizens. From a rhetorical standpoint, this was both modeled in the priors' narrative and tone, and explicitly declared in the rationale they provided for seizing the bell. Particularly noteworthy, in the first case, is that the Signoria offered its remarks primarily in defense of San Salvatore, and not itself. Indeed, the letter implies that, at some point following the Piagnona's relocation, San Marco's brothers, and perhaps the populace more generally, had come to believe that the Franciscans, and not the republic, were the event's masterminds. It was only by hearing from the pope's advisors directly, the priors wrote, that they became aware of allegations that San Salvatore's brothers had taken up arms against San Marco on the night of Savonarola's arrest, and that, "as a reward for their labor, they [had] extracted that bell [known to everyone], as if it were the booty of some war."⁹⁵

In the lines that follow, the Signoria is at pains to absolve the Franciscans of any wrongdoing, clarifying that it had taken the Piagnona, and that it had elected to give the bell to those "well-deserving servants of the Church of

⁹³ ASF, Registro di Lettere, Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v. In Gherardi, 321–22. Regrettably, Sangiorgio's reply, if he wrote one, has yet to turn up.

⁹⁴ ASF, Registro di Lettere, Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v: "Idque nos testari volumus, ne falsis criminationibus innocentia eorum pericliteretur, aut infringerentur decreta nostra: quae tanto omnium consensu (facta or deliberata) tantari aut collabefactari non patiemur."

⁹⁵ ASF, Registro di Lettere, Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v: "suique laboris mercedem, quasi ex alicuius belli praeda, campanam excerpisse."

God.” That the Franciscans had acquired the Piagnona only indirectly, the Signoria reasoned, meant that they were “not guilty of anything.”⁹⁶ In an apparent effort to put the matter to rest, the priors added that San Salvatore’s members had “accepted [the bell] with reluctance . . . and repeatedly declared that what they were receiving [was] a deposit, and not a gift: an abundant number of witnesses can testify to their will. Furthermore, a major indication [of this] is that they still have not used the bell.”⁹⁷ In so framing their letter, the priors fashioned themselves as just guardians of the republic—shielding their citizens, the Franciscans, from blame, anger, and even violence—a move that downplays, without denying, their own role in the bell’s ordeal. This contradiction only enhances the impression, voiced by the chronicler Giovanni Cambi, that the Signoria’s goal had been to demonstrate its own “resolute power,” which required the “cooperation” of San Salvatore.⁹⁸

When the Signoria finally addressed its motivations for taking the bell, in the second case, it again emphasized its obligation to protect Florence. Crucial in this respect is the Signoria’s vehement characterization of the Piagnona as the “weapon [of San Marco’s] insurrection.”⁹⁹ Notably eliding the particulars of how they had punished the Piagnona, the priors argued that the bell’s disobedience rendered their conduct an act of “necessity,” a benign attempt to ensure that San Marco’s brothers “suffered [nothing] harsher at [the government’s hands] . . . than [being] prevented from [another] rebellion.”¹⁰⁰ The Signoria was not denying the bell’s sacred status, of course, but asserting that it had changed. Whatever the Piagnona’s former charge, the Signoria implied, the friars’ choice to ring the bell in alarm had meant interceding in the sonic waves of the republic. This not only defied the bell’s purpose, but it prolonged an uprising that directly occasioned the deaths of Florentine citizens. Supervision of the Piagnona was therefore a secular matter, inasmuch as the bell might again be

⁹⁶ ASF, Registro di Lettere, Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v: “his optime meritis de Ecclesia Dei dedimus”; “nulla in culpa hi sunt.”

⁹⁷ ASF, Registro di Lettere, Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v: “Quam inviti recusantesque, nec nisi coacti a nobis, acceperunt testati saepius, depositum se non munus accipere a nobis: suaeque voluntatis testes habent amplissimos. Cuius id etiam indicium maximum erat, quod hactenus nunquam ea usi sunt.” The Franciscans’ emphasis on the bell’s status as “deposit” might also reflect a central plank in the order’s platform: they took a vow of poverty, and could not own anything, including a gift.

⁹⁸ Cambi, 2:134.

⁹⁹ ASF, Registro di Lettere, Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v.

