

Chapter 16

Cholera Epidemics in Valencia in the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

The world crisis created by COVID-19 invites us to find some precedents to it by examining past periods and situations in which our society has suffered similar circumstances. In this regard, one of the periods that show more similarities from a social and sanitary perspective is the Valencia of the 19th century, where between 1834 and 1890 there were a total of nine cholera epidemics that resulted in dozens of deaths and determined the future development of one of the main regions of the old Crown of Aragon. The author analyzes the social and cultural impact of cholera in Valencia during the 19th century and especially in the intellectual and literary world.

NINE EPIDEMIC OUTBREAKS

When looking back in history, we notice that the viral and bacterial plagues and epidemics that have affected periodically the Valencian population, in some cases in ways similar to the current Covid-19 epidemic, have been a relatively common cyclical phenomenon. Regarding the oldest of these, we find references about them in contemporary histories and chronicles (Escartí, 2020). Regarding the most recent and contemporary ones, we find information in diaries (Mompó, 2015) and periodical publications (Roca, 2020c), which frequently offer abundant details on the origin, dissemination and number of victims they caused.

Thus, we know that during the 19th century –at least between 1834 and 1890–, Valencia suffered a total of nine infectious plagues, at the rate of almost one per decade! There were nine episodes of cholera, a contagious disease, according to a description from 1855, “that is announced with fear, expected with dread, that appears with treachery, horrifies because of its appearance, torments with its sufferings and is repulsive in its misery, intimidates with contagion and threatens with death” (*Memoria* 6). In hope of offering some life lessons a balm against the so-called coronavirus that is affecting us nowadays, we

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will try to reconstruct, although briefly, the infections from the 19th century with the help of the contemporary press, in particular in what regards the city of Valencia.

The Cholera Epidemic of 1834

The first 19th-century infection we know about took place in 1834, that is at the beginning of the reign of Isabel II. According to the *Almanaque* of the journal *Las Provincias*, on July 3 of that year “for the first time our city was invaded by the Asian cholera morbus that had existed in other Spanish provinces for the last two years, creating panic and great ravage everywhere” (*Las Provincias* 1901, 133). In fact, it seems that it entered the Iberian Peninsula through the Portuguese navy: “It was brought to Vigo by a Galician caulker who had worked with the Portuguese navy” (*ibid.*) we are assured by the journal.

In Valencia, cholera entered through the Grau where at the end of July the presence of an infected sailor was detected. Later, “the epidemic advanced little by little [...] and it produced a great mortality during August” (*ibid.*) In September the death rate went considerably down. Nonetheless, the authorities did not consider it was fully eradicated until November of that year. Finally, we know the total death count reached 5,427. And the day with the highest casualties –that is when it reached the dreadful peak– was August 25.

The Cholera of 1854-1855

Two decades later, during the summer of 1854, the entire province of Valencia experienced a second cholera epidemic. The first cases were documented in Alicante on August 18-22. Within a few weeks, the bacteria arrived to the city of the Turia river. The critical point of the disease took place in mid-October (*ibid.*).

On that occasion, the disease reached a death toll of 1,915 people. And although its effects slowed down during the month of November, it reappeared six months later at the end of May of 1855 and progressively increased its deadly ability until August. Thus, the second wave was more deadly than the first one, as it caused the life of 2,073 victims. Finally, by the month of September it had disappeared completely (*ibid.*).

Something interesting to highlight is that the cholera of 1854-1855 had an unusual protagonist, the medieval miracle worker St Vicent Ferrer. It is important to mention that, as far the contemporary Valencians were concerned, the number of victims would have been higher were it not for the small well located at the birth house of the famous preacher.

It happened that in view of the desperation caused by the devastating effects of the cholera and the lack of medical solutions to avoid such mortality rate, in 1854 a large group of citizens of Valencia and also many foreigners began to go to the house of St Vicent Ferrer in order to drink, take with them and distribute water from its well. Because this water sprang out at the birth house of the Dominican preacher, it was considered blessed and salutary, that is miraculous.

Thus, in the midst of a health crisis and desperation, in 1854 the so-called “pouet de Sant Vicent” (St Vincent’s little well) became a refuge and source of hope for thousands of inhabitants who, feeling scared about the lethal effects of the cholera epidemic, did not know what to do nor what measures to adopt, other than asking for the help of the most famous Valencian miracle-worker.

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