

Latest news from Venice 1576

An eyewitness account of the
plague of 1575-1577

Rocco Benedetti

July 2026



Colophon

Latest news from Venice by Rocco Benedetti

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Introduction

This text, written in 1576 and 1577, offers an eyewitness account of the plague in Venice, and a unique first-hand view of how it was living through a major epidemic before the advent of modern medicine.

In 1575, Venice was hit by one of the worst plague epidemics ever. Over the following two years, between 50,000 and 60,000 people died, in a city of about three times that. One third of the population perished in this two-year period.

To understand the severity of such a crisis, imagine what would happen today, if one in three citizens died in just a couple of years, of an incurable, contagious disease which killed at random, for which the authorities had no reliable remedies.

It was as bad then, as it would have been today.

Rocco Benedetti

The author, Rocco Benedetti, was a notary in Venice. We don't know much about his personal situation, but he is known to have worked in the period between 1556 and 1582. Documents, which he has attested as notary, are in the Venetian archives.

During the epidemic, his primary task was to write down last wills and testaments of those who expected to die soon.

In quieter times, he offered his services to the merchants and financiers of the Rialto market. His 'office' was a desk under a portico, which was absolutely normal for the time.

His role as notary at the Rialto markets meant that he had a wide range of contacts, both in the Venetian nobility, and in the citizen class, to which he himself belonged.

He was therefore a well-bred, well-educated, and well-connected individual, a cultured and studied person, one of the pillars of civil society.

This account of the plague in 1576 wasn't his first public writings. In 1574, he had published a short account of the feasts and celebrations held in Venice for the visit that year of Henry III, King of France and Poland.

Manuscripts and booklets

Benedetti's account of the plague in Venice exists in at least four versions: two manuscripts from his own hand, and two printed versions.

What seems to be the first manuscript, today in the *Biblioteca Civica di Verona*, is titled *The most notable events which happened in Venice due to the plague in the year 1576 described by me, Rocco Benedetti, Venetian notary*.

It also carries a dedication, to *The most Illustrious and most Excellent Lord, Sir Giacomo Foscarini, Knight, Superintendent-General of Candia, and my most honoured Lord and Patron*.

The manuscript is dated February 15th, 1577.

Another copy, held in the *Museo Correr* in Venice, has the simple title *Events of the plague in the year 1576*, and no attribution, dedication or date. It is, however, in the same hand, and the content is practically identical.

The two printed versions are both from 1577, and dated in the text to June 28th, 1577. One is printed in Urbino, the other in Bologna.

While the contents of the two printed copies are identical, they both differ from the manuscripts. Language and vocabulary is less Venetian, and more Florentine — probably to reach a wider audience — some parts have been modified, and fairly large segments left out entirely.

Notes on the translation

This translation from the Venetian to English is based on a transcription of the manuscript in Venice, made by Donatella Calabi, Luca Molà, Simone Rauch and Elena Svalduz in 2020.

They published their work on the website of the [*Associazione Progetto Rialto*](#) and in a booklet with [*Cierre Edizioni, 2021*](#).

Without their work — a published, machine-readable transcription of the manuscript — this translation wouldn't exist.

Benedetti wrote some biblical citations in Latin, which I have kept in the main text. Their translations, taken from the King James Bible, with the exact references are in the footnotes.

The original, both in the manuscripts and in the printed versions, was one single block of text, spanning over a dozen pages. Reading such an unbroken text is not easy, so I have added paragraph breaks and subtitles rather liberally.

The subtitles are *not* in the original.

Finally, one Venetian word remains in the translation because there is no proper translation which communicates the same.

The word *pizzigamorti* literally means somebody who removes the dead. In normal times, they were undertakers, who collected the body, prepared it for funeral, and took care of the actual burying after the religious rites.

During the plague epidemics, due to the high mortality among the *pizzigamorti*, people of the absolutely lowest social standing were enticed or pressed into such service: stragglers, vagabonds, beggars, convicted criminals, etc. In the extreme circumstances of the epidemic, this led to numerous cases of abuse, theft, fraud and whatnot, as Benedetti narrates.

About the cultural context

The original manuscripts are 450 years old. Much has changed, and we do not live in the same world as Rocco Benedetti.

Many things, concepts and ideas, which were evident and obvious to him, not worthy of any explanation, might be odd, weird or even entirely incomprehensible to us.

Some of the main differences are covered in five appendices, included after Benedetti's account.

The plague still exists, even if it is mostly absent in Europe today. Appendix A gives an overview of what the plague is and how it spreads, in modern terms.

Bacteria were discovered in the later 1800s, and antibiotics in the 1900s, so at the time of Benedetti, doctors and others had no such knowledge. Their interpretation of the disease was based on ideas from Antiquity, such as *humours*, *miasma*, *buboes*, *tumours*, malignant air, and more, which is discussed in appendix B.

Benedetti lived in the Republic of Venice, an ancient nation, which ceased to exist over two centuries ago. The Venetian Republic, like any other state, had institutions, legal and administrative systems, and traditions and customs, which all shaped how it responded to an emergency like the plague epidemic. The Venetian institutions mentioned by Benedetti are described in appendix C, but one is essential for the understanding of the text.

Matters of the plague were governed by the *Magistrato alla Sanità*, which was a kind of ministry for public health. Rather than one person in charge, there were five: two Over-superintendents of Health, and three Superintendents of Health, which were all appointed for terms of one year.

The epidemic in 1575–1577 was not the first encounter Venice had with the plague. Based on earlier experiences, the *Magistrato alla Sanità* had in the 1400s established two *lazzaretti* on islands in the Venetian lagoon.

The *Lazzaretto Vecchio* was primarily a hospital for the plague stricken, but hospital more in the sense of *hospitality*, than as a place offering cures and treatments. In the 1500s, there was no cure for the plague.

The *Lazzaretto Nuovo*, on the other hand, was not for the sick, but for the suspect. Persons, and goods, which had been in contact with victims of the plague, were suspect of carrying the contagion. They were consequently placed in quarantine, which in normal times happened on the *Lazzaretto Nuovo*.

Venetian society was divided in classes, which governed practically all social interactions, and, while rarely said explicitly by Benedetti, the class differences were everywhere. The nobles ran the state, citizens were merchants, shop-keepers and administrators,

while commoners and foreigners did most of the manual work needed. All this, and some notes on the Venetian economy, are in appendix D.

Venice had historically very little farmland, and therefore developed an economy based on international trade and manufacturing. It was a very wealthy and a very metropolitan place, with people from all over Europe and the Mediterranean basin coming and going all the time. Consequently, the lockdowns imposed during the epidemic, and the reluctance of foreign merchants to come to Venice, hit very hard, stifling trade and travel, which were the backbone of the Venetian economy. The detrimental effects on trade and business really left a mark on Rocco Benedetti, who, as a notary, lived in that world of trade and business.

Finally, Benedetti name-drops some people, who were famous or well-known in his time. Fame is fickle, however, and these once celebrities are now mostly forgotten. Appendix E contains very short biographies of some of the persons mentioned in the text.

Other minor notes, explanations and comments are in footnotes throughout the translation.

Latest news from Venice

To Lord Giacomo Foscarino,¹ Knight and Superintendent-General of the Realm of Candia²

I have undertaken to describe the most notable events that occurred in Venice this year of 1576, during which the plague has reigned so fiercely.

Therefore, I believe that this description, although sad and tearful, shouldn't be, if not pleasing to Your Excellency, who has been absent for a while, not so much to understand the progression of so many events which didn't happen in the distant past, but to see, as in living portrait, that no one should ever become haughty by the riches, honours, or grandeurs of this world, which are constantly in danger of falling at the smallest nod of the great God, who ultimately turns his merciful eyes toward those who with contrite hearts turn to him.

The arrival of the plague

I say then that this most beautiful city, which has always been a courteous and faithful host to the people of the world, when after the long hardships of war³ it hoped to live many years of happiness, having taken as a happy omen of its good fortune the fact that it had had the opportunity to receive in transit, with that great auspiciousness and triumph that has been seen, the majesty of

1 For a short biography of *Giacomo Foscarini*, see Appendix E.

2 *Candia* was the Venetian name for the island of Crete, which at the time was a Venetian colonial possession. Foscarini was in effect governor of a province.

3 The 4th Ottoman-Venetian war started in 1570, over disputes about the Venetian dominion of Cyprus, which was lost in 1570. The victory at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 was much celebrated, but in the peace agreed in 1573, the loss of Cyprus to the Ottoman Empire was confirmed.

Henry the Third, Most Christian King of France and the Fourth of Poland,⁴ when, by odd occurrence, it was completely turned upside-down by the great fury of the plague, which, striking from no one knows whence, first attacked at the gates of Italy the city of Trento, and having devastated it, then passed to Verona, from where it was principally (by divine grace) driven out by the work of the most valiant lord Nicolò Barbarigo, then Podestà.

Afterwards, having spread out in other parts, it went off to make more marked attacks on us, and finally, having passed like an invisible ghost between the guards, who were continually watching on all sides to forbid its passage, it entered this city, where it began little by little to snake its way around, and to strike first this one, then that one, filling everyone with terror and mortal danger.

The first measures

Then the Lords Superintendents of Health, consulting on how to repress the evil seen in the Book of Numbers of the Old Testament, chapter V,⁵ that God ordered Moses to drive out from the camp all the lepers and some infected with contagious disease, so as not to contaminate the others, decreed that it was best to send the wounded as soon as possible to Lazaretto Vecchio to recover, and the healthy ones who lived under the same roof as them to Lazaretto Novo to do quarantine for forty days.

4 Henry III of France, and IV of Poland, visited Venice in 1574, and the Republic of Venice spared no expense or effort to put on a magnificent show.

5 *And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, "Command the children of Israel, that they put out of the camp every leper, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead: Both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them; that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell." And the children of Israel did so, and put them out without the camp: as the LORD spake unto Moses, so did the children of Israel. — Numbers, V, 1–4.*

They then ordered with the Senate that all the household goods of the infected be burned and with the money of the Public Purse be partially compensated, and that the ministers were required to do this by night to avoid further saddening the city and to avoid making the news spread outside with greater clamour.

These measures, although they seemed good, nevertheless resulted in grave harm, not so much to the public as to individuals because the plague, as it made greater progress every day, led to the widespread burning of property, and consequently, a huge amount of public money was being spent, but it was but a small relief to the poor.

Moreover, various infected goods were often found in the streets, believed to have been placed by independent agents to provide more opportunities for plunder by setting fire to the city. Nor was it unthinkable that some unknown scoundrel was plotting the ruin of the city with such seeds.

Therefore, the Lord Superintendents, changing their minds, decided that in the future the ministers should not exercise their office except during the day, and that only the beds and those things that could have caught the contagion through use should be burned, and the rest of the belongings should be cleansed on the Certosa⁶ and other distant places designated for this purpose.

