

THE FLAGELLANTS OF THE THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH
CENTURIES: THEIR RISE AND DECLINE

By

KEITH CHARLES PATTERSON

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Missouri Southern State College

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Thesis Approved:

W. H. H. H. H.

Thesis Adviser

John Paul Bischoff

W. F. Jones

Robert M. Spaulding

Norman W. Duban

Dean of Graduate College

PREFACE

In the year 1260 a mass penitential movement began in the Italian city of Perugia. Thousands of people, known as Flagellants, whipped themselves publicly in a desperate attempt to ward off the judgment of an angry God. Ninety years later, in Germany, the Sect of the Flagellants was revived in an unprecedented thrust of enthusiasm. The thirteenth century penitents were greeted with Church approval and popular veneration. The Flagellants of the next century were branded heretics and persecuted out of existence. By examining contemporary social, political and religious conditions, this study evaluates the reasons for the rise and decline of the Flagellant movement.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Fuller descriptions of the works of reference and collections of sources listed below will be found in the body of the Bibliography.

BARB	Bulletin de l'Academie royale de Belgique
CCF	Corpus Chronicorum Flandriae
CMH	Cambridge Medieval History
FRG	Fontes rerum Germanicarum
MGHS	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores
RS	Rolls Series

CHAPTER I

THE WORLD OF THE FLAGELLANTS

Introduction

For almost one hundred years, beginning in the mid-thirteenth century, the roads of central and eastern Europe were sporadically clogged with groups of penitents known as Flagellants. Those persons, men, women and children, publicly whipped themselves as part of a penitential pilgrimage that frequently lasted a month or more. They did so in a desperate attempt to ward off the wrath of an angry God, who they felt was about to put an end to their world.

Modern man cannot but be repelled by the vision of such useless brutality. Even among contemporaries the Flagellant movement was regarded as exceptional in its force and determination. Yet to dismiss those penitents as mindless fanatics would only underscore a lack of understanding of life during the tumultuous period of the late Middle Ages. An examination of such tortured souls cannot but reveal something of our own reactions under similar conditions.

Originating in Italy, the Flagellants received numerous descriptive designations, often reflective of a trait or action which impressed onlookers. The Italians referred to them as the Battuti (the beaten ones), Disciplinati (the disciplined), Flagellanti (the scourgers) and the Bianchi (the white ones), the last describing

their costume.¹ Following the spread of the movement north of the Alps, the Germans referred to the wandering penitents as die Geissler (the scourgers), Flegler (flailers), and Loissbruder (singing brothers). Latin authors employed such terms as Flagellantes (the beaten), Verberatores (the flogged), Crucifratres (suffering brothers), and Fratres en Albis (white brothers), all descriptive of their mode of penance or clothing.²

Although not immediately obvious, the term "Flagellant" is derived from the Latin verb flagrare, to burn. De Lolme offered an interesting insight in his History of the Flagellants by noting that the Romans often used the phrase "burned by blows" to describe one who had been flogged.³ Similarly, the word Flagellum, a scourge, had its origin in the concept of burning, which describes the sensation produced by the lash.

It must be understood that whipping oneself or one's neighbor was not sufficient to qualify as a Flagellant. People have submitted to flogging for a variety of reasons since ancient times. Herodotus described with some embarrassment the rites of flagellation which occurred during certain Egyptian festivals.⁴ Roman law permitted flogging as a corporal punishment, although it was usually limited to slaves. Even the Christian Church recognized self-flagellation as a valuable penitential practice.⁵ What set the Flagellants of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries apart was their motivation and organization.

The complexity of those two qualities is a major reason why few people have a clear or correct impression of the Flagellants. The Movement encompassed almost a century and spread to many parts of

Europe. To get an accurate picture of a Flagellant band, therefore, it is necessary to specify both time and place. There was no one "typical" Flagellant on which all other Flagellants patterned themselves. The Sect of the Flagellants was constantly evolving to meet the religious and emotional needs of those who joined it.

Although Flagellant bands appeared spasmodically during the entire period, two major outbreaks were most significant. The first occurred in Italy in 1260. The second occurred in Germany and the Netherlands in 1349. Each outburst was in response to seeming disaster. Each drew from a common body of rituals and eschatological tradition. Yet there were fundamental differences which affected the evolutionary pattern of the movement and our perceptions of it.

The Italian Flagellants of 1260 were viewed by most churchmen as politically expedient, morally beneficial, and within the traditions and direction of the Church. Ninety years later the German Flagellants of 1349 were condemned as heretics and persecuted out of existence. By evaluating changing social, political and economic conditions, as well as regional attitudes toward the organized Church, this thesis will attempt to trace the degeneration of the Flagellant movement from its inception in Italy to its demise in Germany.

The Flagellants can be understood only as products of their age. It is necessary, therefore, to briefly sketch the dominant religious and social attitudes of the period. Of paramount importance was the saturation of daily life with religion. Individual and social activities were inextricably linked with conceptions of faith. Objects and actions, however trivial, were often seen as connected to Christ or salvation. This does not mean that the people of the

Middle Ages were, as a group, unusually good or holy. They were, however, permeated with the forms of religion, at times to such an extent that many lost sight of the difference between what was spiritual and what was temporal.

The desire to sanctify every aspect of daily life was evident in the mystic Henry Suso (1295-1366). At table he ate three-quarters of an apple in the name of the Trinity. The last quarter he ate in commemoration of "the love with which the heavenly Mother gave her tender child Jesus an apple to eat." This last quarter was not consumed after Christmas, because Suso reasoned the infant Jesus was then too young to eat apples. Similarly he drank in five swallows because of the five wounds of Christ.⁶

This craving for some higher significance was not limited to ascetics. The wood cutter trudging home with a heavy load pictured the suffering Christ carrying the cross. The baker and the wine maker saw in their products the body and blood of Christ. Preachers were known to stand a quarter of an hour in silence, arms extended in the form of a cross. So intune was the soul with every phase of Christ's life that a blind woman doing the wash took the tub for the manger and the washhouse for the stable.⁷

The blurring of the line which divided religious thought from worldly concern was not without its dangers. If all details of ordinary life were raised to a sacred level, it followed that all that was holy had sunk to the commonplace. It thus became possible to offer indulgences as prizes for a lottery.⁸ This familiarity with things sacred not only cheapened an ever increasing number of religious observances, but opened the possibility of direct contact

between the Creator and the created in times of stress. Such lay intercession was a hallmark of all Flagellant groups.

The mode of penance adopted by the Flagellants was also an outgrowth of the times. As noted earlier, religious flagellation had long been accorded special favor by the Church, especially as practised in monasteries and convents. There, monks and nuns, impressed by the spiritual value of asceticism and overwhelmed by the suffering of Christ, resorted to flagellation as a means of subduing the evil tendencies of the body. This mode of penance gained popularity in the eleventh century through the practices of the monk Dominic Loricatus and the Cardinal of Ostia, Peter Damian. The latter proposed substitution of self flagellation for the reading of Psalms, making a thousand strokes equal to ten Psalms.⁹

According to the Chronicles of Monte Cassino, Saint Dominique L'Encuirasse, who died in Naples in 1031, advocated a penitential cycle of 100 years.¹⁰ During the first year the penitent was to lash himself 3,000 times. For 1,000 of those blows he was to sing ten Psalms of at least 150 verses. After five years the penitent received the lash 15,000 times and pronounced well over 7,000 verses of scripture. By the end of the cycle the penitent would have received an incredible 300,000 self-inflicted blows.

The religious fervor of the monasteries was transmitted to the general public by the Mendicant Orders which emerged during the first half of the thirteenth century. These monks, Dominicans and Franciscans, roamed the countryside preaching repentance and pardon. In 1223, popularly known as the "Alleluia Year", Brother Benedict aroused the people of Parma to join his spiritual exercises, proclaiming the

phrase laudato e benedetto e glorificato sia lo padre. To this the people answered first with lo figlio, then lo spiritu santo.¹¹ This was followed by three vigorous "Alleluias", hence the name of the year.

A similar movement was initiated by the Dominican Giovanni da Vincenza. At the request of Gregory IX, this monk went from town to town, proclaiming peace and brotherhood to all. At one point in 1223 an assemblage of 400,000 bishops, nobles and commoners gathered outside of Verona to hear his plea. So moved were they that the kiss of peace was exchanged between enemies, and tensions among the cities of the plain of the Adige reduced.¹² Such fervor, combined with the penitential practices of the monasteries, helped form the mental attitude necessary for widespread public flagellation.

One of the most conspicuous expressions of piety in the thirteenth century was the pilgrimage to holy shrines. This was particularly true in Italy, whose warm climate encouraged such outdoor activities. Participants in these public processions chanted litanies and sang hymns as they went, and provided both inspiration and entertainment to those with whom they came in contact. The movement of Flagellant bands from city to city can thus be seen as an extension of this religious tradition.

The brutality of the Flagellants is somewhat less shocking when seen as part of the physical and emotional harshness of the times. As noted by Huizinga, the last centuries of the Middle Ages were notable for their contrast between light and dark, suffering and joy, illness and health.¹³ Calamities and poverty were more devastating than at present, and almost impossible to guard against.

A premature death haunted even the educated and well born. For all but a few, life was uncomfortable, uncertain, and filled with real and imagined terrors.

The violent tenor of life was evidenced by frequent public executions. Far from providing any moral lesson, such spectacles served primarily as entertainment for the masses. For the more affluent there was an endless succession of armed tournaments. Although discouraged by the Church for their needless brutality, these private wars were extremely popular and considered good training for life as a noble.¹⁴ Society tended toward extremes, fluctuating between tenderness and cruelty, between asceticism and attachment for this world, and between the fear of hell and the anticipation of heaven.

The age that spawned the Flagellants was weighed down with melancholy. A feeling of impending calamity hung over Europe. The medieval mind was haunted by sorcerers and devils, scarcity and pestilence, and above all by the obsession that the end of the world was near. Though no longer official doctrine after the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Christian apocalyptic tradition continued to exert an enormous attraction, especially among the underprivileged, the oppressed or the unbalanced.

For medieval man the drama of the Last Days was not a phantasy or obscure prophecy, but a promise that would at any moment be fulfilled. Citing the Book of Revelation many Christians saw themselves as the Chosen People. They alone would pave the way for and inherit the Millennium, that final thousand years of peace before the final coming of Christ. French, German and Byzantine rulers represented themselves as the Emperor of the Last Days, the one who would preside

over the approaching Golden Age.¹⁵ Likewise any ruler or Pope regarded as a tyrant was labeled as the Antichrist. This ominous figure was to reign over a last period of turmoil.

People were constantly on the watch for signs that would mark the beginning of the last period of troubles. Because these signs included corrupt rulers, civil unrest, war, famine, plague and comets, generation after generation lived in expectation of the Second Coming of the Kingdom of Saints. The emotional strain thus produced was a major factor in the emergence of the Flagellants of both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Finally, the prevailing intellectual attitude of the Middle Ages held that every occurrence, whether natural or man made, could be explained in terms of an intervening divine providence.¹⁶ Misfortune was usually interpreted as divine chastisement. To avoid further punishment man had to demonstrate remorse and expiate past offenses. Given this premise, it was not surprising that when faced with complete destruction, certain elements of society responded with the most dramatic form of public humiliation at their command.

FOOTNOTES

¹R. Margaret Volker, "The Flagellants of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries" (Unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Library, Fordham University, 1935.), p. 1-2.

²Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol. 5 (New York, 1907), p. 502.

³Jean Louis de Lolme, The History of the Flagellants, Otherwise of Religious Flagellants Among Different Nations and Especially Christians (London, 1783), p. 58.

⁴George Ryley Scott, The History of Corporal Punishment (London, 1938), p. 126.

⁵Dom Louis Gougaud, Devotional and Ascetic Practices in the Middle Ages (London, 1927), p. 179.

⁶J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (London, 1970), p. 136.

⁷Ibid., p. 173.

⁸Ibid., p. 140.

⁹F. W. Bussell, Religious Thought and Heresy in the Middle Ages (London, 1918), p. 787.

¹⁰M. Jean-Baptiste Thiers, Critique De L'Histoire Des Flagellans, et Justification De L'Usage Des Disciplines Volontaires (Paris, 1703), p. 293.

