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Plague Epidemics and Sacrificial Offerings along the Danube: Two Case Studies (1769–1814)

Abstract: This paper investigates the relationship between plague epidemics, religious rituals, and community responses in the Diocese of Nikopol, Ottoman Bulgaria, from 1769 to 1814. Amid political and social instability, exacerbated by wars and brigandage, the region was struck by devastating plague outbreaks. Catholic missionaries sent to the Ottoman Balkans by the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide) documented how local communities sought protection from disease through traditional sacrificial rites, such as the *kurban*. These animal sacrifices, perceived by the missionaries as a superstitious practice, were performed by Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims alike. Through two case studies, this article highlights the friction between local religious practices and missionary efforts to maintain doctrinal purity, providing a deeper understanding of the challenges missionaries had to face in an attempt to enforce religious boundaries.

Keywords: Plague, sacrificial offerings, Ottoman Bulgaria, Catholic missionaries to the Ottoman Balkans, religious hybridizations.

Epidemics and Wars in the Diocese of Nikopol in Ottoman Bulgaria (18th Century)

At the end of the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire experienced a serious crisis, destined to be resolved, albeit temporarily, only in the second half of the following century, with the *Tanzimat* reforms. Armed conflicts with European powers – first and foremost the Russo–Turkish wars – and the emergence of centrifugal forces had progressively weakened the central authorities, to the advantage of local governors. In the eastern Balkans in particular, armed bands of local brigands (known as *kărdžali*)[1] and the personal militias of *pashas*, *beys*, and *ayans*, in perpetual conflict with each other, fueled endemic uncertainty.

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[1] The period from the second half of the 18th century to the first decades of the 19th century is known in Bulgarian historiography as *kărdžalijstvo* (кърджалийство). On

Alongside these circumstances, another element exacerbated an already difficult situation: periodic outbreaks of severe plague epidemics. The disease decimated the local population and contributed to the perpetuation of migratory flows, particularly from the region of Bulgaria towards Banat – or, less commonly, from Banat towards Bulgaria – but also towards Habsburg Hungary, where, at least, the different political and social conditions guaranteed greater security. Indeed, from the very beginning of Ottoman expansion in the Balkans (14th–15th centuries), the authorities had to cope with the recurring problem of epidemics, not limited to plague outbreaks.[2] Preventive measures such as quarantine, which already had a long tradition in Western Europe,[3] were officially introduced only in the 1830s as part of the *Tanzimat* reforms, even though, locally, individual governors, e.g., Ali Pasha Tepelena, could implement special restrictions on freedom of movement.

Escape as a response to epidemics, especially plague, is widely documented in early modern Ottoman society: in the second half of the 17th century, Paul Rycaut, the English ambassador to the Sublime Porte, observed that during plague epidemics, wealthy Turks left the city to seek refuge in the countryside, where they waited for the danger to pass. About a century later, the French historian Elias Habesci also noted that many Muslims had developed the habit of relocating to escape the plague, especially if they had the economic means to do so.[4] All this evidence, as previously observed, helps to deconstruct the historiographic paradigm that prevailed between the 1970s and 1980s, according to

this, see A. Yaycioglu, *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); S. Dimitrov, *Sultan Makhmud II i krayat na enicharite* (Sofia: Iztok–Zapad, 2015); V. Mutafchieva, *Kŭrdzhaliĭsko vreme* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN, 1993).

[2] See, for instance, N. Varlik, *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean* (York: Arc Humanities Press, 2017); B. Bulmuş, *Plague, Quarantines and Geopolitics in the Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

[3] For more recent research on the management of epidemics in northern Italy, see M. P. Zanoboni, *La vita al tempo della peste: Misure restrittive, quarantena, crisi economica* (Milan: Jouvence, 2020); F. Piseri, "Governare la città, governare la peste: pratiche di isolamento e quarantena nel ducato di Milano attraverso le lettere di Ludovico il Moro (1467)", *Pandemos* 1 (2023), 1–5. For the case of Florence, see J. Henderson, *Florence under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2019).

[4] Both accounts are reported in Y. Ayalon, "Religion and Ottoman Society's Responses to Epidemics". In *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean*, ed. N. Varlik (Croydon: Arc Humanities Press, 2017), 187.

which Ottoman society accepted – almost indiscriminately – plague epidemics with fatalism.[5]

Between the 18th and 19th centuries, in Ottoman Bulgaria, many abandoned villages and towns to seek refuge in monasteries, where the existence of camps for the infected is also documented.[6] Catholic families, who constituted a minority in the local religious landscape, were among them, as documented in letters and reports written by the missionaries responsible for their pastoral care. This article focuses on the testimony of priests and missionaries engaged in the Diocese of Nikopol, one of the two ecclesiastical districts, together with the Apostolic Vicariate of Sofia (archdiocese until 1758), into which Ottoman Bulgaria was divided from the 17th century.[7]

Appointed almost continuously until the early 19th century, the bishops of Nikopol resided in Bucharest from the previous century, as they also held the office of apostolic vicar of Wallachia. From the second half of the 18th century onward, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Congregatio de Propaganda Fide), established in 1622, predominantly assigned to the diocese the members of two religious orders: the Congregation of St. John the Baptist, established in 1755 by the Genoese priest Domenico Francesco Olivieri, and the Congregation of the Passion of Christ, founded in 1720 by St. Paul of the Cross (Francesco Paolo Danei).[8]

Between 1767 and 1769, Sebastiano Canepa of the Congregation of Saint John the Baptist, the men's branch of the Romites of Saint John the Baptist, headed the diocese. Together with his brothers Domenico Antola and Antonio Capurro, he attended to the pastoral needs of Nikopol's Catholic community. From 1781, during the pontificate of Pius VI, Propaganda sent the Passionist fathers Francesco Maria Ferreri and Giacomo Sperandio to Bulgaria under the supervision of Bishop Pavel Duvanlia. The first Passionist bishop, Francesco

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5 S. White, "Rethinking Disease in Ottoman History", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010), 549–567.