¹⁰⁰ ASF, Registro di Lettere, Cl. X, dist. I, 102, fol. 57^v: “si criminis hoc est, necessitatis non voluntatis crimen erit”; “nil tristius pati a nobis eos volumus, quam ut amitterent occasionem tentandi iterum res novas.” In early modern legalistic terms, crimes of necessity were far less serious than those of premeditation.

used to create civic discord. More subtly, the Signoria claimed control of the bell by pointedly characterizing San Marco's brothers as "rebels" whose goods, according to civic law, it was the priors' responsibility to manage.¹⁰¹

Foregrounding this portrayal allows us to see the entire exchange of letters in a somewhat different light: as a legal debate about what the bell was, to whom it belonged, and thus whether it could be disciplined by the Signoria. The opening salvo in this debate had been the Dominican order's *querela* to Alexander VI (ca. June 30–July 6), which Francesco Mei summarized in his letter to the Signoria (July 8). The case advanced by these documents rested on the Piagnona's status as a sacred object, a characterization that brought the bell under church jurisdiction, and thereby rendered the violence done to it an act of "villainy," and its confiscation by a secular authority "extortion."¹⁰² The second campaign, documented in the pope's response (July 7), ostensibly upheld this identity. And the final campaign, staked out in the Signoria's reply (July 21), had designated the bell a political "weapon," a tool that could be readily activated to combat the republic.

These remarks invite a broader point. While the Piagnona's treatment may have been historically unique, for any number of reasons, it was but one manifestation of a long-standing and near-pathological effort on the part of the republican government to consolidate and centralize its power through the regulation of sound. At the height of Savonarola's influence, there was no greater threat to the Signoria's acoustic regime than the preacher and his disciples, whose very epithet, *wailers*, attests to the centrality of sound to their conquest of space. Sound was the medium of their message and it was the means by which they reconfigured Florence's ritual topography, and rerouted bodies, toward their own routines. Especially as Savonarola's movement grew in scale, his ubiquitous voice and his strategic usurpation of the city's airwaves impinged upon the government's ability to send clear messages, at times even confounding the distinction between who conveyed the message in the first place. Such was the case when, for example, the Piagnoni rang the Leone during Savonarola's bonfires, leading some to wonder whether the preacher's influence now eclipsed the Signoria's.¹⁰³ Viewed beside these concerns, the priors' eradication of the speech, song, and bell ringing of Savonarola's followers betrays a sweeping effort to rid the city's sonic environment of competing frequencies.

¹⁰¹ See Stern, 186–87.

¹⁰² ASF, Filza di lettere originali, Cl. X, dist. II, 34, fol. 196^r: "maggiore extorsione et villania." In Gherardi, 316.

¹⁰³ Burlamacchi, 134; Villari, 1:505; Girolamo Benivieni's commentary in Savonarola, 2006, 250.

At the same time, the Piagnona's exile reflected a sensitivity to the republic's own fragile past, which was checkered with insurrections initiated precisely through the strategic misuse of bells. In 1307, for example, the monks of the Benedictine monastery called the Badia voiced their opposition to a newly levied tax on their property by ringing their bell in alarm, a measure that caused a minor uprising against government tax collectors and led the Signoria to cut the Badia's bell tower in half.¹⁰⁴ And in 1378, Florence's disenfranchised woolworkers, the Ciompi, had commandeered the city's bell-ringing system to initiate an organized storming of the town hall, which succeeded briefly in overthrowing the republican government.¹⁰⁵ The following year, in 1379, the Signoria uncovered a further plot by Ciompi sympathizers to incite a revolt by ringing the bells of San Lorenzo *a martello*.¹⁰⁶ Such precedents, and their disruptive effect on the republic, grant a certain legitimacy to the Signoria's quasi-paranoid claim that the bell, as weapon, might be used to incite a rebellion.

PERSONIFICATION

To follow this line of thinking is to confront a paradox. For the Signoria's legal argument to hold meant classifying the Piagnona as a political weapon, and in doing so fitting a tight carapace of definition over it, when in reality the bell's trial had defied such tidy thinking. According to long-standing juridical precedent, the municipal court could only try the Piagnona by viewing it as a persona (if not a person), a personified entity or character with intentions, even if those intentions ultimately belonged to its maker or user.¹⁰⁷ Viewed in the *longue durée*, such a legal maneuver was not wholly remarkable. In his book *Friends of Interpretable Objects*, Miguel Tamen cites dozens of examples, from ancient Greece to the present day, in which "disobedient" objects were attributed legal attributes such as rights and duties, and held liable, themselves capable of committing a crime and suffering punishment.¹⁰⁸ And yet in these cases, the objects

¹⁰⁴ See Villani, 2:176–77 (9.89.55–68). See also Atkinson, 2016, 42, 46–53; Atkinson, 2016, 90, for the privileged status of the Badia's bell in the commune.