¹¹Translation is "Praise, honor and glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Volker, p. 17.

¹²The number of people in attendance is obviously exaggerated. Volker, p. 18.

¹³Huizinga, p. 1.

¹⁴James Westfall Thompson, Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages, Vol. 1 (New York, 1966), p. 498.

¹⁵Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium (London, 1957), p. 20.

¹⁶R. G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (London, 1956), p. 53.

CHAPTER II

THE FLAGELLANTS OF 1260-1261

During the last decade of the twelfth century apocalyptic expectations in Italy were raised to a fever pitch by the writings of the Cistercian reformer, Joachim of Flora. This abbot and recluse became convinced that the Scriptures contained a hidden meaning which, once discovered, would enable him to foresee the final stage of history. No less than three Popes, Lucius III, Urban III and Clement III, encouraged Joachim to record the divine revelations with which he claimed to have been blessed.¹ To this task he devoted the last years of his life, leaving upon his death in 1202 a new prophetic system that would haunt Europe for the next half century.

Based on his interpretation of the Scriptures, especially of the Book of Revelation, Joachim envisioned history as an ascent through three stages. Each successive stage was presided over by one of the members of the Trinity.² Thus the first stage was the Age of the Father, the second the Age of the Son, and the third would be the Age of the Holy Spirit. Each age was preceded by a period of preparation. The first such time of expectation had lasted from Adam to Abraham. The second incubation period extended from Elijah to Christ. The preparation for the third and final stage had begun with St. Benedict and was nearly finished by the time Joachim wrote his prophecies. He saw as imminent the advent of the Age of the Holy Spirit.

The Abbot of Flora made such a prediction based on St. Matthew's account that forty-two generations had separated Adam from Jesus.³ Having equated one generation with thirty years, Joachim placed the beginning of the Last Days between the years 1200 and 1260.⁴ A steady building of tensions resulted, for Joachim was in agreement with earlier Apocalyptic tradition that the end would be accompanied by widespread suffering and unrest. As the century neared its midpoint, deteriorating social and political conditions in Italy gave credibility to the Joachite tradition.

Among the first to apply Joachim's commentaries to the realities of the times were the Spiritual Franciscans,⁵ a vigorous but controversial wing of that mendicant order. They began anew the search for the Antichrist, and settled on the imposing figure of Emperor Frederick II. As leader of the Ghibellines he had proved a formidable opponent of the Roman Church. Soon others, notably the well-traveled chronicler, Brother Salimbene, voiced similar opinions concerning the nature of Frederick's mission in Italy. Himself an active supporter of the Papacy, Salimbene believed that "in the Emperor Frederick all the mysteries of iniquity would be fulfilled."⁶

The unexpected death of Frederick II in 1250 dealt a severe blow to those who viewed 1260 as the apocalyptic year. It deprived the German Joachites of their Emperor of the Last Days, the one who would lead them to victory over the papacy, and the Italian Joachites of their Antichrist. Frederick's successors, Conrad and Conradin, the last legitimate members of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, were relatively weak rulers unable to effectively challenge the power of the Pope.

Despite the decline of Hohenstaufen power, the wars waged

between the Emperor and the Papacy had left Italy in a shambles.

Brother Salimbene recorded the following observations:

In the neighborhood of Parma and Reggio and Modena and Cremona, men could neither plow nor sow nor reap nor till vineyards nor gather the vintage nor dwell in the villages. Nevertheless, hard by the town walls men tilled the fields under guard of the city militia, who were mustered quarter by quarter according to the number of the gates. Armed soldiers thus guarded the peasants at their work all day long; for so it must needs be, by reason of the ruffians and bandits and robbers who were multiplied beyond measure.⁷

He cursed the cruelty of the age with this list of grievances:

And all evils were multiplied on the earth, and the wild beasts and fowls increased beyond measure... they found no beasts in the villages to devour according to their wont; neither sheep nor lambs, for the villages were burned with fire. Wherefore the wolves gathered together in nightly packs around the city moats, howling dismally for exceeding anguish of hunger; and they crept into the cities by night and devoured men and women and children who slept under the porticoes or in wagons ... This curse of war invaded the whole of the Romagna in the days when I dwelt there.⁸

As a result of the ravages of war, 1258 had been a year of famine in Italy. The following year was cursed with plague.

Next year a great pestilence fell upon men and women... This curse began in Passion-week, so that in the whole Province of Bologna the Friars Minor could not hold their services on Palm Sunday... And this lasted many months: whereof three hundred and more died in Borgo San Domino, and in Milan and Florence many thousands; nor did men toll their bells, lest the sick should be afraid.⁹

It is little wonder that the monk Justin of Padua recorded in his annals for August of 1260 the tortured phrase "O infelix humana conditio, et nescia futurorum".¹⁰

Even as the power of the Hohenstaufens was coming to an inglorious end, resulting in the uncertain period of the Great Interregnum,

1254-1273, a new enemy of the papal party appeared:

King Manfred, the illegitimate son of the Emperor Frederick, who usurped the Kingdom of Sicily and Apulia and by his own authority placed the crown on his head.¹¹

Manfred's appearance in 1258 in the role of tyrant and papal antagonist, as illustrated by the following selection, revived the chiliastic expectations of an oppressed population.

Poi che lu Re Manfredo venne in signoria
E contra della Ecclesia conforza e tirandia.¹²

Even before his coronation in 1258, Manfred had begun a policy of expansion designed to realize Frederick II's dream for domination of all of Italy. While remaining neutral in the war between Venice and Genoa, he renewed their privileges in the Regno, gaining the friendship of both. He also negotiated with the central Italian towns, and appointed a vicar for the March of Ancona and the Duchy of Spoleto. The defeat of Thomas of Savoy also placed western Lombardy within Manfred's sphere of influence.¹³

In May of 1259 Siena, a traditional foe of Florence, accepted the overlordship of Manfred. In response, Manfred sent German cavalry to strengthen the cities' forces, and to secure his position in Tuscany. Thus enforced, the Ghibelline forces moved against the Guelf city of Florence. Florence was powerful and well led, and had only recently received the support of Guelf nobles who had fled Siena. However, a sizeable contingent of Ghibelline sympathizers had left the city under the able leadership of Farinata degli Uberti to enlist in the service of the Siennese.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Florentines were ill prepared to deal effectively with the German forces in the open field.

On September 4, 1260 at Montaperto the Florentine forces were overwhelmed and slaughtered in great numbers by the victorious Ghibellines. One witness estimated that two hundred thousand men were killed in battle, another one hundred thousand were taken prisoner, and that more than eight thousand died in prison.¹⁵ Although these figures were obviously inflated, the Guelf disaster was real. Ten thousand of Florence's thirty-three thousand soldiers had been killed, another twenty thousand captured.¹⁶ Guelf nobles went into exile and the government was overthrown. In control of Tuscany, Manfred appointed vicars general who ruled Florence until 1266.

Even by medieval standards, the fifth decade of the thirteenth century had been an extraordinarily cruel period. In southern Italy, Manfred had made good his threat to terrorize the Guelfs, while in the north his allies had laid waste a countryside already made barren by Frederick II in his struggle against the papacy. Such devastation had resulted in famine in 1258, which was followed by a strange plague that killed thousands. When set against the background of the Joachite prophecies it appeared to many Christians that the end of an era was indeed at hand.

It was at this point, in the fall of 1260, following the battle of Montaperto, that the Flagellants made their appearance. Contemporary accounts disagreed as to the exact date, but all conceded that the first outbreak occurred in the city of Perugia.¹⁷ Located in Umbria near the border of Tuscany, this Guelf town had not only suffered at the hands of the Ghibellines, but was undergoing an internal struggle between the magnati and the popolani for control of the city. According to the Ordinances of 1260, the popolo, the political party

of the popoloni, was defined as including everyone but nobles, knights, their sons, judges and notaries.¹⁸ In actual practice the popolo was dominated by the guilds and wealthy business men.

This conflict had plagued Perugia since at least 1214, and was part of a larger pattern of social unrest that affected many Italian cities.¹⁹ As noted above, the year 1260 had witnessed a renewal of the conflict. A new series of laws was passed against the magnates, forcing many into exile. The Ordinances were designed to weaken the social strength of the magnates and their ties with influential members of the popolo.²⁰ Under pain of decapitation, no man could become another's vassal. Nor could any member of the popolo discuss business transactions with magnates if the arrangements were being debated by the city government.

The new laws were also intended to end the violent factionalism that had been disrupting Perugia. All societies except those of the guilds, judges and notaries were suppressed, and iron workers were forbidden to make weapons. In October of 1260 the popolo regime passed special legislation aimed at preventing public disturbances.²¹ Violations carried a fine of fifty pounds for a knight and twenty pounds for a popolono. Anyone entering the city from another district during a period of disorder was to lose his right foot.

Approximately one month after those ordinances were passed, Perugia became the center of a major penitential movement that attracted thousands of distraught, emotional pilgrims. The streets were filled with wailing Flagellants, disrupting normal city life. It was a disturbance to end all disturbances. Yet no attempt was made to stop the penitents or curb their volatile penitential exercises. This

suggests that the Flagellant movement had the support of the ruling popolo government and the sympathy of the middle class.

Parallel to the thirteenth century development of the popolo regimes was the dominant position achieved within the government by the guilds. City consuls were elected by guild officials and formed at mid-century the powerful executive council, the Consoli delle Arti.²² These guilds played an active role in organizing Flagellant groups and after 1261 provided a model on which permanent Flagellant brotherhoods were founded. This development, moreover, was not limited to Perugia. In Reggio penitents marched under the banners of the guilds of the city.²³

Despite the prominent position played by the guilds and the implied support by the middle class, St. Justin of Padua recorded that all classes of people, young and old, were seized by the epidemic of remorse that struck Perugia. The venerable monk left the following graphic account of those early penitents:

In the course of that year (1260) when the whole of Italy was defiled by infamy and guilt, a certain sudden and unheard of remorse invaded first Perugia... the fear of the Lord came upon them so that nobles as well as commoners, old and young, even children of five years, naked to the waist, went unashamed through the streets of the city in procession two by two. Each had a leather whip in his hand and with groans and wailings struck themselves so sharply on the shoulders that they bled, and pouring forth tears... they implored, while singing sad songs, the mercy of God and the help of His mother... And not so only in the day but even into the night with lighted candles, in coldest winter, hundreds and thousands even tens of thousands went around through the cities and churches and humbly prostrated themselves before the altar, the priests preceding them with crosses and banners.²⁴

Female penitents whipped themselves in private to preserve their

modesty.

The impact of this public penance on the general population was astonishing. Criminals confessed to their crimes; robbers restored their booty; usurers gave up the interest on their loans; enemies were reconciled; and feuds were forgotten. The Monk of Padua left little doubt that the Flagellants were responsible for creating a moral uplift.

Hard hearts were moved by their tones of lamentation and the eyes of the obstinate were moved to tears... Jails were opened, prisoners freed, and the exiled returned. Men and women did great works of mercy, as if they feared the Almighty would consume them with fire...²⁵

From Perugia the movement "spread as rapidly as an eagle pouncing upon its prey".²⁶ Two routes, north and south can be discerned. To the south, the Flagellants used the valley of Spoleto to reach Rome, where they were enthusiastically greeted by the populace. Such was not the reception the penitents received as they proceeded further south toward the territory of Manfred. The often quoted Justin of Padua clearly recorded that King Manfred

vigorously prohibited the use of any form of penance throughout his rich kingdom, promising a cruel death to violators, for he feared their progress might hinder his tyrannical rule.²⁷

To the north twenty thousand penitents marched from Modena to Bologna, reaching that city in early October. By the end of that month Flagellants were present in Parma and Reggio, where "the men made banners for each quarter of the town, and held processions around the city."²⁸ In Parma, Brother Salimbene related that the devotions lasted for many days and that

if anyone would not scourge himself, he was held to

be worse than the Devil, and all pointed at him as a notorious man and a limb of Satan.²⁹

Only one man blocked the northern movement. This was Pallavicino, who was Lord of Cremona and an ally of Manfred. A staunch opponent of the Guelfs, he ordered

gallows to be set up by the bank of the River Po, in order that if any came into the city with this manner of scourging he might die on the gibbet.³⁰

Because Pallavicino was known to be a man of his word, the Podesta of Parma forbade the crossing of the Po by the Flagellants, although many youths were ready to die for the faith.

