

Plague and Popular Revival: Ecclesiastical Authorities and the Bianchi Devotions in 1399

Alexandra R. A. Lee*
University College London

Religious processions were commonly held during plague outbreaks in medieval Europe to provide succour against disease. The Bianchi of 1399, a popular religious revival, is one such example. This article addresses the Bianchi in Tuscany, demonstrating the crucial role of ecclesiastical authorities in moulding this response to plague, and contributing to both religious history and the history of medicine. It first problematizes the connection between the Bianchi and a punitive plague which could purportedly be remedied by religious devotions. The role of the clergy in the movement is then examined, demonstrating their prominence in preparing the populace, preaching and even leading processions. An assessment of Bianchi processional composition and routes reveals exploitation of pre-existing liturgical traditions. This localized, comparative analysis demonstrates how individual Tuscan towns organized and supported these devotional activities, successfully managing the popular response to plague expressed in the Bianchi devotions.

During times of crisis, and perhaps especially epidemics, society employs any means possible to find succour and hope. An explanation of such outbreaks and a solution to them can both be sought in religion. When epidemics hit in medieval Europe, the populace often participated in ritual processions led by members of the church. During the Black Death of 1347–52, for example, a flagellant revival occurred, although this was condemned by church authorities as it

* E-mail: a.r.a.lee@ucl.ac.uk.

I wish to thank Catherine Keen and Melissa Benson for their insightful comments on this article, as well as the reviewers and editors for their suggestions. I also wish to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who funded my doctoral research which included this topic.

Studies in Church History 58 (2022), 68–90 © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Ecclesiastical History Society. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.
doi: 10.1017/stc.2022.4

descended into anti-clerical violence.¹ In 1399, the populace of the northern and central Italian peninsula responded to the threat of plague by dressing in white and joining a series of nine-day circular itinerant processions: the Bianchi movement.² Participants would sing *laude* (songs of praise), pray, visit churches and fast. Rather than being condemned, this popular revival was endorsed by church authorities at various levels, contributing to its successful spread throughout the central Italian peninsula.

The Bianchi have until now been assessed as a whole, or in terms of individual case studies. Following Tognetti's book-length article and a series of smaller studies in Italian, Daniel Bornstein's monograph brought the Bianchi into Anglophone scholarship in 1993, providing a substantial overview of the devotions.³ His brief treatment of ecclesiastical officials is developed here in the exploration of their role during the processions. A volume of essays arising from a major conference on the Bianchi in 1999 added a series of individual case studies to Italian Bianchi scholarship.⁴ I shall argue that considering such case studies in parallel reveals key differences in the practice of Bianchi devotions in each town. This in-depth, comparative analysis reveals the intricate, individual ways in which towns responded to the advent of these novel processions, specifically through examining the roles played by ecclesiastical authorities.

The Bianchi devotions began in Genoa, gaining a mass following on 5 July 1399 and spreading east towards Venice and south in the direction of Rome. Each circular procession would undertake about four and a half days' travel from its starting point before turning around to complete the loop. Thus Bianchi participants did not travel (for example) from Genoa to Rome; rather, each town that was

¹ Mitchell B. Merback, 'The Living Image of Pity: Mimetic Violence, Peace-Making and Salvific Spectacle in the Flagellant Processions of the Later Middle Ages', in Debra Higgs Strickland, ed., *Images of Medieval Sanctity: Essays in Honour of Gary Dickson* (Leiden, 2007), 135–80, at 155.

² For an overview of the movement, see Giampaolo Tognetti, 'Sul moto dei Bianchi nel 1399', *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano* 78 (1967), 205–343.

³ Tognetti, 'Sul moto dei Bianchi'; Arsenio Frugoni, 'La devozione dei Bianchi del 1399', in *L'attesa dell'età nuova nella spiritualità della fine del medioevo* (Turin, 1962), 232–48; Daniel Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca, NY, 1993).

⁴ Francesco Santucci, ed., *Sulle orme dei Bianchi. Dalla Liguria all'Italia centrale. Atti del convegno storico internazionale, Assisi, Vallo di Nera, Terni, Rieti, Leonessa (18–20 giugno 1999)* (Assisi, 2001).

successfully proselytized took up the devotions and sent out its own groups, meaning that the devotions spread gradually throughout the northern and central Italian peninsula. The focus of this article is on the Bianchi in Tuscany, specifically Lucca, Pistoia and Florence, with reference to Padua for a northerly comparison. These towns can be considered hubs of Bianchi activity. In addition to sending out groups on itinerant processions and receiving Bianchi participants from nearby locations, these towns also offered an intra-urban alternative for those unable to leave home. Participants in these less arduous processions returned home each evening, and often remained within the walls of their town.

The detailed chronicles of Giovanni Sercambi⁵ and Luca Dominici⁶ elucidate the Bianchi experience in Lucca and Pistoia respectively. More of a patchwork of sources survives for Florence, including the diary and letters of Francesco di Marco Datini⁷ and devotional poetry by Andrea Stefani⁸ and Franco Sacchetti.⁹ Giovanni Conversini da Ravenna's chronicle provides similarly

⁵ Giovanni Sercambi, *Le croniche di Giovanni Sercambi, Lucchese*, ed. Salvatore Bongi, 3 vols (Lucca, 1892). The text details life in Lucca from the twelfth century until Sercambi's death in 1423. Sercambi began his career as an apothecary, and then worked as a notary in the employ of the Guinigi family, who staged a successful coup in 1400 and for whom he composed the chronicle: Robert A. Pratt, 'Giovanni Sercambi, Speziale', *Italica* 25 (1948), 12–14. Sercambi is also known for his *Novelliere* written in the style of Boccaccio: *Il Novelliere*, ed. Luciano Rossi (Rome, 1984).

⁶ Luca Dominici, *Cronache di ser Luca Dominici. Cronaca della venuta dei Bianchi e della moria 1399–1400*, ed. Carlo Gigliotti (Pistoia, 1933). Dominici was also a notary, in his native Pistoia, and composed two chronicles around the turn of the fifteenth century, the first on the Bianchi and the second treating the civil war in Pistoia shortly after: Luca Dominici, *Cronache di ser Luca Dominici. Cronaca seconda*, ed. Carlo Gigliotti (Pistoia, 1937). For more on Dominici, see Gigliotti's detailed introductions to these editions.