6 N. Manolova-Nikolova, "Văzroždenska mikroistorija: Manastirăt 'Sv. Sv. Kirik i Julita' v Nišavskata eparhija prez XVII–XIX vek", *Balkanistichen Forum* n.d., 13, 253–270.

7 Tocănel, P. "Laboriosa organizzazione delle missioni in Bulgaria, Moldavia, Valacchia e Transilvania". In *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide memoria rerum 350 anni al servizio delle missioni: 1622–1700*, ed. J. Metzler, vol. I/2, 239–274. Rome–Freiburg–Vienna: Herder, 1972.; see also in the same volume B. Pandžić, "L'opera della S. Congregazione per le popolazioni della Penisola Balcanica centrale", 292–315.

8 For its role and history see G. Pizzorusso, *Propaganda fide. I. La Congregazione pontificia e la giurisdizione sulle missioni* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2022).

Maria Ferreri, was appointed in 1805, and the diocese was entrusted continuously to the Fathers of the Passion until the first half of the 20th century.[9]

Epidemics of Plague in Missionary Reports: Two Examples

The Battistini, as the members of the Congregation of St. John the Baptist were known, played a pivotal role in the missions in Ottoman Bulgaria in the second half of the 18th century: while Canepa served as the bishop of Nikopol, Giuseppe Roverano, a member of the Congregation, was the apostolic vicar of Sofia (1758–1767), where he actively worked to stamp out all forms of religious hybridizations widespread among his flock.[10]

Canepa died on 6 February 1769 surrounded by the spiritual comfort of one of his missionaries, Stefano Lupi, a Propaganda student from the town of Ruse in northern Bulgaria. In a strange twist of fate, during those very same days, the missionary Antonio Capurro also passed away, after a long period of illness.[11]

Therefore, Lupi, along with Antola, remained the only missionary serving the Catholics of no less than seven villages: Oreš, Belene, Petokladentsi, Butovo, Varnapolci, Lagane (in the missionary documents Lasciani or Lexani), and Ruse. Unsurprisingly, in May of the same year, he described to the Secretary of the Roman Congregation a situation that was tragic on a personal and social level:

> Once again, I come to bow to Your Eminence, kissing the hem of the purple, begging you unceasingly to give me advice *quid agendum*. Your Eminence shall know that this new year my house has suffered a great loss because of this turmoil, which occurred

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[9] On the Passionist missions in Bulgaria, see the writings of F. Giorgini, *I Passionisti nella Chiesa di Bulgaria e Valacchia (Romania)* (Rome: Curia Generale Passionisti, 1998), and especially I. Sofranov, ed. *La missione passionista di Bulgaria tra il 1789 e il 1825* (Rome: Curia Generale Passionisti, 1982); I. Sofranov, ed. *La Bulgaria negli scritti dei missionari passionisti fino al 1841* (Rome: Curia Generale Passionisti, 1985). More recently, the Passionist missionary Paolo Cortesi, parish priest at Belene in northern Bulgaria, published a collection of letters and sources produced by co-religionists between the second half of the 18th century and the first decade of the following century: P. Cortesi, *Lettere dai confini d'Europa. La Diocesi di Nicopoli ed il Vicariato di Valacchia durante gli episcopati di mons. Pavel Duvanlia e mons. Francesco M. Ferreri cp* (Belene: 2022).

[10] On Canepa and his missionary period in Bulgaria, see G. Parodi Domenichi, "Due vescovi liguri missionari e pastori in Bulgaria", *Rivista diocesana genovese* 4 (1991), 587–596, where the author traces the biographical and missionary work of Canepa and Ippolito Luigi Agosto, engaged in Bulgaria in the second half of the 19th century.

[11] This information is reported by Stefano Lupi in a letter to the Propaganda dated 8 March 1769 (Ruse), APF, *Bulgaria e Valacchia* 6, ff. 2r–3v.

> in these parts, for they have set fire to the square, and therefore almost all the square has been burnt [to the ground], […] and our shop has been burnt with two and a half bags of goods […] but the Lord God has also taken my Mother from me; So I am left with four sisters to be married, and in Ruse I have no one to whom I should marry them, since there are very few Christians, and the number of them is seven houses, and they are married, so I don't know what course of action to take, while I see that the times are very troubled and bad; and therefore I had written to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, so that they would give me permission to go to Hungary and take my sisters to marry them. The Holy Congregation did not allow me to do that before, and I did not care as much, because my mother was alive, but now that she is dead, I do not know what to do.[12]

War, pestilence, thievery, and family issues[13] made it very difficult for Lupi to reach the villages under his pastoral care. Inevitably, this limitation resulted in an inability to supervise the devotional and social conduct of Bulgarian Catholics, inclined to observe interconfessional practices shared by the Orthodox and, in some cases, Muslims.