In those areas receptive to the Flagellants a pattern of expansion was established. Overcome with guilt and a sense of impending doom, penitents of one town traveled to the next, where they performed their public flagellation. Moved by the humbling display, onlookers spontaneously took up the pilgrimage and spread the movement to a third city. The original penitents thereafter returned home, their duty done. There was no observable central organization or hierarchy of leaders. This mode of transfer was peculiar to Italy and underwent substantial reorganization and formalization north of the Alps.

Alexander IV, who had been elevated to the papal throne in 1254, viewed the epidemic of Flagellants with mixed emotions. Pressed by his enemies, he desperately needed a mechanism to rally the Guelf cities to his cause. That the Flagellants exerted a rejuvenating force over those beleaguered cities was undeniable. There was also the possibility that the emotional appeal of the Flagellants would influence some of the Ghibellines to join his faction. It has been

suggested by Forsteman that the bishops encouraged penitential processions not merely for religious reasons, but to gain adherents to the papal cause.³¹

Alexander was also faced with evaluating the legitimacy of the religious aspects of the Flagellants. They had the support of the lower clergy and many bishops, and were in general content to act out their penances under the supervision of the Church. They also were within the traditional church framework that lauded voluntary corporal punishment.³² What disturbed Alexander was the specter of the masses of common people appealing directly to God, without the intercession of the organized Church.³³ Such a development would weaken the authority of the Church and, due to the individualistic approach, make orthodoxy difficult to maintain. He therefore gave the movement only his tacit approval, and waited to see if the Flagellants stepped beyond the bounds of true piety.

No one individual can be identified as having sparked the Flagellants of Perugia into action. Because of their support for the use of the lash as a means of doing penance, both Anthony of Padua and Peter Damian have been named as originators of the movement. They, however, had been dead nearly two hundred years by 1260. More astute scholars have pointed to the obscure Umbrian hermit, Raniero Fasani, who was the leader of a local penitential brotherhood termed the Disciplinati di Gesu Cristo.³⁴ Such a conclusion was based on the fourteenth century legend narrated by Professor Leon Kern and found in Volker.

In 1258 there lived in Perugia, the Brother Rainier Fasani. For more than eighteen years in deepest secret he struck himself so rudely that the image

of the Virgin before which he stood began to cry. He resolved to go and preach the gospel... Rainier then betook himself to the Church of San Fiorenzo. Even though the doors were closed, he entered and before the main altar commenced to flagellate himself... The night following these events, while he was performing his usual exercises, Rainier saw appear, escorted by two children, a young girl, who disappeared after having deposited a letter on the table of his cell. Then appeared St. Bevignate who explained the vision. "The young girl", he said, "is the Virgin, the two children, St. Michael and St. Gabriel. God, irritated by the turpitude of men, wishes to destroy the world; but conceding to the prayers of His mother, He has decided to accord to sinners a respite during which they will be able to do penance and to inflict on themselves the discipline... Go tomorrow to the Bishop of Perugia and take to him this letter."

The next day the bishop celebrated (Mass) on the letter... and it opened immediately. He hastened to read it to the people assembled... Immediately the Perugians followed Rainier and went naked as they scourged themselves. Soon there was not one who remained out of this movement.³⁵

However appealing, the story was written in the wrong century and can not be substantiated by contemporary accounts.

Due probably to a similarity in names, the Blessed Rainier De Borgo San Sepolcro, a member of the Order of Friars Minor, has also been identified as the originator of the Flagellant movement.³⁶ The fact remains, however, that chroniclers of the period did not provide a list of names from which to choose. In the words of St. Justin of Padua, the penance was not instituted by any authoritative person, "but commenced from the simplest people whose footsteps both learned and unlearned people suddenly followed."³⁷

Despite his ban, Pallavicino, Lord of Cremona, was unable to halt the advance of the Flagellants northward. In 1261 Ellenhard of Argenta noted that the Flagellants of Tuscany had passed through Lombardy and entered German areas. He described their entrance into

his city.

They entered Argenta as one procession, walking two by two, beating their naked backs; more than 1200 were at that place before they ceased.³⁸

Those living north of the Alps were not unfamiliar with the Joachite tradition and no doubt shared the fears of the Italians regarding the end of the world. However, the transalpine area had not witnessed the devastation so prominent further south. The only major threat to that area came from the advancing Tartars, as noted by the nameless chronicler of Erphordens:

In the year 1261... by the order of Pope Alexander a great meeting was convened at Maguncia, attended by lord Archbishop Wernheus and all the other archbishops to deal with the Tartars and other dangers, in order that the enemies of the Church might be resisted by the words of the cross, the prayers of the faithful, and the strength of arms...³⁹

The absence of impending disaster did not prevent the Germans and others north of the Alps from being infected with the enthusiasm of the Italian penitents. Indeed, the spread of that form of devotion was rapid, extending into the territories of Carinthia, Austria, Bavaria, the Rhineland, Moravia, Bohemia, Hungary and even north into Poland. A Polish chronicler recorded 1260 as the year in which the Flagellants appeared.⁴⁰ He was probably in error since that section of the document was not written until 1378.

Herman of Altaich left in his chronicles a description of a northern band of Flagellants:

From their waist upward their bodies were naked; they had a certain garment covering the lower part of their bodies to the ankle and so as not to be recognized, they walked with their heads and faces covered... they went in twos or threes, preceded by banner and cross; they scourged themselves 33½ days in memory of the years our Lord, Jesus Christ, spent

on earth. Singing about the passion of our Lord, they went in and about the Church, alternately falling to the earth and raising their naked arms to heaven.⁴¹

Standardization of the length of Flagellant processions to thirty three days was an innovation not observed in Italy. It was prompted by the appearance of a "Heavenly Letter" which was revered by German Flagellants of both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. According to a tradition related by Cohn,⁴² a marble tablet had that year (1261) descended upon the altar of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. In a message similar to that delivered to Rainier Fasani, God was said to be angry with men for their pride and blasphemies. Determined to kill every living thing, He had been moved by the appeals of His mother to grant a period of atonement. An angel was dispatched which instructed the faithful to go on a Flagellant procession of $33\frac{1}{2}$ days.

The German Flagellants, as in the case of the Italians, represented all segments of society. Herman of Altarch noted that

at first only the nobles and merchants joined but afterwards the country folk and servants.⁴³

An Austrian source provided more precise information concerning the participants' occupations:

Laborers, bakers and hangmen were evangelized...
Shoemakers were given the penance (flagellation)
by confessors, weavers and carpenters spoke out
and were included in the sacrificial rites.⁴⁴

Germanic chroniclers were impressed by this mixture of people, especially the mingling of rich and poor penitents. Sancrucensis II again stressed that the Flagellant bands contained such diverse elements as soldiers, farmers and servants. Heading the list of

descriptions, however, was the observation that the movement combined "homines pauperes et divas."⁴⁵ The annales of Mellicenses contained the same phrase in the same prominent position.⁴⁶ The emphasis placed on class structure, especially when based on wealth, was more prominent north of the Alps than in the south.

The size of Flagellant groups was smaller than those in Italy and usually numbered between forty and sixty penitents. However, bands in excess of one hundred were not unknown.⁴⁷ Women as well as men participated in the flogging, which again raised questions of propriety. According to the Annales Austriacarum, a solution was reached by having the women perform their penances within the homes of supporters.⁴⁸

Henry of Heimburg concluded that the movement was beneficial, noting that

many of our most noted people came among them with pure intentions and sincere devotions.⁴⁹

Authorities in Carinthia recorded the appearance of a new sect of penitents around the feast of the Nativity and noted that it resulted in the accumulation of many good works, the reconciliation of enemies, and the resolution of much evil.⁵⁰

In January of 1261, five months before his death, Pope Alexander IV withdrew his shaky support of the Flagellants and asked that such devotions be carried out individually and in private. The impact in Italy was minimal, the masses of people for the most part having completed their pilgrimages. In Germany, however, the movement was still popular and well organized. That fact bothered some officials who felt the movement had gone beyond their control. St. Robert of

Salisbury referred to the Flagellants as "secta ignota"⁵¹ and maintained the movement was primarily an Italian one. Others expressed a fear that in their blind zeal the Flagellants would undermine the authority of the Church.⁵² A Polish bishop forbade public flagellation in his diocese and asked the secular princes to enforce the order.⁵³ Albert, bishop of Argenta, threatened to excommunicate violators of his ban.⁵⁴

The Flagellants had not been declared heretics, nor were specific charges brought against them. Yet, as Herman of Altaich noted

because the origin of their authority was not from the chair of Rome... it (the Flagellant movement) began to fade out in a short time.⁵⁵

As with other popular movements aimed at an imitation of Christ and His suffering, the Flagellants had been too religious. Excessive piety on a mass scale was considered by the conservative Church hierarchy to be as dangerous as no piety at all.

Philip Schaff, in his History of the Christian Church, declared that by 1261 in both Italy and Germany "the enthusiasm subsided as suddenly as it was enkindled."⁵⁶ This was not the case in either location. Although large bands of penitents no longer clogged the highways, Flagellant societies continued to operate both north and south of the Alps. No inquisition appeared to persecute adherents as did occur in the fourteenth century.

In Italy formally instituted Gilds of Penitents flourished openly in most of the major cities.⁵⁷ Often dedicated to the Virgin Mary, they devoted considerable time and money to caring for the sick and poor. A group in Bologna, known as "The Society of Devotees to the Blessed Virgin Mary" founded a hospital. The Bishop of that

city, Ottaviano degli Ubaddini, appreciated the work so well as to provide funds to aid in the construction. A letter of indulgence issued by Pope Nicholas IV for those involved in the project was dated 1291, indicating the brotherhoods of penitents extended well beyond 1261.⁵⁸

The Italian penitential organizations were kept together by a list of rules designed to guide the spiritual lives of their members and to render aid to the community. The statutes, which were revived a century later, were prefaced by the following paragraph.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen. Here are the ordinances, made and composed for the leader and guardians of the Society of Devotion of the city of Bologna, to the honor and reverence of our Lord, Jesus Christ and to the Blessed Mary Virgin, His mother, to the glory of souls, and to the permanent continuance of the Catholic faith, and to the good, peaceful stability of the community of Bologna in the year of our Lord 1260.⁵⁹

Such penitential organizations were severely orthodox in their religious opinions and enjoyed recognition by both secular and ecclesiastic authorities. Far from being moribund or outlawed, these Italian guilds were within the mainstream of medieval religious life. The Dominican chronicler Pipinus was thus premature in lamenting the end of the Flagellant movement in Italy.⁶⁰

Flagellant groups in Germany were not as fortunate. Forced underground through the efforts of Duke Henry of Bavaria and certain bishops,⁶¹ the penitential societies assumed an air of bitterness. This animosity was directed especially against the clergy, and had been evident even before the ban on public flagellation:

The penitents were stirred up in secret against the clergy.⁶²

Suspected of heresy and at times of social revolution, the secret Flagellants quickly sank into superstition and senseless brutality. Yet the dress, rituals and even the "Heavenly Letter" were preserved for future generations. It was this tradition upon which the Flagellants of 1349 would draw.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Emile Gebhart, Mystics and Heretics in Italy, tr. Edward Maslin Holme (London, 1922), p. 82.
- ²Cohn, p. 100.
- ³Matthew 1:17.
- ⁴Gebhart, p. 89.
- ⁵Ernest Lee Tuveson, Millennium and Utopia (New York, 1964), p. 19.
- ⁶Brother Salimbene, "Cronica," MGHS, Vol. XXXII, p. 236.
- ⁷Thompson, p. 458.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Salimbene, p. 464.
- ¹⁰The Latin translated is: "O unhappy human condition, and ignorant of the future." (Annales of S. Iustinae Patavini, " MGHS, Vol. XIX, p. 178.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 180.
- ¹²The Italian translated is: "Then came King Manfred unto his dominion; And against the Church with violence and tyranny". (Volker, p. 19).
- ¹³C. W. Previte-Orton, "Italy 1250-1290", GMH, Vol. VI, p. 178.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 182.
- ¹⁵John Friedrich Boehmer, "Minoritae Florentini Gesta Imperatorum," FRG, Vol. IV, p. 655.
- ¹⁶Previte-Orton, p. 182.
- ¹⁷Volker, p. 26.
- ¹⁸Sarah Rubin Blanshei, Perugia 1260-1340: Conflict and Change in a Medieval Italian Urban Society (Philadelphia, 1976), p. 53.

