Nils Weber

Two Sixteenth-Century Venetian Plague Images

Fig. 1: Il Redentore, Venice.

Introduction: The Plague of 1575 in Venice

On 8 September 1576 in Saint Mark's Square, the Doge of Venice, Alvise Mocenigo, addressed his people at a time of utmost desperation for the Republic. The plague had been raging in Venice since the spring of 1575, and the death toll was rising exponentially. At the time of Mocenigo's speech in the late summer of 1576, the situation had peaked with approximately 2,000 people dying each day in their homes, in the lazzaretti and on the streets.[1] In the highest political ranks of the Republic, there was no doubt that Venice had to react with drastic measures, and the Doge's speech was the vehicle to communicate this response. Several versions of the speech are preserved in the Venetian archives, but all sources agree that the Doge delivered it under the greatest emotional distress.[2] Exploring the reasons for this disaster, Mocenigo borrowed his arguments from a school of thought that goes back not only to the time of the Black Death (1346–53), but even to the first appearance of the disease during the First Plague Pandemic (541–750). In this interpretation, the plague was sent by God to punish sinful behaviour.[3]

The Old Testament was the main source for this widespread belief, in particular the story of the ten plagues which God inflicted on biblical Egypt as well as an event from the life of King David in which God punished David's wrongdoing with a pestilence that killed 70,000 Israelites. In his speech, Mocenigo identified himself explicitly with the Old Testament king, acknowledging his own shortcomings as Doge of Venice

in a rare moment of self-criticism.[4] This religious interpretation of the plague's origins, however, was not the only aspect present in public discourse; from the very start of the epidemic in 1575, the Doge and the Venetian senate had implemented a series of measures based on early modern scientific knowledge and past experience. Among them were the isolation of infected patients, curfews and the disinfection of contaminated goods.[5] As far as we know today, these measures helped reduce the spread of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacteria responsible for the plague, at least to a certain degree. But they were not enough to completely control the spread of the disease. The plague can appear in three variants: the pneumonic, the less common septicemic and the bubonic, with the difference between them being the location of the infection and the transmission of the bacteria. In the bubonic plague – the most common variant – the lymph nodes are infected. Their swelling and black discoloration are known as 'buboes', the unmistakable characteristic of the disease. Due to its aggressive nature, the likelihood of surviving the plague without effective treatment is estimated to be only 40 to 50 percent.

Against this background, and with so much suffering in his city at the high point of the disease, the Doge Alvise Mocenigo understandably faced enormous pressure with regard to the question of what to do next. Following David's example, Mocenigo decided that only a collective act of humility could calm the divine anger. Only through public displays of repentance in processions, daily prayers at home and ultimately through charitable acts could God be persuaded to intervene. And because of this, the Doge announced in his speech that all the financial means of the Republic would be mobilised to build a church dedicated to Christ the Redeemer on the Giudecca Island: Il Redentore (fig. 1).[6] What followed was a process in which the image of the Redeemer became a devotional icon and also something similar to a 'motto' for Venetian efforts to fight the plague through religious devotion, alongside the more widespread cults of the plague saints St Roch and St Sebastian. In the following, the painting *Doge Alvise Mocenigo Intercedes with Christ the Redeemer for Plague Victims* (fig. 2) will be considered as a case study to explore the circumstances for this Venetian fixation with the iconography of the Redemption during one of the most devastating health crises in the Republic's long history.

Fig. 2: Palma Giovane, *Doge Alvise Mocenigo Intercedes with Christ the Redeemer for Plague Victims*, c. 1590, Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona.