The administration of the local Catholic community in Ruse, where Lupi resided, was equally challenging. The village was home to Catholics of Paulician origin, as well as a group of Catholic merchants—some of the few to have returned to Bulgaria after the anti-Ottoman uprising of Chiprovtsi in 1688.[14] A serious lack of confessional discipline, interreligious marriages, and "superstitious" practices were the norm in a village that also saw clashes between the Ottoman troops and the army of Empress Catherine II.[15]

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[12] APF, S. C. *Bulgaria e Valacchia*, vol. 6, f. 9r, letter of 8 May 1769.

[13] In all of his heartfelt letters, Lupi continued to bear witness to the grave situation he faced in the villages of the diocese, where, he wrote in 1770, "li pericoli sono le [sic.] seguenti, Guerra, peste, Febre malignia, Fame, Fuoco, e ladri e queste sono sei flagelli che si trovano presentimente, e sono continui" (Letter from Stefano Lupi to Propaganda, Ruse, 25 August 1770, APF, *Bulgaria e Valacchia*, vol. 6, f. 85r).

[14] During the uprising, the community of the village of Chiprovtsi, near Sofia, had risen up in the hope—unfulfilled—that the neighboring Habsburg troops would intervene on their behalf. The uprising was ruthlessly put down, and the village, an important center of Bulgarian Catholic culture, lost much of its former importance. See B. Andreeva Cvetkova, "Les mouvements de resistance et de liberation des Bulgares dans le Nord–Est de la Bulgarie, en Thrace et en Macédoine pendant les années 80 et 90 du XVIIe siècle", *Palaeobulgarica / Starobalgaristika* 3 (1980), 45–56; A. Ciocîltan, "The identities of the Catholic communities in the 18th century Wallachia", *Revista Română de Studii Baltice și Nordice* 9/1 (2017), 71–82.

[15] These conflicts were related to the Russo-Turkish War (1768–1774) fought between Empress Catherine and Sultans Mustafa III and Abdul Hamid I. See B. L. Davies, *The Russo-Turkish War, 1768–1774: Catherine II and the Ottoman Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Another difficulty, as Lupi lamented in a letter sent in November 1769, was the presence of a community of Armenian Catholics, who had left Bucharest a year earlier. As Lupi reports, this group refused to adopt the rules the missionary tried to enforce, continuing with its illicit behavior:

> For a year now, I have worked to bring them back them to the [right] path, and with some I have had some success; but others I have not been able to bring to the path at all, as they are imbued with unsound maxims, and therefore I do not know what to do with these people, because they are full of superstitions; and I see that they do not keep any faith; while they do not want to hear the admonitions, and they go to the Armenian schismatic churches, and observe the feasts of the schismatic Armenians, and their fasts, and during our feasts they work, and they eat meat at our fasts, and if they wish also on Saturday they eat meat and do not care to come to Holy Mass, as they prefer to go to eat the Kurban of the Armenians, rather than come to Mass, even though I urge them [to do so], and yell [at them] like an ox, that they should not go to eat this cursed [kurban].[16]

Rather than heed Lupi's instructions and follow Catholic rites and customs, the Armenians soon adapted to local customs and began to mix with the Orthodox Armenians, whose feasts, as Lupi reported, they observed instead of honoring their own confessional tradition. There were countless widespread and shared superstitions: first, Lupi mentioned the *kurban*, an animal sacrifice common to Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims in Ottoman Bulgaria. Writings produced by missionaries and bishops documented this ritual practice among their flock as early as the 17th century, but references became increasingly frequent and poignant during the 18th century. While Petar Bogdan Bakšev, Archbishop of Sofia (1642–1674), described the procedure and purpose without naming the ritual,[17] in 1680, Anton Stefanov, an observant Franciscan from the village of Chiprovtsi and bishop of Nikopol, identified the sacrifice as *kurban*, a Turkish term of Semitic origin (*qurbān* in Arabic, *korban* in Hebrew) denoting a sacrifice to which local Catholics also referred to as *žértva*, an indigenous Slavic word.[18]

In 1760, a circular from Propaganda Fide had forbidden its celebration, but as letters and reports from missionaries working in both dioceses testify, the

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[16] APF, *SC Bulgaria e Valacchia* 6, f. 86r–v.

[17] See P. Deodatus, *De antiquitate paterni soli et de rebus bulgaricis*, ed. and trans. T. Vasilev, vol. I (Sofia: 2020), 264.

[18] See the letter of the Bishop of Nikopol Anton Stefanov to the Cardinals of Propaganda and to Pope Innocent XI, "Report and Visit of the Bishop of Nikopol", Belene, 22 July 1680. In B. Primov, P. Sariiski, M. Ĭovkov, S. Stanimirov, eds. *Dokumenti za katolicheskata deĭnost v Bŭlgariia prez XVII vek* (Sofia: Sv. Kliment Ohridski 1993), 454–455.

practice continued to be widespread.[19] The *kurban* was offered for the dead, but also for the fertility of fields and women, or for the health of family members and children. Sacrificial offerings could also be made in honor of the so-called *samodivi*, forest fairies of Slavic and Bulgarian folklore, believed to be able to deliver men and women from misfortunes and catastrophes.[20] Evidently, the Armenian Catholic community was receptive to this belief, further underscoring the ritual's interreligious and "pan-Balkan" nature. As often noted in the missionaries' letters, Bulgarian Catholics preferred to celebrate the ritual and then consume the flesh of the sacrificial animal rather than attend Sunday mass, as Domenico Antola and Niccolò Pugliesi, Canepa's predecessor and Archbishop of Ragusa from 1766, repeatedly reported to Propaganda Fide.[21] A similar tendency emerged even among the Catholic Armenians of Ruse.

