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Plague Spreaders: Political Conspirators and Agents of the Devil. A Study of Popular Belief in 17th-Century Milan

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

Alessandra Brivio

Committee in charge:

Professor Ulrike Strasser, Chair
Professor Nancy Caciola, Co-Chair
Professor Cathy Gere
Professor Jack Greenstain
Professor Janet Smarr

2017

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Co-Chair

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

DEDICATION

This dissertation is in memory of Professor John Marino, who first believed in the potential of my research and guided me through the tumultuous first four years of graduate school.

It is also dedicated to *papà* Romano, who for the last seven years has religiously asked me every month if I was done with school. *Papà, finalmente ho finito!*

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In Milano, I must acknowledge the archivists at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, and in particular Nino Cellamaro, who went above and beyond his responsibilities to help me complete my research.

Least by not last, this dissertation is the fruit of family labor: the endless encouragement and support received from my husband, Jasper Giammarinaro and my children, Alessio and Giulia. They all kept me on task and never complained despite my many absences during the course of the last seven years. And my best friend Jennifer Bratton, who has been my greatest supporter and continued to care for my children when I needed to focus on my work.

It ‘takes a village’ to write a dissertation!

VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Plague Spreaders: Political Conspirators and Agents of the Devil. A Study of Popular Belief in 17th-Century Milan

by

Alessandra Brivio

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Ulrike Strasser, Chair

Professor Nancy Caciola, Co-Chair

This dissertation focuses on the broader questions regarding the response to natural calamities in the early modern period and on the popular reception of plague literature. The point of entry for my research is the plague outbreak of 1630 and in particular a curious phenomenon that took place in Milan, Italy. A belief begun spreading that people assisted by demons were using a poisonous concoction to spread the plague. The episode became a cause célèbre thanks to Alessandro Manzoni who told the story of the plague-spreaders to criticize the faulty judicial system which tried and executed the plague spreaders based on superstitious beliefs rather than reason. The little scholarship available on the topic has often conflated the events of 1630 with witchcraft. In my dissertation, I contend that the phenomenon of plague spreading exemplifies the synthesis of complex popular beliefs that characterized the Milanese "*Seicento*", and contemporaries did not perceive it simply as a form of witchcraft. I join the revisionist effort of the last forty years that has tried to bring light to the history of Milan during a century that, until the 1980's, was labeled as a culturally "dark" period of Spanish domination, and for this reason neglected.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Italian Wars (1494-1539), the fate of the State of Milan was intimately tied to the struggle between the major European powers to control Italy. During the first three decades of the sixteenth century the ambitions of the King of France, Francis I and of the Emperor Charles V were mitigated by the attempts of the last heirs of the Sforza family to maintain their power over the state of Milan. But, when Duke Francesco Sforza II died without heirs in 1535, Charles V officially extended his rule on the Duchy of Milan opening an era of Spanish control that lasted until the XVIII century.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the administration of the State of Milan was controlled by a mix of new organs of Spanish government and old municipal structures originated at the time of the Milanese commune and the Visconti's *signoria*. The highest officer of the Spanish government was the governor (*governatore)*, who was appointed directly by the Spanish king every three years. He reported directly to the king and performed the diplomatic duties typical of a head of state. Immediately below the governor, the *gran cancellier* acted as a prime minister, with a vast jurisdiction over civil, juridical, and fiscal matters. He was also chosen by the Spanish crown from the Spanish and Milanese nobility, and he held his office for life. The Senate was the most important juridical organ of state government. Its members were chosen from the Milanese and Spanish nobility and they had full jurisdiction over civil and criminal cases. A number of other offices controlled the particular aspects of civic government, such as treasury and minting (*Tesoreria generale* and *Giudice dei delle monete*), public order and police (*Capitano di Giustizia*), and public health (*Tribunale della sanità).*

For many decades, the historiography of Spanish Milan was influenced by the nationalist views of the nineteenth century *Risorgimento.* Intellectuals such as Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) blamed the indolence of the Spanish government for what they labeled as Milan's 'dark years.'[1] Moved by *antispagnolismo*[2]*,* that is an anti-Spanish sentiment, scholars imputed the lack of political and social progress in Milan and Naples to the bad government (*malgoverno*) of the Spanish monarchy. Furthermore, the Spanish Inquisition was considered one of the most repressive forces of religious innovation at work within the empire.[3] In the case of Milan, the Spanish Inquisition was kept at bay by the presence of two strong figures of the Counterreformation: Carlo and Federico Borromeo. Carlo was archbishops of Milan from 1564 to 1584, and his cousin Federico followed him as archbishop from 1595 until his death in 1631. Both cousins tirelessly worked on the moral reform of the city, focusing on the Christian education of the masses and on the repression of all form of magic and superstition. Overall, because of the seemingly troubled and retrograde environment caused by Spanish and Counterreformation oppression, until the 1970s historians kept busy writing about the exceptional splendor of the Republic of Venice and Florence, while Milan was forgotten.

---

[1] See Aurelio Musi, ed., *Alle origini di una nazione. Antispagnolismo e identità italiana,* (Milan: Angelo Gueri e Associati, 2003), and also Thomas Dandelet and John A. Marino, ed., *Spain in Italy:Politics, Society, and Religion. 1500-1700,* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007)

[2] See Aurelio Musi, *Anti-Spagnolismo e identita Italiana* (Milano: Guerini, 2003)

[3] Mario Tedeschi ed., *Il Mezzogiorno e Napoli nel Seicento italiano,* (Napoli: Rubettino, 2003), 27.

My study joins the ‘revisionist’ effort started in the last decades of the twentieth century by historians like Domenico Sella, Federico Chabod, Gianvittorio Signorotto, Aldo de Maddalena, and more recently Stefano D’Amico to rediscover the ‘forgotten’ city.[4] Their work focuses on the history of the political institutions and economic structures, and shows that the state of Milan played a dynamic political role within the larger Spanish empire, and that the Milanese ruling elite was able to maintain a role in the government of the city.[5]

My research contributes this scholarship by offering a view of the Milanese *Seicento* from a *microhistorical* perspective. In fact, my intent is to answer a general question about how people at the margins of the Milanese society responded to the economic challenges and catastrophic demographic losses caused by plague outbreaks. I will try to answer this question by engaging in an intensive study of the case of a group of men accused by the Milanese authorities for having intentionally spread the plague and executed in 1630.[6] Borrowing an expression used by Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, I will use a microscope to examine their trial and from there draw a more general hypothesis about people’s views and responses to plague.[7]

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[4] See Domenico Sella, *Crisis and Continuity. The Economy of Spanish Lombardy in the Seventeenth Century,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) and Aldo de Maddalena, *Dalla città al borgo.Arrivo di una metamorfosi economica e sociale nella Lombardia Spagnola.* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1982), See also Gianvittorio Signorotto, *Milano Spagnola,* (Milano: Sansoni, 1996) and Stefano D’Amico, *Spanish Milan. A city Within the Empire. 1535-1706.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

[5] Federico Chabod, *Storia di Milano nell’Epoca di Carlo V. (1535-1559),* (Milano: Einaudi, 1971), 412-413.

[6] See Siguruour Gylfi Magnùsson and Istvàn M. Szijàrtò, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice (*New York: Routledge, 2013),

[7] Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory”, in *New Perspective in Historical Writing,* ed. Peter Burke, 2nd ed. (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Probably one of the most important questions addressed by my research is to what degree the new medical theories about plague that were emerging from the intellectual debates of the beginning of the 17th century influenced popular views of the disease. Existing scholarship on the plague has addressed this question, but it focused on the influence of the medical debate about the origin of plague on the organization of stable organs of public health from a much broader perspective.[8] To my knowledge, there is no existing study that considers the impact of changing medical theories on the marginal stratum of the Milanese society. Evidence suggests that the Milanese medical elite was involved in the theoretical debate regarding new approaches to the study of the disease. These new theories challenged the authority of Galenic and Hippocratic theories using empirical observation methods. Yet, plague literature of the period shows that ideas about plague were in a state of flux and often the authors of plague treatises used a complex synthesis of classic miasmatic theories and empirical observations to explain what plague was and its origin. Were those debates and ambiguities relevant the 'uneducated' lower classes? Was their view of plague impacted by the uncertainties of medical thinking?

As I already mentioned briefly, the event that has allowed me to enter the complexity of the popular views about plague at the beginning of the 17th century is the story of a group of men – called by contemporaries *untori* - accused of having intentionally spread the plague via greasy concoctions – called *unzioni.* According to trial records, the *untori* produced and applied the grease on the walls and the doors of the city to make people sick. The most immediate question that the story of the plague spreaders raises is why. Why would some people want to intentionally spread a disease that, just in Milan, had killed almost half of its population less than 50 years earlier? The second question is how. How did the *untori* imagine they could produce an ointment capable of spreading plague? As I tried to answer these two questions, the complex worldview of the Milanese people began surfacing. The events associated with the plague epidemic of 1630 show that both the learned elite and the lower classes were influenced by the changing medical understanding of plague in very practical ways. A new ‘economy of the plague’ was developing concurrently with the new intellectual views. For better or worse, the introduction of ideas that emphasized the role of contagion in the transmission of plague made room for human agency. Thus, men seemed to become more confident in their ability to control a disease that was still considered the scourge of God against human sins.

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[8] See for example Ann Carmichael, "Contagion Theory and Contagion Practice in Fifteenth Century Milan, in *Renaissance Quarterly,* 64 no.2 (1992):213-256 and Samuel K. Cohn, *Cultures of Plague. Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,2010).

The story of the Milanese plague spreaders became a cause célèbre thanks to Alessandro Manzoni who published it in 1842 as an appendix to a revised edition of his historical novel *I Promessi Sposi.* Before him, Pietro Verri had used the trial against the *untori* in his *Osservazioni sulla Tortura* published in 1769 as evidence for his argument against the use of judicial torture. [9]

The work of both authors is a product of the Lombard Enlightenment. Verri used the records of the trial to support his claims about the abuse of judicial torture and its ineffectiveness in eliciting the truth. Verri starts from the assumption that the *untori* were innocent and had confessed to having spread the pestiferous concoctions only because of being tortured. He critiqued the faulty judicial system, which he claimed had been put in motion by the irrational accusation of the people in Milan. In a similar manner, Manzoni presents the *untori* as victims of a society influenced by superstitious beliefs rather than reason. Overall, both authors studied the case of the *untori* from the point of view of the judicial system and judged the accusations against the *untori* irrational. Overall, Verri and Manzoni overlooked the value of what the defendants confessed because they simply considered it the product of a faulty system.

Yet, the trial against the *untori* offers an extraordinary opportunity to observe the cultural dynamics of the lower classes during a particularly dramatic crisis. In my research, I came to realize that the phenomenon of the *unzioni* was not the expression of irrational views or superstitious beliefs. On the contrary, it showed the impact that the changing medical views about plague had outside the intellectual circles. In fact, the circulation of new ideas regarding the contagious nature of plague, together with a growing interest in the experimentation with the occult powers of nature, made room for a view of plague as an instrument that could be exploited for personal gain.

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[9] Alessandro Manzoni, *I Promessi Sposi. Testo del 1840-1842,* ed. Teresa Poggi Salani (Milano: Casa del Manzoni, 2013) and Pietro Verri, *Memorie storiche sulla economia pubblica della Stato di Milano* (Milano, 1804).

The idea of exploiting plague was intimately tied to the particularly difficult economic conjuncture of the 1620's. The crisis of the Milanese economy, aggravated by the famine, caused a dramatic spike in poverty, bringing the socio-economic structure of the city on the verge collapse in 1629. Modern scholarship has considered the long term socio-economic consequences of plague outbreaks, especially during the late Middle Ages,[10] but in my dissertation, I look at the consequences of plague outbreaks at a microeconomic level, and during the short period. Evidence from the Milanese plague outbreak of 1630 shows that the repercussions of quarantine measures on the local small-scale economy were dramatic, and that the lower classes feared and resisted the implementation of those public health measures. The phenomenon of the *unzioni* can be read as the consequence of the collapse of the Milanese economy during the pestilence of 1630. In fact, while some people resisted quarantine measures to protect their income and property causing what contemporaries viewed as an unintentional diffusion of the plague, the *untori* chose to intentionally spread the plague to make a profit. People seemed to have feared poverty and hunger more than they feared plague.

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[10] See David Herlihy, ed. Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977) and "Population, Plague and Social Change in Rural Pistoia, 1201–1430,", in *The Economic History Review*, 18: 225–244. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0289.1965.tb02273.x and John Saltmarsh, "Plague and Economic Decline in England in the Later Middle Ages"*,* in *Cambridge Historical Journal, 7*(1), 23-41.

Finally, the underlying question that my work addresses is how contemporaries imagined that plague could be spread via a manmade concoction. The answer to this question will make a necessary distinction between the views of the ‘educated’ elite and that of the populace, but it is noteworthy that people on both sides of the social spectrum believed in the pestilential nature of the concoction. Yet, since contemporaries still believed that plague was first of all a manifestation of God’s wrath against the sins of men, did they also associate the undertakings of the *untori* with the realm of the supernatural? Did the authorities or the common people imply the presence of a compact between the *untori* and the devil? Or did they believe that the *untori* could produce the ointment using their knowledge of the occult powers of the natural world?

Modern scholarship has only superficially addressed these questions and in most cases completely conflated the phenomenon of plague spreading with witchcraft, making a quick association between the witches’ brews and the pestilential ointment. In his article about witchcraft in Geneva, William Monter discusses of a similar phenomenon of intentional plague spreading found in Geneva during the second half of the sixteenth century. Monter describes the phenomenon as a ‘particular’ category of witchcraft.[11] Probably influenced by the work of Monter, Brian Levack places plague spreading in the same category as witchcraft.[12] More recently, William Naphy picked up the study of the phenomenon of plague spreading in Geneva where Monter had left it. Monter admitted that the phenomenon of plague spreading lacked most of the typical elements of witchcraft and eventually treated it as a special category of witchcraft, but Naphy takes a step further from Monter. In fact, Naphy argues that although contemporaries might at some point have conflated witchcraft and plague spreading, but "the melding was never complete."[13] He concludes that it would be a reductionist claim to say that plague spreading was a form of witchcraft. Instead he argues that when the intentional plague spreading phenomenon first appeared in Geneva in 1530 and 1545, the defendants did not make any allusions to the supernatural in their confessions and the magistrates were not looking for it.

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[11] William Monter, “Witchcraft in Geneva. 1537-1662” in *The Journal of Modern History,* Vol. 43, No. 2, June 1971, pp. 179-204.

My study of the Milanese phenomenon as it appeared in 1630 supports Naphy's argument, in that a close look at the confessions of the *untori* reveals that they considered the concoction of the ointment an operation done completely in the *natural* realm. Even when one of the alleged plague spreaders confessed to having had an encounter with a demon, his account of the meeting does not contain the elements typical of witchcraft, but surprisingly it includes details typical of ritual magic.[14] Evidence suggests that contemporaries recognized the work of the *untori* as the expression of the eternal struggle between good and evil. The *untori* were victims of the deceit of the devil, who lured them into believing that they could master the natural world, and even plague, to their own purposes. Thus, the *untori* did not interact with the devil in the same way as witches did. They did not participate to Sabbats, nor renounced to their faith to enter into a pact with the devil. Instead, having learned the occult powers of nature, they decided to use their knowledge in the most despicable way: to make a profit.

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[12] Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe,* second ed. (New York: Longman Publishing, 1995)

[13] William Naphy, *Plague, Poisons and Potions. Plague-Spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.4.

[14] Ritual magic (also known as ceremonial magic) was a branch of magic interested in the control of spirits accomplished with the use of prayers and spells, or other elaborated ceremonies (hence the name 'ritual'). See E.M. Butler, *Ritual Magic,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949).

As stated at the beginning, the main question of my research is if the lower classes were influenced by the changing medical views about plague. The typical problem of this type of investigation into popular culture is the scarcity of written sources that record the views of the common people Trial records remain one of the most important sources of investigation because they recorded the voices of defendants and witnesses. Although these records have to be considered with caution because they were transcribed by a notary who could have unintentionally added his biased perception of the depositions, they still leave the modern reader important clues into the life of the early modern lower classes.

My research on the phenomenon of intentional plague spreading is based mainly on three types of sources: the records of the trial against the *untori,* the chronicles of the plague of 1630 written by Giuseppe Riapamonti, Alessandro Tadino, Agostino Lampugnano, and Federico Borromeo, and finally archival documents produced by government official, and in particular by the public health board (*Tribunale della Sanità*). Each of the sources present a set of problems. The records of the trial against the *untori* are not the original minutes transcribed during the interrogation, but they are the copy of those original documents produced by the court for the defense of one of the defendant. There is sufficient evidence indicating that some parts of the trial are summaries and not *verbatim* copies of the original transcript. This source is the only surviving document that allows us to hear the point of view of the men accused of being plague spreaders, and despite possible gaps, it still remains a rich and detailed transcript of the trial. On the other hand, the chronicles are written by upper class men who had witnessed the events. While the authors provide important information on how the city as a whole responded to the threat posed by the *untori,* their accounts are often tainted by their biased views. For example, the cleric Agostino Lampugnano wrote the earliest account of the plague and of the case of the *untori*, but his writing is filled with moralizing remarks. The same is true for Federico Borromeo's account (he was the archbishop of Milan in 1630).

From a methodological point of view, the main challenge was to place each testimony recorded in the trial records under the microscope avoiding the temptation to 're-try' the *untori*. I examined each source carefully, always considering the context in which it was produced and the possible motives behind certain claims. To gain a better understanding of the dynamics that might have influenced each testimony, it was crucial to reconstruct the social network surrounding each witness of the events of 1630, and fortunately, the trial records contain rich details that allowed me draw a clear map of the network surrounding the plague spreaders. It was also very important to consider to the witnesses' confessions not as individual monologues, but as parts of a dialogue with the magistrate. Doing so, I was able to identify claims that had been influenced by the leading questions of the authorities. Finally, the plurality of chronicles of the plague outbreak of 1629-30 provides a view of the events from different angles that, when are pieced together, offer a comprehensive interpretation of the Milanese society and their understanding of the phenomenon of the *unzioni,* in spite of their individual biases. Overall, each clue led me to the formulation of reasonable hypothesis to make sense of what the protagonists of the story were claiming and, at the end, draw general conclusions about the interaction between elite and popular plague cultures.

The dissertation is organized in five chapters. The first chapter points to the complexity that characterized the understanding of plague during the early modern period. In this chapter, I argue that the intersection of traditional religious views of plague as the manifestation of the wrath of God, with the controversial debates regarding the origin of plague resulted in delays and ambiguities in the diagnosis of the disease.

Chapter two considers the impact of the plague outbreak of 1630 on the already struggling Milanese economy. Here I suggest that especially at the beginning of the epidemic, when the number of victims was still low, the medical uncertainties regarding the diagnosis of true plague were used by both the ruling elite and the lower classes to resist the implementation of those plague containment measures that they knew would completely destroy their commercial activities.

In the third chapter, we finally meet the *untori,* and based on the evidence provided by the trial records, I will argue that the work of the *untori* indicates that the interest in the experimentation with the occult powers of nature had reached the lower classes. This probably happened thanks to the circulation of popular literature adapted from the more sophisticated ‘Books of Secrets’, which were intended to disclose the secret of natural magic only to a ‘learned’ audience.

Chapter four explores the motivations behind intentional plague spreading. Here we will see that the expectation of the magistrate diverged from what the *untori* actually confessed. While the *untori* confessed that their main motivation was financial (for different reasons they expected to make a profit from the continuation of the disease), the magistrate was convinced that they were part of a larger political conspiracy, led by a foreign prince. Despite their differences, it is noteworthy that both the magistrates and the *untori* recognized the instrumental role of the disease. One way or the other, plague was considered an exploitable resource and no longer an uncontrollable natural force.

Finally, chapter five concludes this study of the phenomenon of the *unzioni* by looking at how the Catholic worldview offered a way to explain it as the manifestation of the spiritual struggle between good and evil. In this chapter, I will argue that the teachings offered by the School of Christian Doctrine had a profound influence on the way the common people imagined the devil. I will suggest that the collective imagination saw the *untori* as willing victims of devil’s scheme. Stories circulating in Milan about encounters with demons during the plague of 1630 do not contain the elements typical the interaction between the devil and witches.

Instead, they seem to suggest that during those meetings, the people’s moral character was put to the test by the devil, who deceived them into sin with the lure of riches. The *untori* did not renounce their faith to worship the devil like witches did. Yet, they represented the abomination of sin and were a warning against moral corruption.

Chapter 1

Identifying the Plague in Early Modern Milan

It took a long time for humanity to determine the cause behind the plague that had been ravaging societies across Eurasia for centuries.[15] In 1894 Alexander Yersin, a Franco-Swiss physician working at the Pasteur Institute in Paris finally isolated the bacteria (*Yersinia pestis)* believed to have caused the death of millions of Europeans during the course of almost four centuries, since its first appearance in 1348 until the end of the eighteenth century.[16] Modern epidemiology has discovered that bubonic plague is a zoonotic disease and that during the medieval and early modern period it was transmitted from rats to men via rat fleas (*Xenopsylla cheopis*) that inoculated the infected rat blood into humans with their bites.[17]

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[15] The Latin etymology of the term plague is interesting. In its original translation, *plaga,* meant 'blow, stroke', which referred to the Roman view of plague as blow from the gods. The Christian worldview of plague re-signified this classic notion using Old Testament passages to support the idea that plague was first of all a manifestation of God's wrath against the sins of mankind.

[16] The bacterium was first classified by Yersin as *Bacterium pestis* and only in 1970 reclassified as *Yersinia pestis*

[17] A zoonotic disease is a disease transmitted from animals to human. It is important to note that the role of the rat flea in the transmission of plague during early modern time has been questioned by recent interdisciplinary studies. Scholars considered the possibility that other vectors (such as the human flea) could have been involved in the rapid diffusion of plague. In addition, pneumonic plague, which was a very virulent form of plague localized in the lungs, was transmitted from man to man via infected droplets of saliva. See J. F. D. Shrewsbury*, A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970), Introduction; Cipolla, *Il pestifero e contagioso morbo,* 118-120 and R.S. Bray, *Armies of Pestilence. The Impact of Disease in History.* (New York: Barns and Noble, 1996), Chapter 6.

Bubonic plague is the ‘villain’ of the events that unfolded in Milan during the spring and summer of 1630. It ended up killing almost forty percent of the population of Milan,[18] and like all villains, the disease remained elusive, causing strife among medical practitioners and public health authorities that struggled to agree on its diagnosis. The purpose here is to show how people made sense of the disease without the comprehension of the bacteriological agents responsible for it. Not knowing what Alexander Yersin would discover two centuries later, the medical elite of northern Italy held complex, dynamic views of the plague that incorporated both spiritual and material elements. Those views ended up making room for the inclusion of human agency as an important instrument in the dissemination of the disease. In fact, the convergence of classic Hippocratic and Galenic miasmatic theories with more empirical observations about the mechanics of diffusion of the disease led to an animated debate that developed during the Italian plague pandemic of 1575-78 and divided the intellectual circles in Northern Italian universities well into the seventeenth century.[19]

In this chapter, I will explore the influence of the changing views about the nature of the plague on the general experience of the plague epidemic of 1630 in Milan. I suggest that the introduction of more empirical perspectives in the understanding of the causes of plague moved the attention of the medical elite on the possible role played by human agency in the diffusion of the contagion. This shift consequently created the ideal intellectual framework for the diffusion of the belief that the plague could be ‘controlled’ by human agency, for better and for worse, by medical practitioners as well as by those who intentionally spread the disease.

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[18] Data on plague mortality in Milan during the 1629-1630 plague outbreak was taken from Carlo Cipolla, *Il pestifero e contagioso morbo*, (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2012), 123. Cipolla estimates that 130,000 people lived in Milan before the plague and that approximately 60,000 of them died of the disease in 1630.

[19] Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *Cultures of Plague: Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Chapter 6. On the Venetian medical dispute of 1576 also see Richard J. Palmer, “The Control of Plague in Venice and Northern Italy, 1348-1600” (PhD diss., University of Kent at Canterbury, 1978), Chapter 9.

The chapter is divided in three parts. The first part presents the early chronology of the epidemic and introduces the problems of the diagnosis of the disease. The second and third parts consider the complex intersection of spiritual and scientific reasoning in the explanation of the causes of plague. Finally, the last section is dedicated to the medical debate about the nature of the plague and aims at showing that the intellectual discussion held inside the universities reached the general public and influenced their experience of the epidemic, especially on its onset.

From War and Famine to Pestilence: The Progress of the Plague.

The relative peace that Milan had enjoyed since 1535 when the duchy was officially annexed to the Empire of Charles V came to an end in 1627 when the Duke of Mantua died without an heir and the crisis of succession over the Mantuan duchy reopened the century long political rivalry between France and the Holy Roman Empire. The passage of large military contingents sent by Emperor Frederick II to besiege Mantua and conquer the region of Montferrat between 1628 and 1631 had severe repercussions on the economy of Milan and its territories.[20] The continuous pillaging of undisciplined and ruthless soldiers worsened the already struggling rural economy, which was suffering the consequences of a series of bad harvests and left peasants in a state of extreme poverty and determined to leave their plots to find relief in the city.

In 1629 the steady arrival of large numbers of peasants caused a rapid deterioration of Milan's socioeconomic environment. Giuseppe Ripamonti's chronicle of the plague give us a glimpse into the world of the lower stratum of the population immediately before the outbreak of the plague

> Exhausted by the lack of food, [people] would die in the streets, or they would wander in the squares and in the churches with cadaveric faces. But the size of that unfortunate crowd did not grow smaller […]. And if the number of mendicants that were coming to the city from our countryside and hillside was not enough, many other were coming from neighboring cities and from abroad, hoping to find a safe refuge and a place where food was not missing. Deceived by the name of Milan, they ignored the desolate condition in which [the city] had fallen.[21]

We know now how poor nutrition and the disastrous sanitary conditions of the poor living in the streets created an extremely fertile ground for the diffusion of disease.

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[20] According to the contemporary historian Giuseppe Ripamonti between September 20th and October 3rd 1630 more than 35,000 German troops traversed Lombardy on their way to war in the Duchy of Mantua. Giuseppe Ripamonti, *La Peste a Milano del 1630.* Trans. Francesco Cusani. (Milano, Tipografia e Libreria Pirotta, 1841)

[21] "Sfiniti per la mancanza di cibo, cadevano morti per le strade, ovvero vagolavano per le piazze ed i tempi con faccia cadaverica. Nè scemava di numero quella turba infelice […]. E quasi non bastasse la folla de' medichi accorrenti verso la città dalle nostre campagne e colline, ve ne giungevano altresì dalle città limitrofe e dall'estero come in asilo sicuro, dove non mancherebbe alimento, illusi dal nome di Milano, ed ignorando in che triste condizione fosse caduta", Ripamonti, 14.

In order to meet the basic needs of shelter and food, the *Tribunale di Provvigione*[22] came to the conclusion that the most suitable place to care for the mendicants was the *Lazzaretto of San Gregorio*.

The *Lazzaretto* was built between 1489 and 1509 as a pest house, in response to the need of separating people affected by the plague from the healthy, and it had been used as a shelter for the poor in different occasions.[23] It was a large rectangular structure located outside the city walls. Its 288 rooms were built along an enclosed portico overlooking a vast open field. Each room measured about 22 square meters and quickly became overcrowded when, following the ordinance of the *Tribunale di Provvigione,* 9,715 people were transferred into the Lazzaretto during the first few months of 1629.[24] The overcrowded rooms, poor hygienic conditions and a scarce diet of bread and rice resulted in the spread of a serious disease inside the pest house, which caused the sudden death of about 110 people in just a few days.[25] Acknowledging that the Lazzaretto had become a breading ground for deadly ‘fevers’, the *Tribunale di Provvigione* and the *Tribunale della Sanità* decided to discharge healthy and convalescent people and transfer the sick to the hospital "Della Stella".[26] With the exception of some doubts expressed by Alessandro Tadino, the rampant disease that claimed the life of so many inside the Lazzaretto was not officially diagnosed as plague, which explains the lack of strict quarantine measures and the discharge of people from the pest house.[27]

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[22] The Tribunale di Provvigione was an important organ of civic government. It was composed by members of the local nobility and was in charge of collecting taxes, monitor the work of the magistrates, and finally guarantee the necessary supplies to the city.

[23] The last time that the Lazzaretto had been used as a shelter for the poor was in 1576, and the *Tribunale di Provvigione* used the experience of 1576 to support the recommendation of moving mendicants in the pest house.

[24] The Tribunale di Provvigione ordered the mandatory removal of mendicants from the streets. Public officers picked men and women up against and received, according to Ripamonti, two *soldi* for each person that they brought to the Lazzaretto. Ripamonti, 21.

[25] Alessandro Tadino, *Ragguaglio dell’origine et giornali successi della gran peste contagiosa, venefica, et malefica sequita nella citta’ di Milano, et suo ducato dall’anno 1629, fino all’anno 1632* (Milano, Gio. Battista Bidelli, 1642), 12.

In the meantime, Milanese public health authorities had been warned by its ministers of an outbreak of plague in some cities of the Swiss Cantons and decided to closely monitor the progress of the disease in the Alpine region. The Milanese *Tribunale della Sanità* was part of a stable system of communication that allowed the health boards of north Italian cities to coordinate their effort to fight plague.[28] In theory, public health boards were supposed to inform other cities of all cases of plague found in their territory so that other cities could implement measure of containment in order to avoid the diffusion of the epidemic in their own territory,[29] but in practice public health boards were often reticent to admit the presence of a plague epidemic, especially in its early stages. Their reticence was due in part to the fear of the economic isolation and the damages caused by the implementation of plague containment measures.[30]

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[26] Alessandro Tadino, a physician member of the Health Board, had originally opposed the idea of the Tribunale di Provvigione to amass large crowds in the Lazzaretto. He feared that the exposure to putrid air and corrupted water could cause an outbreak of plague.

[27] Alessandro Tadino and other members of the College of Physicians had opposed the enclosing of large numbers of mendicants into the Lazzaretto. They feared that the proximity of so many poor would lead to an outbreak of plague due to the weak predisposition of their bodies. For more on the association between poverty and plague see for example Brian Pullan, "Plague and perceptions of the poor in early modern Italy", in *Epidemics and ideas. Essays on the historical perception of pestilence,* ed. Terence Ranger and Paul Slack, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp 101-123.

[28] See Carlo Cipolla, *Fighting the Plague in Seventeenth-Century Italy,* (Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), Chapter 2.

[29] See Palmer, Chapter 6 and Ann G. Carmichael, "Theory and Contagion Practice in Fifteenth-Century Milan", in *Renaissance Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1991): 213-256.

In February, after being informed of the presence of plague outbreaks in the Swiss Cantons of Bern and Fribourg, the *Tribunale* issued a decree that banned all commercial exchanges with those areas. In the following months, a series of stricter restrictions and bans were imposed on commerce with the Canton of the Grisons. Beginning on October 3rd, all travellers were required to present to the guards posted at the city gates a certificate of good health (*Bolletta di Sanità)* before being granted access to enter the city.[31]

On October 20th, the Tribunale received news that the plague had crossed the boundaries of the State of Milan. A physician from Lecco, a town in the Milanese territory on the shore of Lake Como, reported several cases 'suspect of plague' (*sospetti di peste*) in the nearby cities of Chiu and Bellano. On October 26th Alessandro Tadino accompanied by Giovanni Visconte was sent by the *Tribunale* to assess the health of the people living in the mountain region north of the city by Lake Como where German troops had been stationed. On October 28th Tadino sent a letter to the *Tribunale* confirming that Chiu had indeed been hit by the plague, and that the contagion was advancing also in the neighboring areas. Tadino and Visconte continued their survey of the territories near Lecco and Como, where they found that many of the sick people there presented buboes under their armpits, in the groin, on their legs, and on their chest. In response to the news, the *Tribunale* ordered a ban on all traffic coming from those areas and posted guards on the roads that connected the city to Lecco. The hope of the *Tribunale* was to stop plague from reaching the city, by isolating it from the rest of its territory.[32]

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[30] In practice, public health boards were often reticent in admitting the presence of a plague epidemic, especially in its early stages. Their reticence was due in part to the diagnostic difficulties that are discussed in this chapter, and in part to the fear of the economic isolation and the damages caused by the implementation of plague containment measure. More on the impact of plague containment measures will be discussed in Chapter 2.

[31] *Processo agli Untori,* edited by Giuseppe Farinelli and Ermanno Paccagnini, (Milano: Garzanti Editore, 1988), 9-10.

Yet the barriers were porous, and contemporary chroniclers indicate that plague penetrated into the city in November of 1629. The vector was a soldier coming from Valtellina to visit family in Milan.[33] Shortly after his arrival, the man fell ill and was taken to the hospital, where he died suddenly. A few days after his death, all the members of the household where he had stayed also became sick and quickly died. But once again, public health authorities did not immediately recognized plague as the cause of those deaths. Chroniclers claim that it was only when the number of daily victims begun to grow at an alarming rate at the beginning of May of 1630 that both authorities and the common people admitted that plague was the culprit.[34]

The existence of permanent public health boards in the major north Italian cities and the effort to track the progress of plague, demonstrated by the investigation carried out by Alessandro Tadino in the Milanese territory, show that contemporaries recognized the need to identify plague outbreaks at their outset in order to limit the spread of the disease. So, why did it take so long for both trained medical professionals and the common people to admit that plague had reached their city? The initial widespread denial in Milan represents good evidence of the challenges inherent to the complex synthesis of theological, philosophical, and medical notions that were used to explain the nature and origin of plague at the beginning of the seventeenth century and made it difficult to pinpoint an outbreak with certainty. Furthermore, those notions were still in a state of flux, and the presence of different and often competing views help account for the seemingly inconsistent way in which people reacted to the risk of contagion. But before considering the different medical notions used to identify plague, we will take a closer look at the spiritual views that informed Milan's medical practitioners in their approach to the 1620's and 1630's epidemic outbreaks.

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[32] Tadino, 23-50. In his *Relatione,* Tadino gives a detailed account of his visits to the territories of the State of Milan. He indicates the number of sick people he found in each town, the signs and symptoms he noticed on the bodies of the victims, and whatever interaction had occurred between the inhabitants of those towns and the imperial soldiers.

[33] Valtellina was part of the mountain areas visited by Tadino where cases of plague had been reported. See Giuseppe Ripamonti, 37-38 and Alessandro Tadino, 51.

[34] Tadino, 84. Tadino claims that consensus among doctors regarding the diagnosis of the disease was first reached in April of 1630, and only in May the population at large accepted their opinion. More about this topic will be said later in this chapter.

The Spiritual Views of the Origin of Plague

The early modern Christian worldview interpreted war, famine, and pestilence as events intrinsically connected to each other and used by God to punish men for their sins.[35] The Church used apocalyptic rhetoric to define this sequence of catastrophic events as a means to punish but also, as means of redemption. Traditional theological explanations of pestilence found their origin in Old Testament passages and described plague as the last scourge employed by God to reach men's stubborn sinful hearts and hopefully cause general repentance.[36]

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[35] In the Book of Revelation, four horsemen riding on white, red, black, and pale horses announce the Last Judgement. Symbolically they represent conquest, war, famine, and death. For more on the symbolic meaning of the horsemen of the Apocalypse in the early modern era see Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Gary F. Jensen, *The Path of the Devil: Early Modern Witch Hunts* (Manham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2007), Chapter 3.

A good example of the interpretation of the plague as divine scourge can be found in rhetoric used in widely circulated booklets published in 1630 by the printer Giovanni Bidelli. Typically, the booklets were dedicated to a member of Senate or to the President of the *Tribunale della Sanità*, but the type of inexpensive binding and the language used in the booklets suggest that their audience was the general public.[37] They were written in Italian and contained different remedies and advice on how to protect oneself from plague.[38]

It is interesting to note that the spiritual causation of the plague remained a recurring theme in these booklets, and that the reader was often reminded of this spiritual premise before considering the eventual medical remedies against the plague. Let us consider a few examples: the dedication of a plague booklet published in June of 1630, has the printer address the *Vicario di Provvigione*[39] with the following words:

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[36] The idea of pestilence 'sent' by a divinity finds its origin in classic Greek and Roman thought. For more on the topic, see James Longrigg, "*Epidemics, Ideas and Classical Athenian Society,"* in Epidemics and Ideas, ed.Terence Ranger and Paul Slack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). In the Judeo-Christian tradition the sequence of sword, famine, and plague were considered a clear sign of the wrath of God, based on the Old Testament tradition in which God sent war, famine, and plague to punish the sins of the people of Israel.

[37] See, for example, the frontispiece of *Il Compagno Fedele di Bernardo Anglesi "*very useful work for those who want to be safe from the plague and know the cause of such accidents. The work contains some splendid and wonderful Secrets, easy, and of little cost, for the poor and the rich alike with information on the lifestyle to follow during these times of plague"

[38] The Biblioteca Braidense in Milan holds a small collection of these booklets all of which are published by the same printer, Giovanni Bidelli between the months of March and June of 1630. See for example the following titles: *Cause et rimedii della peste di Marco Gonzaga, Operetta contra la peste di Cristoforo Carcano, Tesoro inestimabile e corona medicinale di Martio Galasso, Compilatione delli very et fideli rimedii da preservarsi e curarsi dalla Peste, Preservatione dalla Peste di Ludovico Settala, Difesa Contra la Peste di Marcello Squarcialupi, Discorsi Preservativi e Curativi della Peste di Cesare Mocca, Trattato Breve Sopra la Preservatione e cura della Peste di Giuseppe Mugino.*

> I have no doubt that today the sins of the men have come to such a point that God had to use the sharpness of his sword against our city of Milan; because the city has been afflicted for so many years by continuous wars, and seen strange events.[40]

And in the first chapter of another booklet printed in April of 1630 we read

> We all need to rely with a good heart on holy devotion, and good works, confessing our sins without hiding them, devotedly asking forgiveness of our many serious sins, so that our God could have mercy on us[41]

And again, in the preface of one printed in June of 1630

> I would have never believed that [one day] I would see my homeland with carts transporting moribund and the cadavers and that homes would be emptied of their inhabitants. That such a horrible monster, that is the disease sent by God after war and famine, would chastise us[42]

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[39] The *Vicario di Provvigione* was the president of the *Tribunale di Provvigione,* the organ of public administration designated to the control of public rations (for example the collection, storage, and price monitoring of grains), to regulate commercial activities, and to distribute public aid.

