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Y. PESTIS & M. PARETS



The entrance to the Gothic Saint Agatha Chapel, commissioned by King James II in 1302 as part of the Royal Palace. It was here that the sacramental bread was kept and collected by priests going out into the city to give the last rites to those dying during the plague epidemic of 1651-1654.

Humans have always had to deal with epidemics ever since they abandoned the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. This chapter takes us back to 17th century Barcelona and the horrors of bubonic plague....

...to me there is no difference at all between my own days which have gone by and the distant days of Noah about which I have heard. I have nothing in the world but the hour in which I am: it pauses for a moment, and then, like a cloud, moves on.

Samuel ibn Naghrillah (HaNagid), vizier to the King of Granada,
on reaching fifty years old in 1043 AD.

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Y. PESTIS AND M. PARETS

I

The organism producing bubonic plague is a bacterium named *Yersinia pestis*, after the French-Swiss bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin. In another example of east-to-west migration, as with the Pyrenean bear, *Y. pestis* first travelled to Europe from eastern or central Asia. Arriving on the western Mediterranean coast in December 1347, within six months it spread through the eastern half of Spain, most of France, Switzerland, Italy and east across the Balkans. Another six months on it had moved across much of England, and cut a swathe through Central Europe from Belgium almost to Bucharest. Tens of millions of Europeans died in this first Great Mortality.

For his part, Dr Yersin made exactly the opposite migration, rejecting the comforts of life as an academic researcher in a modern western city and travelling east from Paris in 1890 to work in the Pasteur Institute in Saigon. Yersin was something of a loner who never used his first name, avoided scientific meetings, and led several expeditions into the jungle, preferring to face not only tropical diseases but also unwelcoming natives, venomous snakes, elephants and tigers. In 1894 he was asked to investigate the ongoing Manchurian pneumonic plague epidemic in Hong Kong and, during this study, he identified the bacillus responsible for the disease. Studying the enormous lymph node swellings known as buboes, he observed that “the pulp of the bubo in every case was filled with a thick puree of short, thick bacilli with rounded ends”.

Yersin also demonstrated that the bacterium can infect rodents as well as primates, and announced his momentous discovery on the 20 June of that year. At about the same time another formidable scientist, the Japanese bacteriologist Kitasato Shibasaburō, also working in Hong Kong, was making the same observation. Although denied the glory of having his name forever associated with the Black Death, the career of Baron Kitasato-san is at least honoured with the patronymic name of another bacterial genus, *Kitasatospora*.

Just one infected flea, brought in on someone else’s clothes or blanket, can lead to disaster. The flea has ingested *Y. pestis* while feeding previously on an infected black rat. In a macabre but ingenious adaptation, the bacterium establishes itself in the flea’s digestive system and blocks the flow of host blood. It does this by producing a slimy coating (a “biofilm”) which results in the growth of a blockage of bacteria and clotted blood around the valve known as the proventriculus, at the base of the flea’s oesophagus. This mechanism, revealed in a classic investigative study by Bacot and Martin in 1914, drives the flea crazy. Unable to satisfy its

bloodthirst, it repeatedly attempts to feed, regurgitating blocked blood containing infective bacteria back into the mammalian hosts with every attempt. When rats are not available, then humans become a secondary target for the desperate flea. A report on this scientific discovery, published in the New Zealander paper the *Nelson Evening Mail* on Friday 1 May, 1914, and entitled *Rats and Plague* sympathetically concludes that “on the whole a flea once infected has very little prospect of future happiness”.

II

There are a great many unhappy fleas in Spain in the late 1640's. The trouble starts in June 1647 when a plague-infected ship from Algiers docks in Valencia. The first reported cases occur in the *barrio* of Russafa, after which the disease simmers over the high summer only to explode in September. Despite the best efforts of the Viceroy of Valencia to deny the reality of the epidemic, by October it is raging through the city and in the process of killing over sixteen thousand people. It is a disease of the poor: those with money and connections get out of the city as soon as they can.

By early 1648 the worst is over in Valencia, but the infection ripples out into surrounding towns and villages and then further afield to produce similarly catastrophic epidemics in Malaga and Seville. During the winter of that year plague also spreads inland northwards to affect the border town of Ulldecona, but the rest of Catalonia is spared the contagion. Of greater concern here is the continuing fight between the French-Catalan army and the Spanish King, still both at it a full seven years after the Battle of Montjuïc.