But there was more: later in his letter, Lupi also highlighted the Armenians' disaffection with the Catholic sacraments, specifically denouncing the custom of celebrating weddings "as the schismatics do". The newlyweds did not consummate the marriage on their wedding night, but three days later, following the tradition of painting their hands and feet with the "color of Portogalo", that is, orange (in Bulgarian *портокал*, *portokal*).

However, relations between the missionary and the Armenian community soured due to a plague epidemic decimating the villagers. More specifically, the Armenians expected the missionary to visit the homes of women and men who had contracted the disease. Moreover, they wanted the priest and the penitent to be in close contact during confession, without taking any preventive measures. They did not even want communion to be distributed to them "with the scissors made and delivered by the most illustrious and most reverend Monsignor Nicolò Pugliesi, [now]", Archbishop of Ragusa," but wished to receive it directly from the hands of the missionary. It might be interesting to recall that

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[19] A printed copy of this instruction, published in *Collectanea S. Congregationis de Propaganda Fide*, no. 424, 271–276, is preserved in the Archives of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (ADDF, S.O., St. D4 E, I).

[20] I would like mention two articles that I have dedicated to this topic and, more generally, to the specificities of Bulgarian Catholicism in the 18th century: S. Notarfonso, "Il rito del kurban tra i pauliciani bulgari: le fonti missionarie (secoli XVII–XVIII)", Storicamente.org – Laboratorio di Storia 18 (2022); S. Notarfonso, "Animal Sacrifice and 'Schismatic' Celebrations among Bulgarian Paulicians (Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries)". In *The Inquisition and the Christian East*, eds. C. Santus, J. P. Gay and L. Tatarenko (Durham: Durham University Press, 2025). About the transconfessional persistence of animal sacrifices in contemporary Bulgarian society see for instance B. Sikimić, P. Hristov, eds. *Kurban in the Balkans* (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies SASA, 2007).

[21] See, for instance, Antola to Propaganda, 8 June 1765, APF, SC. *Bulgaria e Valacchia*, 5, f. 243rv.

the possibility of using similar tools for the distribution of the Holy Communion in times of plague had been officially introduced by Pope Benedict XIV in 1754 – barely 15 years earlier – in response to a *dubium* submitted to the Propaganda Fide and the Holy Office by the apostolic vicar of Algiers, Arnoult Bossu.[22] Until then, the host could only be given by hand: Catholic ministries were not permitted to alter the standardized rite of the Sacrament in any case so as not to compromise its sanctity. The reality, however, was different: despite the official prescription, many missionaries serving in territories devastated by plague epidemics already used tools when administering the Eucharist to avoid contagion.

As previously observed, in 1754, the use of a spoon in similar cases was finally permitted, although conceived by Pope Lambertini (Benedict XIV) as a last resort specifically intended to meet the needs of those who worked in dioceses suffering from a severe shortage of priests and missionaries, as was the case with Maghreb[23] or, in this case, Ottoman Bulgaria.

Evidently, the uncompromising bishop of Nikopol, Niccolò Pugliesi, immediately took advantage of the newly introduced papal concession, providing his missionaries with a set of scissors to distribute the Holy Host among their flock during the recurrent waves of plagues. Concerned for his own life and that of his relatives, Lupi wanted to make use of the tool but found himself forced to fulfill his flock's requests instead. However, by the time he wrote the discussed letter, the situation had further deteriorated. One of his servants had contracted the disease and died, while his sister, still ill, was on the mend. In Ruse, Lupi lamented, "one hundred and fifty die every day [...] and of our Ragusan and Armenian people eleven have died because of the plague so far, and I do not know what will happen next". In these new circumstances, he felt compelled to take a more cautious attitude. Once again, however, he had to wrangle with the obstinacy of the Armenian community.[24] "In addition," he wrote in his letter to Propaganda, they said that a "man should not fear the plague; if God has written that he must die, then die he will. Finally, they say the plague is a woman who walks, and some even swear they have seen her wandering at night." Determined not to take preventive measures, the Armenians expressed a fatalistic attitude toward the disease.

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[22] ADDF, SO, *Dubia circa Eucharistiam* 1603–1788, fasc. 35, [11 July] 1754, cc. 508–509.

[23] The case has been discussed by Mario Sanseverino: M. Sanseverino, "Dubia barbareschi. La necessità delle trasgressioni nelle missioni religiose delle Reggenze di Algeri, Tripoli e Tunisi (secoli XVII–XVIII)", *Rivista di Storia del Cristianesimo* 19, no. 2 (2022), 454–482.

[24] APF, SC *Bulgaria e Valacchia* 6, f. 86v.

Indeed, in the medieval and early modern Catholic tradition, pestilence and disease had long been theologically interpreted as divine punishment for human sins, while from a medical perspective, the plague was generally regarded as an infection caused by "bad air," a concept derived from the writings of Galen and Hippocrates.[25] Thus, in response to epidemics, medical treatments and preventive measures were increasingly integrated with, but did not replace, spiritual remedies such as devotional processions and prayers.