[40] Gio. Battista Cavagnini, *Delli Veri et Fideli Rimedi da Preservarsi, & Curarsi dalla Peste* (Milano: Per Gio. Battista Bidelli, 1630)

[41] "Ricorrere dobbiamo tutti di buon cuore alla Santa Divotione, et buone opera, confessando le nostre colpe, e non iscusarle, chiedendo divotamente perdono di tanti nostril gravi peccati, e che S.D.M voglio haverci mesericordia" *Il Compagno Fedele di Bernardo Anglesi* (Milano: per Gio. Battista Bidelli, 1630), 8.

[42] Non haverei già mai creduto di vedere la mia patria, à segno, che li carri dovessero ruotare conducendo, languenti, e cadaveri. Che dovessero le case restare spogliate delli suoi habitatori. Che un mostro tanto horrendo, come è il mal detto de Dio, appresso alle guerre, e carestia, ci dovesse flagellare", Cristoforo Carcano, *Operetta Contro la Peste,* (Milano: per Gio. Battista Bidelli, 1630), 4-5.

The sources also suggest that the appearance in the sky over Milan of a comet in 1628 and one in June of 1630 aggravated the widespread sense of impending doom in the city.

> And it happened that at the end of the month of June a great comet appeared in the North, and it lasted a long time, was seen by many people, just as many witnessed eclipses of the sun and the moon; these were evident signs of the upcoming punishment in the form of a pestilence, that our Lord wanted to send us, because people had lost all good reason, judgement, prudence, and piety, and sins were growing daily[43]

It is important to note that secular elite also acknowledged in their writings that the ultimate cause of pestilence was religious: the subversion of the Christian values and morals of the community, which brought forth the wrath of God. These men interpreted the occurrence of unusual celestial phenomenon as an early warning sign sent by God to urge them to correct their sinful ways.

In the meantime, the Church urged the faithful citizens to show their dismay with public and private acts of atonement aimed at re-establishing the spiritual order that had been disrupted by sin. This apocalyptic rhetoric can be perceived in some of the plague booklets printed in Milan that seem to emphasize the idea that the ultimate purpose of plague was not to destroy humanity, but rather to prepare people for the impending final judgment. In his plague booklet the bishop of Mantua, Marco Gonzaga, claimed that plague was a "censure [that] straightened faith,"[44] and the first chapter places particular emphasis on the theological explanation of plague and offers evidence of the eschatological significance and purpose of plague:

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[43] "Apparve nel fine del mese di Giugno una Cometa molto grande verso Settentrione, & durò longo tempo, vista da più persone, come ancora si viddero alcuni eclissi, ed in particolare del Sole e della Luna; inditio manifesto del future castigo della peste, che N.S. ci voleva mandare, perchè hormai si vedeva persa la ragione, il giudizio, la prudenza, la carità nelle creature, & gli peccati ogni giorno maggiormente crescevano". Alessandro Tadino, *Ragguaglio delle origine et giornali successi della gran peste ,* (Milano, per Filippo Ghisolfi. Gio. Battista Bidelli, 1648), 110.

> We should remember that all [that is happening] had to happen, because the eternal truth cannot lie, and his mouth announced that before the coming of the universal judgment wars, earthquakes, plagues, and other signs would come as monitors and interpreters of Divine justice, so that we would wake up at the sound of such dreadful voices, and the fear of God would fill us[45]

In general, the Church expected people to welcome God's punishment with patience, recognizing their need to perfect their faith and virtue through acts of penance.[46] Thus, during times of plague, religious authorities urged people to correct their wrongs in very practical ways: for example by showing piety by taking care of the sick and the poor, controlling their temper when angry, being generous, and finally, the wicked were called to change their ways.[47] Seen in this way, plague acquired a strong redemptive purpose and was supposed to speak to the conscience of each man and bring salvation to his soul through acts of penance.

In Milan, the eschatological interpretation of the plague fitted very well with the moral reform effort carried out by Carlo and Federico Borromeo during their respective tenures as Archbishops of Milan from 1564 and 1631.[48] In his chronicles, Giuseppe Ripamonti paints a vivid picture of the piety of the Milanese people:

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[44] "*La censura ha raddrizzato la fede",* Marco Gonzaga, *Cause et rimedii generali della Peste ed altre Infermita,* ed. Gio. Battista Bidelli (Milano, Gio. Battista Bidelli, 1630),19.

[45] "*Si ricordi, che tutto questo avvenir doveva, non potendo mentire l'eterna verità, dalla cui bocca uscì, che prima che'l giudicio universal si facesse, verrebbero guerre, terremoti, pesti, & altri segni, come intimatori, & interpreti della giustizia Divina, accioche noi ci svegliassimo al suono di cosi spaventose voci, e'l timor di Dio Fosse in Noi,"* Gonzaga, 13.

[46] Gonzaga,11.

[47] Gonzaga,11.

[48] Carlo Borromeo was archbishop of Milan from 1564 until his death in 1584. His cousin Federico Borromeo became archbishop of Milan in 1595 and remained in Milan until his death in 1631.

> They went barefoot to visit the churches, covered with sackcloth, and whipped their backs until they were copiously bleeding, staining their garment in purple as a symbol of their sorrow and penance. Many went around during the day, but many more were going around at night, unknown and lonely; then they would gather in crowds and cried together, prayed, flagellated [their backs][49]

Since the fourteenth century, these manifestations of public contrition were common scenes during plague outbreaks,[50] and their occurrence in 1630 Milan suggests the persistence of a strong response to call of the Church on the part of people, despite the fear of contagion. Furthermore, the performance of public acts of penances points to a special communal aspect of atonement. In addition to private prayer and fasting, the Church insisted on the importance of the participation of the faithful to public celebrations such as Mass, processions, and special visits to certain churches

Yet, what truly sets the Milanese experience apart from other Italian cities is that Milanese public health authorities did not oppose religious assemblies, which were generally considered very dangerous in times of epidemics. On the contrary, the *Tribunale della Sanità* and the Senate pressured the archbishop

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[49] "*Andavano a visitare le chiese a piedi scalzi, coperti di sacco, battendosi il dorso col cilicio, finchè ne grondava in copia il sangue, e tingevano di porpora quella veste di dolore e penitenza. Molti giravano di giorno coperti di sacco, assai più, durante la notte, andavano ignoti e soli; poi, riunendosi a schiere, insieme piangevano, oravano, flagellandosi [...],* Giuseppe Ripamonti*, La Peste a Milano del 1630*. Trans. Francesco Cusani. (Milano, Tipografia e Libreria Pirotta, 1841), 247.

[50] For more on the flagellant movement see Richard Kieckhefer, "Radical Tendencies in the Flagellant Movement of the Mid-Fourteenth century," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies,* IV (1974): 157.

Federico Borromeo to organize a procession in honor of his cousin and previous archbishop of Milan, San Carlo Borromeo.[51] Even if they restricted the participation to the procession only to healthy Milanese citizens by closing city gates and ordering the quarantine of those who were suspected of being infected with plague, this occurrence suggests secular authorities at a minimum collaborated with, if not encouraged, the Church in the implementation of public intercessory rituals.

The willingness to involve religious authorities can also be seen in a letter that the president of the *Tribunale della Sanità* sent to the Spanish governor

> If human prudence, or better weakness, is not enough to contrast this terrible [evil], our *Tribunale* will look for the help of the arm of the Divine Mercy, and we will resort to it with public demonstrations, which are more adequate than the private [ones] used so far, since we believe that the public scourge of the plague is the voice of God, who will be satisfied only by a public appeal [to his mercy] of the people. For this reason, we would gladly ask the Cardinal Archbishop to [organize] devout processions, which should be followed by the members of the *Tribunale della Sanità,* to make the purpose of the procession evident to all.[52]

At the same time, in a general letter to his clergy on May 16the, 1630, Federico Borromeo instructed his secular clergy to collaborate with the *Tribunale*

> I entrust you with the responsibility to warn [people] from the pulpit, during your visits to the sick, and in any other place you will find appropriate, of what grave sin they commit when they keep their sickness or other people's sickness secret for fear of some inconvenience, or harm, or other reasons, or if they hide infected or

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[51] Antonio Ferrer to the *Tribunale della Sanità,* June 2, 1630. ASM, Sanità P.A. cartella 286.

[52] "*Se l'humana prudenza, ò meglio dire debolezza non basta a contrastare à questo si grave male, il nostro Tribunale aiutandosi con il braccio della Divina misericordia a quella ricorrendo con pubblica dimostrazione più adeguata che le altre secrete sin'hora usate, stimando, che il pubblico flagella di peste sia voce di Dio che chiama pubblica sodisfazzione dal Popolo; onde volentieri pregherebbe il sig. Cardinale Archivescovo di qualche devote processioni, le quali fossero dal Tribunale della Sanità accompagnate, occiò si intendesse pubblicamente la causa di esse*" Tribunale della Sanità al Governatore Spinola, 23 Marzo 1630. Archivio di Stato di Milano, Sanità Parte Antica, Busta 278.

> potentially infected goods, because their actions are not only detrimental for the sick who will die without the necessary remedies for their soul and body, but they are also detrimental to public health[53]

It is very important to note that this type of collaboration between secular and religious authorities was not present in other Italian regions where public health authorities discouraged and in many instances prohibited all public gathering during plague outbreaks in order to limit the diffusion of contagion. This even led to clashes in places like Florence and its countryside where the tensions between Florentine public health officials and religious authorities led to acts of insubordination on the part of the clergy who insisted on the necessity of continuing to celebrating public Mass and organizing devotional processions as the only way to placate God's wrath.[54]

In Milan, on the other hand, we find further evidence of the predisposition of public health authorities towards the recourse to religious measures in the intercessory prayers commissioned by the Milanese magistrates and written by notable clergymen. [55] These newly written prayers were often published with classic litanies at the beginning of plague pamphlets and are the expression of the shared belief that medical remedies went necessarily hand in hand with spiritual ones.[56] A good example is a prayer in a plague book published by in June of 1630:

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[53] *V'incarichiamo con ogni miglior modo che per parte vostra avvisiate spesse volte dall'Altare, nelle visite dell'infermi, e dove giudicherete ispediente, quanto gravemente pecchino quelli, che per paura di qualche incomodo, danno, o altra causa, tengono nascosto il morbo contagioso proprio, o d'altri, o pure occultano robbe parimenti infette, o sospette di contagion perchè ne risulta non solo il danno particolare degli infermi, che muoiono senza gl'opportuni remedij dell'anima, ed del corpo ma anche il danno pubblico*." Federico Borromeo to the parish priests in occasion of the plague, May 16, 1630. Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano, Q 140 sup.

[54] For more on the tensions between secular and religious authorities in Florence and its countryside see Carlo M. Cipolla, *Chi ruppe i rastelli a Monte Lupo?* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1977). and of the same author *Faith, Reason, and the Plague in Seventeenth-Century Tuscany* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979)

[55] Ripamonti, 249.

> Everlasting and Omnipotent God, thanks to the merits and prayers of your glorious confessor Saint Rocco, you have already revoked the grave sentence of pestilence, through which the Just Judge and Loving Father has punished the sins of men, and doing so you were trying to bring them to you, just as you did in the past during the time of the great King David. Please have mercy on your children, not only that they would remain free from pestilential suffering, but that they could be safe from any other illness, by which they could move away from your most holy grace. Amen[57].

Public health authorities recognized the need for the intercession of the church to restore the spiritual health to the city while the Church in turn recognized the need for physical care of the afflicted. Carlo Borromeo himself, on the occasion of the plague of 1576, wrote detailed instructions to his secular and regular clergy on how to continue to perform their religious duties in times of plague but also reminded them of the importance of attending to the physical needs of the people. His successor Archbishop Federico Borromeo reissued the same instructions during the outbreak of 1630, namely “the parish priest should make sure that the needs of the poor and of the sick are met. Inculcate the rich their obligation to satisfy the needy with public and private alms. The clergy should be the first to set the example [of charity].” [58]

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[56] “O Sempiterno, & onnipotente Dio, che già per i meriti, & preghiere del Glorioso Confessor tuo S. ROCCO, ti degnasti rivocar quella grave sentenza della pestilenza, con la quale à guise di giusto Giudice, & di Padre amorevole gastigasti i peccati de gli huomini, & con questo cercavi di tirargli à te, si come già anticamente facesti nel tempo del Gran Rè David. Cócedi questa grazia à i Figliuli tuoi, che non solamente restino liberi da questo Pestilente supplicio, ma da ogni altro male, con il quale potessero discostarsi dalla gratia tua santissima. Amen, Cavagnini, 9.

[57] Cavagnini, p.9

Along similar lines, Borromeo enforced in an edict of July 2, 1630 a papal bull issued in 1629 that encouraged the fulfillment of the material needs of the community with the promise of spiritual blessings. Borromeo offered different types of indulgences to those people who took special care of the needs of the poor and sick. For example, plenary indulgence and full remission of sin was granted to those who, on the second Sunday of July attended Mass, received Holy Communion, and “performed acts of spiritual or material service to help the sick or those suspected of plague, for example visiting, comforting, medicating, giving alms or administering the Holy Sacraments, praying for them, or serving them in any other way.”[59]

It is evident from the documents examined so far that the Church intervention was not separated by or overlapped with and supported the practical effort of secular authorities, on both plague containment and public welfare level. Although it is not possible to gauge with precision how the populace responded to the appeal of the Archbishop to care for the needs of the community, what can be said is this: to understand the plague as a form of divine punishment did not imply fatalistic surrender, but, on the contrary, sparked actions of penance that ranged from public rituals down to acts of charity.

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[58] *“Si preoccupi il parroco che i poveri e i malati non manchino di aiuti. Si inculchi ai ricchi l’obbligo di sopperire ai bisognosi con elemosine pubbliche e private. Che i parrochi e gli Ecclesistici siano i primi a dare l’esempio” Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Q 140 sup.*

[59] “*Concede l’Indulgenza plenaria e remissione dei peccati a quelli che in quel giorno communicato fanno qualche opera in servizio e aiuto o spirituale, o corporale di detti poveri infermi, o sospetti di peste, come a dire, o visitandoli, o consolandoli, o medicandoli, o facendoli limosina, o sominístrandoli i Santissimi Sacramenti, facendo orazione per loro, o servendoli in altro modo.*” Urbanus Papa VIII, *Bolla del Giubileo Universale,* 1629. ASM, Sanità P.A., Cartella 286 and Federico Borromeo, *Bando della Concessione delle Indulgenze in occasione della peste,* July 2, 1630, Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano

Miasmatic Theories

The appearance of the comets, just like eclipses and other planetary alignments, were taken as a sign with a double meaning. On the one hand, as we just heard, it was understood as an astrological sign sent by God to prepare the people for the upcoming punishment. On the other hand, people also ascribed to them more than a divine meaning, seeing them as one of the causes of the miasma. In fact, ancient theories going back to Hippocrates imputed the corruption of the air to particular planetary phenomena, implying a direct correlation between earthly and celestial events, and were later incorporated into the Christian worldview that ultimately submitted all events to divine will and purpose.

We see the complexity of this theoretical approach expressed by Tadino's work:

> And it is sure that this major destruction had been predicted by the lunar conjunction of Saturn with Mars and Gemini and in Virgo, not prevented by Jove and Venus, and also by the conjunction of Jove and Mars… From these characteristics, the astrologers observed that the effects of the planetary eclipses were not only earthquakes and inundations, but in addition to famine, the plague and other malign corruptions of the air[60].

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[60] "E per certo a questa gran strage si sarebbe potuto addattare quella predittione Lunare per la congiontione di Saturno con Marte in Gemini, & in Vergine, da Giove, & Venere non impedita, & ancora per la congiontione di Giove, & Marte…. Da questi aspetti gli Astrologi hanno osservato essere occorso per gli'Eclissi delli Luminari non solamente terremoti, & inondazioni, ma oltre la penuria della fame, la peste ancora, & altri maligni accidenti dell'aria, per le turbazioni delle Stelle." Tadino, 12.

Hippocratic and Galenic theories are certainly informing Tadino's views. According to classic miasmatic models the origin of plague was found in the particular corruption of the air triggered by either remote (particular planetary conjunction) or local events (opening of graves, standing water, etc.). [According to this theory], the inhalation of putrefied air caused a fatal corruption of the humors that, once it reached the heart, caused the rapid death of all those who were exposed to the same polluted air.

Hippocrates' theory was based on a very simple assumption: when many people died showing similar symptoms in a short period of time, the cause of the disease must have been something that they were all exposed to, like air or water. His logic was simple and rational and it became the theoretical foundation of classic theories of disease. In the second century AD, building on Hippocrates' foundation, Galen developed a comprehensive theory about the origin of plague in a series of treatises. For example, he described the persistence of hot and humid climate as the ideal condition for the development of plague and believed that the atmosphere could be also poisoned by the occurrence of events such as the opening of graves, and the presence of marshes.[61]

The continuous reappearance of plague in the fourteenth century posed new challenges to classic theories as it became evident to the medical elite that the ancients had never experienced such a devastating disease as the Black

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[61] See Melvin Santer, *Confronting Contagion: Our Evolving Understanding of Disease,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44-50.

Death.[62] In response to the general sense of disorientation caused by the massive death toll, during the fourteenth and fifteenth century new medical literature flourished offering explanations for the causes of the plague based on the observation of signs and symptoms manifested on the bodies of the ill. Nevertheless, the new theories continued to rely on the classic Hippocratic and Galenic notions of disease to explain the origin and nature of plague. For example, physicians read the appearance of the typical black buboes (hence the term bubonic plague) in the groins, neck, and armpits, as the indication of the attempt of the body to expel humors in order to re-establish its balance, which was a central precept the theory of humor proposed by Galen. Yet, specific plague symptomatology remained difficult to identify.[63] In fact, it was not easy to differentiate plague symptoms from other illnesses' symptoms, and because high fevers, headaches, vomiting, swelling and skin rushes were common to other diseases, doctors still relied on the high rate of mortality to determine if they were in the presence of 'true' plague (*vera peste*). Despite the circulation of new literature that focused more on the description of disease symptomatology to identify plague than on remote causation, there is no evidence of any significant intellectual controversy regarding the nature of the disease before the second half of the sixteenth century.[64]

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[62] Nancy G. Siraisi*. Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990),128.
[63] See Cipolla, *Fighting Plague in Seventeenth-Century Italy, 89-96.*
[64] Cohn,161.

A substantial shift in the formulation of plague notions occurred in the late sixteenth century. At this point in time many physicians began to focus less on theoretical assumptions in favor a more empirical approach to the study of the plague, and especially of its mechanisms of propagation. With this shift also came strife. During the Venetian plague of 1576 the new approach sparked a medical dispute between some prominent physicians at the University of Padua and Venetian doctors.[65] In 1576 the Senate asked Girolamo Mercuriale and Gerolamo Capodivacca to diagnose the disease that was spreading in Venice.[66] Based on the application of Galenic premises, the Paduan doctors denied that the disease was 'true plague'. Despite the presence of certain signs and symptoms typically associated with plague,[67] the fact that only a section of the city was infected and that mortality was still low supported their diagnosis. As we heard earlier, according to Galen's theory, true plague was distinguished from other pestilential fevers for its "common" diffusion.[68] The fact that the majority of Venetian doctors opposed Mercuriale and Capodivacca and affirmed the importance of empirical observation of both the symptoms and of the mechanisms of diffusion of the disease suggests that new concepts and especially notions related to the idea of contagion were gaining influence, at least in Venice.

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[65] Cohn and Palmer both talk about the Venetian dispute. See footnote one.

[66] Girolamo Mercuriale (1530-1606) and Gerolamo Capodivacca (? - 1589) were professors of practical medicine at the University of Padua

[66] Sam Cohn, Culture of Plague (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 170.

Yet, it is also true that during the epidemic crisis of 1576, the immediate and desperate need to contain the death toll could have urged some medical practitioners and especially public health officers to a less philosophical and more practical approach to diagnosis that would help identify plague at its early onset, before it spread to a large part of the population. A crucial factor here were the terms of public health administration. Only an official declaration of a plague outbreak granted the health board special powers to mandate plague measures. Thus, when the Venetian senate in 1576 bypassed the opinion of the health board to endorse Mercuriale's diagnoses and call off all preventive measures, the medical controversy took on a political connotation. Mercuriale finally recognized his misdiagnoses after the contagion had spread to the entire city and the number of victims was skyrocketing, forcing him to admit that it was indeed true plague that was ravishing the city. Unfortunately, by the end of the 1576-77 plague outbreak more than 50,000 people died of plague in Venice alone.

From the Venetian episode, we begin to see how medical debates could acquire political value, especially when economic considerations were also involved. In fact, we might wonder if in their decision to side with Mercuriale and Capodivacca, the Venetian senators were more concerned about the negative impact of the implementation of plague containment measures on the city economy than about the medical value of the debate.[69] In fact, we could say that the two physicians from Padua offered the senate a less 'costly' diagnosis,[70] compared to the

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[69] Palmer, 253

[70] The cost of plague on the public and private economy is the topic of chapter 2.

Venetian physicians who insisted that true plague was in the city and called for the immediate intervention of the public health administration.

Identifying the Plague in Milan: Medical debate and Plague Experiences

In Milan, the debate regarding the proper methods to be used to identify plague dated back to the fifteenth century, and it involved physicians, public health officials and other city rulers.[71] In 1630, the debate was still animated and the contemporary chronicler Giuseppe Ripamonti blamed the dispute between those who believed the plague was in the city (*pestisti*) and those who denied it (*anti pestisti*) for the catastrophic death toll. Consider his critique:

> And it was not only the opinion of the plebeian: but also some doctors, who lost in endless arguments laughed at the buboes and at the swollen groins, calling them the effects of uncontrolled lasciviousness, every time an infected person would show them those certain signs of the plague, asking for a remedy… With such absurd things and other rumors, typical of their fallacy, dissuaded the sick from the necessary remedies that should have been taken in a timely manner. Those quacks were earning popular favor […][72]

The so-called ‘*anti-pestisti’* seemed to have relied on Hippocratic and Galenic humoral principles in their diagnosis and linked the illness of their patients to their particularly dire socio-economic condition. In this view, the poor health of such large portion of the population due to famine and also immoderate behavior compromised their ‘humoral balance’.

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[71] See Ann G. Carmichael, “Theory and Contagion Practice in Fifteenth-Century Milan” in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1991), 213-256

[72] “E tale follia non era invalsa soltanto tra la plebe: ma anche in alcuni medici, i quali, perdendosi in dispute interminabili, ridevansi de’ bubboni e della gonfiezza delgi inguini, chiamandoli effetti di sfrenata libidine ogni qual volta un appestato mostrava loro quei segnali certissimi di peste, e chiedeva rimedj. […]Con tali assurdi e con alter dicerie, proprie dell’arte loro fallacissima, distolsero i malati dal prendere i rimedj cui bisognava ricorrere in tempo. Codesti medicastri si guadagnarono il favore del volgo […]” Ripamonti, 41.

On the opposing side of the ‘*anti-pestisti’* were Ludovico Settala and Alessandro Tadino. Both men were trained at the University of Pavia and were members of the *Collegio dei Fisici* and of the *Tribunale della Sanità*.[73] Like Ripamonti, Alessandro Tadino criticized the poor diagnosis of the city physicians and blamed them for the misinformation of the populace

> The Conservatori del Tribunale [della Sanità], and in particular physicians like Tadino, and Settala begun to be hated by the ignorant people, informed [instructed] by some doctors who did not care for public health, and that spread the belief in the streets that it was not the plague, since they did not know other plagues than the one that is found in the air; and that the many deaths were caused by ill living and by the misery of the last two years[74]

He believed that the reason why doctors were convincing people that the deaths in the city had not been caused by the *contagio pestilente* was [due to]their rigid use of the Galenic epidemiologic formula [to determine the nature of the disease]. According to Tadino’s account, it was only when members of the wealthier upper class begun to die that the skeptics finally recognized that plague was spreading in the city. This was in keeping with the view found in the classical theories that the true plague had no ‘social’ preference but rather impacted the wealthy and the poor alike.[75]

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[73] The Tribunale della Sanità was a judicial organ, created in 1534 by Francesco II Sforza. Charles V had regulated its functions in 1541, and it maintained quite impressive powers, since it had the difficult task to keep, at all cost, the plague outside of the territory of the State. It was the tribunal’s responsibility to immediately take the necessary measures to control the plague in the event of an outbreak. Its members were nominated by the Senate and consisted of a president chosen from the Senate, two members of the Collegio dei Fisici (*Conservatori*), three commissaries, a writer, a surgeon, two health officers (*Apparitori*), a door-keeper, a death registrar, and the custodians of the Lazzaretti. On the requisites for the admission to the *Collegio dei Fisici* see F. Calvi, *Il patriziato Milanese, secondo nuovi documenti deposit negli archive pubblici e privati,* 2nd ed. (Milano: Andrea Mosconi Libraio, 1875), 69.

[74]“I Conservatori del Tribunale, et in particolare li fisici come fu del Tadino, e Settala cominciarono ad essere odiati dalla Plebe ignorante, mediante la voce d’alcuni Medici puoco ben intenzionati alla salute publica, li quali per li carobij attestauano non essere contagio pestilente, ne loro consoscere altra peste che quella dell’aria; et che questa moritalita’ copiosa di persone dependueva dalla mala regola et penuria del viuere questi duoi anni prossimi passati”, Alessandro Tadino cited by Ripamonti, 42.

Tadino’s opinion point to an important underlying issue]: namely, the growing incompatibility between inherited classic miasmatic theories, on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessities of implementing and enforcing preventive measures in order to contain the plague. The lack of a consensual diagnosis of plague was more than an intellectual impasse. It had the practical effect of thwarting the public health efforts of the *Tribunale della Sanità*. As an officer of the *Tribunale,* Tadino stressed the need for a more comprehensive definition of plague that encompassed more than one type of plague, and not only the one caused by corrupted air. He seems to come to the conclusion that, in order for public health organisms to be effective in their preventive effort, medical professionals had to adapt and be open to newly emerging and developing notions of what the plague was and how it was spread.

Yet, it is important to note that Tadino is not dismissing traditional religious explanations of plague (and his views are not as progressive as one might think). Let us consider the following passage from his *Ragguaglio*

> We recognize the patience and paternal love that Our Lord has demonstrated towards us [from the fact that] he tried to make us aware of our sins by slowly sending this cruel flagellum so that we would have time to appeal to his divine mercy with an unshakable determination to stop sinning, and since the plague entered the city

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[75] Tadino, 98

> on October 26th of 1629, if the populace, the nobility, and the higher officials would have believed it was plague, we could have easily contained it by soothing God's wrath with prayers, alms, and other works pleasing to Him. But, because our sins had exhausted God's mercy, Our Lord recognized that it was good to let this venomous illness grow in order to chastise the sinners and purge the good people dear to him[76]

At the end, everything, including people's initial denial of the plague, is traced back to man's sins and God's ultimate intent to use plague as an instrument of both punishment and redemption. This type of assertion made by one of the most prominent city physicians shows the complex, and we would say paradoxical, synthesis of scientific and religious views of plague at the beginning of the seventeenth century. While Tadino lamented the narrowness of some doctors' understanding of the disease and blamed them for the ineffectiveness of the medical profession to help the plague-stricken citizens, he simultaneously imputed the initial denial of the plague to a troubled spiritual condition. Men, incapable of recognizing their sinful condition, failed to recognize and heed God's initial warning, allowing the disease to spread. In this deterministic view of the events, the effectiveness of plague containment measures in the end depended above all on keen spiritual awareness rather than correct medical knowledge.

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[76] Da qui si poteva considerare con quanta patienza, & amore paterno N.S. ci andava mostrando per farne riconoscere delli nostri errori, mandando pian piano questo flagello così crudele, dandoci tempo di ricorrere alla sua Divina Misericordia, confermo proponimento di lasicare li peccati, essendo entrato nella Città la peste dalli 26 Ottobre dell'anno passato 1629 fino al mese d'Aprile successivamente 1630 alla quale se gli poteva provedere con molta facilità, quando fosse stata creduta dalla Plebe, dalla Nobiltà, & dalli supremi Officiali, & che si fosse procurato con le oration, elimosine, & altre opera grate à S. D. Maestà placare l'ira sua sopra il popolo Milanese. Ma perche li peccati nostril havevano passato della Misericordia il segno & N.S. vedeva che per castigare li peccatori, & per purgare le buone creature, à lui molto care; era bene lasciare crescere questo venenoso male", Tadino, 85.

Like Alessandro Tadino, Ludovico Settala, the city protophysician (*protofisico)*, also recognized the plague when it first entered the city.[77] Settala had studied medicine at the University of Pavia and had been praised for his tireless effort to help the city during the plague outbreak of 1576. In 1622 he published an influential plague tract "*De Peste et Pestiferi Affectibus*" in Latin, of which an abridged Italian translation appeared in print in 1630. The definition of plague that Settala proposes in his 1630['s] tract incorporates both classical miasmatic and the newer contagion theories.

Settala began by pointing to the fallacies of the notion that true plague had to be "common". He embraced the traditional definition of plague as a deadly illness that is common to the entire population of a certain area, but then noted a telling case in point of a person who had lived in a place infected by what had been identified as the true plague, who moved to a city that was free of the disease carrying in his clothing the *seed of the plague*, or maybe already infected but not showing any symptom yet:

> If this person becomes sick of the plague, with buboes and *carboncoli*, and he dies, but in a well-isolated and protected place, so that the disease is not transmitted to others, can it be reasonable to say, that this person died of the plague, even if the disease was not transmitted to others and did not kill many? The answer to this doubt is for two reasons yes. First of all because the disease is by its own nature very contagious, and it would have attacked many if it wasn't for the diligent care demonstrated in opposing its transmission. Secondly, the disease that is carried from a different place is of the same nature as the disease that is spreading in the

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[77] The *protofisico* was elected by the Collegio dei Fisici from among its members and had the responsibility to oversee the Milanese public health and to regulate and monitor the activities of the apothecaries (*speziali).*

> place of origin, so that only with regards to the place from where it came, it can be called common and spread to many[78]

Like Tadino, Settala is not refuting miasmatic theories here; instead he is using a logical argument to move his readers toward a more flexible application of classical notions, suggesting that the wisdom of the ancients can be updated. The element of contagion (defined as the communication of the disease by close contact) is particularly important for Settala, but according to the Milanese physician not fully explored by the ancients. After a precise exposition of how substantial changes in the air, water, and food can be the initial cause of the plague, he claims that contagion is indeed the most frequent cause of the spread and intensification of the outbreak. Finally, and especially important, the Milanese protophysician implies that a diligent isolation of the infected could indeed stop the spread of the plague. This position, reinforced the importance of public health boards' preventive intervention, and asserted a renewed confidence in the human capacity to limit the scope of or even block epidemics.

Another important element in Settala's definition is that the true plague was caused by "great putrefaction and corruption" that, like a poison, is very easily communicated:

> Every plague is contagious and it is proved: since it is caused by great putrefaction, it can easily be transmitted through direct touch, or through a fomite, or through the air, depending on the strength of the putrefaction in which it is grounded.[79]

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[78] Settala, *Della Peste*, 10-12.

[79] Che ogni peste habbi del contagioso si prova: perche essendo lei fatta da una troppo gran putredine, ne viene in cosequenza, che facilmente s'attacchi o' per il solo tocco immediatamente, o' per mezzo del fomite, o' tocco per il mezzo dell'aere, secondo che e' piu' o meno fiera, e' rimessa la detta putredine, nella quale e' fondata" Settala, *Della Peste,* 16.

To be sure, the notion of contagion was not a new concept, but it acquired new significance towards the mid of the sixteenth century. Since antiquity, the observation of disease had led physicians to the conclusion that disease could be transmitted via the direct contact with someone or something that was already infected. In most cases, miasmatic and contagion theories were reconciled by saying that the cause of contagion was the inhalation of putrid air that had been trapped and then released by an object or exhaled by an infected person.

However, towards the middle of the sixteenth century, the notion of contagion acquired a new significance. In 1546, the publication of "*De Contagion, contagiosis morbis et eorum curatione*" by the physician Girolamo Fracastoro begun to change the medical debate with the introduction of a new classification of contagion based on three main categories: by direct contact, *ad fomite,*[80] and by distance. His theory was particularly significant because it proposed the idea of a "seed" or *seminaria* responsible for the spreading of the contagion. A similar term, *semina,*[81] was present in the classic writing of Galen, but Fracastoro's emphasis on the concept of *seminaria* contributed to the discussion on the causes of the plague by adding, among other things, the idea that the disease could be transmitted by contact with an object on which a pestilential substance (*seminaria*) was deposited.

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[80] *Ad fomite* contagion occurred when people came in contact with fomites, that is clothing and other goods that harbored the infectious particles. See also Isabelle, Pantin, "Fracastoro's *De Contagione* and Medieval Reflections on 'Action at a Distance': Old and New Trends in Renaissance Discourse on Contagion" in *Imagining Contagion in Early Modern Europe,* ed. Claire L. Carlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3-15.

[81] *Semina* is the Latin term used by Galen and it is commonly translated in English as "seed" or "seed of disease".

The real nature of the *seminaria,* though ambiguous even in Fracastoro's writings and not without critics,[82] was characterized as being putrefied matter that had a marked viscosity enabling it to stick to objects. This perspective offered new insights for the understanding of the disease with a particular emphasis on its mechanism of propagation, challenging the over-reliance on miasmatic theory, but not completely dismissing it. Furthermore, Fracastoro's theories suggested that the external agents shared the responsibility for the disease, thus casting doubt on the predominant role of humoral theories and asserting instead the existence of disease agents that acted or attacked the body from the outside.

Fracastoro's influence on Settala's understanding of plague is evident in the physician's treatise on the plague. Although the term 'putrefaction' is certainly ambiguous, Settala clearly recognized that the highly contagious nature of the plague was related to the existence of 'rotting' matter that could cause the plague when touched or breathed in. Thus, Settala did not exclude 'air' as a vehicle of transmission, but he also added the notion of *ad fomite* contagion. It became possible to imagine the spread of the disease through contact with an intermediary substance capable of retaining and transmitting the seed of contagion.

Tadino and Settala held a complex view of plague informed by their medical training. But, did the intellectual discourse on the nature of the plague ever become relevant to the common people? While we don't have direct record of what exactly the uneducated thought about the origin and nature of plague, evidence gathered from episodes told by contemporary chroniclers suggest that the lack of consensus about plague in the intellectual spheres also reached the lower stratum of the population.

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[82] On the influence of Fracastoro's theories on the medical discourse about contagion see Vivian Nutton, *The Reception of Fracastoro's Theory of Contagion: The Seed that Fell among Thorns*, in *Osiris*, Vol. 6, Renaissance Medical Learning: Evolution of a Tradition (1990), 196-234

During the plague outbreak of 1630, contemporary chronicles report that the common people sided with those doctors who denied the epidemic. The position of Ludovico Settala and Alessandro Tadino attracted such scorn that the two men were publicly insulted and physically assaulted by a mob in the streets.

> And the populace was so persuaded by the illusion [that the high mortality was due to the bad living conditions] that they began to say malicious things about those physicians [Tadino and Settala] and when they [the physicians] were unfortunately passing through the streets they were insulted with injurious and dishonest words, and the populace became so insolent that the two doctors were even stoned[83]

The account must be read with caution because it is reported by Tadino, who perhaps wished to portray himself as a forward-looking physician held back by ta superstitious populace. But it does suggest that there was tension between Tadino's position and that of the common people. In this context, it is interesting to note that that doctors who denied the outbreak in all likelihood transmitted their view of plague during their house visits. Doctors and surgeons were in contact with the people during daily visits and undoubtedly were asked about their view of plague on those occasions, a view based on the tradition of the ancients, and diametrically opposed to those of Settala and Tadino. The episode reported by Tadino indicates that, at least at the beginning, people embraced the opinion that Tadino and Settala's view were erroneous and dangerous.

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[83] "La onde la Plebe insupata, & imbibita da questa illusione cominciò sparlare di questi Fisici, li quali quando per sciagura transitavano i carobi gli trattavano con male, & disoneste parole, & à tale petulanza arrivò questa Pleble, che non vi mancò con le pietre restassero percossi", Tadino, 83.

Conclusions

On the onset of the 1630 plague epidemic the understanding of the origin and nature of plague was supported by a complex synthesis of spiritual and material elements. New notions about contagion and old Greco Roman medical theories were woven into the existing religious worldview that recognized God as the ultimate origin of plague. The new theories introduced the idea of the existence of an external agent (*seminaria*) responsible for the transmission of the disease. Although theories of contagion remained to some extent vague when it came down to defining what the external agent really was, they still managed to expose the limitations of traditional miasmatic theories, especially in helping the efforts made by public health boards to limit plague outbreaks. In fact, one of the tenets of miasmatic theories was the notion that plague was "common", thus the identification of a plague epidemic depended on the presence of high mortality in the population living in the same area, which often compromised the possibility of an early detection of the disease, that improved the chances of limiting its diffusion.

Although these theories challenged traditional views, they certainly did not dismiss the spiritual view that recognized plague as a divine scourge. Yet, the overlapping of traditional Greco-Roman medical theories of disease with the newer views of contagion caused ambiguities and uncertainties, which were manifested in intellectual debates inside learned circles, and in 1630 Milan also in violent manifestations of dissent. These ambiguities also created the necessary conditions for the development of the phenomenon of intentional plague spreading. In fact, on the one hand, the new concepts that played down the role of miasma and emphasized contagion provided the prerequisite to the idea that it was possible for men use quarantine measures to try and contain the disease. At the same time, they also seemed to have given people agency to spread it.

In the following chapters, I will suggest that when the ruling elite and the lower classes denied the presence of the plague in Milan, it was because of their immediate economic considerations. In fact, at the beginning the decision to side with the *pestisti* or *anti-pestisti* was not a question of taking an intellectual stand. Instead, the response of the public opinion was controlled first of all by the fear of the negative impact that plague containment measures would have on their household economy.[84]

I will also discuss how the intentional diffusion of plague was not only perceived by the authorities as a criminal act, but it also was seen by the Church as an abomination because it trespassed into a realm controlled by God. The plague spreaders –(called by contemporaries *untori*) are the main characters of the story told in this dissertation. The new notions about plague influenced their actions, in that they took the ideas of contagion and applied them to the fabrication of certain substances that they believe would allow them to trap the essence of plague so that it could be spread to their discretion. By the mid of June of 1630 the work of the *untori* was recognized as the reason for the widespread diffusion of the disease in Milan, and their abominable actions were perceived as part of the divine plan to chastise the people of Milan.

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[84] See chapter 2.

Chapter 2

The Socio-Economic Cost of Plague

Since the 16th century, Milan had been at the forefront of public health in Italy. A permanent health board – *Tribunale della Sanità*[85] – regulated all public health matters in the city and worked with the health boards of neighboring cities to isolate any plague occurrence. Yet, in 1629 when two of Milan's most prominent physicians warned about the presence of the disease in the city, the ruling elite lagged in the implementation of plague-containment measures, and the residents of Milan generally resisted their warnings.