¹⁹Ferdinand Schevill, Medieval and Renaissance Florence, Vol. I (New York, 1961), p. 155; David Herlihy, Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia, The Social History of an Italian Town, 1200-1430 (New Haven, 1967), p. 186.

²⁰Blanshei, p. 63.

²¹Ibid., p. 62.

²²Ibid., p. 7.

²³Salimbene, p. 465.

²⁴"Annales of S. Iustinae of Patavini," p. 179.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Salimbene, p. 464.

²⁷"Annales of S. Iustinae Patavini," p. 180.

²⁸Salimbene, p. 465.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Volker, p. 21.

³²Gougaud, p. 196.

³³G. G. Coulton, From St. Francis to Dante (New York, 1968), p. 192.

³⁴Catholic Encyclopedia, 1913 ed., s.v. "Flagellants," by Leslie A. St. L. Toke.

³⁵Volker, p. 24.

³⁶Leon Kern, "Le Bienheureux Rainier de Borgo San Sepolcro," Revue L'histoire Franciscaine, July-December 1970, p. 234.

³⁷"Annales of St. Iustinae Patavini," p. 179.

³⁸"Ellenhardi Argentinensis Annales," MGHS, Vol. XXIV, p. 202.

³⁹"Chronica Minor Auctore Minorita Erphordiensi," MGHS, Vol. XXIV, p. 202.

⁴⁰"Annales Polonorum," MGHS, Vol. XIX, p. 635.

⁴¹"Hermannii Altahensis Annales," MGHS, Vol. XVII, p. 402.

- ⁴²Cohn, p. 127.
- ⁴³"Hermanni Altahensis Annales," p. 402.
- ⁴⁴"Anonymi Chronicon Rhythmicum," MGHS, Vol. XXV, p. 363.
- ⁴⁵Translation is: "Rich men and poor men." (Continuatio Sancrucensis Secunda," MGHS, Vol. IX, p. 645).
- ⁴⁶"Annales Mellicenses," MGHS, Vol. IX, p. 509.
- ⁴⁷"Continuatio Zwetlensis III," MGHS, Vol. IX, p. 656.
- ⁴⁸"Annales Austriacarum, Continuatio Praedicatorum Vindobonensium," MGHS, Vol. IX, p. 728.
- ⁴⁹Heinrici Heimburg, "Annales," MGHS, Vol XVII, p. 714.
- ⁵⁰"Annales Frisacenses," MGHS, Vol. XXIV, p. 66.
- ⁵¹The Latin translation is: "ignoble group." ("Annales Sancti Rudberti Salisburgenses," MGHS, Vol. IX, p. 795).
- ⁵²"Annales Capituli Cracoviensis," MGHS, Vol. XIX, p. 601.
- ⁵³Basko of Posan, "Chronicon Poloniae," Silesiacarum Rerum Scriptores, Vol. II (Breslau, 1730), p. 98.
- ⁵⁴"Annales Veterocellenses," MGHS, Vol. XVI, p. 43.
- ⁵⁵"Hermanni Altahensis Annales," p. 402.
- ⁵⁶Schaff, p. 878.
- ⁵⁷Coulton, p. 158.
- ⁵⁸Volker, p. 30.
- ⁵⁹Ibid., p. 31.
- ⁶⁰Coulton, p. 158.
- ⁶¹"Hermanni Altahensis Annales," p. 402.
- ⁶²"Anonymi Chronicon Rhythmicum," p. 363.

CHAPTER III

THE FLAGELLANTS OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Except for central and northern Italy, the thirteenth century, especially the first half, had been a period of modest economic gain. This had been accompanied by an anticipation of continued progress. Such rising expectations were shattered, however, around the year 1300, when Europe entered a period first of economic stagnation and then rapid decline. The subsequent hardships lasted for almost two centuries and were instrumental in creating an atmosphere conducive to public despair.

By the fourteenth century western Europe had reached the limits of its productivity.¹ Given existing techniques, food production stabilized at a level barely sufficient to sustain the existing population. Any disaster, whether natural or man made, meant widespread famine and death. Unfortunately, the century was beset with such catastrophes as the Black Death and the Hundred Years War, which caused a rapid decrease of the population.

Except for northern Italy, whose major cities had already suffered major reverses, urban centers throughout Europe declined in population and wealth. With no new trade routes to exploit or products to sell, commerce and industry stagnated. Merchants were forced into bankruptcy as credit facilities were curtailed. A lack of French financiers forced Philip VI to turn to the pope in 1343

for money to carry on the war with the English.² While governments realized the severity of the depression, fiscal ignorance and pressure from special interests rendered effective action impossible.

The decline of the medieval Church imposed an additional strain on European society. The fourteenth century had begun with the bitter struggle between Philip the Fair of France and Pope Boniface VIII. The dispute, which culminated in the death of Boniface in 1302 at Anagni, symbolized the decline of the papacy and the rise in power of secular authority. The growth of nation states and the division of religion along national lines effectively challenged the universal character of the Church.

The position of the Church was further eroded by the decision of Clement V to move the center of Christendom from Rome to Avignon in 1309. The decision had been made in part because of the pressure of Philip IV, and in part in response to the bitter factionalism in Rome. At Avignon the pope was relatively free from the political pressure that had earlier forced him into a continual series of wars, betrayals and alliances. In addition, France, not Italy, was emerging as the cultural center of Europe, and served as the chief source of papal revenues.

Technically, Avignon was not French soil, but the property of papal vassals. The city became official property of the Church in 1348 when Clement VI, the fourth of seven Avignon popes, purchased the property from Queen Joan of Provence.³ Yet the people of Europe were convinced that a pope living at Avignon was little more than a functionary of the French king. Although the pope was not as responsive to French pressure as contemporaries believed,⁴ such an

opinion was strengthened by the fact that all seven of the Avignon popes were French, as were 111 of the 134 cardinals created during that period.

Any political or economic advantages gained by moving to Avignon were more than offset by the subsequent loss of prestige. Papal authority had long been connected with the tradition of Rome, and a pope who performed his functions outside of that city risked losing his spiritual dignity. Further, Avignon rapidly acquired a reputation for worldliness and corruption. Like all major cities, it harbored criminals, taverns and houses of prostitution. Petrarch delivered a stinging rebuke:

Unholy Babylon, thou Hell on earth, thou sink of iniquity, thou cess-pool of the world! There is neither faith, nor charity, nor religion, nor fear of God, no shame, no truth, no holiness, albeit the residence within its walls of the Supreme Pontiff should have made it a shrine and the very stronghold of religion... Of all cities that I know, its stench is the worst.⁵

Although Petrarch, as an Italian, was especially bitter over the pope's change of residence, the wasteful splendor of the papal court was undeniable. Twenty-three sergeants-at-arms guarded the inside of the apostolic palace. Thirty chaplains officiated in the pope's private chapel. The kitchen was occupied by a chief cook, two masters of the buttery, butlers who tasted the wine and a "fruiterer" who supplied the papal table with fruits and nuts. Three masters of the stable cared for the horses and mules, and a furrier distributed summer and winter clothing to court officials. In all the papal household included over four hundred persons.⁶

Because few pilgrims spent money in Avignon, the main source

of papal revenue remained the taxation of ecclesiastics and the sale of indulgences. Although such a financial system, perfected by John XXII, kept the Church solvent, it undermined popular respect for the Church hierarchy. Expectancies were sold to the highest bidder in return for the first year's income. Clergymen who paid such taxes reimbursed themselves by oppressing the lower clergy. The burden of papal taxation thus fell on those who could least afford it.

Attacks on the greed and dishonesty of the clergy multiplied during the fourteenth century. Henry of Herford complained that

simony had penetrated so deep that the clergy, whether high or low, bought and sold ecclesiastical offices publicly without scolding or punishment. Abbeys, priories and guardianships were purchased by ignorant, unexperienced men.⁷

In 1348 John of Winterthur echoed similar complaints:

How contemptible the Church has become. The pastors of the Church feed themselves instead of their flocks... all beauty has left the Church of God, from crown to heel there is no healthy spot on her!⁸

Those clergymen who did attempt to care for their parishioners were likewise alarmed by the religious attitudes of the laity. Nicholas de Clemanges, a French cleric, complained that few people went to Mass, and that those who did were content with touching the holy water or kissing the image of a saint. At Matins and Vespers the priest was alone in the church except for his attendants.⁹ Even Christmas night, among the most revered of sacred festivals, was often passed in licentiousness, card playing, swearing and blasphemy. When admonished for their behavior, the people replied that they merely imitated the clergy and the nobility, who did such things

with impunity.

For many people, therefore, religious life in the fourteenth century was characterized by a mutual contempt between cleric and layman. Thousands of men and women found the formal services of the Church inadequate and their religious experiences unsatisfactory. Those individuals often sought relief through spiritual revivals or the multiplication of forms and ceremonies. Such individual devotions often sank to the level of superstition. The Church responded by expanding its administrative structure, which further alienated it from the common people. Thus, in the face of a major crisis, such as occurred at mid-century, the Church found itself unable to minister adequately to the spiritual and emotional needs of a despairing population. This was a major factor in the revival of the Sect of the Flagellants.

Between the years 1261 and 1349 there were only sporadic outbursts of public penance. In 1286, when the Rhenish cities were experiencing the worst famine in nearly three generations, uniformed, hymn-singing Flagellants suddenly appeared.¹⁰ Such incidents were of short duration and of minor importance. In 1334, however, a new penitential group called le Palomelli, the Doves, emerged in northern Italy which, though short lived, had a more lasting impact. It was led by the Dominican preacher, Venturino da Bergamo, who roused the population of Lombardy to make a pilgrimage to Rome for the purpose of obtaining pardons for their sins. Clothed in white, with black cloaks bearing on one side a white dove and on the other a white cross, an estimated ten thousand penitents traveled from Lombardy through Tuscany on their way to Rome.¹¹

The motivation for the pilgrimage stemmed in part from the political struggle that had just been waged between Pope John XXII and Louis of Bavaria. A member of the House of Wittelsback, Louis had become King of the Germans in the disputed election of 1314. The next ten years were spent in warring against Frederick III of Austria, who also claimed the throne. The pope had refused to recognize the election of Louis and appointed Robert of Naples imperial vicar in Italy vacante imperio. This prompted Louis to send a military force into Italy which interfered with papal actions against the Ghibelline city of Milan. In March 1324 John XXII excommunicated the Bavarian for solely political reasons.

The result was another invasion of Italy in 1326, which culminated in Louis crowning himself Holy Roman Emperor in Rome in 1328. He had previously accepted the iron crown of Lombardy. Following his coronation Louis IV deposed the pope in Avignon and set up an antipope in Rome.¹² However, Louis' forces were insufficient to overcome those of Robert of Naples, and he departed Italy in 1329. Although indecisive, Louis' actions upset an already troubled nation and helped spark Venturino's mission of peace and atonement.

The pilgrims carried a staff in one hand and a seven knotted cord in the other. They were well received by the cities along the way, especially in Florence, where the penitents

betook themselves first into the Dominican Church, disrobed to the waist before the altar and humbly struck themselves... pious men and women prepared meals for them and the entire old market was reserved; there, well served, five hundred or more of them ate at one time.¹³

Supremely confident of his mission, Venturino, in a sermon at

Florence proclaimed that "what I say will happen, if it be God's will."¹⁴

Pope Benedict XII, who had ascended the papal throne in 1334, misinterpreted Venturino's motives and feared the popular leader was going to Rome to be crowned pope. When, therefore, Brother Venturino appeared at Avignon in 1335 to obtain indulgences for his followers, Benedict had him thrown into prison. The unfortunate Venturino remained there until the election of Clement VI in 1344. Interestingly, the pope who later issued a papal bull condemning the Flagellants of 1349 sympathized with Venturino's motives and allowed him to make a crusade against the Turks, where he died in 1346.¹⁵

The efforts of Venturino were significant in that they indicated no change in Italy's attitude toward public penance. Flagellant processions were well disciplined, well intentioned and well received by their fellow citizens. In Rome Venturino, a clergyman, was invited to speak in all the major churches. The Italian penitents harbored no overt anticlerical feelings. This attitude was responsible for little being recorded about the Italian Flagellants of 1349, even though the movement almost certainly started there. In comparison to their Germanic counterparts, there was nothing remarkable about them.

