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978-0-521-03800-3 - The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy

Edited by Nicholas Terpstra

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INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICS OF RITUAL KINSHIP

NICHOLAS TERPSTRA

Long processions of bleeding flagellants wielding banners and whips, or of sleek be-robed worthies shepherding the orphans they sheltered, the adolescent girls they dowered, or the children they educated. Bread handed out on a corner, public feasts hosted on a holy day, private banquets fueled by legacies. Nocturnal gatherings whose purpose could be devotional (as members claimed) or sexual, or political (as critics suspected). Cadres of marching children whose devotion could either inspire or make uneasy. Groups of women who managed shelters, clothed the Virgin Mary on feast days, and organized parochial devotions.

Early modern Italians encountered confraternities in every town and neighborhood, on every holiday, at every rite of passage. But just what did they experience, whether from inside or out? The rituals noted above generated a host of contradictory impressions. Brotherhoods were the most public face of the church, yet were almost entirely lay. They originated to promote civic peace, yet were factious and partisan. Their internal ordering was to reflect the equality of souls in the eyes of God, yet everything from seats in the oratory to place in procession was ranked hierarchically. Distinct groups expressed the finely graded calibrations by which a boundary- and role-conscious society kept genders, ages, classes, and races distinct, though always with boundary-crossing exceptions to prove the rule. Above all, it was their very ubiquity that made conflict and contradiction inevitable: shrines, altars, hospitals, schools, and orphanages testified to the beneficent patronage of *confratelli*, every civic-religious event brought them out in streams behind their banners, and loyalties to neighborhood, craft, parish, religious order, or devotional preference could be magnified through the lens of confraternal ritual kinship.

While the brotherhoods and their rituals were woven into the fabric of early modern life, it has been less clear to historians whether they were central or fringe elements of the tapestry. Traditional political historiog-

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raphy of the early modern state developed its narratives with little if any reference to confraternities. From its nineteenth-century positivist roots, this history tended to disregard ritual, theatre, and social kinship as decorative marginalia to the big narrative of institutional and constitutional development. If religion were of any interest – and this was a debatable point at best – it was better analyzed through the offices, possessions, politics, and doctrines of the institutional church. This approach assumed that early modern states worked much like modern ones in their fundamentals, because early modern individuals pursued their self-interest much like moderns.

Early confraternal studies took their shape from these assumptions. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were largely the province of antiquarians and local historians who respectfully plotted the piety of their subjects through every oratory, altarpiece, and memorial plaque acquired in a two- or three- or four-hundred-year history. Few escaped the parish boundaries or city walls, and fewer yet saw any broader significance in their subject. Those rare studies which did transcend locality often fixed attention on the peninsular development of cultural forms like theatre, on the spread of common groups like the Holy Sacrament confraternities or, in the case of histories of the religious orders, on confraternities as the loyal and obedient auxiliaries of the regular clergy. A few anti-clerical histories offered more sardonic readings of their subjects, but could not free themselves from the local-institutional mindset.

In the 1960s, social history offered the first avenue for taking confraternal studies out of the local-antiquarian backwater, and brought greater rigor to the work of administrative, economic, and religious historians. Yet a functionalist mindset initially governed subject and approach. Historians began to see confraternities behind funerary rituals and so approached them as burial clubs aimed at securing subscribers a plot in the ground for the body, and a path into heaven for the soul. Brotherhoods were recognized in the administrative offices at many charitable institutions, and so were written up as altruistic boards of governors rolling up the sleeves of their robes to secure bread for the hungry and beds for the sick. These histories helped explain how things got done in early modern society, but left many questions unasked. How did confraternities affect the temporal, spatial, and communal rhythms of faith? Were frequent evocations of confraternal kinship more than just rhetoric? What motivated membership and how did it shape lives?

These questions emerged in the past few decades as the historical gaze began reaching beyond institutional development to the more complex questions of how early moderns constructed themselves and their society.