The belief that pestilence was somehow connected to human misbehavior and sin persisted into the first half of the 19th century, when a violent cholera epidemic swept across Europe. The then Father General of the Society of Jesus, Jan Philipp Roothaan (1783 or 1785–1853), who coordinated Jesuit assistance for those who contracted the disease, described cholera as a form of medicine meant to heal the souls of sinners, one that the Jesuits must withstand heroically.[26]

Even the idea that the plague roamed the city in the form of a woman – an image that occupied a central place within their belief system – was not confined to the Armenian community. According to the sources, as we shall see, it was also widespread across the region among multiple confessional groups. The evidence also indicates that the idea was by no means unfamiliar to Western and Central Europe. Perhaps one of the latest examples in this regard was the appearance of the plague as an old woman in the movie *Pest in Florence*, directed by Otto Rippert and written by Fritz Lang (1919), based on the short story *The Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allan Poe (1842). Yet the concept has much older roots. As early as the beginning of the 17th century, the idea appeared in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1603), where the author suggested that the plague should be depicted as a woman: old, emaciated, and terrifying, with sallow skin and disheveled hair. Her head was to be surrounded by a crown of dark clouds and her feet rested on the skins of lambs, sheep, and other animals,

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[25] For a summary, see Henderson, *Florence under Siege*, 136–141; and F. Borghero, "Religious Orders and Plague Epidemics in Late Medieval and Renaissance Florence". In *Religious Orders, Public Health and Epidemics. From the Black Death to Covid–19*, ed. F. Borghero (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2024), 23–48.

[26] On the matter, E. Colombo, *Quando Dio chiama. I gesuiti e le missioni nelle Indie (1560–1960)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023), 203–223; E. Colombo, "Mission at the Time of Cholera: Jesuits in 19th century Italy". In *Religious Orders, Public Health and Epidemics. From the Black Death to Covid–19*, ed. F. Borghero (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2024), 169–187. About the Jesuits and epidemics, see also S. Isidori, "Le 'Indie' della peste: il contributo gesuita all'ampliamento semantico del concetto di 'martirio'", Storicamente. org – Laboratorio di Storia 18 (2022).

while she held in her hand a scourge with blood-stained cords.[27] Between the first and second halves of the 17th century, when several plague epidemics struck the Italian peninsula, artists and sculptors gave visual form to this idea. One of those artists, for instance, was the Flemish sculptor Giusto le Court, who, in 1670, depicted the plague as an old woman chased away by the Holy Virgin in Santa Maria della Salute, in Venice. The church itself, designed by Baldassare Longhena in 1631, was erected in the aftermath of a vow made by the Venetian Senate and dedicated to the Republic's protectress, the Virgin Mary, while the plague was raging in Venice.[28] A few years earlier, a similar solution had been adopted by Mattia Preti. In 1656, shortly after the end of a plague epidemic, the painter was commissioned to create seven votive frescoes above the city gates of Naples in which he represented the disease, once again, as an old woman covered in sores and rags.[29]

However, according to the available sources, the Bulgarian tradition displayed several distinctive features. An undated and unnumbered leaflet preserved in the Historical Archive of the Congregation of the Passion of Christ, presumably dating from the first half of the 19th century, offers additional insight:

> Old plague means here a deity in the guise of an old woman. These people imagine that diseases are being [sic] living and evil gods-spirits. The Bulgarians say that the plague is called "Baba Sciuma" [*Chuma, чума*], "Grandmother Plague," and that she is alive and can have children.[30]

The "pestiferous disease" could therefore take on the appearance of an old woman or that of a particularly attractive maiden. Through its embodiment, the plague made itself visible to human beings and could contact or interact with them. As in Poe's aforementioned short story, the plague was a woman capable of going through all physical obstacles and entering dwellings, nullifying any attempt at isolation.

In the early decades of the 19th century, new plague outbreaks struck Bulgaria and Wallachia, becoming unusually severe between 1813 and 1815. This

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[27] C. Ripa, *Iconologia overo descrittione di diverse imagini cauate dall'antichità, & di propria inuentione* (Rome: 1603), 397.

[28] Cf. A. Hopkins, "Plans and Planning for S. Maria della Salute, Venice", *The Art Bulletin* LXXIX, no. 3 (1997), 441–465; M. Clemente, *Il marmo bianco e la peste nera. White Marble and the Black Death* (Venice: Marsilio, 2019).

[29] Cf. A. Pasolini, "I santi della peste nei territori della Corona d'Aragona". In *Ospedali e assistenza nei territori della corona d'Aragona: fonti archivistiche, archeologiche e artistiche*, eds. M. Rapetti and A. Pergola (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2021), 149–170.