What caused such counterintuitive responses? This chapter tries to explain this apparent paradox. I will propose that contemporaries feared plague epidemics in terms of the risk for their lives, but they also dreaded the public and private cost associated with plague epidemics. The existence of ambivalent medical opinions regarding the diagnosis of plague gave people a reason to refute the early warnings of a plague epidemic.[86] Evidence suggests that during the early stages of the 1630 outbreak, when the economic interests of both the ruling elite and the lower class were threatened by the implementation of plague-containment measures, the majority of people seemed to prefer to deny the presence of the disease in Milan rather than lose their income.

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[85] The *Tribunale della Sanita'* (Health Board) was a judicial organ, created in 1534 by Francesco II Sforza. Charles V had regulated its functions in 1541, and its main responsibility was to manage public health. One of most important tasks was to keep plague outside the territory of the State. It was the Health Board responsibility to immediately take the necessary measures to control the diffusion of plague in the event of an outbreak. Its members were nominated by the Senate and consisted of a president chosen from the Senate, two members of the Collegio dei Fisici (*conservatori*), three commissaries, a writer, a surgeon, two health officers (*apparitori)*, a door keeper, a death registrar, and the custodian of the Lazzaretto.

[86] The medical debate about the origin of plague is the topic of chapter 1.

My contribution adds to the existing literature that explores the long-term effect of plague epidemics on the macro socio-economic structures. For example, several scholars have considered the impact of the demographic losses cause by the Black Death on wages, social mobility and capital opportunity.[87] I look at the effects of plague from a micro- economic point of view. In what ways did plague impact the personal economy of the people? What economic interests were at stake during plague epidemics? How did people respond when their livelihood was threatened by the implementation of public health measures? These are some of the questions that I try to answer in this chapter.

The chapter is divided in three main sections. The first section is dedicated to a brief overview of the Milanese economy during the 16th and 17th century. Here, I pay particular attention to the crisis of the late 1620's and its socio-economic effects on the population of Milan and its hinterland. The second section focuses on the cost of a plague epidemic for the city treasury, and I attempt to show that the reason for the delay in the implementation of strong plague-containment measures was based on the concerns of the ruling elite about the high cost of those measures and the lack of funds in the city treasure. Finally, in the third section I show that the implementation of plague-containment measures was resisted especially from the lower classes that were reduced to dire poverty and had to resort to illegal means to protect their property and make small profits trafficking quarantined goods.

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[87] On the socio-economic consequences of plague see for example Paolo Malanima, "Economic Consequences of the Black Death" in "L'Impatto della "Peste Antonina" ed. E. Lo Cascio (Bari: Edipuglia, 2012). http://www.paolomalanima.it/default_file/Papers/THE_ECONOMIC_CONSEQUENCES.doc.pdf accessed on 5/25/2017; Blockmans, Willem P. "The Social and Economic Effects of Plague in the Low Countries, 1349—1500." in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 58 (1980): 833—63; Samuel K. "After the Black Death: Labour Legislation and Attitudes toward Labour in Late—Medieval Western Europe." *Economic History Review* 60 (2007): 457—85; and Herlihy, David. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*, edited by S. K. Cohn. Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

The Milanese Economy

Already during the Middle Ages, Milan was known for its commercial power.[88] The city economy remained strong, and its population continued to grow until the end of the 16th century making Milan one of the most prominent cities in Italy.

Situated in the fertile plane of Lombardy, the city of Milan and its hinterland enjoyed a strong agricultural production that not only satisfied the needs of its residents but also generated a surplus that was sold in the Alpine region. Yet, it was Milan's commercial and artisanal activities that produced the greatest wealth and gave the city a reputation for opulence.[89] Milan was especially famous for the production of luxury goods, such as silk, wool clothing, and weaponries. Finally, an extensive system of canals (*navigli*) facilitated the import and export of goods to and from Milan, making it an important commercial market.[90]

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[88] See Bonvesin della Riva, Bovesin de la Riva, *Grandezze di Milano*, Tran. Angelo Paredi (Milano: Amilcare Pizzi Editore, 1967).

[89] See Federico Chabot, *Storia di Milano nell 'epoca di Carlo V,* (Torino, Giulio Einaudi editore, 1961) Chapter 3.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the Milanese economy suffered the consequences of the decline in the demand for luxury goods caused by the growing competition of less expensive French and German goods.[91] Yet, recent studies point to the fact that the decline in the city economy corresponded to a growth in the countryside, where the wealthiest merchants re-invested their capital. In the countryside, some invested their wealth buying estates, while others, encouraged by a less rigid manufacturing environment,[92] switched to the production of less expensive common goods to adapt to the changing market demand.[93]

Nevertheless, while some merchants were able to protect their wealth by moving to the countryside, the closing of factories in the city caused a significant spike in the unemployment rate, especially in the silk industry.[94] Considering that more than half of the population in Milan depended on manual labor for their subsistence, the social impact of such decline was great. In fact, those who lost their jobs became completely depended on public assistance. Parish records indicate that at the beginning of the 17th century, the percentage of structural poor fluctuated between 12% and 17%.[95] This means that with a population of 120,000 people, every day between 15,000 and 20,000 people depended on public and private charity for their survival.[96]

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[90] For more on the economy of Milan during the sixteenth century see Stefano D'Amico, *Spanish Milan. A City within the Empire, 1535-1706.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Chapter 1.

[91] For a general perspective on the decline of the demand for luxury goods see H.R. Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century", in *Crisis in Europe. 1560-1660,* ed. Trevor Aston (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 63-123; regarding the specific Milanese experience see Giovanni Vigo, *Manovre monetary e crisi economica nello Stato di Milano.* in Studi Storici, Anno 17, No. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1976), 101-126.

[92] In the city, rigid guild regulations made it very difficult for the manufacturing industry to adapt to changes in the demand.

[93]See Domenico Sella, *Crisis and Continuity,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) and Aldo De Maddalena, *Dalla Citta al Borgo,* (Milano: Franco Angeli Editore, 1982)

[94] Vigo, 104-105

The crisis reached its peak in 1627, when climatic fluctuations and soil exhaustion led to a series of bad harvests aggravating an already struggling economy.[97] Let us consider the chronicler Ripamonti's description of the city. Even if it is laced with moralism, it opens a window at the socio-economic condition in the city:

> The luxury and the vices of the citizens were tamed by calamity […]. The first thing that happened was the ceasing of jobs that, let's say it, encourage vices but also feed a great number of people. It started with the closing of *botteghe,* from which the people of the city received most of their sustenance; and the few that remained open looked like an empty field, made squalid by sterility and famine. The populace, without a job to pay for their food, without any activity was forced to rot in idleness, not used to this kind of suffering in the city […], people begun to starve and finally die.[98]

In the countryside things did not go any better. On the contrary, the famine had forced thousands of peasants to flee from the countryside and move to Milan in search for some relief from starvation. Here, only a fortunate few moved into crowded homes, while the majority remained homeless.[99]

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[95] See D'Amico, "Poveri e gruppi marginali nella società Milanese cinque-seicentesca" in *La Città e i poveri,* ed. Daniele Zardin, (Milano: Jaca Book*,* 1995), 273-274.

[96] D'Amico, *A City within the Empire,* 54.

[97] See G.Aleati and Carlo Cipolla, "Il trend economico nello stato di Milano durante i secoli XVI e XVII: il caso di Pavia" in "Bollettino della Società Pavese di Storia Patria" 1950 and Aleati and Cipolla, "Aspetti e problem dell'economia Milanese e Lombarda nei secoli XVI e XVII" in Storia di Milano, vol. XI, p 389; See also D.H. Pennington, *Europe in the Seventeenth Century* (London and New York: Longman, 1970), Chapter 3.

[98] "Il lusso e i vizi de' cittadini furono domati dalla calamità. […] Dapprima cessarono i lavori, che, servendo al pubblico uso, e, diciam anche, a fomentare i vizi, alimentavano però un gran numero d'individui. Si cominciò dal chiudere le botteghe, dalle quali il popolo nelle città tra in gran parte la sussistenza; e le poche rimaste aperte, somigliavano a deserto campo, reso squallente dalla sterilità e dalla carestia. La plebe, priva di lavoro con cui guadagnarsi il pane, senza traffico alcuno, costretta a marcire nell'ozio, non usa a patire entro la città […]la plebe cominciò a languire di fame, e da ultimo moriva", Ripamonti, 14.

In 1628, the social crisis in the city was reaching massive proportion. Religious and secular authorities were incapable of providing for the needs of so many people living in the streets. Ripamonti offers this dire picture in his chronicle:

> Exhausted by the lack of food, [people] would die in the streets, or they would wander in the squares and in the churches with cadaveric faces. But the size of that unfortunate crowd did not grow smaller […]. And if the number of beggars that were coming to the city from our countryside and hillside was not enough, many other were coming from neighboring cities and from abroad, hoping to find a safe refuge and a place where food was not missing. Deceived by the name of Milan, they ignored the desolate condition in which [the city] had fallen[100].

To make matter worse, a spike in bread prices in November of 1628 led to a popular revolt. The bread revolt, also known as *Rivolta di San Martino,* offers a good representation of the tensions present in the city. The scarcity of food, the increased number of people living in the city, and the inability of the ruling elite to provide for the needs of the poor led to a violent assault against some bakeries and against public officials. On November 10, a crowd was waiting to buy bread in front of the bakery known as "*Scanze*". When the baker realized that he was running out of bread, he decided to close the shop and sell what he had left only to the nobles who had provided wheat to the baker. The angry mob assaulted the bakery, breaking doors and windows to get inside and steal whatever bread and flour they could find. People ran out of the bakery with bags of flour and baskets of bread on their shoulders. Women lifted their skirts “without shame or modesty” and filled them with flour to bring back to their homes.[101] Yet, not content with their loot, the angry populace removed the wood planks that had been used to barricade the bakery and burned them, together other stolen shop fixtures, in the *Piazza del Duomo*.

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[99] Tadino,9

[100] "Sfiniti per la mancanza di cibo, cadevano morti per le strade, ovvero vagolavano per le piazze ed i tempi con faccia cadaverica. Nè scemava di numero quella turba infelice […]. E quasi non bastasse la folla de' medichi accorrenti verso la città dalle nostre campagne e colline, ve ne giungevano altresì dalle città limitrofe e dall'estero come in asilo sicuro, dove non mancherebbe alimento, illusi dal nome di Milano, ed ignorando in che triste condizione fosse caduta", Giovanni Ripamonti *La Peste di Milano del 1630* (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editori, 2003), 14.

The violence quickly spread to other bakeries and finally also reached the house of the *Vicario di Provvigione*[102] in the *Cordusio* area. The assault on his house was so violent that the *Castellano* was forced to send a unit of Spanish soldiers to escort the *Vicario* to safety inside the castle, while another armed unit was posted in front of his house to protect it from further damage. In the meantime, the church also decided to intervene to try to calm the enraged crowds. A few prelates marched in a procession from the Duomo to the *Cordosio* carrying a crucifix as symbol of peace. However, the protesters continued to demonstrate their anger against the city administration until the Spanish *Gran Cancelliere* Antonio Ferrer personally intervened. He managed to calm the revolt by promising to support their request for an increased supply of bread sold at a reduced priced.[103] At the end, the *Capitano di Giustizia* arrested four men accused of having fomented the revolt. They were later hung on the gallows erected in front of the baker in *Cordusio* on Christmas Eve of 1628.[104]

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[101] Tadino, 6-8

[102] The *Vicario di Provvigione* was the president of the *Tribunale di Provvigione.* The *Tribunale* was an organ of civic government with vast jurisdictions. For example, it was responsible for public order, food provisioning, public assistance, and food price regulation.

The episode is important because it shows a polarization between the political actors of the Milanese government regarding the care of the city needs. The story as told by Alessandro Tadino, a representative of the medical elite, suggests the inability of the Milanese authorities to truly provide for the needs of the people. The raiding of the bakeries and the violence against the *Vicario di Provvigione* could be read as a way of the desperate people to take matters into their hands, when the organ of the public administration in charge of the allocation of food resources failed to provide for their basic needs. At the same time, Ferrer's promise to personally intervene with the *Tribunale di Provvigione* to make sure that the requests of the protesters were going to be met, shows a paternalistic attitude on the side of the Spanish government towards the Milanese ruling elite.

In 1629, the problems caused by the lack of public resources to help the poor got worst. The heavy fiscal burden, imposed by Spain to support its military effort in the war of the Mantuan succession, contributed to the depletion of the city treasury. At the beginning of 1629 the *Tribunale della Sanità* warned the *Tribunale di Provvigione* about the worsening conditions of the populace. They stressed the immediate need for an intervention on the part of the city administration to take care of the hundreds of homeless roaming the city streets. In fact, due to their terrible hygienic conditions, the *Tribunale della Sanità* feared the risk posed they posed to public health.

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[103] The cost of bread was fixed at 1 *soldo* per oz. for the bread of lower quality and and 3 *lire* per *staio* for the better quality bread. According to the contemporary historian Giuseppe Ripamonti the price set was so low that the people were excited and exulted for the success of their revolt. Ripamonti,, 34.

[104] Tadino, 8.

The *Tribunale di Provvigione* initially thought about solving the problem by setting up shelters in several city hospitals. But in May, the number of homeless had increased so much that the plan of admitting the poor into the hospitals was no longer feasible. Hence the *Tribunale* decided to reopen the Lazzaretto of San Gregorio, a much larger structure built in the 16 century as a pest house, and ordered the admission of almost 10,000 into the structure.

Nevertheless, from the start Ludovico Settala and Alessandro Tadino had opposed the decision of the *Tribunale di Provvigione* to move such a large number of indigents to the Lazzaretto. They were convinced that moving the homeless into the Lazzaretto was not going to solve the problem; on the contrary they believed that it would create a greater one. The housing of so many people into a relatively confined space would create the ideal environment for the development of diseases, and possibly plague.[105]

Furthermore, the four thousand *scudi* budgeted by the *Tribunale di Provvigione* were not enough to adequately take care of the people held in the Lazzaretto. According to Alessandro Tadino, the result was that people were fed an insufficient diet of bread and rice; the straw on which people slept was old and fetid, and the drinking water was contaminated. [106] Tadino's remarks are certainly biased. In his chronicle, he does not miss the opportunity to blame another organ of the civic administration for what he later said was one of the causes of the diffusion of the plague in the city. Yet, what is evident is that the lack of public funds was an obstacle in the execution of effective measures of public health, even before the plague outbreak.

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[105] Alessandro Tadino reports that up to 30 people slept in each of the 270 rooms of the Lazzaretto. He blames their "putrid breath" as one of the reasons for the risk of the spread of disease. Tadino,10.

What is also evident is that public health concerns had to negotiate with political considerations. After the bread revolt of 1628, city authorities were concerned about the presence of such a large number of vagrants in the streets. Thus, it is plausible that the *Tribunale di Provvigione*'s decision to transfer the homeless into the *Lazzaretto* was a way to reduce the risk of social uprising. Once the homeless entered the *Lazzaretto*, they were no longer allowed to leave; yet, there is no indication in the source that people rebelled against their loss of freedom. Overall, the intervention of the Spanish officials to sedate the revolt of the bread had created a negative precedent for the *Tribunale di Provvigione,* and it is reasonable to believe that the Milanese ruling elite wanted to avoid additional social tensions to avoid the direct involvement of the Spanish crown in the city administration.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the Milanese ruling elite and the Spanish governor was complicated by economic matters. On the one side, the Milanese elite wanted to maintain control of some aspect of the city government, but on the other side it depended on the Spanish crown to help pay for the expenses incurred during the plague. The president of the *Tribunale della Sanità* makes a direct reference between social unrest and lack of fund to provide for the poor in a letter to the Spanish governor:

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[106] Tadino, 11.

> The poor are languishing having only little left over after years of famine and unemployment. If we do not take care of them, we are certain that there will be great revolts and disobedience, as we have already learned about some episodes[107]

The real issue was that without the support of the Spanish crown, the city did not have the resources to deal not only with plague, but also with the bigger problem that they had on hand: widespread poverty.

The Cost of Implementing Plague Containment Protocols

In addition to political considerations, the experience of the 1630 plague epidemic shows that when it came down to public health measures, the organs of the public administration had to consider the economic impact of those measures. In fact, during plague outbreaks quarantine measures put a financial strain on cities by cutting economic ties with neighboring cities. The health boards of northern Italian states monitored the diffusion of plague epidemic through a stable system of communication.[108] Cities were required to report to the health boards of the other cities when plague cases were found in their territory, so that they could all take precautions by blocking the circulation of people and goods from the infected areas.

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[107] "I poveri si vanno consumando con la distrazione di quei miseri avanzi che il mancare gia qualche anni di lavori e la fame passata gli ha lasciato. Se non si pascono siamo certi di disordini gravi e di niuna obbidienza, e gia se ne sentono qualche voci", President of the *Tribunale della Sanità* to the Spanish Governor, dated June, 27, 1630. A.S.M., Sanità, Parte Antica, Busta 286.

In 1629, when the first plague cases were reported in areas close to Milan, the gates were closed and guards were posted at each door. To be allowed in the city, travelers had to present health certificates (*Bollette di Sanità)* that were prepared and signed by local health magistrates, who guaranteed that the traveler was coming from a place free of plague. Depending on the gravity of the contagion, the circulation of people and goods coming from certain areas could be suspended indeterminately, or until there was sufficient proof that the epidemic had abated.

Although the Milanese public health system was at the forefront of the plague fighting effort in early modern Europe, it did not always work as intended because of its elevated cost. In addition to the financial strain caused by the loss of commercial transactions with other cities, the implementation of plague containment measures had a significant impact on the public treasury due to the elevated expenses paid by the city to set up and run plague houses, hire a temporary workforce of plague-cleaners, and finally to provide public support to the large number of people who were left with no sustenance after the implementation of quarantine measures.

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[108] Carlo Cipolla, *Cristofano and the Plague,* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973). Chapter 1 provides examples of the communication between health boards in regards to the diffusion of plague in areas of Northern Italy.

The tension between the need to implement plague- prevention measures and the desire to protect the city economy is evident in the decisions made by the Milanese authorities during the 1629-1630 plague outbreak. Since 1629 local inspectors have been informing the *Tribunale della Sanità* about the health of the surrounding territories so that, when needed, the *Tribunale* could order the suspension of commerce with the infected areas. Yet, its decisions were not always consistent with the information received. For example, in 1629 two of Milan's most prominent doctors had a hard time convincing their 'lay' colleagues in the *Tribunale della Sanità* about the necessity to put certain areas under quarantine.[109] The reason for the resistance on the part of the other members of the *Tribunale* was a combination of public and personal economic considerations.

First of all, the suspension of all forms of commerce with its hinterland and with other cities in the state had immediate repercussions on the city food supply. In a letter to the Spanish governor, the president of *Tribunale della Sanità* expresses his difficulty in deciding what to do regarding the quarantine some cities in the state of Milan:

> If the contagion grows, God forbid, the number of poor to support will grow exponentially due to the closing of all activities, and because of the closing of all cities outside the state, and since provisions would not be able to be delivered from the outside, if we suspend the cities of the state, in our city we might not have a sufficient grain provisions […][110]

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[109] The *Tribunale della Sanità* was first of all a political organ of the public administration and even if it was responsible for public health, the medical component of the board was limited to two physicians (Fisici *Conservatori*

[110] "se il male cresce, che a Dio non piaccia, crescerebbe infinito numero de poveri da sostentarsi cessando i commerce et essendo serrate I passi delle città vicine fuori dallo Stato, nè potendo da di fuori venire vettovaglie, se le città dello Stato venissero à sospensione nostra, forse nella città,

The president of the *Tribunale* was between the hammer and the anvil. Ordering the suspension of commerce with close-by cities meant reducing the risk of the pandemic reaching Milan. At the same time, it also meant cutting off important food suppliers and reducing the population to starvation.

Second of all, if the *Tribunale* ordered a general quarantine in the city, the Milanese economy would have collapsed. In fact, the orders required the closing of commercial and manufacturing activities with the consequent spike in poverty numbers.[111] Thus, when faced with a potential plague threat outside or inside the city walls, the *Tribunale della Sanità* was challenged by daunting decisions: closing most of the commercial and manufacturing activities and closing the city gates 'could' help contain a plague outbreak, but it certainly increased poverty while at the same time reduced the already scarce food stock. The inconsistent implementation of plague measures during the first few months of 1630 indicates that when in doubt, the most pressing concerns of the organs of public administration where economic rather than related to public health.

Yet, the ruling elite was not just concerned about the burden of plague containment protocols on the city treasury. The members of the *Tribunale della Sanità* and of the other organs of the public administration had personal interests invested outside the city. Thus, the closing of certain markets impacted their

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e ducato non vi sarebbe provvisione bastante di grani […]", President of the *Tribunale della Sanità* to the Spanish Governor, April 19, 1630, ASM, Sanità, Parte Antica, Cartella 278.

[111] During epidemic crisis, the number of poor fully dependent on public assistance could reach 60% of the population. D'Amico, "Poveri e gruppi marginali nella societa Milanese cinque-seicentesca," 273-274.

businesses and income. In his chronicle, Alessandro Tadino accuses some members of the *Tribunale della Sanità* to be in collusion with rich merchants. To make his point, he uses the example of the city of Lindau, an important market town in the southern region of Germany. When in the early months of 1629 rumors of a plague outbreak reached the ears of the Ludovico Settala and Alessandro Tadino, the two physicians urged the other members of the *Tribunale* to order a ban on all commercial activities to and from Lindau. But Milan had strong commercial ties with the city, and the response of the *Tribunale*, according to Tadino, was disappointing and showed their true allegiance:

> The city had been declared [by the *Tribunale della Sanità*] 'free' [of plague] with great abhorrence of the *Fisici Conservatori,* who, moved by their zeal for the health of the city, protested more than once with official petitions (which can still be found in the official acts) that it was a very dangerous thing to be so liberal in introducing the commerce of people and goods coming from those towns […] but the interest of some ministers, together with that of the merchants, and the loss of profit of those who were always involved with that ministry, was the reason why Lindau was not only not banned as infected, but [the city] wasn't even suspended[112]

The quote shows that the decision to declare a city "free" of plague was not always based on a medical diagnosis. In this case, because of the reports received directly from the city, Tadino and Settala had reasons to believe that the plague was present in Lindau. Yet, the opinion of the non-medically trained members of the *Tribunale* prevailed over their medical opinion.

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[112] "e poco avanti era stata dichiarata libera con grandissimo disgusto delli sodetti Fisici Conservatori, li quali come zelanti della salute pubblica, protestarono nel Tribunale con pubbliche scritture più di una volta, (le quali so trovano nelli atti) che perniciosissima cosa era l'essere così facili all'introdurre il commercio delle persone, e merci di quei Paesi […]ma gli interessi di alcuni Ministri, congionti con Mercanti, e anco la perdita dell'utile di chi in tale ministerio stava di continuo, furno causa, che assolutamente non fosse, non dirò bandita la Città di Lindò come infetta, mà ne anche sospesa", Tadino, 14.

Something along the same line happened on July 17th, 1629, when the *Tribunale* lifted the order that required health certificates (*bollette di sanità)* before admitting people and goods into the city, in spite of the known fact that many German and Swiss cities were infected. The use of health certificates was reintroduced in September of 1629, but according to some annotations written by the president of the *Tribunale della Sanità*, it was not strictly enforced at the city gates in part because of the neglect of the noblemen – *gentiluomini* –assigned as guards.[113] The president is not indicating the reasons why he believed the noblemen were neglecting their duty at the city gates. We know from other documents that many noblemen were simply not showing up at the gates. They had left the city for their country estate to have better chances of surviving the epidemic. [114] It is also possible that, especially at the beginning of the epidemic, they would not fully comply with their duties because of commercial interests. But again, this is only a speculation.

Finally, there was a social cost associated with the implementation of plague containment measures. The *Tribunale della Sanità* had to hire a temporary workforce of "plague- cleaners", who unfortunately ended up terrorizing people. Because of the continuous exposure to the disease, not many people were willing to risk their lives. Thus, plague cleaners were often recruited among inmates and the poor. The *Tribunale* needed to hire *monatti,* bells ringers, and inspectors. The *monatti*'s job was to transport the sick to the pest house and bury the corpses in mass graves. They used an open cart and a bell ringer – *apparitore* - walked ahead of them, ringing a bell to warn people of the coming of the carts. An inspector supervised the work of the *monatti.*[115] He had the authority to order the transport of the sick to the Lazzaretto and to quarantine households suspected of being infected with plague.

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[113] A,S.M, Sanità Parte Antica, Busta 278.

[114] A.S.M, Sanità Parte Antica, Busta 286. In a letter to the governor, the president of the Tribunale della Sanità mentions an edict issued to order the noblemen who had fled the city to come back immediately to fulfill their public duties.

Evidence indicates the presence of widespread corruption at all levels of the health administration, but it seems that the worst examples of moral degradation were the *monatti* and inspectors. According to Ripamonti:

> In the mist of the endless cares, great pain and indignation was caused by the arrogance of those in charge of the monitoring of the city gates and the different neighborhood of Milan, and the custodians that were guarding from the outside. Arbiters of the daily city affairs, instead of exercising unbiased judgment, they became like tyrants. Some were losers needing public employment to support themselves, others were wealthy men that desired to increase their wealth thanks to the calamity of their homeland, and finally others were greedy men, looking for bribes, speculating on the misery of the indigents, sharing their gains with their bosses[116]

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[115] The etymology of the word *monatti,* which was the term used to call the plague cleaners, is ambiguous. According to Ripamonti, it derived from the Greek term *monos, which* indicated the solitary nature of their job. According to Gaspare Bugatti, a XVI century Milanese historian, the term derived from the word *monere* or warning. Finally, according to Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), the Italian novelist and author of *The Betrothed*, an historical novel set in Milan during the 1630 plague outbreak, the word *monatto* derived from the German word *monatlich* and it was a reference to the fact that plague workers were hired for only one month. Despite the differed word-root suggested by Ripamonti, Bugatti, and Manzoni, the definitions provide an interesting insight in the life of a particularly low class of workers, whose role was to protect public health by removing or isolating the infected people, and at the same time, because of their job, they were isolated from their community. www.archiviodistatopiacenza.beniculturali.it/getFile.php?id=135

[116] "In mezzo alle cure che non davano tregua, e crescenti vieppiù di giorno in giorno, suscitava indegnazione e dolore la prepotenza degli individui posti alla sorveglianza delle poste e dei quartieri in Milano, e dei custody che stavano a guardia al di fuori. Costoro, divenuti arbitri delle

In addition to the economic cost for the city, Ripamonti points to the disgrace caused by those who had been hired to help cleanse the city from the plague. To add insult to injury, plague cleaners not only took advantage of their position demanding bribes and stealing from the household they visited, but they also dealt carelessly with the corpses that they were transporting. The chronicler Pio Della Croce describes their irreverent conduct in the face of human tragedy in his description of the plague of 1630:

> The *monatti* came out of the Lazzaretto singing, and hardened in their hearts by their horrible job, with plumes on their hats, almost as a trophy of death, they audaciously entered infected homes, to ransack as enemies rather than to offer gracious help. Those *monatti* would grab [the bodies] by the head, legs, or how it was most convenient for them, and they would throw the bodies on the carts, as wheat sacks, not caring if legs, arms, and heads were indecently hanging from the sides of the carts. […] While the soft cry of family members accompanied the view of the bodies of their loved ones being desecrated.[117]

And Ripamonti adds:

> The *monatti*, I blush in telling of such turpitude! They even violated the cadavers as the last excess of human folly that is not even found among beasts! They entered all homes, whether or not the household was suspected of being infected, because it was now permissible to question anyone's health. They grabbed husbands,

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faccende e del traffico giornaliero, invece di esercitare un'equa magistratura, tiranneggiavano il popolo. Erano dessi falliti, in bisogno di pubblico impiego per campare la vita, ovvero uomini danarosi che nelle calamità della patria agognavano d'accrescere le loro ricchezze, o infine gente prezzolata, avida di regali, speculante sulla miseria degli indigenti, e che spartiva I guadagni co' suoi padroni". Ripamonti, 239.

[117] Pio Della Croce, *Memorie delle Cose Notabili Successe a Milano Intorno al Mal Contagioso de l'Anno 1630"*, (Milano, per Giuseppe Maga, 1630).

> wives, and children to drag them to the Lazzaretto, unless they would be paid off.[118]

What has been said so far paints a picture of a city on its knees. Since 1628, the organs of the public administration had to negotiate between public and personal interests, while dealing with challenges of trying to avert an epidemic and take care of the growing number of poor. In the meantime, the lower class had its own set of problems caused by the implementation of plague measures. The way they responded ended up frustrating the effort of the ruling elite to stop the epidemic.

The Cost of Plague for the Small-Scale Economy: The Reaction of the Lower Class to Plague Containment Measures.

We have heard how the decision to implement plague containment measures was not always guided by medical advice, but was also influenced by the public and personal considerations of the ruling elite. This was especially true at the beginning of the plague outbreak, when the diagnosis of the disease was still uncertain. In April of 1630, once the authorities finally recognized that the plague epidemic had reached the city, they could no longer delay and thus began enforcing quarantine orders. Yet, those measures were not welcomed by the lower class and by the poor, who saw them an additional assault to their meager means of support and resisted them.

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[118] "I Monatti, arrossisco in narrare tanta turpitudine! Violarono gli stesse cadaveri, ultimo eccesso della libidine e dell'umana pazzia, che neppure riscontrasi fra le belve! Introducendosi in ogni casa, fosse o no sospetta di peste, perchè ormai era lecito sospettare di tutti, afferravano i mariti, le mogli, i figliuoli per trascinarli al Lazzaretto, se non redimevansi sbarsando denaro." Ripamonti, 54.

Their first line of defense was the dispute regarding the diagnosis of plague among the Milanese doctors. The existence of ambivalent theories regarding plague, and the fact that physicians could not agree on a diagnosis gave the populace an excuse to reject these conflicting diagnoses.[119] For the majority of the people, it was arguably not a question of intellectually aligning with one medical philosophy or the other. What really mattered was their survival, and not just in terms of escaping death, but, most immediately, in terms of enduring the economic challenges that the plague outbreak brought with it. In fact, even after the medical dispute was resolved at the beginning of April of 1630, when all the Milanese doctors agreed that 'true plague' was in the city, the majority of people continued to deny its presence until almost the end of May of 1630.

Again, it is important to note that the people did not refute theories only for the sake of an argument. Instead, they probably knew from past experience that quarantine measures had an immediate impact on their personal and economic life. Since the beginning of 1630, they had been reassured by the majority of doctors that the disease that was circulating in Milan was not true plague,[120] but when the general medical opinion changed in April, they did not immediately align with the new official views. Evidence suggests that once the authorities started to enforce plague-containment measures in April, people's first reaction was to think that the measures were not necessary because there was no plague. They expressed their disapproval first of all by threatening and, in some cases, assaulting the officers of the *Tribunale della Sanità* in the execution of their offices. On April 23rd, the Spanish governor Ambrogio Spinola issued an edict in which he condemned to the most severe punishment. Let us consider some parts of the edict:

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[119] The dispute between *pestisti* and *anti-pestisti* is discussed in chapter 1.

[120] See chapter 2.

> [I forbid] every person to gossip, complain, threaten, slander, commit malicious or indecent acts against any officer of public health in virtue of his office and with the intent of hindering the execution of his duties (His Excellence is of the opinion that all [public health measure] should be respected). [I also forbid] to spread seditious rumors among the *popolo,* or to encourage or participate in revolts, or commit any other action in contrast with the will of His Excellence.[121]

Among the rumors, a story was circulating that doctors led by Ludovico Settala were intentionally spreading the fear of the plague among the people to increase their business.[122] Alessandro Tadino reports an incident of violence against Settala, who was verbally and physically attacked by a mob while in the streets.

Overall, the publishing of the edict (published just days after the medical officials had officially declared the presence of the epidemic) and Tadino's anecdote show that the majority of people preferred to take a risk and still deny plague in spite of the unanimous conclusion reached by the doctors. Furthermore, the rumor of a conspiracy led by the city proto-physician to spread the ‘fear of plague’ suggests the idea that the lower classes did not trust medical professionals or public health officers. On the contrary, they imagined them willing to take advantage of them by using the excuse of a plague epidemic.

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[121] "[Con il quale si proibisce] qual si voglia persona, di che condizione e qualità si sia, il sparlare, stridere, minacciare, dir parole ingiuriose, far atti mali, o indecenti a qual si voglia Ministro della Sanità in material del suo ufficio, ne impedirlo con fatti nell'esecuzione di esso (essendo mente dell' Eccell. Sua che siano rispettati come conviene) ne sparger voci sediziose nel Popolo, o concitar tumulti, o intervenirvi, o far altre azioni contrarie a questa mente di S. E.", Edict signed by Ambrosio Spinola dated April 23rd, 1630. A.S.M. Sanità, Parte Antica, Busta 278.

[122] On the topic of the type of payment received by doctors in early modern Italy see Gianna Pomata, *Contracting a Cure. Patient, Healers, and the Law in Early Modern Bologna,* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

Even when the majority of people could no longer deny that plague was in the city, evidence suggests that the populace frustrated the effort to the *Tribunale della Sanità* to stop the epidemic by infringing public health ordinances, mostly by trafficking with quarantined goods. Once the *Tribunale della Sanit*à identified a household as infected (one or more members had died of plague), its members were transported to the pest house and their belonging were either seized and destroyed or brought to the Lazzaretto to be washed.[123] Thus, quarantine measures also resulted in the loss of personal property, which led people to hide their belongings, or illegally take them out of their homes.

One of Alessandro Tadino’s anecdotes gives a good example of this dynamic.[124] A man named Carlo Colona had just come back from Monza, a town in the Milanese hinterland, when he died. Not long after his death, his two children and a number of his neighbors also died showing evident signs of plague. Before dying, Colona’s wife informed Tadino that her husband had gone to Monza to see the passage of the German army, and that he had bought some items from the soldiers. She also told Tadino that after her husband’s death, neighbors took her family belongings and were hiding them. Interestingly, those same items were later brought to the Church of San Rocco as votive offerings, probably because the people who had taken were afraid to be infected. In the meantime, when Tadino learned of the donation, he ordered the immediate removal and destruction of those objects, so that "they would not cause greater destruction to the neighborhood'. [125] Yet, the chain of deaths linked to the Colona's family belongings did not end there. On the contrary, according to Tadino's reconstruction of the events, a man name Turate had taken a piece of cloth from the Colona's household. When he and his family died of plague, many of his creditors took his belongings 'without using the necessary precautions, and the plague spread to Porta Ticinese, and then to the entire city". [126]

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[123] In some cases, the *Tribunale* allowed wealthier families to remain quarantined in their homes. Inspectors looked their doors and periodically checked on them.
[124] Tadino, 51-52

The anecdote is significant because it reveals an attitude of the lower classes towards plague.[127] Tadino's mapping of the diffusion of the plague via the smuggling and hiding of goods shows the inclination of people to take the risk of being infected in order to gain some immediate relief from their misery or to protect their belongings from being seized by plague cleaners. The fact that some of the items taken from the Colona's household were then offered to the Church of San Rocco points to the idea that people who had taken them recognized the risk. Yet, they took their chances. When they changed their mind, they did not simply get rid of the items, instead they offered them to Saint Rocco, a saint invoked against the plague.

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[125] Tadino, 52

[126] Tadino, 86

[127] As mentioned earlier, wealthier families had better chances of being quarantined in their homes (thus maintaining control of their stuff), or often had the money to bribe plague cleaners and avoid the removal or destruction of their belongings.

A similar attitude can be recognized in the small-scale commerce of items people bought from Imperial soldiers in spite of the ordinance that prohibited those kinds of transactions. German troops coming from areas were plague was present arrived in Milan at the end of September of 1629. They were on their way to Mantua and, according to Tadino, the decision of the Spanish governor to allow them to pass through the State of Milan was one of the main causes of the plague outbreak.[128] First, because the soldier's pillaging of towns in the countryside worsened the living conditions of the peasants who, as we have seen earlier, moved to the city. Second, because although the soldiers were stationed outside the city, the goods that they sold to the people quickly entered the Milanese market.

This type of small-scale commercial exchange provided economic relief for the people, who managed to find a way to elude the authorities. Tadino laments a lack of regard for the danger posed by such commerce

> In the meantime, the *fisici conservatori* proposed the to the *Tribunale* to publish an edict that sanctioned with the death penalty and the confiscation of all property the purchase of all type of merchandise from the German [soldiers] to avoid all dangers; but it was not possible to persuade the President Arconato, filled with goodness, could not imagine that thousands of people could die because of the exchange with this people and their things; the edict was eventually issued but not respected bringing little benefit to the common good[129]

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[128] Tadino, 20

[129] "Fra questo mentre proposero li Fisici Conservatori al Tribunale di provvedere con grida rigorosa di pena di vita, & di confiscazione dei beni, che nissuno comprasse robbe di qualsivoglia sorte da questi Alemanni, per obstare à tutti li pericoli; ma non fù possibile persuaderlo al Presidente Arconato pieno di molta bontà, che non poteva credere dovesse succedere incontri di morte di tante migliaia di persone, per il commercio di questa gente & loro robbe; la qual grida fu poi fatta, ma non osservata con poco beneficio universale", Tadino, 16-17.

We already heard the story of Colona, who bought items from the soldiers and brought them into the city. Although there is no indication in Tadino's account of the reasons why Colona travelled outside the city to go buy them, it is significant that Colona took a risk and did it.

Another example of this small-scale commerce is the story of a small shop keeper from Merate, a town in the Milanese hinterland. When the *Tribunale della Sanità* ordered the suspension of commerce with the town, Radaello moved to Milan with his family to try and make a living there. In fact we know from Tadino's account that Radaello brought with him a fur collar he had purchased from a soldier and many bags of cloths. His intentions were probably to sell those items in the city. [130]

We can draw some conclusions from the story of Radaello. First of all, in spite of the plague containment ordinances, the city was permeable. We learn from Tadino that Radaello used a falsified document to enter the city, showing that, unless Radaello was already an experienced criminal, it was probably not too difficult to elude the guards at the city doors. Second, the negative impact of the plague-containment measures on the small shop keeper was such that decided to defy the orders of the *Tribunale della Sanità* and move to the city, where almost ironically he died of plague shortly after arriving.

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[130] Tadino, 52-53

Radaello's story is probably just one of the many occurrences of what contemporary authorities viewed as a great challenge for the containment of the plague.[131] In a document dated May 1630, the president of the *Tribunale della Sanità* affirmed his sense of defeat in the face of so many infractions and claimed that the people 'feared famine more than plague'.[132] Yet, these stories of lower-class men and women defying regulations aimed at stopping a much-feared pestilence tells about their world in which plague was only one of their challenges.

