“The Last Battayle is Atte Hande”: Conceptions of Death in Renaissance Italy

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Death is a universal phenomenon. All living beings eventually cease to live, whether welcome or not. Since time immemorial humans have grappled with how to deal with and defy this reality. In Italy, beginning in the latter half of the fourteenth century, people turned to a “strategy for eternity” that has been called a “cult of remembrance.”¹ While not by any means a rejection of traditional Christian attitudes to the afterlife, interest in the cult of remembrance reflected a desire to “outlive” one’s death on earth through post-mortem memorialization of the individual. Considering the contemporaneous rise of humanistic philosophy and the cult of man, this is perhaps unsurprising. That said, the cult of remembrance and its associated death practices represent a distinct attitude toward death that can be seen as highly individualistic. When analysed in detail, this development is reflective of contemporary social realities. Indeed, this was a time of increasing competition and struggles for power between local families and individuals.² As will be shown, funeral rites and post-mortem memorial reflected this reality by serving to augment the honour of individuals and their families. At the same time, contemporary death practice remained a highly social and public phenomenon. To describe Italian Renaissance death rites solely in terms of increasing individualism would therefore be too simplistic a narrative, for in this particular time and place the public and the private were often inseparable.

¹ Samuel Cohn, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

² Sharon T. Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 55.

The rise of a late fourteenth-century cult of remembrance presupposes the gradual displacement of an earlier medieval attitude toward death. From the earliest centuries of the middle ages to the beginning of eleventh-century papal reform, official church attitudes were decidedly pessimistic. In an age before mendicant preaching and the participatory scheme of the Fourth Lateran Council, monks, nuns and saints held a virtual monopoly in access to post-mortem salvation. Ordinary lay people, whose lifestyle did not measure to the ordered and highly spiritual life of a monk, were simply deemed too sinful to stand a chance at escaping eternal damnation.³ The turn of the new millennium saw the emergence of both an increasingly literate class of people in conjunction with a renewed sense of apostolic zeal. Lay preaching suddenly became popular and the Church began to express an unprecedented interest in the lives and souls of its parishioners. This new emphasis on pastoral care led to a “democratization” of Christianity in which the path to salvation opened up to ordinary lay people.

Alongside this development rose belief in Purgatory. This was an intermediary locus of pain and suffering where most lay people could expect to go after death. It was in Purgatory that sinners were “purged” of their sins until purity signalled their release and subsequent admittance into heaven. Masses for the dead, whose late medieval rise to prominence reflected popular obsessions with Purgatory, soon became crucial for a speedy pass through this intermediary stage.⁴ Intercessory prayer offered on behalf of the soul of the dead had its roots in the second Book of Maccabees: “For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead ... Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they

³ Daniel E. Bornstein, *A People's History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 355.

⁴ Kevin Madigan, *Medieval Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 430.

might be delivered from their sin.”⁵ This notion, that one’s prayers on earth could be directed to the benefit of souls in Purgatory, led to an obsession with masses for the dead, the centrality of which in late medieval and early modern lay religion has been noted.⁶

The other option for purgatorial relief lay in almsgiving, which enjoyed a certain prominence in late medieval wills.⁷ The importance of almsgiving reflects the pervasiveness of the mendicant ideal in late medieval culture. Charged with associations of Christ-like poverty, the mendicant orders exemplified the life of worldly renunciation in favour of absolute devotion to poverty and charity. Lay people expressed their commitment to this ideal in a number of ways. First, involvement in lay confraternities, whose devotional structure was often self-consciously rooted in the mendicant example, provided opportunities for charity that could benefit the member’s soul.⁸ Second, lay people could choose to be buried in mendicant robes, a powerful symbol of their devotion to absolute poverty in death.⁹ The location of their burial could also reflect contemporary mendicant piety. Indeed, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw a marked increase in burials at both Dominican and Franciscan churches, which could even at times provoke the protest of local parish priests who complained of lost revenue.¹⁰

This late medieval interest in almsgiving and masses for the dead is perhaps best illustrated through contemporary wills. For example, the will of one fourteenth-century baker, Bertruccio di Giovanni (d.1337), states “First, wishing to provide for the health of his soul, he leaves 5 Bolognese pounds [in recompense] for ill-gotten gains of which 20

⁵ 2 Maccabees 12:44-45 RSV.