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Anthropological approaches have demonstrated that ritual and theatre are not fringe elements of early modern political processes, but are central to their meaning and purpose, such that contests over ritual roles, honor, or precedence are expressions of political power and not diversions from it. Social kinship groups are the practical means by which early moderns exercise their belief that the family is God's pattern for political and social relations. Absolutist politics entail negotiations between a baffling variety of parties, including groups whose rituals, rooted in tradition, law, and faith, give them a proprietary responsibility for space and time that translates into more real power than many magistrates held. Religion itself has such a complex range of dimensions and forms that a focus on the formal hierarchy of the Catholic church seems almost quaint, if not peripheral to an understanding of how faith animated local communities. Few historians now would speak of "mere ritual."

As early modern historiography becomes less reductionist in the subjects considered worthy of study and the methods of approaching them, confraternities are being recognized as having more than simply an antiquarian interest or a functionalist social role. Historians encounter confraternities in more and more places as groups which define social and political roles, and mediate changes to a more hierarchical society. Gabriel Le Bras first approached confraternities as a parallel or alternative church, encouraging others to see the brotherhoods as a means of understanding religion as a lived experience centered around social relations rather than as a set of doctrines or institutions. John Bossy expanded on this with the claim that confraternities achieved the "social miracle" of peaceful co-existence by embodying the metaphor of kinship in society, while Ronald Weissman and Richard Trexler saw them as groups by which Florentines steered their way through rites of passage and around antagonistic social relations. Brian Pullan overturned a long-standing historiographical convention when he demonstrated that Catholic states, working through confraternities, developed charitable assistance to the same extent as their Protestant counterparts; Pullan and Edward Muir showed how the ritual and charity of the *Scuole Grandi* were fundamental to Venice's image and operation as a stable society. Contested though they sometimes are, these interpretations have opened a way of understanding confraternities as key agents in the construction of early modern society.

As Christopher Black's essay in this collection demonstrates, the works of Le Bras, Bossy, Pullan, and Weissman were catalysts for the rapid expansion of confraternity studies through the past three decades. Confraternities now constitute one of the most active subjects of research and scholarship in Renaissance and Early Modern European historical studies.

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Within the past decade, major monographs have been published dealing with various aspects of confraternal history in Spain, France, the Netherlands, and particularly Italy; scholarly articles have expanded this coverage to areas as diverse as Constantinople and Brazil. Interdisciplinary conferences in Europe and North America have attracted a wide range of historians of politics, art, literature, music, theatre, religion, and ritual to address the topic, and resulted in numerous published essay collections. Within Italian studies, Anglo-American scholars have focused their research largely on the late medieval and Renaissance periods, while Italians have expanded beyond this into the Ancien Régime when the modern state began to take shape. The common theme which all these studies make plain is that confraternities were far more than “purely” devotional groups. Their activity offers insights into the organization and distribution of charity, gender and class relations, the character and uses of civic religion, the shifting dynamics of lay and clerical relations at all levels, and the means by which local elites used religious and charitable institutions to maintain political authority.

This collection aims to demonstrate both some of the common themes which shape recent scholarly approaches to Italian confraternity studies, and the variety of methodological and ideological approaches that characterize the field. Fifteen international scholars, both established and new, demonstrate how the ritual kinship found in confraternities was a significant factor in the social, political, and religious construction of early modern Italy. The collection brings together work on urban centers which have until recently received relatively little attention in English-language scholarship (e.g., Cortona, Ferrara, Bologna, Milan, Naples, Genoa, Turin), with cities which have a longer English-language historiographical tradition (Florence, Venice, Rome), and with rural Piedmont. Each article is based on the author’s research in local archives, yet each puts that research into broader comparative context. Together, they address interlocking questions of religion, class, gender, politics, race, and charity that are at the heart of research into early modern history.

Five themes or questions lie at the heart of this collection, and each article addresses one or more of them in distinct ways and with distinct perspectives. These themes are:

1. The prevalence of confraternities in urban centers, and the distinctions of class, gender, and age that characterize them internally and externally.
2. The religious culture of confraternities and their definition of popular/civic religion through ritual, theatre, charity; related to this, the use of confraternal rituals and institutions as a collective means of

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defending a group's prerogatives and religiously legitimating its interests.

3. Shifting relations with ecclesiastical authorities (parochial, urban/diocesan, religious orders) before and after the sixteenth-century Catholic/Counter Reformation, with a particular emphasis on confraternities as key agents in the post-Tridentine effort to "Christianize" society.
4. Shifting relations of co-operation, co-optation, and suppression with social hierarchies and political authorities, again with the aim of achieving a more ordered and obedient society.
5. The expanding role of confraternities as agencies directing social welfare and social control of marginal and subordinate groups.

