

Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook. *The Plague Files: Crisis Management in Sixteenth-Century Seville*.

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. xi + 296 pp. \$40. ISBN: 978-0-8071-3404-7.

This absorbing narrative of four continuously calamitous years in late sixteenth-century Seville is based on a rich array of archival documents. But the authors are reluctant to burden delectable stories with their historians' voice, and so those of us who know little of plague in Spain must find our own way. The documents available are not as clear and straightforward in their implications as the authors seem to assume from an administrative microhistory. Analyzing plague proper is not the study's goal, but what does it show us about "crisis management"? I will set that purpose in a review written so long after the book's publication.

Cook and Cook organize their book in thirty-four short chapters, none of which exceeds fifteen pages of text. Titles of chapters are sometimes drawn from wording in the documents, for example, "Looking Death in the Eye," "Covered with Blackish Spots," "Jumping over the Wall." Others signal expected moments in any early modern plague narration: "Denying the Plague," "Circumventing the Cordon Sanitaire." Some chapter titles further alert us to Spanish political and social contexts, as "Averting a Morisco Crisis," "Plague in Lisbon," "Bulls and Jousting," and "Tussle with the Inquisition." Harnessing a strict chronological rearrangement of the sources, short chapters capture the staccato but strangely chronic pace of events. An array of misfortunes between 1579 and 1583 include crop destruction by locusts, famine, an influenza pandemic, King Philip II's invasion of Portugal, plague in the city and countryside, and periodic medical advice about whether plague was waxing, waning, or even present. The juxtaposition of the chosen narrative structure and the very nature of the evidence that these files disclose lend a sense of embattled local officials unable to settle on any steady course of action or overarching goals, thus forced to confront each day's challenges on their particulars. This is crisis management without a bureaucracy to implement procedures on the basis of routine expectations and job descriptions, by a group of men apparently not prompted to consult past experience and practice in any studied way. Even physicians, periodically providing separate opinions and assessments to the man in charge, do not appear to strive for consensus recommendations.

Cook and Cook sidestep most opportunities to critique the sources proper or compare this particular plague interval to other similar stories; for example, Giulia Calvi's classic *Histories of a Plague Year* might have been useful. But readers will find here a wonderful bricolage of Spanish urban and rural life, and at its core an interesting hero. Don Fernando de Torres y Portugal, known as the Count of Villar, accepted an *asiente*, or residential royal governorship, to a critically important port region. Posted to Seville at the beginning of an almost unending series of disasters and misfortunes, the assignment nearly bankrupted Don Fernando. As pathetically as the surgeons or petty officials he had dispatched to plague tasks, though far more eloquently, the count had to defend his own service at the end of his three-year posting and beg some reimbursement. The plague files amply vindicate Villar's claim to steadfast job dedication, the expenditure of large sums of his family's resources, the compromise of his own health, and the contemporary loss of members of his family to other demands of the monarch. Lingered in an unrecompensed status for over a year, he was finally provided what men of his station would likely consider a proper next post, the viceroyalty of Peru. After a miserable passage to the lucrative colony, he arrived to face a great earthquake and a continent-wide series of smallpox, measles, and typhus epidemics.

The Count of Villar's style in both assignments may or may not have been typical of expected behavior of Spanish aristocracy beholden to the crown, for the authors do not analyze such matters, but what had succeeded for him in Seville was not appreciated in Peru. He came home broken and sickly, to be recognized postmortem mostly with a deluxe funeral procession. Were we to expect this outcome for a man who micromanaged every aspect of plague in Seville and its hinterlands, detailing medical inspectors to affirm the claims of merchants that their wares were safe to sell, among other tiny tasks of daily oversight? What did he actually protect in his tireless attention to crisis minutiae? How many died in Seville, and were those costs long-lasting? Was the count sabotaged or hoodwinked by local councilmen, allowed to act as an altruistic but unavoidable agent of the crown? By the sixteenth century plague files everywhere begin to shine light on underlying social relations and structures once inaccessible in shadow. This is a wonderfully engaging book, but I wanted slightly more context in order to understand what is now suddenly illuminated.

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