⁶ Bornstein, 356.

⁷ Cohn, 39.

⁸ Nicholas Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities and Civic Religion in Renaissance Bologna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79.

⁹ Strocchia, 41.

¹⁰ Ibid, 94.

solidi must be given each year, beginning from the day of death of the testator until the money runs out, to the Ospedale dei Battuti or dei Devoti and for the poor of that hospital...”¹¹ Additionally, the will of labourer Albertino di Ser Petro (d. 1337) states “...he leaves 20 solidi [in recompense] for ill-gotten gains ... He leaves to his confessor 3 solidi for the singing of masses. He wants his confessor to arrange for his funeral and burial which he wants to be at the church of Santa Maria degli Alemmani.”¹² The importance of both masses and charity in the early *trecento* strategy for eternity is thus evident. It is this preoccupation with the supernatural as opposed to the temporal that perhaps best exemplifies late medieval death practices. This is unsurprising at a time when one’s life on earth could be seen merely in terms of preparing for the next.¹³

It was against this religious background that the fourteenth-century plagues unfolded in Italy. A time of indiscriminate and severe mortality, the Black Death and subsequent plagues resulted in a surge of concern for death and the afterlife. This is seen through contemporary painting, which in Italy tended to reject earlier humanistic themes in favour of more traditional ones.¹⁴ It is also evident considering the rise of the popular *ars moriendi* genre beginning around 1350.¹⁵ This heightened sensibility toward death should have, considering the prevailing culture of mendicant piety and belief in Purgatory, resulted in an increase in post-mortem charity and masses for the dead. This was not the case. While propitiatory masses saw a brief increase, the number of pious

¹¹ “Four Bolognese Wills (1337),” in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, eds. Katherine L. Jansen, Joanna Drell and Frances Andrews (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 515.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy 1420-1540* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 199.

¹⁴ Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death: the Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 67.

¹⁵ Bornstein, 357.

gifts per testator dropped significantly throughout Italy following the 1363 plague.¹⁶ The traditional mendicant-based piety seemed to be giving way to a different strategy for the afterlife. According to Samuel Kline Cohn this marks the beginning of the cult of remembrance.¹⁷ Indeed, where the earlier emphasis on charity and masses for the dead may be seen as concerned primarily with the supernatural, this new attitude partly shifted focus to earth and leaving a visible mark to outlive oneself.

The cult of remembrance needs to be understood in terms of contemporary economic and social trends. The Black Death and subsequent fourteenth-century plagues resulted in the enrichment of tradesmen and artisans that gave rise to a class of *nouveaux riches* in many Italian cities.¹⁸ This was also a time of intensified competition for political and social standing as “new” and “old” money jockeyed for greater reputation and esteem.¹⁹ Such an environment could lead to a great deal of social tension. Civil strife was not uncommon in the latter half of the fourteenth century in cities like Florence, which in 1378 experienced the Ciompi Revolt.²⁰ It was this context that gave rise to the use of funeral rites as outlets for conspicuous consumption in Italy. Indeed, by the end of the fourteenth century Italian funerals were marked by flamboyant displays that contrasted visibly with the mendicant ideal. Enormous amounts of wax, luxurious bier cloths, and elaborate banners and clothing for the dead became the norm in upper class and merchant funerals.²¹ Even the labouring classes sought the most respectable burials

¹⁶ Cohn, 73.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Meiss, 69.

¹⁹ Strocchia, 56.

²⁰ Ibid, 55.

²¹ Ibid, 61.

possible.²² From the moment the procession began to the end of the *requiem*, late fourteenth-century funerals exhibited a theatricality that functioned to display and augment individual and familial honour.²³ To be sure, the old mendicant ideal had not suddenly disappeared. In fact, tension between new and old forms of death practices reflected deep cultural ambivalences about pomp and excessive displays of wealth.²⁴ That said, the cult of remembrance marked a new attitude toward death that in many ways “individualized” its experience. At the same time, death and its associated practices could remain simultaneously a concern of the community.