It seemed that the diligence of said Lords, applied in all things with these and other good orders, was of such benefit that the city remained completely free from the plague.

6 The island of Certosa is located just east of Venice, on the access canal from the sea to the city. It was then home to a monastery, and the church of *Sant'Andrea del Lido*, both of which have since been demolished.

The Second Wave

But alas, the newfound joy did not last long because the disease arose again, more fierce than ever, and threw everything into confusion.

In this new turn of events, the Lords forbade that no one could go into somebody else's house for fifteen days, nor women or children could leave their homes, and one heard a great roaring and howling of dogs and cats throughout the city, because of them being everywhere, and as animals which, passing from place to place, could infect homes, a Sicilian Vespers⁷ was made.

Then it was necessary to pay people to remove the said dead animals from the canals, which brought about an intolerable stench.

A case occurred in those days worthy of laughter on the one hand and of compassion on the other, which was that a poor madman ran through the city one Sunday after lunch, at the time the Grand Council was meeting to elect the magistrates,⁸ and in every house he found sequestered he removed the planks,⁹ saying to the seized ones, 'Brothers, come out, come out, the Lords have freed you because, thank God, there is no more plague.'

The sequestered, believing him to be a public minister, happily left, shaking hands with one or another of his friends, and many of

- 7 The Sicilian Vespers was a uprising against the French in Sicily in 1282, which led to the mass killing of most of the Frenchmen on the island. It is used here in the sense of a mass killing, a bloodbath.
- 8 All noblemen present in the city were obliged to participate in the meetings of the Greater Council, including the Magistrates of Health.
- 9 Two planks crossed, nailed over the doorway, were used to indicate that a household was under quarantine.

them quickly went to the church of San Rocco¹⁰ to thank God for their release.

The Superintendents, hearing this news after the Council, could not have the freed persons sequestered again until the following day, but meanwhile, having seized the madman, they wanted to hang him by the neck.¹¹

However, the College,¹² pitying his madness, did not want him to die, but to be held in prison for a few days.

Discord between doctors

A competition then broke out between doctors in recognising the bodies, some saying that they were all touched by the plague, and others of petechiae and other curable diseases.

With the Lords, the opinion of the former prevailed, who were greatly hated by the people for the many accidents that seemed to haunt the families because of their attestations, which were certainly believed.

It was of no use to anyone to say this is a humour of Gallic disease,¹³ this is acme, this is a descent, a catarrh, a stain, an ancient mark or something else of that nature because in short everything was taken for buboes,¹⁴ for abscesses and for pestilential signs.

10 St Roch (*San Rocco* or *Roch de Montpellier*) was one of the most popular saints for protection against the plague. A Frenchman, on pilgrimage to Rome in 1367, got the plague, but survived miraculously.

11 From 1556 the *Magistrato alla Sanità* could apply the death penalty for severe infringements of their orders.

12 From 1563 a college of sages, appointed by the Senate, served as court of appeal for capital cases from the Magistracy of Health.

13 Syphilis, often called *morbo gallico* or *morbo francese* in Italy, as it was believed to have originated in France.

14 A tell-tale sign in an early phase of the plague are swollen lymph nodes, which were called buboes, hence Bubonic Plague.

In any case, no physician, no surgeon, no barber, no matter how much they were promised, could be found who dared to go into homes to treat the sick, and what is even more lamentable was that Christian piety had fled in the company of health, since no friend could be found who would visit another sick friend, nor a priest or friar who would hear confessions any longer.

Mercuriale and Capodivacca

A very diligent investigation was carried out into the practices, and as soon as it was understood that anyone had in any way engaged with people suspected of having the plague, or had received anything from them, no matter how small, they were immediately sequestered in their house.

While the city was in such dire straits, the Senate deemed it necessary so that everything might be governed with greater order and authority, to appoint, as it did, two highly esteemed Senators as Over-superintendents of Health.

And in the midst of this great affliction, Mercuriale and Capodivacca,¹⁵ two most famous physicians, arrived from Padua,¹⁶ and appeared before the Prince in the College and assured His Serenity with strong arguments that there was no plague in any way, but rather a certain type of malignant disease which, if not treated in time, could quickly become pestilential, offering themselves to personally enter the homes of the sick to cure them.

Their opinions were accepted, and they offered to treat four doctors from Venice as well.

15 For *Mercuriale* and *Capodivacca*, see Appendix E.

16 The University of Padua was one of the highest esteemed European schools for the study of medicine.

All the others, who were of different opinions, opposed it out of interest for their honour, and after the matter was bitterly disputed on both sides, in the end the Prince applauded the judgment of the Paduan doctors, and to honour them he wanted them to be present on the day of San Vito at the feast he usually gives every year for the Signoria.¹⁷

Thus, by boldly undertaking as many visits as the time permitted them, and by occasionally helping the needy from their own funds, the entire city was consoled, admiring them as two terrestrial Gods of medicine, and calling them Saints Cosmas and Damian,¹⁸ who had been sent by God to free it from so many sufferings.

These doctors were truly worthy of the highest praise, since finding themselves rich in goods, fortune, fame, and reputation, they had undertaken such an undertaking, fuelled only by zeal for charity.

But since after their arrival things worsened, not only did the aura of their praises among the people cease, but it was even publicly said that they were the cause of the ruin of the city, since the people assured by the authority of their words spent time together without regard, especially seeing them go everywhere freely, despite the fact that a very Reverend Jesuit Father, who for the love of Christ had gone with them to console the sick, had died of the plague, and that others of his family were said to be infected.

So that there was no longer any doubt that the evil that was spreading was not a real plague, the doctors, seeing that they

17 The Feast of San Vito is on June 15th, which is the anniversary of the Tiepolo-Querini conspiracy in 1310. The event was a fixture in the annual calendar of the republic.

18 The Saints Cosmas and Damian were two Roman doctors, who were martyred under the persecutions of Diocletian in the early 300s. They are the patron saints of doctors, surgeons, barbers and others.

were working in vain at the risk of their lives and honour, decided to present the Prince with a copious letter of their own, and so they did, in which, having set forth the defence of their reasons and discussing the nature of the evils that prevailed and the remedies that should be used, in conclusion, they offered themselves always ready to serve His Serenity and begged him with his good grace to be granted permission to depart, which was benignly granted to them, and it was not long after they returned to Padua that the plague began to make itself felt again in that city.

The city abandoned

Now it was customary to put in writing on the stone of the herald¹⁹ at San Marco all those who died from the disease in the city every day, at the beginning of July the list began to be so numerous that it frightened everyone, so much so that the Princes of Italy banned this city, not wanting even the couriers to come or go with letters.

The ambassadors went far away to save themselves. Almost all the foreigners likewise left.

Most of the gentlemen, citizens, and other wealthy people retired to their villas. The merchants of silk and wool cloth, who gave a living to two-thirds of the city, stopped hiring labourers.

Business between merchants completely disappeared from the marketplaces. The cloth merchants of San Marco and Rialto and almost all the craftsmen shuttered their shops.

19 This is a short column, which still stands at the corner of the Basilica di San Marco, from which the heralds made public announcements.

The litigants and the lawyers left the Palace,²⁰ and the judges and other ministers of law also abandoned it.

The marketplaces were devoid of people, and people walked the streets without bumping into each other.

No more sounds, nor singing, nor other pleasant entertainments could be heard along the streets and canals, but in their place could be heard the continuous crying, sobbing, lamenting, shrieking and howling of tormented persons, some by the evil disease and some by the unhappy death of their loved ones.

Sin and absolution

So, considering the miserable state of the city, I went away with my heart completely torn, imagining seeing at the door of the Church of San Marco the prophet Jeremiah dressed in sackcloth and hair shirt, who, weeping bitterly, said:: *‘Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo;²¹ viae Sion lugent, eo quod non sint qui veniant ad solemnitatem; omnes porte eius distructae, sacerdotes eius gementes, virgines eius squalidae, et ipsa oppressa amaritudine,²² non est qui consoletur eam ex omnibus caris eius, omnes amici eius spreverunt eam et facti sunt inimici;²³ Hierusalem, Hierusalem convertere, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum²⁴*

20 The most important courts and tribunals were located inside the Palazzo Ducale, and were, in fact, called *Corti di Palazzo*.

21 *How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! — Lamentations, 1-1.*

22 *The ways of Zion do mourn because none come to the solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate: her priests sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness. — Lamentations, 1-4.*

23 *among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies. — Lamentations 1-2.*

24 *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God. — this is the chorus of the way the Lamentations were chanted during Holy Week.*

Never before in living memory, nor in the memory of writers, had the city been oppressed by such grave burdens as at that time. Therefore, the Most Blessed Father Gregory XIII, with paternal charity, sent two *motu proprios*²⁵ to help it with spiritual graces.

Through one of them, as Vicar on earth of Christ our Lord and Redeemer, he gave, His Divine Majesty praying, peace and blessing to the city, and through the other pardon and remission of sins to those unfortunates who, dying of illness, were not conceded receiving the most holy sacraments of the Church.

On the other hand, the Most Reverend Monsignor Trivisano,²⁶ Patriarch of Venice, had a Jubilee proclaimed for confession and contrition to be heard on the day of Our Lady of August,²⁷ and at the same time he gave orders that every day after None²⁸ and the Hail Mary the ringing of the bell be repeated, so that the people, kneeling, would say three Paternosters and three Hail Marys, praying to the goodness of God to save them from such a scourge; as is still observed with great devotion.

No respite from the plague

The plague continued to cause greater carnage every hour, and every day inducing greater terror and compassion among the poor infected, who, not without tears from those around them, were seen being carried down to the door by their children, fathers and mothers, and there, stripped naked, their bodies were shown to the doctors to be examined, having to do the same with the dead.

25 A *motu proprio* is a Papal decree issued without a formal request.

26 Giovanni II Trevisan, Patriarch of Venice, 1560–1591.

27 The 15th of August, a Catholic holiday for the Assumption of Mary.

28 The ninth hour in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, approximately 3pm.

It became my turn to bring down three of my deceased, namely the mother, the maid and a nephew, who, although they had shown no signs of plague neither in life nor in death, were nevertheless by the local doctor marked as uncertain; and I was forced, given an order that two uncertain deaths were to be considered suspect, to remain sequestered at home for forty days.

The most miserable cases were of those who were alone at home, who, if by chance they fell ill, with no one to offer them any help, died miserably, and if they remained two or three days without appearing to give an account of themselves, their death was suspected; so the *pizzigamorti*,²⁹ entering the house, or breaking down the door or climbing up the windows, found them dead either in their beds or on the floor or elsewhere, according to where they had been transported by the rage of the disease.

