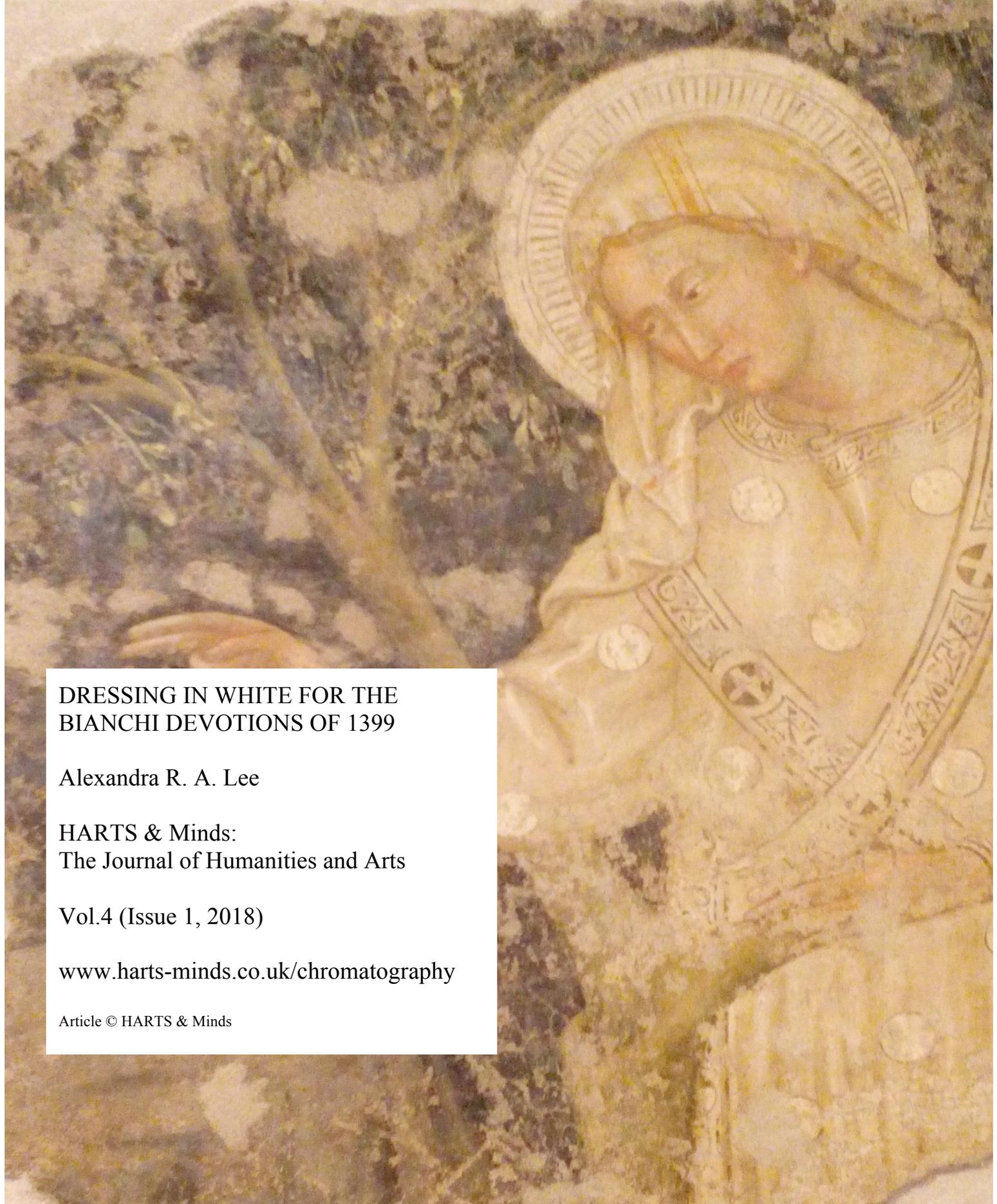


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Alexandra R. A. Lee

Abstract

The Bianchi devotions of 1399 take their name from the white garments that participants were required to wear. Moving eastwards towards Venice and southwards towards Rome from its beginnings in Genoa, the popular religious revival was spread through a succession of nine-day, itinerant, circular processions. This article analyses the significance of participants in the Bianchi devotions wearing white, in terms of the colour itself, and the function that this white 'uniform' played within the movement. I examine the colour white from a medieval Italian perspective, particularly highlighting the religious implications of the colour.

The transmission and application of the instruction to wear white is analysed. The origins of the Bianchi devotions lay in purportedly divine visions, and the necessity to wear white was passed on by word of mouth, songs of praise and wandering preachers. Successful participation in the Bianchi processions would prevent a forthcoming epidemic of plague. Variation on the white garments is assessed, considering regional diversity as well as the circumstances of individuals in these collective devotions. The purpose of the white robes is examined, considering the importance of this rule amongst the host of other instructions for those who took part in the Bianchi processions. These included fasting, singing songs of praise and not sleeping within walled towns.

