

Confraternities on the Edge: Publications on Borgomanero

Review Article

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Piero Zanetta and Laura Chironi Temporelli. *Le confraternite di Borgomanero* (Collana documentaria borgomanerese I). Borgomanero, 1988. 201 pp., illustrations; Laura Chironi Temporelli. *Le confraternite di Borgomanero: mostra documentaria*. Borgomanero, 1988. 73 pp., illustrations; Piero Zanetta, Andrea Zanetta and Laura Chironi Temporelli. *La confraternita di Santa Marta in Borgomanero* (Collana documentaria borgomanerese II). Borgomanero, 1990. 351 pp., illustrations; Laura Chironi Temporelli. *La confraternita di Santa Marta in Borgomanero: catalogo della mostra documentaria* (Collana documentaria borgomanerese III). Borgomanero, 1990. 129 pp., illustrations; Andrea Zanetta, *La confraternita di San Giuseppe e la sua Chiesa in Borgomanero dal XIV al XX secolo* (Collana documentaria borgomanerese IV). Borgomanero, 1992. 430 pp., illustrations; Paolo Venturoli and Laura Chironi Temporelli, *La confraternita di San Giuseppe in Borgomanero: catalogo della mostra documentaria* (Collana documentaria borgomanerese V). Borgomanero, 1992. 161 pp., illustrations; Andrea Zanetta, *La Chiesa e la confraternita della SS. Trinità dal 1590 ad oggi* (Collana documentaria borgomanerese VI). Borgomanero, 1994. 371 pp., illustrations; Andrea Zanetta, Laura Chironi Temporelli, Beatrice Canestro Chiovena and Adriano Cervia, *La Chiesa e la confraternita della SS. Trinità: catalogo della mostra documentaria* (Collana documentaria borgomanerese VII). Borgomanero, 1994. 179 pp., illustrations; Carlo Antonio Molli, *San Bartolomeo parrocchiale di Borgomanero* (Collana di studi borgomaneresi V). Borgomanero, 1986. 191 pp., illustrations.

Non-Italian scholars of early modern Italy have, in the past, understandably concentrated their efforts on the study of major centres, particularly Florence, Venice and Rome. In Italy itself, by contrast, there has also been a strong parallel tradition of researching sites of lesser importance. One reason for this difference is perhaps obvious: international scholars cannot rely on a local audience positively predisposed to the results of such focused work. But there has sometimes also existed a regrettable prejudice against local history, with scholars arguing that if a place played no great role in the master narrative of European history then any study of it is bound to produce uninteresting results. Recently, however, these preconceptions have been reevaluated, resulting in books by non-Italian scholars on Bologna, Brescia, and Vicenza, to name but a few notable examples. These works have shown that, in spite of a certain distance from the main centres of power, the histories of these towns are interesting in themselves, and cast light on phenomena relevant to the general history of the peninsula. At the same time, the writing of the history of the confraternity, as

all readers of this journal will know, has become an extremely important undertaking. Following the general pattern outlined above, non-Italian scholarship has emphasised confraternities in the major centres. Without case studies on confraternities in smaller towns that can provide contrast and context to those in the larger centres, however, historians are unable to develop a convincing picture of the broader roles confraternities played within the political, social and religious networks of early modern Italy.

The series of works under consideration here focuses on confraternities in Borgomanero, a small town located in Piedmont, between Novara and Lago d'Orta. Borgomanero was founded in the Middle Ages, but was not sufficiently important to merit its own parish church, S. Bartolomeo, until the thirteenth century. Following this foundation, the town's importance gradually increased, and confraternities began to be founded. From 1988 to 1994, four exhibitions on the history and art patronage of local confraternities were held in Borgomanero. Accompanying each exhibition were two books, one focusing on the history of the confraternities in question, and the other a catalogue of the objects in the exhibition. The propulsive forces behind this ambitious local project seem to have been the brothers Andrea and Piero Zanetta, along with Laura Chironi Temporelli, who provided art historical accompaniment to their efforts. In the following comments, I will first deal with each of the historical works in sequence, and then with the art historical catalogues as a group.

The first pair of books, associated with the exhibition in 1988, deals with all the confraternities in Borgomanero and serves as a foundation for the later books concentrating on individual institutions. In this first book, the history of confraternities in the town is divided by Piero Zanetta into two sections. The first, dealing with the pre-Tridentine period, describes the origins of confraternities in the town. In the Trecento, only two confraternities were active, one based at the oratory of S. Marta, and the other at an adjoining oratory dedicated to Mary Magdalen. At this early stage it is not clear what was the relationship of these oratories with the parish. In 1486 a confraternity dedicated to the Immaculate Conception was established at the parish church. In the sixteenth century, there was real growth in the number and significance of confraternities. In the early years of that century two were established, one dedicated to S. Giuseppe and the other to the Corpus Domini. The first of these was linked to the oratory of Mary Magdalen, whereas the Sacrament confraternity was based in S. Bartolomeo. In the second part of the history, which describes events following the Council of Trent, Piero Zanetta outlines the late sixteenth century establishment of confraternities dedicated to the Rosary and to Christian Doctrine, as well as a foundation dedicated to the Trinity endowed by a repentant noble. The author traces the histories of all these institutions up to the twentieth century, though none of them survives today.

