"Squatting" in Seventeenth-Century Rome. Some Notes on Nonstandard Dwelling Practices in Early Modern Cities

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Nell'ambito del recente interesse per la nozione di informalità tra gli studiosi del Nord globale, si è assistito a una proliferazione di studi sull'abitare informale nelle città del "primo mondo". Sorprendentemente, tuttavia, e con poche notevoli eccezioni, gli storici della prima età moderna hanno prestato scarsa attenzione alle pratiche abitative marginali nelle società di Antico regime. Anche quando vengono considerate le condizioni abitative delle fasce più povere della popolazione residente, la maggior parte degli studi sembra supporre che anche i più indigenti avessero comunque accesso a una qualche forma di alloggio. Non sempre, tuttavia, le cose stavano davvero così: a volte la povertà poteva essere così estrema da rendere inaccessibile anche la soluzione abitativa più economica, e quando non si era in grado di attingere alle risorse sociali del credito, della carità o del vicinato, le strategie abitative non convenzionali potevano rappresentare l'unica opzione residua. Basandosi su alcune fonti romane del XVII secolo, l'articolo intende richiamare l'attenzione storiografica su queste pratiche, offrendo alcune riflessioni metodologiche sui nodi principali che il loro studio comporta.

Parole chiave: pratiche abitative, informalità, strategie di sopravvivenza, regimi di proprietà, povertà urbana, storia sociale dello spazio.

"*Squatting" in Seventeenth-Century Rome. Some notes on non-standard dwelling practices in Early Modern Cities*

Surprisingly, and with a few notable exceptions, early modern historians have paid little attention to nonstandard housing practices in *ancien régime* societies. Even when the housing conditions of the poorer segments of the resident population are addressed, most scholars tend to assume that even the most destitute had access to

some form of lodging, whether through a semi-formal arrangement such as subletting or accommodation in a public hospice. This article argues that this was not always the case. In some instances, poverty could be so acute that even the cheapest solutions were out of reach; and when individuals lacked access to social resources such as credit, charity, or neighbourhood support, nonstandard practices often became the only viable option. Drawing on some seventeenth-century Roman sources, this article seeks to bring these practices into the field of scholarly inquiry, while offering some methodological reflections on the challenges involved in studying them.

Introduction

In book seven of Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, a story gets told about a little rabbit and a weasel disputing over the ownership of the former's burrow. Taking advantage of its temporary abandonment due to the rabbit's absence, the weasel has invaded «the palace» and now refuses to leave, despite the protests of its original owner. Unable to resolve the matter, the two agree to submit their case to a supposedly «saintly» cat, who is in fact a Rabelaisian judge that eventually settles the dispute by devouring both plaintiff and defendant.

The fable's source – an ancient Indian parable that, through various mediations, had reached France thanks to a 1644 translation[1] – told exactly the same story, except that the disputants were two birds. But La Fontaine chose to add a further layer to his adaptation, making it «a small treatise on the origin of real property»[2]. Under his pen, the weasel and the rabbit become the standard-bearers of two different takes on the issue. While the former defends her invasion by invoking the right of the first occupant – «The land belongs to those who took it first. / Strange cause for war between us, when / It wasn't yours to start with even then!» –, the latter resorts to «custom» to validate an ancestral possession that «made this place our home, / Father to son, each generation»[3]. It is quite easy to recognise here the *mise en scène* of a (simplified) version of Roman and customary law categories, a staged confrontation between original and derivative, natural and historical modes of acquiring ownership under *ius commune*. There is probably no need to suppose any intention on La Fontaine's part to refer to contemporary «doctrinal discussions on natural law»[4], but the echo of legal thought, albeit somehow distorted, is perfectly clear.

1. *Livre des lumières, ou la Conduite des roys, composé par le sage Pilpay Indien*, Paris 1644. See Tilley (1939).
2. Gazzaniga (1998), p. 311.
3. La Fontaine (1678), pp. 179-180.
4. Gazzaniga (1998), p. 312.

But although not intended as a legal treatise, the fable's plot raises a question with broader relevance: how did pre-modern societies deal with ambiguous or contested forms of occupancy, especially in the absence of formal tenancy or property deeds? In fact, when one considers the bare facts of the story – stripped of its polemical purpose and legal overtones – it is hard to shake the impression that something oddly familiar lies beneath its fantastical surface. What «Dame Weasel» is actually doing is illegally occupying the (momentarily) uninhabited house of the rabbit – illegally, at least, from the rabbit's point of view. To put it differently, it may be accurate to say that the weasel is "squatting" in the rabbit's place. The rabbit himself seems to recognize that this is more than a theoretical dispute, as his threat to «send for rats from far / And near» to evict his opponent seems to suggest. Could it be that La Fontaine is not merely playing with abstract legal concepts, but also alluding to an existing social practice? If so, this would probably mean that the titular question – was it possible to squat in early modern societies? – would likely have to be answered in the affirmative.

Things are far more complex, however, as the very notion of "squatting" seems anachronistically out of place here. The term began to enter common European vocabularies in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when a combination of severe housing crises and the rise of large organised social movements gave birth to the first documented instances of mass occupations[5]. From these beginnings to its veritable explosion as a countercultural practice in the decades around 1968[6], squatting has consistently carried the connotation of an act of political defiance against «the hegemony of private property rights» and the regime governing their unequal distribution[7]. Even in its more neutral definitions – such as the «fact of illegally occupying a private space»[8], or the occupation of vacant buildings that the occupants have no formal legal right to[9] – the concept still implies a violation of a positive legal order premised on the existence of exclusive, unequivocal property rights granted to individual owners, regardless of whether they are "actually" using the property. It therefore proves to be utterly inapplicable to socio-legal contexts in which, by contrast, ownership entitlements can be shared among several owners, where *de facto* use and possession take precedence over recognised legal titles, and where, consequently, the boundaries between «formal» and «living» – that is, customary, material, and practice-based – modes of social regulation[10] are porous. As we shall see, this was precisely the case with early

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5. Hinton (1988). In its current meaning, the earliest occurrence of the word "squat" recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary dates from this period. See "squat, *n.*1.8", OED Online, at the following URL: https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/188245 (last access: May 10, 2025).
6. Piazza and Martínez López (2017).
7. Cobb (2015), p. 16.
8. "Squat", in Segaud, Brun and Driant (2002), pp. 393-394.
9. Bouillon (2007), p. 191.
10. Schijman (2019), pp. 15-17.

modern European legal regimes prior to the «codification fever» of the nineteenth century[11]. To speak of *ancien régime* squatting, then, can be misleading, as it risks effacing historical difference.

