

Confraternities and the Plague in Orvieto: 1340–1410

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Summary: Confraternities can be seen as a barometer of social and cultural trends. This article explores the use of confraternity sources as records for the impact of plague. Using Orvieto (Umbria) between 1340 and 1410 as a setting, this article assesses the response to plague by the town's population through their joining the confraternity of San Francesco. My analysis demonstrates the serious impact of the Black Death on Orvieto. It also reinforces the importance of studying subsequent outbreaks of the plague to better understand the role of epidemic disease in expressions of popular piety as well as the importance of situating the study of disease and confraternities in their local context.

The Black Death of 1348 has long been considered a turning point in the history of the Italian peninsula, and indeed of all of Europe. The 1348 outbreak marked the beginning of a series of recurrences of the plague at least every twenty-five years for the following four centuries.¹ Examining the impact of plague outbreaks over an extended period highlights the repeated responses to the disease. This article examines the impact of the epidemic on the confraternity of San Francesco in Orvieto, Umbria. Between 1340 and 1410 Orvieto experienced at least six major outbreaks of the plague.² Chronicle accounts will be used alongside confraternity records to identify years of plague for subsequent analysis. This will reveal the effects of these many outbreaks on the expression of piety across a broad chronology in a medieval Italian city.

Orvieto has been selected because it is a politically and economically representative Italian city state of its size in this period. The town made a final attempt at political freedom in the 1340s before eventually being claimed for the Papal States in 1354, under whose control it remained until the Early Modern period.³ Situated on the route from Florence to Rome, Orvieto depended on trade for its economy.⁴ The population of the town declined gradually over the fourteenth century, so much so that by 1402, the Orvietan population was only half of what it had been in 1292.⁵ Although there were a variety of confraternities in town, this article will

¹ Levi and Levi-Donati, "Galileo e la peste," 3–32.

² Corradi, "Annali delle epidemie," 543–544.

³ Waley, *Mediaeval Orvieto*, 142–143.

⁴ Carpentier, *Orvieto*, 62.

⁵ Carpentier, *Orvieto*, 217.

focus only on the confraternity of San Francesco, which has a surviving *matricola* and a necrology.

Confraternities can be seen as a barometer of town life, popular piety, and social change.⁶ Examining confraternities through the lens of plague will highlight the lay response to epidemic disease in a quantifiable manner. Confraternities did not exist in isolation, but were part of the religious tapestry of a town. In the time period under examination, there were many confraternities in Orvieto, including confraternities of *disciplinati*, *laudesi*, and groups that performed *sacre rappresentazioni* (sacred plays). There were also professional confraternities whose members specialised in medical care or funerary respects.⁷ Many of these groups adapted and changed over time. For example, the introduction of self-flagellation into the rituals of the confraternity of San Francesco in 1323 meant that the previously mixed-sex membership became exclusively male.⁸ Confraternities were usually identified by a particular characteristic, such as whether or not members self-flagellated, but most groups had other remits, usually with a civic outlook, such as caring for the poor or overseeing a hospital.

While the plague will frame this article, the nature of the disease will not be discussed. This is so for a number of reasons, not least of which is the likelihood that each outbreak may actually have been a different disease. Moreover, the purpose of this study is not to evaluate pestilential epidemiology,⁹ but to examine the confraternity's response to the epidemic. Medieval chronicle accounts of these plagues and their impact will therefore be examined in order to understand the contemporary response, and not to carry out a retrospective diagnosis.

This article will draw from five chronicles from Orvieto from the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries published in Fumi's *Ephemerides*.¹⁰ Together, these writers address the period from 1202 to 1505, offering a variety of evidence for the period in question. First, these chronicles will be used to create a plague chronology for Orvieto between 1340 and 1410. This chronology will then be used as a base against which to assess the impact of the plague on a confraternity. The confraternity of San Francesco will be used as a case study, drawing on its *matricola* and necrology.¹¹ These membership lists will be considered in correlation with the years of plague.

⁶ Lance Lazar, "Belief, Devotion, and Memory," 4.

⁷ Henderson, "La confraternita," 109.