The year 1346 brought rumors of a devastating plague that was then raging in the East. According to Aegidius li Muisis, abbot of St. Martin of Tournay, such stories were all too accurate:

There was much validity in the rumors of a pestilence that began in the Orient and then spread over all the surrounding lands, whether Christian, Saracen or pagan ... In many areas only a third or a fourth of the

population survived; in some places only one man out of ten remained alive.¹⁶

The abbot based his statements on the reports of merchants who had frequented such lands, and who ironically helped transport the disease back to Europe.

From Asia the pestilence, a mixture of bubonic and pneumonic plague, spread along the trade routes. It reached the Black Sea trading center of Kaffa in the guise of an infected Tartar army, which had laid siege to that Genoese city. In an attempt to unnerve the defenders, the Asians catapulted the corpses of plague victims over the city walls.¹⁷ Fleeing in terror, twelve galleys transported the disease first to Constantinople and then to the rest of Europe.

According to Michele di Piazza, a Franciscan monk and an eye witness to the epidemic, the disease appeared in Sicily in October of 1347, carried by Genoese galleys from Constantinople. After the galleys docked at Messina,

the infection attacked everyone who came in contact with a patient. The infected person felt a severe pain boring through his whole body... Then there appeared a pustule as large as a lentil on the thigh or arm which the people called carbuncles. These infected the body and spread through it so that the patient spat up blood violently... As the people of Messina realized that the sudden death came to them from the Genoese ships, they drove them with great haste from the harbor and the city.¹⁸

Two freight-ships carried the plague from Messina to Pisa, arriving there in the first days of 1348. The chronicler Sercambi recorded that

there began a great dying in Pisa, and from there (it) spread over the whole of Tuscany... During this great epidemic of death more than eighty died

of every hundred, and the air was so infested that death overtook men everywhere... And when they saw everybody dying they no longer heeded death and believed the end of the world was at hand.¹⁹

Similar vessels, infected and driven from port to port, landed in Genoa. Due to close trade relations, the infection was quickly carried to Venice. Soon all of Italy was affected.²⁰

In the introduction to the Decameron, Boccaccio described the effects of the plague in Florence, which allegedly lost two-thirds of its population:

The calamity had instilled such horror into the hearts of men and women that brother abandoned brother, uncles, sisters and wives left their dear ones to perish... Death had become so common that no more attention was given to human life than would be given to goats brought to slaughter ... So many bodies were brought to the churches every day that the consecrated ground did not suffice to hold them... Hugh trenches were dug in the crowded churchyards and the new dead were piled in them, layer upon layer, like merchandise in the hold of a ship.²¹

From Italy the Black Death, a term not used by contemporaries, traveled by ship to Marseilles, and appeared in Avignon in January of 1348. During the next three months one chronicler recorded 62,000 deaths.²² On orders from his physician, Clement VI isolated himself in his chambers and gave entrance to no one.²³ At the height of the epidemic it was necessary to consecrate the Rhone River so that bodies could be buried in it. By 1350 the disease had engulfed all of Europe, affecting even Scandinavia and Iceland.

Although the total number of deaths was staggering, no precise figure can be arrived at. The official papal register placed the number of victims worldwide at precisely 42,836,486.²⁴ Such a number, of course, was pure speculation based on inadequate information.

Better informed scholars have estimated that the population of Europe decreased by at least a quarter between the years 1347 and 1350. Yet the mortality rate varied considerably from place to place. Taking this into account Yves Renouard calculated the death rate at between one-eighth and two-thirds, the rural areas suffering the fewest fatalities.²⁵

Surprisingly Clement VI authorized autopsies to be performed on the bodies of plague fatalities. All that could be discerned, however, was that the disease was highly infectious and at times attacked the lungs of its victims.²⁶ Even less was known about its origins. Guy de Chauliac, the foremost medical authority of his time, felt that the general cause of the plague was a conjunction of planets by which

the quality of the air and other elements was so altered, that they set poisonous fluids in motion toward the inward parts of the body, in the same manner as the magnet attracts iron.²⁷

In its report of October 1348, the medical faculty of Paris offered the following advice for those wishing to avoid the contagion:

No poultry should be eaten, no waterfowl, no sucking pig, no old beef... cold moist, and watery foods generally harmful. Fat people should expose themselves to the sun. Excess of abstinence, excitement, anger and drunkenness are dangerous... Bathing is dangerous... Intercourse with women is mortal.²⁸

Like the Church, the medical profession was unable to adequately assist the people in coping with the ravages of the Black Death. Society was thrown into a state of utter helplessness and despair.

The situation in Austria and southern Germany was especially grim, for there the plague had been preceded by storms and earth-

quakes. According to the *Annales Frisacenses*:

in February of the year of our Lord 1348, on the feast day of the conversion of Saint Paul, approximately at the hour of vespers, there was a great and terrible earthquake through all of Almonia, the greatest however being in Carinthia and Steria; and it continued for more than eighty days.²⁹

The chronicler added the curious observation that the earth moved primarily at night and was usually quiet during the day.

The combined impact of earthquake and plague convinced many that an angry God was about to put an end to the world as they knew it. It was in this area in the year 1348 that a chronicler first recorded the appearance of bands of Flagellants:

It was reported as true that in Austria men desired through their actions to mitigate the anger of God; singing the hymn Lux Fulgebit they went forth with lanterns after dark, fasting on bread and water, walking barefoot from church to church; upon entering the church they beat themselves about their naked shoulders, falling to the ground together in song.³⁰

Although the author did not provide the month they appeared, it must have been late in the year, for the next mention of bands of penitents was not until January of 1349.³¹

By the summer of 1349 the Flagellant movement had spread from central and southern Germany into Hungary, Poland and the Low Countries. Their exact route of travel was complex and difficult to retrace with any accuracy. Recorders frequently stressed only the penitential activities within their own area, ignoring or distorting previous gatherings. Despite this, Hoeniger traced their progress as follows:

March 1 Bohemia - A few days later Dresden -
 April 17 Magdeburg - Immediately after Lubeck-
 May 6 Wurzburg - May 19 Augsburg -
 Middle of June Strassburg.³²

From Strasbourg the movement followed the Rhine River south into Switzerland, and north to the cities of Mainz, Cologne and Trier. It penetrated France no further than Troyes, however, because of the opposition of the King, Philip VI of Valois.³³

Overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of traveling bands of Flagellants, one chronicler placed their number in the hundreds of thousands.³⁴ Actually, only a small portion of the population of Europe took up such penances, and they probably numbered in the tens instead of the hundreds of thousands. Nevertheless, their mobility and easy recognition combined to produce an impact far in excess of their actual numbers.

Flagellant bands averaged between 40 and 100 penitents.³⁵ Because several of these groups converged on the same town, cities were frequently deluged with penitents.³⁶ Over five thousand Flagellants visited the Belgium town of Tournai between August and October. At Strasbourg a new band arrived each week for nearly six months. The monastery of Bodelo recorded 2,500 penitents in the first half of the year, and at one point received seven hundred a day.³⁷ One of the few towns to do so at the onset of the movement, Erfurt closed its gates to three thousand Flagellants camped outside its walls.³⁸

The Flagellants of 1349 borrowed heavily from the thirteenth century movement, especially as it occurred north of the Alps. Thirty-three and a half days was adopted as the standard length of penitential processions. The "Heavenly Letter" was reissued, its text almost identical with that of the original.³⁹ Said to have been delivered by an angel in Jerusalem in 1343, it contained an

additional paragraph identifying the plague as God's punishment for the sins of "blasphemy, usury, adultery and violation of the Sabbath."⁴⁰ As before the aim of the pilgrims was to induce an angry God to relent.

Although no discernible central organization coordinated the activities of the Flagellants, mid-century penitents possessed a remarkably uniform and elaborate set of rituals. Upon entering a town, they formed a procession two abreast⁴¹ and proceeded to the nearest church, where they prayed to the Virgin. Then, singing hymns of petition and deliverance, in their own language, the Flagellants went to an open area, usually the market place, to perform their devotions. Having removed their outer garments they formed a circle holding the scourges in their hands. They wore nothing above the waist and had bare feet and heads. The members then prostrated themselves on the ground, assuming a position indicative of their sin. For example, the perjurer lay on one side, the adulterer on his stomach, and the murderer on his back. This accomplished they got to their knees and beat themselves until they drew blood. All the while they sang songs of Mary and the passion of Christ. While kneeling a leader prayed for them and preached a sermon as though in a church. The sermon ended, all rose and the service was over. With local variations the ritual was performed twice a day in public and once privately in the evening.⁴² Should a priest or a woman enter the circle of Flagellants the ceremony was immediately invalidated and had to be begun anew.

As described in written accounts and an illuminated manuscript⁴³ Flagellant processions must have been colorful and impressive. Each

penitent wore a black hat with red crosses front and back. The hat was so large that, as Peter of Erfurt commented, they could scarcely see where they were going.⁴⁴ All were barefoot and wore long white tunics belted at the waist by a sash. Most members carried a whip of knotted cords attached to a short stick. Iron spikes were embedded in the knots. These spikes, extending the length of a grain of wheat, occasionally penetrated the flesh so deeply as to require a second pull to free them. The penitents were preceded by a crossbearer, candle holders and banners.

At their inception the bands were composed primarily of middle and upper class adult males. This was the result of requirements for membership in the Brethren of the Cross, as the Flagellants were sometimes called.⁴⁵ According to research done by Paul Runge, each member had to deposit into a common treasury four pennies for each day spent on the pilgrimage. Over a thirty-three day period this amounted to 11 shillings and 4 pennies, a considerable amount of cash at that time.⁴⁶ All but the well to do were thus excluded from formal Flagellant societies. That members were adult males is indicated by the stipulation that participants first acquire the permission of their wives.

A typical Flagellant group of one hundred persons thus had at its disposal well over a thousand shillings. That purchasing power, designed to prevent begging, made the penitential bands a significant economic force in an otherwise depressed economy. Besides paying for food and lodging where it was not offered free of charge, the money was spent to purchase the candles and flags used during the pilgrimage.⁴⁷ The relative economic affluence of the Flagellants was

a major reason why few cities barred their entrance.

Another major factor in their early acceptance was the strict discipline under which the Flagellants operated. Strict obedience was pledged to the lay leaders of the group, a Master and two lieutenants, to whom they confessed before being granted admission. They entered towns as a group and remained no more than one night in any one place. They were forbidden to speak to women or be served at table by them. As noted, members were not to beg, but voluntary contributions were accepted. Bathing was forbidden, as was washing their clothes or shaving. No one was permitted to carry arms or continue flagellation to the point of sickness or death.

The popularity of the Flagellants and of their holy mission resulted in a broadening of the social and economic classes involved in such penitential exercises. In the face of popular demand, financial stipulations were relaxed to permit even the poor an opportunity to participate. Tilemann Elhen of Wolfhagen, author of the Limburger Chronicle, noted that in the middle Rhine districts "knights, servants, citizens and peasants accompanied the Flagellants."⁴⁸ The Chronicles of Hugo of Reutlingen also mentioned the addition of "common travelers, soldiers and farmers."⁴⁹ Due to superior numbers, control of many Flagellant bands fell to these new elements. This development, which many saw as a dangerous trend, prompted the wealthy and educated to withdraw from the movement. As noted by Cohn, in such movements, although often begun by the rich and respectable, it was the poor who persevered in their last stages.⁵⁰

The loss of the upper middle class element deprived the Flagellant movement of some of its most responsible leaders. These men had

served as a stabilizing factor and had given an air of respectability to the processions. The new leaders, and the recruits they attracted, were less notable for their piety and asceticism than their inability to cope with themselves and their surroundings. Many joined itinerant bands of penitents out of a sense of adventure or the chance to flee to a new life elsewhere. Many cities still welcomed such bands. Municipal records reveal that the cities of Louvain and Liège used public funds to purchase food and lodging for groups of penitents.⁵¹ For a few, therefore, flagellation was a last means of gainful employment. Bandits had also discovered that a convenient way to enter a guarded town was to attach themselves to the rear of a Flagellant procession.⁵² A decline in the prestige of the movement was inevitable.