Poverty and plague were competing forces that influenced the way the common people acted during the Milanese crisis of 1630. While between the end of 1629 and the spring of 1630 plague was somehow perceived as a distant threat, famine was a real and present danger and the city authorities struggled to provide for the masses of mendicants now crowding the streets of Milan. The health board's effort to obtain funds from the *Tribunale di Provvigione* and the *Sessanta Decurioni* to provide relief for the poor was frustrated by their non-responsiveness. Archival evidence shows that the president of the *Tribunale della Sanità* wrote several letters to the city administration and to the Spanish governor urging them to intervene, but the city treasury lagged in providing the much-needed resources. In one of his letters to the Vicario di Provvigione, the president expressed a sense of despair regarding the danger caused by the great number of beggars in the city:

> An inevitable calamity and ruin is upon us, and we can no longer doubt that the plague is within us and it is fatal. […] And amidst many

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[131] A reading of different archival documents suggests that the authorities' struggles with the undisciplined and defiant attitude that the populace had towards quarantine orders, especially with regards to respecting the orders regarding the cleansing or destruction of household items.
[132] A.S.M., Sanità, Parte Antica. Busta 278. Letter of the Presidente della Sanità to Antonio Ferrer.

> dangers and menaces we will not be able to last in our office, since we don’t find valid subsidies to feed and take care of the large number of indigents that have been entrusted in our care. It would be appropriate to surrender[133]

Plague, or better the halting of all commercial activities that resulted from the enforcement of plague-containment ordinances, worsened the living condition of the large part of the population that already had been living on the verge of poverty and that ended up joining the ranks of the endemically poor. Left to themselves, people resorted to all kinds of activities to survive. As Alessandro Tadino remarked, the populace had “a greater regard for their things than for their life.”[134] From protecting their belongings from being seized to illegally trafficking goods, the image that comes out is that of a desperate people who saw plague not only as a threat to their health, but also to their livelihood. Therefore, the initial resistance of the populace to the fact that the plague had already penetrated into the city at the end of 1629 could be justified by this context of survival.

Conclusions

While several studies have focused on the effects of the Black plague on the macroeconomic structures of medieval and early modern communities, not a great deal has been written about the actual cost of plague epidemic for the common people. In this chapter, I attempted to show that each epidemic outbreak was feared by both city authorities and the common people, not just for the cost in terms of human lives, but also for the immediate impact that plague containment measures had on the micro economy of the people whose life they were meant to protect. My research stemmed from a very simple observation: although two of the most prominent Milanese physicians recognized the signs of a plague outbreak since the end of 1629 and urged the people to take the necessary precautions, Milanese authorities lagged in the implementation of plague protocols, and the common people publicly attacked those physicians accusing them of 'inventing' plague outbreaks for their own profit. How could this reaction be explained? Did not people dread the uncontrollable force that had taken so many lives in their recent history and wouldn't they rather be safe than sorry? Was Milan not at the forefront with its stable public health board and complex plague preventive procedures? I suggested that the implementation of plague preventive measures had very practical limitations, which stalled them.

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[133] “Ci sovrasta una calamità e ruina inevitabile, nè ormai si può dubitare che la peste non sia tra noi e mortale. […] E noi in mezzo a tanti pericoli e minacce, ove non troviamo sussidj valevoli per alimentare e guarantire in sì grande calamità i poveri affidati alle nostre cure, non potremo durare nell’assunto ufficio, e converrà gettare la spugna”, Ripamonti, 201-203.

[134] Tadino, 75.

First, plague containment measures had very high cost. The city treasure had to pay to set up and maintain plague houses, hire plague cleaners and least but not last, support the large number of new poor that resulted from the collapse of the city economy. Thus, especially during the early stages of the outbreak, when there were still doubts among the medical professionals about the diagnosis of the disease, authorities were cautious in the implementation of those measures. Second, sometimes the political and personal interests of the ruling elite seem to have clouded the decisions of the organs of the public administration, despite the warnings of the medical experts. Finally, the implementation of quarantine measures had a very negative impact on the micro-economy of the Milanese populace. Because of past experiences, people were familiar with the consequences that quarantine measures would have on their personal freedom, possessions, and ability to work. So, like the ruling elite, when they still had doubts about the presence of plague in the city, they chose to deny the presence of plague and worry about what they recognized as the most obvious and imminent threat: famine. And even when the majority of people recognized that a full-blown plague epidemic was in the city, they maintained an attitude of defiance and carelessness towards quarantine measure. They hid their belongings from plague cleaners, stole from neighbors, and in general contributed to what contemporaries recognized as the unintentional spread of plague through the illegal commerce of infected goods.

Chapter 3

To Harm or Heal? From the *Magus*[135] to the Barber: The Mistrusted Use of the Secrets of Nature

We have seen in previous chapters that the skepticism of those who denied that plague had reached the city of Milan came to an end in May of 1630, when medical professionals, as well as the populace, finally agreed that plague was indeed responsible for the growing number of deaths. But, beginning at the end of May, the appearance of greasy stains (called by contemporaries *unzioni*) on walls and doors around the city was recognized by the people of Milan as the cause of the rapid diffusion of plague. Therefore, the authorities began an investigation that led to the arrest of several men accused of having intentionally spread the plague through the dissemination of pestiferous ointments.

In this chapter, I suggest that the phenomenon of the *unzioni*[136] was the product of a time when the experimentation with the occult powers of nature and the changing medical notions about disease began to permeate the lower class. An elite of Hermetic natural philosophers had guarded this type knowledge, known as natural magic, for centuries, but the records of trial against the men accused of being plague spreaders (called by contemporaries *untori*) indicate the presence among the lower class of 'alternative' medical remedies, probably concocted using formulas inspired by the circulation of "books of secrets."[137] The "book of secrets" were part of a widespread genre which was originally indented to only introduce an educated audience to the 'occult' powers of nature, but were later adapted for wider circulation among a more 'popular' audience in the form of cheap booklets and pamphlets.[138]

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[135] The term *magus* in this chapter refers to its early modern use to indicate a learned practitioner of natural magic.

[136] In this chapter, I will use the expression 'phenomenon of the *unzioni*' to indicate the practice of intentional plague spreading. I will also use the term *unzioni* to indicate the greasy stains found of the walls and believed to spread plague.

Despite its popularity, this genre was not free of criticism in the intellectual circles and, as we will see in the trial against the *untori*, also caused the suspicion of many among the common people. The intellectual controversy surrounding the diffusion of "books of secrets" and natural magic is the object of several modern studies that agree on the fact that between the sixteenth and seventeenth century those who opposed natural magic did so because they believed that it involved demonic powers.[139] While the supporters of natural magic refuted the accusation of demonic involvement, they still agreed with their opponents that the knowledge of the occults powers of nature had to remain 'hidden' from the masses. In fact, they believed that only the *magus* had the necessary training and wisdom to fully comprehend the virtues of nature and correctly use its powers, while in the hands of the uneducated masses, those powerful ‘secrets’ could be misused.

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[137] For more on the diffusion of printed material containing medical advice and recipes see David Gentilcore, *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Chapter 10.

[138] About the books of secrets see William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[139] About the controversy over the demonic nature of natural magic see Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially chapter 10.

While the Milanese medical elite expressed its opposition towards the experimentation with alternative medical remedies in several publications, the reservations shared by common people are evident in the records of the trial against the *untori*. In fact, when it came time to identify the *untori*, the suspicion of the people in the neighborhood where the *unzioni* were found fell on a few men who already had a questionable reputation due to their involvement with the production and commerce of alternative medical remedies. Thus, we will see how the populace shared the same mistrust about the manipulation of the occult properties of nature, as did the opponents of natural magic in the learned circles.

Overall, the intent of this chapter is to show that the broad diffusion among the populace of the ‘secrets of nature’ produced a new confidence in human craftiness among the uneducated lower class. At the same time, evidence suggests that the ruling elite and the common people shared the opinion that the work of the *untori* was in fact the demonstration of the inherent dangers posed by the circulation those ‘secrets’ outside the learned circles.

The dangers of the production of empirical medicinal remedies: the point of view of the learned elite

We have seen in a previous chapter that between the end of sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century academic debates regarding the diagnosis of plague began to chip away the authority of classic Galenic theories in favor of a more empirical approach. At the same time, the diffusion of alternative medical remedies produced using alchemical principles inspired by the works of Paracelsus caused grave concerns among traditionally trained physicians.[140] The root of the problem was the fact that principles of 'empirical' or 'spagyric' medicine were very closely associated with natural magic and thus the learned elite (lay and religious) considered them dangerous for two reasons: because practitioners often used dangerous poisons in their concoctions and, most importantly, their alchemical operation were believed to have demonic origins.

The broad circulation of "books of secrets"[141] during the 16th and 17th century is probably what contributed to the conflation between natural magic and spagyric medicine. 'Books of Secrets' facilitated the diffusion of the idea that nature's occult powers could be employed through mechanical operations to produce 'extraordinary' effects, especially in the realm of medical remedies.

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[140] About Paracelsus and the Hermetic tradition see D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic. From Ficino to Campanella,* (London: The Warburg Institute, Univeristy of London, 1958). Also see *La magia naturale nel Rinascimento,* Ed. Paolo Rossi, trans. Silvia Parigi (Torino: Utet, 1989) and Paola Zambelli, 'Le problème de la magie naturelle à la Renaissance' in L.Szezucki, ed., *Magia, Astrologia e Religione nel Rinascimento* (Varsaw: Ossolineum, 1972), 48-82

[141] For more on the topic of "Books of Secrets" see William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature. Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Orthodox physicians often attacked the work of *Professors of Secrets* like the Neapolitan Gian Battista della Porta (1535-1615) and Leonardo Fioravanti (1518-1588) and accused them of medical malpractice. Yet the widespread diffusion of Fioravanti's printed work supports the idea that his fame and influence on medical practitioners continued to grow.

The work of Fioranvanti offers a good example of the new medical approach to disease and the use of 'secrets of nature' in the production of medical remedies. In contrast with traditional medicine, Fioravanti believed that disease could not be healed through a simple 'change of regimen' aimed at improving the balance of humors. Instead, he was convinced of the necessity for the body to expel the 'putrefaction' that was causing the disease with the ingestion of a vomitive. The basic principle used by his method was that of 'sympathy and antipathy', which called for the use of "like" elements to draw out a disease: for example, using a poison to draw out a poison. One of his most renowned remedies was the *Oleum Philosophorum de termentiua et cera.*[142] Fioravanti claimed that his potion was a powerful new invention to cure all sorts of infirmities and especially the plague.

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[142] Fioravanti, Leonardo, 1518-1588., Hester, John, d. 1593. 'A short discours of the excellent doctour and knight, maister Leonardo Phiorauanti Bolognese vppon chirurgerie VVith a declaration of many thinges, necessarie to be knowne, neuer written before in this order: wherevnto is added a number of notable secretes, found out by the saide author. Translated out of Italian into English, by Iohn Hester, practicioner in the arte of distillation. Recipe for the Oleum " Newe yellow Wax. ȝ*.12.* cleare Turpentine, ȝ*.18.* Bengimine .ȝ*.2.* Fine rectified *Aqua vitae, ȝ.30.* common Ashes, ȝ*.6.* mix them & put them into a retort of glasse wel luted, and then distil it in a wind fornes http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A00755.0001.001/1:11.24?rgn=div2;view=fulltext accessed on March 2, 2015

The authors of the 'Books of Secrets' promised their upper-class audience to illuminate them on principles of natural philosophy that for centuries had been kept secret by the Hermetic tradition.[143] In fact, during the 16th century, the development of natural magic was surrounded by an aura of secrecy, and the knowledge of nature's secrets was reserved for only the natural philosophers that could understand them. For example, Cornelius Agrippa, one of its most renowned exponents, believed that the purpose of natural magic was to contemplate the power of nature and that only the *magus* could recognize the correspondences between the 'macro-cosmos' – the heavens- and the 'micro-cosmos' – the hearth. Agrippa believed 'each magical experience abhors the public, it wants to be hidden and is strengthened by silence while it is destroyed when it is revealed.'[144]

Despite the original intent to limit their diffusion among the learned elite, "Books of Secrets" became available to the larger public. They lured readers with the notion that nature's occult powers could be manipulated thanks to simple practical operations. However, because many of those books contained medical remedies, traditional medical practitioners feared the effects that the use of such recipes by incompetent people would have on people's health. A good example of this debate is offered by epistolary dispute between Zeferiele Tommaso Bovio and

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[143] For more on the Hermetic Tradition and its exponents see Frances Yates, "The Hermetic Tradition in the Renaissance", in Art, Science, and History in the Renaissance, Charles Singleton, ed. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1968) and D.P. Walker, Spiritual and Demonic Magic. From Ficino to Campanella. (London: The Warburg Institute University of London, 1958)

[144] In "La Magia Naturale nel Rinascimento" transl. Silvia Parigi. (Torino: Strenne Utet, 1989) p 17.

Claudio Gelli.[145] Bovio was a medical practitioner and alchemist, follower of Paracelsus and Leonardo Fioravanti, while his opponent, Claudio Gelli, was a university-trained physician and member of the *Collegio dei Fisici* in Venice. Bovio voiced his criticism against academic medicine while exalting the virtues of his new remedies in his essay printed in Venice in 1583. Gelli responded to his criticism in an open letter dated 1584. In his letter Gelli emphasized the authority of the ancients upon which traditional medicine was founded in contrast to the fallacy of Paracelsian principles. Bovio continued his critique against traditional medicine and published two additional rebuttals published in Verona in 1585 and 1592.

Evidence suggests that the controversy regarding the diffusion of alternative medical remedies was still relevant in Milan during the first half of the seventeenth century. In fact, the printer Giovan Battista Bidelli, whose printing work was mostly dedicated to contemporary works of literature and poetry, reprinted the epistolary exchange between Zefiriele Tomaso Bovio and Claudio Gelli in 1617. The lack of evidence makes it hard to say for sure why Bidelli became interested in the publication of Bovio and Gelli's debate, but it notable that it was during the same year that in Milan a servant woman named Caterina Medici was tried as a witch. While there is no evident link between Bidelli's publications and the trial against Caterina, it is plausible that the interest of the printer (and of the public) in the debate about the the dangers of Paracelsian medicine, and especially its possible affiliation with the devil, was sparked by the case of Caterina, who was accused of having caused the Milanese senator Ludovico Melzi to suffer of a ‘supernatural’ stomach ailment’.[146]

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[145] For more about Zefiriele Bovio see Maria Pia Vannoni, "Il "Medico dalla spade": Tomaso Zefiriele Bovio*"* in *Bruniana & Campanelliana,* Accademia Editoriale, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2011), 81-96.

Another good example of the fears of traditional physicians towards the improper production and use of medical remedies is offered by the writing two of the most influential Milanese physicians, Ludovico Settala and Alessandro Tadino. In his 1630’s edition of *Preservatione dalla Peste,*[147] the *protofisico* Settala makes a specific remark about the problems caused by ‘untrained practitioners’ preparing empirical remedies. While he does not question the usefulness of remedies proposed by famous Empirics against the plague (such as Mattioli, Fracostoro, and Moibano), he warns against those practicing without the appropriate academic training and knowledge:

> I should not forget to mention the external remedies created by great men in this profession; we try to protect ourselves from such a great illness by applying their remedies to our wrists, ankles, and on the area of the heart; […] I remind the reader to not trust certain *Larovari*, mountebanks, and Empirics lacking the knowledge of the correct method and of the correct proportion [of ingredients] to be used for their concoctions.[148]

Settala concludes his warning explaining that the problem with the remedies is not the ingredients *per se* (which he claims are in fact good), but it is the fact that those

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[146] The original trial against Caterina Medici has been edited by Giuseppe Farinelli and Ermanno Paccagnini, *Processo per stregoneria a Caterina de’ Medici 1616-1617.* (Milano: Book Time, 2011)

[147] Ludovico Settala, *Preservatione dalla Peste,* (Milano: Gio. Battista Bidelli, 1630)

[148] “Non doverò anche à questo fine tralasciare i rimedi esterni à quello fine da grand’huomini in questa professione ritrovati; co’ quali ongendosi i polsi delle braccia, e de’ piedi, e la regione del cuore proviamo da difenderci da tanto gran male; […] Ricordando à non fidarsi di certi Larovari, da molti mont’ in banco, & Empirici senza metodo, e senza proporzione composti” *Preservatione dalla Peste*, 59.

‘secret recipes’ do not indicate the precise quantity to be used of each ingredient. Thus, untrained practitioners could end up mixing everything together “without harmony and with great confusion.”[149]

In 1646, Alessandro Tadino picked up the issues about empirical medicine raised by his now deceased colleague. In his introduction to a short compendium (*Breve Compendio*)[150] of remedies to treat skin ailments that had been originally compiled by Settala, Tadino reminds his readers about the dangers posed by untrained ‘lower ranking’ medical practitioners. He also presents his compendium as the fulfillment of Settala’s desire to offer a practical guide in Italian to instruct “those who practice *chirurgia* and in particular those who treat skin ailments [barbers], who often had fallen into error with evident harm to their patients.”[151]

Settala and Tadino’s warnings suggest that the two physicians did not necessarily take a stand against the use of spagyric medical remedies, but they were worried about the dangers of illicit ‘pharmaceutical’ activities carried out by unskilled people following recipes obtained from charlatans, mountebanks, and their ‘popular’ adaptations of Books of Secrets.[152]

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[149] “con gran confusione e senza armonia ogni cosa mescolano”, *Preservatione dalla Peste*, 59

[150] Alessandro Tadino, *Breve Compendio per Curare ogni Sorte de Tumori Esterni & Cutanee Torpitudini”* (Milano, per Ludovico Monza, 1646)

[151] “Pensò ancora di profittare à quelli, che attendono alla Chirurgia, & in particolare à quella parte di curare li mali cutanei, delli quali molti cascavano in errori con evidente danno delli patienti”. Tadino, *Breve Compendio per Curare ogni Sorte de Tumori Esterni & Cutanee Torpitudini,”* 3.

[152] Gentilcore, 360.

May 1630: The *unzioni* appear in Milan

When the *unzioni*[153] appeared in Milan, the fears related to the diffusion of notions about the occult powers of nature acquired a new significance. Could human craftiness allow men to create concoctions capable of transmitting plague? Although the authorities initially seemed to be skeptical, by the mid of June of 1630, contemporary sources indicate that the majority of the people in Milan believed that the *unzioni* were the cause of the rapid diffusion on the plague, and that were produced thanks to the manipulation of natural elements.

The first discovery of the unzioni happened during the night of May 17th , and it immediately created panic among the people present. In the middle of the night, the president of the *Tribunale della Sanità* was called by the *monsignori* of the Duomo to examine yellow greasy stains that had been found on the furniture inside the Duomo. In a letter written to the governor dated May 21st, the president explained to the Spanish official that because of the "potential severity" of the incident, he personally inspected the Duomo, together with other officers of the board (a physician, a surgeon, the *notaio criminale*, and the Cancelliere). He confirmed the presence of a yellow and greasy substance smeared on the benches and other objects inside the church, but he could not determine its nature. Nevertheless, he reassured the governor, that "to abound in caution," he had ordered a general cleaning of the contaminated objects using *liscia*[154] and vinegar. On their hand, church authorities had then ordered the closing of the Duomo and the removal of all the benches from inside the cathedral.

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[153] Here the term *unzioni* is referred to the actual greasy stains found on the walls of homes in Milan.

We learn about the reaction of the people present in the Duomo from Francesco Maria Borri, a member of the clergy of the Church of San Lorenzo Maggiore. Borri was present when the *unzioni* were discovered and gives an account of the event in a letter addressed to his father and dated May 21st 1630.[155] According to Borri, a sudden scream erupted from the crowd when a religious procession entered the Duomo: “we are all dead.” As panic was spreading among the people, the cathedral’s custodians urged everyone to run outside without touching anything. Borri tells that *unzioni* were found on benches, parapets, doors, holy water basins, and even on the seat of the archbishop. He does not advance any specific claim about the nature of the ointment, but he tells his father that the custodian who had closed the church doors had already died and his aid was about to die as well, implying a causal relation between the two events. Furthermore, he tells that the next day, the sight of all the benches piled outside the church caused great fright in the people.

The reaction of the authorities seemed to be more equivocal than that of the church representative and of the people that were present. Although the immediate and personal response of the president of the *Tribunale della Sanità* to the call of the *Monsignori* suggests a certain urgency on the part of the *Tribunale,* his letter to the Spanish governor seems to suggest the opposite. Furthermore, it insinuates that the church 's representatives overreacted causing unnecessary panic. Because of the possible bias of the two sources mentioned (Borri was an member of the clergy and the President of the *Tribunale* could have had good reasons blaming the church for spreading chaos), it is not possible to say if the Church attendants reaction to the discovery of the grease is what really influenced the collective reaction to the events, but what we learn from the first edict published by the *Tribunale* at the end of May is that the *unzioni* did end up causing great fear in the people who believed that the *unzioni* spread the plague.[156]

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[154] *Liscia* or *Ranno* is a term used to indicate water containing cinder, typically used as a cleaning agent.

[155] “Cinque lettere inedite sulla peste di Milano del 1630” ed. Emilio Sioli Legnani in “La Rassegna della Letteratura Italina” No. 2-3, May- December 1964

The popular response suggests that the authorities were not yet convinced that the *unzioni* posed a real and imminent danger to public health. In fact, it seems that the people had to take the matter into their hands when similar stains were found around the city. Private citizens began purging the walls and doorknobs on which they had found the grease and initiated a manhunt to find the *untori*. In the weeks that followed the first appearance of *unzioni* at the Duomo the *unzioni* continued to appear throughout the city, and rumors about a plague-spreading conspiracy contributed to increase fear in the community.[157] Yet, there is no evidence in the sources of any attempt on the part of the *Tribunale della Sanità* to determine the nature and quality of the ointment that was found on many walls of the city. On the contrary, the language of the edicts issued in May and beginning of June seems to indicate, as mentioned in the previous chapter, that the magistrate was mostly concerned about the popular unrest caused by the perception that the common people had of those *unzioni*, rather than the effectiveness of the *unzioni per se.*[158]

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[156] ASM, Sanità P.A., busta 278.
[157] See chapter 2.

The authorities began to make the connection between the growing number of plague victims and the *unzioni* in the second half of June.[159] A contributing factor for the change was probably the peak in plague mortality that followed the intercessory procession held in honor of the late Carlo Borromeo. The procession was held on June 11th and, in the days that immediately followed, the number of plague victims grew exponentially.[160] Some witnesses claimed to have seen "[*untori*] 'grease so many people and places that some were surprised that the whole population of the city didn't die."[161] It was only then that the *Tribunale della*

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[158] In the first edict published on May 19th the language is clearly pointing to the problems to the people caused by the spread of fear associated with the discovery of the unzioni., and not to a possible true danger of contagion "Il che ha causato negli animi di questo popolo di Milano grandissimo terrore e spanvento, dubitandosi che tali untuosita siano state fatte per aumentare la peste…..dovendo gli Signori Presidenti e Conservatori della Sanità dello Stato di Milano per debito del loro carico provedere, hanno risoluto per beneficio publico e per quiete e consolazione degli abitanti di questa città… far pubblicare la presente grida". *Grida* dated May 19, 1630. Reported verbatim by Ripamonti, *La Peste di Milano,* 63 and also *Grida* dated June 2, 1630 issued by the Treasury increasing the reward to 500 *ducati* for those providing any information about the authors of the *unzioni.* ASM, Sanità, Parte Antica, Cartella 286.

[159] Again, the best indicator of the changing opinion of the authorities regarding the *unzioni* is the language used in the edicts issued in June and July compared to the language used in May. (See chapter 2)

[160] ASM, Sanità Parte Antica, Cartella 286.

[161] "il giorno che si portò in processione San Carlo untarono tante persone, e luoghi, che come confessarono alcuni si meravigliavano come non morissero affatto tutti della città". Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Sentenze Capitali, S.Q. + 1.6.

Sanità began an official investigation to discover those who were conspiring against public health using pestiferous concoction.[162]

Remedies, potions, and most excellent poisons

The involvement of the community played a very important role in the identification and arrest of the *untori,* and it tells us how the common people interpreted the events. Most importantly the claims that witnesses made during the investigation and trial against the *untori* bring to light the ambivalent attitude of the lower class towards remedies and potions circulating in their neighborhood. Such attitude is what led the magistrate to make the first arrests in the case of the *unzioni.*

Before getting to the events of 1630, it is necessary to take a step back and consider an incident that happened in November of 1629 and reported by Alessandro Tadino.[163] The episode suggests that people in Milan identified the potential threat of intentional plague spreading with a specific typology of people even before the *unzioni* actually appeared in the city. The story involves Gerolamo Bonoincontro, a young traveller who was lodged at the Osteria dei Tre Re and was arrested by the Milanese authorities on suspicion of being an *untore*.[164] He claimed to be a medical expert and that his remedies had secured him the favors of the

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[162] See Chapter 4.
[163] Tadino, *Ragguaglio*, 111-112
[164] Tadino, 110

Viceroy of Sicily and of the Duke of Savoy. Thus, having heard of a possible contagion spreading in the Milanese territory, he had decided to come to Milan to offer his services, and was hoping to visit the Lazzaretto soon. According to Tadino, when the stories told by Bonoincontro reached the ears of the president of the *Tribunale della Sanità,* the president ordered the immediate arrest of Bonoincontro "especially because he heard he was dressed in the French fashion and his appearances well supported it [the rumor]".[165]

After his arrest, Bonoincontro's belongings were sent to the Lazzaretto to be carefully examined by Alessandro Tadino and Giovanni Visconte. His luggage contained astrology books, a manuscript about chiromancy[166], some spiritual books, a cleric's dress and belt, and several small vases containing powders and quicksilver. After receiving the report on the content of luggage, the president of the *Tribunale della Sanità* assisted by Ludovico Settala, his son Senatore Settala and Alessandro Tadino, questioned Bonoincontro but they were only able to establish that he was an apostate. Aside from discovering that the Savoyard credentials and passports he carried were false, the experts who examined the powders confirmed their medicinal nature.[167] Not finding any dangerous plague-spreading concoction, the magistrate released Bonoincontro to the General Inquisitor due to his confession of apostasy. He was later transferred to Rome.

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[165] "Lo fece far prigione, tanto più haver inteso fosse in habito francese, & l'aspetto suo lo dimostrava molto bene" Tadino, 112.

[166] Chiromancy is the art of predicting the future of one person through the reading of the person's palm.

[167] Tadino, 112.

The arrest of Bonoincontro shows the existence of a set of prejudices shared at all social levels. The information about Bonoincontro's claims came to the president of the *Tribunale* from the word of mouth of his neighbor, a rich merchant, who in turn had heard the story from the small artisan who had directly talked with Bonoincontro. Thus, it wasn't just the president who recognized Bonoincontro as potential threat. On the contrary, it was a lower-class artisan who had first raised a flag after hearing about Bonoincontro's medical claims.

The story is indicative of an anxiety about the possible use of concoctions to spread rather than cure the plague. It is important to point out that what first raised the alert of the people was the fact that Bonoincontro was in possession of different kinds of ointments and medical remedies, suggesting that the magistrates and the people were on the lookout for individuals that could have the skills necessary to produce pestiferous ointments. Their suspicion fell on the most probable suspect: a young man dispensing various medicines in a time when empirical remedies were unpopular and considered dangerous by university trained doctors.

Another important element is the fact that Bonoincontro carried false credentials and Tadino suggests that he did so "in order to make a living in those parts of Sicily and Savoy where the plague was making great progress".[168] As a university-trained physician, Tadino was probably taking advantage of the story of

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[168] "per procacciarse il vivere in quelle parti della Sicilia, e ancora della Savoia, in cui la peste faceva gran progressi." Tadino, 112

Bonoincontro to remind his readers to be wary of the fraudulent claims made by charlatans, who were selling their remedies for personal profit rather than for the benefit of the people.

Several months later, when the *unzioni* appeared in the city, new suspects were brought to the attention of the authorities. This time the accusations came from a few women after they found yellow greasy stains on the doors and walls of many homes in their neighborhood of *Porta Ticinese*[169] on the morning of Friday, June 21st. Their accusations put in motion the juridical machine that led to the trial against a number of men of the neighborhood involved with the production of potions and remedies. Their activities and bad reputation was recognized by their neighbors as indicative of their involvement with the *unzioni*.

When the Senate sent the *Capitano di Giustizia* Gian Battista Visconti to investigate the events in Porta Ticinese, the residents had already destroyed physical evidence of the *unzioni* by burning the stains and applying quicklime to the walls. Yet, the *Capitano* opened a formal investigation based on the testimony of female witnesses who claimed to have seen a man smearing the greasy substance on the walls of a few homes.[170] Despite the circumstantial nature of the evidence, the testimony of the women put the judiciary machine in motion, and the magistrate ordered the arrest of the man believed by the women to be an *untore* and identified by the witnesses as Guglielmo Piazza.

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[169] The area of Porta Ticinese was a densely populated suburb in the southwest area of Milan. It was a residential area where poor laborers crowded the few residential building that were surrounded by cultivated plots and small gardens. For more on the demographic and economic structure of Milan at the beginning of the seventeenth century see Stefano D'Amico, *Le Contrade e la Città. Sistema Produttivo e Spazio Urbano a Milano fra Cinque e Seicento* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1994), 37-38.

[170] "Allora mi venne in pensiero, se a caso fosse un poco uno di quelli che a giorni passati andavano ungendo le muraglie", *Processo*, 185.

Who was Guglielmo Piazza? Why was his presence in the neighborhood so suspicious that that the women believed he was an *untore*? Although I recognize that the absence of direct evidence makes it impossible to establish with certainty the reasons why he was denounced as an *untore,* his reputation linked to his job as a plague worker could lead to some speculations.

Unlike Buonoincontro, the young man arrested in November of 1629, Piazza was not an outsider. On the contrary, he had ties in neighborhood and his family was also known, making his denunciation different from the typical scapegoating mechanisms, which normally targeted outsiders.[171] He was a tall, skinny man, with a very long red beard, and brown hair.[172] He was a silk worker and lived with his family in his father's house in Porta Ticinese, in the parish of San Pietro in Caminadella. His close connections with the neighborhood are also supported by the fact that some of the witnesses claimed to know his mother-in - law, *comare* Paola.[173]

The arrival of the plague had changed Piazza's life. The slowing down of the already struggling economy due to restrictions on commerce imposed by public health ordinances had forced him to look for an alternative way to support his household. Paradoxically, it was thanks to the rapid diffusion of the disease and the consequent need for a large number of plague-workers that Piazza found a job as a health inspector. The *Tribunale della Sanità* had hired him on May 26th and assigned him to the neighborhood of Porta Ticinese. Unfortunately, due to his constant contact with the sick, he had to separate himself from his family, to avoid the risk of infecting them. He slept and ate in a separate room of the house, and according to the testimony of a neighbor, he lived a very lonely life "shunned by everybody, including his wife".[174]

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[171] Since the Black Death, during plague outbreaks outsiders were often seen with suspicion and at times were accused to be responsible for the diffusion of the disease.

[172] "Un huomo di statura grande, magro, con barba rossa longa, capelli castani scuri", *Processo*, 189.

[173] The term *comare* indicates a woman living in the neighborhood and connected with the other neighbors by an intimate and long-lasting friendship. *http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/comare/*

His days were spent interacting with the sick or those suspected of being sick and his job was to supervise the work of the *monatti.*[175] Every day the elders of the parishes in Porta Ticinese would give him a list of people suspected of having contracted the plague, and based on the information received, Piazza visited those households to arrange the transfer of the sick to the *Lazzaretto* and the removal of the bodies of the deceased.[176] On June 21, Piazza left his house as usual early in the morning to check on a few households in *Porta Ticinese*, but as said earlier, that morning his usual presence in the neighborhood became the strongest incriminating evidence against him.

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[174] "…et per questo è schivato da tutti, anche da sua moglie", *Processo*, 189

[175] Typically, the Tribunale assigned a team of plague cleaners to each neighborhood. The inspector supervised a group of *monatti,* who were generally indigents hired to remove from their homes those affected by the plague and transport them to the plague house. They were also in charge of bringing the cadavers to mass graves outside the city walls. The transported the corpses on open carts and a bell ringer (*apparitore*) preceded the macabre procession to warn people of their passage.

[176] *Processo*, 194.

On June 22, after the *Capitano di Giustizia* arrested Guglielmo Piazza, the officers searched his house looking for material evidence against him, yet they did not find anything. Although the investigation was still in the preliminary stages, the fact that the officers were searching for money as evidence of the crime points to the magistrate's assumption of a possible financial motive. The widespread corruption of plague workers might have been at play here.[177] While the testimony of the women prompted the arrest of Piazza, according to procedural regulations of inquisitorial trials, their denunciation in itself was insufficient for a formal indictment. In fact, according to contemporary legal culture, the testimony of women was not considered 'strong' enough to lead to an immediate incrimination.[178] Nevertheless, due to the potential gravity of the crime, the health board and the *Capitano di Giustizia* initiated an *inquisitio ex officio*, which required, in the absence of unequivocal evidence, the defendant's admission of guilt to reach a verdict. Thus, the magistrate immediately began interrogation Piazza to try to elicit a confession from him.

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[177] See chapter 2 regarding the widespread culture of corruption within the temporary workforce of plague cleaners. Also, the economic motives behind the *unzioni* will be considered in details in chapter 4.

[178] According to Roman law procedures, the validity of women's testimony in criminal trials was limited due to their 'natural fickle nature' and generally it was only admitted if they were the passive victims of the crime. See Giovanni Minnucci, "La condizione giuridica della donna tra Medio Evo ed Età Moderna: qualche riflessione", *in AHDE, tomo LXXXXI, 2011, p 1003, https://www.boe.es/publicaciones/anuarios_derecho/abrir_pdf.php?id=ANU-H-2011-10099701008_ANUARIO_DE_HISTORIA_DEL_DERECHO_ESPA%26%231103%3BL_La_condizione_giuridica_della_donna_tra_Medio_Evo_ed_Et%E0_Moderna:_qualche_riflessione downloaded on 6/13/17.*

On the general history of criminal trial procedure and on the problems of evidence see Ettore Dezza, *Lezioni di storia del processo penale,* (Pavia: Pavia University Press, 2013), especially chapter 5; see also Giovanni Chiodi, 'Nel labirinto delle prove legali', in *Rivista Internazionale di Diritto Comune,* 24 (2013) pp 113-179.

Because of his continuous denial of any knowledge about the events in Porta Ticinese, Piazza was brought to the torture chamber where, despite being tortured, he maintained his ignorance about the *unzioni*.[179] On June 25th, unable to get a confession from Mora, the president of the health board and the *Capitano di Giustizia* consulted the Senate which suggested that the defendant "be shaved and dressed with the clothes of the *curia,* and if the magistrate considered it necessary, to have him drink a laxative."[180] This procedure was borrowed from church inquisitorial trials, and typically used in trials against witches. The removing of the clothing and shaving was intended to discover the presence of any sort of amulet that could supernaturally influence the defendant's ability to tell the truth. To the same effect, the laxative was supposed to purge the suspect from any magic potion and free him from demonic influences. Finally, on June 26, after four days of interrogations, Piazza admitted that on the morning of June 21st he had spread an ointment on the walls of many homes in the *Vedra dei Cittadini.*[181]

Setting aside for a moment the juridical consequences of Piazza's confession, the fact that he finally decided to speak after being shaved and purged tells us something about what he knew about magic potions, and how he was possibly using the circumstances to implicate his accomplice: Giovanni Mora. In fact, Piazza claimed to have received an ointment from a local barber named

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[179] *Processo*, 191.

[180] "e lo dovessoro sottoporre a più riprese ad arbitrio degli stessi president e capitano, raso dapprima e vestito con gli abiti della curia, fattogli anche inghiottire, se così fosse parso a loro opportuno, una bevanda purgante", *Processo*, 193.

[181] The *Vedra* was an area within Porta Ticinese.

Giovanni Mora. He explained that he had no ties with the barber until about a week before his arrest when Mora approached him for the first time and, a couple of days later, the barber gave him a small vase containing about three ounces of a yellow substance that looked like solidified oil. Piazza told the magistrate that he was instructed by the barber to smear the greasy substance around the neighborhood, starting from the walls right outside his barbershop. In return, he would receive a ‘handful of money’.[182]

Two interesting details emerge from Piazza’s confession: the first one is that when the judge asked Piazza if Mora had told him why he wanted him to spread the ointment, Piazza said that the barber didn’t have to say anything because he already knew that the ointment was poisonous. Since Piazza had initially told the magistrate that he barely knew the barber, the fact that he was now claiming that he didn’t need an explanation from the barber seems to indicate that Piazza already knew that the barber was familiar with those type of poisonous potions. The second detail regards an additional mixture that Mora gave Piazza. According to Piazza, it was a white liquid that tasted like distilled water. Piazza told the magistrate that the water was probably the reason why he had been unable to confess until then.[183] Again, Piazza is suggesting that the barber’s preparations had more than simple medical properties.

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[182] *Processo*, 199

[183] *Processo*, 200

Despite the fact that Piazza implied that the cause of his inability to speak could have been the 'water' that the barber gave him to drink, he made no additional or direct reference to magic or demonic involvement. Nevertheless, Piazza's explanation was rather equivocal: he first said that the water was an antidote against the poison contained in the ointment he had received from Mora, but, as just mentioned, he also implied that the potion had occult properties that acted on his ability to confess the truth.[184] What is notable is that once he was 'purged', Piazza confessed. This shows that Piazza imagined it possible, or at least credible that the barber Mora had the ability to produce a potion that affected his freedom to confess. Finally, although Piazza's confession has to be interpreted with caution due to the coercive methods used to obtain it, what begins to emerge is that Mora's preparations were portrayed with ambiguity and raised a reasonable doubt in the magistrate who ordered the arrest of Giovanni Mora.

The arrest of Mora on June 26th was accompanied by a careful search of his house and shop, which provides us a fascinating glimpse into the activities of the barber.[185] Mora's initial reaction to the arrival of the magistrate suggests that he was more apprehensive about his practice as a barber rather than afraid to be linked to the *unzioni.* The inventory of ingredients in the barber's shop and the things that Mora admitted to the magistrate indicate that the he had acquired his practical skills from a variety of sources. They are also an indication that he was probably afraid to be at fault for not having followed the regulations that the health board imposed on the quality and purity of the ingredients used in the preparation of medicaments.[186] As soon as the guards entered his shop, Mora declared:

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[184] Chapter 5, the issue about the inability to confess declared by many of the untori will be discussed. In his "De Pestilentia", Federico Borromeo states that the magistrates were surprised by the fact that many untori declared that they could not freely confess because of some 'supernatural impediment'. Thus, while the reader might expect that the magistrate had recognized in Piazza's excuse for his impediment a familiar excuse from which trials, Borromeo's testimony suggests otherwise. It could indicate that the magistrate did not conflate the work of the untori with that of witches, and therefore could not explain the hindrance.

