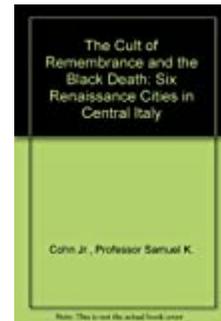




**Samuel Kline Cohn.** *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. iii + 429 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5606-8; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-4303-7.



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The recent release of a paper edition offers a chance to look again at this book, first published in 1992. As Cohn makes clear, the work is an extension, and perhaps a response to critics, of his earlier *Death and Property in Siena, 1205-1800* (1988). Through an exemplary analysis of a sample of 40,043 bequests found in 3,389 wills from Florence, Arezzo, Siena, Pisa, Perugia, and Assisi, Cohn wants to demonstrate that the surprising trends he found in Siena have resonances with the experiences in these five other central Italian towns.

In both books he argues that the second devastating fourteenth-century plague, of 1363, triggered a significant change in testamentary practices and religious sensibilities. Before 1363, he suggests, testators generally followed a Mendicant practice of spreading their bequests among numerous religious institutions. The penitential object Cohn believes is, in St. Catherine's words, "to break the earthly cell." Thus, distributing property and wealth broadly and anonymously was seen as the best way to prepare for life after death. After 1363, on the other hand, Cohn argues that individuals and families became more concerned with insuring remembrance. These new testators made many fewer bequests and preferred those sorts that fostered remembrance. This is not a classical or Burckhardtian idea of fame, but rather a

Christian and penitential desire to insure that the individual and the family are not lost and abandoned. Thus, he argues, after 1363 individuals were more careful to specify the funeral, the masses, and the charities they wished to support. Further, testators after 1363 were more likely to invest in art and chapels

This is a thoughtful and exciting book. Cohn reveals interesting and significant differences among his six towns. Some, like Pisa and Siena, changed slowly. Florence and Perugia, on the other hand, quickly adopted the new style of piety. Further, he can show interesting distinctions concerning patronage of religious art. Cohn's work should lead other scholars to ask new and interesting questions about wills and religious sensibilities in Italy. Scholars must first reconsider remembrance itself. His primary assumption is that distributing numerous bequests represents an attempt to erase, or at least ignore, memory. Yet, legacies donated to monasteries or other institutions usually meant that an individual's name was included in the institution's necrology.

Thus apparently anonymous, "mendicant-style" gifts likely implied a significant liturgical remembrance. Further, the fascinating shifts in testatory strategies Cohn has uncovered make it essential that we be able to place the will in the entire context of a testator's charitable ac-

tivities. Were the citizens of Siena or Pisa more likely to make significant gifts *inter vivos*, that is gifts well before death? It is certainly possible that with the dramatic spread of hospitals and confraternities in all these towns may have made have affected not just what, but when gifts were given. This would be especially true if a donor feared that relatives might not honor the gift. A will, after all, is only one of a number of ways that an individual might choose to convey religious or secular gifts.

Cohn's thesis of the *Cult of Remembrance* makes it

clear just why Renaissance Individualism never meant a rejection of traditional Christian ideas about death and life. He has challenged Italian historians to reconsider the significance of the transformations that characterize Renaissance Italy.

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