⁸ Henderson, "La confraternita," 92–93.

⁹ For more on the epidemiology of the plague see e.g. Green, "Taking 'Pandemic' Seriously"; Benedictow, *The Black Death*; Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence*.

¹⁰ Fumi, *Ephemerides urbevetae*.

¹¹ The *matricola* figures are collected from Henderson, "Piety and Heresy" and Frank, *Bruderschaften im spätmittelalterlichen Kirchenstaat*. The necrology is reproduced from Cohn, "The Black Death," 729.

This will highlight the particular way in which popular piety was affected during outbreaks of epidemic disease in Orvieto.

Plague

There is a unanimous consensus in the chronicle sources that there was a terrible epidemic in 1348. Thereafter, the *Cronaca urbevetana* cites 1362, 1374, 1384 and 1399 as years of plague.¹² Alfonso Corradi, who compiled a list of plague dates for the Italian peninsula, adds 1388–89 and 1405–06 to this list.¹³ The variation in reporting plague may be caused by a certain reticence to name the disease; for example, in 1348 the outbreak is first cited by chronicle accounts in March, but does not appear in municipal records until 5 July.¹⁴ Each instance of plague will now be addressed in terms of its effects on Orvieto, beginning with the Black Death of 1348–50, and then continuing with plagues in 1360–63, 1371–74, 1383–84, 1388–89, 1397–1400, and 1405–06. Reports of these plagues will set the scene for assessing confraternity membership during this period.

Chronicle reports of the Black Death began in March 1348. They noted that the disease worsened throughout the summer and had lessened by September; that the disease struck indiscriminately, attacking adults and children, male and female;¹⁵ that many houses and shops were left abandoned; that death came quickly, as people were fine one morning and dead the next.¹⁶ The government committee of the *Sette* first recorded the plague on 5 July 1348 and used it as an excuse to limit the amount of wax used in candles.¹⁷ This suggests a reticence on the part of the official municipal sources compared to the chronicle accounts, as they do not reflect the devastation this epidemic wrought to the population.

The next outbreak occurred just over a decade later, striking Orvieto between 1362 and 1363. This epidemic was particularly devastating for young people, so much so that it was known as *pestis puerorum*, the children's plague.¹⁸ Children, however, were not the only ones to die: during this period the Council of Two Hundred, the city's legislative body, was allowed to convene with only half its members, which suggests either that its usual membership had been depleted by death or that people had fled the town. The pestilence was so severe that the city chronicles ignored the

¹² Anon., "Cronaca urbevetana," 208.

¹³ Corradi, "Annali delle epidemie," 480–495, 510, 518–29, 525, 536–41, 549–53.

¹⁴ Carpentier, *Orvieto*, 231.

¹⁵ Anon., "Discorso storico con molti accidenti occorsi in Orvieto," 25.

¹⁶ Anon., "Discorso storico con molti accidenti occorsi in Orvieto," 26.

¹⁷ Carpentier, *Orvieto*, 231, 127.

¹⁸ Anon., "Discorso storico con molti accidenti occorsi in Orvieto," 84. Gottfried, "The Black Death," 130.

1363 centennial of the Miracle of Bolsena and focused instead on the outbreak of disease.¹⁹

Another plague struck Orvieto in 1374, and again the sources note that it affected children, especially.²⁰ However, unlike the initial two outbreaks mentioned across the chronicles, only two Orvietan chroniclers mention plague in the 1370s.²¹ The reason for this is unclear. Perhaps the other chroniclers now showed a reticence similar to that of the town councils in discussing the disease, or perhaps the novelty of the outbreaks had worn off and the chroniclers no longer found it to be a novelty worth recording. Indeed, the plague of 1374 was swiftly followed by a more widely reported famine in 1375, which underscores the frequency of natural disasters.²² Thus, an added difficulty in assessing plague is often the silence of chroniclers or record keepers, which means that it is necessary to use a combination of sources to understand the full extent of an outbreak.