This evaluation of the white garments of those who participated in the Bianchi processions in 1399 considers the significance of the colour of the robes alongside the importance of following the regulation. The instruction to wear white, while interpreted in various different manners according to factors was the most consistent regulation that was followed during the Bianchi devotions.

Key Words: Popular Religion, Medieval Italy, processions, devotion, white, Bianchi of 1399, plague prevention, regional variation, origin narrative

Introduction

In 2018, an approaching horde of people dressed in white and chanting would be quite sinister. These white robes have become symbols of white nationalism and white supremacy, and have been ripped from their medieval roots of peace and penitence to become something against which a stand must be taken. The spiritual purity these robes used to symbolise has become darkly transmogrified into a desire for racial purity. White hoods which once covered penitent Christians hoping to prevent a plague through their religious devotion now obscure the identities of those who believe themselves to be superior and who will stop at nothing to get their voices heard. This article examines the white garments worn by a medieval movement of peace, analysing the significance of the colour and the unity it created for participants in the Bianchi processions of 1399.

Crowds of people dressed in white spread throughout northern and central Italy in the summer and autumn of 1399. While some towns felt some misgivings towards the groups, most allowed the Bianchi participants free entry. The white-clad penitents communicated

their message of *pace e misericordia*, peace and penitence, and stressed the urgency of joining the devotions in order to prevent an outbreak of plague. Beginning in Genoa on 7th July 1399, these processions spread in a series of nine-day, itinerant, circular processions, reaching as far as Venice to the east and Rome to the south.¹ The itinerant groups would leave their home towns, and process for nine days, proselytising the towns they reached along the way. These towns in turn took up the processions, and continued to disseminate the Bianchi message, and thus the devotions spread. The name for the movement, the ‘Bianchi’ is the most common epithet given to the groups in medieval sources, and comes from the white garments which participants in the processions were required to wear. The colour *bianc(h)o* is repeated throughout the source materials, coupled either to a noun denoting clothing such as *abito*, or with the reflexive verb *vestirsi* (to clothe oneself), emphasising that participants were actively to clothe themselves in this colour, making the choice to do so.

A focus will be drawn to central Italy, specifically to the towns of Lucca and Pistoia. These were hotbeds of Bianchi activity and there is unparalleled evidence of the Bianchi devotions which survives for each town. For Lucca, the chronicle of Giovanni Sercambi devotes forty chapters to the events in 1399.² This chronicle runs from 1194 until 1423, with each chapter usually describing a single event, and so this is a significant portion of text devoted to the Bianchi processions. The surviving autograph manuscript is splendidly illustrated.³ Multiple manuscript editions of the chronicles of the Pistoiese Luca Dominici survive.⁴ The modern edition is 200 pages long, and is entirely devoted to the Bianchi devotions and plague of 1399-1400.⁵ These lengthy narratives will be combined with evidence from municipal archives and briefer chronicle accounts from other towns that the Bianchi devotions passed through to highlight areas of regional variation.

The Bianchi processions were inspired by a series of reportedly divine visions, which included detailed instructions for participants. These origin stories will be the initial focus and I will evaluate the significance accorded to the colour white by the protagonists. These rules always include the instruction to wear white, although other regulations differ between written accounts of these narratives. The witnesses of these visions were instructed to make all of Christendom participate in processions in order to appease an angry God, who would otherwise send forth a terrible plague to kill one third of mankind.

This article will problematize the use of white garments in the Bianchi devotions; wearing white was not as simple as it might seem. I will tease out the implications of the colour, as well as the function of the robes within the rules set out for participants in the processions. Medieval people usually wore black, brown or grey clothes made of rough materials, and so dressing in white marked a significant change from ordinary dress.⁶ References to the movement by contemporary chroniclers will be analysed to examine how eye witnesses described the Bianchi participants and their clothing. This includes variations on the white garments and the reasons for this, including regional practices and personal preference, highlighting moments of individuality in these collective devotions. The discussion of the use of white in this popular religious revival will highlight how the Bianchi devotions attempted to be universal.

Origin Stories

One day, a farmer was ploughing his field, when Christ appeared to him in disguise. Christ asked for some bread, and the farmer looked in his bag and was amazed to find three pieces, as he had already eaten all his supplies. Christ told the farmer to throw the bread into a fountain. Knowing that there was no fountain nearby but having found the bread, he set off and threw one piece of bread into the fountain he found. The Virgin Mary appeared dressed in white, and rebuked him. She explained that a third of the world would die through plague as a result of his action. However, by spreading the story of his vision and encouraging the people to follow the rules of the Bianchi devotions, this sentence could be revoked.⁷

These are the key narrative points of the *tre pani* story, the most common origin narrative associated with the Bianchi devotions. The narrative features in the writings of two chroniclers: Dominici, where it is told at length in prose, and Sercambi, where it is told once in prose and once in a *lauda* (song of praise), each version with its own illustrations. The tale also features in other chronicle sources from around the whole geographical spread of the devotions and is visually represented in frescoes in Umbria and Lazio.⁸ This story of the three pieces of bread often also includes instructions for participants in the Bianchi devotions, which vary from source to source. In Dominici's prose narrative of the story, there is an extensive list of regulations including wearing white 'a modo di Battuti' (like *Battuti*-members of a flagellant religious confraternity), as well as fasting, visiting three churches each day and so on.⁹ Other narrative sources for this first origin story contain fewer regulations, but this notion of wearing white is repeated in every single source.

