

# The Savelli Murder Project: Unsolved Mystery Story as Historian's Pedagogy

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## The Practice

In the past 15 years, while collecting many trials from [Roman archives](#) for research, I have made copious use of them in teaching. In this year's offering of History 1000B I gave students an extended collaborative assignment based on the lively trial of a noble, Giovanni Battista Savelli, who in 1563 killed his wife and his bastard half-brother, caught *in flagrante* in bed—a story rife with sex, violence, death and skullduggery. This [trial testimony](#), like most others, contains abundant contradictions, gaps, sly evasions and loose ends. It thus poses handsomely the usual problems of historical interpretation. What distinguished this classroom trial exercise from many others is that, in addition to the verbatim testimony, I also gave the students 11 [blueprint drawings](#) of the Savelli castle, shreds of [notarial records](#) of the Savelli household, and my tourist [photos of the castle](#) and village. Their assignment was to write history as mystery story, adding the visual to the written record—to find the corpses and with them to unlock and tell the entire story.

The students had three main tasks: 1) to make a full timeline, from start to finish; 2) to make a roster of all participants with everything known about each; and 3) to annotate the blueprints, showing every person and event: the lovers, the spies, the maids-in-waiting, the lurking husband, the fateful tower window from which the lover rappelled into his beloved's arms and bed, the chambre of the carnage. The students worked in teams on these tasks and on essays to justify all judgments. For their work, each team shared a collective grade.

The exercise was a great success. The students were keen and the work was excellent; most teams found most of the hidden places of the tale. They also sorted through the contradictions and set the tangled record straight. The project taught subtle lessons about observation with eye and mental ear, and about analysis and strategies of writing. Some went further. One student, intrigued, took the blueprints and some papier mache to her grandmother, who helped her build a [replica of the castle](#). Also, our graduate teaching assistant wrote up the trial as a case study of grief and reconciliation. [Her paper](#), a distinctly literary microhistory of complex flashbacks and nested narratives, with the model as a prop, went over brilliantly at a local conference and, later, entertained and edified the class.

## Guiding Principles Behind the Practice

1. Students learn well when engaged in a compelling, authentic task. My students were not just learning history, but also making it. The experience demonstrated handily that the history books and articles they read are works of more or less authoritative reconstruction, artifices of intellect, and not mere reports of truth easily known. By virtue of the Savelli murder project my first-year history students were admitted to the loose fraternity of real scholars.
2. A puzzle in need of solving makes an excellent pedagogical device when well supported by maps and artists' views. Where did Columbus first touch shore? Why did the French not see the English climbing to the Plains of Abraham? Where was Marco Polo camped? Such schemes work best where students confront multiple voices and varied images that must be sifted and collated. Best of all is an untold story, a blank page that liberates students from the authority of print and screen.
3. Big lessons can come in small packages. By that I mean that a microhistory, or microstudy in any social science, handily reinforces general principles about the world at large, for it anchors

generalities in a single, vivid, well-known story. It also serves as a point of departure for new questions, and for hypotheses worth testing on the literature, and on the society in question.

### Sources of Inspiration or Influence for the Practice

I have no specific exemplar, yet only Minerva springs full-blown. I would credit my York colleagues in History, many of them canny experimenters in the classroom. I would also cite my years in Rome, where I had the great good luck to go on walking tours with brilliant archeologists who could make rubble spring to life, and who taught with maps and diagrammes. Also, Renaissance Rome produced excellent maps and bird's eye panoramas, well reproduced and sold by the Vatican. I had York buy these and for years have used them in conjunction with written texts, asking students to map and fathom narratives. From 1600 on, Europeans, Dutch and German especially, and the Lorrainer Callot, produced handsome views, wonderful for teaching, and available in modern editions. (See the Dutch [Theatrum Orbis Terrarum](#) reprint series, for instance.)

Another influence to stress is the microhistory of Carlo Ginzburg, most famously in his *The Cheese and the Worms*, and his band of imitators, many of them also Italianists. Microhistory likes to dwell on the infinite complexities of something very small, in search of agency in the midst of countervailing pressures. It dotes on stories and on puzzles. Its problem, always, is to wring large significance from minute events, to escape antiquarianism by suggesting larger patterns.