[30] The leaflet is preserved in the archival dossier pertaining to the episcopate of Fortunato Maria Ercolani (1815–1822): AGCP, Bulgaria, IV–3/4–3 (Bishop Fortunato Maria Ercolani), unnumbered page.

wave, which decimated entire villages, is known in Bulgarian historiography as *pŭrvata chuma* or *pŭrvata moriya* ("the first plague").[31] Even in this case, we have first-hand testimony from missionaries serving in the Diocese of Nikopol. The ecclesiastical structure of the diocese was significantly affected: Bishop Francesco Maria Ferreri (1805–1813) and the missionaries Raimondo di San Francesco Borgia (Mornia) and Father Pietro della Passione (Molinari), all belonging to the Passionist Congregation, lost their lives after contracting the disease. On 29 May 1814, Antonio Gabriele Severoli, apostolic nuncio to Vienna and bishop of Viterbo, reported that "Bulgaria and Wallachia are [left] without bishops and missionaries, taken away by the plague".[32]

News of their deaths is also provided by Ferreri's successor, Fortunato Ercolani, in a report addressed to Father General Tommaso Albesano.[33] In the report (1815), Ercolani also said that a part of the Catholic community from the Diocese of Nikopol had left their hometown, seeking refuge beyond the Danube, in an attempt to evade the "pestiferous disease" and the bandits that ravaged the Bulgarian countryside. In fact, as early as 1806, in a letter to Propaganda Ferreri himself reported that a number of families, among others, had relocated to a village called Slobozia, just opposite the town of Ruse,[34] by order of the governor of Ruse, who wanted them to cultivate the fields and vineyards he owned on the other side of the river.[35]

In the new settlement, Ercolani swore, they continually showed moral, devotional, and doctrinal integrity.[36] "But the devil", he lamented, "jealous of so much good, sought not only to enervate the most fervent Catholics, but also to

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[31] N. Manolova–Nikolova, *Chumavite vremena (1700–1850)* (Sofia: IF–94, 2004), 72–73.

[32] "La Bulgaria e la Valacchia sono privi di Vescovi, e di Operaj tolti dalla peste", Severoli to Propaganda, 29 may 1814, Vienna, APF. S.C. Bulgaria e Valacchia 8, f.300r.

[33] AGCP, *Bulgaria*, IV–3/4–3 (Bishop Fortunato Maria Ercolani), ff.1–2.

[34] This is probably the village of the same name, today located in the Giurgiu district of Romania.

[35] "[…] altri per […] ordine del Governatore di Ruciuch furono trasportati a Slobosia villaggio incontro a Ruciuch in cui egli hà una gran tenuta, affinché lavorino i suoi campi e vigne". In the same report, Ferreri informed the Propaganda that the Passionist father Bonaventura Paolini had been permanently sent to the village to serve the spiritual needs of the newborn community. APF, S.C. Bulgaria e Valacchia 8, f. 175r, *Relazione della visita della Diocesi nicopolitana in Bulgaria fatta l'anno 1806 nei mesi di maggio e giugno da me Francesco per gratia di Dio e della Santa Sede Vescovo di Nicopoli.*

[36] "When our people fled from the Gargelli, they had formed a village near the town of Rosciuk on the bank of the Danube, on this side towards Wallachia; the Catholics of this village were so good to me that it seemed to be a little garden of paradise, and it was my great pleasure to visit them often," AGCP, *Fondo Bulgaria* IV–3/4–3 (Bishop Fortunato Maria Ercolani), f. 5.

pull them into the schism". As they had done in their parish of origin and indeed throughout all the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire, the Catholic community lived alongside an Orthodox majority. Specifically, around 200 Orthodox families lived in Slobozia. The document does not specify the number of Catholics, but we can assume it must have been smaller: the letter Bishop Ferreri sent to the Propaganda in 1806 documented the presence of barely 40 families, 223 persons in total, 76 of which had received the sacrament of confirmation.[37] A single road separated the "schismatics" from the Catholic flock. The risk of *communicatio in sacris* and forms of confessional and ritual hybridization remained just around the corner: it was the aggressive plague sweeping through the region that sped things up.

An elderly Orthodox man, whom the bishop described as "obsessed with the devil", started wandering around the village, "shouting that he had a great thing to manifest in the name of the old plague". The man entered his "schismatic" church and, although he had never been able to read, he started reading books; he stuck knives inside his mouth without injury, and he performed other prodigious deeds, claiming that these were signs through which God wanted to show the community that he was speaking through the old man.

The elder's fame, unsurprisingly, quickly spread to the surrounding villages. Many came to see him and question him about those unusual incidents. As we read in the report, to those who asked why he was preaching like that and what the origin of those miraculous abilities was, the man replied that he had encountered nothing less than the plague itself. "[...] One night while he was sleeping, he heard a knock at the door, and, asking who it was, he heard a voice saying: Open up". Intimidated, especially by the late hour, the man refused to open the door "[...] but while the door was closed, a beautiful woman entered the house and said, 'Do you know who I am?' The terrified old man replied that he did not; she then said: I am the plague, who goes around everywhere exterminating people".[38]

As in the case documented by Lupi, the belief that the plague could take the form of a woman evidently spread on the other side of the Danube. However, other elements also emerge from Ercolani's account, which is notable for the high quality of its prose. After forcibly receiving the plague in his home, the old man listened to its precise requests:

> You shall go and tell all the priests and people around you that they shall gather in such a place, on such a day, and make me a solemn sacrifice. The people and priests

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[37] *Relazione della visita della Diocesi nicopolitana in Bulgaria fatta l'anno 1806 nei mesi di maggio e giugno da me Francesco per gratia di Dio e della Santa Sede Vescovo di Nicopoli*, APF, S.C. Bulgaria e Valacchia 8, f. 176v.

[38] AGCP, Bulgaria, IV–3/4–3 (Bishop Fortunato Maria Ercolani), f. 6.