The second Bianchi origin story details how another farmer had a vision of an angel who appeared between the horns of his oxen. The angel gave the witness a heavenly book, which was to be taken to Rome and opened on the altar of St Peter.¹⁰ This story appears solely in Sercambi and Dominici, and the narrative is much shorter. While the *tre pani* story is told over a series of pages by both chroniclers, Sercambi tells this book tale in one paragraph, and Dominici devotes only a couple of lines to the narrative. In this story, the sole instruction relayed to the witness is to wear white.

Dominici's chronicle is the only source for the final origin story, of Capperledis the Irish recluse.¹¹ One night, Capperledis was taken from her cell to a vision of the divine court. Here, Christ was being continually crucified, and God the Father explained that unless mankind was penitent, either everyone would die or Christ would be crucified again. Capperledis was told that participants in the devotions must wear white, and also that they should go barefoot and practice abstinence. Three distinct origin stories for one series of processions seems quite a lot, and the diverse messages that they present are problematic. Each narrative suggests a focus on different regulations for those who wished to participate in the processions. Notwithstanding, the single common thread throughout all versions of these three narratives is the emphasis on participants wearing white and processing in order to prevent the annihilation of mankind. Even in instances where only a single practice is mentioned, the focus remains on this colour white. This is the case for example in the book story, and also in Sercambi's *lauda* version of the *tre pani* story. Even within the metric constraints of the *lauda* form, instructing participants in the processions to wear white is still a central tenet.

An important feature of the *tre pani* story is the fact that that the Virgin Mary is dressed in white. This is made explicit in the written narratives, and is visually prominent in Sercambi's manuscript illustrations and the numerous fresco examples of the tale (Figures 1-3).¹² Iconographically speaking, it is highly unusual that the Virgin is dressed in white. While the child Virgin can sometimes be found in white,¹³ the adult Virgin is always dressed in blue. Indeed, as Pastoureau notes in his magisterial work on blue, the colour became one of the Virgin's required attributes after the twelfth century in western painting.¹⁴ There are some variations on the white robes in the wall paintings, for example, there is a starry strip adorning her robes at Terni, and she wears a brown stole at Poggio Mirteto. Nevertheless, she is clearly dressed in the way that participants in the Bianchi processions are supposed to dress. This creates a visual connection between the attire of the Virgin and her promise of reconciliation and the clothing of Bianchi participants and their desire for penitence and freedom from the threat of plague.

Wearing white was the main way, according to the origin stories, of demonstrating one's adherence to the instructions conveyed in order to prevent a pestilential annihilation of mankind. In terms of the *tre pani* story, it was also a way of emulating the Virgin and

enacting her instructions. These three narratives were spread throughout northern and central Italy in letters, by wandering preachers and through singing *laude*.¹⁵ Thus wearing white became the emblem of the Bianchi devotions, and was a universal requirement for those who participated in the processions.



Figure 1. *Tre pani* fresco, Church of San Paolo, Poggio Mirteto (Lazio). Credit Natale Madeo.



Figure 2. *Tre pani* fresco, Church of Santa Maria al Monumento, Terni (Umbria). Credit author.



Figure 3. *Tre pani* fresco, Church of San Eusanio, Rieti (Umbria). Credit Natale Madeo.

Nomenclature

After their purportedly divine inspiration, the Bianchi devotions began on 7th July in Genoa, spreading across the northern and central Italian peninsula. The fact that the main tenet for joining the processions was wearing white is exemplified in the nomenclature used to refer to the movement. In modern scholarship, the most common epithet is ‘the Bianchi’, although there have been attempts to translate this into English, such as Herlihy’s ‘Grand Company of the Whites.’¹⁶ This preoccupation with the colour that the participants wore is evident even from the chronicles contemporary to the movement as laid out in Table 1.

Considering vernacular nomenclature, the most common epithet is ‘i Bianchi’. My inclusion here of sources beyond the Tuscan focus of this article emphasises the use of this term across a broader geographical scope. In addition to the Lucchese Sercambi and the

Pistoiese Dominici, Montemarte, a chronicler from Orvieto, Umbria and Delayto, a chronicler from Ferrara, Emilia-Romagna also use the same term.¹⁷ This literally translates to ‘the whites’, as a reference to the colour worn by participants in the processions. This is further emphasised by Dominici’s other two ways of referring to the devotions. Firstly, ‘moltitudine del popoli bianco’ indicates a multitude of people in white: a circumlocution for ‘i Bianchi.’ The further Dominici gets through his chronicle, however, the more frequently he simply writes ‘B.’ to refer to the devotions. These vernacular terms rely on the reader understanding that ‘Bianchi’ refers to these hordes of processing penitents. Dominici’s three different epithets all essentially mean the same thing; while his initial reference to the devotions provides clarity in stating that the multitude of people is dressed in white, his later shorthand indicates the frequency with which he is referring to the Bianchi processions.