¹⁰⁵ On the unauthorized ringing of bells, particularly to incite rebellions, see Atkinson 2016, esp. 182–93; Rodolico, esp. 441–45. Fearful of a similar rebellion over a century later, the priors had interrogated San Marco's brothers, in at least one case, about the Frateschi's methods of bell ringing when in charge of the government: in Villari, 2:ccxxxii.

¹⁰⁶ Fredona, 144: "[We have] resolved together to cause a tumult on Thursday night . . . and we've planned to ring the bell of San Lorenzo with a hammer, and we will raise the banner of the Gueft Party . . . and cry out 'Viva la Parte Guefta!'"

¹⁰⁷ On this distinction, see Tamen, esp. 78–79.

¹⁰⁸ Tamen, esp. 80, 88–89, 173n6.

were considered soulless, whereas animism—and anthropomorphism in general—was fundamental to bells, and certainly to the Signoria's conduct. The very decision to introduce the Piagnona into a legal archive—its sentence appearing between arraignments of people, on charges ranging from obscenity, to petty crime, to murder—vitiating the Signoria's claim that it was a mere tool, empty of ritual efficacy and intention.

This paradox is magnified when one considers how often, and how explicitly, the Signoria personified the bell throughout its punishment. This personification occurred rhetorically, in the June 29 decrees, which explicitly identified the Piagnona—and not Savonarola or San Marco's brothers—as the culprit; and in the Signoria's letter to Alexander VI, which assigned fault to the bell itself. It was also manifest in the activity of lacerating and torturing the bell. Even subsumed within the parodic spirit of Carnival, the gesture implied that the object had flesh, and by extension personhood. And it took on additional meaning when the Piagnona was exiled, a feat, as the chronicler Filipepi appears to have recognized, that entailed treating the bell “as though” it was a person.¹⁰⁹ Nor should it be overlooked that the Signoria had disseminated news of the bell's banishment with a public announcement, “as [was] done for rebels.”¹¹⁰ While such *bandi*, carried out on behalf of municipal authorities by town criers, were a well-established step in the ritual of political exclusion, they presupposed citizenship.

The sheer quantity of occurrences makes it clear that the Signoria perceived the bell's personification as much more than a necessary pretext for the trial, but as integral to its successful performance of justice. To appreciate this claim it might be recalled how bells, much more than other object types, were always already personified. Consider that the Piagnona had likely been ritually baptized, as most bells were, and named, both rites of passage by which every citizen also passed into municipal legal structures.¹¹¹ The first-person inscriptions common to bells only reinforced the impression of animism further. So, too, did the terminology of bell casting: the liquid metal used to make bells was heated in a crucible (a *matrice*, or womb), poured into a mold bound together by a metal skeleton (*ossatura*), and, once cooled, had a characteristic hollow recess (called an *anima*, or soul) that became animated each time the bell was intoned.¹¹² And as countless sources attest, citizens easily differentiated the sounds of particular bells, suggesting that each of these objects had a subjective

¹⁰⁹ Filipepi, 490.

¹¹⁰ Filipepi, 490.

¹¹¹ On the baptism and subjecthood of bells, see Weinryb, esp. 134–38. See Price, esp. 123–24, for the difference between baptized and blessed bells.

¹¹² Nagel, 190; Cole, esp. 43–50; Motture, 35–40; Arnold and Goodson.

presence in the commune.¹¹³ Most importantly, bells were thought to possess agency: the potential to act upon and in the world, reflected not only in their ability to control the rhythm of life and bodies around them, but also in their ability to vanquish demonic forces that resided nearby.¹¹⁴ By tapping into this register, then, the priors were not so much denying the bell's agency as they were staging their own power to subdue it.

