

Avignonese Confraternities during the Fourteenth Century

The Avignonese confraternal movement reached its peak during the thirteenth century. From the beginning of that century on, the fate of the various confraternities had been tied to the fate of the commune. When in 1251 the Commune submitted to Alfonse of Poitiers and Charles of Anjou, brothers of Louis IX, the winning "French party" put an end to any hope of independence for the southern town. Alfonse and Charles, now counts of Provence and Toulouse, annulled the Commune and, fearing conspiracy, prohibited any form of religious or political association.¹

The fear of conspiracy vanished after a few decades of social and political peace and a new religious fervour spread during the fourteenth century. During the first quarter of the fourteenth century the political authorities relaxed their restrictions and allowed religious associations of commoners. Twenty-one confraternities were created in Avignon between 1280 and 1350, thirty-four in 1360-1400, fifty-three in 1400-1450, and fifty-five in 1450-1500.²

Throughout the fourteenth century, confraternities remained the preferred form of association for the nobility and the bourgeoisie. In an attempt to foster social harmonization, the authorities supported the inclusion of some lower class members. It seems that social mixing was the remedy for social tensions. The confraternal movement, previously seen as a major form of rebellion, became a century later a major form of integration.

Most of the fourteenth-century confraternities had similar ends. They were all devotional associations of lay people supported by the secular authorities and the clergy. Members of

a profession or of a common nation often joined together to honour a patron saint and include charity in their devotional fervour. Alms houses and hospitals were set up by some confraternities to help poor visitors and residents of the papal city. Most of the known confraternal statutes of the city from the fourteenth century profess common goals: confraternal help, charity to the poor, funerary arrangements and commemoration of the dead.³

Throughout the fourteenth century in Avignon the associations were called "charity" or "alms" (*charité* and *aumônes*), when members of the same profession, parish, or street distributed alms to the poor. The name *luminnaire* was used when nothing more than a few individuals of the same profession burned tapers to the image of a particular saint. But such "charities", "alms", and *luminaires* quickly evolved into full fledged confraternities.⁴ By the end of the century they were indistinguishable one from the other. They all described themselves as confraternities, that is, associations of a certain group of people united in devotion by a common profession or residence. The confraternities were simultaneously charity, *luminnaire*, and devotional. The combination of the various forms into one might indicate a social need to satisfy different religious aspirations. The Avignonese wanted to honour various saints with a "liturgy of lights", distribute alms to the poor, and to assure themselves of eternal salvation. In more general terms, the confraternities answered what James Banker calls man's primary need to die in the presence of other human beings and with their remembrance.⁵

Many professional "brotherhoods" appeared throughout the fourteenth century. Different artisans and professionals were associated with different confraternities. The lists compiled by Pierre Pansier of the various associations reveal a large array of occupations.⁶ The devotion of a specific profession to a specific saint was quite common. For example, parchment makers were devoted to Saint Martial, shoe-makers to Saint Crespin, and jewellers to Saint Eloi. Professional associations could also be formed within the perimeters of a specific location: a parish, a street, a chapel, or a convent. For example, the confraternity of

clerics at Saint Peter, a parish church, of the papal scribes in the chapel of the Cross, or that of the carpenters at Saint Agricol. The devotion to a specific saint at a specific location was the common thread for many confraternities; in such cases membership did not presuppose a common occupation. For example, the *Confrèrie du Corps de Notre Seigneur* congregated at the parish of Saint Anthony, the *Confrèrie de Notre Dame du Salut* at the gate of Magnanen, and the *Confrèrie de Saint Michel* at the Carmelite convent.

