

Brancaille and Abrazare: Urban Heritages and Struggles

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(Text translated from Italian by Raffaella Marino)



The hypothesis I propose is merely a personal reflection, an intellectual construction based on historical correspondences, not a definitive truth. However, I rely on solid facts: the profound and lasting influence Italy exerted on France, an influence comparable to that which ancient Greece transmitted to Rome. These cultural, martial, and artistic transmissions left their mark across Europe, leaving indelible traces in our countries that archaeology, philology, and combat arts now allow us to better understand.

France, like all territories integrated into the Roman orbit, preserved an astonishingly rich ancient heritage. In the stones of its amphitheaters, in the tesserae of its mosaics, in the names engraved on funerary steles, one can still read the echo of the combats that thrilled the Gallic-Roman crowds. Gladiatorial combat was not a distant amusement timidly imported; it was part of life, sociability, and the urban identity of Romanized cities. There was also the pancratium—the Roman form of the Greek pankration—practiced in major cities of the South and Southeast, from Narbonne to Vienne, from Arles to Lyon, from Nîmes to Bordeaux. The evidence is so numerous that it forms a true narrative fabric: mosaics depicting joint locks, inscriptions naming Olympic athletes who died in Gaul, texts by Ausonius describing the enthusiasm of local spectators, and even carefully arranged palaestrae designed to host this total combat.

Later, at the heart of the Renaissance, another Italian legacy asserted itself: that of fencing. Sixteenth-century France, fascinated by Italian finesse and elegance, imported the rapier, the emphasis on thrusting, the science of parries, the wide and mobile stance—an entire approach to the art of fighting with a blade. For nearly a century, masters in Paris were mostly Italian or trained by Italians; their treatises circulated like treasures, from the palazzi of Bologna to the private mansions of the French nobility. Then France, attentive and creative, refined this heritage: it simplified, purified, and lightened it. From this transformation arose the French school, which became the global reference by the eighteenth century. Thus, Italy gave birth to the modern rapier, and France elevated it to the status of a universal science. One invented, the other perfected; and from this

alliance arose the fencing practiced today.

There exists, between France and Italy, a form of historical fraternity almost organic in nature. I say this without arrogance or complacency: I have deep respect for France, for its people, for its culture, often misrepresented by Anglo-Saxon clichés which, since the grotesque caricature of “capitulation” spread after the Iraq War, forget that France remains one of the most victorious and strategically influential nations in European history. This reminder is all the more necessary because combat arts, when observed rigorously, reveal the extraordinary interweaving of legacies.

French popular wrestling, called *brancaille*, took two distinct forms: one rural, rooted in votive festivals and village traditions; the other urban, dark and brutal, practiced in alleyways, cellars, and suburbs. Urban *brancaille*, known as street *brancaille* or *brancaille de carrièra* in Provençal, undeniably bears the Venetian imprint. It is the natural heir of *abrazare*, the art of close-quarters combat described by Fiore dei Liberi in the fourteenth century, whose movements, joint locks, throws, and spirit still resonate today in Provençal street fights.

Clandestine fights existed worldwide, but *brancaille* stands out for the extraordinary freedom of its rules and the impossibility of cheating: each fighter represented not only himself but an entire clan, an entire street, an entire group of affiliations. “Laying down” for money was equivalent to signing one’s own death sentence, because in these dense and impoverished neighborhoods, everything was known, and everything had a price. Honor here had the taste of necessity.

Rural *brancaille*, meanwhile, existed since the Middle Ages. It entered cities as early as the thirteenth century, when thousands of ruined peasants headed to urban centers in search of work. They grouped in the poorest neighborhoods, within the famed *Cours des Miracles*, where the destitute, vagabonds, willing cripples, prostitutes, and thieves mingled. Marseille had its own, nestled in the maze of Le Panier: a tangle of steep alleys, unsanitary houses, narrow staircases—a true theater of human misery. By the seventeenth century, authorities explicitly designated this place as out of control, ruled by a “king of beggars.” It was in this rough world that the cries of clandestine fights echoed, where *brancaille* was practiced, and reputations forged.

At the same time, in the sixteenth century, another current crossed Provence: that of Italian condottieri and masters of arms, arriving in the wake of Francis I or stationed in the Comtat Venaissin, a fully Italian-speaking papal enclave. There, just a few days’ ride from Marseille, Italian culture flourished in the heart of Provence, reminding that political borders alone cannot stop cultural flows. Francis I brought artists, engineers, and also masters of arms and tacticians whose teachings circulated in French noble academies. In military camps, French and Italian soldiers

trained together, exchanging grips, techniques, and secrets. This is how *abrazare* deeply infiltrated Provençal practices, blending with local wrestling to give rise to street *brancaille*, a discipline where survival mattered more than glory.

The Marseille *Cours des Miracles* transformed from the nineteenth century onwards. Industrialization, the massive arrival of Italian and Corsican populations, the growth of the port, and extreme poverty gave rise to a new, structured, organized criminality. Le Panier became one of the centers of the Marseille underworld. It was in this fertile ground that the “*nervis*” were born: henchmen, faithful executors, or solitary mercenaries, often from the worlds of boxing, wrestling, circus, or *brancaille*. Their name—derived from the Italian “*nervo*,” meaning brute strength—speaks for itself: muscles for the port bosses, for corrupt politicians, for the clans of the Old Port.

From the 1920s onward, they became the invisible infantry of the Marseille underworld. Some worked for a specific clan; others, freer, sold their fists to the highest bidder, frequenting the dark cafés of Cours Belsunce or the establishments of the Old Port where the price of a punitive expedition was negotiated as one would a shipment. Many were former boxers, wrestlers, *luchaires*, or *brancaillaires*; they knew how to strike, absorb, intimidate. They formed a caste apart, at the boundary between spectacle, sport, and crime.

From 1928 to 1939, they composed a true private army serving the Guerini, Carbone, or Sabiani clans. The brutal destruction of the Old Port by the Nazis dispersed the old gangs, but after the war, the French Connection recruited again among these men shaped by misery and the ring. Until the 1970s, the word “*nervi*” evoked that figure in a dark suit, a shadowy silhouette, armed with a Browning, ready to sell themselves, to punish, to disappear.

Unlike boxing, sometimes called a “noble art” through a linguistic abuse meant to mask the fundamental violence it contains, *brancaille* never claimed respectability. It was born in the shadows, it grew in the shadows, and despite the efforts of Ernest Banon, Régis Renault, or Jean-Paul Jimenez to transmit and preserve it, it will remain an art of rogues, alleyways, and margins. It belongs to those secret traditions that live fully only away from the light, in places where survival is negotiated and honor is measured by the firmness of the fist.