The collection opens with a historiographical review by Christopher Black that surveys the rapid expansion of international scholarship on Italian confraternities over the past thirty years. This review focuses on the five interlocking themes noted above, and highlights the methodological developments and interpretive disagreements that have marked this scholarship. Fourteen essays follow in roughly chronological order, exploring one or more of these themes as they apply to a particular city or territory over a period of one or two centuries.

Chronologically, the first five of these essays plot key elements in the late medieval and Renaissance development of confraternal rituals, administration, and social roles, with all their characteristic contradictions (gender, peace-making, civic religion, charity, and politics). The remaining nine essays demonstrate the further articulation – and transvaluation – of confraternal models into the early modern period. Thematically, groups of essays pick up individual themes in such a way that readers can make comparisons between times and places. So, for instance, Rondeau, Mackenney, Horowitz, and Torre illustrate the very fluid nature of confraternal organization in the constant adaptation of recognized forms to local or communal needs. The issue of gender in confraternal membership and activity is first discussed by Rondeau and Casagrande for late medieval Tuscany and Umbria, and further developed by Esposito and Lazar for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Rome. The use of confraternities by some authorities to control subordinate groups and by some of these groups to resist authorities is explored by Polizzotto and Terpstra with reference to children, and by Lazar and Horowitz with reference to Jews. Confraternities' contribution to shaping social charity is explored by Bornstein for late medieval Cortona, developed by Esposito, Terpstra, and Lazar for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Rome and Bologna, and carried on by Lewis for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Naples. The

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theme of political manipulation – both of and by confraternities – is explored by Rondeau and Bornstein for late medieval Tuscany; Polizzotto and Terpstra for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florence and Bologna; Mackenney, Zardin and Bernardi for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venice, Milan, and Genoa, Torre for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Piedmont, and Eisenbichler for eighteenth-century Florence. The evolving character of popular and civic religion, and its creative/conflictive relationship with the ecclesiastical hierarchy is addressed by Casagrande and Bornstein for late medieval Perugia and Cortona; Lazar and Mackenney for sixteenth-century Rome and Venice, and Zardin, Bernardi, Lewis, and Torre for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lombardy, Genoa, Naples, and Piedmont.

These individual studies reveal the contradictory realities that developed as medieval and Renaissance forms metamorphosed through the Ancien Régime. Social change works by incremental steps from the familiar, and as political and religious authorities aimed to develop a more ordered society, confraternities offered a vehicle, a model, and a means of legitimation. Yet they offered the same to the opponents of this process. Confraternities could be the political agencies by which local groups defended their traditional rights and boundaries (Torre), the theatres for the exercise of authority by groups stripped of former political powers (Esposito), or a means “to draw off the political aspirations of the Venetian citizen class” (Mackenney). They could be the agencies through which the moral disciplines of “Christianization” were promoted (Lazar, Bernardi, Torre, Zardin), and also the agencies through which these same disciplines were resisted (Bernardi, Torre).

The transvaluation of tradition is only one of the factors behind the differences these authors demonstrate. Certainly they treat different cities in a peninsula which is notoriously local, and different periods in an era characterized by significant change. More to the point, this collection expresses the variety of ideological and methodological approaches found in confraternity studies today. While all authors see confraternities as agents of social order in an increasingly hierarchical period, they differ in their assessment of whether that order was just, desirable, or successfully imposed. All believe that religion was the indispensable cement which held early modern society together, yet they differ in the way they see religion expressed: some center it in the officers and aims of an institution, others on the rituals of a community, and others in the cohesion of a group. While all base their interpretations in a close reading of archival documents, they differ in the theoretical lenses used to read these documents and interpret their meaning. Some accept the pious intentions voiced in confraternal documents largely on their own terms, while others subject these documents to a hermeneutics of suspicion. Some

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essays here reflect the hypotheses developed through anthropological and sociological categories, while others maintain the stricter discipline of positivist historiography. By deliberately maintaining these discordant voices, the collection as a whole illustrates the debates which international scholars are engaged in as they seek to recover the role confraternities played in shaping Renaissance and early modern Italian culture and society.

