

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Eisenbichler, Konrad, ed. A Companion to Medieval and Early Modern Confraternities**

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an admirable, rigorous, and reliable scholarly edition. He has given criticism a chance to match this editorial achievement with insights of comparable height and nuance.

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**Eisenbichler, Konrad, ed.**

***A Companion to Medieval and Early Modern Confraternities.***

Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 83. Leiden: Brill, 2019. Pp. xvi, 476 + 14 figures. ISBN 978-90-04-34366-5 (hardcover) US\$234.

This comprehensive 476-page volume of twenty essays by an international cadre of authors represents essential reading on confraternities in the late medieval and early modern periods. The volume is edited by Konrad Eisenbichler, who also translates many entries smoothly into English and contributes a thoughtful introduction. The contributing authors each consider the centrality of confraternities to culture, law, politics, economics, and religion in Europe and the New World. This collection should be of interest to both established scholars and students new to the study of confraternities and urban Christianity.

These essays are divided into five parts, each addressing a current trend in confraternity scholarship. The first part, "Birth and Development," considers the fundamental questions relevant to confraternities, including their medieval origins, shared institutions, and their difference from other urban collectives, such as guilds. The chapter by Paul Trio provides a helpful overview of confraternal life in the Low Countries, giving the reader an immediate sense of these groups' regional diversity. Davide Adamoli and Beata Wojciechowska follow with discussions of Swiss and central European confraternities, respectively. The volume's second part, "Devotion and Prayer," outlines confraternal piety. Gervase Rosser rightly reminds readers that confraternities encouraged the ethical growth of individual members and altruism towards non-kin. Such counsel, founded upon Aristotelian ethics, permeates confraternity sources, such as statutes and sermons. Danilo Zardin explores how Eucharistic piety and doctrine shaped confraternities, while Christopher Black discusses the often complicated relationship between Christian brotherhoods and the Inquisition.

The third part, “Good Works,” connects confraternal activities to towns. Contributions by Marina Gazzini and David D’Andrea focus on sermons and charitable hospitals in Italy, while Colm Lennon provides a fascinating regional counterexample in late medieval Ireland. Nicholas Terpstra considers comforting confraternities, which sought to help criminals confess their sins before execution. In his chapter, Terpstra demonstrates how secular governmental institutions relied on *confratelli* to urge the convicted to produce depositions before death. Such regional and thematic approaches add to the many strengths of this collection.

The two concluding parts of this book focus on exciting recent developments in confraternity studies. “Confraternities in a Transcultural World” illuminates how confraternal structures and institutions were adapted throughout the world. Anna Esposito argues that Rome was a centre of “national” confraternities. The city provides a fine case study for how formal religious collectivization helped immigrant populations assimilate and succeed commercially in the early modern world. Dominika Burdzy considers the role of confraternities in central European Orthodox communities, while Murdo J. MacLeod focuses on early modern *confradías* in colonial Mexico and Central America, especially groups created from the ground up by indigenous and black populations. Frederica Francesconi provides an essential chapter on how Jewish confraternities produced a “generative space,” thereby encouraging mutual aid within their own communities. The fifth and final part of this volume, “Arts and Letters,” is concerned with confraternity production of culture during the Renaissance. Jonathan Glixon makes a convincing argument regarding the centrality of confraternities to the development of western music, while Nerida Newbiggin brings attention to theatrical performances arranged by and for confraternity members. Ultimately, the author demonstrates how printed dramaturgical works changed collective devotional life, bringing standardized confraternity texts to a wider audience. Anne-Laure Van Bruaene and Dylan Reid discuss confraternal chambers of rhetoric in the Low Countries and contributions to French competitive poetry societies, the *puy*s. Alyssa Abraham examines the creation and use of minor art and architectural objects by confraternities in Modena. William R. Levin brings this collection to a close through his suggestive argument regarding *Charity Personified* and the *Allegory of Mercy* at the seat of the Misericordia Confraternity in Florence. Levin asserts that both

artistic works help to determine the patron information, provenance, and even their function. Compellingly, he determines that such works assisted the Misericordia in caring for orphaned children, thereby preventing the alienation of the group's assets after the Black Death.

While this collection of essays is splendidly varied, common themes run throughout. As many contributors note, confraternities were an important feature of civic religion, which, in this volume, pertains to a mutually transformative relationship between ecclesiastical and urban administrations. Confraternities also had a powerful influence on Renaissance cultural production. Even the word "confraternity" itself teeters between fluidity and rigidity: the term can refer exclusively to devotion, as Trio and Van Bruaene argue for the Low Countries, or as fluidly shaping non-religious institutions, as suggested by D'Andrea and Terpstra. Confraternity history coincides with changes brought about by the Counter-Reformation, such as the separation of the devotional from the secular, a general turning away from corporatism, and strengthened top-down hierarchies, all culminating in a departure from "traditional" religion. Even more surprisingly, confraternity involvement could help groups further other types of aims, whether artistic, cultural, economic, or political in nature. Participation in confraternities provided individuals with a collective voice in city politics. Authorities also relied on confraternities, as granting privileges to such groups could legitimize monarchies, town governments, and even other ecclesiastical offices such as the Inquisition.

When taken together, the essays in this volume reveal the undeniable centrality of confraternities between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Each contribution raises possibilities for further research. Early modern political and legal history might benefit from considering confraternal influence on statutory law. Future pertinent studies might describe the influence membership had on daily life, and on ordinary late medieval and early modern households and kinship structures. Judging by the many essays that touch upon gender and age, it would be helpful to see how individual identities were shaped by membership in confraternities. Since this volume has helped widen the scope of confraternity studies, such pursuits might soon be possible.

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