⁷ Federigo Melis, *Aspetti della vita economica medievale. Studi nell'archivio Datini di Prato* (Florence, 1962), 101; Prato, Archivio di Stato, Fondo Datini, Fondo di Barcellona, 864.13.903012 27/09/1399. Datini is best known as the Merchant of Prato, whose business records and letters provide a substantial picture of his life: see, for example, Giampiero Nigro, ed., *Francesco di Marco Datini. L'uomo il mercante* (Florence, 2010).

⁸ Florence, Biblioteca Marucelliana, MS C.152, fols 53v–55v; Ugo Scoti-Bertinelli, ed., *Note e documenti di letteratura religiosa* (Florence, 1908), 35–62. Stefani was probably a composer and poet, although no further details are known about his life: Guglielmo Volpi, *Una lauda di Andrea Stefani fiorentino* (Florence, 1908).

⁹ Franco Sacchetti, *Il libro delle rime*, ed. Franca Brambilla Ageno (Florence, 1990). Sacchetti was well known for his literary works, which also included *Novelle*, written alongside a political career: Natalino Sapegno, 'Sacchetti, Franco', *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1936), online at: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/franco-sacchetti_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/>, accessed 17 June 2021.

detailed evidence for Padua.¹⁰ This cross-comparison of the Bianchi experience highlights elements of continuity as well as key areas of local difference, moving beyond traditional studies of the movement that focus on a single location, or on a specific practice such as peacemaking.¹¹

To demonstrate this, we shall explore the relationship between the Bianchi and the plague epidemic at the turn of the fifteenth century. The article then examines three facets of local, ecclesiastical support for the Bianchi. Firstly, the role of the clergy will be assessed, particularly their involvement in preparing and motivating the populace. The composition of the processions will then be discussed, with a focus on the different groups of individuals participating in the Bianchi processions. Finally, the routes will be evaluated, considering both itinerant and intra-urban devotional activities. This will demonstrate the way that the Bianchi devotions were moulded by each town to suit local traditions, and the importance of ecclesiastical authorities in facilitating the processions.

PLAGUE AND THE BIANCHI

Plague was a crucial motivating factor for participants in the Bianchi devotions. The most prevalent origin narrative, the *tre pani* story, explained that a punitive pandemic was ordained on account of the sins of humankind, but that the Bianchi processions could prevent, or at least mitigate, this outbreak.¹² Many versions of the narrative

¹⁰ Giovanni Conversini da Ravenna, *La processione dei Bianchi nella città di Padova (1399)*, ed. Libia Cortese and Dino Cortese (Padua, 1978). Da Ravenna had a varied, peripatetic career involving teaching rhetoric at Florence and notarial positions for northerly Italian governments such as Venice, Udine and Padua: Remigio Sabbadini, 'Giovanni da Ravenna', *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1933), online at: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-da-ravenna_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/>, accessed 2 June 2021.

¹¹ See, for example, Amleto Spicciani, ed., *La devozione dei Bianchi nel 1399. Il miracolo del crocifisso di Borgo a Buggiano* (Pisa, 1998). For more on Bianchi peacemaking, see Katherine L. Jansen, *Peace and Penance in Late Medieval Italy* (Princeton, NJ, 2018), 48–54; Glenn Kumhera, *The Benefits of Peace: Private Peacemaking in Late Medieval Italy* (Leiden, 2017), 161–2; Diana Webb, 'Penitence and Peace-Making in City and Contado: The Bianchi of 1399', in Derek Baker, ed., *The Church in Town and Countryside*, SCH 16 (Oxford, 1979), 243–56.

¹² The *tre pani* narrative is reproduced in numerous textual and visual sources, such as Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 50–4. Briefly, a peasant miraculously found three pieces of bread, as directed by Christ (disguised as a pilgrim). The peasant went to moisten the bread and met a woman dressed in white, the Virgin in disguise.

included detailed instructions for the Bianchi processions as the act of devotion required to prevent the outbreak. The chronicles suggest that this narrative was preached, and the existence of numerous *laude* also telling the *tre pani* story suggests that they constituted another mode of its transmission.¹³ It is therefore likely that participants in the devotions would have been aware of this connection to plague. As the processions spread, the threat of a ‘great death’ (*gran moria*) was further reinforced by visions in towns the Bianchi were trying to convert.¹⁴ In addition to *laude* telling the *tre pani* story, Bianchi participants also sang a variety of devotional hymns. Some of these also emphasized their connection to plague, such as *Misericordia eterno Dio*, described as ‘a *lauda* that was sung to placate God for the plague’.¹⁵ In this way, the relationship between the forthcoming plague and the necessity for the Bianchi processions was highlighted at various levels.

However, the correlation between the Bianchi and the reality of the plague spreading through the Italian peninsula at the turn of the fifteenth century was more complicated. By this period, plague was a frequent occurrence; after the Black Death of 1347–52, the disease recurred roughly once a decade. However, different locations were not affected in the same way. For example, Umbrian Orvieto endured two outbreaks in the 1370s, whereas Lucca and Pistoia only experienced one.¹⁶ Governmental edicts permitted town councils to convene with lower quora or to appoint emergency committees (*balia*) during outbreaks, as well as regulating public health matters

One piece of bread was thrown into the water, condemning a third of humanity to die by plague, but the Virgin then provided instructions for the Bianchi processions as a means to remedy this threat.

¹³ For example, Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bonghi, 2: 320. *Laude* narrating the *tre pani* narrative were composed both in the vernacular and in Latin, for example *Se peccatore te vol salvare*, in Gennaro M. Monti, *Un laudario umbro quattrocentista dei Bianchi* (Città di Castello, 1920), 124–7.

¹⁴ Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 184–5, 174. All translations are my own.

¹⁵ ‘Una lauda già cantata per placare Idio sopra la pestilenzia’: Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 234.

¹⁶ ‘Cronaca Urbevetana (1294–1505)’, in Luigi Fumi, ed., *Ephemerides urbevetanae dal cod. vaticano urbinate 1745* (Bologna, 1929), 198–210, at 208; Cipriano Manenti, ‘Estratti dalle Historie di Cipriano Manenti (1325–1376)’, *ibid.* 415–71, at 468; Pistoia, Archivio di Stato, MS Provvisioni Comune 16, fol. 65v; Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bonghi, 1: 206.

such as the burial of the dead and the slaughter of animals.¹⁷ Processions also took place: the bishop in Pistoia led plague processions behind a reportedly miraculous crucifix.¹⁸ Each epidemic outbreak was met with a combination of communal edicts and religious actions.