The Reaper's War has effectively stagnated, although the tide is subtly turning back in favour of the Castilian crown. The French expulsion of all Catalan bishops is deeply unpopular; the hated Olivares is dead, and Catalonia a ravaged war zone. It is all definitely another case of “from

Guatemala to Guatapeor" for those yearning for a little peace and stability. Furthermore, there is at last some sign of reconciliation and respect from the King in Madrid. After recapturing the eastern Catalan city of Lleida, the King has wisely agreed to observe the Catalan constitution, so greatly improving his image amongst many war-weary Catalans. And the French have problems at home where things are going badly for Louis XIV, with civil war about to break out.

But, at least early on in 1648, the French-Catalan troops remain in offensive mood and the decision is taken to attack Tortosa, perhaps in revenge for the treachery in giving into the Spanish King so easily back in 1640, and to erase the shame of a failed subsequent French-Catalan attack on the town in May 1642. General Josep d'Ardena i de Sabastida is particularly keen on the conquest. By now a thirty-seven-year old veteran of the early fighting, including the glorious victory at Montjuïc where he fought under the leadership of Serignan, he is still the man in charge of the Catalan cavalry. His antipathy to the Spanish crown is such that he is to assume French nationality after the war, and he will die with his boots on in 1668, battling away in Roussillon during a decade of Catalan peasant rebellion against French taxes: the Revolt of the Angelets, with history repeating itself on the other side of the Pyrenees.

Tortosa, in a strategic position near the deltaic mouth of the River Ebro and close to the Valencian border, is the fifth largest city in Catalonia, but in 1648 it is not prepared enough to defend a serious offensive. In contrast the French-Catalan attacking army led by General Jean-Gaspard Ferdinand de Marsin, as with the Grand Old Duke of York, numbers ten thousand men. De Marsin has both the experience and the spleen to get the job done efficiently. His siege is unsophisticated, involving the breaching of the walls by pounding them with artillery fire for a week, after which the city is taken on the 12 June 1648 without further struggle,

while much of the population cowers inside the cathedral. At first de Marsin agrees to forbid looting, but then there is a terrible explosion in front of the cathedral and many French soldiers are killed. "Treason!" cries the furious General, "There are no agreements!" Control is lost, and a thorough pillaging begins as the troops are given free rein, with one of the first victims being the local Bishop Joan Baptista Veschi. Churches and convents are included as targets, and it is neither a good time nor place to be a woman. This will be the last major French engagement in the Reaper's War south of the Pyrenees, but it is not a heroic victory, despite the fact that it is received with great satisfaction in Barcelona.....

V

.....by 1649, just one year after the subjugation of the city, things are not looking good for the decreasing number of Catalans still opposing the Spanish King. By mid-October the Castilian General Juan de Garay Otáñez, Marquis of Villarrubia de Langre, has already attacked from Lleida with a force of similar strength to that under General de Marsin, scything deeply through Catalonia to the coast less than fifty kilometres from Barcelona.

As a ripost to Garay's advances, Josep d'Ardena is sent to cross the Ebro and take the fight from Tortosa into the Kingdom of Valencia. His cavalry, supplemented with French troops in a force over two thousand strong, crosses the Catalan border beyond Ulldecona on 31 October, intent on its own campaign of punitive action. An early confrontation, twelve kilometres from the border, takes place at the beginning of November in Traiguera, where an opposing force of a few hundred soldiers is overcome. From here the direction is further south then turning west towards the prize of Sant Mateu, historic capital of this rich part of Spain known as the Maestrat. Along the route a series of villages succumb easily: nearby Sant Jordi, then six kilometres

onward to pillage the strangely abandoned village of Càlig, and on another ten kilometres to poor La Jana which is completely sacked. A short diversion north allows Canet de Roig to receive similarly comprehensive treatment before arrival of d'Ardena at the gates of Sant Mateu.

