

An Itinerant Life in the 16th Century: Thomas Platter the Elder

Abstract

Thomas Platter (1499-1582) was a humanistic scholar and teacher of ancient languages in Basel. In his youth, he spent eight difficult years as an itinerant school boy, during which time he supported himself by begging and singing. Platter worked as a servant to a “bacchant” (a pejorative term for a university student), to whom he often gave all the bread he had earned on the streets. In order to feed himself, Platter had to sing for bread even at night. Here, Platter describes his encounter with an Ulm widow, who offered him food and a chance to warm up. Platter’s autobiography is a good source of information about itinerant lifestyles and the multi-layered social relationships associated with them.

Source

[...]

Afterwards I seldom went to school, and whenever I was supposed to go to school, I went around with the cloth. I was very hungry, because I took everything that I got to the bacchant. I hadn’t eaten even a tiny bit because I was afraid of being hit. Paul had brought in another bacchant named Achacius who was from Mainz; my colleague Hildeprant and I had to wait on them, but my colleague devoured almost everything. They chased after him in the streets and found him eating, so they told him to wash the garbage with water and then they fed him a bowl of it with water. When they saw that he had eaten some, they threw him on a bed with a cushion over his head so that he couldn’t scream. The two bacchants beat him soundly until they didn’t feel like it any more. Because of this, I was afraid, and took everything home. They often had so much bread that it turned gray [with mold]; then they cut the gray off the outside and gave it to us to eat. I was often very hungry and frostbitten, too, because I often had to go around in the dark in the middle of the night singing for bread.

I don’t want to forget, and must report that there was a pious widow in Ulm with two grown daughters, who did not yet have husbands, and a son named Paul Reling, who also did not have a wife. In winter, the widow often wrapped my feet in a warm fur, which she had laid behind the stove, to warm them when I came; she also gave me a bowl of pottage, then sent me home. I was so hungry that I chased after the dogs’ bones on the street and gnawed on them. I searched for bread crumbs in the cracks at school and ate them. After that we went to Munich again and had to beg for the money there to make up the cloth, which wasn’t even mine.

A year later we went back to Ulm again, but wanted to go home. Still, I brought the cloth with me again and asked for the money to make up the cloth. I remember that a number of people said to me, “Good grief! Isn’t the jacket made yet? I think you’re pulling a fast one.” I got out of there; I don’t know what became of the cloth or whether the jacket was made or not. [...]

Source: *Thomas Platter und Felix Platter, Zwei Autobiographien. Ein Beitrag zur Sittengeschichte des XVI. Jahrhunderts.* Edited by Dr. D. A. Fechter, Teacher at a Basel Gymnasium. Basel: Druck und Verlag von Seul

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