

C 3.6. COMMUNICATION – FULL ARTICLE

The Impact of the Atlantic Plague (1596–1602) on the City of Tui, according to the First Minute Book of the Municipal Council

Manuel Torres Fernández ¹

¹ Master in Middle Ages Studies. University of Santiago de Compostela



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ABSTRACT: The demographic growth experienced by Galicia between 1480 and 1560 reached a turning point with the onset of a late-century crisis marked by years of famine – at least nine– interspersed with three plague cycles (1567–73, 1576–82 and 1598–99). The last of these, which is the focus of this article, had devastating effects on the city of Tui. Between 1591 and 1594, Tui had a total of 496 householders, corresponding to approximately 1,785 inhabitants out of about 630,000 for the whole of Galicia, and formed part of a weak urban network in a predominantly rural territory. In addition, we show that the earliest extant minute books of municipal councils are a fundamental source for the study of epidemic episodes within the framework of the history of medicine. In this case, we analyze the first minute book of the council of Tui, which records the decisions adopted between 1597 and 1616 by the ordinary judges, aldermen and general procurators to regulate municipal life and, in particular, to manage the arrival of the Atlantic Plague in this small town.

KEYWORDS: Atlantic Plague, Early Modern Epidemics, Municipal Council Minute Books, Tui (Galicia), Public Health History

INTRODUCTION

In the late seventeenth century, the town of Tui was an urban center that had become an administrative, military and religious hub. This was the period of the dual monarchy following the union of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns in 1580, and the passage of troops towards the neighboring country was therefore frequent, as was the billeting of soldiers in the homes of Tui's residents. Moreover, it was an episcopal seigneurial town and the capital of the province of the same name.

However, if we take into account Professor González Lopo's assertion that Tui was a city with limited dynamism – except for the mercantile activity conducted through its port, which had been significant since the beginning of the century (Flemish cloth and Aragonese woolens were by no means lacking) – and compare it, for example, with Santiago de Compostela, which was on the way to becoming the capital of the Kingdom of Galicia, a picture emerges of a fragile urban economy. The lack of a substantial artisanal sector, the



presence of an urban peasantry, and a considerable proportion of the population living in poverty made the town especially vulnerable to the effects of an epidemic such as the Atlantic Plague, which across the Crown of Castile would cause the death of more than half a million people.

DISCUSSION

The first Minute Book of the Municipal Council of Tui provides a precise record of both the preventive measures adopted in response to news of the advancing plague and the subsequent impact on the town. The epidemic originated with the arrival in Santander, at the end of 1596, of a ship called *Rodamundo*, coming from Flanders and Calais with clothes infested with fleas. The infection then spread from ship to ship and port to port throughout Castile, approaching Tui via the cities of Betanzos, Santiago and Pontevedra.

The document records the summons issued to carpenters and stonemasons to stockpile timber and materials in order to construct physical barricades (*at-rancos*) at the town gates, as well as various prophylactic measures, such as the recommendation to clean and douse beds with water, the prohibition of lodging people coming from outside the town—under penalty of 30 days' banishment—the transfer of prisoners from a gaol infected with *Yersinia pestis* to the town hall buildings, and the flight of part of the population to the surrounding countryside.

Finally, the Minute Book attests to the consequences of the death of nearly 800 persons, including many merchants, which left the town, in contemporary testimony, as the poorest in the Kingdom. In this respect, it is pertinent to recall the figures provided by the historian Carlos Giráldez Lomba in his book *1598: La Peste en Vigo*, where he estimates that 3,500 people were infected and that only 22 of the 800 householders' dwellings escaped contagion. Although this author draws on sources from the Diocesan Archive of Tui, his data give an indication of the virulence of the disease throughout Galicia.

CONCLUSIONS

We conclude by drawing attention to the heuristic value – already highlighted – of the earliest minute books of Hispanic municipal councils. Since the regulations of the Catholic Monarchs in the late fifteenth century, these records constitute a privileged window onto historical realities of direct interest to historians

of medicine, particularly in relation to epidemic disease, local governance and public health responses.

It is also important to emphasise that Tui was not an exception to the late-century patterns of catastrophic mortality of the six hundreds. Its population appears to have been reduced by approximately 30%, illustrating the scale of demographic impact that the Atlantic Plague could exert on small urban centres embedded in fragile economic and social structures.

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