The belief that divine anger was a key cause of disease is reinforced in Sercambi's account of Bianchi activity in Lucca.¹⁹ The chronicler details six outbreaks of plague, and each is accompanied by a very similar illustration (Figure 1).²⁰ For example, in the first, accompanying the Black Death of 1348, humanity lies prostrate on the ground, with angels or demons bearing weapons and raining down arrows and oil. Louise Marshall suggests that the fact that these creatures are not prevented from their attacks demonstrates divine anger, as God does not mercifully intervene.²¹ These images are reinforced by Sercambi's explanation in the text of the disease as a result of the sins of humankind. They also create continuity within the manuscript between each outbreak in terms of cause and the devastation wrought. The threat of plague for non-participants in the Bianchi devotions was grounded in at least half a century of coping with the disease. Those who participated would – at least theoretically – be spared the terrors of the epidemic.

The plague at the turn of the fifteenth century is described in detail by Sercambi and Dominici, providing comparative evidence for Lucca and Pistoia. The so-called *moria dei Bianchi* ('plague at the

¹⁷ Animal slaughter was regulated to reduce putrid smells, which were connected to the spread of disease: Pistoia, Archivio di Stato, MS Provisionsi Comune 9, fol. 166r; Alberto Chiappelli, 'Gli ordinamenti sanitari del comune di Pistoia contro la pestilenza del 1348', *Archivio Storico Italiano* 20 (1887), 3–4. For more on medieval public health, see Guy Geltner, 'The Path to Pistoia: Urban Hygiene before the Black Death', *P&P* 246 (2020), 3–33.

¹⁸ Giuseppe M. Guidi, *Vita del beato fra Andrea Franchi dell'ordine di S. Domenico* (Pistoia, 1839), 43–5. Religious processions during plagues were not unique to Pistoia, and occurred frequently during epidemics: Jussi Hanska, *Strategies of Sanity and Survival: Religious Responses to Natural Disasters in the Middle Ages* (Helsinki, 2002), 21–2.

¹⁹ Lucca, Archivio di Stato, MS 107.

²⁰ For the other images, see Ottavio Banti and Maria Cristiani Testi, *Le illustrazioni delle cronache nel codice lucchese* (Genoa, 1978), 18 (1348), 26 (1363), 56 (1371), 78 (1383), 85 (1390), 154 (1397), 209 (1400).

²¹ Louise Marshall, 'God's Executioners: Angels, Devils and the Plague in Giovanni Sercambi's Illustrated Chronicle (1400)', in Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, eds, *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700* (London, 2016), 177–99.



Figure 1. Lucca, Archivio di Stato, MS 107, fol. 49^v: *Come fu moria grande*. Su concessione del Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali e per il turismo – Archivio di Stato di Lucca (With permission from the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, State Archive of Luca).

time of the Bianchi’) began in Genoa in 1397, striking central Italy in late 1399, where it reached a peak in the summer of 1400.²² The Tuscan devotions therefore began before the advent of the plague in that region, although under the shadow of the plague in the north. Sercambi places the initial outbreak in Lucca in September 1399, about a month after the Bianchi devotions began in the town, but still during the height of the processions.²³ He has a second entry for the disease in May 1400, indicating that a hundred and fifty people were dying each day.²⁴ The *Podestà* led a plague procession in 1400, a completely separate event from the Bianchi processions the previous year. Council records show significant numbers of deaths, and emergency measures were implemented.²⁵

²² For a basic overview, see also Alfonso Corradi, ‘Del movimento de’ Bianchi e della peste del 1399 e 1400’, *Rendiconti del Reale Istituto Lombardo di Scienze e Lettere* 24 (1891), 1055–8.

²³ Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bongi, 2: 397.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 3: 4–5.

²⁵ Christine Meek, *Lucca, 1369–1400: Politics and Society in an Early Renaissance City-State* (Oxford, 1978), 336.

Dominici references the disease as early as 17 August 1399, just five days after Bianchi processions began in Pistoia. The highest numbers of deaths are reported between May and August the following year.²⁶ The statistics presented in Dominici's chronicle indicate that roughly half of the Pistoiese population perished. Plague processions were held in May 1400, organized by the bishop and town officials. As seen with Lucca, the Bianchi processions preceded and then coincided with the outbreak of plague, yet there is no mention of the Bianchi in connection to the actual outbreak of the disease.

Turning to the north, again, there is no detailed evidence for the plague in Padua, although other cities offer a comparison. Sercambi describes plague hitting Bologna in October 1399 with a population loss of between fifty and two hundred each day, due not only to deaths but also to people fleeing.²⁷ Milan legislated ruthlessly during times of plague, prohibiting movement of foreigners into the territories it governed, specifically to avoid the contagion of the plague.²⁸ This had an impact on the Bianchi processions, since it meant that the Milanese were only allowed to participate in intra-urban processions.

While plague is presented in the origin stories and the *laude* as a key motivator for participants in the Bianchi processions, the relationship of the movement to the epidemic of 1399–1400 is less straightforward. Chronicles are frustratingly silent on the link, sometimes even reporting the plague in separate sections of the text, as Sercambi does, for instance. Nevertheless, the Bianchi devotions were portrayed as a method through which humankind could prevent or ameliorate an epidemic outbreak, as indicated through the origin narratives and the frequent mentions of plague in the *laude* and chronicles as the processions spread. Despite their proximity to an actual epidemic of plague, it seems that the Bianchi activities were understood as plague-prevention processions, rather than the more traditional plague processions which were utilized during outbreaks. The devotions can consequently be understood as an important reaction, in each town they reached, to the threat of epidemic disease.

²⁶ Figures at the end of Dominici's chronicle recorded by his brother Paolo show this clearly for Pistoia: *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 71, 238–85.

²⁷ Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bongi, 2: 391.

²⁸ *I registri dell'ufficio di professione e dell'ufficio dei sindaci sotto la dominazione viscontea* (Milan, 1929), 164.