Chronicle	Name for Bianchi
Sercambi	i Bianchi
Dominici	moltitudine del popoli bianco/ i Bianchi/ B.
Montemarte	i Bianchi
Delayto	i Bianchi
Cerboni	societas candidatorum/candidati
Manetti	de alborum devotione/albos
Stella	albis induti
Bruni	albatu

Table 1: Nomenclature for Bianchi Devotions in Primary Sources

Latin source material also survives from 1399, and the terms used to describe the devotions provide an interesting point of contrast. These terms are less problematic, as they explicitly state that the groups of people they describe were *dressed* in white. Cerboni, writing in Città di Castello, Umbria refers to the Bianchi processions as *societas candidatorum*, an association of people dressed in white, or later simply *candidati*, people dressed in white.¹⁸ The adjective *candidatus* has the sense of white specifically applied to clothing. Manetti, writing in Pistoia, refers to the group as *de alborum devotione*, ‘the devotion of the whites’, later referring to the group simply by the colour of their garments, *albos*, the whites.¹⁹ Stella, a chronicler from Genoa refers to the movement as *albis induti*, people who had put on white, here presumably clothing.²⁰ The final example is the simplest: *albatu*, meaning dressed in white, from the Florentine chronicler Bruni.²¹

This nomenclature referring to the members of the devotion by the colour of their attire might appear straightforward and convenient. However, in the contemporary Italian context, it is problematic. For example, the Guelph faction, broadly speaking for the papacy, who opposed the imperial Ghibellines, split into two factions in around 1300, the Whites (Bianchi) and the Blacks (Neri). This factional conflict, while less vehement at the turn of the fifteenth century, was nevertheless still a key factor in contemporary political life. The fact that this same word was used in chronicles and public records to denote both this political faction and the processions in 1399 means it can sometimes be difficult to differentiate the two, although context usually suffices to determine which group is being described.

It was not only political groups who used the term ‘Bianchi’, indeed it was also a generic term for other religious movements. In 1335, a series of devotions were begun by Fra Venturino da Bergamo, and enemies put aside their differences, dressed in white and marched to Rome. These white-clad devotees did not wear hoods like the Bianchi participants in 1399,

and the devotions were on a much smaller scale, as only small strands of the populace were moved to participate. Nevertheless, the similarity is striking, and consequently, referring to the movement solely by the colour of the garments worn is problematic. Again, context usually determines which group is being discussed. It is possible that the events of 1335 would have remained in collective memory, but despite the similarities, the Bianchi devotions sixty years later had a much broader appeal and must be considered as a separate entity.

The fact that a term which was at once politically loaded and imbued with meaning from previous religious revivals was used in 1399 is significant. While context usually makes the specific reference clear, it also reinforces the unifying factor of white garments for participants in the Bianchi processions in 1399. Indeed, a term using the colour white is applied in a variety of forms throughout the geographical spread of the Bianchi devotions, as the groups moved from Genoa to Rome, and also from Genoa towards Venice. The fact that this simple word with multiple meanings was selected highlights how crucial this unifying dress was to participants in the Bianchi processions, and the convenience of the term, as chroniclers were writing about these fleeting devotions, which had run their course six months after their Genoese beginnings.

The Colour White

The colour white created a sense of universality and equality across the Bianchi devotions, theoretically removing individuality and establishing one white, mass identity. White has links to purity and renewal, including a baptismal significance as those to be baptised would be dressed in the colour.²² This significance was also applied to conversion, as white was associated with turning away from sin to embrace the Christian mind-set, embracing penitence. The Bianchi devotions encapsulated the element of turning from sin, as confession was required before participation, although calling it a conversion is perhaps overzealous; participants embraced a new way of life within Christianity rather than a wholly new set of ideals.

The purity of white was important to writers contemporary to the Bianchi devotions. For example, in the origin story *lauda Nuova lucie*, Sercambi notes: ‘tucti bianchi son di fuori/perchè dentro sian li cuori’ [they are all white without, because their hearts are white within] (ll. 4-5).²³ These lines connect to the notion of a sacrament as an outward sign of inward grace, implying that the Bianchi robes demonstrated an inner change outwardly. In his poem about the Bianchi processions, the Florentine writer Sacchetti noted that any other mark would show up on white, and he emphasises the pure state that participants in the processions were supposed to embody.²⁴

Numerous holy orders wore white, where taking on these robes marked a significant lifestyle change. The Cistercians, for example, were known as the ‘white monks’ because of distinctive colour of their habits.²⁵ For the Carmelites, white represented a significant reform in their dress. Initially, the order had worn striped habits, but a move in 1287 led to a white *cappa* being adopted.²⁶ Others such as the Dominicans wore a white robe with a darker cloak over the top. White was not the only colour holy orders could wear however, as groups like the Benedictines wore black, and the Franciscans wore brown.