For this reason, the present study does not merely seek to retroactively identify practices of squatting in pre-industrial contexts. Rather, it argues that – provided the terms of inquiry are carefully defined – unconventional dwelling strategies remain a legitimate subject of historical research. Early modern cities abounded in all sorts of empty or unused spaces, as well as in destitute paupers who might resort to them to satisfy (even if only temporarily) their basic need for shelter, engaging in practices and experiences that, I contend, deserve to be studied in their own right. What follows represents an initial step in that direction. Its admittedly narrow documentary basis precludes a comprehensive or in-depth analysis. Instead, through a series of fragmentary but telling examples from seventeenth-century Rome, it highlights some of the conditions that made such practices possible, while also reflecting on the methodological challenges involved in studying them. Though modest in scope, this inquiry aims to open a path for future research into the precarious, improvised, and often invisible ways in which the poor inhabited early modern cities.

I begin by reviewing the existing literature on the subject, bringing recent sociological and ethnographic research on "informality" into dialogue with historiographical studies of early modern housing practices, in order to establish a framework within which the problem can be properly discussed. I then draw on evidence of the occupation of public and private spaces in seventeenth-century Rome to raise and discuss some preliminary methodological questions. Finally, I zoom in on a specific case study: a 1646 trial held before Rome's main criminal court, the *Tribunale del Governatore*, whose proceedings were recorded by the court notary under the heading *occupatio domus*. This case serves to assess the particularities of early modern contexts in defining and recognising standard property ownership, and to consider how these contexts differed from contemporary ones in marking the boundaries between legal possession and unlawful occupation.

1. Nonstandard Housing Strategies in Historical Perspective

In her 2021 ethnographic study of the city of Detroit, sociologist Claire Herbert documents a wide array of different «informal uses» of abandoned properties by various categories of actors[12]. These mainly consist of squatting vacant houses for residential purposes, but also include occupatying of empty lots (public or private) for farming or for creating community gardens, or «salvaging» materials from blighted buildings to resell at scrapyards or to use

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11. Herzog (2018), p. 207.
12. Herbert (2021).

them in home renovation and art projects. What unites these heterogeneous practices is that, although technically illegal and carried out without the owner's consent, they have managed to acquire a degree of social legitimacy and are therefore tolerated or even supported by other residents of the city. This is why Herbert chooses to focus on «*informality* rather than *illegality*», as a way to shed light on «facets of everyday life and the form of the city that elude the strict dichotomy of legal/licit and illegal/illicit»[13].

The notion of informality was originally introduced in the 1970s and 1980s as a tool for sociological and ethnographic inquiry into the Global South, aimed at analysing economic, political, urban, and housing practices taking place in the "grey zones" where non-existent or poorly enforced state regulation allows shared social normativities to shape action[14]. Only more recently has the notion gained traction among scholars of the Global North, who have gradually begun to recognise the extent to which informal strategies are complexly entangled with legal infrastructures, even in ostensibly formalised Western milieus[15]. Within this emerging body of research, studies of urban and housing informality in Northern cities have multiplied, covering a rich phenomenology that includes – but is not limited to – squatting and unlawful occupations. These works are calling attention to «the variety of non standard ways in which people produce, supply, and negotiate residential accommodation»[16].

This geographical expansion of the category beyond its original scope, of which Herbert's book is but one example, might suggest that a further extension, not in space but in time, could also be envisioned. Crucially, the emphasis on informality rather than on illegality shifts the analytical focus from the legal status of housing practices (and of the spaces involved) to the practices themselves, looking at how actors engage in them to cope with, resist, or even reshape their physical and socio-institutional environment and the constraints it imposes. This shift in perspective makes it possible to adapt the analysis to historical contexts in which existing legal systems «accorded an undisputed primacy to the actual possession over formal deeds»[17], and in which everyday praxis often mattered more than abstract legal norms. In other words, such an approach may enable early modern historians to trace something akin to Herbert's «informal appropriation» of

13. *Ibidem*, p. 6.
14. See Ledeneva (2018). See also AlSayyad (2004) and Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur and Ostrom (2006).
15. See Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris (2014); and Chiodelli and Tzfadia (2016).
16. Shrestha, Gurran and Maalsen (2021), p. 160 (this is an introduction to a double special issue on the topic, with several articles specifically devoted to housing informality in the Global North). A wealth of scholarship has rapidly accrued in the last decade within this emerging field of research: for just a few interesting examples, see Staid (2017); Grashoff (2020); Chiodelli, Coppola, Belotti, Berruti, Clough Marinaro, Curci and Zanfi (2021); and Cacciotti (2024).
17. Barbot (2015), p. 80.

urban space, even within the framework of markedly different property regimes.

When applied to the historical study of *ancien régime* societies, however, the notion of informality encounters at least one obvious limitation. This is not because informal dynamics were absent from the early modern social landscape; quite the opposite – they were so pervasive that invoking informality as an analytical category risks becoming almost redundant. From market exchanges and credit relations to judicial procedures to labour arrangements, and even international diplomacy, informal practices played a central role across too many domains of early modern life for informality to retain any meaningful explanatory power. This is especially true of pre-modern rental and housing markets, which appear as only loosely formalised which most transactions were conducted through informal agreements, and any officially notarised contracts were the exception rather than the rule[18]. In such a context, informality covers too vast a field to capture the more specific set of practices I wish to single out here[19]. The issue is not merely terminological but also conceptual, and it calls for a more suitable framing. For now, in the absence of a better alternative, I will use the qualifiers "nonstandard" or "unconventional" to refer to those different dwelling practices that occurred outside – or in the interstices of – the prevailing framework of standard forms of accommodation. Although admittedly imperfect, this choice has the advantage of signalling both the relative statistical rarity of such practices and their deviation from more customary housing norms.

Early modern cities were by no means unfamiliar with the presence of those whom Herbert terms «necessity appropriators»: individuals who, for various reasons and for shorter or longer stretches of their lives, were so deprived of economic and social resources that they found themselves excluded from all conventional housing options, and were thus forced to occupy whatever space they could in order to quite literally put a roof over their heads. This is, in a sense, a self-evident observation: as Raffaella Sarti aptly notes, «the homeless are certainly not a modern invention»[20]. Yet to dismiss something as obvious is sometimes to fall into the trap of assuming that it requires neither explanation nor analytical scrutiny. One of the strengths of the literature on informal occupation mentioned above lies precisely in its refusal to stop at the mere acknowledgment of these phenomena. Instead, it employs the tools of social science to investigate how individuals or groups

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18. See Ago (1998), pp. 131-133; Chauvard (2003), pp. 309-310; and Barbot (2008), p. 25.

19. For analogous reasons, alternative descriptors such as "temporary" or "precarious" are no more satisfactory, as they likewise encompass a broad swath of early modern housing arrangements, with «residential restlessness» characterizing not only the lower social strata but also the more affluent; see Ago (2021), p. 76. See also Ago (1998), pp. 20-21; and Canepari and Crisci (2019). Buchner and Hoffmann-Rehnitz (2011) have highlighted comparable challenges in the field of economic history, though their suggestion to replace "informality" with "irregularity" is not entirely convincing.