Through the differing interpretations, a common factor in these studies is the central significance of the ritual kinship of *confraternitas* in a society which structured its politics, religious institutions, economic agencies, and social life around family models. Yet these essays also demonstrate that *confraternitas* itself became more hierarchical through the sixteenth century; this is at the heart of the transvaluation of confraternal kinship referred to above. We need not adopt romantic notions of egalitarian brotherhood in medieval and Renaissance confraternities in order to recognize that both their character and their ideals (however much limited to the realm of rhetoric) begin to shift noticeably. Existing confraternities underwent an ennobling of membership that reflected a more general process of aristocratization in early modern society; this was further reinforced as reforming bishops like Carlo Borromeo and reforming orders like the Jesuits established new and exclusive confraternities on class, occupational, and gender lines in order to draw particular social groups into their reform programs. Networks of parish or peninsular confraternities emerged under the patronage and closer supervision of priests, bishops, or religious orders, with standardized statutes and with their energies directed to very specific social, educational, or devotional purposes; although not always successfully established, these reforms generated further reactions. Parochial and autonomous confraternities alike consolidated their resources and activities in order to protect and increase their traditional prerogatives. Efforts to achieve what Bossy termed the “social miracle” increasingly gave way to concerns of social order, as the ruling paradigm for confraternities became not egalitarian brotherhood, but authoritarian parenthood. Ritual, patronage of shrines, and social charity all became more important as means of maintaining distinctions, not transcending or mediating them. Confraternal stock rose with consolidation of the Ancien Régime, but declined as that regime’s values were called into question. The Enlightenment corroded them within and without. Dechristianization rendered confraternal rituals empty for many, while notions of social contract and secular utility became more compelling among the middle and upper classes who had formed the core of confraternal membership. This left confraternities open to charges of being self-indulgent, corrupt, and counter-productive. States under enlightened despots experimented with the sup-

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pression, expropriation, and secularization which became the norm once Napoleon crossed the Alps. Ironically, this rejection of Ancien Régime confraternities was not a rejection of traditional confraternitas, or ritual kinship itself. That powerful urge found secularized civic-religious expression in the propagandist evocations of revolutionary brotherhood, in the mutual aid of fraternal lodges, and in the arcane secretive rituals of the Freemasons. Confraternities themselves enjoyed a post-revolutionary restoration, but as little more than parish auxiliaries. They were no longer significant players in the social or political order, and this may be one reason why nineteenth-century political historians found them so easy to ignore. Even though the liberal state took another half-century to expand in Italy, the politics of the Ancien Régime failed to convince, and its traditional ritual bodies failed to impress.

Citizens pledging oaths, planting trees, and donning distinctive red caps as public signs of their commitment to liberty, equality, and fraternity. Men and women gathering to form societies that would carry them through sickness and bury them in death. Professional males adopting secret handshakes and observing ersatz Egyptian rites in nocturnal ceremonies which could be devotional (as members claimed) or politically, economically, or religiously subversive (as critics suspected). Ritual kinship was fundamentally about collectively mediating change, expressing ultimate values, and pursuing socialization; as such, it was inherently political. The earliest confraternities mediated social change during the late medieval expansion of urban society, and early modern confraternities did the same during the rise of commercial and civilized society through the Ancien Régime. Likewise, the political clubs, friendly societies, and lodges of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave those experiencing the rapid political, economic, and social change of the early industrial era a collective means of preserving some sense of order and meaning through the flux. In this way, the Enlightenment transvaluation of ritual kinship confirms the fluidity of meanings which confraternal forms could take, and justifies our shifting attention away from any particular religious/devotional context and towards the broader question of how societies accommodate change. Confraternities can certainly help us understand the lay religious culture of medieval and early modern Catholicism, but to leave the investigation there is to be content with a more informed antiquarianism. Confraternal studies offer a means of approaching the much greater question of how spiritual values take secular shape or, in other words, how different forms of ritual kinship shape processes of socialization, adaptation, and legitimation. This collection of essays aims in that direction.

