

RECENT THESES

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“LOCALISING COLLECTIVE DEVOTION: THE BIANCHI OF 1399 AT LUCCA AND PISTOIA”

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Abstract

The Bianchi of 1399, best described as a popular religious revival, spread throughout northern and central Italy in the second half of that year. Previous historiography has approached the movement as a unique and coherent phenomenon, generalising about the processions and practices of participants. This thesis challenges these presentations, demonstrating the importance of analysing local realisations of the collective devotion of the Bianchi. Its focus on Lucca and Pistoia, two Tuscan hotbeds of Bianchi activity, indicates regional diversity within the Bianchi processions. Narrative, verse and visual sources are used in combination to discuss the brief but compulsive fervour of the Bianchi in 1399.

The thesis reviews the context for each town from 1340 to 1415 to establish a baseline of activities against which to compare the Bianchi processions, including a survey of religious confraternities. It examines the three dominant contemporary narratives concerning the origins of the Bianchi movement, addressing the variation between them. It analyses the practices of the Bianchi, focussing on three problematic examples: wearing white, singing *laude*, and self-flagellating. It investigates the communal response to the Bianchi, revealing the different roles undertaken by lay and clerical authorities in orchestrating the processions. Finally, the thesis surveys the legacy of the Bianchi, underscoring the importance of local considerations in commemorating the Bianchi in the period immediately afterwards (c. 1400–1415). This includes the enshrinement of crucifixes, the formation and reformation of religious confraternities, and the commissioning of frescoes.

The thesis challenges previous studies of the Bianchi, demonstrating the importance of understanding the processions at a local level. New insights are offered into the two different modes of participating in Bianchi devotions: intramural and itinerant processions, and the role of the authorities in managing this popular revival is revealed. It also addresses the plague of 1399–1400, exploring the interaction between the Bianchi and this outbreak. This study demonstrates that evaluating the

local interpretations of the processions in each individual town is crucial in describing the collective devotions of the Bianchi.

Biographical note

Alexandra Lee's PhD in Italian Studies at University College London was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. She is interested in popular responses to unexplainable natural phenomena, specifically popular religious responses to epidemics of plague in medieval Europe.