> shall come well-dressed, each bringing food and flatbread dipped in honey, and after the sacrifice, they shall dine. The old man then said: Are there any Catholics here, and shall I call them again? Call them and invite them, but I fear that they will not come; the old man repeated: Who will believe me? She answered that she would invisibly prove her work, but he would go, do wonders, read, write, etc., and so on. Then, on the day of the sacrifice, she would make three fires of different colors appear in the sky, and she commanded him to order everyone that on the day of the sacrifice no one should order anyone to light a fire in his own house, and whoever would attempt this, she would immediately exterminate him with his whole family, and instigate the fire. So did the old man, and all the people in Slobozia, the name of that village, with a number of schismatic priests.[39]

Thus, to avoid contagion, the community had to collectively sacrifice an animal following the woman's instructions; the bishop does not explicitly use this term, but it could be called a *kurban*. The elder visited by the personification of the plague was Orthodox, but Catholic families were also explicitly called upon to participate, although the woman herself did not really consider their participation in the rite plausible. In addition to the animal sacrifice itself, the preparation of food was required, specifically, the flatbread soaked in honey to be consumed after the ritual. Three fires would appear in the sky at the time of the sacrifice, a miracle that would certify the truthfulness of the elder's words: the woman forbade the lighting of any more fires at the same time.

This was a series of preventive measures, which could be described as magical-ritual, also widespread in other villages in northern Bulgaria between the 18th and 19th centuries: the existence of an interdenominational ritual (open to participation by the Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims) is also documented in the village of "Tarnicevizza (Tranchovitsa)" in the Diocese of Nikopol. Here, too, a collective sacrifice was offered to the so-called plague goddess, and, just like in Slobozia, lighting fires was forbidden on the day of the ceremony. At the end of the ritual, as in the case reported by Ercolani, the consumption of flatbread topped with honey was planned.[40]

The prelate, who at that time resided in the Bulgarian village of Belene, did not know what was happening on the other side of the Danube. Having arrived by chance in Slobozia on the day of the sacrifice, while he was resting, tired from the journey, he was alerted to the fact by a man called "Dedo Stagno". Initially skeptical, after an initial reconnaissance, Ercolani ascertained that no Catholic, not even his host family, had dared to light a fire, in compliance with the orders given to the elderly "schismatic" by the Old Plague. He immediately took steps to counter what he considered an illicit form of collective superstition.

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[39] AGCP, Bulgaria, IV–3/4–3 (Bishop Fortunato Maria Ercolani), f. 6.

[40] As reported in N. Manolova–Nikolova, *Chumavite vremena (1700–1850)*,158.

He ordered the fireplace in the room to be lit, and the bread and other food prepared for the gathering to be thrown away. Together with his companion, Father Bonaventura, he headed for the place designated for the sacrifice, about a mile away from their home. To corroborate their position and discredit the lies of the old man, the two adopted a singular but effective expedient: "We, the priests, had the stole and the Roman Ritual under our robes, and in defiance of the superstitious ceremony, we kept our pipes lit in our mouths, which everyone was surprised about, given the prohibition of lighting a fire".[41]

Upon arriving at the site, Ercolani found before him a diverse group: the families had brought their children to the gathering, on the ground they had laid out the tablecloths with the food for the ceremony, and the "schismatic" priests, simplistically accused of complicity, were reading aloud from their books. The carts with which the people had come to the square were arranged in a circle around the crowd, shaping a kind of protective wall around them. When everything was ready for the ceremony, the Orthodox priests sent for the elderly man who lived in a house not too far away. Invited to join the group, the man surprisingly refused.

The crowd, Ercolani points out, had not eaten yet: just as in Tranchovitsa, fasting before the ritual sacrifice was planned. Surprised and annoyed by the hunger and the bad weather – a wind that was at first mild but gradually became more and more violent – the villagers sent more men to his house. The last six returned shocked by what they had seen: "Oimé! Oimé!" they cried, "what have we seen, the poor old man is clubbed, dragged, tossed by an invisible force hither and thither about the room".

Dismay was soon followed by indecision: the "schismatic" priests did not know what to do. Some proposed to eat, others to wait, generating great confusion among the bystanders and derision in the "Turks" passing by. The Catholics, previously worried, now observed the scene, amused.

Because of the bad weather, the impatience of the hungry children, but also because of the doubts of the Orthodox priests themselves – some were beginning to accuse the old man of madness – the crowd finally dispersed, throwing away the "damned food, bread, and wine" (as Ercolani describes them) brought for the ritual. "We were still soaked", Ercolani reports, "but the water seemed to us roses falling from the sky for the joy we had of seeing the diabolical fraud dispelled before our own eyes".

The danger was thus averted, the lie revealed, the superstitions of the "schismatics" manifestly discredited. The same evening, we read, the Catholic

[41] AGCP, Bulgaria, IV–3/4–3 (Bishop Fortunato Maria Ercolani), f. 6.

community gathered to hear the bishop's sermon, and the "people [...] with great fervor praised and glorified our Holy Religion".[42]

Ever since their arrival in Ottoman Bulgaria (1595), missionaries sent by the Holy See had realized the level of serious confessional indiscipline that characterized Bulgarian Catholics.[43] Due to the presence of Orthodox Christians and Muslims, with whom they lived in close contact and sometimes shared worship spaces, they had developed customs, devotional practices, and, in some cases, even theological convictions that were hybridized and therefore seen as intrinsically flawed by the agents of the Holy See. Missionaries' attempts at solidifying confessional boundaries often met with stubborn resistance from local Catholics.