The change in social composition was accompanied by an intensification of chiliastic expectations. Closner reported that many second generation Flagellants felt that the $33\frac{1}{2}$ day processions were only a beginning. The movement as a whole would last $33\frac{1}{2}$ years, at which time Christ would make his second coming.⁵³ Possessed by such expectations, they saw themselves as a holy army of saints, suffering to expiate not only their own sins, but those of the whole world. Individual penitents claimed to eat and drink with Christ and to converse with His mother. Many people, in the absence of an effective local clergy, eagerly believed such claims, just as they had accepted without question the authenticity of the "Heavenly Letter."⁵⁴

As the Flagellant movement turned into a popular messianic movement its members became increasingly hostile toward the organized Church and its clergy. Always a lay organization independent of

ecclesiastical supervision, it now repudiated the Church's claim to supernatural authority. Setting themselves over pope and clergy, they denied the validity of the sacrament of the Eucharist and refused to show reverence for the elevated Host.⁵⁵ Bands of Flagellants often interrupted church services and decreed that any priest who contradicted them should be dragged from the altar and burned at the stake. In the opinion of the Flagellants, "it is better to die with a skin tanned with dust and sweat than one smeared with a whole pound of priestly ointment."⁵⁶

The movement had thus become an irrational lay protest against ecclesiastical organization and accepted social forms. Devotees considered their services more effective than the sacraments and believed prayers were more effective when accompanied by self-scourging. The most extreme Flagellant belief, as singled out by the chronicler Jean le Bel, was that the blood which flowed from their wounds mingled with that of Christ and that all who shed it would be saved.⁵⁷ Such radical tenets were clearly heretical and threatened to undermine the authority and functions of the Church.

Although not originated by them, the Flagellants had also played an active role in the persecution of the Jewish community. The slaughter had begun as early as 1348 when news of the plague first spread through Europe. Latent fear and hatred of the Jews exploded in accusations that that race had poisoned the wells of Christians. The result was "a general killing and burning of the Jews."⁵⁸ The account preserved in the *Chronicon Elevationense* was typical:

The origin of this pestilence was seen by many as

lying with the Jews through their contamination of the drinking water with a certain powder, from which assumption there began a great death of the Jews, so that through all of Alemania they were burned and killed.⁵⁹

By the spring of 1349, one source placed the numbers of Jews murdered by Christians at 20,000.⁶⁰ Whatever the exact number the slaughter was considerable, this despite the efforts of Pope Clement VI who issued two Bulls on their behalf.⁶¹ On January 16, 1349, the entire Jewish community of Basel was wiped out. In February the Jews of Worms were placed in a single building which was then set on fire.⁶² By March the cities of Stuttgart, Freiburg, Ulm, Dresden and Baden had committed similar atrocities. At Speyer the bodies of the dead were placed in empty wine casks and floated down the Rhine.⁶³

From March until mid-summer there was a lull in the persecution. Only the most naive or ignorant still believed the Jews had poisoned the drinking water, for they died from the plague as readily as did the Christians. The violence was renewed in July, however, when a group of Flagellants entered the city of Frankfort. Despite the objections of city officials, the Flagellants, aided by townspeople, attacked those living in the Jewish quarter. Those who accepted baptism were spared. The rest, with the exception of beautiful women and young boys suitable for adoption, were burned to death.⁶⁴ A similar outrage occurred in Brussels, again as a direct result of the appearance of groups of Flagellants.

There were several reasons why the Flagellants singled out the Jewish community for persecution, even after they were exonerated of blame for starting the plague. By August of 1349 the movement was

caught up in the belief that the end of the world was at hand. A key element of the chiliastic vision was the appearance of an Antichrist, who must be overthrown. Unfortunately, the image of the Jew as such a figure was widely accepted during the Middle Ages.⁶⁶ They were often portrayed as devils with the horns of a goat, usually in the company of frogs, worms, snakes and scorpions. There were also rumors that Jews kidnapped and tortured Christian children.⁶⁷

Another major factor in the persecution of the Jews was their financial situation within the community. Although the recession of the fourteenth century had reduced their prosperity, the Jews in many areas continued as small-money lenders and pawnbrokers.⁶⁸ The clientele they attracted was composed primarily of petty debtors of the lower classes. Due to the exorbitant interest rates routinely charged on loans, many had difficulty repaying the loans, and were watchful for a chance to wipe the slate clean. The killing of thousands of Jews in the name of Christ offered such an opportunity. Matthew of Neuenburg recorded that victims were stripped of their clothing before execution, to enable the crowd to search for money sewed within the garments.⁶⁹

City officials were usually opposed to such violence for financial reasons of their own. In return for protecting their lives and property, Jewish business men frequently paid large bribes to such civic leaders. When barred from a city by the ruling elite, Flagellant bands appealed to the greed of the common citizen, who knew their entrance meant the destruction of the Jewish community.⁷⁰ Thus, when the rich burgers of Maastricht closed their gates to such a group of penitents, the clothworkers rose up and overthrew the city government.

The Flagellants were admitted and the gates closed against the overlord of the town, the Bishop of Liège.⁷¹

In an effort to counter the violence and heterodoxy of the Flagellants the University of Paris sent Jean du Fayt, a young Benedictine monk and renowned doctor of theology, to Pope Clement VI to speak against the movement. On October 5, 1349, du Fayt dramatically condemned the Sect of the Flagellants, comparing their self torture with the bloodletting of the ancient priests of Baal.⁷² He regarded them as a superstitious sect employing new laws and ceremonies in their observance of divine worship.⁷³ Du Fayt claimed that

no literate man and only the fewest laymen of substance adhered to the sect, but instead was composed of the most common men... even the few priests and monks who follow the mendicants are not men of learning, for they are ignorant of the laws of God... therefore with the exception of those men, all other followers were uneducated, ignorant and coarse.⁷⁴

His carefully prepared treatise concluded with the charge that "the Flagellants try everywhere to kill the Jews, thinking to please God by the extermination of that race."⁷⁵

Based partially on Jean du Fayt's sermon and in part on his own experience with Flagellants at Avignon, Clement VI issued a Bull of excommunication against the movement in November of 1349. This Bull, Inter sollicitudines, termed the Flagellants "impious people" and accused them of mistreating the Jewish people "whom Christian charity embraces and protects as much as possible."⁷⁶

The Pope further charged that

they frequently engage in violence, spilling the blood of Christians, and they seize the goods of clerics and laymen alike, and apply them to their own uses.⁷⁷

They were also condemned for usurping the authority of clerical superiors and for the spreading of false stories concerning the life of Christ.

The Bull was sent to twenty-one archbishoprics⁷⁸ and to the kings of France and England. It ordered those officials to call their subjects back from heresy, and authorized temporal punishment if necessary. Church leaders throughout Germany and the Low Countries immediately forbade further Flagellant processions.⁷⁹ Secular authorities cooperated enthusiastically in suppressing the movement. A count of Westphalia ordered Flagellants hanged, while urban authorities in the See of Trier hunted them down to the last man. Under such pressure most penitents quickly abandoned the movement, "vanishing as suddenly as they had come, like phantoms in the night."⁸⁰

The vigor with which lay princes responded to the appeal from Clement VI to aid in the repression of the Sect of the Flagellants was grounded in more than religious piety. The persecution of the Jews had brought widespread property destruction to many cities. As indicated by the Bull, Inter sollicitudines, this damage to private property frequently involved Christians as well as Jews. The governing elite were also concerned by the Flagellant dictum that all members should be called brother, in as much as "all were created out of the same element and bought with the same price."⁸¹ This emphasis on equality of all men before God clashed with the interests of the hereditary nobility and raised the possibility of social revolution.

After 1350 there were only minor outbreaks of public flagellation. In 1360 Konrad Schmid attempted to set up a "Kingdom of Flagellants"

in Thuringia.⁸² By drawing upon the Flagellant tradition, however, Schmid attracted the attention of the Inquisition, and was burned with several hundred of his followers in 1368. In northern Spain St. Vincent of Ferrer preached public penance in 1399, drawing a large number of followers and the criticism of the Council of Constance in 1417.⁸³ With the exception of small, local manifestations, the Sect of the Flagellants passed out of existence.

FOOTNOTES

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⁴L. Elliott Binns, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Medieval Papacy (London, 1934), p. 106.

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⁹Huizinga, p. 143.

¹⁰Cohn, p. 129.

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¹³Volker, p. 42.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁵Schaff, p. 503.

¹⁶"Chronica Aegidii Li Muisis," CCF, Vol. II, p. 341.

¹⁷Philip Ziegler, The Black Death (New York, 1969), p. 15.

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- 30 "Kalendarium Zwetlense," MGHS, Vol. IX, p. 692.
- 31 "Continuatio Zwetlensis Quarta," MGHS, Vol. IX, p. 685.
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- 34 "Chronicon Sampetrinum," Geschichtsquellen der Provinz Sachsen, Vol. I (Halle, 1870), p. 180.
- 35 "Continuatio Zwetlensis Quarta," p. 685.
- 36 Paul Fredericq, Corpus Documentorum Inquisitionis Haereticae Pravitatis Neerlandicae, Vol. II (Gent, 1896), p. 106.
- 37 "Breve Chronicon Clerici Anonymi," p. 26.
- 38 "Chronicon Sampetrinum," p. 180.
- 39 Text of letter in Closner, p. 112.
- 40 "Matthiae Nuewenburgensis Cronica," p. 432.
- 41 "Gestorum Abbatum Trudinensium," MGHS, Vol. X, p. 432.

- ⁴²"Chronica Aegidii Li Muisis," p. 357.
- ⁴³Appears in "Chronica Aegidii Li Muisis," CCF, between pages 348 and 349.
- ⁴⁴"Chronicae S. Petri Erfordensis Moderna," MGHS, Vol. XXX, p. 463.
- ⁴⁵See appendix for Statutes of the Flagellants as based on information contained in Paul Runge, Der Lieder und Melodien der Geissler des Jahres 1349 (Leipzig, 1900), p. 115-123.
- ⁴⁶Runge, p. 132.
- ⁴⁷Ibid.
- ⁴⁸Tilemann Elhen von Wolfhagen, Die Limburger Chronik, ed. O. G. Brandt (Germany, 1973), p. 32.
- ⁴⁹Runge, p. 24.
- ⁵⁰Cohn, p. 125.
- ⁵¹Fredericq, p. 122-123.
- ⁵²Ziegler, p. 93.
- ⁵³"Fritsche Friedrich Closner's Chronik, 1362," Die Chroniken der Oberhermischen Stadte, Vol. VIII (Leipzig, 1870), p. 120.
- ⁵⁴Cohn, p. 133.
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- ⁵⁶Schaff, p. 508.
- ⁵⁷Fredericq, p. 122-123.
- ⁵⁸"Annales Marbacenses," MGHS, Vol. XVII, p. 179.
- ⁵⁹"Chronicon Elwacense," MGHS, Vol. X, p. 40.
- ⁶⁰"Heinrici Rebdorfensis Annales Imperatorum et Papparum," FRG, Vol. IV, p. 534.
- ⁶¹Volker, p. 61.
- ⁶²"Matthiae Nuewenburgensis Cronica," p. 262.
- ⁶³Ziegler, p. 99.
- ⁶⁴"Matthiae Nuewenburgensis Cronica," p. 262.