[185] Because the accusations made by an accomplice raised issues in terms of their value as probative evidence, the discovery of material evidence was preferred. See Giovanni Chiodi, *op. cit.,* 114

> Oh I know that your excellency is here for that electuary: your excellency could find it ready over there, in that small vial I had prepared for the inspector, but he never came to pick it up. By the grace of God I did not do anything wrong[187]

And again, while the guards were searching his shop he is heard muttering to himself

> If they [the investigator and the guards] came to my house because I made electuary, which I wasn't supposed to make, I don't know what to do about it, I made it [the electuary] with good intentions, and to help the poor people, and they will find that I gave out some for the love of God, I made one vase, and another one was made by *signor Ieronimo,* the apothecary of the Balla[188]

According to general health board regulations barbers were allowed to only treat 'external' ailments using ointments and creams, leaving the administration of medicines to physicians.[189] What is most interesting here is the fact that Mora is insisting on his ‘good intentions’ to help the poor. Obviously, Mora is trying to get out of trouble, yet his justification seems to be based on the fact that only the wealthier had access to ‘official’ medical care, leaving the poor in the hands of local practitioners with their ‘alternative’ and often questionable potions.

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[186] The *Protofisico* was in charge of the periodical control of apothecaries, especially to check the purity and quality of the ingredients used in the fabrication of medicaments.

[187] "Oh vostra signoria veda; so l'è venuta per quell'unguento: vostra signoria lo vede là, et aponto quel vasettino l'avevo apparechiato per darlo al commissario, ma non e' venuto a pigliarlo, in gratia di Dio non ho fallato" *Processo*, 201

[188] "se per sorta mi son venuti in casa perché io abbi fatto quell'elettuario, et che non l'abbi potuto fare, non so che farci, l'ho fatto il a fine di bene, et per salute de' poveri, e questo si troverà sempre perché ne ho dato via per amor di Dio, un vase ne ho fatto io, e l'alro l'ha fatto il signore Ieronimo speciaro alla Balla", *Processo*, 203.

The search of Mora’s barbershop reveals other important details related to his preparation of spagyric remedies. The inventory of what the officers found in a large number of ampules and small vases is worth considering because it suggests that Mora was experimenting with the production of spagyric remedies obtained by the distillation of plants and minerals. Sulfur oil, quicksilver, *Oleum Philosophorum*, ‘scorpion oil’, *aurum potabile* (drinkable gold), and *Ruta Capraria* are just few of the ingredients found in Mora’s possession.

Let us consider some of the properties of those ingredients: *Oleum Philosophorum* was a compound used to treat infectious illnesses like syphilis and plague, and we will hear more about it later in this chapter; ‘scorpion oil’ was a compound ideated by Pietro Andrea Mattioli (1501-1577), a doctor and naturalist from Siena. His recipe called for a series of nine infusions in which over 123 ingredients were added following a specific order and according to a precise timing[190]. The oil was used topically for a variety of ailments and aches, it helped to heal wounds, and also to treat intestinal worms, but what set this oil apart from other less complex remedies was its use as a powerful antidote against poisons. Applied to hands, feet, and nostrils every three hours, scorpion oil was believed to neutralize all types of poisons (from bees and scorpion stings to viper bites) and also to protect against the plague.[191]

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[189] Joseph P. Byme, *The World of Renaissance Italy: A Daily Life Encyclopedia,* vol. 2 (Santa Barbara and Denver: Greenwood, 2017), 343-345.

[190] Paula Findlen, “Possessing Nature”, (Los Angeles and Berkley: University of California Press, 1996), p 269.

Similarly, *Ruta Capraria* or Goats Rue, was an herb used topically to treat the bite of poisonous animals and heal sores, gangrene, and ulcers. When distilled, *Ruta Capraria* was applied on the wrists (where the heart's palpitations could be felt) to keep away all types of infections, including the plague.[192] Finally, *aurum potabile* was considered a potent curative elixir. Although alchemists had exalted its qualities since the Middle Ages, it was thanks to Paracelsus's contribution that the use of drinkable gold became diffused. In their laboratories, alchemists liquefied pure gold following a 'secret' process and created the elixir, which was believed to cure all kinds of diseases, because of the perfect nature of its main ingredient: gold.

Going back to Mora's shop, among the other ampules, the officers found at least three containers filled with what Mora described as an "electuary" to protect from the plague.[193] As we just heard, Mora's reaction suggests that he knew that his remedy was against regulations, and that he risked being accused of malpractice. So, he tried to explain to the officers that he had prepared the remedy according to a recipe he received from a priest, maybe in an attempt to establish some trustworthiness for his work.[194]

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[191] Frate Felice Passera di Bergamo. "Il Nuovo Tesoro degli Arcani Farmacologici, Galenici, & Chimici, ò Spargirici" (Venice: Giovanni Parè, 1689), p 620.
[192] John Parkinson, "Theatrum Botanicum: The Theater of Plants (London: Printed by The Cetes, 1640) p 418. See also Ludovico Settala, "Preservatione della Peste" (Milano: Giovan Battista Bidelli, 1630), 47.
[193] *Processo*, 203

Yet, a few days later, while under interrogation, Mora changed the story about the origin of the recipe. While establishing the truth about the real origin of the recipe could only lead to speculations, the different versions of the story give us possible clues about who could have been involved in this type of "recipe" exchange. Mora began to change his story when the magistrate asked him about a piece of paper that he had shredded while the officers were searching his shop. Mora stated that on that piece of paper there was a recipe written for him by a certain "*chirurgo*" named Monte. He admitted to have 'secretly' passed it on to another man named Matteo Bergamasco (whose identity, occupation, and connection with Mora remains unknown) who in turn used it to prepare a concoction to give to Mauro, the '*notaio.*[195] Then the magistrate asked Mora where he was learning how to prepare his remedies, and Mora answered that he had received some formulas them from a *gentiluomo* from Pavia named Giovanni Battista Negri,[196]and that he was about to prepare another medicament against the plague which contained quicksilver (which explained why he had the substance in his shop). Most importantly, when pressed to admit for what reason he had quickly destroyed the paper, he claimed that he was simply protecting the 'secret', so that he could be the only one making money with the sale of the remedy against the plague.[197]

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[194] *Processo*, 202

[195] Mora does not indicate for what purpose the remedy was prepared.

[196] The precise identity of Giovanni Battista Negri is not known. A printer named Giovanni Battista Negri worked in Pavia during the second half of the 16th century, but there is no evidence to suggest that Mora could have confused the name with that of the printer.

Considering the circumstances of his arrest, we cannot fully trust the reliability of Mora's deposition. Nevertheless, it in light of what it has been said earlier regarding the diffusion of 'Books of Secrets', we can accept that Mora is probably describing his general experience with the production of new remedies learned from people with different kind of skills and social background. Those concoctions were probably used to treat friends and neighbors.

We have seen at the beginning of the chapter that medical authorities were concerned about the diffusion of practical instructions on how to prepare medical remedies. The magistrate's questioning about the source of Mora's formulas is a good demonstration of such concern. Yet, evidence from the trial against the *untori* shows that the neighborhood people shared the same concerns. Licensed barbers, under the supervision of their guild and of the *protofisico* prepared simple ointments to treat wounds and other external ailments, but, as we have seen, the ingredients and mixtures found in Mora's shop suggests he was exceeding the limits of his license. Were the concoctions he prepared intended to heal? People in the neighborhood seemed to not be sure of it.

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[197] *Processo*, 233

A revealing example of this ambiguity is offered by the testimony of Mora's son. In an attempt to shift the blame on the barber, Piazza urged the magistrate to interrogate Mora's son about the nature of the ointment that his father had prepared for a man named Giussano. More precisely, the magistrate asked the boy if the ointment was meant to 'heal or kill'.[198] The boy was unable to answer the question, but he claimed that his father was paid *30 soldi* per ounces for it. The fact that the son did not defend the beneficial effects of his father's remedy seems unusual, and could indicate that he also had some reservations about its properties, or maybe that he feared being indicted as an accomplice.

We can also perceive the uncertainties that people in the neighborhood had in regards to the medical properties of Mora's remedies in the testimony of another neighbor who spontaneously appeared to testify in front of the magistrate. On the same night when Mora was arrested, Domenico Furio came forward claiming to have important information regarding Mora. He told the magistrate that earlier in May he had caught a couple of boys collecting lizards in the neighborhood. The boys had told him that a man was going to pay them a coin for each lizard they gave him, and later he had discovered that the man was Mora. So, when he heard about the arrest of Mora, he had put the two things together and decided to come forward with his testimony.

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[198] "cioe quell onto, che il barbiero dava al suddetto Giussano gli faceva guarire o morire", *Processo*, 222.

Furno’s testimony shows two things: rumors about the arrest of Mora were spreading quickly in the neighborhood and people, like Furno, were coming to their own conclusions about the events. In fact, Furno had probably decided to go to the magistrate because he thought that Mora had used the lizards to prepare a poisonous ointment. Yet, we learn from Mora’s wife that the barber used the lizards together with rye flour to prepare an ointment to heal wounds.[199] Again we see how Mora’s methods, especially in a time of crisis, had created sufficient suspicion in the people to lead them to think that he was involved in the affair of the *unzioni*.

The poisonous grease

What contributed to Mora’s incrimination was the discovery in his shop of what the magistrate determined to be a suspicious substance. During the search, the officers found two large caldrons, one in the courtyard, and the other in the basement. Both pots contained a similar substance, but it is not clear why the officers considered the substance suspicious. Perhaps the appearance and consistency of the substance resembled the material found on the city walls, and the quantity in the pots was sufficiently large to lead them to believe to have found the main manufacturer of the ointment. In the sources, the content of the caldrons is described as “turbid water, with a viscose yellow and white substance deposited at the bottom, which stuck to the wall when they tested it.”[200]

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[199] *Processo*, 208

[200] *Processo*, 203

Mora explained that the two pots contained reclaimed laundry water, yet the magistrate was not convinced and subpoenaed Clara Brippia, the wife of Giovanni Mora, and additional 'expert witnesses' to help identify the substance. The magistrate began by questioning Mora's wife about her laundry habits. She replied that it was not unusual for her to save some of the used lye soap (*liscia*) because the mixture could be distilled and used to prepare hands treatments (*strentori*).[201] The magistrate also called two expert witnesses to physically examine the soapy water: Margherita Arpizanelli and Giacomina Andrioni. Both women were laundresses and, after examining the content of the two basins, they affirmed that the lye soap had been altered. Margherita explained that after doing laundry lye soap is deposited at the bottom of the caldron, and because of its lye content, it was normal to feel a small resistance when stirring the left-over substance, but what was in Mora's caldron was too "greasy" and too dark in color to be left over lye. Similarly, Giacomina claimed that the darker color of the mixture indicated an alteration of the lye.[202] Not yet satisfied, the investigating magistrate called two additional expert witnesses Archileo Carcano, a member of the College of Physicians assigned to Porta Ticinese, and doctor Giovanni Battista Vertua to inspect the left over soapy substance. When asked if he believed that the substance in the caldron was lye soap, Carcano answered that because of its consistency, he didn't believe it was pure lye soap. Similarly, Vertua guessed that the substance was something 'fabricated', but for what purpose, he could not tell.

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[201] *Processo,* 208
[202] *Processo,* 212-213

While the witnesses came to the same conclusions about the altered nature of material found in Mora's house, it was the testimony of the women from the neighborhood that moved the investigation to a new level. In fact, while describing the qualities of the lye, they both independently explained that 'excellent poisons' could be made with rancid lye soap, suggesting the possibility of its malevolent use.[203] By contrast, both physicians limited their testimony to the substance *per se*, without any attempt at suggesting a specific use of the greasy soap. Thus, the testimony of both women indicates two things: their knowledge of poisonous substances produced with the manipulation of common household products, and their mistrust of Mora's practice. Perhaps, since they lived in the same neighborhood as Mora, they had already formed a negative opinion of the barber that influenced their judgment of the lye soap mixture.

In contrast, what surprised the physician Carcano was the presence in Mora's shop of a large quantity of potable gold, something not typically found in the *bottega* of a poor lower-class barber due to its cost. His remarks are reminiscent of Settala's warning about the risk of unskilled practitioners experimenting with spagyric and alchemic remedies. However, the testimony of the two sets of witnesses provides a good representation of how the work of the barber was considered suspicious, although in different ways, by both the trained physicians and the local laundry women, who like Furno, were coming to their own conclusions about the *untori.*

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[203] "Sa vostra signoria che con il smoglio guasto si fanno delli eccellenti veleni che si possano imaginare". *Processo*, 212

At the end, the magistrate was convinced that Mora was responsible for the production of the *unguento* that had been spread in Porta Ticinese, but still needed information about its true composition. On June 30th, in response to the pressing of the magistrate Mora broke down and explained how he had produced the ointment. The barber confessed that at night, when no one could see him, he mixed together three simple ingredients: human feces, the 'foam' that came out of the mouth of those dying of plague, and used lye soap. He explained that he had conceived the *unguento* on his own, and that Piazza had supplied the 'mouth foam' to use in the mixture.

Piazza, on his end, explained that it had received the 'foam' from a *monatto*, in exchange for two *scudi*. The two had met secretly in the middle the night at the *Colonne di San Lorenzo,*[204] where the *monatto* delivered him the matter on a small clay dish.[205] Both Mora and Piazza claimed that their motive was money. They maintained that the spreading of the *unzioni* would have kept them both working, but the magistrate kept insisting that it was not credible that the two would cause such a calamity for their city simply 'in the interest of making money'.

It cannot be forgotten that at this point in time notions about the origin of plague were still in a state of flux, and ideas of contagion were still being debated in the academic circles. Yet, Mora's explanation of how he produced the ointment shows his confidence in the experimentation with natural ingredients to produce particular effects. Therefore, it is quite surprising to find this level of confidence in a small neighborhood barber. His confidence in abilities comes up again during another interrogation on July 11th. That day Mora accused the son of the Spanish *Castellano,* Giovanni Padilla[206] to be the ringleader. What really matters here is that Mora claimed to have received a vase containing the ointment from Padilla, but that he threw it away because he feared being poisoned. The magistrate asked if Padilla had told him the composition of the ointment, and Mora answered that he did not. Then he was asked if Padilla came back to check if he had done what he said he was going to do, and he answered that Padilla sent one of his men twice to check on him, and that he told the man "that I have done what they asked me, and it was true because even if I did not used the substance in the vase that they gave me, I had used the compound I had created and whose composition I confessed earlier."[207]

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[204] The *Colonne di San Lorenzo* are Roman ruins located in the Porta Ticinese area, right across from the Church of San Lorenzo, in which parish Mora's shop was located.

[205] *Processo*, 241.

Once again, the story told by Mora indicates the difficulties and fears associated with the circulation of 'ointments', even when those ointments were openly aimed at harming people. Mora told the magistrate about his skepticism about the compound received by Padilla and claimed that after disposing of the vase received by officer, he concocted 'his own' version of the ointment, convinced that he would have produced the same effects. One can only speculate on the reason why Mora feared 'being poisoned' by the compound he received from Padilla, since he knew exactly what the intended effects were, and agreed to be part of the *unzioni* plot. It also goes beyond the scope of this work to determine the veracity of the story and the implication of Padilla. However, Mora's testimony illustrates the barber's confidence with experimentation with substances that would allow him to 'control' nature, and in this particular case, the spreading of plague.

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[206] The *castellano* was the general at the head of the Spanish garrison assigned to the defense of Milan and quartered in the Sforza Castle. He was the highest military charge in the State, and politically he was second in charge after the governor. He was elected directly by the King, who typically chose from a pool of Spanish nobles. Francisco de Padilla y was the *castellano* in Milan from 1620 until 1630.

[207] "La secunda volta mi dimandò, et io gli risposi, che avevo fatto quello che mi haveva commandato, et così è perché se bene non avevo adoperato del suo vase avevo però adoperato io stesso della composizione, che ho confessato", *Processo*, 270.

The conspirators

The arrest of Guglielmo Piazza and Giovanni Mora was only the beginning of the a much larger operation carried out by the *Tribunale della Sanità* to stop what the city authorities believed to be a conspiracy to spread the plague.[208] Because the *unzioni* had been found in many areas of the city, the magistrate was convinced that Piazza and Mora did not act alone, and therefore pressured Piazza and Mora to denounce their accomplices. The results of the investigation strengthen the ideas that the people involved in the spreading of the *unzioni* shared with Mora a familiarity with the production of potions and ointment.

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[208] The motives behind the conspiracy are discussed at length in chapter 4.

Almost immediately Piazza named Stefano Baruello, his brother-in-law Bertone, and Gerolamo Migliavacca and his son. Two things about this group of men emerge from the sources: their bad reputation - *cattiva fama*- and their involvement with the production potions and ointments. The two Migliavacca had a collection of criminal citations and a record with the Church Inquisition.[209] Baruello was also a known in the neighborhood as a scoundrel and a blasphemer. The magistrate ordered the arrest of Migliavacca and the search of his house to look for material evidence. During the search, his wife Costanza was seen hiding a vial in between her legs. Questioned about the content of the vial and about her attempt to hide it, she confessed that the vial contained a special medication that her husband had brought home to help heal her genital sores. Lacking the means to ascertain the pharmaceutical properties of the substance in the vial, the magistrate confirmed that Costanza was affected by syphilis through a physical exam. Brigida Giussana, her daughter in law, corroborated Costanza's story, but added that she had seen Baruello bring different potions to the house.

Although no evidence of the *unzioni* was found in the house, the magistrate to continue the investigation of Migliavacca. The secretive behavior of Castanza, like that of Mora when he tried to destroy the piece of paper during his house search, probably raised the suspicion of the magistrate. It also indicates their uneasiness regarding the remedies they were dealing with.

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[209] *Processo*, 246-247.

The next suspect to be arrested on July 2nd was Giovanni Stefano Baruello, who, according to the sources, thought was being arrested in connection with the vial that Migliavacca's wife had tried to hide.[210] It is interesting to point out that Baruello took a different approach regarding the vial. In fact, he claimed to be surprised by Costanza's attempt to hide the vial since its content was nothing harmful or illegal. He admitted to having given the potion to Migliavacca to relieve his pain and lack of sleep caused by syphilis. He then added that it was a compound that he had prepared according to the instructions given to him by his brother-in-law, Michel Angiolo Bertone.

According to Baruello, the potion contained in the vial was a common folk remedy called *'acqua dormia'.* It contained common ingredients that were not prohibited by health board regulations: half cup of white wine, two *denari* of opium, tobacco, and a few grains of a spice to take away the bitterness.[211] Caterina Bertone, Baruello's wife, confirmed that her brother had suggested the recipe to her husband when he learned that the couple was having trouble sleeping because of syphilis, and that every night they would drink a cup before going to bed.

Yet the magistrate was not satisfied with what he had learned and wanted additional evidence regarding the activity of Baruello and his involvement in the production of potions. On July 10th, he called to testify Margherita Ciechetti, a servant in the house of Baruello. Margherita confirmed that had seen Baruello boil white wine with other ingredients, but she also said that "I couldn't really see what they were putting in the pot, because they always moved me to the side, and sent me to do chores around the house so that I could not see."[212] The testimony of Margherita is important because it shows once again that the weariness towards the concoctions of Baruello and Bertone, stemmed from the air of 'secrecy' that surrounded around the activity of the men.

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[210] According to inquisitorial trial procedure, the charges against the defendant were kept secret, thus it was typical for the magistrate to ask the defendant is he knew why he was questioned.
[211] *Processo*, 243

Finally, we learn something more about Migliacca's involvement with medical remedies and the anxiety that it created in the people around him from the testimony of Paolo Gerolamo Castiglioni. Castiglioni filed a complaint with the magistrate against Gerolamo Migliavacca on July 5th. He claimed that Migliavacca "having no reason to be in our parish"[213] was walking back and forth, looking inside the homes thorough the windows to make sure no one saw that he was 'greasing' and 'bewitching' people. He believed that Migliavacca wanted to harm him and his family, and because he was aware of Migliavacca's reputation as a criminal, he was afraid for his life. What is most important here is that Castiglioni admitted to knowing Migliavacca's criminal history. He knew that he had been tried and punished by the Inquisition for having given lead pallets to some children to put in their mouth reciting orations.[214] In fact, the *cattiva fama* of Migliavacca, which acted as evidence against Castiglione, was based on his reputation as '*strigone*'.[215] He was known, according to Castiglioni, for dispensing questionable remedies, which also involved the recitation of specific orations. Thus, when Castiglione saw him around his house, he seems to have made the connection between Migliavacca and the *unzioni* and because of it, he rushed to the magistrate.

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[212] "Io non potei vedere bene quello, che mettessero nella pignata perchè mi facevano sempre star in parte, acciò che non vedessi, et perché non potessi vedere mi facevano andar via a far qualche cosa per casa", *Processo*, 263

[213] "Non havendo a che fare detto Migliavacca nella nostra parochia", *Processo*, 246

[214] Lead pallets were used in spagyric medicine to treat certain internal indispositions. *Processo*, 247.

Where did Migliavacca and Baruello learn about these remedies? As we saw earlier, it is plausible that those remedies were circulating among the commoners through word of mouth and sometimes ended up being mixed with popular remedies. In a booklet written by a Neapolitan physician Martio Galasso and re-printed in 1630 by the Milanese printer Bidelli we find an exhortation to

> Flee, as it was the plague itself, conjurers and enchanters who want to heal the sick using false and prohibited oration and simulated prayers, knowing that the works of these people are rather works of the Devil than of the omnipotent God, whose virtue and word sustain and govern everything[216]

The warning against those who were using 'alternative' and very questionable healing methods was preceded by the author's explanation that his writing against those ‘deadly medicines’[217] was in response to the work of the Empirics who “with the presumption of knowing and without any judgment or intellect, and with their false doctrine try to make the ignorant people, who know little or nothing about nature, fall[218]”. The introduction to the booklet – which was dedicated to the physicians members of the *Tribunale della Sanità*- confirms the concerns regarding the diffusion of different forms of spagyric medicine among the populace, especially in times of a serious epidemic. In fact, the rest of the book is dedicated to offering ‘true and effective’ remedies against plague and other ‘poisons’.

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[215] The text uses the word 'strigone', which raises possible translations issues, due to the nuances of each of the corresponding word. It could be translated as witch, sorcerer, or conjurer. I believe that the accusations against him suggest that the best translation in this instance would be 'conjurer', as someone using spells and conjuration with the purpose of obtaining certain results.

[216] "Essortando però ciascuno à voler fugire à guisa di morbo, & peste i sortilegij, & incantatori, i quali con false, & proibite orationi, & con simulate preci, vogliono medicare li amalati, atteso che l'opere di queste tal persone sono più tosto opera, & mani del Demonio, che d'Iddio onnipotente, con la quale parola e virtú ogni cosa si deve regere, & governare. *Tesoro Inestimabile, et Corona Medicinale Intitulata Flagello di Peste, Veleno, è di Tutte Medicine Mortifere, Dove si Mostrano li veri, & Perfetti Rimedi.* (in Milano per Gio. Battista Bidelli, 1630), 5.

At the end, what has been said so far creates the image of the *untore* as an ill-reputed man who was secretly fabricating mixtures to heal his own or others’ ailments, and was perceived by the authorities and by the people as having the potential to also concoct poisonous and pestiferous compounds.

Conclusions

Mora was a product of his time, and I suggest that the story of the *unguento* is a good indication of the impact of the changing scientific and medical understanding on the common people. In the 17th century, the Hermetic tradition of secrecy was contrasted by the development of new scientific experimental methods, which progressively transformed the perception of those ‘secrets of nature' from the supernatural to the scientific realm.[219] The new mechanistic cosmology[220] expressed the belief that nature could not only be known, but its effects could be reproduced via special techniques. Thus, certain effects were no longer the results of the *magus*'s unique faculties, but instead they were the outcome of the manipulation of certain natural elements according to a precise technique or recipe. The technique rather than the operator became the essential factor, for example in preparation of alchemical concoctions.

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[217] “Medicine mortifere”, Tesoro Inestimabile, frontispiece.

[218] “e cercano a guisa di huomini privi del proprio giudicio, & spogliati dell’intelletto, con la lor goffa e falsa dottrina, far precipitare quella maggior parte de persone ignoranti, la qual poco ò niente à cognizione delle cose naturali” Tesoro inestimabile, 3.

Sam Cohen has traced the development of new notions regarding the nature of the plague shed some light on the mechanisms of the disease.[221] Through observation people noticed patterns of contagion and, I suggest, began conceiving greater human agency in the spread of the disease. The first decades of the 17th century represented a period of transition, when there was not yet a clear dichotomy between scientific and religious views about the plague. However, the new notions circulating about contagion provided the necessary premise for the recognition of a 'creative power', or the power to 'mechanically' reproduce what was believed until then to be the prerogative of the divine or supernatural.

In Milan, the changing notions about the origin of plague and the interest in the experimentation with nature came together in 1630 to support the diffusion of the phenomenon of the *unzioni.* The interest of the magistrate investigating the case of the *untori* was focused on understating how the concoction was produced, and Mora gave him a ‘recipe’ that he claimed he had invented. His claims demonstrate his confidence in his ability to obtain the desired effects by simply manipulating natural ingredients. I suggest that it was through the kind of confidence created by the experimentation with nature which had permeated the lower-class that Mora and his circle of *untori* considered it possible to also fabricate pestiferous ointments for personal financial benefit.

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[219] Eamon, p .5
[220] Eamon, p 10
[221] On this process of transformation read Samuel K Cohn Jr., *Cultures of Plague. Medical Thinking at the end of the Renaissance,* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Chapter 4-6.

Yet, the line between beneficial and harmful remedies, and between natural and supernatural ointments was a very fine one. While the learned elite accused natural magic of demonic influences, they also feared that if the secrets of nature were made accessible to the masses through the diffusion of “Books of Secrets”, they could be misused. At the same time, the trial against the *untori* shows that the common people, had an ambivalent approach to remedies produced by untrained people using principles inspired by the alchemic tradition. Despite an inherent link between the “Books of Secrets” and the demonic, evidence suggests that Giovanni Mora perceived his work fully in the natural realm of experimentation. In his confessions, there are no direct references the supernatural formulations. He simply admitted to putting together the potion by mixing infected foam with feces and left-over lye soap in order to make it stick. Because, as noted, the line between natural and supernatural was not clearly marked and in fact, soon the story of the *untori* became a story mixed with the supernatural powers of demons. In the following chapters I will address how, from Mora’s testimony, in which the supernatural did not appear, the *untori* became agents of the devil.

Chapter 4

The Exploitation of Disease: the New Notions about Plague and the Emergence of new Economy of Plague.

In previous chapters I have argued that the development of new medical notions that emphasized mechanisms of contagion over celestial and religions explanations for the origin of plague led to the emergence of a less deterministic view of plague. In fact, based on the premise that the agent of contagion could be identified in the natural world, a renewed optimism in the ability of public health authorities to exercise some form of control over plague outbreaks emerged between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. At the same time (paradoxically), the diffusion of those new notions of contagion made room for a view of plague in which human agency played a greater role in the diffusion of the disease. The phenomenon of the *unzioni* in Milan can be read as the embodiment of the fears raised by the idea that through the manipulation of nature, plague could be ‘trapped’ inside a concoction and intentionally disseminated by human agents. But, why would people intentionally spread such a devastating disease?

The men under trial as alleged *untori* confessed their expectation of a monetary advantage to derive from their plague-spreading activity. At the same time, secular authorities became convinced that the *unzioni* were an instrument of “biological warfare”. Alarmed by the tense political situation linked to the war for the Mantuan succession, the ruling elite did not doubt that the *unzioni* were causing the spread of the contagion, and they imagined the activity of the *untori* as part of a political conspiracy led by a foreign prince to weaken the city. Overall, despite the different views about the motives, the phenomenon of the *untori* in Milan reveals the existence of a new understanding of the disease that not only considered the relevant role that human agency could play in the diffusion of plague, but also that disease could be exploited for economic or political purposes. Men were no longer viewed solely as passive victims of a natural and unexplainable force, but they became its accomplices.

The chapter is organized in three main sections. The first section is dedicated to the formation of the phenomenon of intentional plague spreading, and I will argue that it originated from plague workers trying to keep the contagion going by disseminating infected goods and later developed into a more sophisticated and distinctive phenomenon, which was identified by the authorities for its manifest criminal intent. The second and third sections show that both the elite and the lower class recognized the *unzioni* as effective means to spread plague, but in terms of the motives, the elite explained the phenomenon within a macro political context, while the *untori* placed their work and motives within a micro economic context centered on survival.

Plague spreading: how people became agents in the diffusion of disease

In this chapter, the expression ‘plague spreading’ is used to indicate a specific phenomenon that was characterized by an element of intentionality and in which people became material agents in the diffusion of plague. The first people to be recognized as such were plague workers. Contemporary chroniclers and city ordinances suggest that that effort of public health authorities to contain plague outbreaks was often frustrated by the actions of plague workers who intentionally infringed those measures. The transport of the sick to pest houses and the cleansing or destruction of infected household goods was assigned to a temporary workforce hired by health authorities during plague epidemics.[222] Because of the particularly hazardous nature of the job, plague-workers were most often despondent workers, who had lost their occupation, and evidence indicates the diffusion among these workers of the practice of abandoning in the streets items that were taken from infected households. As we will see shortly, chroniclers denounced those actions as reckless and dangerous, because they believed they contributed to the spread of the disease, and edicts issued during plague outbreaks show that the authorities condemned certain behaviors of the plague-cleaners as intentional and malicious attempts at spreading plague.

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[222] See chapter 2

An ordinance published in the spring of 1630 by the Milanese *Tribunale della Sanità* ordered, "if they [plague cleaners] would give away, throw away, or maliciously allow the infected items to fall [from the carts] instead of carefully exercising their office by bringing [all infected items] to the Lazzaretto, they will be punishable by the death penalty."[223] Alessandro Tadino's account of the progress of the plague suggests the ineffectiveness of the edict. Tadino complained that the *monatti*, with the complicity of the *apparitori,*[224] continued to abandon the belongings of plague victims in the streets in spite of the warnings of the authorities and the exemplary punishment suffered by those who were caught.[225] It is probable that the constant threat to their lives posed by their daily exposure to plague was at the root of their carelessness, and that those men were willing to take an additional risk in spreading plague, if it could secure a few more days of employment. What seems evident is that the idea of intentionally causing the continuation of plague emerged as a way to survive the economic downturn caused by plague. Arguably, the *unzioni* can be seen as the sophistication of a phenomenon that had started with the simple abandonment of infected items in the streets and had transformed into an operation that involved the manufacture of a plague spreading concoction.

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[223] Imponendogli pena della vita se le dette robbe che condurranno al Lazzaretto, ne dessero ad alcuni, ne meno gli gettassero via, ne permettessero, che cascassero maliziosamente, mà fedelmente essercitino il loro ufficio". Ordine dell'Hospedale di San Gregorio Lazzaretto. ASM, Sanità P.A, cartella 278.

[224] *Apparitori* were bell ringers that preceded the carts transporting the sick to the pest house and the corpses to the mass graves. See Chapter 2.

[225] Alessandro Tadino, *Ragguaglio,* 102.

The lack of historical precedents makes it impossible to trace the evolution of the phenomenon in Milan, but the experience of Geneva, where a phenomenon similar to the *unzioni* was first recorded during the plague outbreak of 1529-1530 and continued to reappear during subsequent outbreaks until the end of the sixteenth century, makes it plausible to place the origin of the idea of intentional plague spreading with the plague workers.[226] The Genevan trial records suggest an initial ambiguity in the way the magistrates perceived the cases of intentional plague spreading brought before them. Often those cases ended up being judged infractions of public health measures committed by those involved with plague cleaning rather than criminal offenses.[227] In fact, the fine line between what was considered a violation of plague-containment measures and what was perceived as a criminal act of intentional plague spreading was not always easy to identify. The distinction of plague spreading as a crime *per se* became clearer during later plague epidemics when magistrates begun to admit as key evidence a manmade substance- the grease- that they believed was used by the *engraisseurs* as a vehicle to spread plague.[228]

When the phenomenon appeared in Milan in 1630, the Milanese magistrates immediately recognized the *unzioni* as a form of plague spreading distinct from the practice of disseminating infected items because of its more marked 'intentional' nature. In terms of criminal prosecution, the burden of proof relied heavily on proving the criminal intent to harm and, in the case of the *untori,* the grease they produced and spread was considered by the magistrates key evidence of their intention to harm (it was much harder to prove the criminal intentions of a *monatto* when a cloth fell from a cart). Furthermore, while the abandonment of infected goods was considered and consequently persecuted by the magistrates in 1630 as an individual act that infringed specific plague containment ordinances, the actions of the *untori* were understood in conspiratorial terms. Consequently, the investigation focused on establishing the nature of the grease, and apprehending all those who were involved in its production and distribution. Finally, the production of the grease is what truly set the *unzioni* apart from the other forms of plague spreading. In fact, while the intention to spread plague via the dissemination of infected items rested on traditional miasmatic theories that considered contagion as a consequence of 'breathing in' putrid air trapped in the clothing, the production of the *unzioni* implied the ability of those who produced the grease to fabricate a 'new' substance to be used to spread plague. Hence the particular focus of the investigating magistrate on establishing the nature of the grease that was found in possession of the *untori.*[229]

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[226] William Naphy, *Plagues, Poisons and Potions: Plague-Spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps c.1530-1640* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2002). Naphy's study of a series of cases of intentional plague spreading that happened in Geneva during the course of the XVI century indicates an evolution of the idea of exploiting plague for economic profit from the use of infected items to the intentional concoction of poisons act at spreading plague.

[227] Naphy, pp.44-58.

[228] *Engraisseurs* is the term used in Geneva to refer to plague spreaders who used a pestiferous grease to spread plague.

Despite the presence of some skepticism, the scale of the phenomenon and the fact that since the beginning the *untori* were treated by the magistrates as criminals reflects the general acceptance of the idea that is was possible to spread plague via a manmade concoction.[230] Agostino Lampugnano, a cleric who wrote one of the earliest accounts of the Milanese plague of 1630 refers to the production of the grease in his story.[231] He builds his argument on two premises: the use of poisons to spread plague was possible and had historical precedents. The cleric cites four cases of similar events starting from an episode reported in Livy's History of Rome, which told how few matrons were accused of having caused a terrible pestilence in Rome with the use of poisons.[232] He then quotes cases reported in the Marquisate of Saluzzo, where more than forty people were executed in 1536 for having concocted powders and ointments that spread plague, and similar cases in Geneva and Lyon. Lampugnano's claim about the existence of substances capable of transmitting plague challenged those who denied such a possibility based on traditional miasmatic concepts that excluded contagion as a means of transmission of the plague:[233]

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[229] See chapter 3.

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[230] Some sources indicate the presence of skepticism among some members of the ruling elite regarding the *unzioni*. The root of the skepticism was found in the unresolved medical controversy about the nature of plague, which saw the contrast between the theoretical understanding of plague based on the authority of classic Greco-Roman medicine and the emerging new understanding of disease based on empirical observations. Those who rejected the notion that the *unzioni* were actual means of transmitting plague did so because they could not conceive the existence of other active agents aside from miasma.

[231] Agostino Lampugnano, *La Pestilenza Seguita in Milano l'anno 1630,* (in Milano per Carlo Ferrandi, 1634).

[232] [a terrible year succeeded, whether owing to the unseasonable weather or to man's depravity. The consuls were Marcus Claudius Marcellus and Gaius Valerius. I find Flaccus and Potitus severally given in the annals, as the surname of Valerius; but it does not greatly signify where the truth lies in regard to this. One thing, however, I should be glad to believe had been falsely handed down —and indeed not all the authorities avouch it —namely, that those whose deaths made the year notorious for pestilence were in reality destroyed by poison; still, I must set forth the story as it comes to us, that I may not deprive any writer of his credit. When the leading citizens were falling ill with the same kind of malady, which had, in almost every case the same fatal termination, a certain serving —woman came to Quintus Fabius Maximus, the curule aedile, and declared that she would reveal the cause of the general calamity, if he would give her a pledge that she should not suffer for her testimony. Fabius at once referred the matter to the consuls, and the consuls to the senate, and a pledge was given to the witness with the unanimous approval of that body. She then disclosed the fact that the City was afflicted by the criminal practices of the women; that they who prepared these poisons were matrons, whom, if they would instantly attend her, they might take in the very act. They followed the informer and found certain women brewing poisons, and other poisons stored away. These concoctions were brought into the Forum, and some twenty matrons, in whose houses they had been discovered, were summoned thither by an *apparito*r. two of their number, Cornelia and Sergia, of patrician houses both, asserted that these drugs were salutary. On the informer giving them the lie, and bidding them drink and prove her charges false in the sight of all, they took time to confer, and after the crowd had been dismissed they referred the question to the rest, and finding that they, like themselves, would not refuse the draught, they all drank off the poison and perished by their own wicked practices. Their attendants being instantly arrested informed against a large number of matrons, of whom one hundred and seventy were found guilty; yet until that day there had never been a trial for poisoning in Rome. their act was regarded as a prodigy, and suggested

> Similarly, there are also those who claim that the disease of plague is not contagious. But it is evident that every piece of cloth, and even iron in spite of its rigidity, are capable of preserving the contagion[234]

Lampugnano does not provide a theoretical explanation of the mechanism of contagion, instead he uses an incident in Padua and one in Koper[235] to show how objects of common use had become agents of contagion because somehow, they preserved the essence of the disease even after more than thirty years, like in the case of infected cords that had been used to tie corpse during a plague epidemic and ended up infecting many more people when they were re-used years later in Koper.[236]

What exactly was in the ointment used by the *untori?* Did the authorities perceive the *untori* as "creators of plague"? Did the *untori* believe they were capable of creating plague *ex-novo*? These are important questions to consider, especially because this was

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madness rather than felonious intent. Livy, *The History of Rome,* Book 8.18 on line source http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0155:book=8:chapter=18&highlight=poison accessed on 2/27/2017.

[233] See chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[234] "Ne anche vi è, chi parimente non confessi, che il mal della Peste non sia contagioso. Che perciò si vede, che ogni minimo cencio, o il ferro istesso con la sua rigidezza, atti sono a conservar la qualità contagiosa", Lampugnano, p.57.

[235] Koper (*Capodistria)* is a town in the Istria region. In the seventeenth century, it was part of the Venetian territory.