Unexpectedly, the offensive campaign is stopped in its tracks there and then at Sant Mateu, where a determined defence of the town by a small force commanded by Baron de Seebach forces the Catalans back. After venting his destructive frustration in the nearby villages of Xert and Salsadella, a rumour of Castilian reinforcements arriving by sea convinces d'Ardena to return to Catalonia. His campaign fizzles out on the 19 November, but by then the damage is already done. They had entered a plague zone. Villages such as Traiguera and Càlig, as well as the town of Sant Mateu, had been infected the previous summer with the virulent Valencian bubonic plague, and many inhabitants are already dead or have fled well before the arrival of the Catalan troops. In his chronicle of the epidemic, Miquel Parets laments the foolishness of the troops indiscriminately robbing and trading in clothing during d'Ardena's sally into infected enemy territory.

VI

In January 1650 *Y. pestis* makes its triumphant entry into Tortosa and produces a severe epidemic. By April, in an act of desperation, the French Governor Monsieur de Launay orders anyone still remaining to evacuate, leaving the city to be cleaned and left entirely empty until September, by which time around a quarter of the population, over one thousand two hundred people, have died. Those remaining live to see the day, on 4 December that same year, and to the intense despair of Barcelona, when Castilian troops led by the Marquis of Mortara retake the city from the French. Mortara had taken over command of the Castilian forces after the

unexpected death of General Garay Otáñez in April. With Royalist troops now back in control of the Ebro, for Tortosa at least, the combined horror of plague and warfare is over.

Not so for Barcelona. During early 1650, fearful of what might come to pass, the Catalan capital sends plague doctor March i Xelpi and barber surgeon Mr Matas to Tortosa in order to ascertain whether the epidemic is indeed plague. The two men are paid handsomely for their services, but in order to avoid a rough mountain road they unwisely choose to follow an easier route closer to the border, are captured by enemy guerrillas, and held to ransom. Protesting strongly about the general interests of public health, the city is forced to pay an unaffordable number of gold ducats for the safe return of their medical team. A second medic, Doctor Vileta, is sent to Tortosa on the 23 March 1650, and he returns safely to report that it is indeed the plague. All trade with the Ebro Valley is immediately banned, and in order to control entry into the city only four gates (Saint Anthony's, Angel, New, and Sea) into Barcelona are allowed to remain open.

VII

The news arrives that there is already plague in Tarragona, and the decision is made to tighten controls on immigration, leaving open only the city gates to the north (Angel Gate) and south (Sea Gate). This, however, proves impractical as there is such a heaving concentration of mules, carts and people at these access points that it becomes impossible for the guards to maintain order. Reluctantly, return is made to the four-gate solution, until further bad news arrives in early June, this time from Sant Pere Pescador in northeast Catalonia where the disease has arrived by ship, probably from Tarragona. Then, closer still, there are rumours that Girona is infected.

Doctor Vileta is sent to Girona, but confusingly reports back that doctors there remain in disagreement, so an initial cautionary trade embargo between the two cities is briefly

lifted. Miquel Parets comments that it is a great miracle of Our Lord that the disease does not enter Barcelona at this time because many people wisely run to the city from Girona. But the case for plague strengthens every day, and popular opinion is not mollified by Dr. Vileta's ambivalence, so that in July another two experts, in this case Dr. Argila and barber surgeon Jaume Texidor, are sent to Girona to end the uncertainty. They report back that it is without doubt plague, and a virulent strain at that, with around two hundred people dying in Girona every day. To make matters worse, this spring has seen another drought and wheat prices are spiralling. By August wheat has over doubled in price and rioting threatened from those unable to get their hands on hoarded grain. The then forty-year-old Parets later writes: "we had in Catalonia the three greatest plagues God can inflict upon a people, namely famine, disease, and war."

VIII

Pere Josep Oleguer Miquel Parets, born on the 7 March 1610 to Miquel and Catherine, was the eldest of six brothers. The family ran a long established tanning business in the maritime district of Santa María del Mar, the trade passing down from father to son over successive generations. His father, a high ranking member of the Tanner's Guild, serving as treasurer then mayor, died in 1631, leaving Miquel Jnr. to carry on the family tradition. In 1633, assuming his responsibilities to further the dynasty, young Miquel married María Roure, the orphaned daughter of a once-important family in Vic, now making her living as a maid in Carmen Street (*Carrer del Carme*) on the other side of La Rambla. They had a child but it did not survive long after birth, and María herself died in the summer of 1636, probably of tuberculosis.

