

Chapter 10

From Sickness and Death to Devotion and Festivity: The Plague of 1647 and Its Memory

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author analyzes the interpretations that were made of some outbreaks of plague in the Kingdom of Valencia, especially those that occurred between 1647 and 1652. Specifically, he focuses on the majority view that perceived this disease as the consequence of God's wrath towards a certain society or people, due to the continuous sins committed by its inhabitants. In this context, the saints were the best allies of a given people to intercede with God to deliver them from the plague. Thus, the author analyzes some examples of these devotions, some of the Valencian patron saints, lawyers against the plague, or festivities that took root in many Valencian towns after that wave of plague in the middle of the Baroque period.

ACTIONS TO STOP THE PLAGUE

During the 17th century, the city and kingdom of Valencia suffered an important demographic, economic, and social crisis not only motivated by political events such as the expulsion of the *moriscos* in 1609, popular revolts or the violent climate that existed within the society because of the *bandositats* (factional struggles), but also because of the impact of the plague, and more in particular that of 1647 - 1652. The diary of Josep Agramunt informs us that there were one thousand casualties: "At the end of June, 1647, the plague began, and lasted until the end of March, 1649. It was so deadly that it took a toll of twenty thousand people. Philip IV was the king of Spain at the time, Fr. Ysidoro Aliaga was archbishop in this city, the Count of Oropesa was the Viceroy and Captain General of this Kingdom," (Callado & Esponera, 2004, p.121). The account on the plague by Francesc Gavallda suggests the same number: "After such a tragedy, Valencia had twenty thousand people less" and adds that, in addition to the capital city, in the

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Kingdom of Valencia there were 46.789 deaths (Escartí, 2020, p.201). The cathedral archive curator Joan Pahoner tells us that “en el referido contagio, del qual murieron, desde el mes de agosto del dicho año 1647 hasta todo enero del siguiente de todos estados y edades, más diez y ocho mil personas [...]” (in this plague, from August 1647 to the following January, more than 18,000 people of all stations and conditions died) (quoted in Blaya & Moril, 2020, p.279). Capuchin friar Pau d’Alacant also talks about 18,000 casualties in the city of Valencia. (Escartí, 2020, p.231). Despite these numbers, what is certain is that the “contagious evil” —as it was called at the time— greatly influenced society’s fears and affected daily life for everybody, specially the popular classes, the most affected group by the plague.

Vicent Josep Escartí, in a recent book where he analyzes the mid-17th c. plague and translates into Catalan Galvaldà’s and Pau d’Alacant’s works, states that “els valencians —com la resta dels europeus en un moment o en un altre— tenien una llarga experiència en malalties contagioses epidèmiques [...]” (Valencians, as other Europeans, had a long experience with the plague) (Escartí, 2020, p.12) because before and after 1647 the population suffered other instances of the plague that affected more or less the entire Valencian territory. Special mention deserves the plague of 1348 —the black plague— that decimated the entire Europe and where in Valencia “morían diariamente 300 apestados, llegando algún día a ser mil los que murieron” (300 infected people died per day, and some days the number reached 1,000), to the point of “dexar a los heridos sin socorro, y a los muertos sin sepultura, llenando aquellos el ayre de alaridos, y estos de nuevos miasmas pútridos y pestilentes” (abandoning the infected without any help and the dead without being buried, the former yelling and the latter infecting the air with pestiferous and putrid miasmas) (Ribelles, 1804, p.7). In the 15th century, special mention deserve the plagues of 1439 and 1459, when according to Melcior Miralles 20,000 people died; in the 16th century, in addition to other cases that were more benign, we should mention the plague that accelerated the revolt of the *germanies* (1519-1523). In 1600, there was another plague that became very traumatic for Valencians, known as “the plague of Xàtiva” (“pesta de Xàtiva”), a disease that came from Castile, according to Josep Aznar:

In May, 1599 there was an outbreak of the plague in Almansa. And despite all the measures the Kingdom put in practice, when it appeared at the beginning of December, there were many people in the neighborhood of Xàtiva who got infected and died because they went back and forth to Almansa. They kept it secret until January 12, 1600, when Doctor Navarro Solà came to Xàtiva and spread the news there and in the surrounding territory (Boluda & Galiana & Pons, 1995, p.57).

Something to take into consideration in all epidemics in the Ancien Règime is the ignorance writers show about the causes and origin of the plague. We know now that a microorganism, called *Pasteurella pestis* or *Yersinia pestis*, is responsible for it, that is it affected animals like rats and infected humans through a flea that sucked the blood of an infected rat. Once it entered the human blood, it could produce internal hemorrhages, vomits, cough and fever and the infected finally died of a respiratory cardiac arrest (Escartí, 2020, p.18). But this was not known in the 17th century and the population saw their family members and neighbors die as a result of pimples or carbuncle:

...one or two pimples, a sort of carbuncle that caused fetid fevers and it broke out on the neck, underarms and thighs, and the doctors could not find good remedies to cure it because patients died at the most on the third day, and only a few got out of it, for when it entered a house, it was only a miracle to get free of it... (quoted in Blaya & Moril, 2020, p.281).

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