Palma Giovane and 'Il Redentore'

The painting in Verona is the subject of controversy with regard to its attribution, which must be considered first before diving into its complex iconography. Stefania Mason initially attributed it to Palma Giovane based on stylistic considerations and a remark by the Venetian chronicler Marco Boschini.[7] In his *Carta del Navegar Pittoresco* (1660), Boschini offered the following description of a painting of 'la peste' by Palma Giovane in the Ca' Correggio: 'Se 'l Palma ha fato mai cosa esquisita, / Se 'l Palma ha fato mai cosa perfeta, / Questa tra le famose xe l'eleta: / Questa è una peste che ghe dà la vita'.[8] Unfortunately, however, Boschini provides no further details about the plague image, and the attempt to trace the painting in the records of the Ca' Correggio collection has been fruitless.[9]

These uncertainties gave way to a new, but ultimately unconvincing proposal by Andrea Piai, who argues that the plague image was created by Andrea Vicentino, a painter of the generation of the so-called 'sette maniere'.[10] Piai bases his theory on ostensible similarities between the image and two paintings by Vicentino in the Frari church in Venice and the Chiesa di S. Stefano in Rovigo. The comparisons, however,

lack substance, and this argument would need more evidence in order to supersede Mason's initial claim.[11]

A drawing in the Morgan Library (fig. 3) by the artist Marcantonio Bassetti, a friend and colleague of Palma Giovane, seems to offer more promising evidence.[12] In his drawing, Bassetti adopts the compositional features of the painting as well as figurative details such as the buboes on the back of the far-right figure, which are carefully rendered in a delicate brown wash. The upper part of the drawing has been cut off, eliminating the figure of Christ the Redeemer, which led to the false claim scribbled on the drawing in a later hand that the composition showed the Doge Nicolo Contarini and the Virgin rather than Doge Alvise Mocenigo and Christ the Redeemer.[13] Bassetti does indeed seem to be an interesting artist when it comes to plague art in Venice, since he not only carefully studied Palma's painting, but also invented his own compositions, for example in another plague drawing in the Morgan Library that depicts people dying and suffering from the disease.[14] Furthermore, Ridolfi mentions that during the 1630 plague, the artist worked as a 'deputato' for a plague relief service in the city of Verona, helping the population and ultimately dying from the disease due to his efforts.[15] It thus seems that Bassetti had a special interest in the disease and that in this pursuit, Palma's painting was an important reference point for him.

Fig. 3: Marcantonio Bassetti, *Plague Victims (after Palma Giovane)*, c. 1615–1630, Morgan Library, New York.

The iconography of Palma's plague image has to be considered within the context of the widespread distribution and influx of Christocentric images in Venice following Mocenigo's pledge to build the Redentore church. In his painting, created probably 10 to 15 years after the epidemic outbreak, Palma shows the moment of intercession between Mocenigo, the signoria and Christ the Redeemer in front of a church that resembles the design of the Redentore church. Another fascinating example of this exact constellation of figures is found in the 'oselle', the annual commemorative medals issued as the Doge's Christmas gift to the Venetian nobility. Virtually all of the sample proofs for the year 1576 (fig. 4) show the same subject: a standing or seated Christ worshipped by the Doge Alvise Mocenigo on the obverse and various architectural proposals for the design of the Redentore church on the reverse.[16]

Fig. 4: Oselle, Alvise Mocenigo and Il Redentore, 1576, British Museum, London.

Apart from the quite astonishing variety of proposals, it should also be noted that in these medals, the image of the Redeemer and its new architectural representation in the city were translated into a much more tangible medium that allowed a much wider range of circulation not only of the possible design for the church, but also of the very idea that it was Christ who could save and redeem the Venetians from the plague. This idea, and its wider implications with regard to the ubiquitous need for salvation and the sheer weakness of

the Venetians in the face of the epidemic, was given another interesting figuration in a 'bozzetto' (fig. 5) by Tintoretto. As in Palma's plague image and the 'oselle', Tintoretto shows Alvise Mocenigo kneeling in front of Christ the Redeemer, but in Tintoretto's version Mocenigo faces the viewer. As Benjamin Paul has rightly pointed out, Mocenigo's body appears rather small in proportion to the rest of the painting, and the fact that he is not facing Christ directly should be interpreted as a deliberate choice by the painter, underlining Mocenigo's appearance as a humble sinner.[17] This same self-representation is also an explicit part of Mocenigo's speech.[18] Furthermore, the lion of the St Mark, the symbol of Venice, can be seen in a shadow – a clear symbolic allusion to the darkness the plague had cast on the Venetian Republic.[19]