Unlike the silence on the plague in the 1370s, in the 1380s the chroniclers report two outbreaks in Orvieto: 1384 and 1389. The first date is in line with outbreaks in other Italian towns, for example in Lucca.²³ However, the Orvietan chronicler Montemarte does not mention similar outbreaks Lucca, but in Anjou and Savoy instead, and locates the disease in Orvieto only in 1389.²⁴ Perhaps Orvieto was not particularly affected by the outbreak that struck many other locations in the first half of the decade, but succumbed to the disease closer to 1390 instead. Lucca was reportedly struck by both of these outbreaks, and so it is not impossible that Orvieto was struck twice as well.²⁵ On the other hand, many towns were not as affected as others during particular epidemics, for example Milan is widely acknowledged to have survived the Black Death relatively unscathed.²⁶ Orvieto therefore could have had a similar escape from the plague in 1384.

There is also a discrepancy in the Orvietan chronicle reports of plague in the 1390s. Luca di Domenico reports the epidemic from 1397 to 1401, whereas the *Cronaca* and the *Annales* both state that the plague started in 1399 and ended the following July.²⁷ The earlier date range sug-

¹⁹ This miracle occurred in 1263 at Bolsena, near Orvieto. At the moment of transubstantiation during a mass, the host bled onto the altar cloth. The miracle was ratified at Orvieto where the pope was residing at that time. See Rigaux, "Miracle, reliques et images."

²⁰ Anon., "Cronaca urbevetana," 208.

²¹ The *Cronaca urbevetana* writer and Manenti.

²² Manenti, "Estratti dalle 'Historie,'" 469.

²³ Sercambi, *Le Croniche*, 1:243.

²⁴ Montemarte, "Cronaca," 247, 252. Manenti also makes reference to an outbreak only in 1389 in Orvieto: Manenti, "Estratti dalle 'Historie,'" 400.

²⁵ Sercambi, *Le Croniche*, 1:43.

²⁶ Albini, *Guerra, fame, peste*, 24.

²⁷ Luca di Domenico, "Cronaca," 406; Anon., "Cronaca urbevetana," 208; Anon., "Annales urbevetani" 197.

gested by Luca di Domenico could encompass a broader geographical consideration—there was plague in Liguria in 1397, although it did not reach Umbria and Tuscany until 1399, peaking in the summer of 1400.²⁸ Another reason for placing the outbreak in 1399 could be the advent of the Bianchi processions, which were associated with the plague.²⁹ The plague outbreaks in the fifteenth century become increasingly difficult to date; there is, for example, no Orvietan reference to plague in 1405–06, which could suggest the city was spared this outbreak.³⁰

An important factor when discussing the plague is population loss. Although demographic information for Orvieto is limited, a 1292 survey that recorded 2816 hearths in the city allows us to extrapolate a total population figure of about 30,000 people.³¹ By 1402, the population had decreased by more than half, with only 1381 hearths remaining in the city.³² One chronicler estimated a death toll of 90% for 1348 and pointed out that some parishes in the contado had completely collapsed.³³ Whatever the precise statistics, the population of Orvieto was severely depleted at each outbreak of epidemic disease.

The government of Orvieto enacted legislation to attempt to limit the effects of the disease. Because they thought that the plague had been sent as divine punishment, the majority of the legislation sought to reduce sinful activities. In 1349, for example, the government banned gambling and prostitution.³⁴ The general population also believed that there was a connection between disease and sin, so it pursued various religious practices to protect itself from plague.³⁵

While municipal authorities continued to meet (albeit in reduced numbers) and legislate, ecclesiastical authorities generally did not feel bound by their pastoral duties and fled. Doctors also fled the plague and became an easy scapegoat when blame for a death needed to be assigned. Angelo da Orvieto is specifically indicated as a doctor who remained in the town during the pestilence, suggesting that his presence was exceptional.³⁶ Because doctors were clearly necessary in dealing with the plague,

²⁸ Stella, *Annales Genuenses*, 215. Sercambi, *Le Croniche*, 2:64–65 (1397), 397 (1400).

²⁹ The origin stories of these devotions suggested that the world would be annihilated through a plague if the populace did not participate in penitential processions. See for example Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399*.

³⁰ Corradi, “Annali delle epidemie,” 546.

³¹ Carpentier, *Orvieto*, 30.