- ⁶⁵"Chronica Aegidii Li Muisis," p. 342.
- ⁶⁶Ziegler, p. 99.
- ⁶⁷See illustration of ritual murder of a Christian boy by Jews in Cohn, between pages 80 and 81.
- ⁶⁸Ziegler, p. 98.
- ⁶⁹"Matthiae Nuewenburgensis Cronica," p. 264.
- ⁷⁰Volker, p. 62.
- ⁷¹Cohn, p. 140.
- ⁷²Paul Fredericq, "Deux Sermons inedits de Jean de Fayt sur les Flagellants et sur le Grand Schisme d'Occident," BARB, p. 704.
- ⁷³Ibid., p. 696.
- ⁷⁴Ibid., p. 698-699.
- ⁷⁵Ibid., p. 705.
- ⁷⁶Volker, Appendix I, p. 108.
- ⁷⁷Ibid.
- ⁷⁸See appendix for complete list.
- ⁷⁹"Gesta Archiepiscoporum Magdeburgensium," MGHS, Vol. XIV, p. 437.
- ⁸⁰Henry of Herford, p. 282.
- ⁸¹Schaff, p. 507.
- ⁸²Augustinus Stumpf, "Historia Flagellantium, praecipue in Thuringia," Neue Mitteilungen aus dem Gebiet historisch-antiquarischer Forschungen, ed. Erhard, Vol. II (Halle, 1836), p. 16.
- ⁸³Cohn, p. 146.

CHAPTER IV

ROLE OF THE FRONTIER

The phenomenon of organized public flagellation has up to this point been evaluated in terms of an unusual stress set against a background of existing social, economic and religious conditions. However, a review of affected areas indicates that location may also have been a factor in the rise of such penitential societies. The Flagellant movement flourished primarily in northern Italy, Eastern Europe, Germany and the Low Countries.¹ It would thus appear that certain areas of Europe were predisposed to the development of mystical movements such as the Flagellants.

Close inspection reveals that penitential brotherhoods usually arose in areas that could be termed frontiers. The concept is multifaceted and deserves further explanation. Although ultimately perceived in terms of geography, the idea of frontier is not limited to spatial location. On the contrary, territorial considerations are often only reflections of more pervasive factors. It is thus possible to speak of many different types of frontiers: military, political, cultural and religious. Such zones of transition, and at times even conflict, were most likely to be centers of the burgeoning Flagellant movement.

The city of Perugia, where the movement began in 1260, was an Umbrian town located near the border of Tuscany.² Tuscany had been

the site of a bitter military conflict between the Guelf and Ghibelline cities of that region. The Ghibelline victory in the fall of 1260 put Tuscany under the control of Manfred and his allies.³ The Guelf city of Perugia, which had frequently served as a papal residence, found itself next in line for subjection. Like recently defeated Florence, it was ill prepared to face the formidable imperial army. The position of being caught between the forces of the papacy and Manfred's imperial army contributed to the formation of the Flagellant movement.

From Perugia the movement spread most rapidly through those areas devoid of strong central government. The tyrannical Manfred was thus able to exclude Flagellants from his well organized domain.⁴ Similarly Pallavicino, strongman of Cremona and opponent of Alexander IV, not only blocked the entrance of the Flagellants, but effectively prevented his subjects from taking up the crusade.⁵ In both cases the Flagellant movement not only went against religious conviction, but threatened the political integrity of the state.

The enthusiastic adoption of the movement north of the Alps occurred despite the fact that those areas had suffered little when compared to the Italians. Carinthia, Bavaria, Austria, Moravia, Bohemia and the upper Rhineland were far removed from the Guelf-Ghibelline struggle, and had experienced neither plague nor famine. Only the inroads of the Turks threatened the security of the area.⁶ Despite this, the Germans not only took up the way of the cross, but gave it a formalized structure that would last into the next century.

Volker offered the explanation that the Italians, who at first

led the processions, were responsible for infecting the Germanic peoples with the desire for public penance.⁷ In reality, conditions were already favorable for a spiritual renewal. As noted by Grundman, Germany in the thirteenth century was "swarming with unruly beggars under the guise of religion."⁸ All that was lacking was organization and purpose, which the Flagellant bands provided. Once begun there was no one governmental authority able or willing to control their movement or activities.

The next significant episode of public penance began in 1334 in the city of Bergamo, a northern Italian town in the foothills of the Alps. That area of Lombardy had been caught up in the dispute between Pope John XXII and Louis of Bavaria.⁹ Bergamo and other northern cities were subjected to frequent invasions by German troops. Those incursions were then resisted by the supporters of the pope. The confusion was compounded by the establishment of an anti-pope in Rome, while John XXII continued to rule in Avignon. The spiritual and material dislocation was so severe that thousands followed the Dominican preacher Venturino of Bergamo on a penitential march through northern Italy.¹⁰

The plague that visited Europe in 1348 caused widespread suffering and death. No country completely escaped its ravages, and most were severely affected. Yet the Flagellant movement appeared and flourished in only certain parts of Europe. Those areas corresponded closely with territories affected by earlier Flagellant movements. Further, there was frequently little correlation between the appearance of Flagellants and the severity of the plague.

According to the Chronicon Elwacense the great pestilence that

affected every region was most severe in France.¹¹ Indeed, France had been among the first countries affected, the plague having arrived in January of 1348. Within a month fifty-six thousand had died in Marseilles alone.¹² The pestilence spread quickly to the north, engulfing Paris by early summer. According to the Rolls of the Apostolic Chamber, 21% of the Papal Curia died while in residence at Avignon.¹³ Considering the health benefits those prelates enjoyed, it is possible that up to a third of the population of France perished.

Despite the magnitude of the disaster, only minor incidents of public flagellation were reported, notably at Avignon. Acting upon the advice of the University of Paris, Philip VI of Valois refused admission of Flagellants from other countries and outlawed the practice of public flagellation within France upon pain of death.¹⁴ Although not completely successful Philip spared France from most of the death and property destruction that accompanied many Flagellant bands. That he was able to do so, despite recent losses to the English, was indicative of the power inherent in a centralized state.

German losses during the first plague year were estimated at well over a million people.¹⁵ Despite this Germany suffered less than did most of Europe. Yet it was in Germany that the Flagellant movement began and flourished. Geographical location appears to have been a factor. The plague was relatively late in arriving in Germany. Its transmission from Italy was for a time blocked by the Tirolean Alps. The pestilence did not breach that barrier until June of 1348, a full six months after its appearance in Marseilles.¹⁶

Grisly accounts of the disaster abounded, however, which tended to build an anticipatory type of tension. Thus, as Cohn pointed out, it was not unusual for Flagellant bands to actually appear before the plague arrived.¹⁷

Based on the chronicles of Fritsche Closner¹⁸ and Matthew of Neuenburg,¹⁹ and on statistics preserved by Fredericq,²⁰ the Flagellants were especially active in the cities of Bruges, Cologne, Trier, Worms, Speyer, Basel and Strasbourg. Most of these cities were located near the Rhine River, and formed a type of urban frontier between France, Germany and the Low Countries. Literally thousands of Flagellants marched between those cities, creating a north-south corridor of penitents.

Overcrowding and severe unemployment created chronic insecurity among those living in these areas of industrialization.²¹ Peasants moving to the cities lost the traditional network of social relationships that had previously sustained them. An alarmingly high death rate, not necessarily the result of the Black Death, prevented the establishment of a sense of community. Beggars and gangs of mercenaries disturbed the peace and threatened internal stability. Faced with an extraordinary event such as a plague or a holy crusade, those people reacted with impulsive violence which itself caused additional social disruption.

That the Rhineland was an unusually volatile area was further evidenced by the murder of a large number of Jews within its cities. Although the Jews were persecuted throughout Europe, the worst atrocities occurred along the Franco-German border. As was earlier noted the citizens of Speyer floated the murdered bodies of Jews down the

Rhine in wine-casks. Massacres of Jews took place simultaneously at Mainz and at Cologne.²² Matthew of Neuenburg reported the total annihilation of the Jewish community at Frankfort, which had been one of the largest in Europe.²³

A map of the movement of the plague, prepared by Dr. E. Carpentur and reproduced by Ziegler, indicated a "mysterious pocket" between France, Germany and the Low Countries which was only slightly affected by the plague.²⁴ The intense activities of the Flagellants in this area and the subsequent slaughter of the Jews in the Rhineland thus cannot be completely explained by the severity of the Black Death. In comparison with the suffering endured elsewhere, it would be fair to say the inhabitants of those border areas overreacted.

At the height of the Black Death on the continent a group of 120 penitents crossed the channel and introduced public flagellation to England. According to Robert of Avesbury the Flagellants arrived around the feast of St. Michael and were primarily from the Low Countries.²⁵ Upon reaching London they went in formal procession to St. Paul's Church where, to the amazement of the chronicler, they scourged their half naked bodies in full view of the public.

Despite their obvious sincerity, the group was unable to gain a following either in London or in the countryside. Far from starting a new form of public penance, the Flagellants in England remained objects of curiosity if not humor. Thomas Walsingham, the only other chronicler to mention their activities in England, disapproved of the Flagellants, noting that "they did this too indiscreetly and without the approval of the Apostolic chair."²⁶ The English clearly did not care for such unauthorized excesses.

English rejection of the Flagellant movement cannot be construed to mean that England did not suffer the same devastation as did the Low Countries or Germany. Based on the observation that 45% of all parish priests died during the epidemic, it has been estimated that no fewer than 34% of the total population of England perished.²⁷ Yet, as in France, such a disaster did not spawn or even support a Flagellant movement. The central government continued to function, thus averting the sense of total despair characteristic in border zones or areas of political fragmentation.

The other major area that readily accepted the Flagellant ethic was Eastern Europe, the borderlands of western civilization. According to a tradition cited by Nohl, the penitential movement of 1349 had its origins in Hungary:

Gigantic women from Hungary came to Germany, divesting themselves publicly of their clothes, and to the singing of all kinds of curious songs beat themselves with rods and sharp scourges.²⁸

Hoeniger recorded the entrance of Flagellant bands into Bohemia by early March.²⁹ Their presence in Poland was recorded by the *Annales Mechovienses*.³⁰

Like Germany and the Rhineland areas, much of Eastern Europe escaped the worst ravages of the plague. Due to a tight border quarantine, large sections of Poland remained completely unaffected. Similarly Bohemia, protected by rugged mountain ranges, was only slightly touched by the epidemic.³¹ Yet in these areas, particularly the March of Thuringia, Flagellant societies flourished well beyond their decline in the rest of Europe.³²

Politically and culturally the fourteenth century was a type

of "Golden Age" for Hungary, Bohemia and Poland.³³ A decline in the power of Constantinople and the rise of unusually capable rulers permitted Eastern Europe to catch up with the west.³⁴ Yet there remained a frontier area, faced on the one side by a hostile German Empire and on the other by the constant threat of Turkish invasion. Thus for Eastern Europe, the traditional tensions of a turbulent frontier appear to have been a major factor in the adoption of the Sect of the Flagellants.

In both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, therefore, geographical location played a significant role in the appearance and the spread of the Flagellant movement. The practice of public flagellation was most likely to occur in regions that were military or political frontiers. Such regions were frequently characterized by political dislocation and cultural confrontation. Thus, other factors being equal, northern Italy, Germany, the Low Countries and Eastern Europe appear to have been predisposed to the development of the mystical organization of the Flagellants.

FOOTNOTES

¹Paul Fredericq, Corpus Documentorum Inquisitionis Haereticae Pravitatis Neerlandicae, Vol. II (Gent, 1896), p. 100.

²Volker, p. 20.

³Boehmer, p. 655.

⁴"Annales of S. Iustinae Patavini," p. 180.

⁵Salimbene, p. 465.

⁶"Chronica Minor Auctore Minorita Erphordiensi," p. 202.

⁷Volker, p. 35.

⁸Dr. Emil Ebering, ed., Historische Studien, 424 vols., (Berlin, 1935), vol. 267: Religiose Bewegungen im Mittelalter, by Herbert Grundmann, p. 388-389.

⁹A. G. Little, "The Mendicant Orders," CMH, Vol. VI, p. 736.

¹⁰Lea, p. 380.

¹¹"Chronicon Elwacense," p. 40.

¹²Ziegler, p. 64.

¹³Renouard, p. 111.

¹⁴Fredericq, Corpus Documentorum Inquisitionis Haereticae Pravitatis Neerlandicae, p. 116-117.

¹⁵Nohl, p. 32.

¹⁶Ziegler, p. 84.

¹⁷Cohn, p. 130.

¹⁸"Fritsche Friedrich Closner's Chronik, 1362," p. 105.

¹⁹"Matthiae Nuewenburgensis Cronica 1273-1350," p. 264.