It was also a terrifying sight to see throughout the city thousands of house doors blocked with planks as a sign of sequestration.

But a far more horrible spectacle was the multitude of boats that continually went back and forth, some to Lazaretto Vecchio loaded with the infected and the dead all mixed together, others to Lazaretto Novo loaded with healthy people, others with companies going to the said Lazaretto to carry out the regiment of the forty days of quarantine, towed by other boats.

Others then were seen going out to certain designated places loaded with spoils to be sacrificed to Vulcan,³⁰ and others returning to the city loaded with poor widows and unfortunate wards

29 The *pizzigamorti* were manual labourers, charged with moving the dead, the sick and the suspect, and with cleansing houses and goods. They were the real front-line workers. The Venetian word literally means collectors of the dead, but they did more than just that.

30 To be burned, Vulcan being the god of fire.

wearing only one mournful dress of plain black cloth;³¹ most of whom, upon disembarking, remained confused and almost beside themselves, having no house or roof to take shelter in, and even seeing themselves as if by a miracle returned to life, they could not help but send praise and thanks to the Lord God up to heaven.

All these things represented a sad and painful triumph of death, which appeared all the more horrible and fierce because it seemed as if the justice of God had sent it there precisely to contrast, as a flip side of the medal, the magnificent and sumptuous triumph already achieved, as I said, in receiving the Most Christian King of France.

Lazzaretto Vecchio

But leaving the city and turning towards the Lazzaretti, I say in truth that on one side the Old Lazaretto resembled the Inferno, where from every side came out a stench and an unbearable fetor, one could hear continuous moaning and sighing, and at all hours one could see clouds of smoke spreading widely in the air due to the burning of bodies.

Some who miraculously returned from there unharmed tell, among other details, that at the time of that great deluge of the infected there were three or four of them to a bed, and that since there was no one to attend to them because a large number of servants were missing, they had to leave their places to get food and do other chores, and that all they did was continually lift the dead from their beds and throw them into the pits.

And it often happened that those who were in agony, or left paralysed without speaking or moving, were lifted by the *pizzigamorti* and thrown onto the pile of corpses, and if any of them were then

31 Their own clothes had been burned on arrival for quarantine.

seen moving the hands or feet, or making an act of wanting to help themselves, it was very fortunate if some *pizzigamorto*, moved by pity, wanted to go and remove them from there. In the end, many, maddened by the disease, especially at night, would jump out of bed and, screaming with terrifying voices of the souls of the damned, would run here and there, bumping into each other and suddenly falling dead to the ground. Some, furiously rushing out of their rooms, would throw themselves into the water or run madly through the orchards, and later that day be found dead among the thorns or elsewhere covered in blood.

Lazzaretto Nuovo

On the other side, the Lazaretto Nuovo resembled Purgatory, where the unfortunate people in poor condition were suffering and deploring the death of their loved ones, their miserable state and the desolation of their homes.

At the height of the plague, seven to eight thousand infected were languishing at the Lazaretto Vecchio.

Please see, Your Excellency, how many medicines and syrups, plasters, ointments and patches were needed to treat them, and how many broths, loaves of bread, distillates and other things were needed to restore them.

It was truly impossible to meet such needs with so few who were employed in that service in such danger, nor should we be surprised if barely ten percent made it, and hundreds died every day in those smoky and stinking beds.

At the Lazaretto Nuovo, between inside and outside in the boats, which looked like an armada, there were sometimes as many as ten thousand people.

Emergency structures

The number of these people had grown so much that, as the Lazaretti could not accommodate them, two hospitals were built for the sick, one at San Lazzaro³² and the other at San Clemente,³³ and for the healthy, five hundred wooden houses on Le Vignole and others around in the lagoons.

Some individuals, to make a profit, tried to build on posts, that it looked like the huts of bird hunters.

In addition to this, many vessels called burchielle³⁴ were taken from the Arsenal to accommodate the poor people, and some old hulls of large galleys, on which certain barracks were erected for the isolation of those who returned healed from Lazaretto Vecchio.

Where it was no longer possible to burn the dead because of the great stench, a cemetery was built at a short distance on the Lido, in a place called Cavanella,³⁵ in which very deep pits were dug, where, placing as they did on the said Lazaretto, one layer of bodies, one of quicklime, and one of dirt, and so on, layer by layer, as much as possible, so that from one day to the next they were all turned to ashes.

The dead of other causes from the city were then taken to be buried in coffins in Sant'Ariano³⁶ di Torcello, and because the Certosa and other places designated for the cleansing of the goods were not sufficient, which, having to be kept in quarantine for a period

32 The island of *San Lazzaro*, about 2km south-east of Venice, had been a leper colony in the Middle Ages, but it was mostly abandoned in the 1500s.

33 The island of *San Clemente*, circa 2km south of Venice, housed a monastery.

34 Wide river transport boats.

35 The exact location is unknown. The Lido was mostly uninhabited in the 1500s, and the name simply means small dead-end canals where boats could be moored.

36 The island of *Sant'Ariano*, some 15km north of Venice, was used as an ossuary from shortly before the epidemic in Venice.

of forty days, most of them were damaged from being exposed to the air, the rain, and the wind day and night.

Those who had spacious houses were given the freedom to cleanse their things in their own houses, and to others in suitable places elsewhere.

All in all, the Prince³⁷ spent a fortune in maintaining so many people and incurring so many expenses, and the matter became a chaos in which every wise man was left confused, not seeing how so many needs could be fulfilled nor what course to take to defend from such a storm of arrows, which the plague rained down from every direction.

The pizzigamorti

The Prince,³⁸ seeing that the Superintendents and Over-superintendents alone could not sustain such a burden of work, decided with the Senate that three Presidents, noblemen of authority, should be assigned to each of the six sestieri of the city, who would take care of those provisions that seemed necessary to them for the health of the city.

He also ordered that for each district there be noblemen and citizens appointed to take care of their neighbours, reporting everything to the Presidents of their sestiere, and, at the same time, that they should have guards standing at night to ensure that the houses of those who went to the Lazzaretti were not robbed or that other inconveniences did not arise, therefore every evening a number of neighbours had to be chosen at random for this purpose, having subsequently been forbidden under very severe pen-

37 In this case, the Prince means the Republic of Venice, i.e., the state.

38 Here, the Prince means the *Signoria*, which was the Doge and his six councillors, the closest Venice had to an executive in the modern sense. See Appendix C.

alties that anyone should dare to go out after the second hour of the night.

The *pizzigamorti* became fewer, as there had been a great number of them affected by the plague, and they included not only as many wanderers, vagabonds and other desperate people as could be found in the city, but also as many criminals condemned to the galleys as could be removed from prisons and from the galleys by promising them their release after they had survived serving a certain time.

Therefore, the corpses remained in the houses for two, three and even four days before being removed, thus causing, in the great summer heat, an intolerable stench for the servants and neighbours.

And because of this lack of *pizzigamorti*, the infected were often taken to the Lazaretto in the same boat with the dead, and before they arrived there, many of them died of nausea and grief.

Public announcements were made throughout the cities and castles of the mainland of this Most Illustrious Dominion to find the aforementioned *pizzigamorti*, promising a good salary to anyone who wanted to serve.

This measure was truly good, for a thousand of them came from various places, as cheerfully as if they had been invited to some solemn wedding.

Some of them were sent to the Lazaretto Vecchio to serve, others were distributed throughout the sestieri to remove by boat infected goods, the sick and the dead, and to perform other services; some went to the districts to clean the houses, and others were sent to help Padua, which was in great need of them.

Social problems

Later, the public place of the racket of the whores at Rialto³⁹ was sacked, and they were sent to the Lazaretto Vecchio to serve with many other women of the city who, due to the scarcity of work or the lack of buyers of their goods, were also forced to close their shops.

There was also a dire need for porters, of whom, miraculously, not one could be found, where there used to be such abundance in every square, on the canal sides and in every corner of the city that when one was called on land, entire crowds would race to see what was wanted.

Likewise, there was not a single chimney sweeper or drain cleaner to be found,⁴⁰ so that people were forced to do all the work themselves, which seemed very strange to them.

At first, poverty was alleviated by the rich, who therefore voluntarily taxed themselves for every contract, some for one thing and some for another, but as most of them left the city, especially the poor began to suffer, and crying from all sides that they were dying of hunger and every hardship.

To help them, a tax was twice imposed on the tenants of houses and shops who paid rent of more than twenty-five ducats of one grosso per ducat,⁴¹ to be paid within eight days and to be collected and dispensed by the deputies of the districts, under penalty of double the rate for those who did not pay on time, and on the

39 An area near Rialto had since the Middle Ages been destined as living quarters for prostitutes, called the *Castelletto*. Benedetti probably refers to what remained of this area.

40 Chimney sweepers and drain cleaners also cleaned out overfull cesspits and exhumed bones in cemeteries, to make room for new burials.

41 This was circa 4%, as there were, at this time, 24 *grossi* to one *ducato*.

second occasion, those absent from the city were charged three grossi per ducat.

This tax was collected with some difficulty, as everyone acted like a poor man in such calamity of times, nor was it seen that this was sufficient to relieve the poor.

The poor were found innumerable in the greatest need imaginable, since countless widows and orphans were left without government or means of any kind, and since all crafts and industries had disappeared, it was impossible to sell or pawn any kind of goods, which were at such a low price that anyone who had wanted to give the value of one hundred ducats for ten would not have found them, except for copper, pewter, rings, chains and other such gold objects, which few of low fortune, in such distress, had not already disposed of.

Lockdown

These strange accidents led some to believe that the deaths of so many poor persons were largely caused by their great hardship.

Others argued that the high mortality rate was due to simple contagion, and by addressing that, the city could be saved.

Holding this opinion, the very reverend Father Fiamma, a famous preacher of the Order of Charity, came to speak with a secretary about the provisions that could be made, whereupon the secretary having made this known to the Prince, His Serenity had the Father called to the College, who spoke with such fervour of spirit that he moved them to tears, reminding them how the goodness of God had miraculously founded this blessed city in these waters with his holy hands as a bulwark of all Christendom, and that having always defended and saved it for so many centuries from so many

storms and tempests, and preserved it unblemished, likewise one had to be sure that in the future he would have supported and happily favoured it, until the end of the century, for the glory and exaltation of its sacred faith.

Nor should His Serenity have been dismayed by this plague, which, since it did not come from the air, which was better than it had ever been, was clearly understood to have spread through the behaviour and speech of the people, who, if they had had all secluded themselves in their homes for fifteen days, would have discovered in the meantime whence it emerged, and could have easily limited it and expunged the city, referring in this regard to the example of hunters, who, just as they can hardly catch the wild animal in the open field, so it is easy for them to put it in their power once they have brought it to a narrow pass.

