

*Invisibile come Dio: la vita e l'opera di Gabriele Biondo.* By MICHELE LODONE.

Pisa: Edizioni della Normale. 2020. 368 pp. €28. ISBN 978-88-7642-671-1.

This volume is the first monograph dedicated to the life and works of the secular priest Gabriele Biondo (d. 1511), who, unlike his father (the historian Flavio Biondo), has so far failed to attract significant scholarly attention. In order to contextualize Gabriele Biondo's 'silent and secluded Christian testimony' (p. 17), Michele Lodone places him against the background of the religious landscape of pre-Reformation Italy.

Lodone's book is divided into two parts. Part I examines the main events of Biondo's life in chronological order. Evidence of Biondo's upbringing in the Roman Curia is in short supply, but Lodone surveys a range of sources which together produce a portrait of a young man who was an uneasy member of Roman society. Through his discovery of controversial authors such as Angelo Clareno, Ubertino da Casale, Peter John Olivi, and Jacopone da Todi, Biondo underwent a radical conversion and arrived at a highly original understanding of Christian revelation. It was Biondo's reading of these Franciscan authors that triggered in him the desire to disentangle himself from the ties he had formed with the religious environment in Rome, leading ultimately to a profound sense of isolation (which his relocation to Modigliana did nothing to alleviate). Biondo's humanist education and familiarity with scholasticism are regrettably mentioned only in passing later in the volume (p. 260).

Lodone moves on to illustrate Biondo's varied readership, drawing upon the priest's own works and various other sources. Particularly interesting is his relationship with a young man named Giovanni; he was supposed to live with Biondo only temporarily, but, captivated by Biondo's charisma, failed to return to his monastery. This section paves the way for Lodone's discussion of Biondo's doctrine, centred on the ideal of Franciscan poverty, which had been given a radical turn by Peter John Olivi and Angelo Clareno. The key proposition of Biondo's doctrine is that self-reformation, which requires self-effacement, leads not to the pursuit of self-improvement but to the affirmation of obedience. This demands withdrawal from society and, if flight from the world is not sufficient, martyrdom.

Obedience and self-emptying are the basis for a correct understanding of the two most dramatic events in Biondo's life: his troubles with the ecclesiastical authorities and conflict with Savonarola and his followers. Despite the paucity of details concerning the trial, it seems that the accusations made against Biondo and his *Ricordo* by an ecclesiastical court presided over by the Patriarch of Venice and the Apostolic Nuncio were to do with the exterior aspects of faith, which he considered to be unnecessary and misleading. Biondo's opposition to all external and institutionalized expressions of faith led to a process of internalization. From this point of view, his criticism of corrupt religious orders was not aimed at reforming them; rather, it was the very notion of a religious order that was unacceptable to him. The dialogues of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic with God, for instance, were a private matter, which should not lead to the formation of a congregation

of followers: a *sequela Francisci* or a *sequela Dominici* (a follower of Francis or of Dominic) should not replace a *sequela Christi*. Whereas Savonarola's followers, the *Piagnoni* (Weepers), forcibly denounced and silenced any attempt to move away from the stringent rules that they had instituted, Biondo renounced all claims to leadership: there would be no Church of Gabriele Biondo, only a Church of Christ.

Part II consists of editions of Biondo's most significant writings: his treatise on meditation and its deceptions; the *Commentarius* (a Latin translation of his *Ricordo*); and a long letter, entitled *De amore proprio* (On self-love), written for the nun Alessandra degli Ariosti. These texts are presented in chronological order, accompanied by helpful notes which shed light on obscure points. Each work is also preceded by an informative and readable introduction which offers a summary of its general theme. This editorial approach proves especially useful given the extraordinarily convoluted and oxymoronic style which Biondo used to express the paradoxes and intricacies that are characteristic of a certain kind of Christian mysticism. The volume ends with an index of manuscripts, an index of names, a map of Italy highlighting the main locations in Biondo's life, a family tree, and four illustrations from Biondo's own manuscripts. In conclusion, Michele Lodone has succeeded in saving Gabriele Biondo from oblivion, while at the same time making a real advance in historical knowledge and inviting further research.

WARBURG INSTITUTE

VITO GUIDA