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Spiritual Solutions For Plague in a Late Medieval German Broadside

Erik A. Heinrichs

Erik Heinrichs is an associate professor of history at Winona State University in Minnesota, USA. He earned his PhD in history at Harvard University. He researches the medical and religious reactions to plague in late medieval and early modern Europe.

[*Pestblatt*] [Augsburg: s.n., ca. 1473][1]

Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, RC171 .P33 1473

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[Pestblatt]. [Augsburg : s.n., ca. 1473]. Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, RC171 .P33 1473.

Translation of prayer to St. Roch

O you holy, confessor Roch, God has shown you great grace. Through the grace given to you the sick are healed, the blind illuminated, and the burdened relieved. God has revealed to you the kingdom of the heavenly Father. Eternal God, I beg for mercy, as You have shown mercy to Your holy confessor Roch. As he was making a pilgrimage to the holy places, he suffered in Your name up to the point of death from the poisonous swelling between his legs, but was healed by calling out Your holy name and by the service of Your holy angel. You restored his happy pilgrimage. Bestow upon us all who call on Your holy name through this prayer, just as St. Roch earned much from such poisonous swellings and was redeemed to the eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.[2]

Commentary

This rare plague broadside appeared during the first wave of German vernacular plague prints, and is notable for its glimpse into the popular spiritual solutions for plague that circulated in late medieval Europe. The main purpose of this small poster (41 x 25 cm) was to offer spiritual comfort and healing to a broad German audience amid the recurring epidemics known as the *Pestilentz*. It features a dramatic spiritual illustration that includes the plague saints, St. Sebastian and St. Roch, along with a prayer to each of them written in a late medieval German vernacular.[3] Little is certain about its origin or creator, although the best evidence places it in the German city of Augsburg during the plague of 1472–4.[4] At the time, Augsburg was among the more influential free imperial cities of the Holy Roman Empire and a burgeoning center of print.

This broadside appeared at the onset of a new wave of German vernacular prints that advised the broad population on both natural medicine and spiritual protection for plague. This trend began around 1473 in various media, including books, short pamphlets, and broadsides such as this.[5] The broadside in question focuses entirely on spiritual themes and is dominated by iconography that provides both a spiritual explanation for and spiritual solutions to the *Pestilentz*. A general cultural assumption in premodern Europe, based on multiple passages in the Bible, held that epidemics were the result of God's anger over human sins. The great spiritual quest of the time therefore sought to appease divine anger in order to reverse the divine punishment. The iconography in this print provides such spiritual solutions to this overarching spiritual problem, offering Saints Sebastian and Roch as spiritual helpers to humanity. By seeking their intercession with an angry God, the pious hoped that such plague saints could turn divine anger into divine mercy, thereby bringing about physical protection or even a miraculous cure.

This striking spiritual scene is depicted in layers from the top to the bottom of the page. God the Father appears in the heavens at the top, spiritual helpers in the middle, and suffering humans at the bottom. God is ringed with a halo and glorious light, bears a mild expression, and is presumably returning the sword of judgment to its scabbard. God had evidently used the sword, since afflicted humans lie or sit on the bare ground at the bottom of the page.[6] As evidence of their affliction, the men reveal swellings on the chest and on the insides of the upper leg, both places where plague buboes would appear. In the middle are the spiritual helpers, Saints Sebastian and Roch, as well as an angel. St. Sebastian is recognizable by the arrow shaft in his upper chest, recalling his persecution as a Christian during the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, c. 300 CE.[7] St. Roch's depiction is fairly typical for the time, emphasizing his own bubo on the upper leg and the angel who helped nurse him back to health. Both saints were common throughout Renaissance Europe, and the only two plague saints described as "universal."[8] The layout of the iconography here may have influenced later images that appear on the title pages of German plague tracts into the 1520s.[9]

St. Roch was special among the late medieval plague saints for having miraculously cured plague victims during his life, as well as for suffering and recovering from plague himself.[10] These healings are likely the main source of his popularity at the time. St. Roch lived in southern France and Italy during the 14th century, although the exact dates—as well as many historical facts about him—are unclear. After his death, popular support sustained his cult of veneration through the 15th century, first documented in the later 1460s in northern Italy.[11] St. Roch achieved canonization, or official recognition from the papacy, only later during the 16th century. [12] When, around 1473, this broadside was printed north of the Alps, the veneration of St. Roch was relatively new to the area, thus marking his early rise in popular religious devotions there, despite the lack of papal recognition.[13]

The text of the prayer to "St. Rochius" on this broadside introduces this saint by retelling his basic life story. (See the translation above.) The "poisonous swelling" here refers to a bubo, thereby connecting St. Roch's life story directly to the experience of plague.[14] Also notable is that the prayer appeals to God as much or more than it appeals to the power of St. Roch. In this respect, it is theologically sound in its emphasis on God's power, thereby integrating the story of this popular saint into the orthodox teachings of the church.