His Serenity was pleased with the account of the Father, and placed among the Sages in the Consulta, a resolution was taken in the Senate to make the sequestration for fifteen days, which resolution, together with other orders to be observed at that time, was published.

Three Senators were appointed to oversee provisions and other matters in this business.

A census was made of the people who were in the city, and they found to be over one hundred and twenty thousand people.

All the poor were considered, to whom were to be given from the public purse for the said period of sequestration soldi per head per day, which amounted to around sixty thousand ducats.

Differing ideas

And while the other provisions were being made with speed and the matter was about to be carried out, some important difficulties were discovered, so it was decided to suspend the resolution for the time being.

In these events, everyone wanted to express their opinion.

The good sailors used to say that one should not lose one's way but rather be of good cheer because after a great tempest at sea it is always the custom for the calm to return.

Other natural men, who judge present things by past ones, believed it necessary to put an end to this plague once and for all, just as it had done so many other times when it had reached its peak here and elsewhere, and that it was like a madman who, having run and bumped here and there for a long time, finally, tired, loses the strength of his fury.

The contemplatives considered the matter hopeless, saying that if the evil had multiplied so much because of a single infected person, they did not see how it could diminish at all so quickly.

The astrologers held out hope that the stars, soon to be revolving with benign aspects, would at the same time turn around the evil, which was certainly not caused by contagion but by celestial influence, as had been predicted by them long before, seeing that almost all those who fell ill developed some tumour, paroptis, acne, bubo or abscess, and that many people who never set foot outside the door, nor allowed anyone to mingle in the house, were overcome by the malignity of this disease.

Only Annibale Raimondo, a most excellent astrologer, said in a speech of his published in print that the said contagion did not

arise from the polluted air nor from infected exhalation coming out of the earth, but from the waters of the wells corrupted by the rising sea in the year 1574, drunk by the people.

The philosophers said that these were bloodlettings that were performed by nature when the species multiplied too much, as a good doctor does when he opens the vein of those who are too hot,⁴² and that especially this city, with its population having grown excessively, needed a similar purgation.

Finally, spiritual people resolved to say that God, angry with us for our wickedness, had given the bow and arrows of his wrath to the exterminating Angel to strike us, and that we must strive with prayers and good works to appease his divine justice in the manner done in the holy memory of Pope Gregory the Great, a most holy man, who, while Rome was in this disaster,⁴³ with thousands of them falling every day, was able with his fasts, works of charity and prayers to move God to forgive those people, who one day visibly saw above Castel Sant'Angiolo, as it has since been called, an Angel with a naked sword in his hand, all bloody, to polish it and put it back in its sheath, and immediately disappeared, the scourge of mortality ceasing at that moment.

Charlatans

Every now and then, someone would appear before the Prince and offer to share his secrets with the city if he were given a good salary.

42 See Appendix A.

43 Gregory the Great, Pope 590–604, during whose reign the plague of Justinian raged through the Byzantine Empire and Italy. The plague of Justinian has recently been confirmed to be *yersinia pestis* too.

When they were then tested, it was found that their preservatives, electuaries and medicines upset stomachs and ruined complexions.

Among the first was Antonio Gualtiero, a Flemish merchant, who, offering to liberate the city in eight days, reminded that the healthy should fast at dawn and drink three sips of their own urine, and before dinner eat a little bread in vinegar with rue, and that the infected should likewise drink theirs, both in the morning and in the evening, putting instead a poultice on the bubo, some of their own warm dung, keeping the wound clean with urine until it was healed.

And while he was in the mood to receive a large provision for this, and to justify the secret he went to the homes of the poor people who had been sequestered to persuade them to do so, one day by bad luck he fell to the ground and bruised his arm, on which a small tumour had developed, and he began to suspect that it was the beginning of a bubo. So to cure it, he put a poultice of dung on it and, constantly drinking as much of the urine as if it were syrup, his blood and vital spirits became so altered that in a few days, vomiting his soul, he ended up killing himself with his remedy, which had been the cause of many people falling ill and dying, as was said.

Then an excellent doctor named Annibale Girolodi came diligently from Ghedi near Brescia, who offered to perform miracles, and he was sent to the Lazaretto Vecchio, as he had requested, with a boat loaded with bottles and stills for distilling and large jars or barrels full of liqueurs, but not as soon as he arrived, he and a servant who had got the bubo, died there within a few days.

Deaths of doctors

Here, within a few days, fifty-seven of the best doctors similarly died, some having gone in turn, under duress, to identify the dead and sick, others having finally been persuaded by rewards to visit the sick in their homes, or to do service to friends, or to ingratiate themselves with great men. Nor did it help them to go armed with antidotes and preservatives, nor claim to be more wise and cautious than the other.

It was ridiculous to see some pharmacists having short notices placed high up in capital letters that said: ‘Certain preservatives against the plague from the Most Excellent such-and-such’, and that on the other hand they kept the doors of their shops barred and immediately put any money they touched in vinegar for fear of being infected,⁴⁴ and that shortly thereafter one of them was heard to have died together with the Excellency of the Preservative.

It was not otherwise true that the Most Excellent Ravenna⁴⁵ was one of those who died from the Preservative, indeed he is better than ever and says that before he dies, among many other things worthy of memory that he has done, he wants to erect a Museum with a Royal Library in the city.

However, there is malicious gossip that he has been withdrawn at home all this time, distilling drinkable gold to cover such expenses.

What he has spent and what he is about to spend, is from the money that he has in good times saved with his valour, and if he already sequestered himself in his house it was to avoid having to

44 See Appendix A.

45 See Appendix E.

run into such a sort of bestial plague, which made even the bravest lose their wits.

Flagellants and processions

Three evenings, one evening after another, an unknown man appeared in the square, who was thought to be a good soul of a gentleman dressed in the habit of a brotherhood,⁴⁶ with a large crucifix in his hand, singing the litanies in a feeble voice, followed by many people.

This was the reason why all the districts of the city began to imitate him, visiting the church of San Rocco.

But since it was understood that many infected people, hoping that God would heal them, went there and infected the other healthy people, it was forbidden to go around in procession like this except to the church of San Marco, which every morning had its own around the square, sometimes with the crucifix and sometimes with the image of our Lady, most holy Mother of grace.

In this procession many senators, nobles and others of the people were seen walking in a long line with great devotion.

Pledge for the Redentore church

Meanwhile, seeing that the city was not improving, and that, the plague having previously spread almost exclusively among the poor, it was now beginning to affect the rich and persons of noble condition, fear grew, and the conviction grew ever stronger in everyone's mind that our faults were undoubtedly a punishment sent upon us by divine will.

46 Members of religious confraternities often dressed in long robes and covered their faces with hoods, with only small openings for the eyes.

Whereupon the Prince, together with the Senate, as a sign that he had to obtain forgiveness from the eternal Father, decided to erect a temple for Christ our Lord and Redeemer which would be called the Redentore,⁴⁷ for which ten thousand ducats of the public money would be spent, and which would be made simply of brick so that it would be finished all the more quickly.

Then for three days public supplications were made to His Divine Majesty and on the third in the church of St. Mark, after the procession had taken place and Mass had been said, His Serenity, standing on the steps of the choir, where an altar had been erected, turned to the people in tears and spoke to them first about divine justice and clemency in punishing and pardoning peoples, in which he went into great detail, citing various examples from Scripture, and how, having left the chosen people to suffer for a time by the cruelty of Pharaoh, he finally miraculously freed them by allowing them to cross the Red Sea safe and sound, while submerging the Pharaoh and his entire army in it.

And if the said people came to suffer hunger in the desert, he had manna rain down from heaven to feed them, and so when they were thirsty he gave power to Moses, who, by striking the stone with his rod, to quench their thirst, a great quantity of sweet and soothing water flowed out, and finally, he allowed them to go safely to the land of promise.

Therefore, one had to have firm faith that His Divine Majesty did not want to see us completely destroyed, but that after so many tribulations inflicted on us for our sins, He would come to our aid, converting our tears into joy, provided that we turned to Him with a contrite and humbled heart, which He encouraged everyone to do in this way.

47 *Redentore* means Redeemer.

And his Serenity, turning his face towards the image of the Redeemer, with pious affection said: *'Dicam Domine sicut dixit David Rex: servus tuus ego sum, qui peccavi, iram tuam in me converte. Parce Domine, parce populo tuo'*.⁴⁸

And said how he vowed to erect a temple to His Divine Majesty, as to our Redeemer, which would be visited every year by him and his successors as an everlasting memorial of this act of clemency and forgiveness, he induced in each one great tenderness of heart and hope that the Lord God would shorten the days of His wrath, and look upon us with the eyes of His mercy.

Lockdown

It seemed that, from then on, it being the month of September, things were improving in the three sestieri beyond the Rialto Bridge, which are San Polo, Santa Croce and Ossoduro, and that in the other three on this side of the bridge, which are Castello, San Marco and Cannaregio, they were getting worse.

Therefore, the Senate, in order not to try all possible remedies, both divine and human, resolved to sequester for eight days all the persons of the three above-mentioned sestieri which were most afflicted, at home, except for a few ministers, and to provide public assistance for the said period to the poor which was of six soldi per head per day.

And while it was being discussed that nothing would be done, as had been the case with the other similar resolution, it was made public that the sequestration would begin on the eighth of Octo-

48 *I will say, O Lord, as King David said: I am your servant, who has sinned; turn your wrath against me. Forgive, Lord, forgive your people.*

ber, which was the day following that of Santa Giustina, celebrated in memory of that happy day of the naval victory.⁴⁹

Barriers were placed in the middle of the Rialto Bridge with guards to prevent anyone from passing without a written permit from the superiors.

Guards were similarly placed in each district, and in the Piazza di San Marco, in addition to the night guard of the men of the Arsenal, two armed galleys of the Most Excellent Council of Ten.⁵⁰

Abundant supplies of bread, wine, meat and other necessities of life were made for each district, with the deputies and other ministers being charged with going every day to the houses of the sequestered and ensuring that they promptly received at a fair price the things they said they needed.

Not seeing anyone going back and forth in that sequestered part of the city caused great horror and sadness.

For me, as a notary, who sometimes happened to go there to make wills, my hair often stood on end, and walking through that solitude I almost felt as if I were dreaming of wandering lost in the silence of the night through deserted and wild places, nor could I sometimes hold back my tears as I considered how such a great city, famous throughout the world for so much business and accustomed to being frequented by an infinite number of people, found itself so deserted and abandoned.

49 The battle of Lepanto, part of the 4th Ottoman-Venetian war, took place on October 7th, 1571, which was also the day of Santa Giustina.

50 Security around government in the Piazza San Marco was normally entrusted to armed guards or workers from the Arsenale (the Venetian navy docks). Likewise, war galleys were sometimes moored at the *molo*, with their guns pointing at the square, in case of an insurrection or a conspiracy.