20. Sarti (2002), p. 9.

21. Lefebvre (1991), pp. 164-168.

resorted to the «appropriation» and «diversion» of portions of vacant urban space in order to reshape them according to their sheltering needs[21].

This is another benefit of bringing the research questions developed in the study of informal occupation into the analysis of early modern contexts, as it helps to open up a largely overlooked field of inquiry. In fact, with a few notable exceptions[22], and despite a rich and robust body of scholarship on the different modes of residential arrangement in early modern cities, historians have shown surprisingly limited interest in unconventional dwelling practices in *ancien régime* societies[23]. Even when the housing habits of the poorer segments of the resident population are considered, it is only very rarely that the focus extends below the lowest fringes of the legal (or semi-legal[24]) rental market, represented by subletting[25] or lodging in furnished rooms, taverns and alehouses[26]. When attention shifts instead to non-settled social groups – migrant beggars, vagrants, nomadic communities – it is typically their mobility, rather than their (however ephemeral) stability, that draws the scholar's eye. Much effort has been devoted, with considerable success, to reconstructing the patterns and causes of their migration. Yet the question of where these people "stayed" during their temporary sojourns has been seldom raised. Finally, a third way of «accommodating poverty», aimed at the more integrated category of the "deserving" poor, has also been sometimes examined. This includes various types of housing assistance provided by parishes, poor relief institutions, charitable associations, and private benefactors – from purpose-built settlements to almshouses, reception in public hospices, and rent-free accommodations offered by individual landlords «*pro amore Dei*»[27].

Michela Barbot, whose works have greatly contributed to deepening our understanding of the complex relationship between residence and citizenship in early modern cities, offers an apt summary of this state of the art: «for those who lacked the qualities required to enter the rental regime» – that is, irregular low-income or seasonal workers, along with the "worthy" or "shamefaced" poor – subletting, temporary stays in inns and hostelries, or support from public and private charity were the only remaining options. A

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22. Mostly from studies focusing on the English context. See Ward (1980; 2002); Hitchcock (2004), especially pp. 23-48; Boulton, (2011), especially pp. 35-39; and, but on a quite different topic, McDonagh and Griffin (2016).

23. The study of housing informality has been comparatively more successful among contemporary historians. For some recent examples, see the articles collected in the special issue of «Histoire & Mesure», 34, 1 (2019), under the title *Favelas, bidonvilles, baracche, etc.: recensements et fichiers*; Pullan (2020); and Bartolini (2020).

24. In fact, hybrid situations abounded, as in the case of the Neapolitan *fondaci*. See Marin (2021).

25. See Barbot (2008), pp. 160-166.

26. See Roche (1987, pp. 97-126; 2000); Fumerton (2002); Canepari (2021); and Carnevale (2024).

27. See Broad (2000); Chauvard (2003), pp. 305-323; Fortini Brown (2004); and the essays collected in part III of McEwan and Sharpe (2011).

further step down, right «at the bottom of the hierarchy of the miserable», lay those who, like gypsies and vagabonds, «by definition inhabited nowhere»[28]. As she more recently concludes, «in all their great diversity, the many forms of urban property occupation (…) offered newcomers and long-time residents alike a kaleidoscope of residential possibilities with powerful inclusive effects»[29].

However, it is fair to ask whether this picture truly captures the full range of lodging possibilities which were available to the poor and the destitute. After all, even those who inhabited nowhere still needed somewhere to sleep at night. And while the availability of extremely low-cost accommodations, the widespread use of credit, and various strategies of cohabitation may have lowered the threshold for accessing affordable housing, there was always, at any given moment, a conspicuous – if difficult to quantify – number of individuals who were not even partially integrated into the local community, and were thus unable to draw on family or "national" networks, neighbourhood support, social credit, or charitable institutions to meet their housing needs[30]. Despite their inclusive potential, these residential forms invariably left a corresponding zone of exclusion – one in which nonstandard routes may have represented the only viable option. Bringing this shadow zone into the field of scholarly inquiry is one of the central aims of this study.

Yet aside from the smokescreen of apparent obviousness, there is another and more substantial reason for the partial neglect of this topic. The precarious and unsystematic nature of unconventional accommodation practices meant that they left only scant and transient traces in the archives. Even when not formalised by a notary, letting and even subletting agreements often involved a certain degree of «publicity», which could generate various kinds of written documentation, such as testimonies in legal disputes or private writings. By contrast, the irregular appropriation of unused property was, and largely remains, an « "under the radar" activity», whose participants were «mostly hidden from view»[31]. Something similar can be said about vagrancy: vagrants typically came to the attention of public authorities – and their presence registered in criminal proceedings – not because they were "residing" somewhere, but precisely because they were "wandering" without fixed abode and visible means of support[32]. Their dwelling practices, therefore, left little or no documentary trace, rendering them elusive to historical inquiry and prone to scholarly oversight. The relative silence of secondary sources on the matter may thus owe less to the topic's historical irrelevance than to a perceptual bias shaped by the limitations of the available source base.

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28. Barbot (2013), pp. 40-45.
29. Barbot (2024), p. 94.
30. On this relatively broad range of residential solutions available to migrants, see, for the specific case of early modern Rome, Canepari (2007; 2009); and Cabibbo and Serra (2017).
31. O'Mahony and Hickey (2015), p. 5.
32. See Humphries (1999); Gueslin (2013); and Dani (2018).

2. Early Modern Appropriations: Cases from Seventeenth-Century Rome

The paucity of direct archival records does not mean, however, that "indirect" traces have not occasionaly been captured in the web of documents produced for other purposes. Evidence of the unconventional housing practices of the poor has indeed survived, but, as Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker observe more broadly about the lives of the non-elite, «it is spread almost randomly across hundreds of thousands of pages. To construct a history from below, the first and most necessary task is therefore to dismember the archives themselves, and reconstruct them with plebeian lives in mind»[33]. The following sections present a collection of cases I have thus far identified through a similar method of archival dismemberment and reconstruction. All are drawn from the context of seventeenth-century Rome, though I also refer, where relevant, to examples from other parts of Italy and Europe. Their aim, however, is not to offer a comprehensive or definitive account of nonstandard dwelling practices in a given time and place, but rather to illuminate the methodological challenges these practices present – and the types of sources that can be mobilised to address them.

2.1. Market Stalls, Porches and Barns: Shelter Strategies and the Use of Urban Space

One of the key lessons from contemporary literature on informality is that unconventional shelter practices cannot be reduced to the mechanical act of occupying a physical location out of sheer necessity. Enacted by human agents operating within human environments, they always involve an aspect of agency and strategic reasoning – essential for navigating what are not only material but also legal and social spaces. A first step in analysing these practices is therefore to understand how occupiers deliberately selected specific sites in order to take advantage of the normative frameworks in which they were embedded, using them to secure protection from both natural and social exposure.