As a broadside made up mostly of imagery, this work targeted the widest possible audience, literate and illiterate alike. Since this print was limited to one piece of paper, its price would have been much lower than a book, making it more affordable for a broader segment of the population. One can imagine someone buying this in an urban marketplace as an aid to religious devotions in the home, perhaps intending to hang it on the wall like a poster.[15] For this reason, this print provides a valuable window into popular religious devotions during the recurring plagues, emphasizing the importance of saints as protectors or healers.

Regardless of a person's place in society, saints held special power during the Middle Ages, extending even to their images. Such images played a spiritual role similar to physical relics of saints, in that the images were believed to contain a holy presence that allowed direct access to the power of a saint. One could activate this power through prayer or thought. Some even believed that paper bearing written prayers to saints held the spiritual power to ward off evil or poisons, much like an amulet.[16] In 1494, for example, the Augsburg physician Ambrosius Jung described an old practice of writing prayers to saints on small papers and hanging them from the necks of children to protect them from plague.[17] One continuing mystery on this theme regards the meaning of the strange symbol in the first letter of the prayer to St. Roch (fig. 2). It is difficult to say whether it is the signature mark of an artist or printer, or—perhaps more likely—that it is a special symbol intended to ward off evil. Its resemblance to the Tau cross, albeit with some unusual additions, connects this mark to a known apotropaic symbol used in other images for spiritual protection from plague.[18]

Figure 2. Mysterious symbol inside the letter "O," the first letter in the prayer to St. Roch. Detail, [Pestblatt]. [Augsburg : s.n., ca. 1473]. Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, RC171 .P33 1473.

This particular print, held at the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine at Harvard University, is neither complete nor in good condition. Such a condition or worse is often the fate of cheap, popular prints from the distant past. Worm holes are many. A long tear runs through most of the right-hand side. The left side bears two cuts, which removed a sizable column from the imagery and the prayer to St. Sebastian. One can speculate on the reasons behind these injuries. At one time, it may have been bound inside a folio-sized book, but later cut out. It may have been deemed worthless at some point and part of it repurposed as binding waste inside a book. Or it may have been attacked amid a surge of iconoclasm during the Reformation. One can imagine this print hanging on a wall in Augsburg until the Reformation, when its images and devotions to saints were deemed idolatrous and offensive.[19] Interestingly enough, another copy of this broadside exists, held at the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington. This copy has also suffered serious injury, and is missing its entire top half.[20] Were the bottom half extant, it would allow scholars to recover the complete prayer to St. Sebastian.

This broadside came to the Countway Library of Medicine through the William Norton Bullard Collection. Upon the death of Dr. William Norton Bullard in 1931, it passed to the Boston Medical Library, along with other Renaissance manuscripts, prints, and incunabula.[21] When the Boston Medical Library and the Harvard Medical School Library merged their collections in 1960, the book became part of the newly-formed Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.[22]

Notes

[1] The title "[*Pestblatt*]" and imprint information are given in Frederick R. Goff, *Incunabula in American Libraries: A Third Census of Fifteenth-Century Books Recorded in North American Collections. Reproduced From the Annotated Copy Maintained by Frederick R. Goff, Compiler and Editor* (Milwood, NY: Kraus Reprint, 1973), 476. See also James F. Ballard, *A Catalogue of the Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts and Incunabula in the Boston Medical Library* (Boston: Boston Medical Library, 1944), 144–6. This broadside appears in the Incunabula Short Title Catalog (ISTC) at ip00363000. It appears in the Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke at M3145910.

[2] [*Pestblatt*] [Augsburg: s.n., ca. 1473]. The translation is my own, favoring the sense and style of a prayer in modern grammar.

[3] The historical form of the German vernacular in this broadside is Early New High German.

