Discipline Transformed: The Processions of a Pavian Flagellant Confraternity, 1330–1460

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In a text composed around 1330, Pavian priest Opicino de Canistris describes a group of laypeople who process through his native town, beating themselves with chains and prostrating themselves in front of altars.¹ This passage likely refers to the Raccomandati della Beata Vergine of Pavia.² There were other confraternities in Pavia, but this one was unusually renowned. Its statutes, approved in 1334 by the bishop of Pavia, were adopted by confraternities in Milan, Lodi, and Piacenza.³ One year later, a schism split the confraternity into two factions, one of which remained at the church of San Gervaso in the northwest corner of the city. The other left San Gervaso and eventually settled at the church of Sant'Innocenzo.⁴ This chapter is concerned with the processions of the confraternity based for most of its long history at this second church, which is now destroyed. It analyzes the transformations of a processional culture from the time of Opicino’s text into the second half of the fifteenth century.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. Opicino de Canistris, Libellus de descriptione Papie, ch. 14: “Est autem ibi quedam societas laycorum, quod laudabilius est, qui certis diebus et noctibus, et maxime in ebdomoda maiori, que dicitur sancta, procedunt per civitatem ad ecclesias et predicationes, precedente cruce, amicti sacco super nudo, facieque velata et detectis scapulis, se cathenis ferries vel corrigiis verberantes, ac ante altaria prostrate quedam devotionis verba cantantes.” Faustino Gianani, Opicino de Canistris l’“Anonimo Ticinese,” Cod. Vaticano Palatino latino 1993 (Pavia: Fusi, 1927), 104.


⁴ Maria Antonietta Grignani and Angelo Stella, eds., Antichi testi pavesi (Pavia: Tipografia del Libro, 1977), 13; on the date of the confraternity’s transferral to Sant’Innocenzo, see Caterina Zaira Laskaris, “San Guniforto Martire. Testimonianze storiche e iconografiche del suo culto a Pavia,” Bollettino della Società Pavese di Storia Patria 110 (2010): 142, n. 35.
At the core of this essay is an investigation of a Pavian confraternity’s changing relationship to its city, to sacred sites, and to objects. I anchor this story in local, peninsular, and institution-specific contexts. Two changes in ritual behavior—increasing formalization of processional routes, and discontinuation of flagellation—will be shown to correlate with each other and intersect with broader shifts in confraternal priorities and attitudes. Taking stock of these developments prompts a new and perhaps surprising interpretation of a surviving fragment of the confraternity’s late-fifteenth-century altarpiece. The concluding reflections on methodology will be of interest to historians concerned with the problem of assessing the evidentiary value of different kinds of visual and textual sources.

A Changing Experience of the City: Formalization of Processional Routes

Flagellant confraternities have long appealed to historians of art and theatre who focus on connections between art and drama, and understandably, these scholars are often captivated by the more spectacular aspects of these cultures. However eye-catching, these processions depend on a dialectic of high visibility and deep interiority. The full-coverage hoods and habits of flagellants’ ceremonial dress confirm this (Fig. 7.1). Flagellants make themselves visible in public so that they can perform their withdrawal from the world—a gesture of humility. Clothing creates this distance and enacts the ascesis that confraternities’ flagellation rituals entail. Everyday social status is suspended. To the observer of a procession, the only thing that can be known about an individual is his or her confraternal affiliation, but for the confraternity member, ritual

5 Two significant contributions published in the last ten years are Mara Nerbano, Il teatro della devozione: Confraternite e spettacolo nell’Umbria medievale (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2006); Barbara Wisch and Nerida Newbigin, Acting on Faith: The Confraternity of the Gonfalone in Renaissance Rome (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2013).
