

Eckstein, Nicholas A. *The District of the Green Dragon. Neighbourhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1995. xxvi, 274 pp., 6 ill.

The rituals and ceremonies in which the members of medieval confraternities engaged have been the traditional focus of scholars interested in the significance of confraternities to urban life. Recently, however, some historians of late medieval Florentine confraternities have turned their attention towards the question of how lay religious associations facilitated the development of the social fabric of medieval Florence. In his recent work *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* John Henderson argues that the charity dispensed by confraternities such as the Orsanmichele provided an important social service to the city by relieving actual need among Florence's poor. Similarly, Nicholas Eckstein's study of parish life in Florence, *The District of the Green Dragon: Neighbourhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence*, suggests that the social foundations of the gonfalone of the Green Dragon, a community in the Oltrarno district of Florence, were developed not by political ties between the inhabitants of the district but by the networks that they developed as members of two confraternities linked to the local parish. He views the confraternities of Sant'Agnese and the *Bruciata* as essentially local organizations which brought people from the same area into close contact with each other. He also argues that this local corporate spirit changed over the course of the century as the administration of the two confraternities came under the increasing power of the Medici family.

Eckstein compares the character of the community of the Green Dragon, with its social interweaving and close contact between rich and poor inhabitants, with the membership of the two confraternities, and finds that the members of the confraternities were themselves from varying social backgrounds. He suggests that the cement which bound together the members of both the confraternities and the community at large was the need to live "a good Christian life" (p. 88). These values were most visible in the charitable activities of confraternity members and their clear concern for the well-being of all inhabitants of the community, confraternity members or not.

Eckstein argues that the confraternities' goal was to "solve the problem of poverty" in the community by giving alms to the most needy inhabitants of the area (p. 91). He maintains that the "corporate responsibility ... which emanated from within the community" (p. 132) caused the administrators of the confraternities to make specific choices about who received alms in the community, focusing more on the "miserabili" (i.e. those who could not help themselves) than the "poveri vergognosi" of the area (p. 129). At the same time, almsgiving retained its devotional meaning for the associations. While the members of the confraternities were aware of the social significance of the charitable gifts they made to the association, the act of giving charity retained its penitential aspect for them. Charity, notes Eckstein, had the triple effect of bringing the poor back into the community, satisfying the souls of those who had willed alms to the poor, and blessing the living members who offered gifts. "At this moment, the community of the dead and the community of the living met, and became one" (p. 138).

The final chapters of Eckstein's volume deal with the political changes which took place in Florence over the fifteenth century as the Medici family gradually consolidated their power in the city. Eckstein claims that as the power of the civic government was centralized in the hands of a few men the local significance of associations such as Sant' Agnese and the *Bruciata* was weakened, and they became vehicles for the furthering of the Medici's influence in the Oltrarno (p. 199).

Eckstein's work demonstrates that a significant development has taken place in the writing of the history of confraternities. Historians have begun to acknowledge not only the significance of the ceremonies and rituals carried out by confraternities but also the real effect on local communities of the bonds created by members of these associations.

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Henderson, John. *Piety and Charity in late Medieval Florence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. xviii, 533 pp.

John Henderson has provided here a much needed overview of late-medieval Florentine confraternities. In so doing, Henderson does more than synthesize previous work in this area. Taking as a starting point the work of both social and religious historians, he proceeds to examine the confraternity as a mediator between the sacred and the secular facets of medieval society. Henderson argues that previous historical work has tended to examine the confraternity as either a religious or a secular institution, but rarely as the two combined, even though the appeal of the confraternity lay in its mingling of the two worlds. This mingling of the secular and the spiritual is visible through the confraternity's practice of charity. Charity was an integral component of the medieval confraternity not only because it bound the individual closer to God, but also because it reinforced bonds of fellowship within society. It was an expression of brotherhood which was itself the very essence of the collective confraternal identity.

In keeping with his intention to examine the meeting of two worlds, Henderson has divided his book into two parts: Piety and Charity. Part I concentrates on the structure of the confraternity itself and how it modelled itself on existing secular institutions, particularly that of the guild (chapters 1-3). Henderson also discusses here the spiritual appeal of the confraternity for the lay individual, especially confraternities concerned with the afterlife of members (chapters 4-5). The final chapter provides a fine transition to the second section. Here Henderson examines one particular confraternity, that of Orsanmichele, which became increasingly important over the fifteenth century and which for him represents the inherent duality of the medieval confraternity. Part II compares the practice of charity before and after the Black Death (chapters 7-8) and during the fifteenth century (chapter 9) in order to understand how practices of poor relief adapted to the changing nature of poverty.

Henderson has drawn a number of surprising and intriguing conclusions from his research. He argues, for example, that even as the number of confraternities grew over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the number of flagellant organizations