³² Carpentier, *Orvieto*, 217.

³³ Anon., “Discorso storico con molti accidenti occorsi in Orvieto,” 26. Carpentier, *Orvieto*, 239.

³⁴ Carpentier, *Orvieto*, 243–244.

³⁵ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 3.

³⁶ Anon., “Discorso storico con molti accidenti occorsi in Orvieto,” 25.

legislation was passed to encourage doctors to work in the city once the outbreak had lessened.³⁷

Although contemporary accounts do not offer a clear linear chronology of plague during this period, a working timeline for outbreaks in Orvieto has been established that places an epidemic roughly once a decade after the Black Death. The main outbreaks have been identified as 1348–50, 1362–63, 1374, 1384, 1389, 1397–1401 and 1410. These dates will now be examined in connection with the confraternity of San Francesco in Orvieto in order to demonstrate the correlations between years of plague and membership in lay religious associations of this type.

Confraternity Membership

Two relatively detailed membership records for the confraternity of San Francesco survive: a *matricola* from 1323 until 1419 and a necrology from 1337 to 1398. The *matricola* was edited and compiled respectively by J. Mary Henderson and Frank from MS 528 at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emanuele II di Roma and is presented in Figure 1.³⁸ This information will be compared with the necrology drawn from the same manuscript presented in Figure 2.³⁹ Comparing these figures in relation to the years of plague will reveal the correlation between plague outbreaks and membership figures in the group.

Joining a confraternity was an expression of piety. It presented an individual with a spiritual challenge without obliging the individual to follow a monastic lifestyle. This was particularly important during plague outbreaks because confraternal activities such as prayer and self-discipline were understood to offer absolution for the spiritual errors that were deemed to be the root cause of the pestilence.⁴⁰ The medical assistance and subsidised funerals offered by some confraternities would also have been of interest to people during episodes of plague.

The confraternity of San Francesco in Orvieto was founded in the late thirteenth century, under the influence of the flagellant movement of the 1260s. It generally had a fairly even membership of around seventy people. Deaths in the confraternity were usually balanced by new admissions; for example, 13 members died in 1340, and 12 new *confratelli* were accepted in the sodality in 1341. An analysis of the membership of the

³⁷ In 1348, Orvieto offered 100 lire per annum for a doctor, four times the previous salary, and 200 lire if he taught too. A doctor was hired in 1356 for 600 lire per annum. Fabbri, "Continuity and Change," 156.

³⁸ Henderson, "Piety and Heresy"; Frank, *Bruderschaften im spätmittelalterlichen Kirchenstaat*; Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, Vittorio Emanuele II, MS. 528.

³⁹ Cohn, "The Black Death," 729, fig. 15.

⁴⁰ Henderson, "Piety and Heresy," 307.

confraternity of San Francesco in relation to outbreaks of plague sheds light on the expression of piety in Orvieto during epidemics.

The most severe drop in confraternity membership occurred during the Black Death in 1348 when 109 members died in that single year. This unprecedented loss was almost precisely matched that same year by the admission of 106 new members. When the induction of new members is examined on a monthly basis, the rise in membership is particularly notable at the height of the plague: in July, when the confraternity suffered 75 deaths, it also accepted 63 new members.⁴¹ The turnover was rapid: one new member, Turi di Cecco, died on the same day he was admitted, while Giacomo di Domenico died five days after.⁴² The fact that more than a hundred new members joined the confraternity that year suggests not only that people in Orvieto were keen to seek the comfort or security of confraternity membership during times of pestilence, but also that the confraternity had no problems finding new members to replace deceased *confratelli* and did so quickly.

J. Mary Henderson maintains that this high number of new members in 1348 demonstrates a profoundly religious response to the plague, particularly since no more than 15 new members were usually recruited annually.⁴³ Indeed, this phenomenon does suggest that joining a confraternity represented a tangible response in the face of incurable disease. This above average intake of new members in 1348 continued in the two years immediately following, with 36 new members in 1349 and 20 in 1350, followed by a reasonably quiet period in admissions, suggesting that people no longer felt the need to confront the plague by joining a confraternity and that the confraternity had attained a sustainable number of members. This period of three years not only encompassed the plague outbreak, but also the Jubilee Year of 1350, another possible reason for the heightened interest in joining the confraternity. Although the Black Death and its immediate aftermath had a profound impact on the confraternity of San Francesco, the sodality managed to maintain a relatively stable membership thanks to the ease with which new members could be found and accepted (figs. 1–2).

