The study of the Nerviano Lazaretto in the context of the 17th-Century Plague

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Abstract. The study of the Nerviano Lazaretto in the context of the 17th-century plague is essential for understanding the historical significance of epidemics. This site, with its unique combination of historical documents and human remains, offers an extraordinary opportunity to deepen our understanding of the plague's impact on the local population. A comprehensive interdisciplinary study integrating historical, anthropological, paleopathological, and archaeological data is necessary to unravel the complexities of the epidemic's effects. The findings from this research could not only enrich our understanding of the 17th-century plague but also contribute to the preservation of historical and anthropological heritage associated with the epidemic.

Key words: Yersinia pestis, plague, epidemics

To the editor,

The history of the plague is characterized by a series of epidemics that have had a significant impact on human history. Among these, three pandemics stand out for the breadth of their spread and historical consequences: the Justinian Plague in the 6th century, the Black Death in Europe in the 14th century, and the Third Pandemic in China in the 19th century. In current research on the plague, a wide range of disciplinary approaches and research interests have been observed. Historians have focused on analyzing archival documents and official reports to understand epidemics' extent and socioeconomic impact (1). Paleomolecular studies and epidemiological studies have sought to reconstruct the strain of Yersinia pestis. A significant milestone was reached in 2011, with the publication of the first complete genome of Yersinia pestis by a victim of the Black Death in London. Archaeologists, on the other hand, have recovered numerous skeletons from various regions of Europe, allowing anthropologists to conduct essential anthropological studies to understand the health conditions and mortality of affected populations. Despite the progress made, many questions about the evolution and spread of the bacterium remain unanswered, underscoring the importance of increasing the amount of high-quality data on suspected cases from the past. In this regard, the Nerviano Lazaretto site, owing to its significance in the context of the history of the plague in the 17th century, requires thorough studies. Nerviano, with a population of approximately 1500 inhabitants, represented a significant settlement in the Milanese countryside during the plague epidemic of 1630–1631. Local authorities reacted by establishing a lazaretto that also served as a burial site for the deceased. The management of the lazaretto was entrusted to a local provost, who recorded the first case of plague in the *Mortuorum Libri*, in June 1630. He continued to document the situation without interruption until the end of the contagion, in the early months of 1630. 1631. The records of lazaretto, kept in the parish archives of Nerviano, provide valuable details about the deceased, including names, surnames, ages, and causes of death. At the end of the epidemic, a census was conducted, documenting a significant decrease in the population, from approximately 1400 individuals to 890. Subsequently, within the lazaretto cemetery, a church dedicated to San Gregorio was erected to house the victims from the mass graves. What makes this site unique is the presence of both

relevant historical documents and human remains, an unusual combination in epidemic-related cemeteries. Often, in such contexts, only a few skeletons are found and identified mainly through molecular or historical confirmations, as Yersinia pestis leaves no recognizable traces on the skeleton. This fact not only elevates the historical and scientific value of the site, but also underscores its singularity in the landscape of research on the 17th-century plague (2). The site offers an extraordinary opportunity to deepen our understanding of the plague and its consequences for the local population. This site requires a comprehensive study that integrates historical, anthropological, paleopathological, and archaeological data. The analysis should include an examination of parish death registers, along with an anthropological evaluation of the skeletal remains of plague victims. It is essential to record pre-existing pathologies and stress markers in addition to examining documents preserved in the Milan State Archives relating to health institutions. This would allow for the identification of any demographic trends among the victims, provide a pre-existing pathological picture of the population, and deepen our understanding of the history of medicine and health responses during the epidemic. The study of Nerviano lazaretto could be of fundamental importance in enriching our understanding of the history of the plague in the 17th century, and the collected data could be used for future biomolecular research on skeletal remains. This study will not only provide a more comprehensive view of the spread and impact of the plague in the region but will also contribute to the preservation of the historical and anthropological heritage linked to the epidemic.

References

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