THE ROLE OF THE CLERGY

The duties of clerics during the Bianchi devotions could range from saying mass and preaching to taking part in itinerant processions. Their actions provided endorsement for the popular religious revival, helping to maintain its momentum. In addition to putting on white garments, participants were required to confess and take communion.²⁹ Datini records taking communion; the prerequisite of confession is implicit.³⁰ While the laity attended mass regularly, under normal circumstances communion was generally only taken at Easter, marking the Bianchi devotions as exceptional. Sercambi describes how both parish priests and mendicants struggled to keep up with the demand for the sacraments,³¹ While this may be an exaggeration, it highlights the popularity of the Bianchi devotions and the large number of individuals preparing to participate in the plague-prevention processions. These requirements essentially made the clergy into spiritual gatekeepers for participation. Their sacramental support established a penitential prerequisite for the Bianchi participants, and demonstrated ecclesiastical endorsement for the processions.

As seen above, preaching was crucial for spreading the Bianchi origin narratives, instructing participants, and communicating the urgency of participation. Clergy used preaching to communicate with the laity who, by the turn of the fifteenth century, had increasingly high expectations from sermons.³² This was in no small part due to the Franciscans and Dominicans, who were trained to preach in an engaging way.³³ Urban spaces were given over to preachers, for whom special platforms were sometimes constructed, and exceptional orators could even be paid.³⁴

All Bianchi participants were expected to attend mass daily, and preaching formed a crucial part of their devotional experience.³⁵

²⁹ Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bongi, 2: 320.

³⁰ 'Prexi la comunione del corpo del nostro Signore Gieso Cristo': Melis, *Aspetti*, 101.

³¹ Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bongi, 2: 305.

³² David d'Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars: Sermons diffused from Paris before 1300* (Oxford, 1985), 6, 127; Nicole Bériou, *Religion et Communication. Un Autre Regard sur la prédication au Moyen Âge* (Geneva, 2018).

³³ D'Avray, *Preaching of the Friars*, 28, 66.

³⁴ Augustine Thompson, *Revival Preachers and Politics in Thirteenth-Century Italy: The Great Devotion of 1233* (Oxford, 1992), 52.

³⁵ Melis, *Aspetti*, 102.

Sercambi describes the sermon of a *frate* who provided detailed instructions about what was required during the processions.³⁶ The involvement of various ranks of the clergy, including priests, friars and bishops, indicates an endorsement of the Bianchi by the church hierarchy. Their actions both literally and figuratively aided the spread of the devotions, maintaining momentum and ensuring that other towns were more open to the processions. The fact that individual clergy were also responsible for instructing people on how to participate in the processions provided an additional method of control, and also a way to mould Bianchi devotions according to local traditions.

In Pistoia, Dominici often names the mass celebrant and the preacher. For example, on 13 August, mass was said by a canon, Giovanni di Simone Cibicci Cancellieri, a member of a prominent Pistoiese family, and the preacher was *frate* Giovanni da Carmignano.³⁷ Dominici frequently emphasizes the role of high-status individuals, demonstrating that the Bianchi were seen as a suitable endeavour even for the elite of society. The most frequent preacher in Dominici's account is the Dominican bishop Andrea Franchi, who also sometimes said the accompanying mass, as well as granting indulgences of forty days to Bianchi participants who visited particular crucifixes or participated in the itinerant processions.³⁸ Franchi also made announcements, reiterating that pregnant women or children under twelve years old were excused from the itinerant processions and reinforcing the importance of the processions for plague prevention.³⁹ He announced the progress and return of the itinerant Pistoiese Bianchi while remaining within the town. The bishop thus directed the discourse about the Bianchi in Pistoia. Franchi's pronouncements also demonstrate that those in Pistoia had a clear

³⁶ Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bongi, 2: 319–21. All those who wished to join the processions were to confess and communicate, and then don the white Bianchi garments. These were to cover their whole person except their face and hands. Participants were to process for nine days, not sleeping in walled towns or in beds but in churches. They were to refrain from eating meat and remain chaste, fast on bread and water on Saturdays, and sing *laude*, including the *Stabat Mater*.

³⁷ Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 59. The latter's order is not noted.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 71, 143, 162. For more on Franchi, see Giuseppe M. Guidi, *Vita del beato fra Andrea Franchi dell'ordine di S. Domenico* (Pistoia, 1839); Paolo Franzese, 'Franchi, Andrea', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (1998), online at: <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/andrea-franchi_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/andrea-franchi_(Dizionario-Biografico))>, accessed 18 November 2020.

³⁹ Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 77.

sense of where the itinerant participants were, using this knowledge for practical purposes such as food provision, although it is unclear how this information was communicated.⁴⁰ Datini describes how the bishop of Fiesole, the Dominican Jacopo Altovita, led the itinerant Florentine procession in which he participated.⁴¹ This involvement of bishops in both itinerant and intra-urban processions demonstrates their support for various Bianchi activities. Moreover, their direct involvement, particularly in terms of leadership and preaching, helped to shape the devotions.

One particularly remarkable example is Grazia di Santo Spirito, an Augustinian from Santo Spirito in Florence who is explicitly named in two separate sources.⁴² Dominici reports that Grazia accompanied an itinerant procession from Florence, on one day of which he preached a Bianchi origin at Pacciana, near Pistoia.⁴³ In the Florentine *laudario* MS Chigiano L.VII.266, he is credited as the author of the Bianchi *lauda*, *Vedete, o peccatori* ('See, O you sinners').⁴⁴ The rubric even dates the composition of the *lauda* specifically to August 1399, suggesting it was written in the midst of the processions. It is unusual for a preacher to feature cross-textually in this manner, although this could reflect his reported fame as an excellent orator.⁴⁵ These examples demonstrate the important role of a series of individuals in creating motivation and momentum for the Bianchi movement.

To sum up, there was considerable space for members of the church hierarchy during the Bianchi processions. They contributed to the successful adoption and spread of the processions in all the locations under consideration here. The clergy determined whether

⁴⁰ Alms for the itinerant groups were collected outside the church of San Giovanni di Rotondo and sent out: *ibid.* 83.

⁴¹ Giorgio Stella, *Annales Genuenses ab anno 1298 usque ad finem anni 1409*, ed. Giovanna Petti Balbi (Bologna, 1975), 240; Melis, *Aspetti*, 102.

⁴² Gary Dickson, 'Encounters in Medieval Revivalism: Monks, Friars, and Popular Enthusiasts', *ChH* 68 (1999), 265–93, at 288.