During this time, no improvement was seen in the said districts; indeed, it seemed that the mortality rate in the others was returning to the same level, and, the Senate discussing the extension of the sequestration for two days, it was decided, after debates, not to prolong the sequestration, but to focus on extinguishing the plague with the usual measures, and above all by praying to the great God to place his holy hand on it.

Cleansing of goods

In conclusion, since the plague was so aged, and therefore so familiar, there was no one who feared it as before or took many precautions.

At first, everyone armed themselves by carrying in their hands some odoriferous ball or sponge soaked in rose vinegar, or perfumed gloves or handkerchiefs, or some bundle of rue or wormwood or other strong-smelling herbs, or around their neck some small bag of something aromatic or arsenic on the side of the heart, or by taking in the morning pills of Rufo⁵¹ or a walnut with a fig and four leaves of rue, or a pinch of theriac,⁵² rubbing it on their wrists, temples and the area of their heart, or refreshing waters, or electuaries or other compotes, all of which ultimately meant nothing when the hour of their misfortune arrived.

Then, seeing someone along the street with a sad colour on their face, everyone would move away from him and, shaking their heads, say, 'He's in trouble,' 'He's on his way,' and if any friend met him, he would say, 'Brother, stay back, don't touch me, you're sick,

51 Pills made of aloe, incense, ammoniac, myrrh, with a strong smell, originally intended as a laxative.

52 Theriac was a kind of wonder medicine, based on over sixty different ingredients, and a major industry in Venice. Besides containing small amounts of opium, it probably had little effect.

go home, poor thing, and give note to the parish priest,' because there was an order, which it was not permitted to ignore, that as soon as someone felt ill in a house, it was necessary to report it to the parish priest of the district and keep the house sequestered for three days, until the outcome was seen.

But this was nothing compared to the misfortune that sometimes befell some poor man, who, if by chance he was seen walking languishing and limping, immediately the people, moving away, would form a circle around him, and at that point the deputies of that district, or other person of authority, would order him under pain of death not to move from the place where he was, and suddenly the doctors would appear, who, having made him take off his trousers and show in public what nature and honesty hide, would take the *visum et repertum*,⁵³ and, certifying to Their Excellencies that he was infected, the *pizzigamorti* would hurry to take him by boat to the Lazaretto, when his family could still be waiting for him or to hear what had happened to him.

Now, having introduced the idea of attaching bells to the legs of the *pizzigamorti*, so that wherever they went they would be heard, the people who met them made little effort to back away, so much so that at first when the mace-bearers of the Health Authority came forward shouting 'Beware of the *pizzigamorti*,' everyone moved away with greater haste and fear than one does on Shrove Thursday from the furious bulls, hunted by the festive youths through the city.⁵⁴

53 A legal term, usually used for a formal report drawn up after an examination of a corpse on a crime scene, so likely a rather invasive and humiliating physical examination.

54 Bull fights, in the style of Pamplona, were a regular occurrence in Venice at large feasts and celebrations.

By now, everyone had learned to treat the buboes themselves thanks to the many recipes for poultices and medicines that were going around, and many, both men and women, who had returned healthy from the Lazaretto Vecchio, driven by necessity, entered the houses to treat the plague-stricken and to cleanse infected things.

Grisons

Twelve Grisons⁵⁵ appeared in tripartite company, who, based on their experiences, were permitted by the Lords to go into the houses to clean things, which they cleaned according to the quantity in one, two or three days.

Neither could it be truly known how they did it because wherever they went they did not want others to go, nor did they let anyone know what they did.

Yet, there was somebody curious who, observing their behaviour, deduced that for this service they bought myrrh, Spanish pitch, sulphur and resin, with which things they made a mixture of perfume,⁵⁶ and having arranged the infected clothes high in the rooms, they placed a good quantity of the perfume on the fire, and on top they placed rags and papers that they found around the house and a lot of juniper.

From these things came out a very thick smoke, which, when it was at its peak, closed off the rooms and remained inside until they finished carrying out the work, and the dirty things were used to be soaked in a large boiler of hot water mixed with who knows what.

55 Citizens from the Swiss canton of Graubünden.

56 For the meaning of perfume, see appendix B.

Suffice it to say that since their fame had grown great because of this, and there was an infinite amount of stuff to be cleansed and cleaned in the city, they were caught by people with promises of money, long before they could be obtained according to need.

Because the Lords urged everyone to cleanse of the goods as quickly as possible, since otherwise they would have been sent to the usual places, where in fact they could be said to have gone missing, both because the autumn weather was rainy and windy, and because everything had been thrown into confusion by the workers, since for the most part, it was not known which goods belonged to this person and which to that person, and since then, they were all squandered and spoiled in the same way, and it was not possible to bear the expense of recovering them with the interest that were due.

One day, when the aforementioned Grisoni had to elect one of their leaders, they made me go and get the election deed, and I saw them coming out of the stinking houses, dirty and smoky, looking like so many Brontes and Steropes⁵⁷ coming out of Vulcan's forge.

The leader told me how they were locked up in the rooms where they perfumed the things, waiting for the fire to be lit, and that they used various kinds of perfumes according to the quality of the things, that the smoke that their perfumes made was so dark and dense that if a candle had been lit, it couldn't be seen an arm length away, and that it was so powerful that it even made mice run away.

It happened once that a mouse, not seeing where it could save itself, threw itself on the fire to burn itself because it could not stand so much stinking smoke.

57 *Brontes* and *Steropes* are two cyclopes in Greek (and Roman) mythology.

The said leader also told me that if one or more people died of the plague in a house, they had the courage to enter it and vacate the house, the belongings and the people who were there within forty hours. However, those who were already ill would be released from the disease within the said time and would be able to recover with the remedies they had given.

In fact, one cannot help but say that they did marvellous things, since by frequenting so many infected houses and handling so many contaminated goods, they never became infected at all, nor did any accident happen to the owners of the goods after they had cleansed them.

More cleansing

The Lords also gave the permission to cleanse and clean private things to a certain Felice Brunello, who kept them closed for five days in large perforated boxes in the flowing water of the Marani Canal,⁵⁸ making them clean and safe.

Likewise, for the common good, a new order was published regarding the perfuming of suspected houses with the perfume of things similar to that of the Grisoni, the cleaning of silk cloths and other important things with sand, and the boiling of drapes of linen and of other types, and their soaking in salt water in the aforementioned method of Brunello.

For three or four days, from the twentieth of October onwards, it seemed the tide of the plague seemed to be turning, but afterwards it returned to the battlefield with greater fury than ever.

58 The *Canale Marani* is a major lagoon canal north of Venice, in the vicinity of Murano, which has strong tidal flow.

And the Signori, believing that the cause of this was the people's getting medical treatment in their homes, forbade this by public edict, mandating that in future the infected should be sent immediately to the Lazzaretto Vecchio without any remission, and that those who did not want to go there or resisted, the Captain of Health should knock down their doors, and they should be forcibly removed from their homes by the *pizzigamorti* and led away.

They also ordered that those who recovered after being treated at home had to cleanse their belongings, and to prevent any evasion, inquisitors were appointed for the sestieri who would investigate and bring proceedings against the infected houses.

Crime and punishment

In addition to this, since every day many complaints and cases were heard against the *pizzigamorti* for the insolence and thefts they were committing throughout the city, several were given the due punishment of the noose, and among others, on the third of November, four were hanged in full public between the two columns of St. Mark's together with a beautiful young woman of 22 years of age for having given them shelter in their house for the night and the opportunity to hide the stolen goods.

This spectacle truly had something of a tragicomedy, and is worthy of being recorded because the last *pizzigamorto* who was hanged, finding himself at the top of the gallows, asked for a glass of wine to drink, which, when brought and placed in his mouth, raised his voice towards the people saying 'I raise a toast to you all, accept it kindly', and after drinking it he turned to the executioner and said to him 'Brother, do your job, that now I die happy'.

The woman then made a pious conversion to the image of the Saviour, which caused those around her to be amazed and shed tears all of a sudden.

She said in substance that if Christ the Redeemer of the world, who was innocence itself, patiently endured such a harsh and ignominious death, and that he then prayed to the Eternal Father for his crucifiers, why should not this miserable sinner willingly suffer that death and pray to His Divine Majesty for the prosperity of these Lords, who had justly sentenced her in this way for her wickedness so that she would be a public example to all.

And if Christ stood with open arms as a sign of receiving into the bosom of his pity the miserable sinners who confidently turn to him, and that already that day on the wood of the cross he gave paradise to the thief, why should she, his devout servant, at that moment when she was called to salvation, be lost and confused by her sins which she saw being cancelled by the most precious blood of the Lord, and finally that her soul rejoiced and jubilated in Christ, seeming to her not as an unfortunate one who had arrived at the unhappy stage of a sad and painful death, but as one fortunate enough to make an easy and happy passage to that other glorious life.

The end of the plague

The Lords did not fail to provide with all exquisite diligence with vigorous provisions according to the progress of the plague, so much so that on the twenty-second of November, as it then appeared to have lost strength and to have run out of arrows, it seemed to the Prince that the appropriate time was approaching for the construction of the temple that he had already vowed with the Senate to erect to the Redeemer, especially since, as things

were already close to a state of calm, he could find masons and other workers according to the need for such a large undertaking.

Where His Serenity in the Senate, deploring the great misfortune that everyone had suffered, and in particular that of his person, which had been twice quarantined due to the death of members of his family, said that they could say this city had been like a ship long tossed and battered by a great storm at sea, which had been valiantly preserved after God by the prudent and careful sailors, who were the Superintendents and Over-superintendents of Health, and the other good ministers.

He then went on to demonstrate how much we should continually thank our Lord God, who had always looked upon this Republic with the eyes of his immense mercy in the days of its most serious tribulations.

A site for the church

Finally, he came to say that it was necessary to find a suitable place to build the said temple.

Thus, after various proposals and diverse discussions, it was agreed, by intervention of the Most Illustrious Mr Antonio Bragadino and Mr Agostino Barbarigo, who were appointed for this business, to build it on the Giudecca under the government and custody of the reverend Capuchin fathers, on a large empty piece of land adjacent to their monastery.

And it was also declared that the ten thousand ducats that had already been decided to be spent on the said temple were understood to be zecchini,⁵⁹ which would have been worth four thousand ducats more, and His Serenity, who was the first to vote,

59 *Zecchini* are golden Ducats, as opposed to the normal silver ducats of lesser value.

offered for this building one thousand five hundred ducats of his own, also with the intent that others, imitating his step, moved to offer good sums of money.

Since nowadays, many respectable churches are being built in the city, one must believe that for the construction of the said temple so that it may be even more magnificent and adorned, there will be many pious and religious people who will contribute, in order to further honour the Redeemer, Lord of the universe.