The first aspect that requires our attention is the experience of the individual in the days and moments immediately before death. As will be seen, there remained throughout the early Renaissance a firm emphasis on the role of the community throughout this critical time. Two main primary sources will be instructive. The first is Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1353), which tells of the plague’s disruptive effects on contemporary death rites. An examination of this narrative will therefore reveal contemporary expectations surrounding proper death practice. The second is an account of the death of Pope Alexander VI (d. 1503) by chronicler Johann Burchard, with which we will begin. Far from a simple retelling of events, Burchard’s account needs to be treated as reflective of the personal opinion of its author: “Alexander the sixth, here I lie; Roma rejoice thee Free now at last; for my death was to mean new life for you. Alexander the sixth has smothered the world in carnage.”²⁵ Indeed, Burchard’s distaste for the Borgia pope colors his entire work. The account tends to highlight the chaos

²² Ibid, 82.

²³ Ibid, 64.

²⁴ Ibid, 63.

²⁵ Johann Burchard, “Pope Alexander VI and His Court,” in *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance: A Sourcebook*, ed. Kenneth Bartlett (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 220.

surrounding Pope Alexander VI's death. This emphasis on the abnormality of the events surrounding his death serves to reinforce the negative character of the pope's rule. Such a reading of this document is not far-fetched considering the role of contemporary papal funerals as expressions of nuance of character and biography.²⁶ Burchard's account will therefore reveal, like the *Decameron*, contemporary norms regarding death practice.

The moments before Alexander VI's death indirectly reveal the enduring role of family and community in death. The account begins "On Friday, the 18th, between nine and ten o'clock [Alexander VI] confessed to the Bishop ... After his communion he gave the Eucharist to the Pope who was sitting in bed. Then he ended the mass at which were present five cardinals ... at the hour of vespers after Gamboa had given him extreme unction, he died."²⁷ Burchard's account noticeably omits mention of any family or friends that surrounded Alexander VI on his deathbed. The only sense of encouragement is seen in the presence of five cardinals during his mass, but even these are not mentioned in the pope's final moments. Only the bishop, Pedro Gamboa, is named, whose omission from the narrative would have deprived even Alexander VI of last rites. The moments before death were perhaps some of the most important in early modern societies. Indeed, death marked the greatest test of faith, which needed to be sustained until one's very last moments to avoid damnation.²⁸ For this reason, norms dictated that the sick be surrounded by clergy, friends, and relatives for encouragement to remain steadfast until the end.²⁹ With that in mind, Burchard's silence here is deafening, especially considering the rest of the text's painstaking attention to detail. The absence of the pope's family at

²⁶ Strocchia, 138.

²⁷ Burchard, "Pope Alexander VI," 217.

²⁸ Bornstein, 358.

²⁹ Ibid.

his deathbed is therefore a critical take on Alexander VI's nepotism in life, a message from Burchard that even those who benefited most from the pope's rule did not support him in those final crucial moments. This becomes apparent later in the text, when Burchard remarks that neither Cesare nor Lucretia appeared during the whole illness of the pope.³⁰

The importance of having people around the deathbed for encouragement followed by mourning in the moments after death is well attested, particularly in Boccaccio's plague narrative. For example, Boccaccio notes, "It was the custom, as it is again today, for the women relatives and neighbors to gather together in the house of a dead person and there to mourn ... [I]n front of the [home] his male relatives would gather together with his male neighbors and other citizens, and the clergy also came..."³¹ The onset of the plague, according to Boccaccio, led to the breakdown of this practice. "...[T]his custom ... died out and other practices took its place. And so ... there were many who passed away without having even a single witness present ... most relatives were somewhere else, laughing, joking..."³² The absence of a large group of kin and friends at the deathbed clearly disturbed Boccaccio; it is the fact that people died completely alone that appals him in this excerpt.

Indeed, contemporary confraternal practices reflect Boccaccio's concerns. The role of confraternal brethren in the death of a fellow member began from the onset of sickness. From this time members were charged with attending to the terminally ill in

³⁰ Burchard, "Pope Alexander VI," 217-218.

³¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: New American Library, 1982), 11.