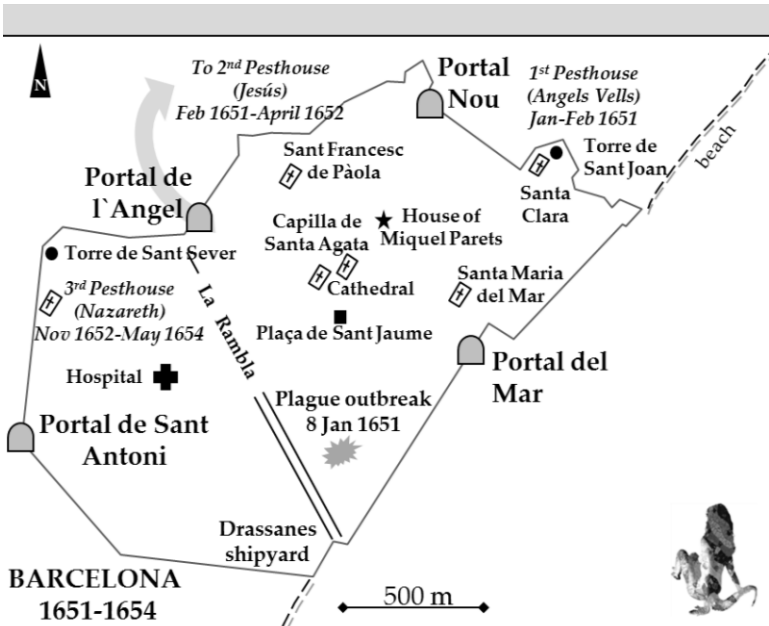
The following year Miquel tried again, marrying Elizabet Mans, the daughter of Eulàlia and Joan, a family of wealthy farmers out on the Barcelona piedmont plain in

Sarrià. This marriage is to produce seven children, four of whom survive. These are the three brothers Miquelo (born in the spring of 1639), Josep (born the summer of the next year), and Gabrielo (who arrives seven years later), and little Anna María who, in the middle of the plague panic of autumn 1650, is still in her early infancy.

There are already unsettling rumours by December, but early the next month the worst happens. Parets records how on Sunday 8 January 1651, in the house of a blind man called Martin de Langa, his wife and a young girl both sicken and die, and people in contact with them also fall ill. The city councillors immediately visit the house that night and send the sick to the Dominican convent of Angels Vells, the first pesthouse, situated just outside the city walls in what will in modern times become Ciutadella Park.

Those who are not obviously ill but who have been in contact with the victims are quarantined in the two towers of saints Severus and John, houses in the street are fumigated and cleaned, and clothing burnt. The rapidity of the response however is foiled by some of those charged with the cleansing process when they steal items, including clothes, from the infected houses. Parets comments how in such situations there are always evil persons who cause problems.

The blame for the initial infection falls upon a man named Campderrós, a previously imprisoned, debt-ridden retailer from the Born marketplace who arrives at the General Hospital with a plague bubo. He had recently been to Olot, where the plague is raging, and the incubation period for the disease can be up to six days before symptoms appear. He is sent in disgrace to the pesthouse, where he recovers from the disease and is forced to tend the sick arriving there.



The medieval city of Barcelona during the plague epidemic that began in 1651. The official onset of the plague on 8 January 1651 occurred near La Rambla in the Carrer Nou de Sant Francesc which runs down towards the port from Plaça Reial. All entrances to the city were closed, apart from the four shown on the map (and sometimes some of these too were sealed off). The first two pesthouses were maintained outside the city walls, although during the final resurgence of the epidemic in 1653 the Nazareth Convent was used.

IX

As the month of January passes there is a slow but steady traffic of infected people being taken to the pesthouse and many not yet affected begin to flee the city, especially those who had already seen in Girona what the plague can do once out of control. Bread is increasingly scarce, law and order begin to fail, and there are nightly muggings and murders.

The Councillors try to keep control, using increasingly severe punishments as a deterrent: in February, for example, a gardener is charged with murder, has his hands chopped off, is whipped through the streets, and hanged on the sea gallows. But the robbery and violence continue, commonly perpetrated by local soldiers, and few people dare to venture out at night.

Despite the seemingly obvious, there is great reluctance officially to declare Barcelona as contaminated with the plague. Yet by this time the Angels Vells pesthouse is already proving too small to cope with demand and the sick are being moved to the Franciscan Jesús Monastery on the sloping plain north of the city (near the Passeig de Gràcia and Carrer de Aragó of modern times). The wicked plague survivor Campderrós moves with them, but falls sick and dies. Only God knows, ruminates Parets darkly, if this is due punishment for entering Barcelona with symptoms after visiting a plague-stricken area.