Let us begin with what may be considered the baseline level of shelter: the appropriation of outdoor public spaces. In his 1655 treatise on the Roman prison system, the Modenese bishop Giovanni Battista Scanaroli describes how, during the summer months, large number of «vagabonds» would settle in Piazza Navona and sleep there under the open sky («sub dio dormire»). Scanaroli does not provide much detail about their identities or places of origin, but from what he writes immediately afterward it can be inferred that at least some were likely unemployed labourers who had come to the city to try to earn a living, as the reference to the calluses on their hands – which the Roman *birri* inspected to distinguish idle vagrants from the legitimate poor –

33. Hitchcock and Shoemaker (2015), p. 24.

seems to imply[34]. Though seemingly offering little protection from bad weather or police oversight, staying in the open carried certain advantages: it drew on the long-standing nature of the practice, the strength-in-numbers afforded by the many who resorted to it, and the legal recognition of streets and squares as spaces open to common use by all (*res in publico usu*)[35].

Indeed, the Roman criminal archives contain numerous instances of people found sleeping rough, often arrested and questioned on suspicion of theft, burglary, or vagrancy. One such case was that of Giovanni Pietrangeli, accused in 1609 of being part of a gang of pickpockets. During his interrogation, he recounted his miserable living conditions. He had previously worked for a goldsmith and lodged in his workshop, but after contracting scabies, he had been unable to practise his trade for over a month, causing him to slide to the bottom of the housing ladder: «when I had some money, I went to sleep at a lodging-house in Campo de' Fiori, and when I had no money, I went to sleep sometimes under the stalls of Campo de' Fiori, and some others at the Mont'Alto palace»[36]. He also added that both under the market stalls and in the courtyard of the (no longer extant) villa Peretti Montalto, he had often spent the night with a bunch of «bad boys and beggars» (*certi ragazzacci et stracciati*)[37]. Pietrangeli's testimony is particularly significant, as it sheds light on two key dimensions of nonstandard dwelling. It suggests that these accommodations were not necessarily stable or long-term, but rather a constrained choice that could be alternated with periods of regular or semi-regular lodging. But it also shows that, however inexpensive and accessible they might have been, even the cheapest solutions – such as taverns or furnished rooms – could still prove unaffordable for the utterly destitute.

The allusion to the *tavolati* of Campo de' Fiori is also indicative of another strategy that was widespread among early modern necessity appropriators. At the end of the day, after their daytime use had been temporarily suspended, wooden shelves in front of small shops and stalls in squares and markets could be converted into makeshift refuges. This was common practice in many other European cities: in London, for example, where «at night, cleared and disregarded, the bulks formed a convenient shelter for the homeless, an almost traditional prerequisite of the poor»[38]; or in Naples, where eighteenth-century travellers marvelled at the large number of down-and-out people who huddled at dusk under empty market stands or other similar niches[39]. This alternative

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34. Scanaroli (1655), p. 239.
35. See Dani (2014).
36. Archivio di Stato di Roma (ASR), *Tribunale criminale del Governatore* (TCG), *Processi*, b. 78, fols. 751r-v: «[…] dopo che io mi ammalai, et mi partij dall'Hospidale e che non potevo lavorare per essermi empito di male andavo a dormire quando havevo denari ad una bettola in Campo di Fiore, et quando non havevo quatrini andavo a dormire quando sotto il tavolato di Campo di Fiore, et quando nel palazzo di Mont'alto». The case of Pietrangeli is discussed in Baldassari (2005), p. 24.
37. ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 78, fol. 752r.
38. Hitchcock (2004), p. 33.
39. Anselmo and Marin (2020), p. 28. See also Carnevale (2024), p. 77.

could obviously offer only the most precarious of accommodations, but it had the advantage of providing some defence against the wind and rain.

The element of agency and strategic decision-making – reflecting a keen awareness of the «different modulations» and varying normative significance of urban spaces[40] – was particularly evident in the appropriation of areas adjacent to religious buildings and centres of secular power, such as churchyards, porches, convent steps, and the portals or courtyards of noble palaces. These locations offered a slightly higher degree of protection, not only from adverse weather but also from unwanted encounters with city authorities. Choosing to sleep on church steps or in other supposedly immune spaces could amount to a deliberate attempt to exploit that immunity in order to avoid police scrutiny[41]. Moreover, occupying church porches or other devotional spaces can be read as a conscious decision by the poor to «publicise their destitution», staging a silent reproach to members of the religious community for their blatant lack of charity[42]. Alternatively, one could seek shelter behind the halo of untouchability surrounding powerful noble figures, by entering not only their premises but also, where possible, their patronage networks. Such was the case of a man arrested in Rome in 1665 – likely on suspicion of vagrancy – who claimed to have been sleeping with others on a cart in the stables of the Pamphilj palace, and to have occasionally run errands for members of the family. He invoked this high-level connection in the hope of securing his release[43].

Even the most trivial and, quite literally, down-to-earth solutions were far from devoid of social meaning. They always entailed a cultural dimension that appropriators had to carefully recognize and manage. It was not mere chance, then, but a deliberate effort to exploit a well-established moral economy of hospitality – shaped by religious obligations to shelter the homeless as well as by the routine nature of mobility in *ancien régime* societies – that helps explain what was likely the most common choice among the unsettled. Sources from across Europe abound with "vagrants", itinerant workers and other nomadic figures sleeping in barns, stables, cattle sheds, and the like – whether used or not – often with the consent of their owners. This theme also became a commonplace in popular ballads and picaresque narratives[44]. A late seventeenth-century English broadsheet, for instance, has its beggars boast of their supposedly merry condition – of which a rent-free existence was no small part: «Sometimes in Farmers Barns lye we, / And sometimes in a Hollow Tree; / No Rent we pay, nor none we mean»[45]. The practice was so

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40. Chauvard (2005), p. 7.
41. Ago (2021), p. 108.
42. Hindle (2007).
43. ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 565, fols. 413 r-v. On the complex clientele networks linking together the highest levels of Roman nobility with the lowest ranks of society, see Canepari (2013).
44. See Harvey (1984); and Hitchcock (2018).
45. *The Jovial Beggars Merry Crew*, London 1671-1702?, British Library, The

widespread that even otherwise settled individuals might resort to it when circumstances demanded. A Florentine hat-maker travelling with his brother-in-law to Leghorn during the 1630 plague outbreak recounted how, having arrived too late in the day to enter the city, they took shelter beneath two haylofts just outside the walls, «where seven or eight porters were also sleeping, who, as they told us, are used to sleeping there every night»[46].