The second outbreak of plague (1362–63) is marked by a spike of 22 deaths in the confraternity, nearly double the usual number of annual deaths. Though a peak, this is also a significantly lower number of deaths than in 1348–50. One reason for this may be found in the nature of the plague which, according to contemporary chroniclers, was, as indicated above, a *pestis puerorum* that affected children more than adults. Because the confraternity did not accept children as members, it was not as affected

⁴¹ Henderson, "Piety and Heresy," 409.

⁴² Henderson, "La confraternita," 97.

⁴³ Henderson, "Piety and Heresy," 386.

by the “children’s plague”, though it was nonetheless affected more than the annual average.

The shape of both graphs for the 1370s indicates a higher than average turnover of new members in 1373 (six) and 1374 (eight), correlating with the members who had died in each year. This corresponds with the plague epidemic in the first half of the 1370s. While neither the number of deaths nor that of new admissions were as high as during the previous two outbreaks of plague, this cluster suggests that there was a noticeable impact from the disease at this time. Indeed, throughout the period between this plague and the previous outbreak, only three new members had been admitted into the confraternity, in 1366, 1368 and 1371 respectively.

Membership figures in the confraternity of San Francesco remained steady throughout the 1370s. Those who died were usually replaced, with one or two new members a year in this decade, and a cluster of six new members were admitted in 1378. While there was no plague in 1378, the spike may perhaps be attributed to the papal visit for the feast of Corpus Christi in 1377 that could have inspired such an expression of piety.

The two outbreaks of plague in the 1380s do not fit the confraternity membership patterns we have seen so far. The first plague in 1384 saw the death of 15 *confratelli*, an elevated cluster of deaths that continued until 1391. This suggests that there may indeed have been two outbreaks in this decade in Orvieto, or a steady series of deaths from plague and not two distinct episodes. While the impact was most keenly felt in 1384, the mortality rate for the decade as a whole is the most sustained for the period in question. In spite of the presence of the plague and high mortality in the confraternity, new admissions during this period were lower than the total number of deaths. In fact, there were no new members between 1388 and 1390, and only three new *confratelli* were admitted in 1391. Thus, while confraternity members were still dying of the disease, the desire to join a confraternity appears to have lessened, at least as far as the confraternity of San Francesco is concerned.

The confraternity’s necrology stops in 1398, so it is not possible to assess the impact of the 1397–1401 plague on members. We do know, however, that during this plague period no new members enrolled in the confraternity. This may be due to the processions of the “Bianchi” that swept through the town in the late summer of 1399.⁴⁴ The Bianchi participants dressed in white and processed for nine days, going from town to town, spreading their devotion to other cities before returning home. It is possible that in this devotional climate joining a confraternity was no longer the main method of expressing piety. Indeed, David Herlihy points towards a focus on civic Christianity that prioritized individual charity and good works, rather than collective devotion.⁴⁵ Unlike Tuscany, where the

⁴⁴ Montemarte, “Cronaca,” 266.

⁴⁵ Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia*, 240–258.

Bianchi devotions did lead to the founding or renewal of confraternities, in Umbria it seems not to have had such an effect.

Moving into the fifteenth century, there are only three *matricola* figures and they point to a single annual admission to the confraternity in 1403, 1409 and 1419 respectively. As a result, no meaningful analysis can be made for the final decade of this study. Nevertheless, these dwindling admission figures suggest that the plagues that struck Orvieto in the first few years of the fifteenth century did little to revitalise the diminishing interest in the confraternity of San Francesco.