⁴³ In this tale, an Irish recluse, Capperledis, had a vision of the heavenly court, and was told to spread the Bianchi devotions to prevent total world annihilation. Dominici's chronicle is the only source to include this narrative: *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 168.

⁴⁴ Vatican City, BAV, MS Chigiano L.VII.266, fols 21r–v, reproduced in Bernard Toscani, ed., *Le laude dei Bianchi contenute nel codice Vaticano Chigiano L. VII 266. Edizione critica* (Florence, 1979), 82–5.

⁴⁵ Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 164.

the processions could occur; secular leaders could decide whether or not to let the processions in, as seen with Milan above, but ecclesiastical authorities were necessary to confess and communicate the populace as part of their spiritual preparation. Preaching allowed the clergy to shape the regulations for the Bianchi participants. This visible role of members of the church hierarchy in the Bianchi devotions provided legitimation, as well as allowing the processions to be shaped according to local norms. Indeed, communal actions such as providing food and drink for the Bianchi often took place behind the scenes, making the clergy the face of communal control.⁴⁶ Examining ecclesiastical authorities at this local level provides a more detailed picture of their role in the Bianchi devotions; while they formed a key part of the community, their elevated position in these processions maintained the distinction between laity and clergy. Moreover, this accorded them a significant amount of control during the processions, moulding them to local expectations.

PROCESSIONAL COMPOSITION

Medieval towns played host to a variety of annual feast day processions, including those celebrating major festivals such as Easter and Christmas.⁴⁷ These processions could be centred around guilds, confraternities or even military companies.⁴⁸ The routes and composition of these processions were often codified in town statutes, which also dictated fines for non-participation.⁴⁹ The events were inherently local to each town, combining civic pride and religious devotion.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ See, for example, Lucca, Archivio di Stato, Raccolte speciali, MS Consiglio Generale 13, 263 (this manuscript is paginated); Pistoia, Archivio Capitolare, MS M6, fol. 15r.

⁴⁷ For example, the procession for the patron of Pistoia, St James, was on 25 July. Gai describes a composition centred around guilds, led by *il clero*: Lucia Gai, 'Le feste patronali di S. Jacopo e il palio a Pistoia', *Incontri Pistoiesi di storia arte cultura* 39 (1987), 1–29, at 8–15.

⁴⁸ Almerico Guerra, *Notizie storiche del volto Santo di Lucca* (Lucca, 1881), 121; Lucca, Archivio di Stato, MS Statuti del Comune di Lucca 5, fols 46v–51r; Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1994), 219; Franklin Toker, *On Holy Ground: Liturgy, Architecture and Urbanism in the Cathedral and the Streets of Medieval Florence* (London, 2010), 120–2.

⁴⁹ For example, in Lucca, the celebrations for the annual feast for the *Volto Santo* were codified in 1308, and there was a fine of 40 *soldi* for non-participation: Guerra, *Notizie storiche*, 121.

⁵⁰ The combination of secular and religious activities incorporated in these processions can be described as 'civic religion'. For an overview of this complicated concept, see

These religious rituals in communal spaces provided a template for those organizing the Bianchi processions, allowing the novel devotions to employ familiar local liturgical practices. Hanska suggests that the use or adaptation of traditional liturgical practices during times of crisis was not unusual.⁵¹ We shall examine the composition of several Bianchi processions, treating each town individually in order to compare the different arrangements. This will demonstrate that the processions were not simply adopted indiscriminately in every new location: they were carefully managed.

Among the various Bianchi activities Dominici describes is a nine-day intra-urban procession which began on 18 August in Pistoia. This included ranks of the clergy: the bishop, priests, friars and prelates; followed by men, women and children; then *Battuti* and *Ingesuati* (flagellants and members of an order founded by Giovanni Colombini) and finally whoever was left over.⁵² This suggests that despite the white garments worn by the participants, there was clear demarcation between these different groups, in particular a separation between the ecclesiastical and lay sections. Dominici also highlights the high social status of some of the individuals, citing knights and nobles among the throng, indicating that the processions were for everyone.⁵³

An even more detailed order was reported for another procession in Pistoia on 7 September. Dominici cites three high-status leaders followed by the *Battuti*, then the rector of Santa Maria, a singer with a viol and men clad in white. Then followed the priests, friars, prelates, abbots, masters of theology, the general (*lo generale*) of the Augustinians and the bishop. Behind them was a group not dressed in white, followed by religious confraternities.⁵⁴ The traditional

Nicholas Terpstra, 'Civic Religion', in John H. Arnold, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity* (Oxford, 2014), 148–63; Patrick Boucheron, 'Religion civique, religion civile, religion séculière. L'Ombre d'un doute', *Revue de synthèse* 134 (2013), 161–83; Andrew Brown, 'Civic Religion in Late Medieval Europe', *JMedH* 42 (2016), 338–56; Alexandra R. A. Lee, *The Bianchi of 1399 in Central Italy: Making Devotion Local* (Leiden, 2021), 146–216.

⁵¹ Hanska, *Strategies*, 55, 63.

⁵² Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 64.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 150.

⁵⁴ 'Tre guidatori, grandi cittadini ... tutti li torchi de' Battuti ... poi il crocifisso ... di S. Maria a Ripalta: portollo il rettore di S. Maria ... uno cantatore con una viola ... uomini vestiti tutti di bianco, poi li preti, frati, prelati e abati, maestri in sacra teologia, lo generale

Pistoiese processional structure, which centred around guilds, was exchanged for one focusing on religious groups; the model was adapted rather than merely adopted.⁵⁵ This level of specificity in terms of processional composition suggests communal oversight, as traditions traditionally overseen by civic authorities were transposed onto the novel devotions.

One of the intra-urban processions Sercambi describes in Lucca was composed of lay men, lay women, members of the *Anziani* (a town council of nine members) and the bishop.⁵⁶ This highlights the combined presence of secular and religious authorities as key groups within the processions, separated from the laity at large. The specificity of these demarcations within a rapidly organized procession again suggests reliance on a pre-existing order connected to the town's annual celebrations. Sercambi's illustrations offer a small amount of information about processional composition.⁵⁷ The individuals at the heads of each procession depicted carry crucifixes or large candles.⁵⁸ Some differentiation is offered in that many of those leading the processions wear beards, although they wear the same, raised white hoods as the other participants. While Sercambi's text suggests a great diversity of participation from various levels of society, including men and women, the images do not provide visual reinforcement of this diversity.