Free movement again

On the fifth of December, when the city was on the point of being freed, the Lords of Health, to ensure that the wounds would not be renewed by people from infected areas, issued an edict that for forty-five days no one, except couriers and sellers of foodstuffs, could come with goods of any kind whatsoever, but only in person, and with the obligation to remain sequestered in their house with their family after ten days.

Since no news of evil was heard from any of the neighbouring places that had been in turmoil, on the 12th the edict was repealed by a resolution of the Senate and everyone was given the right to come to Venice, bringing their authentic health certificates, from healthy places.⁶⁰

But the Lords of Health, to complete the purge of the city and all suspicion, published these new orders confirmed in the Senate: that in future the normal deaths were to be treated as suspect, the people of those houses were to be sent to Lazzaretto Nuovo to be quarantined, or to other healthy houses, removing their clothes and putting on other ones, and their belongings were to be

60 *Fedi di sanità* were certificates of good health, issued by the authorities, without which it was difficult or impossible to enter cities.

cleansed; that if someone died within five days, even if not of the plague, that family was to remain sequestered for twenty-two days, cleansing in the house their belongings; that the deputies of the districts were to have all the houses evacuated and cleaned within eight days, and the presidents of the sestieri were to go personally at the end of said eight days to see if the order had been carried out.

The Most Reverend Monsignor the Patriarch published a great jubilee⁶¹ sent by His Holiness the Pope to be held at Christmas with general absolution from all sins, even those reserved to the Apostolic See and in Cena Domini⁶² so that everyone would all the more readily awaken to accept it and be reconciled with the Divine Majesty.

For this reason, the Prince went in procession for the three days of Embertide⁶³ without his hat⁶⁴ on his head as a sign of humility, accompanied by the Senate, the nobility and many commoners.

Finally, when it pleased the infinite goodness of God, who has always demonstrated particular miracles in preserving this city from dangers, on the first day of January there was a blank sheet of paper,⁶⁵ as no one had died on the day before the last day of the year.

During this liberation of the city, which began happily at the beginning of the year, the Prince and the Signoria, dressed in crimson, were in procession, opening their hearts to everyone with in-

61 A special event where people can get absolution for all their sins.

62 Maundy Thursday, before Easter Sunday.

63 Embertide in December are Wednesday, Friday and Saturday of the third week of Advent.

64 The *Corno ducale*.

65 The list of the dead, which were previous published daily. By posting a blank sheet, it was a clear message that nobody had died.

credible joy, which had been kept in great anguish for such a long time by so many trials, and everyone went rejoicing together to give immortal thanks to the most clement God who had opened the doors of his mercy.

We must therefore certainly believe that this was a visit from His Divine Majesty to awaken us and bring us to our senses because just as the storm of the sea does not cease unless the fury of the winds first ceases, so the fury of the plague would not have ceased unless the wrath of His divine justice had first been appeased, since no reason could be advanced to the contrary.

Because, if the plague began with one man alone, and no human prudence was able to keep it from spreading thus far, then, when it had spread that much, it could have been annihilated if God alone had not put his hand over us.

Having thus secured the situation in the city, on the 8th of the said month the Prince went with all the Signoria to the church of San Marco, where after the Te Deum was sung, a solemn mass was sung.

And as soon as the place is ready for the foundation of the dedicated church, His Serenity will go with solemn pomp to lay the first stone.

Reopening

Shops have begun to open everywhere, countless people are appearing from every side, the trade in goods is getting back on foot, and will, with God's help, be more than ever, so that both public and private will soon be able to recover from the damages suffered.

Litigators swarm through the palace, the squares and streets are so crowded that anyone who has not been present at the great mortality and ruin that has passed cannot understand it fully by hearing it from others, who, against their will, have seen and experienced it.

Panegyric for Venice

In truth, Venice is too rare and too singular, nor can one imagine how it could ever be abandoned, since so many who have wandered the world finally resolve to settle here, declaring that they have seen no other city that equals this one in beauty, convenience and safety.

Venice brings, to those who look at it carefully and observe it inside and out, great delight and wonder.

It has a wonderful view all around, being set among clear waters in a circumference of eight miles, where the air is open and smiling, on every side one can see a magnificent structure of infinite buildings and many temples, and among other things on one side and the other of the Grand Canal, which is two miles long, a continuous row of palaces, in addition to the many islands which are around it, that can be said to be castles.

It then has nearby the mainland and the open sea, from where in abundant quantities all the things necessary for human life are continuously brought to it, especially by ships and other vessels that come from the West and the Levant laden with merchandise.

There is the use of gondolas and boats with which one can easily and safely travel both within and outside the city in any weather, and carry all sorts of things right up to the doors of the houses.

The air is healthy and one lives peacefully and quietly in great freedom.

Here there is no dispute or dissension, nor is there any need to worry about priority on the road. Everyone, without limitations, walks as he sees fit, either on the right or on the left.

Here are all the crafts and businesses, and whoever wants to work hard can easily earn a living.

Here at all hours they have spiritual recreation in the many honoured churches of priests, friars, nuns and in other pious places, where, in addition to masses, sermons and divine services, angelic melodies of music and songs are heard.

Here finally everyone lives safely with their families and wealth, nor have they fear of incursions and sieges by enemies, since the Lord God has placed the city in an impregnable location and His Divine Majesty has always had special protection over it, as His most cherished work.

Therefore, it is rightly called the Ark of the Covenant because from all the nations of the world, people flock there for salvation.

Therefore, I say, and I will end here, all must desire, as for their common fatherland, health and happy preservation, that in all things, through the centuries, may be given glory and honour to the Greatest and Best God, to whom I pray to maintain us in his grace and to give us the light to walk on the straight path of his justifications.

Appendix A — What is the plague?

The epidemic which struck Venice in 1575 was an outbreak of *Yersinia pestis* — the Black Plague or the Bubonic Plague.

Yersinia pestis is a bacterium, and one of the most virulent diseases known.

It has caused three pandemics in known history. The first was the Justinian plague in the 500s, named after the Byzantine emperor at the time. We don't have exact numbers, but most likely tens of millions died in and around the Byzantine Empire, and the Italian peninsula was particularly hard hit.

The second pandemic of the plague started in 1348 in Europe, and would over half a century kill half the population of the continent. The plague remained endemic in Europe until the late 1700s, with recurring outbreaks here and there. The epidemic in Venice in 1575–77 was one such outbreak.

Finally, the third and last plague pandemic struck in south-east Asia in the 1890s, and spread through much of South Asia and eastern Africa. Here, too, the victims were tens of millions.

The outbreak in Venice, which Benedetti recounts, is therefore just one of many in Europe over the three and a half centuries the plague haunted the continent.

Infection

The usual way of contracting *Yersinia pestis* is through the blood, most commonly by insect bites. Fleas and mosquitoes were therefore the main carriers of the contagion.

The infection has an incubation period of between a few days and a week.

Initially, the bacterium settles in the lymph nodes, in the armpits and in the groin. They swell, and can become the size of chicken eggs. These swollen lymph nodes were often called *buboes* or *tumours*.

This phase has given the disease the name Bubonic plague.

If the infected person's immune system can overcome the infection, it happens at this point. The swelling subsides, the fever falls, and after a while the infection passes, leaving no other marks than the psychological scars.

In the unfortunate case, the infection spreads from the lymph nodes into the blood stream, leading to *sepsis*. With the infection present all over the body, if the disease doesn't kill the victim, their own immune system will, as it goes into overdrive and eliminates cells at random.

During the last, fatal phase of the infection, *necrosis* often sets in. As the body struggles to contain the infection, it sacrifices the extremities, which suffer widespread cell death. Fingers, toes, and sometimes the nose and the lips, go black as *necrosis* sets in. Death usually follows shortly after.

This last phase has earned *yersinia pestis* the name Black plague.

The two names are therefore the same disease, but refer to two separate phases of the infection.

Pneumonic plague

It is also possible to contract the plague through the lungs. Infected droplets, from coughs or sneezes of an already infected person, can enter the lungs of another individual.

Pneumonic plague is very fast, and normally always fatal.

Fatality and survival

On average, in the absence of any efficient treatment, between forty and fifty percent of the infected die.

In comparison, untreated COVID-19 has a case fatality rate of one to two percent.

Being a bacterium, *yersinia pestis* can be treated with antibiotics, as long as it happens in an early stage.

The human body is incapable of developing lasting immunity to *yersinia pestis*, and it is therefore possible to get it several times. There is, however, some short-term protection, which might be how epidemics like the one in Venice in 1575–77 ran out of steam. Once the bacterium had touched almost everybody, it could no longer find new receptive victims.

Rats and other rodents

We tend to associate the plague with rats.

However, the real vectors of transmission are fleas and mosquitoes. By biting several individuals in turn, whether human or animal, they can move minute quantities of blood between them, and with that also the bacterium.

The role of rats and other rodents in the spread of the disease was another.

While humans often die of the plague, many species of rodents don't. They can live with the bacterium in their blood without getting sick.

It would take a bite of a rat to contract the disease directly from an infected, but otherwise healthy, animal, and such bites are not very common.

The populations of rats, however, served as a reservoir for the bacterium, where it could linger between outbreaks. When, like in Venice in 1577, the bacterium had burned through most of the population, and it failed to find new human victims, it could survive in the blood of the rats, and come back again much later.

Relevance to Benedetti's account

In the 1500s, people knew none of all this. Their beliefs about the disease are covered in Appendix B.

Benedetti notes that persons returning from the Lazzaretto Vecchio after having survived the ordeal, were sent to clean the houses and belongings of others, who had got sick. They had, therefore, observed that individuals were unlikely to contract the infection again, immediately after having recovered.

Appendix B — Humours and Miasma

The prevalent ideas in the 1500s of what constituted health and disease, originated in Ancient Greece and Rome, with Hippocrates and Galen.

These same ideas would remain dominant until the end of the 1800s, after the discovery of bacteria.

Humours

The main idea was, that the human body contained four essential liquids, which in a healthy person are balanced.

They were called *humours*, and they were blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm.

Various associations were imagined of the humours with the four seasons, with the four basic elements in the ancient Greek world-view (earth, water, air and fire), with different internal organs and with types of personality or temperament.

For example, blood was considered hot and wet, associated with spring, air, the liver, and a sanguine disposition.

Disease

If the four humours became imbalanced, disease and sickness follow.

Different diseases corresponded to different combinations of excess or deficiency of each of the four humours.

The main skill of the doctor was to understand, based on the condition of the patient, which humours were in excess or in deficiency, and to devise a treatment to restore the balance.

For example, a patient with a fever, and therefore sweaty, was hot and wet, which corresponded to an excess of blood. A possible cure was bloodletting, to restore the correct balance of the blood with other humours.