Rural annexes were not exclusive to the rural landscape, though. Many early modern cities – including Rome – were «still half rural» themselves[47], dotted with «stables, barns, outhouses, bog-houses and kitchens, tucked away but still accessible»[48], with their *intra muros* zones comprising «extensive tracts of rural land»[49]. A quick glance at one of Giovanni Battista Falda's maps of Rome, the so-called "little map" of 1667, is enough to grasp the texture of the urban fabric of the time: even within the walled perimeter, the built habitat occupies just over a quarter of the total area. The rest consists of vineyards, gardens, parks and cultivated fields[50]. Though gradually disappearing with the advent of industrial urbanisation, service buildings connected to farming and livestock activities would continue to shelter the poorest among the urban poor well into the nineteenth century. In some cases, priests even recorded them as places of residence in parish censuses, as did the one responsible for the Roman parish of San Silvestro and Martino ai Monti, who in the *status animarum* of 1640 listed seven people living in «the barn behind [the church of] San Pietro in Vincoli»[51]. Moreover, even where such facilities were unavailable, the presence of mews, stables, and coach-houses, which were essential to meet the needs of upper-class transportation, could serve as a second option.

2.2. Caves and Ruins: Nonstandard Dwelling and the Cityscape

Other cases allow us to highlight the relationship between nonstandard forms of dwelling and the specific morphology and geography of each city. Every urban context had its own geological and historical peculiarities, which

Roxburghe Collection, accessed through *The English Broadside Ballad Archive*, EBBA 31350, at the following URL: https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu (last access: october, 27, 2025). Beneath the moralistic and sarcastic overtones, it is not difficult to discern here the reality of poverty extreme enough to preclude access even to the most precarious forms of tenancy.

46. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Sanità, *Negozi*, F. 150, fols. 154-55 r-v, quoted in Calvi (1984), p. 40: «Et arrivativi la sera non potemmo entrare perché era tardi e dormimmo di qua da Livorno sotto due pagliai, dove con esso noi dormirno anche sette o otto facchini che sono soliti dormirvi ogni sera, secondo che ci dissero».

47. Morris (2013), p. 194.

48. Hitchcock (2004), p. 25.

49. Canepari (2016), p. 115.

50. Falda (1667). See McPhee (2012), p. 241.

51. Archivio storico del vicariato di Roma (ASVR), *Parrocchia di San Martino ai Monti*, Stati d'anime, 1640, fol. 10r.

shaped the possibilities and modalities of spatial appropriation. Conversely, these unconventional practices could in turn modify the urban environment – at times quite literally, by carving living spaces directly into the rock. Where the terrain permitted, people could settle in natural caverns or in grottoes dug out for the purpose, adapting them as makeshift homes. As Eleonora Canepari has shown, caves were often used in the Roman countryside to provide temporary accommodation for agricultural workers at no cost to their employers, but they could also serve as dwellings for those living within the city walls[52]. Nor was this phenomenon unique to Rome. In 1639, the English poet John Taylor reported how in Nottingham, a town with «very faire buildings» and «many large streets»,

a great number of the inhabitants (especially the poorer sort) doe dwell in vaults, holes, or caves, which are cut and digged out of, (or within) the Rocke: so that if a man be destitute of a house, it is but to goe to Nottingham, and with a Mattock, a Shovell, a Crow of Iron, a Chizell, and Mallet, and such instruments, he may play the Mole, the Cunny, or the Pioner, and worke himselfe a Hole, or a Burrow, for him and his family[53].

The relative popularity of this practice should come as no surprise; whether natural or man-made, such concavities could provide for free a reasonable degree of shelter and even some tangible withdrawal from public view.

These were not the only «uninhabitable» parts of the urban environment[54] that could be made habitable through appropriation. In cities where the legacy of the past was still very much present, ancient ruins, dilapidated or semi-dilapidated buildings, remnants of structures that had long since lost their original function and were no longer in use, all represented another sheltering opportunity for those who, for whatever reason, were unable or unwilling to access ordinary lodging or housing markets. Their state of abandonment made them dangerous and unsafe refuges, but it also implied a general lack of interest that would hopefully keep their inhabitants away from the inquisitive eye of the guardsmen. This is probably one of the reasons why the practice of residing in mausoleums or under the arcades of some dilapidated monument has such a long history; references in the *Digest* attests to its existence since the third century A.D., and its traces can still be found in twentieth-century censuses[55].

In Rome in particular, the practice of «squatting» in ancient monuments and repurposing them «for all sorts of domestic and commercial use» dated back at least to the sixth century, involving both ordinary inhabitants and

52. Canepari (2020).
53. Taylor (1639), p. 11. This passage is partially quoted in Ward (2002), p. 16.
54. Lefebvre (1996), p. 112: «Paradoxically, taken at this level, the city is made up of uninhabited and even uninhabitable spaces: public buildings, monuments, squares, streets, large or small voids».
55. See, respectively, van den Bergh (2003), p. 454; and Bartolini (2020), p. 149.

members of the local nobility[56]. Evidence of this use was still visible in the seventeenth century. The remains of Roman villas and medieval towers scattered across the countryside just beyond the city walls were used as temporary dwellings by shepherds and other rural labourers working in the surrounding area. In 1643, for example, the priest of the parish of San Martino ai Monti noted in the *status animarum* eight shepherds (*pecorari*) living in the Torre di Schiavi, the name then given to what were in fact the vestiges of a third-century Roman mausoleum[57]. Around 1625, the priest of San Giovanni in Laterano entered in the parish register a married couple – Pietro Antonio from Cerreto and his wife Ademia – living «in the arch beneath the Colosseum» (*all'archo sotto il Coloseo*)[58]. Interestingly, Pietro Antonio reappears at the same location some six years later, in the *status animarum* of 1631, this time with his 20-year-old sister Fiora[59]. We do not know what had happened to Ademia, nor whether Pietro had remained there the whole time, but his continued presence suggests that this was more than a fleeting arrangement and may point to the relative stability such accommodation could offer[60].

2.3. A Night at the Limekiln: Social Profiles of the Necessity Appropriators

One of the main challenges in analysing early modern unconventional dwelling lies in the difficulty of reconstructing who the dwellers were and, even more so, what motivated their actions. This marks a key difference between history and other social sciences dealing with informality: historians cannot rely on interviews to build actors' profiles or access their perspectives directly. Yet this does not make the task entirely hopeless. In this regard, criminal court records – if approached with due caution – can occasionally yield valuable insights[61], as shown by the example that follows. Preserved in the archives of the *Tribunale del Governatore*, Rome's principal criminal court from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, this document offers a rare glimpse into the experiences of homeless migrants in the seventeenth-century

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56. Hopkins and Beard (2005), p. 162. See also Dey (2021), pp. 137-169.

57. ASVR, *Parrocchia di San Martino ai Monti*, Stati d'anime, 1643.

58. ASVR, *Parrocchia di San Giovanni in Laterano*, Stati d'anime, [1630]. The entry is reported with the date 1630 in Canepari (2016), p. 121. However, the register in which it appears is not dated, and the year 1630 is only an admittedly hypothetical (and probably incorrect) guess by the anonymous archivist who filed it.

59. ASVR, *Parrocchia di San Giovanni in Laterano*, Stati d'anime, 1631.

60. In his *Italienische Reise*, recounting a nighttime walk in February 1787 during his stay in Rome, Goethe could still note the presence of «some beggars [who] have made themselves at home in the crumbling vaults» of the Colosseum. See Stewart 2020, pp. 175-177.