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I

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONFRATERNITY STUDIES OVER THE PAST THIRTY YEARS

CHRISTOPHER F. BLACK

Since the 1960s lay confraternities in Italy, as elsewhere, have moved from the periphery of medieval religious history to a central place in mainstream studies of social-religious and cultural history up to the eighteenth century. In the early 1960s a student of medieval and Renaissance Italy might have known about confraternities as part of the broader flagellant movement exploding on the scene from 1260; or as contributors to the cultural scene of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence, if they recognized Or San Michele as a confraternity building, or sixteenth century Venice – if it was realized that *Scuola* in the context of, say San Rocco, meant a confraternity and not an educational school. Now it is recognized that confraternities expanded and diversified in Italy through the later medieval, Renaissance, Catholic Reform, and Counter Reformation periods that in this volume are subsumed under the broader term of Early Modern. The Reformation crisis period that saw the collapse of the fraternities or religious guilds (or guilds) in Protestant areas of Germany, in England, and in Scotland, witnessed a major diversification of their roles and activities in Italy, as in Spain and later France.

Confraternities were central to the spiritual life of many urban inhabitants, female as well as male, and more patchily to remoter rural dwellers. They were a key link between the living and the dead. But increasingly we have studied the roles of confraternities in politics, in the structuring

In preparing this chapter I am much indebted to the assistance and encouragement of fellow authors Richard Mackenney, Nicholas Terpstra and Danilo Zardin; of my colleague Sam Cohn, and of my former colleague and *amica simpatica*, Tricia Allerston. For revising this chapter the Editor has opportunely provided me with copies of most other chapters before editing and, in some cases, translation. This has helped me indicate the interpretive context of what my co-authors are analyzing. Archival material has only been cited where supplementary to what can be found in references to my published writings. I have used here: Archivio Storico del Vicariato di Roma (ASVR), Arciconfraternita della Dottrina Cristiana (ADC); Archivio di Stato, Roma (ASR), Camerale II (CII), and Camerale III (CIII).

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CHRISTOPHER F. BLACK

of social relations and social life, their links with many aspects of social welfare, being involved in hospices and hospitals, prisons and poor houses, in religious education, in the welfare of females from the provision of dowries to secure accommodation to protect vulnerable young girls, battered wives and forsaken widows. The roles of fraternities in cultural life have similarly been much studied since the 1960s; in connection with processions and plays, with religious musical celebrations, as well as with the provision and financing of chapels and church decoration.

This chapter will first highlight the landmark publications, conferences, research projects and institutions that have fostered the expansion of confraternity studies over the past thirty years, and linked them with other developments in historical studies. Subsequently five sections will elaborate on key aspects of confraternity activity and developments, emphasizing what has contributed to broadening our knowledge and understanding. The selectivity of my commentary and examples, governed by my recent research interests, and space limitations, should be compensated for by references in the rich and varied chapters that follow, and in the composite bibliography, so that no major contributor to changing approaches to confraternities through the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries remains unmentioned. Important, but highly specialized studies of local importance, even major contributions to documentary information, may however have been omitted.

Penitential flagellation was one of the significant activities of one type of fraternity. It was renewed interest in medieval flagellation, or discipline (*disciplina*), that most stimulated my generation's interest in early modern confraternities. An anniversary conference in 1960 to celebrate the 1260 flagellant movement produced seminal papers published in 1962, the establishment of a Center in Perugia for the study of discipline confraternities, and the organization of a second conference in 1969 (published in 1972).¹ The conferences and Center set many scholars searching for documentation to establish when and where discipline confraternities existed, and their statutory basis; the pursuit of printed statutes empha-

¹ *Movimento dei disciplinati*, in which G. Alberigo's long "Contributi," 156–256, was an important stimulus to research into lay spirituality in the Catholic Reform period; also *Risultati e Prospettive*; the Centro di Documentazione sul Movimento dei Disciplinati, Perugia, has intermittently published a number of studies, printed statutes, and cataloged sources, but suffered from underfunding. For recent comments on the development of different approaches to confraternity studies see: Banker, *Death in Community*, 1–14; Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 1–8; Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities*, xv–vii; Eisenbichler, "Ricerche nord-americane", and his recent "Italian Scholarship." References below are largely to titles listed in the composite Bibliography. Page references are given only in a few cases for something very precise; and sometimes in the case of my own book *Italian Confraternities* as possibly the easiest way of leading readers to further sources.