

# Plague in Istria: a critical chronology

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A CRITICAL CHRONOLOGY**University of Rijeka  
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**SUMMARY** The chronology of the occurrence of plague epidemics in the areas of the Istrian peninsula between the 2nd and the 17th century, followed by the evolution of thinking about the antiepidemic measures and a review of the different social implications of the pestilence.

## REVIEW

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history of medicine, plague.

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Among the misfortunes that have followed man since the beginning of time, the infectious diseases represent one of the biggest, and for a long time not solvable problems. Speaking to that extent there are the paleopathological findings, as well as documents written later. Often it is the case of leads whose reliability is to be doubted: records written by medically poorly educated witnesses, inadequate differentiating of infectious diseases which even the official medicine groups simply as "pestilentiae" until the renaissance.

The first reliable data about plague were brought forward by the Ebers papyrus from about 1500 B.C. The sickness was also known to the Babylonians, and, according to the Bible, to the Jewish, as well.<sup>1</sup> Homer, Tukidid, Hippocrates and numerous other ancient sources witness the plague as an early known symbol of fear, horror, trouble, pestilences (*pestis* in Latin means plague and pestilence, and it is so in other languages as well: German *Pest* or *Pestilenz*; Dutch *pest*, *plaag*, *pestziekte*; Italian *peste* or *pestilenza*; French *peste*; Russian *čuma*, Greek *loimos*, Croatian *kuga*).

Everywhere it marks, besides plague and infection, pestilence, death, repentance, evil, misfortune, punishment, suffering, misery, need, temptation, even corruption, poison, repulsiveness, boredom. During the Roman period mentioned as the ruin of friendship: *Pestis in amicitia pecuniae cupiditas*, (that is, Lust for money is the ruin of friendship). Plague also became one of the four riders of the apocalypse (Dürer and others) siding with Winner, War and Hunger.

During the Roman period mentioned as the greatest plagues there were the Galen (2nd century) and Cyprian plague (3rd century), and in the time of Justinian, the restorer of the Roman splendour in the 6th century, a real European pandemic occurred well described by Procopius (*Hypèr ton polemòn lógoi* - The Books on the Wars).

The epidemics of the Middle Ages were not rare. Poor hygienic conditions and the ignorance about the basic factors favoured them. In the 14th century, somewhere from the south-east Asia the most terrible "black plague" started sweeping through Asia to Europe. Villages disappeared as wiped away by wind. Italian cities had tens of thousands of victims, the whole Europe some 25 million. Asia, not including China, had about the same number.

After the black plague, plagues occurred often here and there, but never again in that extent. In the 18th century the plague mostly occurred in eastern Europe (Moscow 1770-72). In 1812 some 70,000 people died in Constantinople. At the end of the 19th century quite a large epidemic hit south-east Asia.

In 1894, during the Hong Kong epidemic, the Swiss Yersin and the Japanese Kitasato discovered the cause, the bacteria *Pasteurella pestis* (now *Yersinia pestis*). In the 20th century plague occurred only sporadically (the last epidemics in Europe: 1918 at the Thessalonica front: 90 cases, 1920 Paris: 60 cases). In 1906 Haffkine introduced the first vaccine, and when

antibiotics were discovered the plague definitely lost the battle with human mind. Nonetheless, the story about plague does not end here. After decades of long abstinence, hidden in the world of oblivion, child-scaring and ignorance, lung plague flamed up in September 1994 in Surat (India) with the spreading tendency (Delhi, Calcutta), despite the anti-epidemic measures which had been adopted by the larger part of the world.



**Figure 1**  
Plate expressing gratefulness to the Goddess of Health, Augusta, erected by the priest Lucius Ventinarius Lucumo at the end of the third century A.D. Goričica near Buzet

*Plague on the Istrian territory*

At the crossroads of military and commercial paths of Venice, Kranj and Mediterranean Croatia, Istria widely opened its doors to any, including the plague epidemic.

It is assumed that the plaque that ravaged through Rome in the 1st century spread to the provinces, as well. The epidemic of 192 certainly arrived to Istria, witness to which bears the table from the Buzet castle, which the population used to thank the goddess of health for the victory over sickness<sup>2</sup>.

The impacts on Istria were again catastrophic in 557 and 587. From that time till the 10th century we do not find evidences of epidemics of such scale. The plague occurred again in 904 when the worst hit was Rovinj (the works on the building of the cathedral were stopped). Thereupon followed a calm period until 1066, when plague arrived from Venice and Lombardy and lasted for three years. In the following fifty years there were no new registered cases of the infection, although plague occurred in Venice in that period at least fourteen times. In the 14th century the epidemics occurred in 1222, 1238, 1245 and 1248, coinciding with draught, which caused a severe impoverishment of the population. An especially serious epidemic raged even through the Brijuni Isles in the 14th century, and five Istrian Benedictine abbeys were abandoned. Epidemics followed in 1312, 1330 and 1338. The coincidence of tragedies lead to local insurrections of the population,

which were used by the Venetian Republic for its own purposes (for example the case in Koper in 1338). In 1343 Rovinj was hit again during the pestilence imported from Venice.

