

Food Provision During the 1629 Plague – A Model of Organisation

I have recently read the review by Erin Maglaque on John Henderson's new book, *Florence Under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City*. It is interesting to see the parallels of when plague came to Italy in 1629 and our current COVID-19 pandemic. A few months after the plague arrived there were already over 2000 dead Florentines and although there was no understanding of the disease or how it was spread, a general quarantine was deemed the only measure to stop it. In January 1631, the Sanità (health department) ordered its citizens to be locked in their homes for forty days and social gatherings were banned, including all ball games and gambling dens, taverns and schools were closed. After an initial flurry of bell ringing and fervent praying in the streets all church services were also suspended. What is really interesting is the Florentine authorities had the good sense to provide for their citizens and as a result they got through it with far less deaths than other Italian cities. Here is an extract of the review describing the food provisions during the plague. *The Sanità arranged the delivery of food, wine and firewood to the homes of the quarantined (30,452 of them). Each quarantined person received a daily allowance of two loaves of bread and half a boccale (around a pint) of wine. On Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays, they were given meat. On Tuesdays, they got a sausage seasoned with pepper, fennel and rosemary. On Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, rice and cheese were delivered; on Friday, a salad of sweet and bitter herbs. The Sanità spent an enormous amount of money on food because they thought that the diet of the poor made them especially vulnerable to infection, but not everyone thought it was a good idea. Rondinelli recorded that some elite Florentines*

worried that quarantine 'would give [the poor] the opportunity to be lazy and lose the desire to work, having for forty days been provided abundantly for all their needs'. We may now have a good understanding of infectious agents, hygiene and medicine but attitudes to the working poor haven't changed that much in 400 hundred years.