Towards the end of February the decision is taken to swear a solemn vow to Saint Francis of Paola (*Sant Francesc de Pàola*) and hold a procession regularly on his feast day (2 April) in order to help protect the city from the plague. Then, in an expansion of the rogation strategy aimed at dealing with the troubles afflicting Barcelona, Saint Madrona is brought to the Cathedral on 5 March, an act followed by abundant rain that eases the increasingly desperate situation in the surrounding countryside. Wheat arrives by ship from Livorno, keeping further crisis in the city at bay, but those living in the rural periphery are facing famine, and it is increasingly hard to get bread sent to help them. Furthermore, the meteorological respite is short and drought conditions return in April, prompting further reactivation of the rogation ceremony protocol, with Saint Madrona being returned to the Cathedral (24 April) and Saint Severus being carried through the centre with full honours six days later.

But by now strong doubts are surfacing over the wisdom of encouraging people to gather together, even to venerate and implore Saint Severus. The City Council has finally capitulated and declared the plague outbreak to be official, cancelling all legal business, and moving lock, stock and barrel to the town of Terrassa on the other side of the Collserola Hills. Many citizens thus find their former optimism to have been simple wishful thinking and belatedly flee the city only to find that they are most unwelcome anywhere else. Those left within the walls take on a siege mentality. The Angel Gate becomes reserved exclusively for the task of carrying the sick and dead to the Jesus Monastery. Elsewhere heavily guarded stakes are set up at three entry points, one in the west (near Saint Anthony's Gate), one in the east (near New Gate), and one down by the harbour (Sea Gate) where boats can bring in supplies.

X

The stake system is simple but it works. Deep, wide trenches are dug and long wooden planks are attached to a vertical metal axle placed in the middle of the ditch. The planks can then be rotated horizontally about this vertical axis, allowing food and money to be exchanged without physical contact. The farmer brings his chickens, eggs, fruit or whatever, places them on the plank and spins them around to the recipient (usually a retailer) on the other side. If a price is successfully agreed upon, then the money is duly rotated to the farmer, who drops the coins in a pot of vinegar to cleanse them of infection, and the retailer goes off to sell his goods in the Born marketplace. The penalty for cheating is death, ensuring that the system functions well enough.

Steps are taken to reduce physical contact between people. At particular risk are the monks, duty bound to administer the sacraments to the sick and dying. They take to wearing shortened, knee-length cassocks to avoid possible

contagion from the ground, and keep the sick at a safe distance when taking confessions. The priests collect the sacred hosts in the Chapel of Saint Agatha (*la Capilla de Santa Ágata*) in the Royal Palace next to the Saló del Tinell. To give communion to those in need across the city the holy sacrament is administered with the aid of a silver rod, again to prevent any physical contact, and sometimes giving the last rites to an entire house to avoid the need to return.

On a bad day some monks return home exhausted after seeing as many as eighty people. If smitten with the disease they take themselves to the pesthouse, or seclude themselves in their monastery to recover or die. With the plague beginning to reach its peak in May to July, they are the heroes of the occasion, abandoned by their more senior clergy and left to keep up the good work.

XI

On 1 May Josep Parets dies, aged ten years and eight and a half months. He has been ill for five years with some kind of bone disease and slowly wastes away until, his father sadly observes, he is so dried up that the only things left are bones and nerves. The child has suffered quietly and patiently, with his father admiring him as the best tempered and most sensitive of his sons: “a very lovely boy”. Three days before his death Josep calls his parents to his room to show them an apparition of the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, Michael the Archangel and a host of other angels, accompanied by music and a smell of roses. His father writes how fortunate the child is to see all this because the parents can’t see anything. The next day, 2 May 1651, Josep is buried in the graveyard beside Santa María del Mar.

Shortly afterwards young Gabrielo goes down with symptoms of the plague, with a characteristic swollen lymph gland swelling under his left forearm. He is nursed by his mother who, on 8 May, develops two similarly painful

buboes on her thigh and groin. A plague nurse is hired and Elisabet isolated in the attic of the Parets house to let the disease run its course over the next seven days. On 15 May at 10 o'clock in the morning Elisabet has herself dressed in some of her best clothes, the bedding changed, and asks that her husband be called.