In all these respects, the Signoria's treatment of the Piagnona speaks to the sophistication of its rituals of punishment. It also attests to how integrated, and intricate, the culture's thought structures about bells were. That the priors were seamlessly able to activate different facets of the bell—drawing on the one, bell as persona, during the Piagnona's trial and punishment, and the other, bell as weapon, to defend their actions—speaks powerfully to this point. What is striking, then, in view of all evidence, is not that the Signoria may have believed that it was whipping and exiling a bell, but that it recognized the symbolic and psychological import of such conduct in communicating to the populace how comprehensively it could render justice, this in the face of deep-seated anxiety about its own grip on power.

There is a final point here. If the Signoria's actions were aimed at shattering the Piagnona's authority, they had also arguably reinforced its agency. For as much as thrashing the Piagnona served a point, it also foregrounded the bell's subjecthood, inviting the idea that, even in exile, the bell might still be capable of action. The clearest evidence of this logic is found in a local legend, spun sometime in the early years of the Cinquecento, which maintained that the bell's arrival at San Salvatore brought immediate death in its wake. One of the first printed versions of the anecdote related that God, indignant at the Piagnona's mistreatment, had sought retribution by afflicting one of Savonarola's principal opponents, Tanai de' Nerli (1427–98), with “an illness so grave and sudden that he died.”¹¹⁵ The author alleged that Nerli's son had found his deceased father with “head tipped out of bed [and] feet in the air,” a pose that suggested to many that he “had been strangled by the devil thanks to the justice of God.” Thus it happened that the “first and last time” that the Piagnona sounded in San Salvatore was at Nerli's funeral, for “just as he was buried, there came a commandment from the Pope that the bell be removed from the campanile . . . and in a short span of time [the republic] returned [the bell] to [San Marco].”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ See Atkinson, 2016.

¹¹⁴ For the apotropaic dimension of bells, see Price, 79; Weinryb, 137–39.

¹¹⁵ Burlamacchi, 229.

¹¹⁶ Burlamacchi, 229: “Ma Dio, giusto giudice, non volse più prolungare la sua vendetta, imperochè subito li mandò una infermità sì grande et repentina che si morì, et la campana, che per ancora non haveva suonato, suonò la prima volta al suo mortorio; et questa fu la prima et

The story should not be taken literally. Part of an effort to have Savonarola canonized in the generation after his execution, anecdotes like these are quasi-hagiographic in nature. Myths, miracles, and half-truths are the ground against which they unfold.¹¹⁷ Still, the anecdote's referential value should not be dismissed entirely. Available evidence suggests, for example, that Nerli did die suddenly, and in close proximity to the bell's installation; it is unthinkable that this coincidence would not have jolted Florentines of every stripe like a crack of thunder, given the popular tendency to interpret such phenomena as "significant signs," in the words of the chronicler Nardi.¹¹⁸ Nerli had evidently been among the private citizens to lobby for the Piagnona's punishment; his sons, Jacopo (1461–1505) and Benedetto (b. 1449), had been bitter opponents of Savonarola, with the former losing an eye in the April 8 siege, and the latter serving as a deputy for the Franciscans in the Trial by Fire and on the first commission appointed to interrogate the Frate.¹¹⁹ The death of the Nerli patriarch, here called the "leader of the Frate's enemies," must therefore have struck the Frateschi as divine vindication.¹²⁰

ultima volta che la suonò lassù, perchè, come fu sepolto, venne un comandamento dal Papa che la detta campana fussi cavata del campanile de' detti frati et fussi loro tolta. Et così fu fatto loro . . . et in spatio di poco tempo fu restituita a' frati di Santo Marco per il Doge di Firenze. . . . Di questo Tanay disse un de' suoi figliuoli . . . come lo trovorno morto in questa forma: cioè fu trovato una notte col capo fuor del letto, che toccava terra, et con li piedi all'aria, et così si trovò morto; credono che fusse strozzato dal diavolo per giuditio di Dio."

¹¹⁷ The story's unreliability is apparent, for example, in the remark that the republic had returned the Piagnona to San Marco in "a short span of time." For miracles, see Pico della Mirandola, esp. 54–89.

¹¹⁸ Nardi, 1:434. Cf. Nerli, 1:125, who notes the city's inclination toward "superstitious credulity." Examples of this trend are pervasive, and are discussed in Burlamacchi; Pico della Mirandola. For Tanai's death, see Filipepi, 490; cf. Parenti, 2:193, who mentions Tanai's death in a September entry.