Confraternities sometimes also wore white. Surveying the thirteen confraternities for which records survive in Lucca before 1399, one flagellant confraternity wore white, but other groups wore black, red, and even yellow with a white cincture.²⁷ While white was clearly important for some of these groups, the variety present among holy orders and confraternities suggests that the Bianchi participants were not signifying a connection to any one single order through their dress. Moreover, the orders which are referenced in the sources

are usually the Franciscans and Dominicans, neither of which wore solely white, but whose preaching activity was fundamental to the spread of the devotions.

Participants in previous popular religious revivals had also worn white. Contemporaneous representations of the Flagellants of 1260 show them in white robes, covering the participants from the waist down, although it is unlikely that the Bianchi participants were deliberately mimicking these groups.²⁸ Indeed, while Tognetti notes the presence of the same impulse in the collective need for public repentance, this cannot be extended to the specific practices and attire adopted in previous revivals.²⁹

While all participants in the devotions were supposed to wear white, it is difficult to consider the garments a uniform. As will be revealed below, different individuals wore different items. Delaruelle suggests a degree of ritual around putting on the white robes.³⁰ However, there are no reports of mass robing ceremonies, or of any particular rituals associated with dressing in the colour. Tognetti notes this as a point of difference between Bianchi participants and pilgrims. For pilgrims, their uniform was a ritualised symbol of their journey and purpose. For the Bianchi however, there was no similar ceremony, perhaps due to the short nature of the processions. Overall, there were precedents for participants in such movements to wear white, and so those who participated in the Bianchi processions were not unique in dressing in this manner. Nevertheless, the fact that all participants were supposed to wear the same colour was a uniting factor across the many different groups that joined the devotions.

White Garments

The regulations set out in the origin stories for the Bianchi devotions specify that participants were to wear white. Some, like Dominici, even go so far as to specify that *Battuti* robes were a good example of how to dress correctly. However, this ideal of full, hooded white robes does not map entirely onto the reality of the processions. Indeed, there were a variety of garments and cloths used. As mentioned in the introduction, white robes were not usual attire, as brown, black or grey were the colours most worn by ordinary people in the Middle Ages. Some people owned white robes due to their membership in religious confraternities, lay institutions which met periodically with a religious goal. Each group performed a variety of functions, such as singing *laude* (*laudesi*), self-flagellating (flagellant), caring for the sick (hospital), as well as social activities such as providing food for those in prison or for the poor.³¹ Nevertheless, most people did not already own white garments, and so had these robes been the only permitted clothing for the Bianchi processions, many would have been financially prohibited from participating.

So, a variety of white cloth was worn: participants used anything white that they could get their hands on. Dominici notes that in addition to the robes, Bianchi participants in Pistoia also wore shirts, albs, cassocks and bedsheets that were made of white cloth.³² He also transcribes a letter he received from Genoa which describes how Bianchi participants were dressed in cloths, linen and bedsheets, and that some just wore ‘un tovagliuolo in testa’ [a handkerchief on their head].³³ The final example of the handkerchief demonstrates the fervour of the Bianchi participants as people scrambled to fulfil the requirement of wearing white in whatever way they could.

Regarding the visual evidence, all of the Bianchi participants depicted in Sercambi’s manuscript are wearing full length, hooded white robes.³⁴ Some robes are open at the back in the style of the *Battuti*, so that participants could self-flagellate.³⁵ Other participants are shown with their heads completely covered, with only holes cut for their eyes.³⁶ The robes covering the participants’ faces cannot have been practical for a long journey due to the very limited visibility, and so these robes were more likely for the intraurban processions. These images are similar to those depicted in a fresco of a Bianchi procession in the church of Santa

Maria Maggiore in Vallo di Nera, Umbria (Figure 4). Here, participants are dressed in a similar manner to Sercambi's manuscript, with full, white robes, although there is no obvious marker to separate men and women. These visual sources do not indicate the variety suggested in Dominici's written account. However, these depictions can be considered as a visual ideal of the processions, with all participants joining in fervently in their activities in the full-length white robes.



Figure 4. *La processione dei Bianchi Bianchi*
Fresco, Church of Santa Maria Assunta, Vallo di
Nera (Umbria) (detail). Credit author.

Since the Bianchi devotions aspired to the universal participation of Christendom, participants could not be required to contribute financially in order to join in. White robes were the ideal, although the other options show how those who could not afford them still participated with other white garments and cloths. While the processions never left Italy, the fact that this variety of attire was acceptable suggests that this goal of universal participation was paramount for those who wished to participate in the devotions. In this way, poorer members of society were not excluded from processions and were considered a part of the devotions rather than being ridiculed for their lack of sartorial elegance. These concessions and variations due to individual circumstances also demonstrate that the whiteness of the garments overshadowed their shape, indicating that unity was maintained through the colour of the cloth rather than its style.