Miquel climbs to the attic of the adjacent house, from where he can see and hear her put her affairs in order. She speaks clearly and does not appear to be especially ill, asking that the woman caring for her be given various holy items from the house (candles and a crucifix hanging over the bed). She commends the children to her husband, asking him to bring them up to be good and virtuous, and to take especial care of Anna María, although Elisabet expresses doubt that she will be alive for long. The infant is under the care of a young wet nurse while her mother is confined to the attic, but had fallen ill the day before.

Miquel hears his wife say goodbye to him and many tears are shed. He returns downstairs to give the holy items to the nurse who is astonished at the calm fortitude of her patient. No plague priest can be found, and when her husband climbs back to the attic Elisabet takes the crucifix in her hands and prepares for her death. When she knows it is time, she has candles lit by her bed and she dies between 12 and 1 o'clock in the afternoon, on Saint Isidore's Day. Miquel, who never thought for a moment that his beloved wife would actually die, now realizes that she has gone to join her son Josep. The married couple have been together for fifteen years, and he thought the world of her.

Elisabet is interred that same day, also in the Santa María del Mar graveyard. The next day little Anna María dies, aged one year old, free of plague symptoms but overcome by a severe intestinal infection. Her father describes her as a little angel with a doll's face and cheerful, peaceful temperament. Less than a fortnight later Miquelo, his son of twelve years

and two months, develops a lymphatic swelling on his throat. Upon seeing the position of the bubo, the doctor immediately gives him up for dead. His illness lasts for just one day and a half, with the boy suddenly choking to death on 29 May. Already at work and a good sailor, Miquelo was to be the future backbone of the family and support to his father.

Both children are buried in the pesthouse at Jesus Monastery, and their father is left with three-year old Gabrielo who has fully recovered. Of all of the children, writes Miquel, Gabrielo has the most difficult character. The two of them leave the city as the plague is reaching its peak, with cartloads of dead and sick swelling the pesthouse population to an unmanageable three or four thousand. Many, even if they survive the bubonic infection, die of lack of food and care. Meanwhile father and son are quarantined in a hut in Sarrià before moving into the house of Miquel's mother-in-law, as the news arrives that the Castilian army is gathering its forces in Lleida and is expected to lay siege to Barcelona that summer.

XII

By the high summer the plague epidemic seems to have run its course. Strenuous efforts have been made to clean the city, fumigate infected houses, prevent contact and transmission, and force anyone entering to undergo strict controls that include passing them and their clothes through specially constructed ovens. Many thousands of people have died, but the survivors must now put this behind them and face the next immediate threat. The Marquis of Mortara, the latest Viceroy of Catalonia, following a meeting in Tarragona with his new military commander Don Juan José de Austria, is at the point of besieging the city. Don Juan has persuaded Mortara to prepare an immediate attack against Barcelona. By late July the Castilian army, over thirteen thousand strong, has already left Vilafranca to retake the Via Augusta route.

In early August the City Council orders all Barcelona inhabitants still remaining outside the fortified centre to come back and join the home defence forces, and Miquel Parets returns home after being away for just a couple of months. There is still plague around, but it has greatly reduced. The Castilian army arrives and takes up positions against the city, but, well aware of the debacle at Montjuïc over ten years earlier, Don Juan opts for a slow strangulation of the besieged population by denying supplies from both land and sea. Still, some aid does get through, mostly by the use of small boats bringing goods from nearby coastal villages and managing to avoid the vigilance of the Spanish fleet. The siege thus drags on into the next year, as the plague continues to subside, with Parets recording how on 6 April 1652 the Jesús Monastery is finally closed as a pesthouse. The battle against *Y. pestis* appears at last to be won, but the chances of a second victory over the Spanish King are looking increasingly bleak.

Hope in the city flares anew on 3 August when a French relief squadron arrives from Marseilles, escorted by eight warships, and attempts to break the Spanish blockade. But after four days of frustrated manoeuvring they are forced by Don Juan's stronger fleet to withdraw and run for home. It is the last chance for the starving city. In a final turn of the screw, Mortara focuses on subduing the coastal villages responsible for smuggling supplies into the capital, which he does firmly and successfully but with minimal violence, persuading most that further resistance is pointless.