²⁰Fredericq, Corpus Documentorum Inquisitionis Haereticae Pravitatis Neerlandicae, p. 106.

- ²¹Cohn, p. 28.
- ²²Ibid., p. 138.
- ²³"Matthiae Nuewenburgensis Cronica," p. 264.
- ²⁴Ziegler, p. 104-105.
- ²⁵Robert de Avesbury, De Gestis Mirabilibus Regis Edwardi Tertii, ed. E. M. Thompson (London, 1880), p. 406-407.
- ²⁶Thomas Walsingham, Historia Anglicana, Vol. I, RS I, Chronica Monasteria S. Albani, ed. H. T. Riley (London, 1863), p. 275.
- ²⁷Ziegler, p. 228.
- ²⁸Nohl, p. 135.
- ²⁹Volker, p. 59.
- ³⁰"Annales Mechovienses," MGHS, Vol. XIX, p. 670.
- ³¹Cohn, p. 129.
- ³²Stumpf, p. 26-27.
- ³³J. F. N. Bradley, Czechoslovakia (Edinburgh, 1971), p. 36.
- ³⁴C. A. McCartney, Hungary (Edinburgh, 1962), p. 43.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The Sect of the Flagellants, as it existed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was the unique product of a period filled with emotional stress and physical suffering. As such, the penitential movement must be evaluated in terms of the then prevailing intellectual, social, economic, political and religious climate. Further, although all Flagellants practiced a similar mode of penance and were motivated by a similar sense of terror, the movement as a whole constantly evolved to meet the needs of particular groups.

The Italian Flagellants of 1260 arose in response to a decade of unrest that had seen Frederick II and Manfred turn northern and central Italy into a battlefield. This destruction was accompanied by plague and widespread famine. In the light of the Joachite prophecies, which were then very popular, these disasters appeared to foreshadow the end of the world. Thus, given the prevailing assumption that God used misfortune to warn or punish mankind, widespread public penance was almost predictable.

The appearance of Flagellants in Perugia was especially significant. That city had been involved in an internal struggle between the magnati and the popoloni for political control. The year 1260 found the later firmly in command. Under the popolo regime the nobility was purged from the ranks of government. The resulting

power vacuum was filled to a great extent by gild representatives, whose organizations rose to unchallenged dominance.

The situation in Perugia meant that the Flagellant movement could not have succeeded, or even existed, without the permission and patronage of the ruling upper middle class. That the penitential processions were supported by that social group is indicated by the active participation of the gilds. Penitents were frequently organized by gilds and marched under their banners. After 1260, Flagellant societies in Italy patterned themselves on the gild structure.

The assertion of St. Justin of Padua that the processions included all classes of people, notably the poor and the rich, was made well after the initial outbreak of penitential proceedings, and at a time when the movement was making its greatest popular appeal.¹ Additionally, chroniclers often noted only the most exceptional or bizarre aspects of the Flagellants. This would exclude any mention of middle class participation and explain frequent references to the mingling of divergent social classes.

Although the Flagellants enjoyed only the tacit approval of Alexander IV, most of the other Italian clergy supported their activities. They did so for a variety of reasons, some more political than religious. Nevertheless it is apparent that the Flagellants of 1260 operated within Church tradition and were content to submit themselves to the direction of the clergy. The spontaneity of the processions and their lack of organization rendered the penitents innocuous to most lay and religious leaders.

After spreading north of the Alps, however, the Flagellant movement became more formalized. The pilgrimages were standardized

in duration, and the Flagellant service was embellished by the appearance of a "Heavenly Letter". The deliberate organization of thousands of Germanic penitents outside the control of the Church prompted Alexander IV to withdraw his approval in 1261. The result was the rapid decline of the movement, especially north of the Alps.

In Italy the legacy of the first major Flagellant movement was primarily positive: enemies were reconciled, sinners were converted and the struggle between the Guelfs and Ghibellines was moderated. In Germany the benefits were less clear. Condemned by the Church and forced underground by the state, Flagellant societies preserved an esoteric tradition notable for its anticlericalism and for its tendency to foment social unrest.

It was this tradition, complete with an elaborate set of rituals, that was revived in Germany in 1349. Sparked by the appearance of the Black Death in Europe, the German movement, like its thirteenth century Italian predecessor, began as a respectable middle class movement. Pilgrims were required to donate a sizeable sum of money to support the group's activities, which were strictly regulated by complex statutes. Due to their good conduct and substantial purchasing power, Flagellant bands were welcomed in most cities.

The popularity of the movement, however, soon forced a relaxation of the rules governing Flagellant groups. Financial requirements were reduced or eliminated to permit the participation of lower social and economic classes. Those elements, due to their overwhelming numbers, rapidly displaced the authority of the wealthy and educated and assumed leadership of the movement. No longer a middle class phenomenon, the Flagellant movement assumed the appearance of a

people's crusade.

The change in social composition ushered in a period of rapid moral and religious decline. The original objective of saving mankind from divine wrath was transformed into a search for economic and social betterment. Reduced to unruly mobs, Flagellant bands were responsible for the slaughter of thousands of Jews and for widespread property destruction. Civil officials eagerly persecuted the Flagellants out of existence after they were condemned by the Church for their heretical beliefs and unruly conduct.

An overview of Flagellant activities for both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries reveals that penitential brotherhoods were most active in those parts of Europe that were frontier regions in some cultural, social, intellectual, or military sense. The line of large urban centers extending from northern Italy through the Rhineland and into the Low Countries constituted such a frontier zone and was predisposed to welcome the development of the Flagellant movement. Eastern Europe was also a focal point of border conflict and as such nurtured the growth of penitential societies.

The Flagellants produced at different times and places social reform and unrest, moral uplift and degeneration, religious renewal and heresy. Regarded with ecclesiastical approval and popular veneration upon their inception in Italy in 1260, the Flagellants were anathematized as heretics a century later. This was largely the result of a trend in the social composition of the movement toward the lower social orders, in particular urban laborers and the unemployed. In the words of A. S. Turberville, the evolutionary history of the Sect of the Flagellants demonstrated the extent to which "the

perfectly orthodox belief in the efficacy of the scourge as a means
and an outward sign of repentance could degenerate into a depraved and
animal delight in self-torture..."²

FOOTNOTES

¹"Annales of S. Iustinae Patavini," p. 179.

²A. S. Turberville, "Heresies and the Inquisition in the Middle Ages," CMH, Vol. VI, p. 711.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

THE STATUTES OF THE BRUGGER FLAGELLANTS

1. Debts should be paid and unfair earnings returned.
2. Permission (for entrance to the brotherhood) is to be obtained from the wife.
3. Each one entering has to go to his priest for confession and ask permission from him (for entrance to the brotherhood).
4. He has to receive the cross from the same.
5. After receiving the cross, the one entering may request no alms.
6. Each one who wants to dedicate himself to penitence duty must in addition have permission from his master.
7. A Flagellant band must have four rectors or masters.
8. The Flagellants must celebrate their entrance into cities together.
9. If they have complaints or disputes among themselves, they must complain of it to their master.
10. They may go only paired or double paired.
11. No one should carry weapons.
12. They should deliver alms to poor clergymen in all places.
13. They may not speak with women.
14. Only the oldest (member) may speak with a hostess or her daughter.
15. They may accept nothing from women.
16. At the table only the oldest (member) can speak.
17. At the performance of necessities they should take off the pieces of clothing decorated with the cross.

18. They should only enter a house on the invitation of the master of the house.
19. No one may take a place at the table without the bidding of the master of the house.
20. No one may take into use water except from the ground.
21. Before mealtime, everyone must pray five Pater Nosters and Ave Marias on bent knee, and just as many afterward.
22. Those who are rebellious should forfeit their cross and be expelled from the society.
23. Upon leaving the hospitable lodgings in the morning, they should pray five Pater Nosters for the master of the house.
24. Each should pray fifteen Pater Nosters and Ave Marias for his benefactor before he enters a lodging.
25. If one is invited for mealtime, he may only take one companion with him; if his superior consents.
26. No one may sleep on feather cushions; such is allowed only for the head.
27. They may not make use of a straw mattress.
28. Also they may not clothe themselves with the white garments that they use at the flagellation.
29. They may not leave their sick behind, but must keep them (the sick) with them.
30. No one may flagellate himself so that he dies or becomes ill.
31. Murderers and adulterers should lie on the ground different than the others.
32. To refuse the acceptance of alms is not allowed.
33. They must bear abuse with patience and pray for their persecutors.
34. It is forbidden to sit on cushions.
35. The brotherhood should last $33\frac{1}{2}$ days.
36. Dealings contrary to these rules should be punished by the masters.
37. No one may take the cross to himself of his own power.

38. On every Friday they should flagellate three times a day and once a night, so long as they live.

THE STATUTES OF THE DOORNIK FLAGELLANTS

1. Those entering promise: We pledge ourselves to avoid inflicting evil to the best of our abilities, to repent all our known sins, to make general confession;
2. To meet ordinances with regard to legally acquired goods, to pay debts, and return goods acquired unjustly;
3. To live in peace and to do better and to strive against other indulgences;
4. To dedicate body and life, property and possessions to the defense and observation of the laws of the holy church, its honor and freedom, its beliefs, its teachings and statutes;
5. To acknowledge that we are all created from the same material, bought with a price, that we should name one another brother, not comrade.
6. The one entering should ask permission from his parish priest, receive the cross from him; from his legal wife he should likewise ask permission.
7. He should say the Pater Noster 3 times and the Ave Maria 3 times a morning; then five times, that is five at kneeling before mealtime, a further five afterward, finally five at night; he should wash his hands with knees bowed to the earth before mealtime, and speak at the table only with permission.
8. He may not swear on the passion of the Lord, or say blasphemous words the rest of his life to the best of his ability.
9. He should fast on all days of passion for as long as he lives and to the best of his abilities.
10. If they have complaints or disputes among themselves, they must complain of it to their master.
11. No one should carry weapons.
12. No one who isn't wearing an overshirt with short sleeves and his hat may take off his cross either in going in or sitting or lying.
13. No person may withdraw from the brotherhood without permission, or sit at the table without such.

14. No one may flagellate himself so that he dies or becomes ill.
15. He may give alms to the poor according to his ability.
16. No one, no matter how rich or in high standing, may reject alms out of love of God.
17. With head, heart, and mouth, he should carry on his meritorious deeds and his flagellation persistently and pray to God for the healing of all Christianity that He allows this great death to cease and forgives us of our sins.
18. If he violates one of these commands or speaks against them, he should submit to whatever punishment is decreed by the one in charge.
19. If one of the brothers dies during the duration of the flagellant journey, each should flagellate as long a time as passes if he prays three times five Pater Nosters and three times five Ave Marias.
20. We determine that each hangs his penitence garment and his whip over his lodgings in lasting remembrance of the sorrows of our Lord Jesus Christ.
21. He must in particular pledge total carnal abstinence his entire life, must watch over his matrimonial conduct, and commit no perjury.
22. All should refrain from eating meat on Wednesday.

APPENDIX B

The twenty-one archbishoprics which received copies of Clement VI's Bull, Inter sollicitudines, included the following:

Bordeaux	Touraine
Rouen	Cologne
Sens	Turin
Rheims	Mainz
Lyons	Armagh
Magdeburg	Dublin
Gnesen	Canterbury
Prague	Tuam
Treve	Cashel
Bremen	York
Tours	

2
VITA

Keith Charles Patterson

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: THE FLAGELLANTS OF THE THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH CENTURIES:
THEIR RISE AND DECLINE

Major Field: History

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Houston, Texas, March 2, 1951, the son
of Dr. and Mrs. Donald R. Patterson; married, one child.

Education: Graduated from Our Lady of the Ozarks High School,
Carthage, Missouri, in May, 1969; received Bachelor of
Arts degree magna cum laude, in History from Missouri
Southern State College, Joplin, Missouri, in 1975;
completed requirements for Master of Arts degree at
Oklahoma State University in May, 1977.

Professional Experience: Graduate teaching assistant, Oklahoma
State University, Department of History, 1975-76; member
of Phi Alpha Theta, The Medieval Academy of America, The
American Historical Association, Pi Gamma Mu, and Phi
Kappa Phi.