61. For a discussion of the interpretive possibilities offered by Roman criminal archives for studying the social trajectories of strangers and foreigners, see Vasta (2017).

papal capital. It records the interrogations of fifty individuals arrested as vagrants by the court's *birri* during different night patrols between January and February 1623[62]. In their responses, almost all of them specify the exact location where they were apprehended: details that, given the nighttime arrests, generally correspond to the places they had chosen as their shelter. Six report being found in «piazza del Duca Sforza» (now Piazza Barberini), and two of them add that they were sleeping in a barn there[63]. Three others mention the arcade of St. Mark, near present-day Piazza Venezia[64]. These are two types of locations we have already encountered. However, the vast majority, thirty in total, state that they were arrested at the «*calcara del Carabella*», «together with many others»[65]. They were referring to a limekiln located in the area of the Botteghe Oscure, then owned by the Carabella family, which traditionally supplied lime for the new buildings in the neighbourhood[66]. As it happens, spending the night in a kiln must have been a common survival strategy among Rome's destitute – so common, in fact, that it even emerged as a distinct theme in seventeenth-century genre painting[67].

What is most significant, however, is that the information disclosed during the interrogations also provides valutable insight into the sociological profile of these individuals. They are all men and, with one exception, foreigners, mainly from the Papal States and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, but also from other parts of Italy (Naples, Venice, Savoy). They are relatively young, with an average age of 22: the youngest is 11, the oldest 40. Most report having arrived in the city only recently, generally within the past six months (with five having been there for less than a week, and seven for under a month); those who have stayed longer say they have been unemployed for an extended period or have no trade at all. The relative majority (fourteen individuals) identify themselves as current or former agricultural labourers (*lavoratore di campagna*), followed by six dockers, three soldiers, two servants, two fruit sellers, two textile workers, and a handful of others (including one tailor, one

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62. ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 184, fols. 140r-149v. The document appears to be incomplete, as it ends midway through the interrogation of the fiftieth man, whose responses are missing. On the repression of vagrancy and begging in seventeenth-century Rome, see Fatica (1992). For further insights into the control of foreigners in early modern cities, see Zannini (2023).

63. ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 184, fols. 142r and 143v.

64. *Ibidem*, fols. 140v, 141r and 143r.

65. See for example *ibidem*, fol. 143r.

66. See Manacorda (2002). I thank professor Manacorda for his precious help.

67. Incidentally, this piece of archival evidence can indeed shed new light on the much-debated question of the actual degree of realism present in the works of the *Bamboccianti*, whose genre scenes were very popular on the Roman art market in the first half of the century, and one of whose favourite themes was the depiction of tramps and vagrants against the backdrop of ancient ruins and indeed modern limekilns. See Levine (1988). While Levine claims that the subject was merely an iconographic device to paradoxically convey «high thoughts» through «low imagery», our source seems to challenge such entirely idealising interpretations.

carpenter, and one rag seller). Eighteen claim to be temporarily unemployed due to a debilitating illness or the lack of work opportunities. Of these, three say they are getting by through odd jobs, while four admit to surviving on the charity of others. To them must be added three more who explicitly define themselves as beggars. Some even offer an explanation for why they were sleeping where they were. This is the case, for example, of Domenico Ciriani from Francavilla, an 18-year-old stevedore, who says he sought shelter at the *calcara* to warm himself[68] – it was a winter's night, and the residual heat from the daily operation of the furnace must have been particularly inviting. Another man, aged 30, states plainly that he went there because he had «no money to lodge»: that is, no money to lodge anywhere else[69].

The fragmentary and highly casual nature of the source precludes any statistical interpretation. Nevertheless, it offers a fairly clear picture of the sociological background of this group of homeless men and, to some extent, their motivations. What emerges is a condition of extreme – if possibly temporary – destitution, in which youth, displacement, the breakdown of family ties, and the unstable dynamics of a «baroque economy» exposed individuals to acute precariousness[70]. They undoubtedly qualify as indigent, but their almost complete extraneity to the local context and, in most cases, their lack of employment prevented them from being recognised as part of the category of the "deserving poor" – a label that might have granted them access to the «moral economy» that regulated housing exchanges and defined the boundaries of housing inclusion in early modern societies[71].

3. Artificial Vacancies: A Case of Contested Ownership in Seventeenth-Century Rome

In her book on Detroit, Herbert argues that the tendency to resort to «informal appropriation» finds particular traction in what she calls «declining cities», where two essential conditions converge: inconsistent police surveillance and high vacancy rates[72]. Notably, both of these conditions were also present in many *ancien régime* cities. In fact, the imbalance between limited police forces and the vast territory and population they were expected to oversee often rendered effective control objectively «impossible»[73]. As for

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68. ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 184, fol. 141r: «fui preso questa notte alla Calcara con altri che vi ero andato a scaldarmi».

69. *Ibidem*, fol. 149r: «e son [stato] preso alla calcara, dove ero and.[a]to per non havere quattrini d'allogiare».

70. This picture also broadly overlaps with the demographic profile of early modern Rome, where male immigrants consistently made up a large part – if not the majority – of the population. See Sonnino (1997); and Ago (2023), pp. 107-111.

71. See Barbot (2007).

72. Herbert (2021), pp. 32-52.

73. Zannini (2023), p. 579.

vacancy, a 1642 «report on the city of Rome» went so far as to claim that most of its houses were actually uninhabited[74]. This was clearly an exaggeration, but it contained a kernel of truth: derelict properties were indeed numerous, and could offer a relatively safe haven for early modern squatters, at least in most of the major cities of early modern Europe. In his book on the lives of poor eighteenth-century Londoners, Tim Hitchcock reconstructs the trajectory of a group of destitute women who had been occupying the garret of a vacant house for quite some time, only to be eventually found dead or on the verge of starvation by a prospective buyer of the building. However sad, this story shows how the women's ability «to live for months and years as squatters reflects the extent to which it was possible to find shelter from the weather – if not from the harsh winds of economic depression»[75]. They had managed to survive that long only because their dwelling strategy had allowed them to devote the meagre income they earned from begging or casual work at a nearby market entirely to food – something that would have been impossible had they been forced to pay even for the cheapest lodgings. This was another essential ingredient of an «experience of squatting» that, to borrow Hitchcock's words, was not «unusual. It was simply one end of a continuum of housing arrangements that sheltered the poor»[76]. That is why similar practices can be found almost everywhere, from Rennes[77] to Naples, where, according to the Prince of Strongoli, most beggars «do not live in houses of their own but in a few caves, stables or ruined houses (...)»[78].