Barcelona is finally starved into surrender on 12 October 1652. The garrison of three thousand French and Swiss troops is allowed to leave the city and return safely to France, taking with them their arms and belongings. Philip IV is accepted as King and, as at Lleida, agrees to uphold the Catalan constitution, although the city loses its military privileges and is mobilized against their former allies, with the focus of the war now moving north. Meanwhile, the plague flares up

again, probably brought in by troops newly stationed within the city walls. The troops, malnourished, unwelcome and far from home (many are of Irish origin) are forced to sleep rough on the streets, “completely lost” as Parets writes.

A new pesthouse is set up, this time just within the city walls in the Monastery of Our Lady of Nazareth near Butcher’s Street, and once again the Chapel of Saint Agatha is used to house the sacred hosts for dying plague victims. By now, however, there is a well-developed and strict protocol for controlling the spread of the disease, and this new outbreak proves much less severe. Parets describes how the dead bodies are taken by night to the Nazareth graveyard, followed by a thorough incineration of the bed, curtains, clothes and other belongings of the victim, without exceptions. If the dead person is Catalan, the burning is attended by a city councillor; if a non-Catalan then a Spanish army officer is present. In the middle of all this, Miquel Parets marries for a third time, on 6 January 1653. His third wife is Marianna Vinyes, daughter of the grocer Pau Vinyes and Jerònima Grosset. Marianna is also from the parish of Santa Maria del Mar and widowed during the plague epidemic.

With the disease finally abating by the spring of 1654, a grand procession is scheduled for Saturday 2 May to give thanks. Parets describes giants, dragons, serpents, devils and horses, a night of beautiful, abundant rain, further festivities on the Sunday, and an overwhelming blessed relief in the city for having survived the ordeals of pestilence and war. He continues his daily journal for another six years and has four children with Marianna, two of whom, named Marianna and Miquel, manage to survive infancy.

The final entries in the Parets journal are made in 1660, and Miquel dies the following summer aged fifty-one, survived by his third wife and three of his eleven children, Marianna, Miquel and Gabrielo. Four years later the 17-year-old Gabrielo Parets i Mans takes the vows to become an

Augustinian priest and enters the local monastery of Saint Monica. He is still alive nearly 30 years later, in 1693, but after this any further records are lost and he disappears into the timeless anonymity to which all lives are eventually assigned.

Notes

8. I. Details regarding the independent observation of the plague bacillus by Alexandre Yersin and Kitasato Shibasaburō can be found in the 1976 paper by David J. Bibel and T. H. Chen entitled *Diagnosis of Plague: an Analysis of the Yersin-Kitasato Controversy*, published by the American Society for Microbiology and available free of charge online.

8. II. The effects of bubonic plague on the city of Valencia in 1647 were witnessed and recorded by the priest and medical doctor Francisco Gavaldá (1618-1686) who, unusually, provided social statistics and commented on the reality behind who was most likely to become infected with the disease: "The lottery of the people who died of the plague was as follows: Gentlemen, none of them because, apart from Royal Officials and one or two others, they all left; judges, none of them either; lawyers, one or two; for those free to entertain themselves and pass the time without working God left alone to enjoy life; the dead were civil servants and workers, basically the whole (male) working class, the disease catching them already weakened by exhaustion and malnutrition. It was the same for the women....that year we saw need and poverty throughout Valencia; so much so that, as I witnessed with my own eyes, many people had only bread and grapes to eat. With such a poor diet came many problems." See the 2006 article entitled *Francisco Gavaldá, Ahead of his Time in the Social Statistics Study of Bubonic Plague*, by José María López Piñero in the Spanish Journal of Public Health (Revista Española de Salud Pública) and available free of charge online.

8. V. An account by Javier Hernández (2013) of the military incursions of d'Ardena across the Catalan-Valencian border is entitled *Incursiones y operaciones navales franco-catalanas sobre la frontera valenciana durante la Guerra dels Segadors. La invasión de don Josep d'Ardena (noviembre de 1649)*, and published in the journal Centre d'Estudis del Maestrat (CEM).