¹¹⁹ Nerli's insistence that the Piagnona be installed at San Salvatore likely had personal motivations. He was a supporter of the Franciscans, and had known ties to San Salvatore, his family chapel and eventual burial site arguably being the centerpiece of the church's renovations. Cambi, 2:134; Parenti, 2:166–68; Cerretani, 248; Guicciardini, 1998, 235, 249; Nerli, 1:127.

¹²⁰ Burlamacchi, 229: "Tanay de' Nerli . . . capo de' nimici del Frate." This premise is borne out by the sheer number of times that Savonarola's biographers repeated the anecdote. Filipepi, 490, 510, and Cambi, 2:134, relay similar, if less dramatic, accounts. Cf. Nardi, 1:133, who claims that the bell was returned because of persistent troubles afflicting the benefactors, but does not mention Tanai's death. For similar afflictions to Savonarola's persecutors in general, see Burlamacchi, 224–31, 233–39, 244; Pico della Mirandola, 65–71; Filipepi, 509–11; Nardi, 1:136.

Embroidery notwithstanding, the story offers a rare glimpse into popular views concerning the Piagnona's efficacy. Because in drawing a causal relationship between the indignities suffered by the Piagnona and Nerli's diabolical demise, the story registers the common view that the bell was possessed of supernatural powers, divine or demonic, depending on one's point of view, and that even, or especially, in exile, it could bring good or bad fortune upon those who came into contact with it. In other words, no matter how exhaustive the Signoria's program to silence the Piagnona was, it had been unable to control the agency that the populace attributed to the bell.

THE END OF EXILE

Whether or not additional exchanges occurred between the Signoria, the Dominicans, and the pope, the overall sense is that these parties had reached a stalemate. This left the bell in a kind of perpetual limbo—lodged at San Salvatore, but evidently not in use, for the next decade. The Piagnona was never forgotten, however. This is forcefully demonstrated by the torrent of emotion that accompanied the bell's return, which occurred on the evening of 6 June 1509, just weeks before the eleventh anniversary of the bell's seizure. To what might this sudden thawing be attributed? Though few, eyewitness testimonies make clear that the bell's recovery coincided with a particularly consequential event in the history of the republic: the long-awaited reconquering of Pisa, the jewel in Florence's territorial crown that had broken free in 1494. The very week of the bell's return, in fact, delegates from both cities had met in Palazzo Vecchio to put the finishing touches on a peace treaty that would end fifteen years of bloodshed. While some found this timing unremarkable, the connection was inescapable for San Marco's denizens: the bell's restoration, a "thing worthy of memory," being the direct result of "the victory accomplished against the Pisans."¹²¹

In a letter written mere hours after the Piagnona's homecoming on June 6, a friar of San Marco, one Stefano da Castrocaro, noted that he had returned a day earlier to a jubilant Florence, where he witnessed the reigning gonfaloniere,

¹²¹ Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Firenze, Carte del Convento di San Marco 903 (hereafter BMLF, SM 903), Libro di Ricordanze B, fol. 40^r: "Res memoratu digna contigit hodierna die"; "Causa vero cur Domini Florentini moti sint ad istam restitutionem faciendam fuit victoria habita hodie contra Pisanos." In Gherardi, 322–23. Among the lay chroniclers who would have been eyewitnesses, only Landucci, 294, records the event's date, but by circling back to its banishment rather than providing additional explanation. Unfortunately, an official order from the Signoria remains undiscovered.

Piero Soderini (1450/52–1522), and the Signoria “most happy and playful,” which seemed “an excellent sign.” “Exhausted” from an emotional frenzy, Castrocara found “confirmation” of the victory over Pisa not in the celebration itself, but precisely in the “restoring of the bell,” and thus the revitalization of San Marco, that followed.¹²² That Soderini, a partisan of Savonarola from the beginning, had been both the military mastermind behind the Pisa victory and the one to authorize the bell’s return meant that the beleaguered Dominicans had come full circle in Florentine affairs.

The most obvious rationale for why the bell’s fate had rested on the outcome with Pisa was its direct entanglement with Savonarola, who had made the error of staking his prophetic credibility on the support of French armies in Florence’s “swift” recovery of the city, a promise that died along with the French king, Charles VIII, in 1498.¹²³ If Florentine disillusionment with Savonarola had reached its boiling point, in the years following his execution and the bell’s exile, the Piagnoni mounted an astonishing political recovery that had culminated in the gonfaloniership of Soderini. Still, the movement’s political credibility hinged precariously on Pisa, for victory alone could validate the legacy of Savonarola and justify his followers’ continued faith in his prophecies of spiritual renewal.