Andrea Stefani's report of Florentine processions included the bishop and the Signoria together announcing the Bianchi processions and encouraging participation, thus uniting these authorities. The participants included men and women, adults and children, and Stefani highlights those leading the singing: priests, school children and nuns.⁵⁹ He includes no further information about how the participants were ordered, except that they were to walk four by four. Datini reports an itinerant procession beginning in Florence

de' frati di S. Augustino ... poi m. lo Vescovo ... poi molta gente non vestita di bianco, poi certi Ingiesuati, Apostoli e simili, poi Battuti': *ibid.* 129–30.

⁵⁵ Gai, 'Feste patronali', 8–15.

⁵⁶ Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bongi, 2: 354.

⁵⁷ While it was initially believed that Sercambi created the images himself, recent scholarship has noted the professional nature of the illustrations, although it is likely that Sercambi had some oversight: Banti and Cristiani Testi, *Le illustrazioni*, 70–4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 199 (image 470).

⁵⁹ 'Preti o scolari o monache o scolare femmine': Biblioteca Marucelliana, MS C.152, fol. 54r. Singing *laude* such as the *Stabat Mater* was a crucial requirement for Bianchi participants.

in which the groups were arranged by parish.⁶⁰ This less complex processional composition would presumably have been more practical for those travelling from town to town. The Florentine sources do not mention the presence of communal authorities, but this does not mean they were not there. Indeed, it is likely that processional orders from annual processions would have been co-opted in Florence, as in Lucca and Pistoia, and perhaps they were simply so well known that Stefani and Datini did not feel they needed repeating.

Giovanni Conversini da Ravenna's report on the Bianchi in Padua demonstrates that processional composition was not solely a Tuscan concern.⁶¹ Like Datini, Da Ravenna reports organization by parish, although the Paduan Bianchi were to walk three by three. The processions were led by the mendicants, followed by other religious orders, and then the laity organised by *quartiere*: children and women, and finally men.⁶² For the intra-urban processions, which lasted nine days, a different parish led the procession each day. This is an extra level of detail not present in Tuscan sources, suggesting a slightly more complicated composition in Padua.

These detailed processional compositions account mainly for the intra-urban processions; much less detail is provided for the itinerant devotions. The participants in these intra-urban examples were ordered according to local norms, as pre-existing processional orders were adapted. This meant that the whole community was involved: the laity, alongside ecclesiastical and secular authorities. Notwithstanding, usual social distinctions were maintained; while everyone was to participate, they were not accorded equal status within the processions. This local, comparative analysis reveals the crucial role of ecclesiastical authorities in providing practical support to manage and facilitate these important processions to prevent the plague. Their intervention encouraged orderly participation from as much of the populace as possible.

PROCESSIONAL ROUTES

Another key concern for the Bianchi processions was the nine-day routes taken within towns for intra-urban processions, and those

⁶⁰ Melis, *Aspetti*, 101.

⁶¹ Da Ravenna, *Processione*, ed. Cortese and Cortese, 66–8.

⁶² *Quartieri* were the official divisions of the city, and each *quartiere* usually had a main parish church.

followed by the itinerant participants. The routes for annual liturgical processions were usually well established, reinforcing the idea of the city as a sacred landscape, although little information about these routes survives.⁶³ For the Bianchi, reports of intra-urban processions focus on the church or churches visited each day, sometimes complemented by detailed itineraries of the processions' progress through the streets of the town. Reports of itinerant processions tend to focus instead on the town or towns visited each day, meaning that we can only speculate about the precise route taken through these urban spaces to visit the requisite daily church or churches. The chronicles do not elucidate how routes were selected, although the practical use of space and achievable daily distances suggest a degree of oversight. I will first consider intra-urban processions, then itinerant examples. Chroniclers often describe a multitude of processions within their treatment of the Bianchi, so particularly detailed examples have been selected.

In Lucca, the populace prepared for the Bianchi devotions by confessing and receiving communion. However, the secular authorities decided against letting anyone leave the town to participate in an itinerant procession. Even so, some individuals managed to 'escape' before the town gates could be shut, and could not be convinced to return. A single day of intra-urban processions was staged on 13 August 1399 for those who remained within the town, but the populace judged this insufficient in comparison to the nine-day itinerant tour of their fellow Lucchese who had managed to leave the town.⁶⁴

Consequently, a *novena* was begun on 15 August, coinciding with the feast of the Assumption. On each of the nine days, the intra-urban Lucchese Bianchi met at a specific church for mass; thereafter they processed to the cathedral of San Martino, and then returned home, moving between two churches each day.⁶⁵ All but one of the churches visited were within the town walls, and they included the main Franciscan and Dominican churches. While the churches are named, the routes from each church to the cathedral are not elucidated. However, some churches, such as San Frediano, had well-

⁶³ Philip Sheldrake, *The Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban* (Chichester, 2014), 70.

⁶⁴ Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bongi, 2: 348.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 2: 353–7. The churches were Santa Maria Forisportam, San Frediano, San Salvatore, San Michele, San Francesco, San Romano, Santa Maria dei Servi and San Giovanni.

established processional traditions from annual liturgical feast days and these may have been followed.⁶⁶ When exiting the baptistry church of San Giovanni, the cathedral is visible, so this would have been a very short procession indeed had the participants gone straight from one to the other. It is therefore possible that more circuitous routes were taken. Another issue was practicality: all these churches were relatively large, and most had a piazza outside into which Bianchi participants could overflow if required. This was not a fixed set of Bianchi churches, however, and itinerant Bianchi from other places would visit other locations, suggesting a level of oversight in directing the different groups of participants.⁶⁷

The situation for a procession in August in Pistoia was similar, with the participants meeting at a named church each day for mass before processing to the cathedral of San Zeno. The churches were all within the town walls, and again included those of the Franciscans and Dominicans.⁶⁸ A route is indicated for the first day of the processions, which also involved the Pistoiese Bianchi who were beginning an itinerant procession, but the remainder of the days specify only a named church.⁶⁹ The route for the initial day focuses on the churches visited by the participants, as well as naming secular landmarks such as *Porte* and the palazzo of Piero Cancellieri.⁷⁰ Another contrast with Lucca is that each of the named churches is roughly equidistant from the cathedral, providing a similar journey for each day of the intra-urban Pistoiese Bianchi if a direct route were taken.