Starting its conquering campaign in Europe, the "black death" took the first lives as early as in 1347. The reactions of the population were those of panic: the citizens of Koper, under the leadership of count Albert III arrested the local major, took down the flag of the Venetian Republic and raised the flag of the commune. In the neighbouring Muggia half the population died from plague at the same time. Due to the large number of deaths in 1348 Piran had to buy off a new piece of land for the cemetery. Three fifths of the population died from the "black plague" in Venice.

The next witness to the plague pestilence was that of Dolfina's chronicle from 1360, who spoke again of the "importing" from Venice and Friuli. Since the city officials were required to stay in their cities even in the time of epidemics according to the active regulations, specially interesting are the requests of the majors of Piran and Grožnjan directed to the Venetian Senate, in which they asked for permission for treatment in Venice. The following year the epidemic spread to Poreč, Pula and Motovun. Fearing the revolt, and learning from previous experience, the Venetian Senate sent ten soldiers to Istria to prevent unrest<sup>3</sup>.

After ten years of peace, in 1371 Istria was taken again by a new epidemic. The mass dying drastically reduced the work force, so the

navigator Carlo Zeno, missing sailors for his six ships, had to anchor in the immediate vicinity of Poreč. A new epidemic of large dimensions occurred in Koper in 1376 again. The church freed the population from paying the dues which it could not collect, due to the poverty that took over.

The story about the Istrian plague continued in the 15th century with the new epidemic which, in 1427, decimated the population from Savudrija

to Pula. The infection in this case possibly spread in the reverse direction. i.e. from Istria to north-west, since the Great Council of Trieste forbade the citizens to host persons from the endangered areas under the threat of a 50 liras fine. In spite of that, the plague occurred in Trieste in 1429<sup>4</sup>. The following epidemics of 1449 and 1456 grasped the whole Istrian peninsula, and worst hit were Poreč and Motovun. The authorities established strict anti-measures: travels were forbidden, peasants were forbidden to enter cities, belongings of the dead were burned. Even the priests were forced to

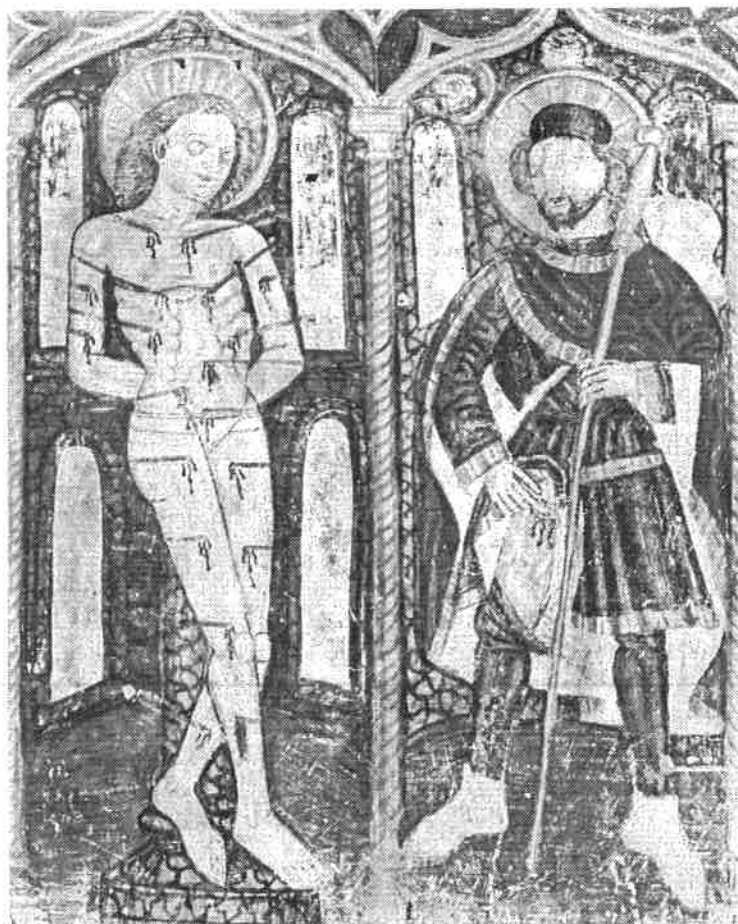


Figure 2  
St Sebastian and St Rochus on the fresco by the Istrian late-Gothic painter, "colourful master", (the end of the 15th c.) from the Church to St Mary of Lokvić in Dvigrad

work on land in order to survive. In Trieste in 1467 the epidemic took 105 lives in the city hospital alone. The loss in Poreč and Rovinj amounted up to one fifth of the total population.