³² *Ibid*, 12.

order to provide comfort and spiritual encouragement.³³ They would also read the Bible and other devotional works to the sick.³⁴ According to Nicholas Terpstra, this practice is best understood in the context of the post-plague preoccupation with *ars moriendi*.³⁵ Indeed, at a time of heightened concern for “proper” death confraternal membership functioned to guarantee the presence of brethren at the deathbed. In the absence of familial support confraternal brethren could “stand” for the family as fictive kin in the days and moments before death, assuring even the most anxious of a “proper” end and passage to the next life.

Having a confessor present was also of utmost importance considering they were necessary for the absolution of venial sins. That said, not all people could afford one. Indeed, a 1310 Florentine statute obliged all parish rectors to confess the dying without regard for material gain.³⁶ Evidently, this was an attempt by the city authorities to guarantee the right to a confessor for all citizens regardless of socioeconomic background. The 1337 will of the Bolognese labourer Albertino di Ser Petro illustrates the issue, as it allocates ten solidi to a certain friar Alberto, his confessor, “for the benefit of his soul...”³⁷ Initially, the implication here appears unclear. The will continues “He leaves to his confessor 3 solidi for the singing of masses. He wants his confessor to arrange for his funeral and burial...”³⁸ The initial ten solidi, since separate from the rest, must therefore account for something other than masses and funeral expenses. It seems then that this labourer allocated ten solidi to his confessor for the absolution of his venial

³³ Terpstra, 71.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 73.

³⁶ Strocchia, 89.

³⁷ “Four Bolognese Wills (1337),” 519.

³⁸ Ibid.

sins. This kind of financial gain is likely the kind of abuse the 1310 Florentine statute attempted to suppress.

But not all Italian cities legislated against avaricious confessors and not all people could afford the cost of having one. In such cases the responsibility to provide these services to people extended to confraternities. In Bologna non-wealthy brethren like artisans, labourers, and small merchants could expect access to a confessor before death, a privilege that was otherwise reserved to those who could afford it.³⁹ For some, membership in a confraternity could mean the only chance at having access to this important spiritual tool.

The role of confraternities in the last days of its members taken with the 1310 Florentine statute reveal a culture deeply interested in those final crucial moments before death. More importantly, these examples reveal the very public nature of that interest. In Florence, the city authorities recognized the problem caused by avaricious confessors. By demanding payment these men barred a portion of the population from access to absolution in death. It is significant that the solution resulted in state interference, a clear indication that the Florentine government saw the deaths of its citizens as a concern of the state. In the absence of such state involvement, confraternities could reaffirm the role of the community by carrying the sick from one life to the next. This was done through spiritual encouragement and providing a confessor to those who could not afford it. With all this in mind, Boccaccio's remarks on the fact that during the plague some died without a single person present take on an added importance. Over a century later the same sentiment can be glimpsed in Burchard's account of the death of Alexander VI. In a text

³⁹ Terpstra, 81.

that pays painstaking attention to detail, no family or friends are mentioned in the Borgia pope's final moments. Burchard's "attack" by omission thus reveals that even by the sixteenth century, it was still better to die surrounded by people than to die alone.

The experience of the terminally ill in early modern Italy was therefore not an individual one. The stakes were too high. Both spiritual encouragement and a confessor were needed to ensure a swift passage through Purgatory. To this end the help of fellow human beings was necessary. As Erasmus poignantly states regarding the dying man, "The last battayle is atte hande. The space is shorte. He nedethe spedye counsell."⁴⁰

After the deceased had taken their final breath, news of the event quickly reached a wide audience. To that end the importance of bells is well attested. Agnolo di Tura's plague narrative remarks, "[a]nd none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. Nor did the death bell sound."⁴¹ Later, during the 1374 plague, the Florentine government prohibited the customary bell ringing for the dead in the interests of minimizing the negative psychological effects.⁴² Clearly these bells did not go unnoticed and were an important part in the death process. The sound alone, which likely could be heard across an urban space, brought death itself into the streets and piazzas of Italian cities. A highly public phenomenon, the death of a fellow townsman warranted the attention of all citizens.

⁴⁰ Desiderius Erasmus, "Preparatione to Deathe," *The English ars moriendi*, ed. David William Atkinson (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 1992), 55.

⁴¹ Agnolo di Tura del Grasso, "The Plague in Siena."