Especially after the uprising of 1688, the condition of Bulgarian Catholicism further deteriorated: the Catholic community of Chiprovtsi was decimated, while the Venetian and Ragusan merchants left the area. The Paulicians, whose very recent conversion to Catholicism (the process had begun at the beginning of the 17th century) had not eliminated many of the traditional practices and beliefs they had inherited from their ancestors, remained the main representatives of the Roman faith in the region.

Between the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the following century, as we have seen, other sources of instability contributed to further jeopardizing the missionaries' few achievements. The internal political situation within the Ottoman Empire, as well as wars and epidemics, hindered the actions of the missionaries, who were often no longer even equipped with the *firmans* that, until a few decades earlier, had allowed them to move more or less easily within the Ottoman territories.[44]

The case studies examined here are particularly eloquent in this regard. On the one hand, Lupi's experience in Ruse highlights the limitations of the missionary's attempts: the Armenian community, while seeking contact with the priest and his services (they insistently asked for the administration of the Eucharist), expected the sacraments to be administered on their terms and ended up adhering more to the internal logic of their own community than to Lupi's exhortations. Ercolani's report similarly reveals the persistent adherence within the relocated Catholic community to a system of beliefs and magical-ritualistic

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[42] AGCP, Bulgaria, IV–3/4–3 (Bishop Fortunato Maria Ercolani), f. 6.

[43] See the letters and reports published in E. Fermendžin, *Acta Bulgariae ecclesiastica ab a. 1565 usque ad a. 1799* (Zagreb: 1887) and in the abovementioned B. Primov, P. Sariĭski, M. Ĭovkov, S. Stanimirov, eds. *Dokumenti za katolicheskata deĭnost v Bŭlgariia prez XVII vek*.

[44] Cf. for instance Matteo Massarek (Archbishop of Skopje) to Propaganda Fide, APF, SC Servia 3 (1785–1839), f. 242r.

practices for the prevention of illness shared by the Orthodox. In fact, as scholars observe, the Orthodox Church itself sought to offer an alternative to this system, for example by promoting the cult of St. Haralampius, who in Bulgarian iconography is often depicted trampling the personification of the plague.[45]

Across early modern Europe, Catholics commonly prayed to God or to saints usually invoked against pestilence, such as St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Sebastian, or St. Roch, seeking their intercession and protection against the plague at the public and private levels. In 17th-century Florence, St. Antonino, to whom a public procession attended by political and ecclesiastical authorities was dedicated, was believed to have mitigated the effect of the plague in the city.[46] In the latter half of the century, this devotional theme found monumental expression in the work of Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, Ludovico Ottavio Burnacini, and the sculptor Paul Strudel, who collaborated on the famous *Plague Column* (*Pestsäule*) in Vienna. The monument depicts the Holy Trinity triumphing over the allegory of the dying plague. Similar stylistic and iconographic motifs appeared in other cities of the Habsburg Empire, such as Kremnica (1765–1772),[47] but also Klausenburg/Cluj-Napoca (1738–1742),[48] where a statue of the Virgin crowns the top of the column. In fact, such monuments are closely connected to the Marian columns that spread throughout Central Europe between the 16th and 17th centuries, serving as instruments of re-Catholicization and often bearing a pronounced anti-Ottoman connotation.[49] The Viennese *Pestsäule* was commissioned by Leopold I as a double offering to God, both for the end of the plague and for another victory over the Ottomans in 1683.[50]

In the episode that occurred in Slobozia, at least according to Ercolani's testimony, the devotional measures taken against the disease followed a com-

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[45] See for instance Kristiyan Kovachev, "Mezhdu grekha i nakazanieto: obrazŭt na chumata v tsŭrkovnoto izkustvo i vŭv folklora" [Between Transgression and Punishment: The Image of the Plague in Christian Art and Folklore], Bŭlgarska etnologiya 4 (2021), 524–536. Other saints associated with protection against plague are, for instance, Sts. Menas, Anthony and Athanasius as reported in R. Popov, "The Cult for St. Athanasius among the Bulgarians", *Ethologia Bulgarica*, 1 (1998), 21–30.

[46] Henderson, *Florence under Siege*, 156–161.

[47] Cf. B. Balážová, "Stíp Najsvätejšej Trojice v Kremnici (1765–1772). Jeden z posledných morových stípov v bývalých habsburských krajinách", *ARS* 35 (2002),1–3.

[48] Cf. M. Bogade, "Marian Columns in Central Europe as Media of Post-Tridentine Policy of Recatholisation", *Ikon* 10 (2017), 329–336.

[49] U. Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin Mary in the Religious and Political Context of the Renaissance* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

[50] C. Boekl, "Vienna's Pestsaule: The Analysis of a Seicento Plague Monument", *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 49, no. 1 (2019), 41–56.

pletely different path: Catholics, along with the Orthodox majority, addressed the plague itself, offering "her" a sacrificial ceremony led by an old man who was not even a priest. In breach of the post-Tridentine tradition, this practice further blurred the boundaries between the two confessional groups. The episode sheds light, above all, on a tenacious attachment to local traditions and ritual forms, so pronounced that it necessitated Ercolani's immediate intervention. Even though, according to his own account, a series of (un)fortunate events ultimately prevented the sacrifice from being performed, the case shows that the rules missionaries had been attempting to enforce on behalf of the Holy See for the previous two centuries were still far from being fully implemented.

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