Two perspectives on Florence are provided by Stefani's account of an intra-urban procession there and Datini's account of the use of Florence as the starting point for an itinerant procession. The churches described by Stefani cover a broader geographical area than those visited by the intra-urban processions in Lucca

⁶⁶ There is no record of the route taken: Kasimir Edschmid, *La Processione di Lucca* (Lucca, 1991).

⁶⁷ For example, a group of itinerant Bianchi participants from Montemagno visited Sant'Agostino: Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bonghi, 2: 319.

⁶⁸ Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 80–101. The churches were San Zeno, San Francesco, San Lorenzo, San Giovanni Fuorcivitas, San Paolo, Servi, San Bartolomeo, San Domenico and San Francesco.

⁶⁹ Gai states that the annual *Volto Santo* procession began at San Francesco and ended at the cathedral, but that no sources record the route: 'Feste patronali', 14.

⁷⁰ A member of a high-ranking family in Pistoia: Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 80.

and Pistoia, but remain within the bounds of Florentine territory.⁷¹ This could reflect the dominion of Florence over a broader area, coupled with the fact that there was no issue of participants trying to leave the city, as in Lucca. There is significant overlap in the spaces traversed by Datini, although the merchant relied more on secular landmarks like *Porte* and bridges.⁷² This focus on entry points to, and bridges within, Florence may reflect its position as the start of an itinerant procession, as seen above with Dominici's description of the Bianchi at Pistoia. The specificity of this route suggests that the leaders knew where to take the Bianchi participants as they were led out of Florence for their itinerant journey.

Again, Padua provides a useful northern point of contrast. Da Ravenna notes a series of churches and secular landmarks to be visited and passed through, recording an impressive level of detail for each of the different, circular processions.⁷³ Each of the nine days began and ended at the cathedral, with the exception of the final day, which focused on the church of Santa Giustina, whose patronal festival it was. Da Ravenna even indicates whether participants should turn left or right down particular streets, as well as suggesting distances.⁷⁴ He also shows how access to the sacred spaces was facilitated by the commune: certain individuals would lead the way, open (*aprire*) streets and fill in holes in the roads.⁷⁵ This demonstrates the chronicler's detailed knowledge of these routes, as well as highlighting a different mode of practice to the Tuscan examples. Several churches were reportedly visited each day, with some visited more than once

⁷¹ Biblioteca Marcelliana, MS C.152, fol. 53v. The notation '∧' in the manuscript indicates that the fifth day's location is missing. The churches named are: San Ghaggio, Santo Antonio a Ricorboli and San Miniato, Verzara, 'il tempio', San Salus, San Ghallo, the monastery at Montedomini, San Giovanni Trallarcora and San Bartolo fuori della porta al Prato.

⁷² Melis, *Aspetti*, 101–2. After the participants gathered at Santa Maria Novella, this procession went through the Porta a San Gallo, the Porta alla Croce and the Porta alla Giustizia before reaching Santa Croce, then crossing the Ponte Rubaconte and going on to the Piazza de' Mozzi, the Porta a San Niccolò, and then to Ricorboli.

⁷³ Da Ravenna, *Processione*, ed. Cortese and Cortese, 68–89. For example, the first procession left the cathedral and went to Sant'Agostino, San Michele (whose feast it was), Santa Maria Maddalena, the convent of San Francesco piccolo and San Prosdocimo: *ibid.* 68–71. The granular level of detail offered by Da Ravenna suggests a different approach to recording the processions.

⁷⁴ For example, 'octo prope stadia emensi ... ordines processerunt' ('so, the processions went forward for eight *stade*'): *ibid.* 87. This distance is roughly equal to 1.5 kilometres.

⁷⁵ Da Ravenna, *Processione*, ed. Cortese and Cortese, 75–7.

throughout the nine-day period. Again, this differs from the Tuscan intra-urban Bianchi processions which focused on one church each day. However, like Datini and Dominici, Da Ravenna includes a mixture of sacred and secular markers for the participants to follow as they navigated the processional route through the town, making these intra-urban processions more like the reported Tuscan itinerant processional beginnings.

The distribution of churches in each town meant that the Bianchi participants covered a significant amount of urban space. Hanska suggests that circular processional routes were common, making a ‘sphere of protection’.⁷⁶ Indeed, it is possible that this is what the Bianchi participants were aiming to achieve through their various intra-urban routes. Da Ravenna notes that the routes were always circular within Padua, and the spread of churches in Lucca and Pistoia creates a circle around the cathedral, as does Stefani’s route for Florence. Datini’s route however is more linear, simply leading out of the town rather than making the town a key focus. This appears to constitute a difference in aim between the itinerant and intra-urban processions: those which remained within the towns sought as much divine protection as possible for the town itself, whereas itinerant processions were more focused on the journey from town to town to secure salvation. It is to these itinerant journeys that we now turn.

Accounts describing the nine-day itinerant processions tend to focus solely on the towns visited each day. [Figure 2](#) shows the area of Tuscany covered by the processions under discussion. Sercambi reports a group of Lucchese Bianchi visiting Castelfranco, San Miniato, Vicopisano, Calci, Cigoli, Vorno, Vico, Bu(i)ti, Badia di Guamo (Cantignano) and Pontectio (Pontetetto), before returning to Lucca.⁷⁷ If Sercambi’s route is to be taken as the one followed by these Bianchi, it is not especially direct, although the distance to be covered each day was roughly 25 kilometres. The Pistoiese route is much more circular, visiting Quarrata, Tizzana, Carmignano, Signa, Fiesole, Florence, Peretola, Campi, Prato and Pacciana, before arriving back in Pistoia.⁷⁸ While no specific churches are mentioned, the fact that Dominici mentions the *cintola*, a relic of the Virgin, suggests that the Prato cathedral (where it was kept) was a stopping point.

⁷⁶ Hanska, *Strategies*, 58.

⁷⁷ Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bongi, 2: 360–6.

⁷⁸ Dominici, *Cronaca dei Bianchi*, ed. Gigliotti, 73–100.