Plague arrived again from Venice in 1475, only this time with far worse effects. Fearing contagion, commercial and maritime ties died, which hit worst of all Piran. The population ran in masses, Poreč was abandoned by the major Donato in 1478. Four years later the pestilence raged in Poreč again, and in the absolute panic one could

not even find a priest for the last sacrament. At the same time some 1,250 people died in Trieste. In the 1505 epidemic the public outcry was provoked by the behaviour of the doctors who refused visits to the plague patients. Twenty years later plague again raged through Trieste and Koper, but that was only an introduction to a larger - scale epidemic which, in 1527, for the innumerable time raged through Istria again. The worst hit city was Pula.

A few plague cases were again registered in Trieste in 1543. Ten years later the illness was again in Koper, and in 1554 in Muggia, as well. Doctor Petroni discovered the source of the contagion in the neighbouring swamps,

actually in their mud which was used for making the city road. (This reminds of the miasma by Hippocrates, as well as the Trincavallo explanation of the ropes used to lower dead into graves as source of the contagion.)

Almost two thirds of the population died from the pestilence in Piran in 1557/8. In relation to this there is the work of Tintoretto which can be found in the building of the County<sup>5</sup>.

The Jewish were blamed for the 1600/1 epidemic in Trieste (which was not a rare case in Europe: one has to remember the burning of the Jewish of Strasbourg, blamed for the "black death").

Most authors regard the 1629-31 plague as the last Istrian plague of this kind. It is a case of pestilence of European size spreading from Constantinople and described in Manzoni's "Fiancees" (I promessi sposi). The plague possibly arrived in Istria through Koper, and there by ship. It further spread through Izola, Piran, Umag and Brtonigla. Only in Koper there were 5,000 recorded deaths, which reduced the city population to some 2,000. The tragedy in Novigrad, Umag, Poreč and Pula was enhanced by the escalation of malaria (such an unhappy constellation was survived only by some 30

people in Poreč). In Pula only three old families survived, a few soldiers and newcomers - all together some 300 people. The Istrian inland was not spared, as well. Dvigrad was devastated and in 1650 it ceased to exist (actually, the greater role here was played by malaria which, as opposed to the plague, threatened the town constantly)<sup>6</sup>.

Interestingly Rovinj was spared (on five died). Possibly the timely isolation and the burial of the dead on the island before the town helped to this extent.

#### *Attempts at plague defence*

It is difficult to envision an effective medicament without knowing the causes and the ways of spreading of illness. Nonetheless, the population was

searching for answers without stopping. We find regulations and instructions for stopping the contamination in the city statutes as early as in the 13th century (Rovinj 1501; Grožnjan 1559, etc.). Most often it was the case of forbidding the entrance into cities to infected or suspect persons, closing of city entrances during larger dangers, burning of belongings and even houses of the plague victims, and somewhere even appeared separate cemeteries for the burial of the plagued (Koper, Buje).

A special story is the establishment and work of hospital facilities. The St Marco hospital existed in Koper from 1358 but it did not, however, accept plague victims. Venice had a doctor with a responsibility to instruct the population during epidemics as early as 1293, and in 1348 (during the "black death" period) an extraordinary commission, the so called Three Smart, acted and suggested solutions to the current epidemiological problems to a higher instance (forbidding of immigration to foreigners, depth of at least five feet for the graves and similar issues). The quarantine was established in Venice in 1374, and the Magistrate of the public health service in 1485. Koper followed that lead in 1575, Vrsar in the 17th century, and Rovinj in



**Figure 3**  
Ex voto against plague: St Sebastian and St Rochus are praying God together with frightened folk. The fresco by Anton of Kašćerga (1529) in the St Rochus votive church in Draguč

the 18th.

Certainly, all of these measures arrived too late for Istria, or were not enforced vigorously enough: the doors of the north - western ports remained open for the plague.

The population could not follow up the achievements and evolution of medical sciences: it got on by its own recipes, prayed and called for saints, among whom especially St Rochus, to whom some thirty churches in today's Istria are still devoted. The construction of the isochronal lines according to the years of building of these cultural buildings give an insight into the greater grip that the plague attacks had on the north - western regions, as well as of the dimensions of the spread of the epidemics individually.

Having gathered the tiles of the Istrian medieval epidemiological mosaic, a clear-as-day message announces itself: the plague changed the picture of Istria - demographically, economically, politically. The plague made Istria as it is

today - colourful as a child's puzzle, complex as the mechanism of the finest watch, enduring under the weight of any kind as a young mare.

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**SAŽETAK** Kronologija pojava kužnih epidemija na prostorima poluotoka Istre u vremenskom rasponu od 2. do 17. st. popraćena evolucijom razmišljanja o protuepidemijskim mjerama i osvrtom na razne socijalne implikacije pošasti.