Fig. 5: Jacopo Tintoretto, *Doge Alvise Mocenigo Presented to the Redeemer*, c. 1577, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Compared to Tintoretto's plague image, Palma (fig. 2) chooses a much more direct, less symbolic and in part even graphic visualisation of the plague disease. His painting clearly emphasizes the bodies of the plague victims, which are piled up in the foreground of the image – a possible reference to the well-known practice of burying the dead in layers on top of each other on the quarantine islands of Lazzaretto Vecchio and Lazzaretto Nuovo.[20] Because of this compositional choice, Mocenigo and his entourage are literally pushed and crowded into the background on the stairs in front of the Redentore church. Also important to note is the attention to detail with which the bodies of the plague victims are shown. Palma clearly has a keen eye for the appearance of the buboes, which can be identified on the back, in the armpits and on the loins of several figures. These details in Palma's painting can be considered important evidence for the fact that it was indeed the bubonic variant of the disease that caused the plague outbreak of 1575 in Venice.

The web of images associated with the construction of the Redentore church thus demonstrates that the Venetians produced a highly diverse and multifunctional panorama of Christ-centred images during the years of the plague crisis, in the form of paintings, coins, buildings and the procession of the 'Festa del Redentore' in July 1577 – a true creative outburst, orchestrated by Venetian culture against the horrors of the disease.[21] However, the veneration of Christ the Redeemer was by no means the only reference point for the Venetians in this process. As the next example will make clear, the Redemption iconography was appreciated first and foremost by the ruling class, while the commoners of the Venetian Republic put their trust in other candidates, like St Roch.

Jacopo Bassano and St Roch

When it comes to the details of sixteenth-century Venetian plague images, Jacopo Bassano's painting *St Roch Visits the Plague Victims* (fig. 6) should be considered as the most accurate.[22] The painting was executed for the high altar of the Chiesa di San Rocco in Vicenza and was later transported to the Brera Museum after the fall of the Venetian Republic. As in Palma's painting, Bassano shows the suffering and agony related to the plague disease in the foreground. We see, for example, St Roch blessing a young mother, who kneels next to her dead child. This powerful symbolic allusion to the heartbreaking loss of loved ones during epidemics was first developed in arguably the most famous plague-related image of the Renaissance: Raphael's *Morbetto* print, where we find the opposite constellation of an infant grieving for his dead mother. Nor was the accuracy and attention to detail with which Bassano depicted the bodies of plague victims lost on early modern chroniclers. Boschini, for example, observes that 'quegli ignudi sono propriamente carne viva da farne scaturir il sangue col pungerla'.[23] In addition, the examination of the bodies is present not only in the relation between painting and viewer, but also within the painting itself, in the case of the doctor who examines the body and in particular the buboes of the dead infant. The buboes are indeed

among the most striking visual elements of the painting, especially in comparison with the recognisable, but overall looser depictions in Palma's painting. Bassano demonstrates keen first-hand knowledge of the swollen, discoloured lymph nodes as well as their form, although their placement on the figure is somewhat arbitrary and in many cases does not correspond to the actual location of lymph nodes on the human body. Another interesting visual strategy that Bassano uses to distinguish between the sick and the healthy is the figures' clothing: the healthy population are fully dressed, while the sick are shown nude or semi-nude. The exception to this rule is St Roch, who wears his pilgrim robe, but with his right leg exposed, clearly revealing a swollen black bubo.

