

Roisin Cossar. *The Transformation of the Laity in Bergamo, 1265–c. 1400*.

The Medieval Mediterranean: Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400–1500, 63. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006. xiv + 228 pp. index. bibl. \$116. ISBN: 90–04–15222–9.

Since its beginnings in the mid-1970s, the study of medieval and early modern confraternities has come a long way. At first, it focused exclusively on statutes. By publishing numerous founding documents and later revisions of them, an ongoing effort, participants in this field of research have made a valuable contribution. Statute history, however, has inherent limitations. Obviously, prescriptive sources can shed no light on who members of lay devotional and charitable organizations were and what they actually did. To discover which social groups joined and led confraternities, whether and to what extent women and clerics participated in them, to what kinds of devotional and charitable activities they devoted themselves, and how these features changed over time, it is necessary to scrutinize other, non-prescriptive sources — as the more sophisticated and perceptive students of confraternities have recently been doing.

With this monograph, Roisin Cossar joins the vanguard of confraternity studies and scholarship on the laity and religion. As her title indicates, she focuses on Bergamo, a city in northwestern Italy, during a “long” fourteenth century. At the beginning of her period, Bergamo was an independent commune; in the middle of it (1332), the Visconti of Milan became its overlords. (Later, in 1428, the city and its hinterland would be annexed by the expanding Venetian Republic.) Making ingenious use of abundant documentary material preserved in Bergamo, above all notarial records, Cossar conducts a socially differentiated, diachronic examination of lay religious activities in this late medieval city.

The *Misericordia Maggiore* (MIA) features prominently in Cossar’s study. Founded in 1265, the MIA almost immediately became Bergamo’s largest and most powerful confraternity. Over the course of the fourteenth century, led by prominent male citizens who served simultaneously as officers of the confraternity and of the commune, the MIA assumed direction over other lay religious groups’ affairs. Its notaries redacted a growing number and proportion of Bergamasque testaments and supervised their execution. In the process, it increasingly wielded social control over testators’ heirs as well as beneficiaries of its own charitable initiatives.

Membership in the MIA and other Bergamasque confraternities was open to men of all social ranks. Some, though not all, confraternities admitted women, but they were never allowed to participate in directing confraternal operations. Until

about the middle of the fourteenth century, women and poor men had considerable opportunity to exercise agency in another type of institution: hospitals. On entering hospitals, women donated their property, reserving to themselves lifetime income from it. Living there, they formed intimate bonds with other female residents and often took part in administering the institutions. Male residents of hospitals demanded good treatment, sometimes bringing suit in order to obtain it. Reforms conducted by ecclesiastical officials and directors of the MIA in the 1360s and 1370s, however, relegated women and poor men in hospitals and those who received charity outside them to subservient, passive roles. Carefully scrutinized for their “worthiness” and suspected of misrepresenting their need for help, they had less and less voice in how they were treated.

Cossar’s final chapter, “Testaments, Gender, and Religious Culture,” exemplifies the skill, sophistication, and good judgment exhibited throughout the book. She has a firm grasp on what readers need to know: at this point, how testaments were shaped, and how one can ferret out testators’ voices. When direct quotation of Latin documents is needed, she provides it. Adeptly employing conditional and subjunctive verbs and qualifying adverbs to indicate what may have been the case, she nonetheless mounts a strong, clear argument. Respectfully but firmly, she compares and contrasts her findings with those of previous scholars: James Banker, Daniel Bornstein, Robert Brentano, Samuel Cohn, and Augustine Thompson in particular.

In summary, *The Transformation of the Laity in Bergamo, 1265–c. 1400* is a marvelous book. The only players who remain in the shadows — probably because available sources reveal little about them — are professed members of religious orders. Rather than chanting the ritual lament about the high prices publishers charge these days, let me simply encourage all readers of this review to recommend that their libraries acquire it.

ANNE JACOBSON SCHUTTE  
University of Virginia, Emerita