The importance of this premise might be inferred from an event alleged to have occurred during Pisa’s surrender at Palazzo Vecchio, which Landucci and others imbued with near-mythic connotations. As the two factions negotiated in the courtyard, a dove landed at the feet of Giovacchino Guasconi (1438–1521)—a member of the Ten and, like Soderini, a fervent Savonarolan—who was left holding its white feathers, “as though it were a miracle.”¹²⁴ According to Landucci, many interpreted this sign as heaven sent, proof of God’s approval of Florence and of the Piagnoni, whose interests were now one. That Castrocara, a San Marco friar, could report celebrating the Pisa victory “alongside the entire Signoria” itself suggests a newfound unity that transcended their tumultuous past.¹²⁵

Only in this atmosphere of civic optimism and absolution could the Piagnona reenter the fortified walls of Florence. In practical terms, the bell’s

¹²² BMLF, SM 903, Libro di Ricordanze B, fol. 40^r: “Ho visto stamani el Gonfalonieri et la Signoria alla processione, molto lieti et giocondi, che mi pare ottimo segno”; “et la confirmatione di ciò mi pare la restitutione della campana.” In Gherardi, 323.

¹²³ See Parenti, 1:203, 300; Landucci, 80; Ridolfi, 88. Charles died on April 7, the very day of the Trial by Fire, thus accentuating the failed promise; the connection was observed by Cambi, 2:122.

¹²⁴ Landucci, 293–94.

¹²⁵ BMLF, SM 903, Libro di Ricordanze B, fol. 40^r: “con la totale signoria.”

restitution to San Marco restored the convent's standing within the community and mended relations between the Dominicans and the republic, as well as those between San Marco and the monks of San Salvatore. The willingness of San Marco's brothers to put the bell's decade-long ordeal behind them may be inferred from the fact that they responded to Soderini's conciliatory gesture with a gift of their own: two diminutive paintings by their fellow friar, the artist Fra Bartolomeo (1472–1517).¹²⁶ Although neither painting survives, an entry in the artist's account books hints at the momentousness of this exchange: "Item: two panel paintings, one braccia each, the one representing the head of Christ, the other the Virgin, valued at 14 ducats, given to Piero Soderini . . . at the time when the bell was returned."¹²⁷ In view of the psychodrama that San Marco had endured, and the clash of authority that the bell's seizure had precipitated, it is a great irony that so humble a gift had brought the episode to a close.

The story of the Piagnona is about the fight for a bell. But it also foregrounds the many competing ways that bell was understood: as divine vehicle and protector, as voice and emblem of a community, as political instrument, as practical tool, and as personified citizen of the republic with rights that could be given and taken away. Our aim has not been to adjudicate between these competing identities, but to signal that each was latent in the Piagnona, and potentially in every church bell. In supporting their respective cases, the event's participants activated these different identities, peeling back each ontological layer in almost archaeological fashion, in pursuit of their own particular version of justice. It could be argued that this laying bare of the Piagnona could only have happened in such an exceptional state of affairs, that because of—not despite—its unique nature, the episode reveals so much about the status of bells in Florentine consciousness.

Yet there are greater ironies here that should not go unremarked. The first is that no matter how much the Signoria saw its treatment of the bell as an exhibition of "resolute power," the episode more closely resembles a parable of the republic's decline.¹²⁸ Indeed, what shines through the Signoria's screen of explanations is less the priors' confidence than their anxiety about their ability

¹²⁶ Chris Fischer has suggested that Fra Bartolomeo's gift may have been an effort to secure the commission for the altarpiece in the council chamber of the town hall (which he obtained in November 1510). See Fischer, 28, 187.

¹²⁷ Marchese, 145: "Item dua quadri circa d'un braccio l'uno, ne'quali era una testa di Yshesu, nell'altro una Vergine, di prezzo di duc. XIII, donato a Piero Soderini quando era Gonfaloniere, quando ci rendè la campana."