Fig. 6: Jacopo Bassano, *St Roch Visits the Plague Victims*, c. 1576, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

St Roch was indeed a prominent figure in sixteenth-century Venetian plague art. Titian, for example, painted his *St Mark Enthroned with St Cosmas and St Damian, St Roch and St Sebastian* (1510) at the beginning of the century, though in a much less graphic manner than the later works by Palma and Bassano, with only a few visual clues relating to the plague of 1510. These clues can be found first and foremost in the figure of St Roch, who points at the bubo on his right leg, while the doctors St Cosmas and St Damian also acknowledge St Roch's wound. In this context, the gaze of St Roch toward the two doctors, and from them to St Mark, patron saint of Venice, are deliberate choices by the artist, creating a system of visual references that link the plague with the city of Venice. Despite this influential early example, arguably the most important authority on St Roch in Venetian painting was Tintoretto, with his iconic works in the Scuola Grande and the Chiesa di San Rocco in Venice. In his painting *St Roch Healing the Plague-Stricken* (1549), Tintoretto shows the saint in the dimly lit environment of a plague hospital, examining the buboes of a patient. Here, the muscular bodies of plague victims, crouching and suffering in agony, are introduced into the canon of Venetian painting.[24]

Interestingly, during the plague epidemic of 1575–77 the cult of St Roch manifested itself not only in paintings, but also in two rather obscure instances of public disobedience. The Venetian chronicler Rocco Benedetti recalls the following event:

"Comparve in Piazza tre sere, una sera dopo l'altra, un huomo incognito, che fu stimato una bonanima d'un gentilhuomo vestito d'habito di confraternita, con un crocifisso grande in mano cantando con flebil voce le letanie seguitato da molte persone. Il che fu cagione che tutte le contrade della città si missero ad imitarlo, visitando la chiesa di S. Rocco. Ma perché s'intendeva che molti infetti per speranza che Dio gli risanasse ci andavano et infettavano gli altri sani fu vietato l'andar così attorno in processione fuor che alla chiesa di San Marco."[25]

In a second incident, a 'poverino impazzito' falsely informed the Venetians that the plague had ceased and once again led a large, cheering crowd to the Chiesa di S. Rocco.[26] The government acted quickly against such events, since the authorities were concerned about the increased risk of contagion associated with 'superspreading events' as well as the imminent radicalisation of the populace. Consequently, they decided to limit the area for authorised processions to the piazza of S. Marco.[27] Both episodes represent an apparent disconnect between the ruling class around Doge Alvise Mocenigo and the Venetian *popolani*, which made up almost 90 per cent of the Venetian population. The latter were apparently less moved by the elaborate words and images carefully chosen by their superiors in the fight against the disease. Rather, they put their trust in traditional plague saints like St Roch and 'proven' locations of worship like the Chiesa di S. Rocco. Thus it seems only logical that in the Venetian province of Vicenza, where reactions to developments and new trends from the capital were often significantly delayed, an expensive plague image like Bassano's *St Roch Visits the Plague Victims* was commissioned with the popular plague saint as the main protagonist.

Conclusion: The Visuality of the Plague

When considering early modern images related to epidemic outbreaks, it is important to note that compared to other deadly diseases like typhus, the bubonic plague had an unmistakable visual characteristic: the buboes. Both Palma and Bassano painted them in large numbers and with great accuracy in their plague images, demonstrating first-hand experience of the disease. The visual evidence provided by the paintings, however, is only one piece of the puzzle that should be considered when studying epidemic outbreaks in conjunction with demographic records, contemporary political statements or archaeological excavations. Despite the wealth of source material, it seems to me that the different kinds of information available on historic disease have been left virtually untouched in their respective fields. In recent years, this situation has come under increasing pressure with the advent of new scientific disciplines such as archaeogenetics and their ability to provide new sets of data, including recent discoveries on the origins of the Black Death.[28] While close reading of the visual material at hand remains as important as ever, I would like to suggest that the study of epidemic outbreaks in Venice and the cultural responses of the Venetians can profit enormously from the systematic combination of the available source material.