This analysis of membership figures indicates that the initial two outbreaks of plague raised enough interest in the confraternity of San Francesco that membership figures could be maintained in spite of very high mortality rates. This is particularly evident during the outbreak of 1348 when the 106 new members admitted into San Francesco counter-balanced the 109 deaths the sodality suffered. New members were not, however, a guarantee of sustained membership because those who joined did not necessarily remain; 11 of the members who joined in 1348 were expelled before 1350; a certain Peruccio, for example, was expelled for disobeying confraternity regulations.⁴⁶ Expulsion was not necessarily irrevocable, as some members who had been expelled were later readmitted; Simone di Conte, was expelled for bad behaviour in 1347 but was later included in the confraternity's necrology.⁴⁷

There is an unmistakable correlation between plague outbreaks and new enrolments in the confraternity of San Francesco, particularly during the earlier epidemics when enrolment figures generally match, or come close, to the mortality figures in the confraternity. Alternately, as mortality from plague in the confraternity decreased, so too did the desire to join the group. Over time, however, the recurrence of plague did not elicit a similar response, so much so that towards the beginning of the fifteenth century interest in joining the confraternity of San Francesco during plague years declined.

Conclusion

Outbreaks of plague had a serious effect on the Orvietan confraternity of San Francesco during the period between 1340 and 1410. This relationship is best exemplified by the events of 1348; while it is not surprising that a large proportion of members died, it is remarkable that they were almost all replaced within that same year. It was perhaps the confraternity's promise of a regulated expression of piety and funerary rituals for deceased *confratelli* that may have drawn new members to the sodality. While the death toll on the confraternity from later epidemics was significantly less, so too