Taking all of this into account, it therefore seems problematic to consider those who did not wear white as part of the Bianchi processions. Nevertheless, Dominici reports a group of individuals who were not wearing any white garments participating in an intraurban procession in Pistoia.³⁷ These people were overlooking the most ubiquitous requirement of the devotions, which makes it challenging to consider them as Bianchi participants. However, this could highlight the difficulty of procuring white garments, or simply demonstrate Bianchi fervour in action, as bystanders were swept up in the processions as they went past. Nevertheless, it remains problematic that these people did not fulfil this most basic requirement for participants.

The white garments were, by and large, the identifying feature of a participant in the Bianchi processions, a way of differentiating between participants and onlookers. This was particularly the case as the robe was not to be removed for the nine-day duration of the

devotions. From a practical standpoint, Dominici notes that the robes of those returning from the itinerant processions were no longer white, but rather ‘sucide e imbrunite’ [dirty and brown].³⁸ This demonstrates the physicality of the journey as well as the importance of the underlying colour of the robes, rather than any dirt which might have marred its perfection. While Sacchetti was preoccupied with marks showing up on the white robes as mentioned above, these stains were evidence of physical participation in the processions, and so cannot be considered as detracting from the penitent mentality of the Bianchi participants.

Wearing white provided a unifying factor for participants in the Bianchi processions. Men, women, children, politicians, artisans, writers and people from numerous walks of society were supposed to participate in these processions, and were all joined together by their white garments, whatever form these took. This unification was crucial to overcoming the threat of plague which had been conveyed in the origin stories. Dominici’s inclusion of those not wearing white at the tail end of a Pistoiese Bianchi procession is harder to reconcile within this ideal, but shows how individuals were caught up in the Bianchi fervour, and attempted to participate even if they did not have the requisite attire. Thus a variety of white clothing was worn during the Bianchi processions, and was stained with mud and sweat along the way. This united participants not only in their purpose, but also visually, creating a divide between onlookers and those performing the devotional activities.

Red Crosses, Albs and Scallops

There was significant variation in the ways that Bianchi participants wore white. Another level of difference is added when adornments for the items of clothing are considered. These additions are mentioned in some origin stories, as Dominici stipulated that a red cross should delineate the sex of participants, with women wearing one on their head and men, one on their shoulder. The *lauda Venne Gesu* presents the red cross rather as a choice: on the shoulder or on the head (l. 187).³⁹ Thus already in the origin stories there are different methods of wearing this red cross- delineating sex or a choice between the head and the shoulder. As with the white garments, this red cross is also reinforced visually in the Virgin’s attire in the frescoes of the *tre pani* stories (Figures 1-3).

In terms of the way this instruction was interpreted, all images of Bianchi participants have red crosses somewhere on their attire. Morton suggests that this was a ‘fashion statement,’ although there appears to have been a deeper significance to this marking.⁴⁰ In Sercambi’s manuscript, red crosses are visible on either the shoulders or the heads of the white-clad penitents.⁴¹ It is unclear what this signifies, so whether this marks gender or not. However, the majority of depicted Bianchi participants wear the cross on their shoulders. Textually, Sercambi makes it clear that both men and women were participating in the processions, which could suggest that the norm was to wear the cross on the shoulder, rather than it delineating gender, as that would suggest very few women took part in the processions.

Marking participants by their sex detracts from the universalising white robes, although it does emphasise that women were able to participate in the processions. However, such a marking might have been superfluous, as physical separation of the sexes was enforced in the processional order and at night. The use and placement of the red cross seems mostly to have been a part of how Bianchi participants were supposed to dress, especially if they were wearing robes; there is no suggestion for where to place the red cross on a handkerchief. The location of the red marking depended on local factors- either everyone wore it in the same way, or it was used to delineate sex. However, it would have been difficult to pinpoint whether a participant was wearing a cross on her head through choice or to mark her sex. Dominici’s suggestion that men and women were to place it differently would only have been read by those who adhered to the same particular variation, so those from Pistoia might assume that Bianchi participants with a red cross on their heads were women, but this might

not have been the case for Bianchi from other cities. While Sercambi's Bianchi participants are mostly marked on their shoulders, those in the processions depicted at Vallo di Nera are marked both on their heads and their shoulders (Figure 4). Stella also notes that this was the case in the Genoese processions, further suggesting that the instructions for the placement of the red cross were dependent on the location of the processions.⁴²

To the modern eye, a red cross on white robes is reminiscent of the crusades and the Templars.⁴³ These red crosses usually adorned the cloaks the crusaders wore over their darker undergarments. This is different from the Bianchi participants, who did not have cloaks, just one layer of white clothing, in whatever form that came. Bianchi garments also were not built to last, whereas the crusading uniforms would be worn for a much longer period of time. It is unlikely that the Bianchi devotions were trying to recall these military orders, however, as they promoted their message of peace and did not bear arms. Nevertheless, the marked clothes had a particular meaning to those who wore them, and to those who saw them, denoting a difference with usual attire.