In fact, more secure grounding in the identification of historic diseases can stabilise some of the existing hypotheses when it comes to Venetian plague images. A final example is Titian's *St Sebastian* (fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Titian, *St Sebastian*, c. 1576, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

The painting was among a handful of works in Titian's studio at the time of his death on 27 August 1576, all of them executed in his peculiar late style and often la-

belled as ‘unfinished’.[29] Because of these difficulties in ascertaining its provenance, function or even basic technical status, *St Sebastian* has been treated with only mixed interest by modern scholarship.[30] David Rosand, for example, analyses the painting in the context of Titian’s own oeuvre and his various depictions of St Sebastian throughout his long career.[31] This argument is based on the inner workings of Titian’s artistic development, but unfortunately overlooks the surrounding circumstances in which Titian applied the final touches to his painting: that is, the devastating outbreak of the bubonic plague in Venice in 1575–77 and St Sebastian’s long-established role as the most important plague saint alongside St Roch. From this perspective, the vibrant colour palette of the painting – at times resembling bursts of fire, at times drops of blood – that underlines the agony of the saint can be interpreted as a concrete visual manifestation of the precarious conditions in the Lagoon City during the plague years. In addition, the dark spots, rendered in strokes of thick black paint on the saint’s skin, especially on his chest and thighs, closely resemble the depictions of buboes in the two contemporary plague images by Palma and Bassano.[32] It might seem odd, therefore, that the connection between the painting and the plague outbreak of 1575–77 has not been considered in more detail. But one has to remember that debate over the nature of the epidemic has been going on for a long time, and although the plague has always been a prime candidate, scholars have also considered other agents such as an ‘Ebola-like virus’ or ‘famine fever’. In the discipline of art history, such uncertainties in the correct identification of the disease have necessarily led to ambiguities when it comes to the interpretation of images created during these years.[33] However, recent excavations in the Lazzaretto Vecchio and Lazzaretto Nuovo seem to suggest beyond doubt that it was indeed the bubonic plague that struck the city. This new hard data therefore provides the opportunity to consider the Venetian plague images again in their original context: namely as a first-hand symbolic expression of the suffering and longing for redemption of the Venetian population in the face of health crisis and within a wider scientific framework as visual evidence for the presence of bubonic plague in Venice.[34]