So far, I have found no substantial evidence that anything similar happened in seventeenth-century Rome – which, of course, given the methodological difficulties discussed above, cannot be taken as proof that nothing of the sort ever occurred there. In a series of petitions from the mid-eighteenth century addressed to the *Presidente delle Strade* – the Roman magistracy responsible, among other things, for the upkeep of buildings and streets – several private citizens complained about the state of neglect of a neighbouring house, which, they claimed, had turned into «a hideout for wrongdoers» (*un nascondiglio di malviventi*)[79]. Might it not be, then, that behind this ominous image, shaped by the fears and suspicions of local residents, we can discern the shadowy presence of the necessity appropriators?

However, this was perhaps not the only way in which someone could be said to occupy another person's property in the particular socio-legal milieu of

74. Schiavoni (1971), p. 373.
75. Hitchcock (2004), pp. 30-31.
76. *Ibidem*, p. 31. See also Boulton (2011), p. 39.
77. See Fontaine (2022), p. 70.
78. Pignatelli (1782), p. 51: «La maggior parte di essi non abitano in case proprie, ma in alcune grotte, stalle, abitazioni dirute (…)». I found mention of this passage in Braudel (1981), p. 532.
79. ASR, *Presidenza delle strade*, b. 200. Unfortunately, almost all petitions from the seventeenth century have been lost; what survives is only a single folder from the 1650s, containing requests for tax exemption.

the *ancien régime*. In fact, most of the cases considered so far took place in spaces that were vacant – either temporarily, having been abandoned for the night by their daytime users, or permanently, having been left unused altogether. Vacancy here seems to be something actors just happened to "find", a "given" condition of which they might take advantage within their survival strategies, but which they did not "create". This is maybe too "naturalistic" an approach, though[80]. In the peculiar context of early modern property regimes, where the legal right to possession was less important than possession itself, and where, «consequently, the discriminatory factor [lay] more in the ability to enjoy an asset, rather than in its ownership»[81], it was theoretically possible to work with (rather than merely play by) the rules of law to "produce" vacancy, to modify the institutional landscape so as to artificially determine an interruption in the transmission of property – a void that could be subsequently occupied anew[82].

Moreover, the *ius commune* had inherited a tendency to favour the social value of real property over the private interests of its negligent owner. This *odium negligentiae* had been enshrined into Roman law through the fourth-century institute of *agri deserti*, that allowed those who had seized and cultivated a piece of vacant land because of the prolonged absence of the owner to acquire its ownership after a period of two years. Originally introduced to cope with the increasing depopulation of the countryside at the frontiers of the empire[83], the *favor culturae rei immobilis* was to be evoked times and again in later epochs, whenever an analogous risk of a decrease in agricultural production due to demographic decline – as, say, after a plague outbreak – would present itself[84]. The doctrine clearly concerned rural rather than urban property, and its rationale lay more in the protection of public interest than the safeguard of the rights of the occupant. But it can still attest to the presence in legal thought of the idea that, under certain conditions and within certain limits, the standard canon and civil law leanings against the *mala fides* possessor of real property could sometimes be overcome[85].

80. For a "non-naturalistic" approach to vacancy, see the recent issue of «Quaderni Storici» on *Neglected Properties*, along with the reflections offered by the two editors in the introductory essay: «In the end, all these cases show us that an "abandoned property" is not something "natural" but there is always a work of qualification that paves the way to some procedure for management, occupation or for dispossession and reallocation»; cfr. Buono and Schijman (2023), p. 579.

81. Ago (1995), p. 4. On the peculiar characteristics of pre-modern legal conceptions of property, see Grossi (1992); and, for a special focus on real property, Barbot (2008), pp. 81-86.

82. Incidentally, this was not only true of real estate, but of any kind of possession, even personal identity. See Buono (2020), especially pp. 104-108, where a strategy similar to the one I am about to describe is used to get rid of an old identity and forge a new one.

83. The extent of the phenomenon is however debated. See Whittaker (1976); and Grey (2007).

84. See Ascheri (2020), p. 45.

85. On the juridical regulation of abandoned things (*res derelictae*) in Roman law and on *bona fides* as a requirement for their licit acquisition, see Vacca (1983; 1984). For a

Coupled with the chronic lack of formalisation that characterised real estate exchanges and rental markets in *ancien régime* societies, this created a normative environment that could be ideal for social actors to manipulate and produce legal effects that could meet their housing needs and aspirations.

Or, at least, try to do so. The following case represents a (failed) attempt at navigating this particular conformation of the socio-legal terrain in order to, literally, make a home for oneself. It also shows that the possibility of actively creating a vacancy in the continuity of property transmission was, in fact, something more than just a possibility. The events can be reconstructed through a dossier preserved in the criminal archives of the aforementioned *Tribunale del Governatore*. It is a record of the trial held in April 1646 against a man and a woman who were accused of «occupation of a house and false testimony» (*occupat[io]nis domus et falsae deposit[io]nis*)[86]. The court's action was prompted by a complaint filed by two sisters, Eugenia and Anna Sabbatini, the daughters of the late Fabio Sabbatini, an apothecary (*speziale*) from Palermo who had long been settled in Rome, and the late Laura, a Roman woman about whom nothing more is said in the proceedings[87]. At the moment of the complaint, they had been residing for some years in the monastery of St. Eufemia (no longer in extant), popularly known as *zitelle sperse* (lost spinsters), where they joined the large population of women confined in Roman conservatories, the contours of which have been masterfully outlined by Angela Groppi[88]. They claimed to be the rightful heirs and owners of a house located in the Borgo neighbourhood, at the corner between the street of Borgo Vittorio and the place known as *chiavica delle vaschette* (the current Piazza delle Vaschette). The house had been rented in 1636 by their father to Francesco Ferro, a Sienese cobbler (*calzettaro*) who, then in his forties, had been plying his trade in Rome for some twenty years and eventually managed to open his own workshop in Monte Giordano[89]. Ferro, the complaint went on, had immediately brought into the house Giulia Thei (or Thea), a Perugian woman he had known for quite a long time[90], as he used to have her now dead husband – a barber-surgeon (*cerusico*) at the service of the cardinal of Savoy – had been one of his clients[91].

general historical overview of the more specific issue of the *res immobiles derelictae*, see Bona (2017), pp. 15-60.

86. ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 399 bis, fols. 1380r-1405r.

87. The information about the provenance of Anna and Eugenia's parents is not contained in the dossier, but can be learned from another sworn testimony given in 1645 in favour of the two sisters before the notary of the civil court of the Governatore. See ASR, *Tribunale civile del Governatore*, b. 153, fols. 617v-621r.

88. Groppi (1994); on St. Eufemia, see Vasaio (1984).

89. At the time of his first appearance before the court's notary on April 16th, he declared to have been residing and working in the city «for approximately 24 or 25 years» (ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 399 bis, fol. 1387v).

90. 18 years according to his deposition (fol. 1388r), 23 according to hers (fol. 1398v).

91. Thei's presence is confirmed by the transcription of the parish *status animarum*, which recorded it since 1636 (fol. 1405r).