[236] Lampugnano, 59.

a time period when ideas about disease where in a state of flux. Evidence suggests that the intellectual elite who wrote about the *unzioni* had a rather ambiguous understanding of how the *unzioni* spread the plague. Terms such as *venomous, poisonous* and *pestiferous* were used interchangeably by contemporary chroniclers and in published edicts to describe the fatal quality of the ointment, making it hard for modern readers to precisely determine how contemporaries perceived the mechanisms by which the *unzioni* killed people, and especially if they believed that people died of plague or simply died because of the effects of poisoning.

Like Lampugnano, Alessandro Tadino, a physician trained at the University of Pavia and a member of the *Collegio dei Medici,* also argued about the responsibility of the *unzioni* in the spread of the plague in Milan using the experience of the past rather than theoretical medical notions as evidence. In his account of the progress of the plague, he claims that the increased mortality observed after the month of May was due to *unzioni.*[237] Nevertheless, his explanation contains significant ambiguities in regards to the specific way in which the *unzioni* caused the death of those who came in contact with the grease

> the idea of the existence of a crafted (*fabricato ad arte*) poison that can kill people when smeared, touched, or smelled is proved by Lorenzo Ioberto in his *Decade,* Pietro Andrea Mattiolo in the preface of *Diascoride,* and also by Grevino in his book on poisons and by Salio in his book about pestilential fevers; and also Cardano in chapter 8 of his book about poisons, and Schenchio in book five of

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[237] Tadino, p. 110

> his observations about poisons claim that the Turks fabricate poisons so quick to act, that they can kill in one day when just touched[238]

Tadino does not make a marked distinction between the action of generic poisons and the effects of the grease used by the *untori*. One reason could be because in his experience not all of those who had died after having touched items soiled by the grease manifested signs of plague on their body. Tadino seems to simply imply that the *unzioni* had the power to kill because, like poisons and plague, they caused an extreme corruption of the body that led to a quick death.

As mentioned earlier, Lampugnano also uses the authority of experience, as told by reputable witnesses like the physician and astrologer Girolamo Cardano[239] and the Jesuit theologian Martin del Rio (1551-1608) to defend his conviction about the lethal power of the *unzioni*

> Cardano, cited by Martin del Rio and Veiero in chapter 50 of book two, and in chapter 35 of book 3 tell us that in the year 1536, in the marquisate of Saluzzo, there were up to forty people who produced the same powders and ointments and by doing so they increased the plague and were all punished[240]

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[238] “Che poi ci sia anche veneno fabricato ad arte, quale per unzione, tatto, & odorato ammazzi le persone, lo provano Lorenzo Ioberto nella Decade, Pietro Andrea Mattiolo nella prefatione del 6 di Dioscoride, anco il Grevino nel libro primo de ven., il Salio de feb. Pestilente, il Cardano puoi nel libro de ven. Cap. 8 and Schenchio nel quinto libro delle osservationi tit. de veneni dicono, che li Turchi fanno fabricare veneni di si presto effetto, che il solo tatto in un giorno ammazza”, Tadino, p.120-124.

[239] Gerolamo Cardano (1501-1576) was an influential physician, astrologer, and mathematician. He taught at the University of Pavia, and wrote many important tracts. See Nancy G. Siraisi. *The Clock and the Mirror: Girolamo Cardano and Renaissance Medicine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)*

[240] “Il Cardano citato da Martin del Rio, et il Veiero al secondo libro cap.50., e al libro 3. De venef. Cap. 35. ci avvisano, che l’anno 1536 nel Marchesato di Saluzzo furon fino a quaranta persone, che le medesime polveri e unguenti fecero, e ivi accrebbero la Pestilenza, e ne furon gastigate tutte”. Lampugnano, p. 56-57.

The conflation between *unzioni* and plague in Lampugnano is more explicit than in Tadino, and it is supported by the use of the experience of a relatively more recent past. He cites the case of Saluzzo[241] and makes direct correlation between plague and substances concocted to increase the pestilence that occurred in 1536. After asserting the existence of historical precedents, Lampugnano explains how such events were possible

> Haven't I read in the work of a reputable author how in the past such things were done, so that if I wanted, I could do it? […] What more? Wasn't there a treaty circulating about '*De Peste manufacta*'? I would agree that those things are possible. I am not the only one to believe that among poisons there are some that are so effective and quick that if you smear them on a strap, those who put their foot on it will be poisoned[242]

Lampugnano explains the efficacy of the *unzioni* by comparing it with poison, but he makes a more precise connection between poison and plague. He insinuates that if he wanted, he could also produce the ointment, suggesting the existence of specific, and probably relatively easy to follow instructions on how to fabricate the poisonous substance. At the end, both Lampugnano and Tadino make two important assertions: first, they recognize that the *unzioni* were responsible for having *increased* and not generated plague, and second that the grease acted as a *poison*. Lampugnano clarifies some of the ambiguities present in Tadino's view regarding the connection between the *unzioni* and plague by proposing a categorization of the nature of the *unzioni* according to the observation of the effects they caused

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[241] The Marquisate of Saluzzo was a territory in the Western Alps whose independence was always threatened by both France and Savoy. The territory was annexed to France in 1548

[242] "Non ho io letto presso a buon autore la maniera con la quale in altri tempi è stato fatto l'istesso, e la potrei se ben di fare io stimassi. Che più? Non e' andato atorno un trattato De Peste Manufacta? Che poi possibil fusse, argomenterei in cotal guisa. Non e' per mio credere, chi non sappia, che in fra I veleni, alcuni non ve ne siano così efficaci, e presentanei, che unguendo con essi una staffa, non vi rimanga avvelenato chi vi pone in piede", Lampugnano, p.57.

> Those who have observed the nature of the disease caused by the unzioni have informed me that there are three types of unzioni. Those that cause death but the victims are not contagious, so these people were simply (so they believed) poisoned. The second type [of unzioni] also contained the contagion, and the third type contained magic.[243]

According to the cleric, not all *unzioni* contained plague, but because they all caused death, the way to distinguish pestilential from poisonous *unzioni* was to observe if the victims became contagious or not (probably measured by the number of subsequent deaths in the same household). Finally, Lampugnano makes a connection to the supernatural claiming that in his experience, the most powerful *unzioni* were those that involved magic, since they were capable of killing people in twenty-four hours, and no doctor was ever able to save those infected by this kind of *unzioni.*[244]

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[243] "avvertisco ancora, come da pratici osservatori della natura del male concitato dalle unzioni, m'han riferito, che tre sorti d'appestati travavansi. Una occideva, ma non infettava gli altri, e questi erano solamente (così credevano) avvelenati. La seconda haveva anche la contagione. La terza di più aveva la malia". Lampugnano, 62.

[244] The theme of the supernatural and diabolic component of the *unzioni* will be the topic of chapter 5.

Compared to the explanation of the mechanism of the *unzioni* presented by Lampugnano and Tadino, the testimony of Mora and Piazza indicates a simpler understanding of how the *unzioni* worked, and it exemplifies the juxtaposition between the theoretical perception of the learned elite and the practical understanding of the common people. When the *untori* talked about the production of the grease, they referred to the manufacture of a ‘carrier’ that would harbor and transmit the disease. This is particularly evident in Mora’s testimony when he is asked to describe what was contained in the substance that he produced

> it was human feces with lye residue, and with the matter that comes out of the mouth of the cadavers that are on the carts. The inspector [Piazza] had asked me for it [the concocted grease] to smear on houses. […] The Inspector Piazza had supplied the matter [foam] in a small vase, which I then poured into the pot that in on the stove in my house[245]

From his confession we gather that Mora believed that the agent that made his concoction effective was the foam collected from the mouth of the deceased. The other ingredients seemed to have been used by the barber as ‘inactive’ ingredients to make the substance ‘stick’ to walls and doors. Thus, the final product was not *‘ex novo’* creation of plague, but rather the production of a ‘carrier’ to contain the agent. By claiming that Piazza had provided the mouth-foam to mix in with other ingredients, Mora managed to shift the blame of the crime on the inspector, implying that the lethal component of the grease was the foam procured by the inspector and which contained plague.

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[245] “era sterco umano, smoizzato perchè me lo dimandò lui cioè il commissario per imprattare le case, e di quella materia, che esce dalla bocca de’ morti, che sono sui carri [...] Me l’ha data detto commissario Piazza, il quale me ne diede un vasetto, il quale resentei poi nella caldara, che è la in casa mia nel fornello”. *Processo*,.233.

The juxtaposition between how the elite imagined the composition and efficacy of the *unzioni* and how the *untori* described their composition becomes less marked in the testimony of Geronimo Migliavacca and Stefano Baruello, two men implicated by Mora and arrested at beginning of July. Their testimony introduced new elements about the production of the grease, which suggested the presence of poisons in the recipe

> Asked to freely say what kind of ingredients were used by Baruello to create the grease he [Gerolamo Migliavacca] answered: […] but Baruello told me this words: I have become a charlatan, this small shawl is full of toads and small snakes, and I saw him throw everything in the said pot, in which he also added certain powders, but I don't know what kind of powders they were[246]

The addition of toads, snakes, and unidentified 'powders' proposed a more 'sophisticated' recipe then the one followed by Mora and made a more direct reference to the production of concoctions typical of charlatans and that were considered by traditional medicine as dangerous poisons.[247] In the beginning of September, during his final deposition, Baruello claimed to have received from the son of the *Castellano,* Giovanni Padilla, a vial containing a smelly substance, to which- as Migliavacca had already testified- he was supposed to add toads, and lizards, to make it ‘perfect’. Thus, the production of the grease as described by Baruello involved both pestilential matter – the malodorous substance received by Padilla, and poisonous ingredients- snakes and toads. Later in this chapter, I will discuss more in details about the significance of the implication of Giovanni Padilla as the person giving instructions about the preparation of the grease; what is important to note here is that Baruello claimed that the Spanish official had explained that for the grease to be effective (or ‘perfect’) all ingredients had to be included.[248]Baruello’s description of the composition of the ointment corresponds to Lampugnano’s typology of the *unzioni*, and in particular to the second type of *unzioni,* which were those that included both poisonous and contagious ingredients.

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[246] "Interrogato che dica liberamente con qual sorta di ingredient fece l'onto detto Baruello rispose […] ma il Baruello mi disse pur simili parole: sono diventato un cerlatano, questo mantino e' pieno di zatti, e bisie, e così viddi, che buttò ogni cosa nella detta pignata, nella quale mise certe polvere, che io non so, che polvere siano" *Processo*, 336.

[247] For more on use of poisons animals in the preparation of remedies by charlatans see David Gentilcore, *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Chapter 6.

It has become evident that contemporaries were not completely sure of how the *unzioni* worked: the writings of the learned medical elite contained ambiguous references to the poisonous and contagious nature of the grease, likewise the testimonies of the *untori* did not agree on the type of the ingredients contained in the grease and in how it was produced. The lack of a theoretical explanation of the nature of the *unzioni* led the learned elite to use of historical evidence to support their belief in the effectiveness of the grease to transmit plague. In addition, Alessandro Tadino, Lampugnano[249] and the Archbishop Federico Borromeo[250] mentioned the existence of a booklet titled '*De peste Manufacta'.* The content of the booklet is not described by any of the authors, and there are no surviving copies of it. But, it is possible that it contained practical instructions on how to produce the pestilential substance.[251]

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[248] “et puoi ritorno’ con un vaso pieno di vetro quadro longo un palmo che poteva tenere due zaine, et me lo diede dicendo prendete questo, et perché confido di voi, ricordatevi, che trattate con il cavaglier Giovanni de Padilla, che sono huomo di portarvi fuori di qualonque pericolo si sia, et che ho buona ritirata in Spagna per me, et per li amici miei, questo è un vaso di onto di quello che si fabbrica in Milano, et io ho a centenara de galanthuomini, che mi fanno questi servizii, et questo vaso on è perfetto, ma bisogna prendere delli ghezzi, e delli zatti, e del vino bianco, et mettere tutto in una bozza, overo in una pignata vitriata, e farla bolire a concio, a concio, acciò questi animali possono morire arrabiati nella material, che è in questo vaso in modo che morti, che siano questi animali si levino fuori, et tutta quella material si riduca dalle quatro parte a tre”. *Processo*, 365.

When talking about the fabrication of the grease, Borromeo compares it with the experiments of the alchemists when he says:

> This type of activity [the production of the grease] is such that not only it obtains the desired results, but also these experiments are more successful than the experiments of the alchemists[252]

His observation indicates a view of the *unzioni* in terms of experiments and manipulations of natural elements with the intent of creating a poison capable of causing plague. The question is how the common people become involved with this type of 'experimentation' with plague. It is improbable that the booklet "*De Peste Manufacta"* circulated among the lower classes. Instead, the trial records seem to indicate that instructions on how to concoct the ointment were orally transmitted to the *untori*.

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[249] Lampugnano, 57.

[250] Federico Borromeo, *La Peste di Milano,* Edited by Franco Torno (Milano, Rusconi Editore, 1987) 62.

[251] "*De Peste Manufacta*" was a small manuscript circulating in the 17th century. Alessandro Tadino mentions it in his "Progresso della Peste" and its also cited by Agostino Mascardi in 1680 as part of his comments on the *unzioni* in Milan. The author is unknown and today we have lost trace of it, but it supposedly written with the intent of supporting the notion of a form of contagion controlled by men with the use of historical precedents. For more on this topic see "*Atti dell'Accademia di Scienze Morali e Politiche*" (1936) Volumi 56-58. 37-38.

[252] "E' attività di genere tale che non solo può accadere, ma che capita facilmente in modo contrario a come si comportano gli esprimenti dei chimici." Borromeo, 62.

While the writings of the learned elite show their interest in the theoretical explanation of how the *unzioni* worked, the testimony of those who produced the grease indicates their simple hands-on approach to grease, which depended on practical instructions on how to concoct a substance that they believed could be used to spread plague. How did the knowledge about the production of the grease reach the uneducated populace in Milan? Because of the lack of direct evidence, the answer is to a certain extent speculative. Nevertheless, the social ties that connected the *untori* and some remarks made by Federico point to soldiers as the main vehicle for the oral transmission of the 'know-how' of the unzioni.

The arrest of Piazza and Mora at the end of June was followed by the implication of a series of accomplices, and the criminal network uncovered by the magistrate's investigation reveals strong connections between the *untori* and the military. In fact, the trial records expose the activities of a group of people who gravitated around the Spanish citadel (at the Sforza Castle) and, according to both Mora and Piazza spent time eating and drinking in local taverns, showing off unusual amounts of money, and at night going around greasing the city walls with the pestiferous ointment.[253] Mora told the magistrate: "they eat, drink, and go out to smear the ointment"[254] and Piazza claimed: "Because they are poor, and they are always at the tavern, merrily eating and drinking with money always in their pockets… and I saw Baruello at the Osteria dei Sei Ladri with a sock filled with money."[255]

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[253] Osteria di San Paolo was the tavern where Baruello served as a keeper; Osteria Rosa d'Oro was owned by Melchiore Bertone, Stefano Baruello's father in law. The tavern was closed, but according to a witness Baruello had buried a vial containing the ointment its the garden; Osteria del Gambaro was own by one of Baruello's relatives. A witness confessed of having being sent there by Baruello to kill people smearing the pestiferous ointment on their jacket sleeves; Osteria dei Sei Ladri was a tavern in the immediate vicinity of Mora's barbershop, habitually frequented

Stefano Baruello, 'one of the worst blasphemer of the world'[256] became one of the central characters investigated by the magistrates soon after the beginning of the trial. Because of his direct involvement in the production of the grease and his connection with both the military and the social network that meet in the taverns, his testimony provides important clues about the transmission of knowledge about the *unzioni*. At the time of the trial, he was living with his wife Caterina Bertoni in the neighborhood of Porta Ticinese in the parish of San Lorenzo, the same parish where Mora lived. He was the keeper at the tavern of San Paolo, and his father in law, Melchiorre Bertone, was the keeper of another tavern, the Osteria Rosa d'Oro. Before returning to Milan, he had served in the army under the command of Vercellino Visconte[257] and had been stationed in Monferrato for many months. According to Piazza, Baruello deserted Vercellino

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by Baruello and other alleged untori; Osteria dell'Agnello, Osteria della Croce and Osteria del Pozzo were other taverns frequented by the defendants.

[254] *Processo*, 321.

[255] 'perche' sono poveri, et stanno sempre su l'hostaria mangiando et bevendo allegramente con danari sempre nelli calzoni… ho visto il Baruello nella hostaria dei Sei Ladri con una calza piena di denari"

[256] 'quale è uno delli maggiori biastemmiatori del mondo' *Processo*, 253. It is relevant to remember that blasphemy was considered a crime under penal law.

[257] Vercellino Maria Visconte was a Milanese marquise. Don Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordova, when he was Governor of Milan (1625-1629) put him in charge of an Italian infantry unit, and later Vercellino formed a battalion at his expense that participated to three expeditions to Monferrato and Piedmont. He also paid the expenses of a cavalry battalion led by the marquis of Caravaggio. Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato, "*Relatione della citta' e stato di Milano sotto il governo dell'eccellentissimo Sig Don Luigi de Guzman Ponze di Leone"* (Milano, 1666) 197.

Visconte and found protection at the Castello, where he received a safeguard.[258] Based on the evidence collected against him, on July 2nd the president of the Health Board ordered the immediate search of his house and issued a warrant for his arrest, but before the warrant could be executed, Baruello turned himself in.

On July 8th Giacinto Maganza voluntarily came forward to testify against Baruello, placing him at the center of the 'business' of the *unzioni*. Maganza was the illegitimate son of a friar of San Giovanni in Conca and probably hoped to receive the reward promised by the edicts issued by governor by providing information about the *unzioni.*[259] He had returned from Piedmont where he had also served as a soldier in the company of Vercellino Visconte for one year and a half. Maganza explained that he had met Baruello while their company was engaged in the siege of Casale, and that when he returned to Milan he had come in contact with Baruello and learned about the *unzioni.* He told the magistrate that the men 'would get together, eight or ten, with Baruello and go eat at the tavern and then go out to grease (*ontare*).'[260] He explained that he had gone with them six or seven times and they would meet at two in the morning to eat and then go out to grease around the city until five or six in the morning.

The participation of soldiers is not limited to Baruello and Maganza who had both served in the same unit during the siege of Casale. The trial records contain a number of references of the involvement of soldiers in the dissemination of the grease. Mora claimed that Spanish soldiers were fabricating the ointment in Sforza Castle,[261] and another defendant, Gerolamo Migliavacca, claimed that when Baruello came to his house to produce the ointment, soldiers accompanied him.[262] In addition to mentioning the soldiers' direct involvement with the production or dissemination of the *unzioni*, witnesses also point to their presence in the social network of the *untori.*[263]

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[258] *Processo*, 265.

[259] "io vorrei che vostra signoria mi accetti nella sua squadra, et io dirò quello che so" *Processo*, 249.

[260] 'si mettevano insiemo otto o dieci col Baruello e andavano a mangiare per osterie ed a untare', *Processo*, 250.

I recognize that the claims about the role of soldiers in diffusion of the practical notions about the *unzioni* among the lower class are limited by the fact that they are based on circumstantial evidence. Yet, as said earlier in this chapter, other cases of plague spreading with the use of ointments were reported in areas of the Western Alps, and it is possible that the circulation of notions between those areas and Milan was favored by the transit of a large number of soldiers between those areas and the state of Milan.[264] In 1629 the Spanish Governor Don Gonzalo de Cordova led an expedition of 8,000 infantries and 2,500 cavalries to the siege of Casale in Montferrat, and again in 1630, the newly appointed Governor Spinola moved the Spanish army to Casale. While in transit, the need for housing brought the soldiers in close contact with the local population. In fact, each household was required to house a certain number of soldiers and provide access to the kitchen fire for the preparation of meals, which were often consumed in the house. The presence of the soldiers contributed to social tensions because of the violence and abuse that they often committed against the local population, despite the attempt of Spanish military authorities to regulate their behavior and provide for their needs in order to avoid disorder and tensions.[265] In addition, the common fear that accompanied the presence of soldiers was the diffusion of plague. Tadino recounts

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[261] *Processo*, 319.

[262] *Processo*, 328 and 352.

[263] Migliavacca testified that a Spanish soldier named Diego had come to his house looking for Baruello (*Processo*, 352); Matteo Sacco was local oil seller and soldier friend of Maganza *(Processo*, 256), Giovanni Battista Bazio called the *Inspiritato* was a tailor and served as a soldier (*Processo*, 277), Vacaza and Pedrino, both recognized by Guglielmo Piazza as friends of Baruello and serving inside the Sforza Castle (*Processo*, 277).

[264] On the presence of Spanish contingents in the state of Milan see Romano Canosa, *La Vita Quotidiana a Milano in Eta' Spagnola,* (Milano, Longanesi & C., 1996), chaper 11.

> For a few months, while D. Gonzalo de Cordova was still governing [Milan], the German army remained in the Grisons, where some territories had already been infected by plague and[consequently] had been banned by the State of Milan […]. But the lengthy presence of the soldiers in the Grisons worked in such a way that the contagion spread in Coira, Maiafel and in other places, and the city should have been more concerned when the Health Board pointed out that those soldiers did not fear death, nor plague when they robbed some of the infected lands because of their poor living conditions and of their greed, despite the fact that D. Gonzalo de Cordova had ordered the delivery to the Count of Merode, commander of those people of 10000 *scudi* and of 2000 wheat sacks to help them.[266]

While the public health authorities dreaded the arrival of soldiers, soldiers seemed to have no fear of plague and liberally took spoils from cities where plague had been reported, creating what was perceived as a dangerous commerce of infected items. The culture of plundering was so engrained in the soldiers, that they appeared to be indifferent to the risks of contracting plague and continued robbing infected goods, even after receiving local food and financial subsidies.[267] Thus, the idea that they would also have acquired knowledge of how to exploit plague to make a profit doesn't seem so far-fetched.

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[265] Canosa, 134-138.

[266] "Per lo spatio di alcuni mesi, mentre ancora governava D. Gonzalo di Cordova, si procurò, che questa soldatesca Alemanna dimorasse nelli paesi de Grigioni, nelli quali alcune terre si trovavano infetti di peste, & bandite dallo Stato di Milano [...] e il longo dimorare questa soldatesca nei Grigioni, operò ancora in modo tale, che il contagio passasse in Coira, Maiafel, e altri luoghi, molto più si doveva temere, quando il Tribunale della Sanià haveva havuto aviso, che questa soldatesca, non stimando la morte, meno la Peste, haveva svaligiato alcune di queste terre infette, atteso la loro penuria del vivere, e l'ingordigia del rubbare, nonostaten che d'ordine di D. Gonzalo di Cordova fosse mandato al Conte di Merode capo di quella gente 10000 scudi, e 2000 sacchi di formento per loro soccorso, come fu assicurato. Alessandro Tadino, 15- 16.

Archbishop Federico Borromeo also seemed convinced that the cohabitation between soldiers and civilians had favored the diffusion of the knowledge of the *unzioni.* In an unpublished note on the plague of 1630 he suggests

> The origin of this great wickedness was the maltreatment of the soldiers, their desertion, and famine that has brought some to despair, and it is also possible that those soldiers have taught the way to concoct this poison [the grease][268]

Borromeo considered the possibility that the soldiers were responsible for teaching people how to prepare the poison, and imputes the origin of the phenomenon to the dreadful socio-economic condition of the people. The archbishop does not explain in what way the production of the poison ointment would benefit the soldiers or the people they instructed, but it is apparent that the operation was perceived by the poor as a way to survive famine.

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[267] For more on the topic see Geoffrey Parker*, The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Chapter 7.

[268] "l'origine dunque di questa gran scelleratezza e' stata i maltrattamenti dei soldati, il desertare di questi, la fame che ha indotto alcuni a disperazione et quei soldati anche puo' essere che habbiano insegnato ancora la maniera di conporre questo veleno". Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano, Foglio 87

Finally, it has been mentioned earlier that the *untori* had many personal ties with the military. Baruello had served for a few months at the siege of Casale and, like him many Milanese citizens were drafted to join the Spanish troops under the leadership of Milanese *gentiluomini*. The small benefits offered to the drafted soldiers were not sufficient to cover for the loss of income caused by the abandonment of their workshops and small commercial activities and was a source of continuous malcontent and desertions.[269] Recalling what I mentioned earlier about the accusation made by Stefano Baruello that Giovanni Padilla had given him instructions on how to prepare the grease, Guglielmo Piazza also implicated the participation of the Spanish soldier

> Since I hesitated in giving him [Mora] the putrid matter as discussed, finally he told me after four or five days that the important person was a certain Padiglia, whose name I don't remember although he did tell me; I know well, and I remember precisely that he said that he was the son of the *signor castellano* in the castle of Milan[270]

Padilla was acquitted in 1633, and it is beyond the scope of this study to speculate if he actually participated to the crime. What is significant for this study is that his incrimination, together with the reconstruction of a social network that included soldiers and civilians, supports my suggestion about the role of soldiers in the oral transmission to the lower classes of instructions on how to produce the poisonous grease. For contemporaries, his incrimination offered a credible explanation in regards to the motives behind the unzioni, as it satisfied the authorities imagination of a political conspiracy.

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[269] Canosa, 142-143.

[270] 'Perchè io non mi risolsi dargli putredine come sopra, finalmente egli mi disse dopo il spazio di quarto, o cinque giorni, che questo capo grosso era un tale di Padiglia, il cui nome non mi racordo benchè me lo disse; so bene, et mi racordo precisamente, che disse essere figliolo del signor castellano nel castello di Milano', Processo, 253.

The first appearance of the *unzioni* in the Duomo on May 17th was followed by similar incidents around the city, but, despite the panicked reaction of the common people, authorities did not respond immediately to it. In fact, at the beginning of June, they still considered the incidents distasteful pranks rather than criminal acts.[271] In the meantime, despite the effort of public health authorities to contain plague, during the month of June, more and more people were transferred to the pest house (*Lazzaretto*), and many homes were 'closed' by quarantine orders.[272] By the mid of June, the reported number of deaths rose exponentially to over two hundred per day, and the grim spectacle of death is described by foreign correspondents with an overwhelming sense of despair.[273] The rise in mortality and the rumor that suggested that on the night before the intercessory procession organized by Borromeo on June 10th *untori* had infected more than 4,000 women seem to have affected the view that the authorities had of the *unzioni*. The language of the edicts issued by the *Tribunale della Sanità* between May and August 1630 indicates a gradual forming in the elite of the conviction of the criminal nature of the *unzioni*, shifting from the idea of a prank to cause panic, to that of a criminal attack to increase the plague.[274] In a previous chapter, I discussed in details the events that led the *Tribunale* to launch its first investigation into the affair of the *unzioni* and order the arrest of Guglielmo Piazza and his accomplices. In the following pages, I will discuss the motives behind the *unzioni* as they surfaced from the initial depositions of the defendant and in contrast with what the magistrate imagined.

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[271] Evidence of this conviction is found in the language of the edicts issued by the *Tribunele* in May and June and in the accounts of contemporaries. See Francesco Maria Borri to his father Simone, 23 May 1630, *Cinque lettere inedite sulla peste di Milano del 1630,* ed. Emilio Sioli Legnani (Firenze: Sansoni, 1964).

[272] The Health Board, through a system of neighborhood informants, ordered the quarantine of the houses where cases of plague, or the suspect of it, were found. Plague cleaners would remove the sick from the house and transport them to the pest house. The house door was then boarded to prevent the other members of the household to exit, placing them into a forced quarantine period. The number of deaths is reported by Giuseppe Farinelli and Armando Paccagnini in the preface of "*Processo agli Untori*" (Milano: Garzanti, 1998)

[273] "più di diecimila persone morte per questa circostanza" (in A. Corradi, *Annali delle Epidemie,* v, p.375). Alarmed by the ineffectiveness of public health measured, the *Tribunale della Sanità* and the *Decurioni* urged the archbishop Federico Borromeo to organize a religious procession for the expiation the city's sins, in the hope of placate God's wrath and thus see the health of the city restored. See Biagio Guenzati, *Vita di Federico Borromeo,* ed. Marina Bonomelli (Milano: Biblioteca Ambrosiana e Bulzoni Editore, 2010), p.362.

The motives behind the *unzioni:* the *untori's* hope for a 'handful of money'

On June 26th, four days after his arrest, Piazza was pressured to tell who was fabricating the ointment that "was found many times on the doors, walls, and locks of the homes of this city."[275] Piazza did not hesitate to implicate Gio. Giacomo

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[274] Francesco Cusani reports some of the edicts in the notes of his translation from the Latin of work of Giuseppe Ripamonti. G. Ripamonti, *La Peste a Milano,* ed. Ermanno Paccagnini, tras. Francesco Cusani (Milano: Tipografia e Libreria Pirotta e C., 1841), Book II, Chapter 2.

[275] "che dica […] se sa chi sia il fabricatore degli unguenti con I quali tante volte si sono trovate ontante le porte, e mura delle case, e cadenazzi di questa città" Processo, 198.

Mora, a local barber. After answering a few questions regarding the place and time when he had received the grease from Mora, Piazza said

> he told me, take this small ampule and go grease the walls right behind here [his shop], and then come back to get a handful of money, and I told him, who is going to give me this money; and he answered: I will give the money to you, so I took the ampule, and executed [his instructions] the next Friday morning[276]

Piazza's first confession of motives is important because it is probably the least influenced by the questioning of the magistrate and suggests that Piazza saw his activity as locally confined to the area where he normally operated.[277] He claimed that, in exchange for a handful of money, he was asked to perform a service that was supposed to increase the barber's business. Asked if the barber had assigned him a precise place to grease, the inspector answered that Mora told him to grease in the *Vedra dei Cittadini* (which was the neighborhood where his shop was located) and to begin from the barbershop door.[278] Piazza's answers implied a localized act that was supposed to create a 'market' of the disease in the neighborhood where the two men worked. Since the *unzioni* were not found just in their neighborhood but all over the city, the magistrate continued to push Piazza in the attempt to obtain information regarding possible accomplices that had acted in the other areas and additional motives.[279] Piazza explained that about a week before his arrest, one night (about half an hour after the evening ringing of the bells for the *Ave Maria*) the barber talked to him about the grease and a couple of days later delivered it to him right outside his shop.[280] Piazza claimed that the barber had first approached him while he was passing in the street. He could not remember the names of the three or four men that were with the barber that day, but he was sure that Mattheo, the local fruit and shrimp seller who was with him on that day, could identify them.[281] Piazza's initial description of his exchange with Mora gives the impression that the transaction between the two men was informal. The fact that the men spoke while standing in the street and in the presence of other men of the neighborhood (although Piazza did not remember their names, Mattheo, a local shopkeeper knew who they were) does not suggest an elaborate or large-scale conspiratorial plot, which was, as we will see, what the magistrate expected to uncover, but rather a small economic scheme in a neighborhood setting.

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[276] "Mi disse, pigliate questo vasetto, e ungete le muraglie qui adietro, e poi venete da me, che avrete una mano de danari, et io gli dissi, chi mi averia dato tali denari; esso rispose: ve li darò io, così pigliai il vassetto, et lo missi in esecuzione il venerdì di mattina seguente" Processo, 199.

[277] On the use of evidence from trial records see Carlo Ginzburg, "The Inquisitor as Anthropologist" in Clues, *Myths, and the Historical Method,* transl. by John and Anne Tedeschi, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 156-164.

[278] "Interrogato se il detto barbiero assignò a lui constituito il luogo preciso da ongere", *Processo*, 200.

Piazza's description of his occasional relationship with the barber and of the agreement that had occurred between the two did not convince the magistrate, who did not believe that the barber would commission such a crime to someone he barely knew.[282] Therefore the magistrate decided to counter-interrogate Mora who, in spite of the pressure exercised by the magistrate, also insisted on the superficial and occasional nature of his relationship with the inspector.

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[279] "se ha trattato più volte con detto barbiere, se gli ha dato denari, e se sa che detto barbiero abbi trattato con altri", Processo, 217.

[280] *Processo*, 199.

[281] "Ero in strada per contro a sua bottega, e di sua compagnia vi erano tre, o Quattro persone, ma io adesso non ho memoria chi fossero, però m'informerò da uno che era in mia compagnia chiamato Mattheo cha fa il fruttarolo, e che vende i gambari in Carobbio, quale io manderò a dimandare, che lui mi saprà dire chi erano quelli che erano con detto barbiero", *Processo*, 199.

On June 30th, Giovanni Mora was called back in the interrogation room. It was his fourth day of questioning and, upon entering the room, he religiously kneeled in front of a crucifix that was in the room and prayed.[283] The magistrate ordered the guards to prepare him for torture in order to elicit a full confession.[284] Before beginning torture, he was asked to tell the truth "about the reason why he denied his familiarity and regular interaction with the inspector."[285] Then, after having been lifted on the *canape,* he was asked again three times to tell the truth.[286] With a loud cry he answered, "I am dead, I am dead. Let me go…ah Jesus Christ, ah Jesus Christ, ah Jesus Christ, tell me what you want me to say and I will say it."[287] In response to Mora's supplication, the magistrate insisted, "we are looking for the truth, and so just confess it."[288] The fact that at this point Mora was under torture cannot be ignored and it requires a cautious consideration of his deposition. However, it is also important to note that the lack of particular suggestive questions during this initial stage of the interrogation allowed a certain freedom on the part of the defendant to build his own story. Mora finally admitted of having given Piazza the ointment that he had concocted, but told the magistrate that Piazza was the one that had initiated the contact with the barber and had given him a vase containing the key ingredient for the grease: the foam from the mouth of infected people. When asked for what purpose Piazza had given him the substance, he answered that Piazza intended to make some money. Mora claimed that the inspector had asked him to prepare the mixture "so that he would have worked a lot, because many people would get sick, and I could also make a profit by selling my remedy [against the plague]."[289]

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[282] "dettogli, che ha molto dell'inverosimile che tra lui, e detto barbiero non sia passata altra negoziazione di quella, che ha deposto trattandosi di negozio tanto grave, il quale non si commette a persone per eseguirlo se non con grande, e confidente negoziazione, e non a la fugita come lui depone", *Processo*, 217.

[283] 'si pose davanti al Crocifisso e pregò. Poi baciata la terra, si alzò", *Processo*, 230.

[284] During the trial against the *untori* the magistrate used torture as part of the interrogation process. The use of torture during a trial was justified when the testimony of the defendants contained inconsistencies, and to elicite the defendant's confession, which remained the strongest evidence to incriminate and legally persecute a person suspected of having committed a crime. Nevertheless, the confession obtained under torture had to be confirmed as true by the defendant a second time without torture or the threat of torture. During the trial, the form of torture used by the magistrate was the *legatura alla corda canape.* The suspect's arms were tied behind his back with a rope and then he was pulled up with a pulley. The torturer would then 'drop' the tortured several times *(stratti*) to procure the dislocation of the shoulder. For more on the topic of torture during the XVII century see Cesare Cantù "Sulla Storia Lombarda, Ragionamenti" (Milano, Tipografia Maninin, 1842).

[285] "Et interrogato che dica la verità [...] e nega la pratica e cognitione del detto commissario", *Processo*, 232.

[286] "incalzato a dire la verità", Processo, 232.

[287] "son morto, son morto. Lasciame andare, lasciame andare. Ah Gesù Cristo, ah Gesù Cristo, vedete quello che volete che dica che lo dirò", *Processo*, 232.

Although the confessions of the two men differed regarding who had initiated the affair, what is significant is that both men described their activity and their prospect for economic gain in very 'practical' terms. The *unzioni* were supposed to be spread in the neighborhood, and the economic advantage would result from the opportunity to work created for both men by the continuation of the contagion in their neighborhood, where one had his barbershop and the other worked as a health inspector. According to judicial procedure, in terms of the trial, because of the presence of inconsistencies in two testimonies, judicial procedure required a continuation of the interrogation and allowed the use of torture. The next day the magistrate continued in his attempt to establish who was the initiator of the crime. In the meantime, Mora managed to shift some of the pressure on Piazza, and was granted brief respite from torture.

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[288] "Dettogli, che si ricerca la verià solamente, e perciò la dica", *Processo*, 233.

[289] "et mi disse che li facessi questa composizione, perchè lui avrebbe lavorato assai, poichè si sarianno ammalate delle persone assai, et io avrei guadagnato assai con il mio elettuario". *Processo*, 233-234.

The discrepancies between Piazza and Mora's version of the story could be explained by the attempt of the two men to be exonerated from the charge of being the principal perpetrator of the crime. Piazza and Mora were probably aware of two edicts that granted immunity and a financial reward to anyone who would provide information about the unzioni. The Health Board issued the first *grida* on May 19, two days after the first *unzioni* had appeared in the Duomo. It offered a large reward of 200 *scudi* to be paid by the Health Board treasury, and it promised that "if the informant will be one of the accomplices, provided he is not the principal, he will be granted immunity, and at the same time he will earn the above mentioned reward."[290] Similar language was used in the edict issued by the Spanish Governor on June 13th, which added 200 *scudi* to the reward and impunity to any accomplice provided he was not the principal.[291]It is probable that the promise of immunity tainted the confessions of Piazza and Mora. In fact, they both tried to convince the magistrate of their secondary role in the plot in order to be granted judicial pardon.

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[290] "e se il notificante sara' uno de' complici, purche' non sia il principale, se gli promete l'impunita', e parimente guadagnera' il suddetto premio". Edict dated May 19th, 1630. ASM, Sanita' PA. 278. (Check reference). For more on criminal trial procedures in early modern Lombardy see G.P. Massetto, *Saggi di storia del diritto penale Lombardo. Sec. XVI-XVIII* (Milano 1994)

[291] "ed impunita' anche al complice purche' non sia il principale", Edict June 13th . ASM, Sanita' PA. 278.

Thus, the reliability of the story regarding who initiated the plan is questionable, but the assertion of both defendants that profit was the principal motive behind their agreement still stands as credible, especially because it seems in line with the attitude of other plague workers who considered exploiting the diffusion of the disease for economic profit.

The motives imagined by the ruling elite: the political conspiracy theory

The confession of the economic motive by Piazza and Mora did not convince the authorities. The magistrates and the senate deemed that it was unconceivable that men would commit such a heinous and large-scale crime simply for a handful of money. In their view, the phenomenon of the *unzioni* was part of a greater political conspiracy, which involved the leadership of a 'great prince' armed with the intention to weaken the city and gain its control, and various sources point to this as a widely held view.[292] The resistance of the authority to the simpler version of the story told by Piazza and Mora resulted in the intensification of the interrogation with the use torture, which led to a 're-shaping' of the story. Under the pressure of torture and the suggestive questioning of the magistrate of the *Tribunale*, the defendants implicated other men, all part of a network of small shop-keepers and artisans who, as noted earlier in this chapter, had a direct or indirect connection with the army, but no apparent links to foreign powers.