At least two national associations existed parallel to the professional and locational groups. The testament of a German physician, Albertus de Herbipoli, alluded to a confraternity of the "German nation" in Avignon in 1348.⁷ The Datini letters point to a confraternity of the "Florentine nation" honouring St. John the Baptist in the 1390s.⁸ If other national associations existed, they have yet to be discovered. It can only be assumed that the thirty or so professional and devotional confraternities created during the fourteenth century satisfied the religious needs of the various groups of immigrants.⁹

Four confraternities created between 1329 and 1356 left statutes whose copies are in the communal archives of the city.¹⁰ They reveal a certain diversification in devotion even if their statutes include many similarities. The confraternity of tailors was a devotional association honouring Saint George. The *Confrèrie des Ames du Purgatoire* was purely charitable. The *confrèrie du Saint Esprit* was created by the rich merchant Bernard Rascas to honour the souls of the testators who left alms to it. And the fourth confraternity, *Notre Dame la Majour*, which has been the main subject of my own research, consisted of *curiam romanam sequentes*.¹¹

The language of the various statutes reflects the cosmopolitan climate of papal Avignon. The first statutes use French, the next two Provençal, the last one Latin (though its matriculation lists and administrative registers are in Italian). The statutes of the four confraternities run parallel to each other with few variations. They regulate the religious and social practice of the

association, insisting on the non-political aims of the brotherhood.

Our knowledge of these associations is often defined as a function of negative assertions. They were not legally binding institutions nor a pressure group. For the swelling number of immigrants who arrived in Avignon throughout the fourteenth century, these associations offered the comfort of a surrogate family. Looking at the internal evidence provided by the matriculation lists of Notre Dame la Majour one can assert that the majority of affiliates (mainly Italians) joined as soon as they arrived in the city. Doing so might have promoted speedier integration in the social and professional ranks of the city. It is unfortunate that only one Avignonese confraternity left lists of matriculation to posterity. All artisan confraternities were dissolved by the authorities in 1604.¹² Only a few purely-religious associations were allowed to survive until the elimination of all religious confraternities in 1770.

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Notes

¹L.H. Labande, *Avignon au XIIIe Siècle. L'Évêque Zoen Tencarari et les Avignonnais* (Paris, 1908), pp. 152, 201.

²J. Chiffolleau, *La Comptabilité de l'Au-delà* (Paris: Boccard, 1980), p. 270.

³P. Pansier, "Les Confréries d'Avignon au XIVe Siècle," *Annales d'Avignon et du Comtat Venaissin*, 20 (1934), pp. 5-48. The Statutes of Notre Dame are published on pp.34-43.

⁴Pansier (1934), p. 6.

⁵J. Banker, *Death in the Community* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 1.

⁶Pansier (1934), p. 6.

⁷H. Pogatscher, "Deutsche in Avignon im XIV. Jahrhundert," *Römische Quartalschrift*, 13 (1899), p. 61: "Do et lego confratres Alemannorum Avinionensium cuius sum confrater duos Floren. auri dumtaxat semel."

⁸R. Brun, "Annales Avignonnaises de 1382 à 1410. Extraites des Archives Datini," *Mémoires de l'Institut Historique de Provence* 13 (1936), 93-95 and 14 (1937), 7, 37. Pierre Pansier listed that confraternity as St. John of the Florenine, meeting in the fifteenth century in the Augustinian monastery; see Pansier (1934), p. 9. That confraternity might have existed prior to 1390 since R. Davidsohn (ed.) *Forshungen zur Geschichte von Florenz* (Berlin, 1896-1908), vol. 4, fol. 265 mentions for the year 1329 a letter from an official of the *mercanzia* to the "rectores fraternitatis Sancti Johannis Baptiste corumque consilarii et universitas in Avinione morantes."

⁹Pansier (1934), p. 11.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹See my "The People of Curial Avignon. A Critical Edition of the 'Liber Divisionis' and the matriculation lists of the confraternity of Notre Dame la Majour." Doctoral dissertation, SUNY Binghamton, 1992.

¹²Avignon, Archives de la Ville, fol. 351, 16 Dec. 1604.

¹³P. Pansier, Manuscripts de la Bibliothèque d'Avignon, No. 5700, n.p.