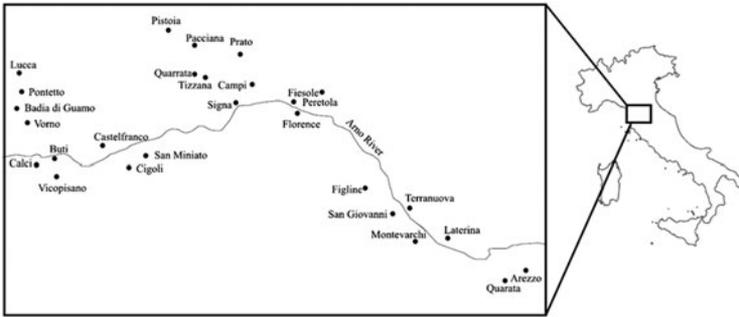


Figure 2. Map of Itinerant Tuscan Bianchi procession towns.

Dominici also records that the procession stopped in more than nine towns, although the distance between some stops is very short: for example, Quarrata and Tizzana are only 3.4 kilometres apart. It would therefore have been possible to visit more than one town each day, spreading the Bianchi message in the hope of preventing the forthcoming plague. As Datini describes a procession in which he took part, rather than just providing a report, it is perhaps unsurprising that the route is the neatest. Beginning at Florence, the procession went to Figline, San Giovanni, Montevarchi and Quarata, reaching Arezzo before turning back northwards through Laterina and Terranuova on the way back to Florence. There was a distance of between ten and fifty kilometres between each town. Some towns lay at intersections between different routes: for example, a Bianchi group left from Florence on 28 August 1399, six days after the itinerant Pistoiese Bianchi had visited the town.

The more northerly sources provide less detail on itinerant activities. Da Ravenna does not provide any information on itinerant routes taken by the Paduan Bianchi. However, sources from Milan suggest that there were prohibitions on movement which had an impact on Bianchi processions in Milanese territories; indeed, routes were curtailed specifically to avoid spreading the plague.⁷⁹ As such, the Milanese were only allowed to participate in intra-urban processions and were stringently separated by *quartiere*. In Venice, the

⁷⁹ Bornstein, *Bianchi*, 64–82; Giuliana Albini, *Guerra, fame, peste. Crisi di mortalità e sistema sanitario nella Lombardia tardomedievale* (Bologna, 1982), 24.

Bianchi were not allowed in, for political rather than public health reasons. The authorities believed that there were already sufficient religious processions in the city and were also suspicious of the problematic Dominican Giovanni Dominici who was leading this procession.⁸⁰ The Tuscan Bianchi did sometimes meet with issues, as seen in Lucca, but the sources suggest that there was more significant opposition to the Bianchi processions in Milan and Venice.

A variety of considerations were therefore involved in establishing processional routes. While there are no written accounts of communal intervention in route planning, it seems likely that there must have been some oversight to ensure that the distances were feasible and churches would not be overwhelmed. Moreover, political and public health issues had to be addressed. For the intra-urban processions, popular spaces were used, activating sacred spaces used for feast days. This would have made it easier for the populace to understand the expectations for the Bianchi devotions, and for those leading and marshalling the processions. Control over the itinerant devotions was more difficult than with the intra-urban alternatives, but oversight remained crucial. This is particularly visible in the way that towns provided for their itinerant participants, as demonstrated with the organization of food provision for the Pistoiese procession discussed above. This meant that someone within Pistoia needed to know where the groups would be in order to arrange for the supplies to reach them. Overall, this examination of the evidence from several towns demonstrates the involvement of communes in ensuring that the Bianchi participants followed ordered routes as they attempted to prevent the threatened epidemic of plague.

CONCLUSION

As usual during times of epidemic, Italian ecclesiastical authorities mobilized to lead the populace in religious processions with the hope of securing salvation from the disease. The Bianchi processions were an amplified version of these usual devotions. Plague was

⁸⁰ Daniel Bornstein, 'Giovanni Dominici, the Bianchi and Venice: Symbolic Action and Interpretive Grids', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1993), 143–71. Giovanni Dominici, while initially supported by the church, created enmity between the Dominican order and in Venice by his actions.

presented as the motivation for the Bianchi devotions from the origin stories that were narrated by preachers, and circulated in the form of *laude*. Clerical endorsement meant that participants could prepare spiritually for the plague-prevention processions through confession and communion, and visit numerous sites of worship, either within their own town or on itinerant processions. The plague began to arrive in Tuscany in the late summer and autumn of 1399, but the chroniclers do not comment on the advent of the disease in connection with the efforts of the Bianchi participants.

Ecclesiastical endorsement undoubtedly contributed to the successful spread of the Bianchi devotions. Indeed, previous popular religious revivals such as the flagellants at the time of the Black Death and the Shepherds' Crusades were unsuccessful in this, due to their condemnation and other practical issues, compared to those which involved members of the church, such as the Great Hallelujah, which spread more easily.⁸¹ The Bianchi belong with the more successful revivals, in that they were not condemned and enjoyed a significant geographical spread, and the church's visible role in the devotions provided an ecclesiastical seal of approval. Indeed, even the pope endorsed the processions once they reached Rome.⁸² Local authorities were able to exploit traditional processional norms for the Bianchi devotions, particularly processional composition. There is more work to be done on mapping the routes involved, and particularly in exploring the sometimes minutely described use of urban space. Preaching played a key role, not just in disseminating the need for the devotions, but also for clarifying local expectations in terms of what participants were supposed to do. Bishops and other clergy also led certain processions, further underscoring ecclesiastical support. Thus, unlike previous revivals which had a single leader throughout their spread, the Bianchi were shaped at a local level with local leaders, allowing an unprecedented level of control.

Members of the church therefore played a crucial role in supporting the populace through a moment of crisis. They prepared them, marshalled them and provided daily input through sermons. This

⁸¹ Malcolm Barber, 'The Pastoureaux of 1320', *JEH* 32 (1981), 143–66; Augustine Thompson, *Revival Preachers and Politics in Thirteenth-Century Italy: The Great Devotion of 1233* (Oxford, 1992).

⁸² After initial hesitation, Pope Boniface IX showed the Bianchi various relics in September 1399: Sercambi, *Croniche*, ed. Bonghi, 2: 370–1.

support moved with the participants, both notionally in terms of the regulations and physically as bishops and preachers joined the processions. Such actions were not dissimilar to those which formed part of annual liturgical processions. However, the support that the clergy demonstrated for the novel Bianchi procession in 1399 was a significant factor in their spread throughout Tuscany, allowing the populace to attempt to prevent the foretold plague epidemic. Church authorities tempered the fervour of this popular religious revival, intervening not in a malicious manner but to shape the processions and control their impact.