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[292] The view of the authorities was probably influencing also the common perception of the phenomenon. In letter to his father dated 21 May 1630 Francesco Maria Borri tells his father that he had heard rumors that three men had been arrested in Turin, who claimed to have come out of France with seventy men to infect all of Italy and in Milan in particular. In a letter dated 4 July 1630, he tells that the ambassador of Savoy, his brother the Marquee D. Hercole Gonzaga and many others were involved in the *unzioni* to "annihilate Italy", Francesco Maria Borri, *op. cit.*

The authorities' perception of the *unzioni* as a political instrument did not come out of thin air. The fear of a possible French or foreign invasion was imbedded in the Milanese view of politics as a result of decades of political and religious tensions, which had begun with the Italian Wars, had continued through the sixteenth century and had culminated with the beginning of the Thirty Years War, and in particular with the war of the Mantuan succession. Milan's strategic geographic position made it an important pawn in the hands of the Spanish Crown, and French territorial ambitions over the state continued to put pressure on its borders, especially in Valtellina, which was a vital corridor that connected Germany with south of Europe.[293] Thus, fear of a foreign invasion, in addition to the pervasive culture of conspiracies characteristic of the early modern period, contributed to the formation of a climate of suspicion, which offered a fertile ground for the formation of the idea of the *untori* as an agents of a foreign power.[294]

The intent of the magistrate was to elicit from Piazza and Mora the name of the political enemy that, in their opinion, had commissioned the unzioni to socially destabilize the city, and he used the threat of the possible loss of the impunity to put pressure on Piazza. On July 1st, the magistrate accused Piazza of having lied about his role in the affair in order to receive the immunity promised to those who gave information about the grease. He was accused of having withheld the fact that he had provided pestilential matter collected from the bodies of the sick and, because of his principal role in facilitating the production of the grease, he could not be granted the immunity:

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[293] See chapter 1.
[294] For more on the topic of early modern conspiracy culture see "*Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in Early Modern Europe*" ed. Barry Coward and Julian Swann (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004)

> that the defendant failed to confess that the principal crime that he had committed was to provide the matter [coming out of the mouth] of the dead of plague to the barber for him to produce the grease…. So said, the defendant is found guilty of greasing the walls with the intent of killing the people, as he has already confessed, and also of having provided the barber with the said matter […] and consequently he is subject to the punishment prescribed by the laws that proscribe such actions[295]

Based on the stipulation that the immunity was granted only in the event that the person providing information was not the instigator, the magistrate used the fact that Piazza had provided the pestilential matter employed by Mora in the concoction of the grease as evidence of his role as principal actor in the crime, thus invalidating his right to receive the immunity. In response to the judge insinuation Piazza changed his initial story. He declared that Mora had convinced him to spread the grease with the promise of a 'great quantity' of money and

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[295] d'aver lui constituto ommesso di dire il delitto da lui principalmente commesso in dar la detta materia de' morti appestati al detto barbiero per fare il detto onto, ... e per ciò si fa reo non solo d'aver onto le muraglie a fine di far morire la gente, siccome ha confessato, ma ancora d'aver dato al suddetto barbiero la suddetta materia ... e che per aver così fatto sii incorso nelle pene delle leggi imposte, e che proibiscono così fare", *Processo*, 241.

"saying that there was an important person that had promised him a large amount of money to do such thing."[296] He added that, despite his insistence, Mora did not reveal the name of the person who had promised the money. With his latest confession Piazza accomplished two things: he shifted the attention of the magistrate to a new potential instigator that could satisfy the magistrate's hypothesis of a large political scale conspiracy and, by doing so, he hoped to secure his immunity once again. The 'handful of money' that the barber was supposed to pay him in return for his service became as a 'large amount', and the implication of an important instigator made him only an accessory to a much greater plot. The magistrate asked Piazza to confirm his deposition:

> To tell if it was true that the said barber, with the promise of money, asked you to do what you have confessed, and that [the barber] told you he was doing so upon request of an important person, who had promised [him] a large amount of money, and also tell if it was true that he had received the foam [from the infected people] from the said *monatto* in the way and form he confessed earlier[297]

Piazza's answer was a simple "Yes, sir. It is true" followed by an almost verbatim repetition of what the magistrate had just said. The intensity of his interrogation finally eased.

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[296] "Dicendomi che aveva una persona grande che gli aveva promesso una gran quantità de danari per fare tal cosa", *Processo*, 241.

[297] '*Interrogato* se è la verità, che il suddetto barbiero l'abbi ricercato con danari a fare quanto dice d'aver fatto, e che gli abbia detto, che ciò facesse ad istanza d'una persona grande, quale gli aveva promesso una quantità de denari, e che dica parimente se è vero, che abbi ricevuto la spuma dal suddetto monatto nel modo, e forma che di sopra ha detto", *Processo*, 242.

On July 2nd, it was Mora's turn for the interrogation. This time the magistrate used Piazza's confession to prompt the barber:

> We read in the proceedings of the deposition of Piazza obtained after your last examination, that he was introduced [to the affair of the unzioni] and asked to provide the [mouth] foam from the cadavers of those died of plague, and that to convince him to do so you promised him money saying that an important person that had promised a large amount of money to produce the effects that were indeed obtained with the grease produced by you with the foam received from the above mentioned inspector, and [we ask] to tell if it is all true, and at the same to say who is the important person who had promised you such a large amount of money […] This would be a much more credible reason that could have motivated you and the inspector to such great depravity, than your desire to sell your remedy and the inspector's desire to continue to work as you have previously confessed[298]

The fact that for the first time the magistrate used Piazza confession in a suggestive way to continue interrogating Mora indicates that what Piazza confessed had satisfied the magistrate, who now focused on obtaining a consistent confession from Mora, which was necessary before a sentence against the two men could be issued. But Mora affirmed that all that he had previously said was true and could not say who was the *persona grande* that, according to Piazza had commissioned the production of the grease. On July 8th, Piazza said to the magistrate that he finally remembered the name of the *capo grosso:* it was Giovanni Padilla.[299] Under the pressure of the interrogation, the economic motive behind the *unzioni* was now taking a different shape. The profit was no longer produced by the selling of plague remedies or by the continuation of employment as an inspector. Instead, it was the result of the participation to a greater plot to harm the State of Milan and financed by the son of a foreign official.

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[298] 'che pure si lege in processo dalla propria deposition del sudetto Piazza fatta dopo l'ultimo esame di lui constituto, qual dice, che fu indotto, e ricercato da lui a farli avere della suddetta spuma dè morti appestati, e che indurlo a così fare gli promise di dargli quantità de denari con dirgli ancora che aveva una persona grande che gli aveva promesso gran quantità di denari per far l'effetto, che poi fu fatto con l'onto da lui contituto composto con la sudetta spumma dal sudetto commissario havuta, perciò si dica se è vero. Et dica parimente chi è la persona grande, che aveva promesso a lui constituto la suddetta quantità de danari [...] cosa che ha più del verosimile, che habbi mosso lui constituto, et detto commissario a far una tanta sceleragine, che non è per aver occasione di vendere lui constituto il suo ellettuario, et il commissario d'haver modo di più lavorare come nelli loro essami hanno deposto" *Processo*, 244.

Among the elite, the archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Federico Borromeo seemed to be more in tune with the condition of the populace and disagreed with the opinion of the secular authorities that considered the *unzioni* as part of a larger political conspiracy. Instead, he believed that the origin of the phenomenon was found in the socioeconomic fabric of the city. In his account of the plague of 1630 he commented:

> Because the plague was spreading and growing in strength, the idea deeply penetrated many minds that it was the work of great princes. They believed that to fulfill their goals, [the princes] were spreading these poisons and infecting the population. And because such opinion was plausible among the populace and welcomed by gullible minds, it brought great damage to the general condition. In fact, it would have been better to make any effort to ward off the plague, rather than being distracted by trying to find the perpetrator of such a great fraud[300].

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[299] *Processo*, 253.

[300] “Poichè tanto si diffondeva e aumentava la peste, penetrò profondamente negli animi di molti l’opinione che ciò accadesse per opera di alcuni Principi, i quali, per poter realizzare i loro progetti, spargevano questi veleni e infettavano la popolazione. E poiché codeste opinioni risultano abbastanza plausibili tra il volgo e sono accolte con animi creduli, di per sé tale fatto fu di grave danno alla situazione generale. Infatti, mentre sarebbe stato meglio che ponesse ogni cura nel respingere e scacciare la peste, gli animi furono distolti a indagare chi mai fosse stato il

Borromeo criticized the authorities for what he considered a misjudgment of the case, which resulted in a worsening of the contagion. In his opinion, the Health Board spent too much time and energy working as a criminal justice organ rather than strengthening the implementation of public health measures which was the only way to stop the spreading of the contagion.

Borromeo believed that one of the strongest indications that the *unzioni* were not part of a political conspiracy was the absence of large sums of money:

> I find it more probable that there were no princes involved in this crime and that these venomous ointments were not the product of their machinations. They [the magistrates] claimed that a lot of money and silver had been paid; on hearing such things I responded that many things were said, but that no more money than what is commonly used to eat and drink was ever discovered, or more than the amount that a gambler, or alchemist, or astrologer, or thief would be able to procure[301].

The archbishop did not dispute the idea that the unzioni were used to make a profit, instead he re-dimensioned its scope. Borromeo points out to the fact that the amount of money circulating among the alleged *untori* was more typical of common crooks than of people paid by princes. In his opinion, the criminal actions of the

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macchinatore e l'artefice di una frode così grave". Federico Borromeo, La Peste di Milano, ed. Armando Torno (Milano: Rusconi Ed., 1987), p 48.

[301] "Ma a me appunto sembra più probablile che non ci siano stati Principi complici di questa colpa e che non siano derivati dalle loro decisioni questi venefici unguenti. Sostenevano che per ciò era stato procurato del gran denaro, che era stato fatto passare molto argento; io udendo tali affermazioni sostenevo che si dicevano e menzionavano molte cose, ma di denaro non ne appariva più di quello che chiunque potrebbe anche spendere per mangiare e bere, o di quello che anche un solo giocatore d'azzardo o alchimista o mago o astrologo o ladro sarebbe in grado di procurare", Borromeo, 48-49.

untori were motivated by the desire to gain some money like gambler, alchemists, and charlatans, who illicitly exploit people's need for their own profit.[302] Finally, I have mentioned earlier, Borromeo believed that, if there was an external actor involved in the diffusion of the *unzioni*, it was not a great prince, but rather the common soldier who, not afraid of plague, had taught the common people a way to concoct the poisonous grease. His remarks point to the socio-economic roots of the crime and, in his opinion, the true issue was the deteriorating condition of the lower class, which had pushed some people to resort to 'desperate measures' for survival in a time of extreme crisis.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of the *unzioni* in the propagation of plague was, for the most part, recognized by both the learned elite and the popular masses. While the elite's understanding of the *unzioni* was supported by a complex set of notions drawn from the authority of antiquity as well as from the contemporary medical debates about contagion, the *untori* – who were mostly members of the poor working class – described the nature of the grease in very simple terms, as a substance created by mixing infected body fluids with various other ingredients that allowed the grease to stick to walls and doors. At the root of these views was a more empirical understanding of the causes of plague, which led to the perception of a much greater role played by human agency in the diffusion of contagion. The stronger emphasis on the material causation of plague rather than its remote and spiritual origin led contemporaries to pay more attention to the mechanisms of contagion. In their effort to contain the infection, authorities became more aware of episodes of intentional plague spreading and began to regulate the work of plague cleaners with severe sanctions against recklessness behavior while transporting infected goods.

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[302] For more on this topic, see chapter 5.

The episodes of intentional plague spreading reveal the development of a particular attitude among the poor, who, in the presence of natural cataclysms such as famine and plague, found a way to survive by creating an ‘economy of the plague’ that depended on the continuation of the contagion. In this climate, the phenomenon of the *unzioni* demonstrates a propensity of both the elite and uneducated masses to consider the potentials offered by the exploitation of disease. Guided by rudimental recipes, the *untori* believed that they could take advantage of plague to make a profit, while secular authorities considered the *unzioni* as biological weapons in the hands of great foreign power. In both cases, it was the questioning of classic miasmatic theories and the shift of attention to the mechanisms of contagion explored in chapter one of this dissertation that favored a new attitude towards plague.

Chapter 5

The Untori as agents of the Devil: the influence of religious worldviews on the perception of the unzioni.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the religious worldview that supported the contemporary understanding of the phenomenon of the unzioni as the material manifestation of the spiritual struggle between good and evil, God and the Devil. Despite modern scholarship that has often associated the phenomenon of the *untori* with witchcraft,[303] we have seen that the trial record tells a different story.[304] The *untori* did not associate their work with the supernatural; instead they described their production of the grease in very mechanical terms. They confessed of having produced it according to recipes that they had learned from other people and being motivated by the desire to make a profit exploiting the disease (see chapter 4). Yet, the language used by secular and religious authorities, who blamed the *untori* for the diffusion of the contagion, associated their heinous enterprise with the demonic realm.

This association led modern readers to a simplistic assimilation of the phenomenon of the *untori* into the broader witchcraft category. In this chapter I will argue that, influenced by the Catholic worldview that explained the events of the material world in terms of the transcendent opposition between good and evil, the magistrates in charge of the trial as well as the general public understood and interpreted the phenomenon of the *unzioni* as a manifestation of this primordial opposition and never fully conflated it with witchcraft.

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[303] See for example E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in Geneva, 1537-1662,* in The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jun., 1971), 179-204; Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe,* second ed. (New York: Longman Publishing, 1995), 131, 168.

[304] See chapter 4

We see this in the trial itself, where there is no specific reference to the demonic until September, when one of the men accused of being part of the conspiracy, Stefano Baruello, confessed to having been part of a ceremony that involved the evocation of a devil. As we will see, the episode described by Stefano Baruello raises many questions, but it lacks the typical elements of witchcraft. We also hear it in the language used to instruct the masses on the precepts of the Catholic Church, which was part of the moral reform initiated by Carlo Borromeo, champion of the Counterreformation and archbishop of Milan from 1564 to 1584, and continued by his cousin Federico Borromeo, archbishop of Milan from 1595 until his death in 1631. Their reform stressed the importance of Christian education in order to eliminate all forms of superstition and demonic influences. Yet, this category was broad and did not always include a manifest pact with the devil, which is has been identified by modern scholarship as a distinguishing element of witchcraft.[305]

While demonologist expounded the supernatural mysteries of the demonic realm in treaties destined only to the learned elite[306] and engaged in complex theological debates about the distinction between natural magic and demonic magic,[307] the masses indoctrinated since childhood by the Schools of Christian Doctrine experienced demonic opposition in a much more material way. Evidence gathered from an unpublished collection of Borromeo's reflections on 'extraordinary things heard or seen by the cardinal suggests that it was commonly believed that demons could take human forms and interact with men.[308] Nevertheless, the stories told by people about those encounters do not always conform to the stereotypical encounters between witches and the devil imagined by contemporaries. In fact, in most cases they did not involve a request for a formal 'pact', nor abjuration of faith, worship, or sexual intercourse. Instead, the Milanese stories of the people's encounters with demons seemed to have simply placed the individual in front of a moral choice between good and evil behavior.

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[305] See Levack, *op. cit.,* chapter 2.

[306] In Milan, one of the most influential demonologist was Francesco Maria Guazzo, who published his *Compendium Maleficarum* in 1604, and a revised edition of the *Compendium* was published in 1624 with the *imprimatur* of the *Collegio Ambrosiano*. In his treaty, Guazzo makes

In the specific case of the *untori*, did the magistrates believe that a demonic force produced the power of the grease? Did they believe the *untori* had made a pact with the devil? Probably not, and this could explain why their trial, despite some references to demonic inferences, was never moved under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. What about the general public?

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many references to the work of two other renowned demonologist of his time: Martin Del Rio and Nicolas Remi.

[307] The intellectual debate stemmed from the idea that, according to the supporters of natural magic, their knowledge derived directly from the study of the occult properties of nature. Opposed to this view of natural magic as a synonym of natural philosophy, were many demonologists who affirmed that all those who practiced magic had received their knowledge from demons. See Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), chapters 14-15.

[308] Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano, F 13 inf. *Capo* 22 and 40.

The chapter begins with the account of Stefano Baruello's two interrogations. In his first deposition, Baruello suggested that the *unzioni* were part of a human conspiracy to make a profit. But the next day, he added details to his story that included the involvement of the demonic realm. His second deposition is noteworthy because it introduces the only direct mention of demonic interference made during the trial against the *untori.* The richness of details in the story allows us to get a glimpse into his perception of the supernatural and offers an extraordinary opportunity to learn about a seventeenth century innkeeper's worldview. In the last two sections of the chapter I consider the influence played by the Schools of Christian Doctrine in the formation of the Milanese belief system. Using the example of two stories that were circulating in Milan about the physical presence of the devil in the city, I will argue that the teachings of the Schools of Christian Doctrine stressed the juxtaposition of good and evil and in doing so contributed to the formation, in the popular imagination, of a view of the world in which the devil interacted with people in very tangible ways. A world where men had to make moral choices to resist the schemes of the devil or become its victims.

Baruello's first testimony: a human conspiracy

On September 11, 1630 Stefano Baruello was brought by a guard in a room of the office of the *Podestà.*[309] All witnesses were let out and, behind closed doors, the *auditore*[310] Gaspare Alfieri read him the sentence issued against him by the Senate on August 27th. He was found guilty of having prepared a pestiferous ointment and to have infected the city for his own interest and the interest of others with the promise and payment of money.[311] He was to be transported to the place of execution on an open cart. His right hand was to be cut off in front of the house of Migliavacca, where he had allegedly fabricated the ointment. Before being strangled, he was to be tied to the *wheel* to break his bones and then was to remain exposed for six hours as a warning for the people. Finally, his corpse was to be burned, his ashes tossed in the nearby river, and the image of him hanging from the gallows was to be painted on a wall with the inscription of *traditore della patria* as a warning to posterity.[312] This type of punishment was reserved for particularly heinous crimes (murder, treason, sorcery, sodomy, polygamy to name a few) and was executed in a ceremonial manner. Each element of the sentence maintained a specific symbolic meaning for the crowd present during the execution of the criminals and aimed at perpetually defaming them in frot of the fellow citizens.[313]

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[309] The *Podestà* was one of the oldest organs of the city public administration. During the period of Spanish domination, the Spanish governor *chose the Podestà* from the members of the most

Guglielmo Piazza and Giacomo Mora had already been found guilty of the same crime and executed in a similar manner on August 1st. Geronimo

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prominent Milanese families and he remained in office for one year. He adjudicated both civil and criminal matters.

[310] The *uditore* was a juris consult elected by the members of the Tribunale della Sanità to participate in and facilitate trials.

[311] ‘imputato di aver preparato unguento pestifero e di aver infettato la città per sè, e per gli altri con la promessa ed anche con il pagamento di denaro’. *Processo agli Untori*, 357.

[312] *Processo*, 357.

[313] There are no specific studies on the death penalty in Milan during the early modern period. For more on the symbolic meaning of capital punishment in the late medieval and early modern period see Andrea Zorzi, *La Pena di Morte in Italia nel Tardo Medioevo,* in Clio and Crimine, n 4 (2007), 47-62.

Migliavacca suffered the same fate on August 30th. But on September 11th, Stefano Baruello was offered the opportunity to save his life. With a recommendation from the Senate, on September 7th the Spanish Governor Ambrosio Spinola issued the order to convert Baruello's death sentence into lifelong exile, in exchange for his truthful and complete confession about the *unzioni.*[314]

Why was Baruello offered an opportunity to avoid the death penalty? The lack of direct evidence regarding the motives behind the offer leaves room for various interpretations. It is possible that the magistrate needed additional evidence against Giovanni Padilla in order to continue to prosecute him (*inquisitio specialis).*[315] Baruello was the only surviving defendant who had an alleged contact with Padilla, and it is possible that the magistrate was not convinced by what the other defendants had confessed or did not have sufficient legal evidence to proceed against the son of a prominent Spanish administrator. Thus, on September 11th, using the words of the *auditore* Alfieri, ' life and death were placed in his [Baruello] hands'. Baruello was given six hours to prepare for his final deposition regarding the authors and the motives behind such wicked crime. The *auditore* exhorted Baruello to confess in order to 'expiate the wrongs he had committed against his motherland (*patria*) and then assured him that his confession would be well accepted by God, his Excellence Spinola, the Senate, and by his own *patria.* At the end, he was transferred back to prison where, according to the records, he had the freedom to talk to 'anyone he wanted'.[316] Baruello accepted the terms of the governor's offer and, after only three hours, he appeared in front of the *auditori*. He was ready to "tell the truth and enjoy the promised immunity."[317]

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[314] *Processo,* 362

[315] For an in depth study about the legal value of the incrimination made by a codefendant see Giovanni Chiodi, "Nel labirinto delle prove legali: la testimonianza del complice nel processo penale d'età moderna"*, in Rivista Internazionale di Diritto Comune,* 24 (2013),113-179; for more general information about the judicial process and the role of the accusations and denunciations in the inquisitorial trial see Ettore Dezza, *Lezioni di storia del processo penale* (Pavia: Pavia University Press, 2013), especially chapter 2 and 3.

Baruello began his confession by claiming that two of his acquaintances, Mr. Fontana and his son-in-law Carlo, had first told him about the *unzioni* on the 5th Sunday of Lent. The two men had told him that they had found a way to make some money working for the son of the *Castellano* and invited him to join them. The next morning, they arranged a meeting between him and the son of the *Castellano*, Giovanni Padilla, on the castle's square. Baruello claimed that Padilla arrived at the meeting accompanied by a priest and by two men dressed in the French fashion, and that, after exchanging few words, he recognized him as one of the soldiers who had served in his unit and gave him twenty-five Venetian *ducatoni* to enjoy as a gift. Then, after asking him if he was a friend of Gerolamo Migliavacca, Padilla gave Baruello a small, square glass vase. He told him that it contained the ointment that was being "concocted in Milan"[318] and that he had hundreds of *gentiluomini* working for him. He then continued saying that the content of the vase was not "perfect" and that lizards, toads, and white wine had to be added to the concoction. Everything had to be cooked on a slow flame "so that the animals would die upset inside the substance,”[319] and when the animals had died, he was supposed to remove them and continue cooking the concoction to further reduce it. Then, Padilla instructed Baruello to remain in contact with Migliavacca and to give him part of the ointment once he had prepared it, because there was no one more capable than Migliavacca to ‘inflict revenge’. In return, he would receive money and protection. Baruello then asked Padilla about what kind of revenge he was talking about, and the man answered that the *unzioni* were used to avenge Don Gonzalo, the former Spanish governor, who had been mistreated by the people of Porta Ticinese.[320]

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[316] Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Fondo Morbio, 077/016. 1632. Die per D. Io. Gaetanum de Padilla equitem Santi Iacobi (*Defensiones).*

[317] "Ho deliberato di dir la verità, et godere l'impunità promessa" *Processo*, 363.

[318] "Che si fabrica a Milano", *Processo*, 365.

A very interesting element to note about Baruello’s account of his meeting with Padilla is the presence during the meeting of a priest and of two men, whose elegant and expensive French attire is described in detail by Baruello, and who had arrived, according to Baruello’s account, from Valtellina. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Valtellina was a particularly strategic region in the State of Milan.[321] It was a valley in the mountains north of the city and represented a crucial point of connection between the Hapsburg’s dominions in Spain and Germany. Because of its strategic position, both France and Venice contended over the area, as they wanted to control the transit of imperial troops to and from Germany. This area also saw internal conflicts between the Catholic majority supported by the Spanish Crown and the Protestant minority that was living in the valley and was supported, for political interest, by the League of the Grisons, Venice and France. The conflict, fueled by a strong anti-heretical sentiment, culminated in July of 1620 when hundred of Protestants were killed by a group of radical Catholics[322] during what became known as the *Sacro Macello di Valtellina,*[323] but the political controversy continued until it was finally resolved in 1639, when Valtellina was returned under the official control of the League of the Grison.

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[319] “acciò questi animali possano morire arrabbiati nella materia”, *Processo*, 365.
[320] Baruello is referring to an incident linked to the departure of the Spanish Governor Don Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordoba from Milan in 1629. The King of Spain removed Cordoba from Milan as a consequence of his failure to take Casale. The Governor was not well liked by the Milanese that considered him responsible for the economic difficulties suffered by the city, and for having allowed the passage of German troops in the Milanese territory, causing a great of the diffusion of plague. According to contemporary chronicles, he left the city in 1629 and on his way out of Porta Ticinese the local population insulted him. The diplomatic incident was resolved by the Senate with an envoy of a formal apology, which was accepted by Don Gonzalo. His response to the apology is found in ASM, Sanità Parte Antica, Busta 278, foglio 15.
[321] See chapter 1.

Thus, the story was probably invented to respond to the expectation of the magistrate and other secular authorities to discover a political conspiracy.[324] The characters and the details Baruello tells are a representation of what he probably recognized as the potential enemies of the State of Milan. The fact that he is paid in Venetian currency, the presence of the priest and the two richly dressed French men, and the detail about their arrival from Valtellina are all elements that suggests a French and Venetian plot against the State exploiting the desires for personal vendetta of a Spanish official against the people who had disrespected his authority. Although the story raises some questions (why would a Spanish soldier participate in a plot organized by representatives of Spain's enemies?), it provides an interesting perspective of what Baruello imagined being credible based on his perception of the political environment.

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[322] For a contemporary account of the political and religious situation in Valtellina see Francesco Ballarini, *Gli felici progressi dei Catholici nella Valtellina per l'estirpazine dell'Heresie,* (Milano, Pandolfo Malatesta Stampatore Regio e Camerale, 1623).

[323] The name *Sacro Massacro di Valtellina* was first used by the nineteenth century Italian historian Cesare Cantù, who published a book about the massacre in 1853.

[324] See chapter 4. The population at large seemed to have feared a French invasion and we have evidence of this widespread phobia in Tadino's account of an episode of popular panic one evening of July 1630: " *ecco che alli 25. del detto corrente mese (Luglio), verso le ore 23, mentre si trovava il Tribunale congregato per li bisogni urgenti della salute pubblica, si sentì dare all'arma tutta la Città per causa di uno bisbiglio nato senza sapere l'origine, che quantità di Soldati Francesi si trovassero nascosti fuori della Città, & che Havevano fatto attaccare il fuoco in diverse parti della Città, come fu alle beccarie di Porta Ticinese, a Porta Vercellina, al Carobio, per atterrire maggiormente il popolo, dove al concorso di tanta gente à quei fuochi, s'hebbe per avvisono, che in questo bisbiglio fosse unto molto numero di persone", Ragguaglio,* 128.

Going back to the story of the ointment, Baruello admitted that he did not immediately 'perfect' the ointment he had received, because he did not want to go through the trouble of getting the lizards and toads to cook up according to Padilla's instructions. It was after a second meeting with the Spanish officer, and after having received thirty more *zecchini*, that Baruello finally paid a boy to procure him three lizards and two toads and then went to the house of Gerolamo Migliavacca to prepare the ointment. Baruello gave a very detailed account of the way he prepared the ointment, the pot used, and the ingredients that went into it, but he did not suggest what was in the vase he received by Padilla, and the magistrate did not ask him about it. Once the ointment was ready, he placed it in small vases that he closed with wax, and then he gave Migliavacca one vase telling him "take this vase that contains the poisonous ointment that makes people die, and grease the scissors of the women with it."[325] A few days later, he met Giacinto Maganza, a soldier that had served in the same unit under Vercellino Visconti at Casale.[326] Baruello also gave him some ointment with the instructions to go to the *Osteria del*

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[325] "piglia questo vasetto, nel quale vi è dentro quell'onto venenoso, quale fa morire, ongi le forbice delle donne", *Processo*, 367.

[326] See chapter 4.

Gambaro (a tavern owned by a friend) and grease its door and the men who were dining there. He claimed to have reassured Maganza that this was just a prank, and only after Maganza came back from the tavern, Baruello revealed to him that the ointment he had used was “that ointment that kills people.”[327] Baruello told the magistrate that both Migliavacca and Maganza were afraid of dying after having used the ointment, and that he had reassured them that the ointment was not dangerous for those who greased, but did not precisely explain why. Finally, Baruello confessed that the *acqua dormia*, the potion that he had concocted to alleviate the pains of syphilis,[328] was a cover up to misdirect the investigation.

From the allusion to a political plot with the implication of Frenchmen coming from Valtellina, to the claim that it was an act of personal vendetta of a disgruntled former Spanish Governor, much can be said about Baruello’s first confession. What is clearly missing is any reference to the supernatural. The strongest evidence about Baruello’s understanding of the ointment as a manmade poisonous concoction is the fact that he claimed that the vase he received from Padilla contained an ‘imperfect’ substance. Although we lack specific information about the nature of the substance received by Padilla, it is clear that according to Baruello its original form lacked the power to kill and needed to be altered with the addition of toads, lizards, and white wine.

Baruello’s account can be compared to Mora’s story of when he had received a vase containing the ointment from Padilla. Mora admitted of having thrown away the vase he had received from Padilla out of fear of contagion and when a few days later Padilla checked on him to see if he had done what he had asked him to do, Mora said that he eventually concocted his own version of the ointment. In both stories, the concoction is crafted following a recipe, and it contained some sort of foam provided by an accomplice. Mora declared of having received from Guglielmo Piazza a small ampule containing the mouth foam collected from plague victims, and Baruello told the magistrate that he had received a 'foamy foul-smelling substance' from Padilla, but he did know exactly what it was. Both men's testimony implied the presence of putrid matter cooked up according to a recipe passed down by a third person. It is worth recalling here how Baruello, when preparing the concoction, had exclaimed, "I have become a charlatan."[329] This indicates a perception of his activity not in terms of witchcraft, but probably more in terms of manipulation of natural ingredients with the expectation of making some profit.

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[327] “E’ di quell’onto, che fa morire”, *Processo,*370.

[328] See chapter 4.

Baruello's second testimony: Demonic appearances

The next day, on September 12th, Stefano Baruello was called back to the office of the *Pretore* to clarify the inconsistencies that the magistrate found in his deposition. Aside from wanting clarifications and details about the people that Baruello had mentioned the day before (Carlo, Fontana, and Tamborino), the magistrate zoomed in on the question of the motives behind the *unzioni*. There seemed to be a contradiction. Baruello had initially claimed that the reason why Padilla had asked him to fabricate and use the ointment was to vindicate the affront to the honor of Don Gonzalo made by the people of Porta Ticinese. But later in the interrogation, when he told the magistrate about the involvement of Gerolamo Migliavacca, he confessed of having instructed Migliavacca, who had a knife-sharpening *bottega* in the neighborhood of Porta Comasina, to grease the scissors that women brought to the *bottega* to be sharpened.[330] Since Migliavacca's *bottega* was in a different neighborhood closer to the Castle, the target of the *unzioni* was now widespread and outside the area of Porta Ticinese, thus casting doubts on the previous claim that Don Gonzalo had commissioned the *unzioni* as a personal vendetta.

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[329] "sono divenuto un zarlatano", *Processo,* 367.

According to judicial practice, the contradictions in Baruello's statements led to more intense questioning in order to obtain an unequivocal confession, and Baruello's reaction to it introduced a new element to the trial: demonic possession. It is at this point that for the first time since the beginning of the trial the magistrate made a direct reference to a demonic involvement in the affair. Yet, the magistrate's mention of the supernatural was a response to the sudden change in Baruello's demeanor and not the cause of it. The trial record paints a very vivid image of the reaction of Baruello when the magistrate begun pressuring him to confess. Extending his neck and shaking his body, Baruello begun crying "u u u I cannot tell, help me, his lordship! His lordship, help me!"[331]He continued to contort his body and screeching with his lips open "Your Lordship, help me, Lord, Ah my God, ah, my God."[332] In response to Baruello's erratic behavior, the magistrate asked' "Have you made a pact with the devil? Do not doubt, renounce to the pact, and surrender your soul to God, he will help you."[333] Kneeling down, Baruello asked, "Tell me, what should I say" and the magistrate continued

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[330] "Io gli dissi, che in cambio di metter oglio come soleva sopre le forbici delle donne, vi mettesse di questo onto, et gli dissi anco che facendoli bisogno de danari m'havisasse, che non gli sarebbero mancati, ma che dovesse star secretto", *Processo*, 367.

> you must say, I renounce to any pact that I might have made with the devil, and I surrender my soul in the hands of God, and of the blessed Virgin, and I pray that they will want to free me from the state in which I find myself, and accept me as their creature[334]

Baruello repeated the words as instructed "with devotion and enough sincerity", but when he got up, he began contorting his neck again and emitting screeching sounds, as if he wanted to speak but could not. Then he screamed "the French priest!" and he threw himself on the ground, trying to hide behind a desk. He repeatedly said that a French priest was coming towards him with a sword in his hand.

The magistrate's first question when Baruello begun to convulse and claim that he could not speak was whether he had made a pact with the devil. This question is very important because it suggests a change in the magistrate's perception of the *unzioni.* Up until this point there was no suggestion during the interrogation of the other *untori* of any demonic implication. On the contrary, we know that when something similar had happened during Gugliemo Piazza's interrogation (Piazza claimed he could not speak because of his throat closing up), the magistrate made no direct connection with the supernatural. Yet, in the case of Baruello, the magistrate immediately read the shaking and screeching as a demonically induced behavior, and took 'spiritual' measures to correct the situation.

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[331] "u u u se non lo posso dire, vostra signoria mi aggiudi, vostra signoria mi aggiudi" *Processo,* 374.

[332] "vostra signoria mia aggiudi, Signore ah Dio mio, ah Dio Mio!", *Processo,* 374.

[333] "Dettogli: havete forse qualche patto col diavolo? Non dubitare, et renunciate alli patti, et consignate l'anima vostra a Dio, che vi aggiuterà", *Processo*, 374.

[334] "Et dettogli, che debba dire: io rinuncio ad ogni patto, che io habbi fatto col diavolo, et consegno l'anima mia nelle mani d'Iddio, et della beata Vergine col pregarli a volermi liberare dal stato, nel quale mi trovo, et accettarmi per sua creatura" *Processo,* 374.

What new information might have informed the reaction of the magistrates to Baruello's behavior? We learn from Federico Borromeo's remarks on the trial against the *untori* that sometimes during the course of the trial court officials had consulted him regarding some perplexing claims made by some of the alleged *untori*

> [The devil] can certainly cause a sort of oblivion that does not allow a person to confess and admit facts whose memory has been completely erased from the mind. On hearing these things [that even under torture people would not confess], I answered those who were asking that they were so incredible or strange as they believed and considered: because all sorcerers, witches, and some witch doctors had made a pact with the Devil and because of such pact they were empowered and enabled[335]

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[335] "*[il demonio] può certamente indurre nell'animo un oblio di tal genere che uno non possa confessare e ammettere fatti il cui ricordo sia stato completamente cancellato dalla mente. Io, sentendo dire tali cose, rispondendo ai loro espositori che esse non erano tanto incredibili e strane quanto credevano e consideravano essi stessi; poichè tutti gli stregoni, le maghe, i maghi e alcuni fattucchieri hanno stretto un patto col Demonio e in forza di tale patto è loro concessa sia la forza sia la capacità",* Federico Borromeo, *La Peste di Milano,* ed. Armando Torno (Milano, Rusconi, 1987), 54-55.

The fact that the magistrate investigating the case of the *unzioni* found certain claims of the alleged *untori* ‘perplexing’ is good indication that, at least at the beginning, the court was not looking for a demonic implication. Although there is no precise indication of when Borromeo was consulted, we can infer that the response of the magistrate to Baruello’s behavior during his interrogation on September 12 was influenced by what they had learned from the archbishop and therefore he suspected that the defendant had made a pact with the devil.

While we can only speculate about the causes of his obsessed behavior, what is certain is that Baruello was aware of the fact that his life depended on the credibility of his confession, and when the magistrate rejected his confession because of its inconsistences, Baruello probably panicked. The court reporter stated on the record that Baruello acted “as those who are possessed by the devil, and he was foaming at his mouth and bleeding from his nose.”[336] So the magistrate, after aspersing him with Holy Water, called an exorcist to the courtroom[337]. The magistrate read in Baruello’s behavior the signs of demonic possession and intervened accordingly.

This episode from the trial is significant because it brings to light the complexity of the authorities’ view of the supernatural implication in the phenomenon of the unzioni. Was Baruello a victim of devil possession or a willing accomplice of a demonic plot? The line between demon possession and witchcraft was blurred, and Borromeo broadly applied the idea of a pact with the devil to different categories of workers of magic. Yet, the fact that the magistrate called an exorcist and not the inquisitor suggests that first of all Baruello was considered a victim of demonic possession and not an apostate.[338] The goal of the exorcism was to liberate Baruello from the demonic influence that prevented him to confess the truth about the unzioni, and from the perspective of the authorities it was successful. At the end of the exorcisms, Baruello had calmed down and began again to tell the story of how he became involved with the *unzioni*. This time he added to the account of his meeting with Padilla a new character: the devil.

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[336] “e compì atti per alcun tempo che sogliono fare gli ossessi dal diavolo, e perdeva schiuma dalla bocca e sangue dalle narici”, *Processo,* 375.

[337] “sopravvenuto poi il sacerdote e riferitegli tutte le cose soprascritte, questi, benedetto il luogo, e in specie quella finestra, dove il Baruello diceva travarsi il prete con la spada nuda nelle mani che lo minacciava, ricorse a vari esorcismi e con l’autorità conferitagli da Dio in qualità di sacerdote dichiarò nulli ed inefficaci i patti stipulati con il demonio o meglio li rese inefficaci e li annullò”, *Processo*, 375.

The Devil has a Name: Gola Gibla.

The intervention of the exorcist marked a turning point for Baruello. Now that all supernatural impediments had been removed, Baruello was expected to tell the truth, if he wanted to receive his immunity.[339] The magistrate began questioning him on the people involved in the *unzioni* and their motives, starting from where he had left right before the alleged dramatic appearance in the room of the menacing French figure. When Baruello began telling his story, the majority of the details about his meeting outside the castle with Padilla remained unchanged, but he added some new elements to explain why he had not been able fully disclose the truth the day before.

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[338] Sarah Ferbern discusses the difficulties inherent to the distinction between demonic possession and witchcraft in the early modern period in chapter 7 of her book, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France,* (New York: Routledg, 2004).

[339] *Processo*, 375.