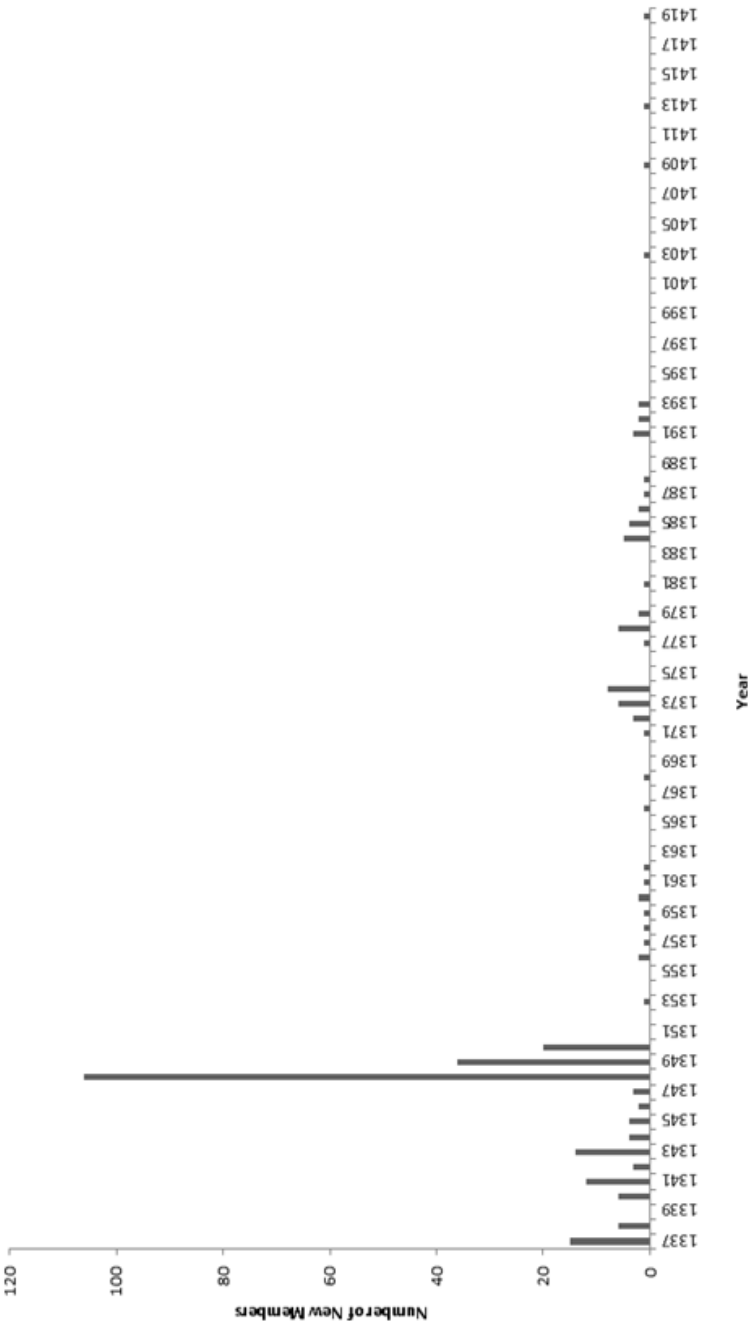
⁴⁶ Henderson, "Piety and Heresy," 344

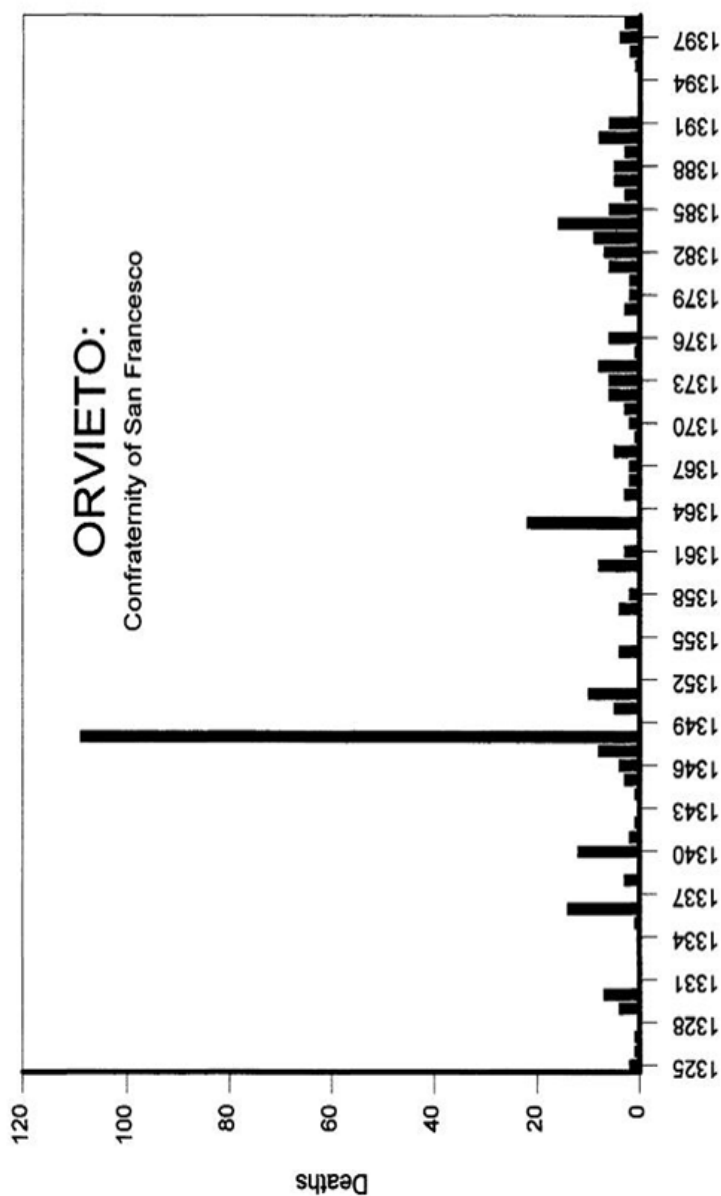
⁴⁷ Henderson, "Piety and Heresy," 413.

was the interest in joining the sodality in times of plague. This is particularly evident in the analysis of the year 1363 when 22 members of the confraternity died and were not replaced. Throughout the rest of the period in question, members of the confraternity continued to die, and were not replaced at the same rapid rate as they were in 1348.

The Black Death provoked the strongest reaction, but as time passed and the plague returned, reaction was much more limited, possibly because of other external events that offered the population an alternative to confraternity enrolment and support such as, for example, participation in the Bianchi processions of 1399. The evidence presented suggests a shift in the expression of piety in the face of epidemic disease.

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