Miasma

If a person had a wound or abscess, it was fairly easy to interpret what caused the imbalance of the humours. The cause was visible.

With contagious diseases, it wasn't so simple, as persons could fall ill with no clearly visible cause.

What had then caused the imbalance of their humours?

This was explained by *miasma*, a Greek word which means impurity or pollution.

Miasma were something invisible or imperceptible, which, if it entered the human body somehow, would cause an imbalance of the humours and therefore disease.

Different kinds of *miasma* caused different types of imbalances, and therefore different diseases.

Consequently, if a space — say, a house or a ship — was full of *miasma*, those who spent time there were likely to get the same illness. This explained how entire households or ship crews could come down with the same disease, even in the absence of directly physical contact between some of them.

Contagion was therefore seen as a kind of environmental problem.

Naturally, the people of the past observed person-to-person contagion. They settled on the explanation that one person could pass a disease to another because the *miasma* had attached to the person's body or to their clothes.

The origin of miasma

All this just led to the next question, of where did the *miasma* come from? Why were they sometimes there, and sometimes not.

The accepted idea was, that *miasma* generated spontaneously in certain conditions.

Such conditions were, for example, unburied cadavers in decomposition, or piles of rotting rubbish, or simply the foul smelling mud of a swampy area, which smells of rotten eggs (sulphur) if turned over.

More generally, the appearance of *miasma* became associated with things and places that smelled bad.

The disease of malaria, caused by a parasite spread through mosquito bites, was common around swamps and wetlands, where mosquitoes could easily breed. Such swamps also smelled bad, so people named the illness *mal aria* — literally 'bad air'.

Fighting miasma

What could be done to prevent *miasma* from appearing and causing disease, or to remove *miasma* from a space where people got sick?

On a very basic level, ventilation. Simply have the *miasma* blow away, by replacing smelly air with fresh air.

To prevent *miasma* from appearing, remove the sources of stench and foul smells. Eliminate rotting rubbish and dispose quickly of the corpses of the dead.

The next step was to replace the bad smells with something more pleasant. The fumes of fires were commonly used, which was called 'per-fuming', hence the word perfume.

Other means of replacing foul smells were incense, vinegar, ambergris, herbs, scents of all kinds, and what we would call perfumes today.

How does this relate to Benedetti's account?

The ideas of humours and *miasma* permeate the account of Rocco Benedetti.

He put a lot of emphasis on smells, talking about stench, fetor and malignant air repeatedly because he believed such bad smells caused contagion.

When somebody died, the entire household and the house itself, with everything in it, were quarantined and later cleansed. Since the *miasma* causing the plague could stick to both persons, objects and the building itself, everything had to be treated.

When persons returned from their quarantine, they didn't wear their own clothes, which had been burned, as infected with *miasma*.

Their belongings were taken to islands in the lagoon, where they were exposed to the winds and the sun, or submerged in the salt water of the lagoon, in attempts to remove the *miasma*.

The Swiss Grisons used heavy smoke to 'disinfect' the houses because the contagion was believed to be associated with smells.

The apothecaries — which Benedetti ridicule for their useless remedies — used vinegar to wash the coins with which they were paid. Vinegar was believed to make the *miasma* disappear, by giving the coins a nice smell.

Wrong reasoning, but right results (sometimes)

Even though the line of reasoning applied by Benedetti and his contemporaries was entirely wrong — based on little more than ancient superstition — they still arrived at some remedies, which actually worked.

Washing coins and other metallic objects in vinegar reduces the contagion because vinegar is a disinfectant.

Isolating the sick and quarantining the suspect limits the spread of the contagion.

A bacterium like *yersinia pestis* can only survive for so long outside a living body, so quarantining objects also works. After some days, the germs on the objects die.

Exposing cloth, fabric and paper to sunlight also has positive effects, as ultraviolet light kills bacteria.

Rats and other small rodents had a secondary role in the spread of the plague, and the use of smoke in buildings could flush out the rats and mice living there, or kill them, as Benedetti also recounts in the little anecdote of the mouse jumping on the fire.

Appendix C — The Republic of Venice

Rocco Benedetti lived and worked in the Republic of Venice, and he mentions quite a few of the republic's institutions. This appendix serves to give a quick overview of those bodies.

Firstly, the Republic of Venice was an aristocratic republic, where only the nobles had a vote. They were approximately two percent of the population of the city, much less of the entire state.

Most of the constitutional order, the legal system and administration had roots in the Middle Ages, so it was a rather different state than the ones we live in.

The Republic of Venice never had a codified constitution, so magistracies were created and allowed to lapse, as the conditions of the time demanded.

Maggior Consiglio

The *Maggior Consiglio* (Greater Council, Great Council or Grand Council) was the sovereign body of the republic. All authority emanated from the Greater Council, where all noblemen, aged twenty-five or more, participated, and were, indeed, obliged to participate.

In a way, the republic was the nobility, and the nobility was the republic, and the will of the nobility was expressed through the Greater Council.

It had at times over two thousand members, so debates and votes were slow and cumbersome affairs, so much of its authority was delegated in bits and pieces to other councils, colleges, tribunals and magistracies.

Much of the work of the Greater Council was therefore to appoint councillors and magistrates to all the other offices of the state, to which it had delegated power.

Benedetti recounts how a madman ran around, freeing people who were in quarantine in their homes. He did that during a session of the Greater Council, when all the noblemen were in the Doge's Palace to 'create magistrates'. In practice, the city was devoid of authority figures on such afternoons when the Greater Council was in session.

Also, everybody in the city knew the Greater Council was in session because the meeting was called by ringing a bell in the bell tower at St Mark's.

The Doge

The *Doge* was the head of state, elected for life by the Greater Council. At the time of Benedetti in the late 1500s, the position was mostly, but not entirely, ceremonial.

The Doge was often styled *Principe* (Prince) or *Sua Serenità* (His Serenity).

Benedetti sometimes used the word 'Prince' to mean the state as such, or the government in a general sense, rather than the actual figure of the Doge.

The (Full) College

The Greater Council appointed six councillors annually to aid the Doge, called the *Minor Consiglio* (the Smaller Council or Lesser Council). This was originally a way of curbing the excessive power of the Doge, and it had, by the 1500s, absorbed most of his authority.

The College, or the *Signoria* (Lordship), was the Doge and his six councillors, and it was the closest the republic had to an executive.

Most day-to-day state business happened in the *Signoria*, as they were practically always present in the palace. For more important matters, they would often refer to the Senate.

Senate

The Senate was appointed by the Greater Council annually, with sixty senators and (in the 1500s) also sixty adjunct members.

In practice, the Greater Council delegated most matters, but for the most important, to the Senate, which would meet much more often than the Greater Council.

The Senate was therefore one of the most important bodies of the republic.

Simplifying a bit, the Greater Council would meet one or more times each month, the Senate once or more each week, while the *Signoria* was there almost every day.

Magistrato alla Sanità

The *Magistrato alla Sanità* (Magistracy of Public Health) was the primary office in charge of the safeguards against the plague, but they were responsible for almost everything related to public health, such as drinking, gambling, prostitution, food safety and much more.

It was created by the Senate, with three *Provveditori* (Superintendents) appointed annually. Later, the Greater Council took over the appointments of the magistrates, after which the Senate added

two *Sopraprovveditori* (Over-superintendants), bringing the magistracy to five members.

Given their responsibilities, it is not a surprise that Benedetti's account contains many references to the magistracy and the magistrates, under a number of different titles, like the *Signori alla Sanità* (Lords of Health) and such.

The Council of Ten

The *Consiglio dei Dieci* (Council of Ten) was primarily responsible for the safety of the republic, so it had roles as secret police, secret services and tribunal in criminal cases against members of the nobility.

Benedetti mentions the Council of Ten in the passing, related to keeping public order around the Doge's Palace.

Power was not personal

Most appointments of magistrates in the Republic of Venice were for one year, with no reelection allowed.

The main exceptions were the Greater Council, where membership was for life by birthright, and likewise the Doge, who also served for life.

Almost all councils and magistracies had multiple members, usually three, but four, five, seven, ten and other numbers also appeared. As the republic didn't have a formal constitution, such things were never codified.

Benedetti mostly doesn't name the various individuals, who occupied the posts in the various magistracies. The way offices were assigned to groups of noblemen, serving short terms, meant that

power was exercised in a much less personal way than in other contemporary states.

His references are therefore to the office itself, and not to the individual holders of the office.

Appendix D — Venetian society

The Republic of Venice was a class society, with an economy based on international trade and manufacturing.

Classes

The main classes were nobles, citizens, commoners and foreigners.

The classes were foremost legal, but they also had social and economic aspects.

Which class a person belonged to, was primarily decided by their birth, but other factors also mattered. An illegitimate child didn't necessarily get the status of the father, and the social standing of the mother also mattered, as did what they did for a living.

What possibilities a person had to earn a living, depended entirely on which class they belonged to.

Class society was second nature for Benedetti and his contemporaries. They knew no other system, and probably considered the differences between people as natural and god-given.

The Nobility

It was the prerogative of the nobility to participate in the running of the state, as all noblemen, aged twenty-five or more, were members of the Greater Council of the Republic of Venice.

The Republic of Venice was, to a large extent, synonymous with the Venetian nobility. They were the state, and the state were them.

The Venetian nobility was highly regulated.

To be recognised as a noble, the father had to be noble, and legally married to the mother, who had to be of 'decent' birth, which normally meant noble or citizen.

The birth of a boy to a noble family was registered in the *Golden book*, kept in the chancellory Doge's Palace.

Not all nobles were necessarily wealthy. There were even destitute nobles, who, however, didn't lose their status — and their right to participate in government — because of that.

Besides the clearly political positions in the republic, there were many other jobs which had to be performed by a nobleman, in administration, in the tribunals, overseeing taxes and duties, and much more.

The Superintendants and Over-superintendants of Health were noblemen.

Whenever Benedetti refers to somebody as Lord, Sir, Excellency or as 'magistrate', those men were noble.

Citizens

The status of citizen was hereditary, following the father, just like for the nobility.

Most citizens were merchants and shopkeepers, or they engaged in the liberal arts.

Many roles within the state institutions were reserved to citizens, and in some cases, to a subgroup called the *original citizens*.

To be an original citizen, the requirement was to be a legitimate child of an original citizen, and a mother of decent birth, and like-

wise for the grandparents. If any of the men of the three generations had engaged in 'mechanical arts' (the opposite of the liberal arts), original citizenship was forfeited.

The reason for these restrictive rules was, that the original citizens could occupy numerous influential positions in the state apparatus. The secretaries of all major state institutions were original citizens, and so were the lawyers and notaries.

