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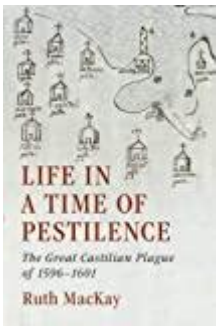
Ruth MacKay. *Life in a Time of Pestilence: The Great Castilian Plague of 1596-1601.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 297 pp. $39.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-49820-3.



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Epidemics and other disasters are usually studied for their ability to encapsulate social order by highlighting what happens when it is thrown into chaos. Instead of focusing on the catastrophe wrought upon early modern Castilians, Ruth MacKay's *Life in a Time of Pestilence* takes an alternative approach by documenting how people endured: “They kept on living. They did not lose their collective minds” (p. 3).

Plague arrived to Castile in 1596 on a merchant ship from Dunkirk and/or Calais. Half a million people would die as it spread throughout the region over the next few years. Because “each choice—to obey, cooperate, flee, protest, succor—embodies both immediate circumstances and deep-seated customs and beliefs that slice vertically and horizontally,” MacKay argues that there is no single beginning to this story (p. 4). Thus she structures her narrative around physical locations where these choices were made, with chapters titled “Palace,” “Road,” “Wall,” “Market,” “Street,” “Town Hall,” and “Sickbed.” It is a fantastic method to make sense of a great number of stories, allowing her to clearly show how both individuals and social institutions responded to the crisis.

MacKay relies on city council minutes, correspondence, accounts, and ledgers as primary sources, and they serve well to demonstrate the choices made in search of preservation. Despite her perception that parish records would not be able to support demographic conclusions and that printed treatises offer only insular scholarly debates, these sources would have done much to show the belief systems behind these choices. This nominal criticism, coming from another plague scholar who herself studies those things aside, this is a well-researched, engaging, and enlightening book.

Scholars of the early modern period will find MacKay's nuanced handling of the dynamics between state and regional structures of authority during a period of profound instability particularly useful. But there is much here of interest to scholars throughout the humanities. Early modern people were indeed quite modern. At the center of

each chapter rests an issue familiar to the twenty-first century: establishing the truth amid competing motives. The first chapter on the palace's hesitancy to acknowledge plague in the face of uncertain symptoms and likely economic devastation is mirrored across markets, town halls, and households.

Once acknowledged by authorities, plague demanded difficult choices. The palace's decision not to burn the village of Pasajes to the ground might have saved property, but it allowed plague to continue its relentless spread. The choice of walled towns to close their gates was likewise a double-edged sword. Preventative quarantine might have offered long-term protection from plague, but its short-term consequences could be severe in ceasing trade. Farmers and other rural producers of goods depended on town markets for their livelihoods as much as people within the walls did for their sustenance. Guards' choices to allow traders through city gates necessitated high levels of trust in their claims of good health. Entirely closing the gates to trade resulted not only in price inflation but also sometimes in famine. The palace, town, and household did not avoid making these types of choices daily according to their ability to pay certain consequences now or potential consequences later.

Higher taxes exacerbated most of these problems. Outbreaks forced towns to hire guards to man the walls and gates, hire physicians on salary to open public hospitals, and provide poor relief for greater numbers of families. This meant authorities raised tax rates on individuals at the same time severe restrictions were being placed on economic activity. MacKay's finding that authorities or individuals resorted to placing blame and attacking scapegoats, in the middle of such widespread economic devastation, is unsurprising.

Technology increasingly allows humans and their societies to find distance from nature. But as a force of nature from which neither are ever completely immune, “plagues” offer valuable lessons for environmental studies scholars, most particularly on the responsibility of authorities to take action when it is hard, unpopular, and expensive. This is a timely lesson we are being forced to reconsider not only in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic but also as we confront the threat of climate change.

Like climate change, plague was uncertain in the timing, distribution, and severity of its myriad potential effects. No one wants to take action in such uncertainty. Those who do advocate placing restrictions on our ways of life receive no awards for standing against a seemingly invisible enemy.

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