Figure 5. *La processione dei Bianchi* Fresco (detail)

While the majority of Bianchi participants wore a red cross somewhere on their white garments, other groups were marked out more particularly. Priests and members of the clergy wore special robes and accoutrements so that they could be recognised.⁴⁴ This group wore their usual amices, albs, stoles and maniples over their Bianchi attire.⁴⁵ Indeed, in the Vallo di Nera fresco, priests are immediately recognisable not only from their stoles, but also from their tonsures, revealed by their lowered hoods (Figure 5). This image shows the clergy in one of their key roles during the processions: leading the singing. They also led processions, preached and said daily masses for Bianchi participants. Thus, it is unsurprising that this group marked themselves out among the throng of white so that they could perform their duties.

Other specific groups were identifiable in the processions due to the markings they added to their white garments. These were usually regional signifiers. For example, Bianchi participants from Pistoia would sew a scallop shell to their robes.⁴⁶ This symbol of St James, the patron of Pistoia, added an extra devotional dimension. Dominici also reports a Lucchese group who had a *croce di stagno* sewn onto their shoulders.⁴⁷ The chronicler does not explain the symbolism, and so the precise purpose of these tin crosses is ambiguous, although it is

likely that it was a local symbol, as Dominici can identify them as Lucchese without further explanation. Such local additions were therefore not unique to a single location, but the modification demonstrated a regional identity for the group wearing it.

While these small signs detract from the universality of the white garments, they demonstrate the importance of regional identity for the Bianchi participants. This was not considered problematic by Dominici, who instead commended the deep devotion of those wearing multiple symbols. Incorporating local elements into the Bianchi attire in this way therefore ensured the devotion and participation of individuals, connecting the novel processions to something more usual. Indeed, there were annual processions in Pistoia for St James in the final week of July. The scallop shell combined with the Bianchi white robes and red cross joined the intercession of the Virgin with that of St James, providing renewed hope of preventing the foretold outbreak of plague.

Conclusion

Wearing white was the most universally accepted and adopted tenet of the Bianchi processions throughout the spread of the movement. Participants wore whatever they could that was white, and often marked the white with a red cross, and sometimes also a local devotional symbol. The white attire seems to have been an ideal; a universalising factor making everyone who joined in look the same. In practice, this was not the case, as different individuals wore certain items and marked their garments in different ways. Nevertheless, there was a sense of adhering to the Bianchi practices in all of these attempts to wear white robes to imitate the Virgin of the *tre pani* story. All of these individual methods of dressing in white were brought together to perform the collective Bianchi devotions.

However, wearing white was not as neat in real terms as the frescoes suggest. People wore white cloth in whatever form they could get their hands on. Some individuals were more identifiable, especially members of the clergy. They wore elements of their clerical regalia over their white Bianchi robes to make themselves distinguishable. While this did not maintain the universality and uniformity of the processions, it demonstrates the crucial role they played in the processions, serving a practical purpose. Other variations marked out groups from particular locations, such as those from Pistoia who wore the scallop of St James.

Nevertheless, the instruction to wear white is the only regulation that features in all sources which describe the Bianchi devotions. Indeed, when considered among the gamut of other rules suggested for Bianchi participants, it seems that this was the most important one to follow. This is reinforced by the names for the processions across the sources, as well as in pictorial evidence. We cannot suppose that the Bianchi participants wore white because they knew that previous religious revivals had worn the colour, as these events may have fallen out of collective memory. However, the connection between white and renewal remained strong. While the Bianchi participants may not have been emulating any previous popular devotion, similar themes were still continued: peace, penitence and the white garments.

Once the devotions had finished, people went back to their ordinary lives. There were some local attempts to commemorate the Bianchi devotions, such as a confraternity in Pistoia and a Bianchi crucifix being enshrined at Lucca. However, this was very much a temporary movement to combat a specific threat. Wearing white was a crucial part of the devotional activities of those who participated in the Bianchi processions in 1399. The various types of clothing and customisations discussed showed individual circumstances, sex and regional identity, allowing everyone to participate in the devotions. This did not detract from the universality of the processions however, demonstrating instead how different strands of society and people from different locations interpreted the regulations they needed to follow to prevent the outbreak of plague. White garments were not unique to the Bianchi devotions, but it was a significant factor of cohesion across most of the participants in the processions. It

was a relatively simple rule to follow, and the fact that even white handkerchiefs were used meant that it was accessible to a wide spectrum of the population. The variations represent small pockets of regional differences which did not mark out particular groups, but rather local preferences. Wearing white was the most ubiquitous requirement of participants in the Bianchi processions, but was interpreted in a variety of different ways to ensure universal, yet diverse, participation.

Notes

¹ For more on the whole spread of the Bianchi devotions, see Daniel Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Giampaolo Tognetti, 'Sul Moto dei Bianchi nel 1399', *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano*, 78 (1967), 205-343.

² Giovanni Sercambi, *Le Croniche di Giovanni Sercambi, Lucchese*, ed. by Salvatore Bonghi, 3 vols (Lucca: Tipografia Giusti, 1892).

³ Lucca, Archivio di Stato, MS 107; Ottavio Banti and Maria Cristiani Testi, *Le Illustrazioni delle croniche nel codice lucchese* (Genova: Basile, 1978).

⁴ E.g. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS Riccardiana 2049; Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, MS Ashburnham 1715; Pistoia, Biblioteca Forteguerriana, MS B.155.