One last influence is a sympathy with Jane Jacobs, who prefers urban spontaneity to the planner's beloved, deadening order. Architects of a recently converted Portland warehouse, inspired by her, told *The New York Times* (Baker, 2001) that tenants had to have "a high tolerance for ambiguity and unpredictability." My students likewise. Power Point can be a strait-jacket, the antithesis of the unsettling effect I cultivate. Malcom Gladwell, in a recent [New Yorker article](#), summed up nicely the virtues of creative chaos when applied to the design of work-space for technologists and other creative workers.

### Frequently Asked Questions About the Practice and Responses

1. What proportion of the class time is given over to the collaborative work and how are those sessions organized?

*The collaborative paper was worth 10% of the grade, and was one of four in the first semester. [A Midterm question](#) was worth 30% of a 10% exam. As for the sessions in class, we had two two-hour blocks per week. Now and again, we would just take time, in chunks of fifteen minutes or so, to confer. I took further time for picture shows about the castle.*

2. Do the groups interact with each other or make interim reports for instance? How do they know whether they are making good progress along the way?

*We had no formal interim reports, but a lot of sharing, both on campus and by telephone and email. I would group students in the tutorial and come visiting, and students from other groups would do the same.*

3. Doesn't so much emphasis on one project result in a rather narrow view of the historical period you are considering?

*This is a fascinating question. Yes and no! Before the castle project, students read a good deal of social history and the history of Renaissance culture, in the anthropological sense of that term. They had seen a good deal of material about family matters: courtship, dowry, marriage, siblings, servants, neighbors, and underlings. They had been immersed in the subtleties of the honour ethic, as supple practice and ideal. We had talked a lot about violence, self-help, and the odd*

*interface of state and society where the state is wobbly and easily bought off. They had seen the police, courts, torturers, and executions. So, yes, the project looks narrow, but the story, with its passions, intrigues, connivences, and gender-solidarities, actually helped crystallize and dramatize larger lessons and served well as a foil for the many other stories the students had encountered.*

4. I don't see myself or most instructors searching the archives any time soon for trials or blueprints. Is this method really generalizable to many courses?

*I agree that some parts of what I did here would be hard to replicate. The blueprints, for example, were a stroke of crazy luck. But the important idea, the essence of the method, is the puzzle in need of solving. One then builds around the puzzle from what one has—maps and urban panoramas could serve well, for example. In the second term of History 1000B we have moved to seventeenth-century London, where the central document is Pepys's diary. Alongside the diary's facts the students have the recent fiction, *Jem (and Sam)*, a novel by Ferdinand Mount. While they mine the diary for social and cultural history, they puzzle over the truth, if any, of a work of imagination only loosely tethered to the historical record. Finding the materials relevant to this puzzle required no specialized searching at all.*

### **For More Information (References and Links)**

Narrative account of the project, including an account of the Savelli Murders, [click here](#).

Many elements of the Savelli Murder Project can be seen by clicking on the links in the first section of the article. Other materials available from the course and project are available by clicking on the following links:

The [syllabus for History 1000B](#).

[Instructions to students](#) for the Savelli Murder Project.

Examples of [student assessments](#) of the Savelli Murder Project.

Baker, L. (2001, March 4). Building on ideas for urban conservation. *The New York Times*, p. BU6.

Cohen, T.V. (2000). [Double-Death in Cretone Castle: The Savelli Murders of 1563](#). Paper presented at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, Cleveland, OH. An account of the Savelli murders addressed to historians.

[Ginzburg, C.](#) (1992). *The cheese and the worms: The cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller* (J. Tedeschi & A.C. Tedeschi, Trans.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1976)

Gladwell, M. (2000, December 11). [Designs for working](#). *The New Yorker*, 76, 60 - 70.

Hicks, D. (2001). [The Savelli Murder: A Tale of Murder and Adultery in the Roman Papal State](#). Paper presented at the New Frontiers in Graduate History Conference, York University, Toronto.

[Mount, F.](#) (1998). *Jem (and Sam): A revenger's tale*. London: Chatto & Windus.

[Pepys, S.](#) (1993). *The shorter Pepys / selected and edited by Robert Latham from The diary of Samuel Pepys: A new and complete transcription edited by Robert Latham and William Matthews*. London: Penguin Books.