In addition to providing a straightforward recounting of dates and events, Piero Zanetta also comments on a variety of other aspects of confraternity life. There is, for instance, a brief discussion of what types of people, in terms of class, gender and occupation, were attracted to which confraternity. The history of the oratories and other buildings associated with each organisation is investigated in greater detail, as is the art produced as decoration for these sites. In this last respect Chironi Temporelli's accompanying catalogue forms an important adjunct. In addition, the

attempts by the central ecclesiastical authorities to impose control on the confraternities following the Council of Trent are adumbrated convincingly. Throughout this first volume, however, no footnotes are used to direct the scholar to the relevant archival sources, rendering its conclusions of limited utility.

The regrettable omission of archival references is remedied in the later volumes of the series. The second pair of books, which accompanied an exhibition in 1990 on the confraternity of S. Marta, is provided with a full scholarly apparatus. As in the historical volume of the first pair discussed above, the text follows a chronological sequence that continues up to the present day, but is in this volume much more detailed, as well as better documented. At the end of the book is an appendix of transcribed documents, including inventories and papal Bulls, ranging in date from 1556 to 1940. The activities and organisation of the confraternity are again described, but perhaps the most interesting and fully developed part of the narrative concerns tensions manifest from the late sixteenth through seventeenth century between the central ecclesiastical authorities and the confraternity. Piero Zanetta has drawn on a wide range of documents to paint a convincing picture of the maneuverings of each side. This particular case study can certainly be used by scholars seeking to nuance any research into this important dynamic.

The 1992 pair of books on the confraternity dedicated to S. Giuseppe follows the same format as the previous pair and deals with the issues in a substantially similar fashion. This confraternity was founded in the early sixteenth century under Franciscan influence, but, as with the confraternity of S. Marta, the most interesting aspect of its history was its struggle with the bishop in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Both of these confraternities finally amalgamated with archconfraternities in Rome. While this development may have been motivated by a desire to benefit from the indulgences offered by these institutions, it was probably also related to the struggle with the episcopal authorities. The examples of S. Giuseppe and S. Marta are of use to those interested in studying how confraternities developed strategies for the maintenance of lay autonomy.

The last pair of books is a study of a confraternity dedicated to the Trinity, which was founded in 1590 by Giuseppe Maione. He and his brother Francesco had been banished from Borgomanero in 1552 following a smuggling operation that led to the death of seven tax officials. They moved to Rome where the two became wealthy traders and, perhaps because of his association with Filippo Neri, Giuseppe decided to found a confraternity and hospital in his home town as an act of penitence. This study should be of interest to those studying connexions between confraternities and the emerging Orders of the Counter-Reformation.

Each of the above pairs of books includes a volume cataloguing the art objects shown during the exhibition. The goal of these catalogues is simply to describe, date and attribute, if possible, each of the exhibits. The objects range widely in quality, function, medium and date; there are processional banners, altarpiece paintings, crosses, and other assorted liturgical paraphernalia, representing, in other words, the full range of luxury items that a confraternity might possess. Some of the pieces can be dated to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the majority of them come from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even though Chironi Temporelli has

written a thorough catalogue, the role of this material accumulation in the history of the institutions is not discussed outside of the individual catalogue entries. In spite of this shortcoming, such catalogues are of great value for those interested in the visual culture of confraternities in early modern Italy. Without them, it would be impossible to investigate the broader issue of how confraternities used visual means to establish and maintain their identities.

The last of the publications under consideration here, on the parish of S. Bartolomeo, does not focus directly on confraternities, but is still of some relevance here. In this study Piero Zanetta has reproduced a manuscript text written by the eighteenth-century antiquarian Carlo Antonio Molli on the parish church, and added to it not simply annotations, but a complete parallel text that draws on Zanetta's own extensive research into the archives. Zanetta's additions include, for example, a 1617 inventory of the church's possessions. Zanetta provides a fully documented building history of the church, and identifies the patrons responsible for each of the chapels. At least three of these chapels were controlled by confraternities based in the parish. It is to be regretted that the death of the author prevented him from writing the planned companion volume to this one, focusing on the involvement of these confraternities in the parish. Such a study would have been a valuable addition to our knowledge of the extent to which confraternities participated in the consolidation of the parish in the late sixteenth century. But even without it, this parish history is exceptionally well documented, and a valuable tool for anyone interested in the development of the parish as an institution in early modern Italy.

These local studies can be used as tools for historians seeking evidence for broad cultural trends and phenomena. But a good local history can also be interesting in and of itself. These publications are unfortunately somewhat disappointing in this respect. To a large extent, blame for this rests in the motivation lying behind their production, which seems to have been primarily to celebrate nostalgically the glories of local history. Strangely enough, given the strong local focus, each of the confraternities is connected to a very wide historical context, but there is little sense of how these institutions interacted with one another within the local context. Although the differing memberships of each are mentioned, these distinctions are never employed as part of an analysis of how the confraternity acted either to control or empower these groups. This criticism aside, these well-documented studies enable the historian to test generalising hypotheses against a set of circumstances obtaining in an otherwise unknown and peripheral context. In addition to this, it should be noted that all of the books are lavishly and beautifully produced, with many illustrations, both in black and white and in colour.

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