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Death in the Community: Memorialization and Confraternities in an Italian Commune in the Late Middle Ages (review)

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James R. Banker, *Death in the Community: Memorialization and Confraternities in an Italian Commune in the Late Middle Ages*. Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988. xiv, 292.

In *Death in the Community* James R. Banker examines the religious and social functions of confraternities in the city of San Sepolcro from 1250 to 1450. Confraternities, religious associations of lay persons, first appeared well before 1200 but proliferated in the thirteenth century. Though supervised to some degree by clerics, confraternities allowed laymen and women opportunities for an active role in worship and various religious activities, most notably charity and the commemoration of the dead. Until recently historians have undervalued the importance of these lay groups in later medieval towns and cities. Large cities like Milan or Florence supported scores of confraternities, and these groups have received substantial study. However, towns and small cities greatly outnumbered large cities, and their confraternities form a subject of considerable historical significance, for which the unusually full records of San Sepolcro provide an opportunity for a valuable case study.

San Sepolcro lies in the upper Tiber Valley in Tuscany, close to the borders of Umbria and the Marches. The city attained a population of 5,000 just before the Black Death and was thus a place of considerable local importance. Unlike many medieval cities its size, San Sepolcro provides the historian with a mass of valuable source materials—notarial records, local chronicles, and rules and records of confraternities. Professor Banker skillfully uses these records to reconstruct the religious and social roles of confraternities in San Sepolcro.

Banker's approach to his subject reflects the influence of anthropological approaches to religion, though he gives due consideration to more traditional institutional history. His first chapter provides a sketch of the religious life of the city, ranging from its demographic and economic underpinnings to the complex jurisdictional struggles between the bishop of Città di Castello and the abbot of the monastery of San Giovanni in San Sepolcro. At no point in the Middle Ages did San Sepolcro possess a coherent parish system, and the number of secular priests in the city never reached a level comparable to most cities. To some extent this shortfall in spiritual guidance was made up for by the establishment of Franciscan, Servite, and Augustinian houses in the mid-1200s. But, Banker argues, the confraternities of the city did more to meet the spiritual needs of the laity. These associations did much to spur the giving of charity to the poor and to encourage penitence in their members, but their most crucial role came at death.

Confraternities organized funeral processions and often paid the costs of poor members' funerals. During monthly services the living prayed for deceased members of their confraternity. Additionally, confraternities often administered charitable bequests for both members and non-members. These provided the bulk of the funds and gifts in kind for the confraternities' sizeable programs of charity.

Subsequent chapters plot the evolution of confraternities in San Sepolcro from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries. Banker examines the purposes and practices of the city's confraternities and analyzes their social composition and role in political life. In the later thirteenth century one large confraternity, the Fraternity of San Bartolomeo, overshadowed all others in the city. This association recruited several thousand members from both the city and the surrounding countryside in this period, but after about 1310 its role changed markedly. Whereas earlier it had gathered a large number of participants for services of remembrance for deceased members and sponsored only a modest charitable program, after 1310 a much smaller membership administered charitable bequests from the wills of both members and non-members. Indeed, the confraternity came to serve in effect as an agency of the city government, administering wills and collecting a death tax which it used in part to subsidize funeral services for the poor.

No single association replaced San Bartolomeo as a channel for the religious impulses of the bulk of the city's population. Rather, the early 1300s saw the founding of fourteen new confraternities. None of these associations individually approached the size attained by San Bartolomeo in the previous century, but cumulatively they appear to have taken in a sizeable portion of the city's population. These groups assumed two radically different approaches to the same ends of fostering the religious devotion of their members and providing for the commemoration of the dead.

One type, the *laudesi*, sang praises to Christ and the Virgin Mary in public processions and in their oratories. Banker studies in detail the best documented of the *laudesi* confraternities, the Confraternity of Santa Maria della Notte. It was first attested in the early 1300s, the same period which saw the formation of six other *laudesi* confraternities. The group had about forty members in 1345, shrank considerably by 1349 as a result of the plague, and then returned to its pre-plague size, apparently absorbing one or more of the other *laudesi* confraternities. By the fifteenth century, Santa Maria della Notte administered considerable endowments of land from bequests, the income of which was used to fund charitable enterprises and perpetual masses in much the same manner as the Fraternity of San Bartolomeo.

The city also gave rise to seven different groups of *disciplinati*, or flagellants, in the early fourteenth century. All of the *disciplinati* confraternities were founded before the Black Death of 1348, an event usually associated with increases in flagellant activity. Banker argues that the increasing emphasis on commerce in the economic life of San Sepolcro in the fourteenth century precipitated a spiritual crisis there as in other cities in northern and central Italy. The earliest *disciplinati* appeared in Perugia and several other cities in 1260; their absence in San Sepolcro before 1300 may reflect in part the city's relatively backward commercial life. *Disciplinati* associations aimed to purge their members of sinful forms of social behavior, especially those involved with commerce and the vices of city life, like usury. Members did penance for various sins through ritual self-flagellation in processions through town, a commitment to charity, and a closely regulated code of behavior. The purification imposed on members would ensure their salvation and inspire others by example.

Death in the Community provides a valuable portrait of a major part of the religious and social life of a small Italian city. Throughout the book Banker demonstrates a commendable command of his sources as well as an awareness of their limitations. These limitations stem largely from Banker's resolute refusal to strain the evidence beyond its limitations. The book thus delivers less about individual attitudes to death and more about the institutional handling of death by the confraternities of San Sepolcro than one might expect from the introduction. The otherwise commendable focus on sources leads to a degree of narrowness. The book would have profited from a broader discussion of confraternities in medieval life, though the curious reader may find ample material for further study cited in the notes and bibliography. Several appendices give previously unpublished texts of the rules of some of San Sepolcro's confraternities. These minor points notwithstanding, *Death in the Community* makes a fine contribution to medieval social and religious history.

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Harry Berger, Jr., *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. xxiii, 519.

In *Centuries of Meditations* II. 90, Thomas Traherne writes, "God hath made you able to create worlds in your own mind which are more precious