⁴² Strocchia, 62.

After Pope Alexander VI's death, the body was washed and dressed in a brand new white coat.⁴³ Later, Burchard relates "I returned to the city during the night ... I ordered the runner Carlo ... under penalty of the loss of his office, to inform the whole clergy of Rome, both regular and secular, that they should be at the Vatican on the morrow ... to escort the body from the main chapel to St. Peter's."⁴⁴ Preparations were underway for the pope's funeral procession. As mentioned, the late *trecento* saw a general transition from a mendicant-based approach to death to a cult of remembrance characterized by pomp and self-memorialization. In this, funerals became means of displaying honour in a highly public way. This began with the procession. The procession involved placing the body on a bier to be walked publicly through the streets, ending at the desired church to celebrate the *requiem* mass. A highly ritualistic event, the procession could be full of symbolism and diverse associations. Here one of the most important aspects was the appearance of the deceased, from which two general distinctions can be made. Elite individuals, such as knights, doctors of law and medicine, and persons buried at public expense generally reserved the right to lie on the bier uncovered.⁴⁵ Ordinary people, on the other hand, were required by law to cover the body.⁴⁶ The privilege of having the body uncovered was therefore something to be flaunted as it communicated a certain association of honour and social standing. It could also provide an opportunity for conspicuous consumption as the clothing of the deceased became visible to all participants.

⁴³ Burchard, "Pope Alexander VI," 218.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Andrew Butterfield, "Social Structure and the Typology of Funerary Monuments in Early Renaissance Florence," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 26 (1994): 60.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Bodies that were uncovered naturally needed to be dressed appropriately. Dressing the body in the most expensive manner could serve to display honour to the public participants of the procession. It also reflected contemporary concerns with the afterlife, as the clothing worn during the burial, and thus the honour of the individual, was believed to carry into the next life with the dead.⁴⁷ The specific kind of clothing worn on the body was also of great importance. This could showcase the occupation and status in life of the deceased. For someone like a pope, this was crucial. For Pope Alexander VI, Burchard reports he was dressed in “a short fanon, a beautiful chasuble, and with stockings.”⁴⁸ In 1419, Pope John XXIII wore a white miter with his cardinal’s hat resting at his feet.⁴⁹ Knights could also lay on the funeral bier in the full trappings of their status.⁵⁰

But dressing Pope Alexander VI for his funeral procession apparently did not go according to plan: “His ring was missing and I could not recover it ... [I] covered him with an old rug...”⁵¹ Although he was dressed in his papal garments, the absence of the ring deprived the pope the honour of his complete outfit. Further, Alexander VI’s body, according to this account, lay covered by a rug during the funeral procession, denying him the honour of remaining uncovered on the bier. Mention of the “old rug” is also significant. Indeed, the quality of the material covering the body expressed honour and therefore was of great concern at this time, even amongst people like artisans. This is seen in the fact that confraternities often loaned vermillion silk to be used in processions

⁴⁷ Strocchia, 44.

⁴⁸ Burchard, “Pope Alexander VI,” 218.

⁴⁹ Strocchia, 138.

⁵⁰ Butterfield, 51.

⁵¹ Burchard, “Pope Alexander VI,” 218.

to non-wealthy members, augmenting their honour in the absence of sufficient wealth.⁵² Surely a pope, if uncovered to begin with, would be covered in something more expensive than a mere “old rug.” This, in addition to the lost ring, makes Burchard’s message quite clear; this was not by any means a “normal” or honourable funeral. On the contrary, it was dishonourable.

The pope’s procession began when “he was carried from the main chapel to the center of St. Peter’s ... About a hundred-and-forty torches were borne for the most part by the clerics...”⁵³ The importance of wax in the funeral procession at this time is well attested. Indeed, the number of candles that accompanied the body functioned to exponentially augment the honour of an individual. As early as the 1350s, Boccaccio lamented “Very few were the dead whose bodies were accompanied to the church by more than ten or twelve of their neighbours ... not even carried on the shoulders of honoured ... citizens but rather by gravediggers ... accompanied by four or six churchmen with just a few candles, and often none at all.”⁵⁴ Here the small number of candles worries Boccaccio, although a few are apparently better than none.