⁵ Luca Dominici, *Cronache di ser Luca Dominici: cronaca della venuta dei Bianchi e della moria 1399-1400*, ed. by Carlo Gigliotti (Pistoia: Cav. Alberto Pacinotti, 1933).

⁶ Frank W. Morton, 'The Bianchi Movement of 1399: Its Individual Characteristics and Chronology' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1973), p. 191.

⁷ This is my translation and summary of the *tre pani* story, including the narrative points common to most versions of the story. This story also appears in prose in e.g. Sercambi, pp. 290-4 and Dominici, pp. 50-7.

⁸ For example Angelo Cerboni, 'Cronaca Latina', in *Due Cronache quattrocentesche*, ed. by Angelo Ascani (Città di Castello: Istituto Professionale di Stato per l'Industria e l'Artigianato, 1966), pp. 1-56 (p. 15-17) and the *tre pani fresco* in Church of San Paolo, Poggio Mirteto (Lazio) (Figure 1).

⁹ Dominici, p. 53.

¹⁰ This is my translation and summary of Dominici, p. 57; Sercambi, pp. 302-3. This story has biblical precedents, for example in the Apocalypse (Revelation 5), where the scroll with seven seals is opened by one who is worthy to do so; this idea of worthiness is retained with the unopenable book.

¹¹ Dominici, pp. 169-70.

¹² Banti and Cristiani Testi, pp. 186-9.

¹³ For example Giotto's *Presentation of the Virgin* in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.

¹⁴ Michel Pastoureau, *Bleu: histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000), pp. 50-1.

¹⁵ In addition to being a vehicle for the origin stories, preaching was a consistent feature throughout the devotions. It was performed by various individuals, as well as members of holy orders. For example, the bishop of Fiesole accompanied a group of Bianchi that left Florence on 28 August 1399 to preach each day for them.

¹⁶ David Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia: The Social History of an Italian Town, 1200-1430* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 105.

¹⁷ 'Cronaca del Conte Francesco di Montemarte e Corbara', in *Ephemerides urbevetanae dal cod. vaticano urbinate 1745*, ed. by Lodovico Antonio Muratori (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1903), pp. 211-68; Jacobus Delayto, 'Annales Estenses', in *Johannis Ser Cambii Auctoris synchroni Chronicon de rebus gestis Lucensium ab anno 1400 usque ad annum 1409*, ed. by Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1723), pp. 792-1036.

¹⁸ Cerboni, p. 19.

¹⁹ Giannozzo Manetti, *Historia Pistoriensis* (Florence: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2011), 4, p. 218.

²⁰ Giorgio Stella, *Annales Genuenses ab anno 1298 usque ad finem anni 1409 deducti et per I. Stellam ejus fratrem continuati usque ad annum 1435* (Bologna: Zacinelli, 1975), p. 236.

²¹ Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People (Book XII)*, ed. and trans. by James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 252.

²² Baptism usually occurred at Easter, so the connection to the Bianchi devotions is symbolic.

²³ Sercambi, p. 300.

²⁴ Franco Sacchetti, *Il libro delle rime*, ed. by Franca B. Agno (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1990), p. 470.

²⁵ Emilia Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe 1090-1500* (Oxford: Routledge 2013), p. 63, 297.

²⁶ Andrew Jotischky, *The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and their Pasts in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 51-64.

²⁷ Umberto Nicolai, *Le Confraternite della città di Lucca, sorte tra il 12. e il 18. secolo* (Lucca: Azienda Grafica Lucchese, 1968).

²⁸ Gary Dickson, 'The Flagellants of 1260 and the Crusades', *Journal of Medieval History*, 15 (1989), 227-67 (p. 228).

²⁹ Tognetti, p. 339.

³⁰ Delaruelle, p. 132.

³¹ For more on confraternities, see John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³² Dominici, p. 75.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 151, 220.

³⁴ Banti and Cristiani Testi, pp. 186-204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 196 (Image 468), 197 (Image 467). Self-flagellation was not particularly prevalent among Bianchi participants and was confined to specific, ritualised situations.

³⁶ E.g. *Ibid.* p. 199 (Image 469). While Dominici suggests that women should have their heads covered, Sercambi's text does not mention this.

³⁷ Dominici, p. 130.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³⁹ This *lauda* is from a collection of Bianchi songs from a collection in Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana, MS Chigiano L.VII.266, fols. 18^r-19^v, transcribed in Bernard Toscani, *Le Laude dei Bianchi contenute nel Codice Vaticano Chigiano L. VII 266 Edizione Critica* (Florence: Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1979) pp. 61-89.

⁴⁰ Morton, p. 187.

⁴¹ For example, Banti and Cristiani Testi, pp. 192-6 (Images 459-65); p. 199 (Image 469).

⁴² Stella, p. 238.

⁴³ AAVV, *La Sostanza dell'Effimero: Gli abitanti degli Ordini religiosi in Occidente* (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 2000), p. 94.

⁴⁴ Dominici p. 74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 221.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

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Biography

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