[4] Ballard, *A Catalogue*, 146. On placing this work in Augsburg, see Martin Weinberger, "Ein Augsburger Pestblatt," *Beiträge zur Forschung. Studien aus dem Antiquariat Jacques Rosenthal* Neue Folge 4, (1932): 1–6.

[5] Erik A. Heinrichs, *Plague, Print, and the Reformation. The German Reform of Healing*, 1473–1573 (New York: Routledge, 2018). On the religious prints for plague, see Thilo Esser, *Pest, Heilangst und Frömmigkeit: Studien zur religiösen Bewältigung der Pest am Ausgang des Mittelalters* (Altenberge: Oros, 1999). On spiritual medicine for plague, including many forms of art, see Heinrich Dormeier, "'Ein geystliche ertzeney fur die grausam erschrecklich pestilentz': Schutzpatrone und frommer Abwehrzauber gegen die Pest" in *Das große Sterben. Seuchen machen Geschichte*, eds. Hans Wilderotter and Michael Dorrmann (Berlin: Jovis, 1995), 54–93.

[6] Weinberger and Ballard offer a different interpretation, that God is drawing the sword in order to protect the sick. This view, however, does not take into account the general cultural assumption that plague was a divine punishment. Weinberger, “Ein Augsburger Pestblatt,” 3. Ballard, *A Catalogue,* 144.

[7] David Hugh Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of the Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 440–1.

[8] Louise Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy” *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 1994), 485–532, here 502, doi:10.2307/2863019.

[9] Philippus Culmacher, *Regimen zu deutsch Magistri philippi Culmachers von Eger wider die grausamen erschrecklichenn Totlichen pestelentz* (Constans: Johann Haselberck, c. 1530).

[10] Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of the Saints*, 430–31

[11] Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred,” 502–4

[12] Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of the Saints*, 431.

[13] Heinrich Dormeier, “Pestepidemien und Frömmigkeitsformen in Italien und Deutschland (14–16 Jahrhundert)” in *Um Himmels Willen. Religion in Katastrophenzeiten*, eds., Manfred Jakubowski-Tiessen and Hartmut Lehmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 14–50.

[14] On medical explanations of buboes as well as bubo treatments, see Erik A. Heinrichs, “The Live Chicken Treatment for Buboes: Trying a Plague Cure in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 91 (2017): 210–32.

[15] Dormeier, “‘Ein geystliche ertzeney,’” 63.

[16] On saints and piety in late medieval plague prints, see Esser, *Pest, Heilangst und Frömmigkeit*, 225–314. See also Robert W. Scribner, “Cosmic Order and Daily Life: Sacred and Secular in Pre-Industrial German Society,” in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe 1500–1800*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984): 17–32, 25.

[17] Ambrosius Jung, *Ein außerrvelt loblich tractat vñ regiment in dem schwären zeit der pestilentz. auß gezogen. auß den bewärttn vñ weysisten alten gschrifften der artzney. Durch Ambrosium jung der sil- freyen künst vñ der artzney doctor. D zeit der wirdigē herrn vom thům zů Augspurg geschworner doctor* (Augsburg: Hans Schönsperger, 1494), AVr-v.

[18] Weinberger, “Ein Augsburger Pestblatt,” 4. On apotropaic symbols for plague, see Esser, *Pest, Heilangst und Frömmigkeit*, 225–314.

[19] On iconoclasm during the Reformation, see Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands. Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999). On the impact of the Reformation on plague prints and ideas of spiritual healing, see Heinrichs, *Plague, Print, and the Reformation*, 75–106.

[20] IUCAT Lilly, Indiana University Library Catalog for Lilly Library, accessed February 10, 2021. https://iucat.iu.edu/lilly/5561016.

[21] Center for the History of Medicine at Countway Library, “Building a Collection,” *Onview: Digital Collections & Exhibits*, accessed February 10, 2021. https://collections.countway.harvard.edu/onview/exhibits/show/fifteeners/building-a-collection. “William Norton Bullard Collection,” *Contagion: Historical Views of Diseases and Epidemics*, Harvard Library, accessed February 10, 2021. https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/contagion/feature/william-norton-bullard-collection. Center for the History of Medicine at Countway Library, “James Francis Ballard,” *Onview: Digital Collections & Exhibits*, accessed February 10, 2021. https://collections.countway.harvard.edu/onview/exhibits/show/fifteeners....

[22] “About Countway,” Harvard Countway Library, accessed February 10, 2021. https://countway.harvard.edu/about.