The number of candles used in processions could even be restricted under local sumptuary laws, as they were in late *trecento* Florence. Here the demand for large amounts of wax proved quite profitable, and in 1391 alone the city sold seventy-one sumptuary exemptions to the rule.⁵⁵ Clearly upper-class people saw in wax an air of prestige that could be used within the competitive social climate of late *trecento* Italy. Candles were also important to artisans and labourers. In the early Renaissance, corporate

⁵² Strocchia, 85.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Boccaccio, 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 62.

groups like confraternities often loaned wax torches to the families of deceased members in the case of inadequate wealth.⁵⁶ The confraternity of Orsanmichele in Florence, for example, recorded in their inventory of goods a collection of bier cloths, cushions, and large candles mounted on staves, which were loaned to members at death.⁵⁷ Confraternal membership, therefore, could guarantee labourers and artisans access to this “necessity” just as it could provide a confessor in the moments before death.

It is in this context that the ultimate fate of the pope’s hundred and forty candles needs to be understood. Burchard continues, “When the coffin was deposited in the center of the church ... some soldiers of the palace-guard attempted to appropriate several torches ... [the clergy] fled to the sacristy. And the Pope was left lying there almost alone.” This incident recalls an attempted attack on the honour of the pope. For these soldiers, the appropriation of the candles could visibly deprive the pope of his honour. For Burchard, its inclusion in the narrative reinforces the dishonourable nature of the pope’s funeral by depriving the pope of wax. For us, it serves to highlight the importance of candles as a highly public indicator of honour.

The positioning of individuals in the procession line could hold a number of associations. Burchard notes “First came the cross, then the monks of St. Onofrio, the Paulist Fathers, the Franciscans ... Then came the body ... it was carried by the poor who had stood around it in the chapel ...”⁵⁸ According to Sharon T. Strocchia there existed within funeral processions the double importance of those leading as well as those positioned nearest to the body.⁵⁹ In this case, the leading cross clearly recognizes the

⁵⁶ Strocchia, 34.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Burchard, “Pope Alexander VI,” 218.

⁵⁹ Strocchia, 7-8.

primacy of God. Perhaps most striking is the proximity of the poor to the body. Charged with carrying the funeral bier, the poor played a starring role in this very public spectacle. Burchard's mention of them seems to contradict our reading of this text, as it would serve to highlight the pope's commitment to Christ-like charity. On the contrary, Burchard explicitly names the poor in order to debase the honour of the pope. Indeed, by the sixteenth century the slow erosion of the mendicant ideal that began in the *trecento* had created an environment in which this kind of humble display of charity could in fact threaten loss of honour.⁶⁰

For elite funerals, the location of people in the procession could serve to reinforce familial claims to power. For male funerals this could result in the primacy of agnates to the detriment of extended family networks through marriage.⁶¹ On the other hand, female elite funerals often gave primacy of place to members of the household in which she had lived at the time of death.⁶² Here both cases reveal attempts at displaying notions of patrilineage in funeral processions. In much the same way, the location of people in the procession could also be used to strengthen foreign political ties. For example, in ducal Milan foreign ambassadors walked in front of immediate kin as a sign of honour to Milan's foreign friends.⁶³ Disputes over primacy of place in the procession could even break out between ambassadors. Indeed, in the fifteenth century, Mantuan ambassador, Vincenzo Scalone, complained that the ambassador of Modena had preceded him in the procession line at Francesco Sforza's mother's funeral.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Terpstra, 62.

⁶¹ Strocchia, 13.

⁶² Ibid, 14.

⁶³ Ibid, 17.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 18.