¹²⁸ Cambi, 2:134.

to retain control of a city plagued by violent factionalism and economic unrest. It had been this very anxiety, in fact, that led the Signoria to enable the rise of Savonarola in the first place, paralyzed by fear that subduing his movement would only amplify popular resistance to the government. And so deeply felt was the priors' anxiety later on that they deemed it necessary to stage a ceremony that visualized their suppression of an adversary, and in doing so, to risk alienation from an entire Christian community. That this same community had disseminated news of the Piagnona's plight throughout the peninsula and assembled itself in opposition to the Signoria within days is a testament to how integrated and efficient Christianity's networks had become, while the Signoria's refusal to compromise, communicated by proxy while the priors remained sequestered in the town hall, speaks to their isolationism.¹²⁹

Because the Signoria remained shrouded in secrecy, bells were a principal means by which the government supervised everyday affairs. Secular bells in particular, and especially the Leone, asserted Florentine freedom to regulate its own space independent of other entities, even as internal instability reigned and external forces plotted the city-state's takeover.¹³⁰ The second irony, then, is that the Medici principate would exploit this very logic after its devastating defeat of the republic in 1530. Indeed, one of the first deeds of Duke Alessandro de' Medici (1510–37) following his ascension was to remove the great Leone from its bell tower, just as the republic had done with the Piagnona—a bell commissioned by Alessandro's ancestor, Cosimo—decades earlier. Yet whereas the republic had not broken the Piagnona, and even allowed for its return, Alessandro would tolerate no such ambiguity, reasoning that the Leone's very existence might “awaken echoes of lost freedom.”¹³¹ On 1 October 1532, Alessandro had the bell destroyed in the Piazza della Signoria—the site of the government's most spectacular shows of authority, including Savonarola's execution—and its remains melted down and minted into coins bearing his effigy (fig. 7).¹³² In doing so, Alessandro liquidated the bell, and with it three centuries of hope in the republican experiment. Here, the very strategy that the Signoria had used to control its dominion became the source of its undoing, with Alessandro preferring an irrevocable act to the unpredictability of the

¹²⁹ Meier, esp. 252–71.

¹³⁰ This stands in contrast to church bells like the Piagnona, which connected institutions like San Marco to the broader Christian community.

¹³¹ Quoted in Staley, 74. On this episode see Lungo, 2:463; Davanzati, 1:xix; Varchi, 3:9.

¹³² Varchi, 3:9, notes that the reason for destroying the bell was a matter of debate. See also G. Conti, 122, who notes that the first minting of these coins was used to pay German troops, supplied by Charles V, in the war against Florence.



Figure 7. Benvenuto Cellini, forty-soldi coin with profile of Alessandro de' Medici (reverse). Silver. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello. Photo: Scala / Ministero per i beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY.

populace's use of bells. That each actor understood the acoustic dimensions of power, and their ability to legitimize or undermine republican authority, is what makes this story so poignant, so particularly resonant, in the history of Renaissance Florence.

APPENDIX

Document 1

29 June 1498: First set of decrees against the bell of San Marco
 ASF, Sig. e Coll., Deliberazioni Ord. Aut., 100, fol. 68^r
 (In Villari, 2:ccxcī–ccxcīi)

a. Die XXVIII iunii 1498. Magnifici et excelsi Domini domini Priores libertatis et Vixillifer iustitie populi Florentini, simul adunati etc., servatis etc., deliberaverunt quod a fratribus ecclesie Sancti Marci de Florentia restituatur presbiteris ecclesie Sancti Laurentii de Florentia el battaglia campane Belfortis, penes dictos fratres existens; et insuper eidem ecclesie Sancti Laurentii consignetur Campana dicte ecclesie Sancti Marci etc. Mandantes etc.

b. Item dicti Domini simul adunati etc., servatis etc., revocaverunt suprascriptum partitum solum in ea parte qua disponitur quod dicta campana ecclesie Sancti Marci consignetur ecclesie Sancti Laurentii, et voluerunt quod loco dicte ecclesie Sancti Laurentii consignetur ecclesie fratrum Observantium Sancti Francisci extra portam Sancti Miniatis; et propterea concedatur mazerius si opus fuerit etc. Mandantes etc.

c. Item dicti Domini simul adunati etc., servatis etc., deliberaverunt et preceperunt Signorino Francisci eorum preceptori, quatenus vadat ad dictam ecclesiam Sancti Marci et Campanam dicte ecclesie capiat et eam conducere faciat ad

ecclesiam dictorum fratrum Observantium Sancti Francisci extra portam Sancti Miniatis; et ad hoc effectum, ex parte dictorum Dominorum, cogat quoscunque magistros quatenus cum canapis et ferramentis et curribus dictam campanam conducant ad dictam ecclesiam dictorum fratrum etc., sub pena eorum indignationis etc. Mandantes etc. Qui Signorinus retulit se fecisse Omnia predicta.