Endnotes

1. Samuel Cohn, *Cultures of Plague: Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance*, Oxford 2010, p. 21.
2. For the most extensive record of the speech in the Biblioteca Marciana, see BNM, MS It. VII. 364 (7934), fols. 66–7. Other sources are summarised in Benjamin Paul, *“Convertire in se medesimo questo flagello”: autocritica del Doge Alvise Mocenigo nel bozzetto di Tintoretto per il dipinto votivo a Palazzo Ducale*, in: *Celebrazione e autocritica. La Serenissima e la ricerca dell’identità veneziana nel tardo Cinquecento*, ed. Benjamin Paul, Rome 2014, pp. 143–144.
3. ‘Per nessun altra causa…questa città sostiene questo flagello di mortalità se non per li grandi et enormi peccati nostri’; see BNM, fol. 66.
4. On Mocenigo’s extraordinarily eventful tenure as Doge of Venice, which included not only the epidemic of 1575–77 but also the war against the Ottomans, see Benjamin Paul, *Introduction*, in: *Celebrazione e autocritica. La Serenissima e la ricerca dell’identità veneziana nel tardo Cinquecento*, ed. Benjamin Paul, Rome 2014, pp. 9–16.
5. See Richard Palmer, *The Control of Plague in Venice and Northern Italy, 1348-1600*, Canterbury 1978, esp. Chapter 5.
6. ‘Cosi noi, con l’autorità del senato, et in nome del popolo facciamo l’atto d’edifichare una chiesa dedicate al nome del Redentore nostro’; see BNM, fol. 67.
7. Stefania Mason Rinaldi, *La peste e le sue immagini nella cultura figurativa veneziana*, in: *Venezia e la peste 1348/1797*, Venice 1980, p. 253, no. a26, Stefania Mason Rinaldi, *Aspetti del modelletto a Venezia nel secondo Cinquecento*, in: *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Ölskizze vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*, Braunschweig 1984, pp. 25–34 and Stefania Mason Rinaldi, *Palma il Giovane. L’opera completa*, Milan 1984, p. 149, no. 598.
8. Marco Boschini, *La carta del navegar pitoresco*, Venice 1660, ed. Anna Pallucchini, 1966, p. 601.
9. Linda Borean, *La quadreria di Agostino e Giovan Donato Correggio nel collezionismo veneziano del Seicento*, Udine 2000, p. 86.
10. Andrea Piai, cat. no. 286, in *Museo di Castelvecchio: Dalla metà del XVI alla metà del XVII secolo*, ed. Paola Marini, Ettore Napione and Gianni Peretti, Milan 2018.
11. Piai’s remark, for example, that ‘il Redentore è quasi sovrapponibile, nella posa, al Cristo in atto di apparire a san Francesco nella tela dei Frari’ is unsubstantiated, because Christ’s gestures in the Frari painting are guiding St Francis into heaven, while in the painting in Verona, Christ is rushing down to meet the signoria with the victory banner in his right hand.
12. For their correspondence, see e.g. Giovanni Bottari, *Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura ed architettura*, II. Rome 1979, pp. 484–486.
13. The handwriting on the sheet reads: ‘Doge Nicolo Contarini praying to the Virgin during the plague of 1630 ?’. However, no figure of the Virgin is visible in the drawing, and it is clear that the author of this note was not aware of the connection to the painting in Verona.
14. Morgan Library, inv. no. 140929.
15. Ridolfi seems to be well-informed with regard to Bassetti’s *Vita*, due also to a personal visit he had paid to Bassetti’s studio in Verona in 1628. See Carlo Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie dell’arte ovvero le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello stato*, ed. Detlev von Hadeln, Berlin 1914/1924, II, pp. 241–242.
16. For the design of the Redentore church and its heated debate in the Venetian senate, see Deborah Howard, *Venice Disputed: Marc’Antonio Barbaro and Venetian Architecture, 1550–1600*, New Haven 2011, pp. 98–109. The ‘oselle’ are catalogued in *Venezia e la peste 1348/1797,* cat. a132.
17. Paul (2014), pp. 152–154.
18. See the archival sources summarized in note no. 2.
19. This pictorial device was first developed in Titian’s plague image *St Mark Enthroned with St Cosmas and St Damian, St Roch and St Sebastian* (1510); see Paul (2014), p. 137.
20. Rocco Benedetti, *Venezia 1576, la peste*, ed. Donatella Calabi, Luca Molà, Simone Rauch and Elena Svalduz, Verona 2021, p. 43 uses the term ‘monte de cadaveri’. See also Ambika Flavel and Daniel Franklin, *Camposanto, a Cemetery in the Venetian Lagoon*, in: *Mediterranean Archaeology* (2022), pp. 169–180 for the most recent archaeological excavations at the Lazzaretto Nuovo.
21. The first ‘Festa del Redentore’, which marked the end of the plague on 13 July 1577, was described in detail by the chronicler Muzio Lumina in his text *Liberatione di Venetia* (1577).
22. See esp. Enrico Noè, cat. no. 11, in: *Pinacoteca di Brera. Scuola veneta*. Milan, 1990, Livia Alberton Vinco da Sesso, cat. no. 47, in *Jacopo Bassano c. 1510–1592*, Bologna 1992 and Rosella Lauber, *Milano. La Pinacoteca di Brera*, Udine 2012, cat. 204.
23. Marco Boschini, *I gioelli pittoreschi virtuoso ornamento della città di Vicenza*, Venice 1677, p. 116.
24. See also Mason (1980), pp. 209–86, for a first attempt at compiling a catalogue of Venetian images connected to plague outbreaks in Venice. For a short introduction to the Saint Roch iconography in Venice, see Andrew Hopkins: *Combating the Plague: Devotional Paintings, Architectural Programs, and Votive Processions in Early Modern Venice*, in: *Hope and Healing. Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500-1800,* Chicago 2005, pp. 138-140.