Clearly the highly public nature of funeral processions facilitated the use of symbolism to communicate the values of its organizers. Processions then became opportunities of expressing the needs of individual people and families. However, they were not always neatly contained within the sphere of the needs of the individual. Indeed, processions could simultaneously carry associations of a public nature. The case of Vieri de' Medici will be instructive here. A prominent banker, Medici's funeral procession took place in 1395 with all the pomp that had become characteristic of late *trecento* funerals. His bier was covered in gold cloth and draperies.⁶⁵ The body was dressed in an elaborate belt ornamented with silver, and he wore a dagger and gold spurs to signal his knighthood in life.⁶⁶ Surrounded by eight family members dressed in black, the funeral procession began in front of San Tommaso, the Medici family church.⁶⁷ This funeral at first glance appears no different than those discussed earlier. The golden bier cloth is an example of conspicuous consumption that functioned to augment honour. The accoutrements of the deceased were meant to signal Medici's knighthood in life. Even the fact that the procession began at the Medici family church served to highlight the centrality of the individual family. This would, perhaps, be a straightforward case if it were not for one little detail. The funeral bier was covered in draperies that depicted the Medici coat of arms alongside those of the commune.⁶⁸ To participants and onlookers this likely reinforced the ambiguous nature of the funeral. As an "important public figure," Vieri de' Medici warranted a quasi-state funeral. The occasion, while no doubt an

⁶⁵ John T. Paoletti, "Medici Funerary Monuments in the Duomo of Florence during the Fourteenth Century: A Prologue to 'The Early Medici,'" *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2006): 1149.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

opportunity to reinforce individual and familial honour, simultaneously concerned the city at large.

But there is something larger to take away from the case of Vieri de' Medici. It speaks more broadly to an important cultural shift that began in late *trecento* Italy: the cult of man. The rise of humanism in this period is well known. In the middle ages, if generalizations can be made, prevailing philosophical and cultural trends prioritized spiritual over temporal greatness. *Trecento* humanism represented a shift towards an increased appreciation for earthly accomplishment and virtue. In the area of death, this shift is related to the rise of the cult of remembrance. Indeed, as will be seen, Vieri de' Medici's quasi-state funeral is representative of such trends.

In the later middle ages, the lay deceased were relegated to tombs outside the church walls. Indeed, thirteenth-century canon law restricted access to sacred church grounds to the tombs of ecclesiastics and saints.⁶⁹ Beginning in the *quattrocento* this started to change. Gradually, laymen were allowed burial within the church, though not without struggle. Here the example of Florence's cathedral will be useful. Construction of the building began in 1296 using public funds and as a source of communal pride.⁷⁰ The structure was therefore both religious and civic from its origins.⁷¹ Throughout the *trecento* numerous individuals sought unsuccessfully to be buried within its walls.⁷² The outside of the cathedral also became cluttered with the private coats of arms of many local families as individuals sought to privatize public wall space as a display of

⁶⁹ Butterfield, 59.

⁷⁰ Paoletti, 1119.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

honour.⁷³ In 1385, the resolve to keep the cathedral exterior free of private family emblems resulted in their systematic removal. Within three months this order was rescinded.⁷⁴ By 1400, burial within the cathedral remained restricted to cathedral canons.⁷⁵ The new century, however, marked a shift in policy. The *quattrocento* saw the gradual transformation of the interior of the cathedral into a civic space that increasingly allocated places of honour to defenders of the city and citizens whose talents were sources of civic pride.⁷⁶ This shift is exemplified by the construction of Leonardo Bruni's tomb in the 1440s. An important political and cultural figure, Bruni received his own wall effigy within the cathedral, an honour traditionally reserved for prelates.⁷⁷

The case of the Florence Cathedral reveals two important pieces of information. First, it shows that the cult of man had apparently triumphed by the middle of the *quattrocento*. In this case, the sacred ground of the Florentine cathedral, traditionally reserved for important spiritual figures, turned its attention for the first time to great men of civic and, therefore, secular importance. Indeed, it appears that man had crossed the physical threshold separating the godly from its opposite. At the same time, the cult of man needs to be understood within a public context. As early as the fourteenth century, the cathedral struggled to prevent the appropriation of this public space by private symbols and tombs. That struggle was ultimately unsuccessful, a reflection of the ambiguous relationship between the public and the private. After all, the monuments of men like Leonardo Bruni simultaneously brought honour to the individual as well as to the city. Here the two overlapped.

⁷³ Ibid, 1126.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 1156.

⁷⁷ Butterfield, 61.