The original citizens were therefore central for the functioning of the republic, and the group was as regulated as the nobility. The birth of an original citizen boy was registered in the *Silver book*.

Benedetti was, since he was a notary, an original citizen.

Likewise, all those, who he refers to as 'ministers', were original citizens employed by the state institutions to assist the noble 'magistrates'.

When he mentions the 'mace-bearers of the Health authority', they were original citizens too. Anybody, who somehow exercised a bit of state power, no matter how minute, had to be an original citizen.

Commoners

The rest of the legal residents of Venice were generally commoners. They included most craftsmen, who worked with their hands (the mechanical arts), and all manual labourers, of which there were many.

Commoners could potentially be quite wealthy, say an artisan with a large workshop, but no matter their wealth, they were and remained commoners.

They did have some rights, such as access to courts and tribunals, and they could be members of guilds and confraternities, which were important civil institutions in the Venetian republic.

When Benedetti wrote about rowers, porters and such people, they were necessarily commoners. So were the *pizzigamorti*, if they weren't foreigners, and the whores sent to the Lazzaretto to work.

Foreigners

Foreigners in Venice were abundant, but they had very few rights, and they could be summarily banished.

Some were travelling sellers of goods from their home towns, who came and went, others moved around selling their services. Some foreigners lived in Venice for very long periods.

There were some procedures for becoming citizens or commoners, but the rules were generally restrictive.

The Grisons, who Benedetti mentions, were obviously foreigners, and so were the *pizzigamorti* imported from the mainland, even if they came from the Venetian dominions on the mainland.

A trading and manufacturing nation

The territory of the original Venetian state was all lagoon, with very little farmland. It was not, therefore, possible to have an economy based on agriculture, like in most other parts of Europe.

Venice consequently developed an economy based on long-distance trade, between the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Europe. Even though this trade diminished after the journeys of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus, it was still a large part of the Venetian economy in the later 1500s.

Concurrent with the trade, Venice also developed a manufacturing sector, primarily fabrics and textiles of all sorts, glass, and later pharmaceuticals, printing and all sorts of luxury goods and services.

At the time of Benedetti, most of the nobility had ceased engaging directly in trade, but they continued to function as financiers, bankers, owners of the ships, and such.

Most of the international trade and manufacturing were in the hands of citizens, like Benedetti himself.

They, in turn, employed most of the lower classes, as Benedetti notes in his description. As trade stopped and shops were shuttered, two-thirds of the common people were left without an income.

It is not a coincidence that Benedetti finished his account by noting how shops reopened and trade returned, and expressed the hope that the money lost would soon be recovered.

Appendix E — Biographies

Giacomo Foscarini

Giacomo (Jacopo) Foscarini (1523–1603) was a Venetian nobleman from a prominent, but no longer very affluent, family

He was curious and adventurous, and he departed for Paris, in the entourage of the official Venetian ambassadors to the Kingdom of France, at the age of sixteen.

Later, Foscarini went to London, where he developed a flourishing business in trade between Venice and the British Isles, which brought him a solid fortune.

In the mid-1550s, he returned to Venice, leaving the London business to his brother. He married Elena Giustinian — from another important Venetian noble family — with whom he got seven children.

He had entered the *Maggior Consiglio* at the age of 21, thanks to the *barbarela* lottery, but his first political appointment was at age 44, in 1559.

In 1461, Foscarini served as *Provveditor alla Sanità* (Superintendent of Health), but then took another break from politics until 1564, for family reasons.

His career was stellar after 1564. He served in the Senate and in various roles overseeing trade and commerce. He was *podestà* (governor) of Verona in 1569–70, but was then called to serve in the war with the Ottoman Turks.

In 1572, Foscarini replaced the victor of Lepanto, Sebastian Venier, as *Capitan General da Mar* (top admiral), not for his military skills, which were few, but for his diplomatic experience.

During the visit of Henry III of France and Poland to Venice, in 1574, Foscarini was, thanks to his international experience, assigned the task of accompanying the King at all times.

Despite the recently signed peace treaty with the Ottoman Turks, Venice feared an attack on Candia (Crete), and Foscarini was appointed *Provveditor generale* (governor) of the island, with command over all forces there.

He was therefore away from Venice during the plague of 1575–1577 when Rocco Benedetti wrote his report.

After his return to Venice in 1578, he served as councillor for the Doge in the *Signoria*, and he became *Procuratore di San Marco*, an appointment for life, ranking second only to the Doge.

He held positions related to the restoration of the Palazzo Ducale after the fire in 1577, for the construction of the Rialto Bridge, and in the foundation of the public bank, the *Banco Giro*.

Foscarini remained a central figure in the republic until his death in 1603.

Source: [Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani](#).

Mercuriale

Girolamo Mercuriale (1530–1606) was a physician and a professor of medicine at the university of Padua.

Born in Forlì, he soon went to Venice to study, and was in 1555 awarded a doctorate in philosophy and medicine from the Venetian College of Physicians, but part of his studies were in Padua.

Mercuriale returned to his native town after his studies, but remained in correspondence with many of the most prominent doctors and physicians of Padua.

After an official journey to Rome in 1562, he remained there under the protection of cardinal Alessandro Farnese, for whom he became personal physician.

Thanks to this connection, Mercuriale was appointed first chair of ordinary medicine at the University of Padua in 1569. Having published little before, he now published a series of works, which he must have written while in Rome.

His fame grew, and in 1573 Mercuriale treated and cured Emperor Maximilian II, who knighted him.

In 1575, the Republic of Venice extended his tenure for another six years, and raised his pay.

As Rocco Benedetti recounts, Mercuriale and Capodivacca were summoned to Venice in June 1576, where they insisted the disease circulating wasn't the plague. They agreed to cure patients, but as the epidemic got worse, they left, having achieved nothing.

His career at the University of Padua wasn't damaged by the lack of success in Venice, and in 1581 his tenure was renewed again, with a substantial pay rise.

He left Padua in 1587 for Bologna, where he got a twelve-year appointment, and a very generous pay.

Only halfway through his tenure in Bologna, he left for Tuscany, and from 1592 he taught at the University of Pisa. He returned to his native Forlì in 1606, where he died later that same year.

He is recognised as one of the most important medical scholars of the 1500s.

Source: [Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani](#).

Capodivacca

Girolamo Capodivacca (c.1523–1589) was born to a noble family in Padua, and started teaching almost as soon as he had finished his own studies.

In 1553, he was third chair in medicine at the University of Padua; in 1561 second chair. Then, in 1564, he moved from ‘extraordinary’ medicine to ‘ordinary’, where he taught for the next twenty-five years, part of this time in a difficult relationship with his colleague Mercuriale.

In 1576, Capodivacca and Mercuriale were summoned to Venice, as Rocco Benedetti writes, without earning much glory.

Capodivacca was highly esteemed for his treatment of venereal diseases, which earned him a small fortune. Widespread rumours that he had a secret cure for even the most severe cases of syphilis, didn’t hurt him.

He, too, was offered tenure at the University of Pisa by Francesco I, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, but declined the offer, despite the very generous pay and other benefits.

In 1589, he travelled to Mantua to treat the Duke of Mantua, and — just like predicted by an astrologer — died of a fever on his return.

Source: [Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani](#).

Ravenna

Tommaso Giannotti Rangoni (1493–1577) was born in Ravenna to a well-off citizen family named Giannotti.

Little is known of his youth, but in 1510, he was studying philosophy and medicine in Bologna, and in 1513 he defended his dissertation successfully. He started teaching, probably astrology, at the university immediately after, in a position reserved for brilliant but poor scholars.

The earliest publications to his name are all astrological in nature.

Around 1516, Giannotti went to Rome as doctor for cardinal Domenico Grimani, whom he might have got to know in Bologna. When cardinal Grimani later returned to Venice, Giannotti followed, and got a teaching position at the University of Padua, in astrology and mathematics.

He left Padua suddenly, for a position as astrologer and physician to Guido Rangoni, an aristocrat from Modena, and general in the army of the Papal State.

Giannotti was one of the astrologers, who foresaw a giant flooding for 1524, due to a conjunction of several planets in the sign of Pisces. The flooding didn't materialise, and Rangoni and Giannotti, who had sought refuge in the mountains, were sorely ridiculed in the carnival in Modena that year.

Despite the flood debacle, Giannotti remained in the service of Rangoni until 1532, and their relationship was so close, that Rangoni gave Giannotti permission to use his surname.

Sometimes before 1535, Giannotti Rangoni had settled in Venice, where he produced numerous booklets and pamphlets, mostly in matters of medicine, including syphilis, which was quite profitable.

He used his wealth to sponsor the arts, and he bought a palace in Padua for a college for poor students, especially from his native Ravenna.

In Venice, he sponsored the restoration of the church of *San Zulian*, on the condition that his funerary monument would ornate the façade. His bronze statue, created by Sansovino, still sits over the entrance.

Thanks to his charity, in 1562, he was appointed *Cavaliere di San Marco*, the highest honorific the Republic of Venice could offer non-nobles.

That same year, he also sponsored three paintings by Tintoretto for the *Scuola Grande di San Marco*, of which he was then *guardian grando*.

Giannotti Rangoni was therefore a well-known figure in Venice at the time, thanks to his scholarly status, wealth, charity, and self-promotion. Because of his city of origin, he was often just called *il Ravenna*, or as Benedetti styles him, The Most Excellent Ravenna.

He died on September 10th, 1577, after the epidemic was over, which is why Benedetti insisted that he was still alive. He is buried in the *San Zulian* church, as he had asked.

Source: [Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani](#).

References

The original Venetian text, which this translation is based on, is available from the website of the [Associazione Progetto Rialto](#)

The same material is published as:

- Benedetti, Rocco, Donatella Calabi, Elena Svalduz, Luca Molà and Simone Rauch. *Venezia 1576, la peste : una drammatica cronaca del Cinquecento*. Venezia Progetto Rialto, [Cierre Edizioni](#), 2021.

The two printed versions from 1577 are available online, in digitized form: [Bologna](#) and [Urbino](#).

- Benedetti, Rocco. *Noui auisi di Venetia, ne' quali si contengono tutti i casi miserabili, che in quella, al tempo della peste sono occorsi; non solamente gl'ordini, & prouisioni, ma etiamdio i medicamenti, profumi, & altre cose a tal'infermità ottime, & buone. Con alquante orationi, che fece il sereniss. principe di quella inclita città, esortando il popolo a pregare ...* Stampata in Urbino, & ristampata in Bologna per Alessandro Benacci, 1577.

Other literature on the plague in Venice in 1575–1577:

- Comune di Venezia: Assessorato alla cultura e belle arti. *Venezia e la peste: 1348-1797*. Marsilio, 1979.
- Preto, Paolo. *Peste e societa a Venezia nel 1576*. Vicenza N. Pozza, 1984.