25. Benedetti (1576), p. 76.
26. Benedetti (1576), p. 24.
27. See also Paolo Preto, *Peste e società a Venezia nel 1576*, Vicenza 1978, p. 85.
28. Maria Spyrou et al., *The Source of the Black Death in Fourteenth-century central Eurasia*, in: *Nature* 606 (2022), pp. 718–724.
29. Sheila Hale, *Titian. His Life*, London 2012, p. 720.
30. See Tamara Fomichova, *The Hermitage Catalogue of Western European Painting: Venetian Painting Fourteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, Florence 1992, no. 261 and recently Peter Humfrey, *Titian: The Complete Paintings*, Ghent 2007, no. 291. For a long time, the Russian authorities considered the painting in the Hermitage a damaged work of poor quality, contrary to the excellent condition the *St Sebastian* is actually in. Only increased interest and more substantial scholarship on Titian's late work has made it possible to slowly correct this thinking.
31. David Rosand, *Titian's Saint Sebastians*, in: *Artibus et Historiae* 15, no. 30 (1994), p. 37.
32. St Sebastian's wounds and the arrows that pierced his skin were a ubiquitous part of early modern plague iconography; see Louise Marshall, *Reading the body of a plague saint: Narrative altarpieces and devotional images of St Sebastian in Renaissance art*, in: *Reading Texts and Images*, ed. Bernard Muir, Exeter 2002, pp. 237–272. Interestingly, Rocco Benedetti (1576), p. 46, also uses this metaphor in his description of the repercussions of the epidemic outbreak of 1575–77 in Venice: 'In somma delle somme il Prencipe spendeva un tesoro in mantener tanta gente et in far cotante spese, e la prattica era fatta un caos ove ogni savio restava confuse, non vedendo come si potesse supplire a tanti bisogni né qual via si dovesse tenere per ripararsi da tanto nembo di saette fioccate dalla peste per ogni verso.' The literary basis for this metaphorical association is the *Iliad*, where Homer describes the plague inflicted on the Greeks by Apollo as caused by Apollo's arrows.
33. See e.g. Sheila Hale (2012), p. 710–11, who acknowledges the connection between the *St Sebastian* and the epidemic of 1575–77, but unfortunately fails to explore the full depth of the linkage between image and bubonic plague. In addition, her account of the epidemic in Venice is no longer up to date, especially in regard to the circumstances and aftermath of Titian's death. For a full discussion of this argument, see my forthcoming book, *Veronese und die Krisen der venezianischen Spätrenaissance*.
34. See most recently Flavel/Franklin (2022).

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Figures

Fig. 1: Il Redentore, Venice.
Credit: Didier Descouens, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chiesa_del_Redentore_(Venice).jpg

Fig. 2: Palma Giovane, *Doge Alvise Mocenigo Intercedes with Christ the Redeemer for Plague Victims*, c. 1590, Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona.
Credit: Sailko, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Andrea_vicentino,_implorazione_per_la_cessazione_della_peste_a_venezia.jpg

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Credit: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York

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Credit: Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0 1.0 Universal

Fig. 6: Jacopo Bassano, *St Roch Visits the Plague Victims*, c. 1576, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.
Credit: ©Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan – MiC

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Credit: Wikimedia/Hermitage Museum
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Titian_sebastian.jpg

Abstract

This article analyses the effects of the plague epidemic of 1575–77 on the visual culture of Early Modern Venice. To this end, two plague images, i.e. Palma Giovane's *Doge Alvise Mocenigo Intercedes with Christ the Redeemer for Plague Victims* and Jacopo Bassano's *St Roch Visits the Plague Victims*, are compared to explore how each artist responded to the crisis through visual symbolism, narrative structures, and pictorial details. This approach highlights how the visual strategies employed in the fight against the plague also reflected a deeper social divide – between the elite's preference for an iconography associated with the theme of redemption and the *popolani*'s identification with the iconography of St Roch.

Author

Nils Weber is Max Planck PreDoc Fellow at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut and inaugural member of the research unit AC(H)E: Art Histories, Catastrophes, Heritage, Ecologies (Department Gerhard Wolf). He is PhD candidate and Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Art History at Heidelberg University.

Title

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