One further example will demonstrate this ambiguous relationship. The Colleoni Chapel in Bergamo was built in 1472-76 at the behest of the knight Bartolomeo Colleoni. It was here that the *condottiere* sought to be buried within an altar at the back of the building. The chapel itself is attached to the side of Santa Maria Maggiore church. The façade contains two busts of Julius Caesar and the emperor Trajan, each with the number of years they ruled, which when added together equal the years Colleoni served as army commander.⁷⁸ Within the chapel lies Colleoni's tomb. On top rests a wooden equestrian statue over sculpted lions, clearly a deliberate imitation of the statue next door of San Alessandro at Santa Maria Maggiore.⁷⁹

The busts of the Roman emperors, considering the clever mathematics of the inscriptions, are clearly meant to stand for Colleoni. At this time Julius Caesar and Trajan were respectively renowned for their military greatness and justice.⁸⁰ In addition, the wooden statue of Colleoni within the chapel, as a near replica of that of San Alessandro outside Santa Maria Maggiore, evidently was designed to associate the virtues of the saint with its patron.⁸¹ All these associations with virtue would have brought honour to Colleoni. At the same time, as Giles Knox notes, virtue could serve to justify the exercise of power.⁸² The Colleoni Chapel therefore functioned to augment the individual prestige and legitimacy of its patron.

Yet the decision to attach this chapel to the Santa Maria Maggiore church prompts a secondary reading of the building. As a highly important public space, Santa Maria

⁷⁸ Giles Knox, "The Colleoni Chapel in Bergamo and the Politics of Urban Space," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60, no. 3 (2001): 293.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 304.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 293.

⁸¹ Ibid, 304.

⁸² Ibid, 296.

Maggiore carried strong associations of civic identity. The attached Colleoni Chapel therefore reads as a separate but important component of that idea. This is perhaps unsurprising considering Colleoni repeatedly sought to legitimize his role in the political life of Bergamo.⁸³ At the same time, it would be inaccurate to view the chapel solely in terms of Colleoni's relationship to the city. On the contrary, the chapel itself was a public building. The busts of the Roman emperors were designed to inspire and edify onlookers. The role of funerary monuments for public edification in this period is well attested. Indeed, *quattrocento* humanist Leon Battista Alberti wrote that the state should build memorials of great men in order to inspire patriotism and virtue among its citizens.⁸⁴ Such considerations came into play in the construction of the tomb of Leonardo Bruni. Indeed, this tomb was almost surely designed as an exemplum worthy of imitation.⁸⁵ Further, contemporary tomb slabs often included inscriptions mentioning the deceased's virtuous and exemplary character.⁸⁶ Thus, the Colleoni Chapel served a dual function. It could serve to augment the individual honour of its patron and legitimize his power. At the same time, this was a building that displayed its patron's virtue in the interest of public edification.

In Italy the late *trecento* rise of a cult of remembrance marked a general shift from a mendicant-based approach to death to one that increasingly centred on the individual. That said, death remained in this period a highly social phenomenon that concerned the community at large. Indeed, the individual experience of death was firmly rooted in the presence of people around the deathbed. In these last crucial moments people were

⁸³ Ibid, 297.

⁸⁴ Butterfield, 56.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 51.

necessary to provide spiritual encouragement and comfort. The sick also needed a confessor present in order to receive absolution. In the absence of both, governments and corporate groups could intervene to provide these “necessities” to people of all socioeconomic levels. To that end, confraternities could guarantee both the presence of people and a confessor around the deathbed. Also, city governments could provide universal access to deathbed absolution through legislating against avaricious confessors. Funeral processions reflected the competitive social environment of Renaissance Italy. Indeed, individuals and families could manipulate them to reflect their own interests and values. To that end, the clothing of the deceased proved an important display of wealth and honour. The amount of wax also functioned as a way to display and quantify the honour of the individual. In the absence of candles, confraternities could loan these for the funerals of less wealthy members. At the same time, funeral processions could evoke notions of communal identity, as the cult of great men like Leonardo Bruni often operated within a public framework. Indeed, funerary monuments that brought honour to an individual often simultaneously evoked notions of civic identity and could be designed as an exemplum for the edification of onlookers. The ambiguous nature of death in this period as both a private and public matter undoubtedly reflects a culture deeply interested in the afterlife. As a crucial transition point, death and its practices required the attention of friends, family, and the entire community. In this way death remained in this time and place much as it had always been: a truly universal concern.

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