a. On the day of 29 June 1498. The magnificent and eminent lords and the Priors of liberty and Gonfalonier of Justice of the Florentine people having been united here together etc., having safeguarded etc., have deliberated that the clapper from the bell of the Belfry is to be restituted from the friars of the church of San Marco of Florence to the priests of the church of San Lorenzo, in the hands of the aforementioned brothers; and additionally the bell of the said church of San Marco will be surrendered to the same church of San Lorenzo etc. Commanding etc.

b. The same lords having been gathered together etc., having safeguarded etc., have revoked the above ordinance only in that part in which it was ordered that the bell of the church of San Marco was to be surrendered to the church of San Lorenzo, and they wanted that, instead of the said church of San Lorenzo, it is to be surrendered to the church of the Observant brothers of Saint Francis, outside the gate of San Miniato; and therefore let a mace-bearer be given to them if needed etc. Commanding etc.

c. The same lords having been gathered together etc., having safeguarded etc., have deliberated and ordered to a high-ranking leader of the Franciscans, their preceptor, that he go to the aforementioned church of San Marco and seize the said bell of the church and have it brought to the church of the Observant brothers of Saint Francis beyond the gate of San Miniato; and to the accomplishment of this, according to the said Lords, that he gather any other prominent members of the order so that, with whips and instruments of torture and a cart, they conduct the said bell to the said church of the said brothers etc., under the pain of [the Lords'] indignation etc. Commanding etc. The Franciscan official has reported that he has done all of the things ordered.

Document 2

30 June 1498: Second set of decrees against the bell,
and any future bell, of San Marco

ASF, Sig. e Coll., Deliberazioni Ord. Aut., 100, fols. 70^v, 71^v

(In Gherardi, 313)

a. Die xxx iunii 1498.

[Magnifici ed excelsi Domini, domini Priores libertatis et Vexillifer iustitie], simul adunati etc., servatis etc., deliberaverunt quod de cetero in campanile ecclesie et Conventus Sancti Marci de Florentia non possit teneri campana

minoris ponderis librarum centum nec maioris librarum centum viginti; sub pena rebellionis cuilibet qui ipsam applicaret vel quomodolibet auxilium prestaret vel contrafaceret etc. Mandantes etc.

b. Dicti die xxx iunii 1498.

Item dicti Domini simul adunati etc., servatis etc., confinaverunt campanam que erat in campanile ecclesie Sancti Marci de Florentia, et que fuit allata ad ecclesiam Fratrum observantium Sancti Francisci, ex precepto dictorum Dominorum, ad standum extra civitatem Florentie, pro tempore et termino annorum 50 proxime futurorum; et quod durante dicto tempore non possit micti nec afferri in civitate Florentie, sub pena rebellionis adferentis et conducentis vel contrafacientis: quos sic contrafacientes et conducentes ex nunc condemnauerunt ad dictam penam rebellionis etc. Mandantes etc.

a. On the day of 30 June 1498.

The magnificent and eminent Lords, the Priors of liberty and Gonfalonier of Justice, having been gathered together etc., having safeguarded etc., have deliberated that for other [future] times in the bell tower of the church and Convent of San Marco of Florence, there cannot be held a bell of a weight inferior to one hundred pounds nor superior to one hundred twenty pounds, under pain of being declared a rebel for whomever places it there, either in providing assistance in whatsoever manner, or in violating this order etc. Commanding etc.

b. On the said day of 30 June 1498.

The same said Lords having been gathered together etc., having safeguarded etc., have confined [exiled] the bell, that was in the bell tower of the church of San Marco of Florence and that was transported to the church of the Observant brothers of Saint Francis, in accordance with the decree of the said Lords, so that it remain outside of the city of Florence for a period of 50 years; and that during this period of time, the bell can be neither sent nor brought to the city of Florence, under pain of being declared a rebel for whomever brings it, conducts it, or violates [this decree]: anyone who thus violates the decree and brings the bell the lords have now condemned to the said penalty of rebellion etc. Commanding etc.

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