

Alexandra Parma Cook, Noble David Cook. *The Plague Files: Crisis Management in Sixteenth-Century Seville*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. x + 296 pp. Illustrations \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-3404-7.



Reviewed by Kristy Wilson Bowers

Published on H-Urban (November, 2009)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook provide a welcome contribution to both urban studies and plague studies. Following up their previous collaborations, including *Good Faith and Truthful Ignorance: A Case of Transatlantic Bigamy* (1991), the authors turn their attention to the city of Seville. As an vital (and growing) urban center in the sixteenth century, Seville has long received attention from early modern historians. In this respect, the Cook and Cook study nicely complements the earlier work of Ruth Pike and Mary Elizabeth Perry in examining the city itself and what life was like for those living there.[1] Like these works, the Cook and Cook book serves to illuminate a particular aspect of life in sixteenth-century Seville, in this case how officials took on the task of keeping the city running as smoothly and securely as possible despite numerous "crises" or events over which they had no real control. Perhaps of greater importance is the authors' contribution of an English-language study of plague in Spain. Aside from James Amelang's translation of a diary from seventeenth-century

Barcelona, this is the only English source available specifically for Spain.[2] While Spanish scholars have produced a number of important urban studies focused on plague epidemics and their repercussions, none are offering the particular focus or detail given here.[3] The only other work covering plague in Seville, for example, Juan Carmona García's *La peste en Sevilla* (2004), offers much less detail than the Cook and Cook study. In roughly the same number of pages that Cook and Cook take to describe events over the course of four years, Carmona García surveys three hundred years.

The study under review both documents efforts to endure constant crises, particularly from the perspective of officials who sought to maintain control, and also provides a unique look at one of the enduring (or at least most prevalent) crises of the early modern era, that of plague epidemics. The authors offer an in-depth look at the functioning of Seville's city government through one brief period of near-continual crisis, 1579 to 1582. They chose this time frame both for its cor-

respondence with the leadership of a single governor, Don Fernando de Torres y Portugal, better known by his title, Count of Villar, and for the wealth of available documentation for it. A short list of the crises endured during these years would include famine, the royally mandated quartering and care of some four hundred German soldiers, the threat of internal revolt by Moriscos (Muslim converts to Christianity), swarms of locusts that decimated crops, and epidemics of both influenza and plague. In their own words, the issue authors seek to examine is: “how did city officials in a large early modern urban complex deal with crises that arose—not as a single epidemic or natural disaster, but rather in a series of waves, none great enough to break down the system but several combined, sufficient to challenge the social and economic order?” (p. 12).

Rather than specifically answer this question themselves, the authors choose to let the documents speak, using them to structure a chronological narrative of events and the efforts of city officials to respond to those events. Divided into thirty-four short chapters plus an introduction and epilogue, this study provides essentially a translation and summary of a large number of the relevant documents. Just as the extant documents do not provide a continual or cohesive narrative, so the Cooks have used their numerous chapter divisions to move the reader through events, each new chapter shifting the reader’s attention in a reflection of the many discontinuities that exist within the documents.

The title of the book is an apt one, for while the first half of the work explains several different crises between 1579 and 1581, the second half focuses entirely upon the plague epidemic of 1582. There is good reason for this, as Seville’s municipal archive holds the papers of the city’s plague commission of that year in two vast files, approximately three hundred folios each. On a minor note, these records, bound into volumes in the nineteenth century, are foliated. Given the

wealth of information contained in them—stories, accounts, and myriad details of life—future researchers could have benefited from the use of this pagination by the authors. Nonetheless, the authors make good use of the stories contained within these records, and have supplemented them with additional records both from the municipal archive and from the city’s notarial archive. In addition, the authors tracked down letters from the Count of Villar to the king, as well as his official report on his tenure as governor, in the Biblioteca Nacional and the British Library. These documents nicely supplement the narrative given by the authors, though not entirely seamlessly. The authors introduce the Count of Villar in the introduction, giving background information about him. They then return to him in the epilogue, discussing his letters and memoir. But he appears rarely (other than occasionally in name) in the majority of the book, as his was a position of oversight rather than action. As should be, it is the actors—the councilors, doctors, and many residents of the city—who take center stage in the narrative.