Things, however, started to go awry only a few years later in 1642 when, after the demise of Fabio Sabbatini somewhere around 1639, Thei began claiming the house as her own and «disputing its ownership» (*controvertere il dominio*) against the plaintiffs. A long and uncertain judicial skirmish followed, with both parties appealing to different Roman courts on multiple occasions to have their (presumed) rights certified and the other's pretensions called into question[92]. The judges of the Curia di Borgo had initially agreed to the sisters' request and granted them an eviction warrant (*mandato de evacuando*) against Ferro and Thei, and the decision had been confirmed some time (and an appeal by Thei) later by the civil branch of the *Tribunale del Governatore* itself. But a new appeal filed by Giulia at the beginning of that year to the *Segnatura di Giustizia* – and based on the sworn testimonies of Ferro himself and another acquaintance of hers, a 22-year-old Roman citizen named Francesco Pandolfo – had reversed the course of the lawsuit, providing her with an order of repossession with which she again occupied the house. For Anna and Eugenia, petitioning the criminal court of the *Governatore* was thus a last attempt at setting things straight. They succeeded in having Thei and Ferro imprisoned, and although no sentence is recorded, the irrefutable nature of the evidence they were able to adduce leaves little doubt as to what the outcome might have been.

However, what interests us here is the strategy carried out by Giulia Thei to reach her goal. Her situation after her husband's death looked grim. Ferro said she had no profession and lived by begging[93]. She was also probably homeless; before entering the house in Borgo, she had been hosted by «a gentleman» (*gentilhuomo*) for some months, and the same had happened after her eviction, when Fabrizio Bettino, another *calzettaro* she had met through Ferro, let her stay at his place «*per Carità*»[94]. Ferro himself, once pressed by the court's questioning, confessed to having accommodated her in Sabbatini's house «for the love of God» (*per l'amore di Dio*)[95]. Having to face these harsh conditions, Giulia decided to cope with them in the most determined way. First, she concocted a story in which the house had been bequeathed to her by «a priest» of the cardinal's court, whom she had nursed during the last days of his illness; in this alternate version, *she* had housed Francesco out of pure charity. Next, she started spreading the story among her neighbourhoods and the network of her acquaintances, and acting as the real owner of the place.

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92. On the strategic use of the judiciary system as a way of establishing an otherwise uncertain legal title in seventeenth-century Rome, see Ago (1998). On the complex tangle of Roman tribunals and jurisdictions in the pre-unification period, see Fosi (2007); and Di Simone (2011).

93. ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 399 bis, fol. 1388v: «lei non fa arte alcuna ma va accattando».

94. *Ibidem*, fol. 1394r.

95. *Ibidem*, fol. 1396v. «*Pro amore Dei*» was the formulaic expression signalling a charitable intention to house the poor for free or at reduced rent: see Chauvard (2003), p. 315.

She convinced Ferro to stop paying the rent, hired a carpenter to have a ladder repaired[96], and repeatedly and publicly affirmed to be the «master» (*padrona*) of the house. Finally, she made use of the judicial system to have her fictional reality legally validated through the testimonies of her acolytes. The words Ferro swore before the notary of the *Segnatura* aptly summarized this elaborate plot :

The truth is that at the time when said Thei was being harassed by said Sabbatini sisters, she inhabited the house as her own, and it is also true that she did not pay nor she had ever paid any rent, lease, or anything to anyone in the past, (...) and she [had made] every other possessory act that real owners usually make with their own things, and this is not only public knowledge in the neighbourhood, but there is also public voice and fame of it[97].

Given the bold nature of her strategy, what is striking is not that Thei's plan eventually failed, but that, on the contrary, it had worked for quite a while. A destitute, foreign widower with no trade nor home, she had managed to live for some years in another's house rent-free, and without having to resort to public charity. She had taken advantage of the distinctive features of her socio-normative environment to try creating a vacancy in which she could dwell. And, in so far as these features were also common to many other contemporary contexts, it is possible that her case, though undoubtedly exceptional, was not unique[98]. This marks a clear discontinuity with post-codification societies, a discontinuity that must be taken into account when selecting the sources and methodological perspectives that may be relevant to the study of early modern squatting.

Conclusion

The examples examined in this article reveal the wide range of sheltering strategies that emerged at the margins of the housing system in early modern cities. Far from being anecdotal, these nonstandard practices – whether

96. As the carpenter himself recalled (fol. 1393r). To make improvements to a property was a sign of some degree of ownership, since simple tenants were required to leave no trace of their passage: see Barbot (2008), p. 94.

97. ASR, TCG, *Processi*, b. 399 bis, fol. 1383v: «la verità [è] che del tempo nel quale detta Thei fu molestata dalle dette Sabbatine habitava detta casa per sua e come sua propria, et è anco vero, che non haveva fatto per il passato e non haveva mai pagato pigione canone ne altro ad alcuno (...) et con essercitar ogn'altro atto possessorio, che veri pro.[prieta]ri sogliono fare delle cose loro e q.to non solo è pubblico e notorio per il vicinato, ma n'è ancora pub.[blic]a voce e fama». Ferro's statement appears in the dossier as a transcription of his original testimony.

98. Chauvard (2003, p. 312) reports an analogous episode that occurred in seventeenth-century Venice. In a completely different context, the cases of Gustavo and Fatima in today's Buenos Aires as described by Schijman (2019, respectively pp. 113-4 and 126) bear some striking similarities with Giulia's own.

involving the occupation of ruins, barns, religious thresholds, or even private homes – formed part of the survival repertoire of the most vulnerable segments of the urban population. Much of the scholarship on housing conditions in *ancien régime* societies seems to be under the impression that even the most destitute could have access to some form of accommodation, be it through semi-formal arrangements like subletting or placement in a public hospice. But the cases discussed here suggest otherwise. When economic hardship overlapped with the absence of kinship ties, neighbourhood support, or institutional relief, access to shelter was no longer guaranteed. Under such conditions, poverty could become so acute as to render even the cheapest forms of lodging unattainable, leaving unconventional solutions as the only viable recourse.

Luckily, the surrounding circumstances were not entirely unfavourable. While early modern property regimes were not explicitly designed to accommodate unauthorised occupancy, legal discourses were not wholly hostile to the idea of appropriating abandoned property – a resource that abounded in most urban milieus of the time. Furthermore, the distinctive features of pre-modern property systems, in which actual possession often carried more weight than formal ownership, tended to create zones of uncertainty that actors could exploit to meet their dwelling needs.

Many other aspects still remain to be explored, which will be matter for future researches. Given the scarcity of archival sources, it is likely that only a comparative study across multiple early modern cities will be able to fill these gaps and yield more substantial insights. This article was more limited in scope. Its primary aim was simply to highlight the possibility – and indeed the desirability – of such an undertaking. Provided that careful attention is paid to the specificities of different legal and social contexts, such an approach might yet reveal that the early modern poor had more strings to their bow when it came to finding shelter than has traditionally been assumed.

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