

Franco Mormando and Thomas W. Worcester, eds. *Piety and Plague: From Byzantium to the Baroque*.

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Throughout history, religious beliefs have been a primary way of understanding epidemic disease. For anthropologists, the characteristics of a religion are most clearly revealed by how it explains misfortune and sickness and by the steps recommended to avert these. Christians interpreted plague as corrective punishment of sinful humanity by a wrathful God. This volume is a welcome addition to a field often dominated by demographic and epidemiological studies. Across a millennium of European history, nine essays explore Christian responses to plague in the visual arts, in devotional practices, in recourse to healers, and in a plethora of texts. The volume's strengths are its interdisciplinarity and breadth. Yet the connecting threads are stretched thin across gulfs of time and place, and from the diversity of contributions it is difficult to retrieve overall themes. Without an introduction to draw out continuities and changes over the *longue durée*, the collection succeeds predominately in its parts, but is nevertheless likely to interest scholars from a variety of disciplines and periods.

Two case studies investigate specific epidemics, in sixth-century Byzantium and sixteenth-century Nuremberg. The Justinianic plague initiated the first European-wide bubonic plague pandemic, but has received less attention than the infamous Black Death. Unfortunately, Anthony Kaldellis's analysis is marred by its dismissive attitude to Christian explanations, castigated as "pietistic clichés," "non-scientific," "incoherent," and superstitious. Kaldellis here continues his contentious rereading of Byzantine authors according to the tenets of political philosopher Leo Strauss, assuming a fundamental divide between rationalist classicizing philosophy and irrational Christian faith. Yet, as others have observed, these are our constructs, not theirs, and cannot be supported by the sources. Sixth-century Byzantines consulted doctors trained in Greco-Roman medicine without perjuring themselves as Christians, since corruption of the air, identified by Hippocratic medicine as immediate cause, was understood as a local instance of overarching divine causality. Similarly, a Hellenizing, philosophically-minded writer like Procopius might model his account on Thucydides' celebrated description of the Athenian plague, but this does not mean he can be recast as a crypto-Christian who rejected orthodox belief for Neoplatonic philosophy, and his own statements about God as the ultimate source of the disaster emphatically contradict such a reading.

In an elegant and exemplary essay, Ronald Rittgers investigates how the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism affected reactions to plague in Renaissance Nuremberg. As he shows, causal explanations — divine anger at human sin — remained the same. However, Protestant dismantling of the cult of the saints and the Virgin Mary removed at a stroke all those heavenly helpers previously relied upon as humanity's surest advocates before a wrathful deity. While most scholars have discerned only negative effects — increased anxiety, gloom, stoicism,

self-reliance, moralizing — Rittgers convincingly stresses the spiritual comfort provided by Reformation doctrines, particularly a greater trust in God and his love for humanity. William Eamon uncovers the opportunities and tensions of the sixteenth-century medical marketplace through the 1567 trial of an itinerant Dominican who sold anti-syphillitic medicines in Venice, and who was denounced as a Lutheran by a Paduan physician with whom he had had extensive business dealings. Eamon's study is, however, somewhat tangential to the book's focus, since the friar was consulted for diseases experienced individually and sporadically, differing from the high morbidity and collective urban affliction of plague. Many of the authors refer to plague tracts, enduringly popular self-help manuals offering explanation of causes and hope of preservation and cure through recommended hygienic regimes. Thomas Worcester's exposition of a 1628 tract by French Jesuit Etienne Binet, elucidates the paradoxical comfort that Christian consolatory writers wrested from the disease. To the question "whether the plague brings more ill than good," Binet answers a resounding yes: plague is a form of preaching that calls the soul to repentance, a "happy necessity" that forces sinners to reform.

Pamela Berger discusses manuscript illustrations of the plague of the Philistines, interesting visualizations of epidemic disease before the Black Death. However, her argument that they articulate medieval and biblical understanding of that disease as rat-borne bubonic plague is unpersuasive. Elina Gertsman offers an excellent analysis of medieval macabre imagery that bracingly concludes it is not caused by the plague. Sheila Barker contends that Sebastian's cult as a plague protector originated only after 1348, inspired by Jacobus de Voragine's retelling of Sebastian's role in lifting plague from Rome in 680, in his bestselling hagiographic collection the *Golden Legend*, composed around 1260. This suggestion deserves further debate, although for this reviewer it remains unconvincing, since it ignores the fundamental question of why Sebastian should be associated with plague, either by Jacobus or by his eighth-century source. Unlike Barker, I think it impossible to avoid the relevance of biblical arrow symbolism as divine weapons of sudden death and disease in Sebastian's imagery and cult — the hedgehog saint, he was first martyred by arrows before being miraculously resurrected and martyred anew — along with Christian ideas of martyrdom as the most perfect imitation of Christ (an argument first propounded in this journal, in an article uncited by Barker: see my "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy" in *RQ*, 47, no. 3 [1994]: 485–532). Two final essays investigate a new genre of plague picture created by Poussin in the 1630s with *The Plague at Ashod*: grandiose history paintings of famous biblical and historical epidemics. Elizabeth Hipp demonstrates how far the picture departs from existing pictorial and exegetical conventions, and skilfully unpacks the layers of meaning and intended effect. Convincing too is her reconstruction of the circumstances of the work's creation, commissioned by or intended for a member of the Roman health board. A later example by Michael Sweerts has eluded specific identification. Franco Mormando's solution, a fictitious epidemic during the reign of Julian the Apostate, concocted by Christian writers to demonstrate divine displeasure at the emperor's efforts to revive paganism, does not

entirely convince, but has the merit of posing problems and stimulating further debate.

In sum, the collection offers challenging readings of well known and less familiar plagues and pictures, and deservedly focuses attention on the issue of how Christian beliefs shaped responses to epidemic disease.

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