While the underlying thesis is one of government officials working diligently to maintain order and control through these constant challenges, the book is descriptive rather than analytical—it presents essentially a view of life in the late sixteenth-century city. This approach successfully conveys to readers the wonderful complexity of city government in the early modern era and the interconnectedness of a variety of urban issues, including ensuring sufficient provisions, monitoring sanitation, and the maintenance of law and order. It also gives a clear picture of the endless tasks taken on by the city council, as well as a sense of the richness of information available through these documents. At the same time, though, the lack of analysis does leave unanswered questions. Because the records themselves are somewhat discontinuous, numerous events are partially depicted then left unresolved. For example, the second chapter presents the debates

over housing and care for sick German soldiers that the king's agent demanded. The authors faithfully recount the various debates of the councilmen regarding what to do with these soldiers over the course of several days at the end of May and beginning of June 1580. The chapter ends, though, with councilmen agreeing to present a proposal to the Count of Villar, but not his response. Instead, the following chapter moves onto another issue, that of a feared Morisco revolt.

In addition, while the overall structure of city government is nicely explained in the introduction, there is little explanatory material through the book to offer analysis of the events depicted. Some debates or discussions among city councilmen are followed in detail, while in other cases the actions of the men are presented without any clear sense of why officials took one set of actions rather than another. In recounting how municipal officials dealt with the plague epidemic, for example, the authors recount numerous instances of city councilmen sent to gather information about suspected illnesses in outlying towns, who do so quickly and efficiently. Juan de Perea Durán and Diego de Toledo, for example, travel to the town of Constantina in January 1582. "The commissioners arrived in Constantina 'at three in the afternoon,' on Thursday, 18 January 1582" (p. 133). Yet later, when another councilman, Rodrigo Sánchez de Soria, travels to the town of Cazalla de la Sierra, "before entering the town itself, the jurado cautiously conducted 'a field inquiry'" (p. 159). Subsequently, he realized "he needed to investigate further. Rather than flee, the brave jurado and his team promptly entered the town to collect more evidence" (p. 160). The authors offer no explanation here either of why this councilman may have chosen this unusually "cautious" approach, or why he (and not others) should be considered "brave" in this instance.

Despite the discontinuities, Cook and Cook have done an excellent job of taking a rich source of information and providing an interesting and

vivid view of life in a major metropolis. It is clear that city leaders were well accustomed to their routines of administration, which stood them well during times of crisis. Thus, while officials may have been prompted by crises to keep additional or extraordinary records, their remarkable efforts to maintain the social and economic routines of the city remained intact at all times. The book brings to light many facets of urban life in the sixteenth century, including the interactions of a wide variety of people within the city with their governing body. It should prove useful for scholars in several fields, including urban history and public health history, and interesting for many others as well.

Notes

[1]. Ruth Pike, *Aristocrats and Traders: Sevillian Society in the Sixteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Crime and Society in Early Modern Seville* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1980), and *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[2]. James Amelang, ed. and trans., *A Journal of the Plague Year: The Diary of the Barcelona Tanner Miguel Parets (1651)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[3]. José Luis Betrán, *La peste en la Barcelona de los Austrias* (Lleida: Milenio, 1996); José Manuel Fernández Álvarez, *Peste y supervivencia en Oviedo (1598-1599)* (Oviedo: KRK Ediciones, 2003); Juan Ballesteros Rodríguez, *La peste en Córdoba* (Córdoba: Diputación Provincial, 1982).

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Citation: Kristy Wilson Bowers. Review of Cook, Alexandra Parma; Cook, Noble David. *The Plague Files: Crisis Management in Sixteenth-Century Seville*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

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