Baruello said that the day he went to the castle to meet Padilla, he was also induced by the French priest to recognize the devil as his master. He told the magistrate that the priest traced a circle on the floor with a small black stick long about a span that he kept under his garb and ordered him to enter the circle. Once Baruello was standing inside the circle traced on the floor, the priest took out a book that had "circles and letters traced on its pages."[340] The priest told him that the book was the "Clavicle of Salomon" and asked Baruello to invoke, "*Gola Gibla*" and to repeat other words in Hebrew without stepping out the circle, or else something bad would happen to him. After the invocation, a man dressed like a *Pantalone*[341] appeared in the circle. The priest was holding a small vase containing the ointment and told Baruello not to be concerned and to recognize the *Pantalone* as his lord (*signore*).[342] Immediately after, the man looking like *Pantalone* disappeared, and both Baruello and the priest exited the circle. Baruello claimed that while he was in the circle, he could not see anyone else outside of it, but that his other accomplices (Fontana, Carlo, and Michele) were waiting there and could see what was happening. The priest gave the vase with the ointment back to

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[340] 'e l' [il libro] apperse, et io viddi sopra li foglii delli circoli, et lettere, attorno, attorno, et mi disse, che era la clavicola di Salomone", Processo, 375.

[341] *Pantalone* is a character in the 16th century *Commedia dell 'Arte.* His traditional costume included a red tight-fitting vest, with red breeches and stockings, and a black pleated cassock. As the cartoon a Venetian merchant, he represented 'money' and greed (From *Encyclopedia Britannica* *https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pantaloon. Consulted on 11/23/2016)*

[342] "E poi voltosi verso di me, disse riconoscete voi questo qua per vostro signore? Facendomi cenno, che dicessi de sì, et io all'hora risposi: signor si, che lo riconosco per mio signore", *Processo*, 376.

Padilla, who, in turn, gave it to Baruello, telling him that the ointment was ‘not perfect’ and that he had to add lizards and toads to it. Then, questioned by Baruello about who was the *Pantalone,* Padilla replied that it was the devil, and thanks to him, Baruello would never lack money. At the end of his confession, Baruello asked the magistrate to forgive him because the day before he had lied about the *unzioni* being a revenge of Don Gonzalo against the people of Porta Ticinese. He claimed to have lied because the devil had suggested that he do so. He concluded his confession swearing that he had not unjustly implicated anyone.[343]

Baruello’s testimony raises many questions of interpretation, especially because the description of the meeting between him and the *Pantalone* presents spurious elements typical of a learned form of magic known as ritual magic, mixed with popular fantasies. In ritual magic, the interaction between the individual and the devil did not result in diabolism, which assumed the adoration of the devil on the part of the person operating the magic, and was the object of concern for contemporary demonologists. Invocation was the ritual used to call demons to fulfill some specific wishes of the magician. If a pact with the devil existed, it had a contractual nature and did not necessarily involve the veneration of the devil.[344]

Ritual magic rested on the core assumption that demons were commanded through the power of God, and because of it remained in a sort of submissive role.

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[343] *Processo*, 375-376

[344] Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, (Berkley and Los Angele: University of California Press, 1976),6. See also Michael D. Bailey, “From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conception of Magic in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Speculum,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), Vol. 76, No. 4 (Oct., 2001), 965-966. *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic,* ed. Claire Fanger (University Park, PA, 1998) and Elizabeth M. Butler, *Ritual Magic* (University Park, Pa., 1949)

Thus, the rituals of conjurations “followed a resolutely religious pattern”[345] but excluded the adoration of the demon. In fact, ritual magic manuals stressed on the absolute necessity to be close to God before performing ritual magic, which explains why often the practitioners of ritual magic were members of the clergy. Prayer, fast, and confession were the most common spiritual tools used in preparation of a conjuration. During the invocation itself, it was through the use of the name of God that the demons were summoned. Paradoxically, although some conjurations did not imply evil purposes, a large number was specifically intended to harm others.[346]

Baruello’s story contains three important elements of ritual magic: the circle traced on the ground, the direction of a priest, and the mention of the book *Clavicula Salomonis.* Starting from the 13th century books carrying a reference the name of King Solomon in their title started to circulate in Europe. They were manuals of ritual magic and offered precise instructions on the art of conjuration, together with a list of demons with the indication of their specific power.[347] Strictly censored by the Catholic Church, the *Clavicula Salomonis* continued to circulate in Italy in the form of manuscripts, and although the *Clavicula* was part of the learned tradition, different simplified versions appeared in vernacular and reached the lower social classes.[348]

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[345] Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demon*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993),107.
[346] Cohn, 107.
[347] Cohn,104-106 and E. M. Butler, *Ritual Magic,* especially Part II, Chapter 1.
[348] For more on the circulation of books of magic in early modern Italy see Federico Barbierato, “*Writing, Reading, Writing: Scribal Culture and Magic Texts in Early Modern Venice*” in Italian Studies 66:2, 263-276. http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/174861811X13009843386710 accessed on 11/19/16.

Baruello's detailed description of what he claimed he saw in the hands of the French priest suggests the possibility that he had personally seen a copy of the book. He said about the book, "a long book made of small writing paper, but three fingers high, and when he [the priest] opened it, I saw on the pages circles with letters all around them, and he told me that it was the *Clavicola* of Salomon."[349] The manuscripts in circulation among the lower classes were made of inexpensive paper and they contained words, drawings, and pentacles to be used during the rituals. The use of circles was described by the *Clavicula* as necessary to protect the magician from possible negative effects produced by the evocation of the demon, and in fact, according to Baruello, he is instructed by the priest to remain inside the circle, which also acted as a barrier between him and the men who were standing outside the circle. Finally, the presence of a priest is certainly controversial, and contributes to the complexity of his deposition. In fact, it is thanks to the ritual performed by the priest that Baruello was liberated from the influence that prevented him to tell the truth, but paradoxically, it had also been a priest that had led him to recognize the devil as his master in the first place.

What can be said of the significance of the figure that supposedly appeared to Baruello in the form of a *Pantalone*? First of all, according to Baruello's story, his appearance is the result of a ritual of invocation. Baruello claimed that the French priest had instructed him to say the name Gola Gibla, and after the priest had recited a few more words in Hebrew “ one dressed like *Pantalone* appeared in the circle”[350] The *Clavicula Salomonis* was known to be used during invocation rituals, and it contained the names of specific demons that could be evoked during the ritual, hence the fact that Baruello used a specific name could indicate, together with the physical description he gives of the book, that he had some sort of familiarity with it.[351]

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[349] ' e poi mise mano ad un libro lungo in foglio come di carta piccola da scrivere, ma era grosso tre dita, et l'apperse, et io vidi sopra li foglii delli circoli, et lettere, attorno attorno, et mi disse che era la Clavicola di Salomone', Processo, 375.

At the same time, it is also possible that someone had coached Baruello him during the three hours he spent preparing for his deposition. The account of the ritual performed in front of the castle contained particulars of ritual magic that seem unusual in the account of an uneducated tavern keeper. Nevertheless, the lack of evidence regarding who had access to Baruello during the time he was preparing for his statement renders any attempt at determining who could have influenced his deposition speculative. At the same time, it is possible, yet difficult to prove, that Baruello might have read a copy of the *Clavicula.*

What is curious is that Baruello gave very specific details about the ritual but did not provide a detailed description of the figure that appeared to him. The day before, he had also provided detailed physical descriptions of the priest, the Frenchmen, and Padilla, but he does not do that with the man that appears to him in the circle. Instead, Baruello associates him with a very well-known character of the Commedia dell' Arte – *Pantalone-* who was a greedy and deceitful Venetian merchant and symbolically represented money.

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[350] “ed in quel ponto comparve nell’istesso circolo uno vestito di Pantalone”, Processo, 275.

[351] Inquisitorial records show that the *Clavicula Salomonis* was probably one of the most widely circulated books of magic. It is of some interest that some copies of the book claim that a Milanese doctor called Pietro Mora wrote them in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of the existence of a doctor named Pietro Mora in Milan during the time period. See Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50-60.

Most of all, what is important to note is the effect that the story about the involvement of the devil had on the magistrate. The mention of a demonic incantation earned Baruello a second chance to confess and receive the promised immunity

> And I would have gladly confessed the truth if I could, but I could not say the truth because I could feel the words being trapped in my throat, so that I could not say them, in such a way that even now my throat hurts, and it is all scratched[352]

His deposition on September 11th contained too many inconsistences, and when the next day the magistrate challenged its veracity, Baruello was so distraught that the magistrate called in a priest to perform an exorcism. The spiritual merit of the exorcism is not in discussion here, but what is evident is that Baruello believed, or wanted the magistrate to believe, that he had a valid reason for not having told the full truth. The claim of a demonic impediment made him an unwilling victim. The mention of his 'scratched throat' was the indication of his internal struggle. He wanted to cooperate and tell the truth, but it was physically prevented to do so by a supernatural power. The intervention of the exorcist freed his soul from the demonic pact, and in addition to a chance of spiritual redemption, it offered Baruello the excuse for not telling the truth and a chance to still be granted immunity despite the initial flawed confession:

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[352] "E volentieri l'haveria detta se avessi potuto, ma in verità non potevo, perchè mi sentivo chiudere le parole nella gola, che non potevo proferirle in modo che anche di presente mi brusa la gola, et l'ho anche tutta sgarbellata", *Processo*, 376.

> Up until now, he [Baruello] can be excused for not having said all that he knew by the prescribed deadline because of the impediment that he exposed, but now that all impediments have been removed, if he will withhold something, or if he will not tell the simple truth, how he is required to do, he will no longer have the chance to be excused, nor to complain if not of himself, but we exhort him that if he said something that was not true or if he left something out that he was required to say, to not waste more time, so that he could be granted the promised immunity[353]

The ordinance of the Senate stipulated that he would receive the immunity, if he confessed within six hours, and the six hours were up. Nevertheless, the magistrate had recognized the external impediment and excused him. On September 13th, according to judicial procedure he was tortured to validate his confession and the implication of the accomplices he had named.[354] On September 18th Stefano Baruello died of plague, in the room where he was held.

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[353] “E detto nuovamente che sin’hora per l’impedimento, che allegò si può escusare se nel termine prescritto non havesse detto tutto quello, che sapeva, ma hora, che sono levati gl’impedimenti, se tacerà qualche cosa, o non dirà la verità pura, e netta, come è obbligato, non haverà più occasione di scusarsi, né di lamentarsi, che di se stesso, e però s’essorta, che avesse detto qualche cosa, che non fosse, o tralasciato qualche cosa, che fosse obbligato a dire, a non lasciar più passar il tempo, perchè possa godere dell’impunità concessa” *Processo*, 379.

[354] According the juridical practice, the deposition of an accomplice was not sufficient evidence for a formal conviction and had to confirmed, or ‘purged’, under torture. It is only then that the confession of an accomplice acquires the full legal force as evidence.

The Rhetoric of Sin and Demonic Deceit (*L'Inganno del Demonio*)

One of the concepts reflected in the deposition of Baruello is a view of the world in which human being were subjects to the deceit of the devil. The idea was part of a broader understanding of the spiritual realm in which both good and evil – God and Satan- acted as opposing forces in the material world and influenced people in their everyday life, something we will encounter again later in this chapter. Related to this view was the notion that man was in a constant state of struggle between these two forces, and the post -Trent efforts made by the Catholic Church, and in particular by both Carlo and Federico Borromeo, focused on increasing popular awareness of the demonic schemes that were hidden in popular superstitious beliefs and practices.[355]

Both archbishops recognized that an expansion of basic Christian education among the masses was going to be an important instrument for the elimination of all superstition.[356] For this purpose, in 1564 the archbishop reorganized the Schools of Christian Doctrine (*Scuole di Dottrina Cristiana*) to expand their presence in the local parishes and reach a greater number of children. The schools were under ecclesiastical control and, in addition to teaching basic reading and writing skills, they taught the fundamental principles of the Catholic Doctrine. The purpose of the schools was to educate the children so that they would be equipped to understand what it meant to be a Christian. On Sundays, the parish bells rang to call children to the schools and school 'recruiters' scouted the streets around the parish to gather up boys and girls to bring to the local school. In addition to the work of the recruiters, parish priests emphasized the parents' responsibility for teaching children Christian precepts and making sure they attended Sunday Catechism. In their homilies, they pressured parents to bring children to the schools and "threatened them [parents] with eternal damnation, if they had been negligent with such an important thing."[357]

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[355] One of the most important documents that help us determine what beliefs and behaviors were considered superstitious is the *Index Superstitionum.* The document was compiled under the request of Carlo Borromeo in 1576 and it contains a list of popular superstitions observed by parish priests in the dioceses of Milan. A copy of the *Index* (which was not consulted) is conserved by the Achivio della Curia Vescovile in Milan. An edited copy can be found in O. Lurati, *Superstizioni lombarde* (e leventinesi) del tempo *di San Carlo Borromeo*, in "Vox Romanica", Bern, 27/2, 1968, pp. 229-249.

[356] For secondary work on the attitude of the Milanese Church towards superstition see Giovanni Romeo, *Inquisitori, esorcisti e streghe nella Italia della Controriforma,* (Firenze: Sansoni editore, 1990), especially the chapter titled "Lotta alle superstizioni", 201; Attilio Agnoletto, "Religione popolari, folklore e magia nei documenti Borromaici" in *San Carlo e il suo tempo: atti del convegno internazionale nel IV centenario della morte. (Milano 21-26 Maggio 1984)* (Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura) 2 voll. 1986, 867-888. Also see Wietse de Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul: Confession, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan* (Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2001)

The work of indoctrination that had began under Carlo Borromeo continued under his cousin the Archbishop Federico Borromeo, and records show that in May of 1630 the total number of boys and girls attending the schools had reached 34,749.[358] Children learned the basic elements of the Catholic doctrine from texts called *Interrogazione.* These texts were written in vernacular and were in the form of questions and answers that the students had to memorize. A central element in the teaching of Sunday schools was the understanding of the principle of Sacramental Penance and Confession for the remission of sins. Consequently, notions about sin and its different degree of gravity were included in much of the material memorized by the students. The gravest sins were called "mortal sins" and were distinguished from "venial sins", because the former were committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent of the sinner, while the latter were minor or accidental.[359] In the *Interrogazione* students learned about the seven mortal sins, which were often presented in contrast to the seven Christian virtues. The language employed in these educational writings emphasized the juxtaposition between God and the devil, and the necessity for the Christian to explicitly renounce the devil by rejecting a life of sin. Students had to repeat formulas (in the form of question and answer) in which they were reminded that at their baptisms their godfathers had pledged to renounce Satan and his deeds on their behalf, and that his evil deeds 'were incantations, witchcraft, any form of magic art, divinations, superstitions and other similar diabolical things.' [360]

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[357] *Dialogo delle Utilita' delle Scuole della Dottrina Christiana di Milano*

Ad instanza del Reverendo Priore e Fratelli della Compagnia. Alla quale da Prete Hieronimo d'Arabia la presente operetta vien dedicata.

In Milano M.D.L XXXVI. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, S.M **IV.17

[358] Before the plague of 1630, the population of Milan counted between 140,000 and 150,000 people. For the number of students enrolled in the Milanese Schools of Christian Doctrine during the like of Federico Borromeo see Francesco Rivolta, *Vita di Federico Borromeo*, (Milano:Gariboldi, 1656), 266

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[359] According the Catholic doctrine mortal sins is: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. The corresponding virtues are chastity, abstinence, liberality, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility.

[360] '*Vuol dire renonciare alle opere sue maligne, cue sono, incanti, strigarie, arte magica, divinazioni, superstizioni, & altre simili cose diaboliche'*. in *Le cose necessarie al Christiano preso da "Seconda Parte del Dialogo overo Interrogatorio molto Utile e necessario di ammaestrare I figlioli mascoli e femmine e altri che non sanno, nelle devozioni, E' buoni costumi del viver christiano.* – in Cremona MDXCV. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, S.C.R.I.66.

The spiritual struggle portrayed by the religious booklets taught in the Schools of Christian Doctrine saw the devil as the fierce opponent of every Christian, who became even more susceptible to his power when he willingly sinned

> Because of mortal sin (which causes the death of the soul) man becomes servant and slave of the great infernal devil, who, with divine permission, can hurt and cause all kinds of evils not necessarily only to his house, his belongings, or his body, but also and even more to his soul[361]

Thus, the consequence of mortal sin was the immediate separation of the soul from God, which in turn resulted in particular vulnerability of men to the power of Satan:

> When because of sin the soul is dead to God, there is nothing left for it than to be buried in hell, with the horrible mass of demons. Thus, at that point the sinful soul becomes prey of the devil and it is under his control[362]

Students were taught that when they sinned, not only they were deliberately offending God, but they also were exposed to the devil's schemes, whose ultimate goal was to deceive men so that, continuing in their sins and dying without the sacrament of Confession, would be eternally damned. This view of sin implied a dualist understanding of the spiritual realm. While God ultimately remained in control of the heavenly realm, the everyday choices that man made eventually made him more or less vulnerable to the influences of the devil, who acted in the material world.

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[361] "Per il peccato mortale (che causa la morte dell'anima), l'huome diventa servo e schiavo del gran diavolo infernale, che gli puo' fare e procurare ogni male, per divina permissione, non tanto alla casa sua, alla robba, al corpo, ma anco e molto piu' alla anima sua in dannazione." *Le cose necessarie al Christiano preso da "Seconda Parte del Dialogo overo Interrogatorio molto Utile e necessario di ammaestrare I figlioli mascoli e femmine e altri che non sanno, nelle devozioni, E' buoni costumi del viver christiano.* – in Cremona MDXCV. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, S.C.R. I. 66.
[362] 'L'anima morta a Dio per il peccato, non gli resta altro se non che sia sepolta nell'inferno nella horrrenda turba dei demonij, se Dio permettesse. Perche' allora l'anima peccatrice e' fatta preda del diavolo e e' in sua potesta' Biblioteca Ambrosiana S.C.R.I 66.

Overall, two things emerge from the *Interrogazione:* the continuous reference to the power of the demonic resulted in an view of the devil who did not simply represent a metaphysical symbol of evil, but was portrayed as a material force that interfered in human affairs. Based on this premise, the circulation of rumors about the devil appearing to many in Milan could be read as the product of this religious culture. Furthermore, I suggest that that the teachings about sin contributed to the formation of a particular vision of the relation between human free will and demonic influence. While man remained free to choose between sin and virtue, by falling into mortal sins, his spiritual condition changed, and he became more susceptible to the deceit (*inganno*) *of* the devil.

Looking back at the story told by Baruello, the notion of a cosmic struggle between human free will and demonic influence arguably shaped his testimony about his actions, if not the actions themselves. The *untori' s* motivation for the greasing was, first of all, greed. Thus, it can be argued that Baruello's story about the involvement of the devil in the affair of the unzioni responded well to the view of mortal sin that he could have learned in the School of Christian Doctrine. It was greed that had made some men more vulnerable to the temptation of the devil and, in Baruello's imagination, the human struggle between sin and virtue, was represented by the threatening figure of the priest that kept him from confessing the truth, and thus redeem his soul. Finally, the abominable *untori,* moved by their desire for profit had been deceived by the devil and, using their human craftiness, caused death and destruction to their own city. Other men had resisted and we have an account of their story in what was also being told.

The Devil of Porta Romana and other Demonic Encounters

The story told by Baruello about his encounter with the devil was not an isolated story. During the summer months, while the plague was ravishing the population of Milan and the Health Board magistrate was busy investigating the plot of the *untori*, the contemporary chronicler Giuseppe Ripamonti tells that the people of Milan believed that "demons had established their residence in the city."[363] Their belief was fueled, according to Ripamonti, by the circulation of at least two stories about what has become known, because of the location of his alleged residence was in the street called Porta Romana, as the *Devil of Porta Romana.*

A detailed account of the story is found in an unpublished document conserved at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana among Borromeo's annotations for his book on the Plague of 1630.[364] The story tells about a great demon called *Mammone* who had appeared in Milan to many reputable men. He had the semblance of a man in his fifties, not too thin, nor too fat, of average height, and with a long, squared beard. He was seen daily with a following of sixteen pages, all well dressed in green, gold, and precious stones. Six magnificent horses pulled his carriage, and every night he was seen going around the city, spending large amounts of money drinking and eating. He also visited the sick and healed those who wanted to be healed from the plague, and tortured to death those who did not want to be healed by him. He was hosted by a count whose palace was on the street of *Porta Romana,* and every night the count prepared forty beds for him. In exchange for his hospitality, *Mammone* gave the count a small flask with instruction to put a drop of its content every day in some wine, so that by drinking it, he would be protected from the plague and other poisons.

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[363] "Fu dunque in Milano comune la credenza, non isventata come assurda nemmeno dagli uomini di senno, tenere i demonii sicure stanze in essa città" Giuseppe Ripamonti, *La Peste a Milano del 1630,* 62-63.

[364] Biblioteca Ambrosiana, G 264 inf. Fogli 225-226.

The story said that, having heard of the presence of this man in the city, the *Capitano di Giustizia* had sent nineteen men to arrest *Mammone* on the charge of being a sorcerer (*stregone*) or necromantic (*negromante*), but when the officers were about to arrest him, he became invisible and escaped. Then, on August 16th, the astonished city authorities invited him to meet at the Duomo to discuss with them the truths he professed to know. Doctors and illustrious people conversed with him and were amazed by his knowledge of the Scriptures and by his claims of having seen the Holy Trinity. Nevertheless, people believed that, knowing that a large number of people would have come to the cathedral, *Mammone* had poisoned the church square with powders and caused the death of more than six thousand people.[365]

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[365] Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Y.178 bis Sup. Folio 84

Evidence of the widespread circulation of the story is offered by a German broadsheet that had on its frontispiece an image depicting the scene of the devil on a luxurious chariot traveling through the streets of Milan.[366]Federico Borromeo also mentions the diffusion of the rumor and the request he had received from a very ‘honorable’ person arrived from Germany to confirm the truthfulness of the story.[367]

Ripamonti reports a second episode of a demonic encounter and, despite the fact that in his account he does not identify by his name the person who had the experience, he claims that those who were reporting the story to him knew exactly who this man was and could “point him out.”[368] The story told of a man who, while on his way home, was approached by a carriage pulled by six horses and escorted by a great number of servants. On the carriage rode a man who, “looked like a prince, but with a red-hot forehead, prickly hair, flamboyant eyes, menacing lips, and with a physiognomy that he had never seen before.”[369] The coachman stopped and ordered him to get inside the carriage, and the man was taken inside a house. The house was described as being, just as its owner, splendid and terrifying at the same time. The man saw great treasures and boxes full of coins, and he was promised a share of those treasures, if he would take part to the *unzioni*. But when the man refused, he found himself back to the Duomo, where he had first encountered the devil.

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[366] Giuseppe Ripamoti claims to have personally seen fragments of the German broadsheet with a drawing of a devil on a high coach with the inscription that said that it was the devil that was deceiving the Milanese people. *La Peste di Milano del 1630,* (Milano: Arnoldo Forni Editore, 2003),65. A copy of the broadsheet was preserved at the Biblioteca Trivulziana in Milan but was unfortunately lost during the Second World War bombings. According to the research of Paccagnini e Farinelli, only a few copies of the broadsheet still exist: one copy is in Madrid, one in Modena, and one in the public library of La Spezia (Farinelli e Paccagnini, *Processo agli Untori*, p131).

[367] “Essendo poco fa venuta dalla Germania una persona onorata e trattando di altre cose mi venne a dire che in certe parti delle Germania s’era sparsa una novella molto strana e spiacevole ad udirsi e che qui pure ne aveva sentito parlare ma non già da persone di molto credito e pero da noi come Arcivescovo di questa città disse di voler sapere se fosse vera.” Biblioteca Ambrosiana, G 264 Inf. Folio 224.

[368] “Molti osavano indicare il quartiere dove erano situate quelle case, nominandone perfino i proprietarii. Finalmente citavasi a nome, e s’indicava a ditto un tale che faceva il seguente racconto”, Ripamonti, 64.

[369] “un uomo con aspetto da principe, ma con fronte infocata, occhio fiammeggiante, irti capegli, labbro minaccioso, e con una fisionomia che mai egli non aveva veduta l’eguale.”, Ripamonti, 64.

In these two stories, the devil is described in details and he interacts with people in very personal ways. He engages in conversations, he has a following of servants and pages and, as he flaunts his riches, he seems to represent the inherent lure of luxury. Nevertheless, these stories of demonic encounters do not present the elements recognized by contemporary demonological theories as typical of witchcraft. There was no adoration of the devil, no sexual intercourse, and no flying to the Sabbat or any similar meeting. Even when there is a mention of a 'pact' with the devil, the idea suggested by the stories is that of a specific agreement on the part of the person to spread the grease in exchange for money, rather than an explicit abjuration of the Christian faith, typical of witchcraft. In the common people imaginary, the devil appeared as a deceiver, both majestic and terrifying and trying to corrupt those who easily fell pray of the lure of riches.

The common element in the stories about the encounter with the devil is the fact that the characters are lured by the devil with the promise of riches. But, did they really have a choice? In the more detailed story of the devil of Porta Romana, what we learn is that *Mammone* was going around the city, healing from the plague those who wanted to be healed by him, and torturing those who did not want to.

Although in this story there is no specific mention of the devil dispensing the ointment, and we don’t have many details about the terms of the healing, the notion of human choice is again central to the interaction between *Mammone* and the people. Overall, the stories circulating about the appearances of demons that took on human form tell important clues about the imagination of the Milanese. The rhetoric of the spiritual battle between God and the devil presented by the Schools of Christian Doctrine had acquired very vivid connotations in the common imagery, and the devil was recognized as a tangible being operating in the city and interacting with its citizens. Most importantly, he was doing exactly what he was expected: deceiving men with the ultimate purpose of destroying their body and souls.[370]

Conclusions

Historians estimate that the plague outbreak of 1630 in Milan caused the death of approximately 86,000 people, which corresponded to more than half of the population. Plague outbreaks had traditionally been understood as the manifestation of the wrath of God caused by the sins of people, and the ultimate instrument for redemption. Nevertheless, the contagion of 1630 presented a new problem of interpretation for contemporaries who were convinced that *untori* were responsible for having spread plague via poisonous ointments. The concoction of the ointment was done following recipes that circulated among a network of soldiers and plague workers, and the motive for their actions was the desire to make a profit. But how justify such a heinous and indiscriminate crime against the people? Federico Borrromeo had no doubts. The *untori* had fallen pray of the deceit of the devil, like alchemists who manipulated nature with the hope of creating treasures. The language he used to describe their endeavor referred to demonic interference, but not in the same terms as with witchcraft. For Borromeo, the phenomenon of the *unzioni* was the demonstration of the power of the devil to currupt men through the promise of riches, and the concoction of the ointment was the demonstration of the dangers posed by the circulation of natural magic recipes among the unlearned masses, who were easily deceived. Nevertheless, the *untori'* s alleged confabulation with the devil was not understood as an intentional and formal alliance, but rather the consequential result of their greed. They had been morally corrupted by the devil, but did not abjure their faith. In fact, they were never charged, nor suspected of apostasy, and their trial was never moved under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition.

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[370] A contemporary chronicler commented on the rumors that said that some of the *untori* had suddenly died in jail before they could confess their misdeeds saying that it was the work of the devil, who was taking away their last chance for penance to make sure they would end up in hell.

On the other hand, the common people (*volgo)* experienced the phenomenon of the *unzioni* in different terms. They imagined the struggle between good and evil in much more realistic terms, and stories circulated that claimed that great demons lived in the city and interacted with its citizens. The *untori* were material agents of the devil, who was not imagined as an ethereal spiritual force, but as a physical being, whose appearance was both splendid and terrifying. I argued that this view had been influenced by the way the Schools of Christian Doctrine portrayed the struggle of each man against the devil. The language of the religious literature used in the Sunday schools emphasized the necessity of resisting the devil's schemes, and the constant repetition of formulas in which the devil was described as the great deceiver trying to lure people into sin, produced a very vivid picture in the collective imagination From the *Pantalone* allegedly met by Baruello, symbol of money and greed, to the flaunting of his treasures of Devil of Porta Romana, the devil was described as the embodiment of the sinful life that the Milanese youth was taught to resist every Sunday for the previous sixty years.

Epilogue

The Spiritual Intervention: Sacraments, Rituals, and the Miraculous Healing Oil of Santa Maria delle Grazie.

In opposition to the demonic forces that were determined to destroy the people of Milan through deceit and temptation stood the Church, its sacraments, rituals, and saint patrons. From a general point of view, the intervention of the Church during plague outbreaks ensued from the understanding of the plague as a manifestation of God's wrath and involved a series of measures apt to appease God's anger and restore the health of the city. In 1630 Milan, the rhetoric of the spiritual restoration of the community acquired a particular significance as it was employed in direct opposition to the chaos and death caused by the *untori.*

Since the XIV century, processions during plague outbreaks were an expression of public penance. They held particular significance for the people of Milan, who believed that the Archbishop Carlo Borromeo had freed the city from plague in 1576 when he carried a cross with the Holy Nail in a procession barefoot across the city, as an act of atonement for all the sins of the city. Nevertheless, processions were only one of the many forms of penance encouraged by the Church in times of plague. On July 2, 1630, a decree granted full or partial indulgences to those who "promptly engaged in works of charity, prayer, fasting, and alms giving."[371] Archbishop Borromeo called the Milanese people to three days of fasting, to demonstrate their contrition by visiting specific churches barefoot, and to give alms to be used by the Church to help the poor and the sick. In addition, people were called to attend Mass and take Communion on the second Sunday of July. Full remission of sins was granted to those who, during the same Sunday, provided any form of material or spiritual help to those sick or suspected of being sick with plague.

The decree contains very detailed guidelines regarding the number of years of indulgence granted depending on the individual commitment to prayer, fasting, and participation to the sacraments. In all cases, there were two conditions to the granting of the indulgences: a spiritual one and a material one. The spiritual requirement urged the community to intensify its religious fervor with prayers and fasts. The material condition instructed people to perform acts of charity in the form monetary donations and physical care of the poor and the plague-stricken. Both the spiritual and the material requirements shared a particular communal character: while private prayer was allowed for those who were quarantined, the granting of indulgences required the participation to communal prayers in the different churches (either the participation to the night prayer or the morning prayer), and the needs of the community had to be the object of the prayer. The faithful were required to pray for the "*appestati*" and those suspected of being infected. The effort of the Church aimed at restoring the spiritual and physical health of the community, through the community. The work *untori,* condemned as enemies of the *patria,* had caused chaos and disorder in their society, and the church called everyone else to spiritually counteract.

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[371] Indulgenze al tempo del contagio. 2 Luglio 1630. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Q 140 sup.

The theme of spiritual struggle between good and evil, agents of God and agent of the devil is represented in a very symbolic way on one of the very few anonymous prints that have survived in the archives.[372] The drawing can be divided in three sections, and each section holds a particular significance, highlighted by an inscription. The picture offers a view in perspective of a street in Milan during the plague of 1630. In the lower part of the picture we notice lifeless bodies lying in the street. Death, desperation, and confusion seem to pervade the people depicted in this section of the picture. Some are kneeling down to pray, others have their arms stretched out, and others are simply walking by. They all look in different directions, and there is no apparent unity. The inscription immediately below the scene states, “Despite the plague, under these grave blows, you are still asleep, here is disdain that removes its veil, so that you can learn to fear divine ire.”

At the center of the picture, we find the depiction of the execution of the *untori*. A man is tied to the wheel of torture, one is hanging upside-down over a fire, and another is laying down with an amputated hand. A priest is holding a cross over them, and the inscription says “Guglielmo Piazza and Gio. Giacomo Mora, who have infected the city with a pestiferous ointment.” Immediately above this scene, the tone of the picture seems to change. The confusion that characterized the lower part of the picture has vanished. People are walking in the same direction towards the altar that is placed at the vanishing point. The community is coming together; people are all focused on the altar, some are kneeling and praying, others are walking, but there are no lifeless bodies in the street. Devotion and order have replaced desperation and confusion that characterizes the scene at the bottom of the print.

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[372] The print is preserved at the Raccolta Civica Bertarelli in Milan.

Finally, at the top of the picture we find Mary, standing in a cloud above the altar and surrounded by Saints and the Archbishop Carlo Borromeo. She is watching over the faithful that are coming to the altar, where her miraculous oil is distributed. The inscription reads, “Mary of the Graces diffuses the merciful and healing oil to the faithful devotees that offer her their prayer and pious vows.” The scene refers to the oil of a lamp that was found in the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie.[373]The healing power of the oil was so renowned that it attracted people to the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie from other cities, and in this print Mary lowers the lamp from Heaven as a gift to the people of Milan.

The print is a remarkable representation of how the *unzioni* were seen as part of the eternal struggle between good and evil. The scene with the execution of the untori sits at the center of the drawing and marks the divide between chaos and order. The health of the community was restored by an act of divine mercy, but the community participated in the triumph of good over evil by coming together in communal prayer and by persecuting the *untori*. While the healing oil of Santa Maria delle Grazie contrasted the venomous ointment, the execution of the *untori* by secular authorities restored unity and moral order.

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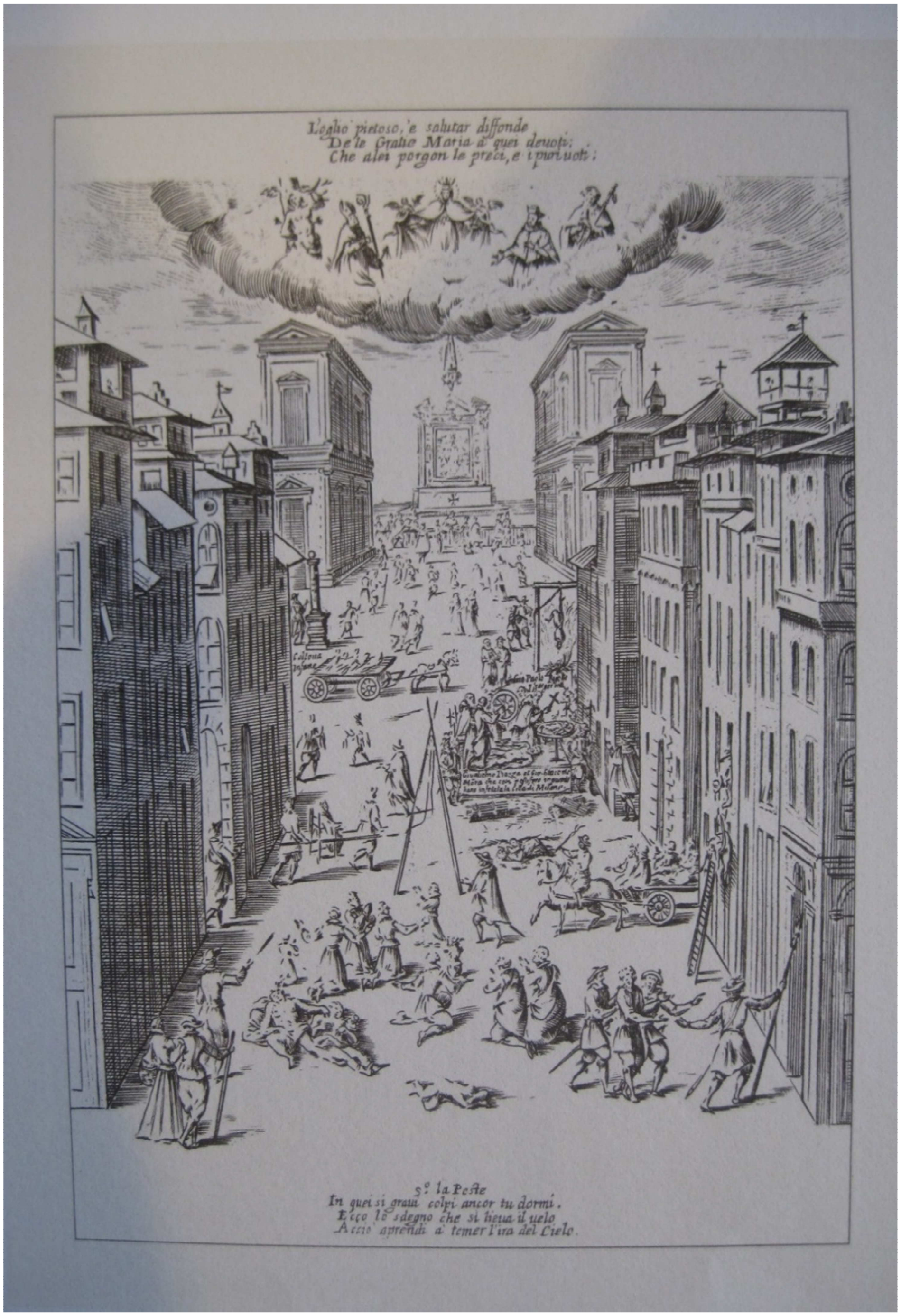
[373] Santa Maria delle Grazie was a part of a Dominican convent and seat of the Roman Inquisition since 1558.

In conclusion, the large question at the heart of my research regards the influence of the new medical theories about plague and contagion on the 'uneducated' lower classes. Did those new ideas matter for the common people who struggled to survive famine and plague? The image that emerges from the study of the phenomenon of the *unzioni* suggests that they mattered, but they mattered in very practical ways. Those ideas were part of a very complex system of belief that helped people make sense of epidemics in a context characterized by extreme economic challenges. Fracastoro's theories about a 'seed of plague' that could be encapsulated in a substance acting as a carrier agent caused controversy and excitement in the intellectual community. At the same time, the study of the phenomenon of the *unzioni* leads to the hypothesis that that those notions reached the lower classes and became the foundation of the belief that, through a simple operation in the natural world, even the 'uneducated' people could gain control over the diffusion of plague.

This study has also brought to the surface a significant element regarding the more general attitude of the Milanese people towards the manipulation of the natural world. The evidence we examined suggests that both the elite and the lower classes shared a sentiment of mistrust and anxiety regarding the experimentation with what they considered the 'occult powers of nature', showing that some aspects of the interaction between elite and popular culture was considered a dangerous experience. The anonymous author of the print representing a scene from the plague of 1630 seems to remind his contemporaries that pushing the boundaries of knowledge and experimentation resulted in destruction and chaos. His interpretation of the events brings the viewer back to the centrality of the Milanese Church and its ministers in restoring harmony in a city that could easily fall prey of the deceit of the devil. My hypothesis is that, in spite of the progress of empirical observation and the consequent understanding of the role of human agency in the diffusion of plague, the Milanese people viewed plague as a natural force that needed to be controlled only by God. Thus, it is possible that the work of the *untori* was interpreted by contemporaries as the manifestation of the dangers posed by the exploration and experimentation with the powers of nature.

Appendix 1.


L'oglio pietoso, e salutar diffonde
De le Gratie Maria à quei deuoti;
Che alei porgon le preci, e i pii uoti;
5° la Peste
In quei si graui colpi ancor tu dormi.
Ecco lo sdegno che si lieua il uelo
Acciò aprendi à temer l'ira del Cielo.

Anonymous author, *Scebe della Peste dek 1630 a Milano,* acquaforte (Milano Bertarelli)

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