8. VI. Plague doctors such as March i Gelpí were used throughout Europe as specialists hired by a city during an outbreak of the disease, although they were often unsuccessful or inexperienced individuals not at the top of their profession. In the case of Doctor March i Gelpí,

however, he seems to have been highly valued by the city of Barcelona who agreed to pay out 675 ducats to retrieve him from the hands of the Castilian enemy. Master Mates was clearly held in less esteem, having been released to return to Barcelona with word of the ransom. Barber surgeons such as Mates had a broad range of highly practical duties that included cutting hair, applying leeches, and amputating limbs: they were the medical technicians of Medieval Europe. Surgery at that time, long before the use of anaesthesia, was considered beneath medical physicians working in universities.

8. VII. The account by Miquel Parets of the 1651-54 bubonic plague epidemic in Barcelona is the subject of a book by James S. Amelang and entitled *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Oxford University Press 1991). Amelang takes his title from the plague narrative written by Daniel Defoe and published in 1722, but points out that the Parets account is very different. Whereas the narrator of Defoe's account (supposedly a saddler) probably never actually existed but was a fictional character used to convey a historical reconstruction, Miquel Parets was an authentic eyewitness and survivor who suffered with the city and his family. Amelang views the Parets account as "the most extensive surviving popular account of the experience of plague in European history" and the text conveys the brutal reality of the experience with a clarity and directness that is at times, particularly with regard to the account of his own family, quite distressing. Much of this and following sections in this Tale are sourced from the Amelang translation.

8. VIII. The first clearly substantiated case of bubonic plague in the house of Martin de Langa in "New Street" (according to Amelang this is the Carrer Nou de Sant Francesc that runs down to the sea one block east of La Rambla) seems not to have been the first. Parets comments on rumours that the disease was already in the city for maybe two weeks or more beforehand but had been kept quiet by the families involved. Those implicated were a lawyer called Tristany and a shoemaker called Matas (in whose house someone supposedly died before Christmas), both of whom lived close by to each other in the centre of the medieval city just east of the Plaça de Sant Jaume.

8. IX. James Amelang notes how Saint Francis of Paola was a strictly vegan self-flagellating model penitent from Calabria recognized for his potent thaumaturgic (miracle-working) powers. The saint was also invoked to ward off plague epidemics at other places in seventeenth century Spain, such as in Girona and Mallorca.

8. X. The stakes were also used as a meeting point to allow communication between those inside and outside the city. At the end of May, for example, Jean-Gaspard Ferdinand de Marsin, still the French military commander of Catalonia, visited one of the stakes to warn the city councillors that the Castilian army was organizing in eastern Catalonia with the intention of besieging Barcelona. The French General was encamped alongside the Besòs River at Granollers, thirty kilometres north and well away from the quarantined city.

On a bad day some monks return home exhausted after seeing as many as eighty people. Miquel Parets writes of these priests: “many times when they went out at the height of the plague...they gave Communion to seventy or eighty persons before returning home. Thus the poor monk was exhausted when he returned to the church from such a long walk and from having climbed so many stairs, for most of the sick were up in the attic in order for them not to have any contact with anyone save the person nursing them” (from James S. Amelang’s *A Journal of a Plague Year*, published in 1991 by Oxford University Press).

8. XI. The account by Parets of the death of his beloved wife is the most poignant part of his chronicle and Amelang provides a moving translation of the fortitude shown by Elisabet Parets i Mans in the face of her own death: “She then said goodbye to me with many tears...and when she knew that it was time for her to die she had the candles lit, and with the candles and crucifix in her hands she died between twelve and one in the afternoon, Saint Isidore’s Day, 1651. May God look after her in heaven.”

8. XII. At the height of the plague epidemic, in June 1651, Parets describes horrific scenes of the city constantly filled with carts piled with clothed and naked corpses, the pesthouse overflowing with the undernourished sick and dying, doors of infected houses marked with the white cross of Saint Eulalia, and a pervading loneliness accompanying the breakdown of social contact and empathy. But then, gradually, things improved to a point where, by Easter 1652, medical staff attending the pesthouse victims could finally be dismissed. Parets is convinced that the slowness of recovery from the epidemic was due to the ongoing siege, with the Royalist soldiers robbing houses infected with plague and then entering the city as prisoners of war, messengers or deserters. He describes how those entering from behind enemy lines were made to undress and pass through ovens (with their clothes placed in a hotter oven) and comments wryly that after all the preventative measures Barcelona was for once actually quite clean.

BARCELONA TIME TRAVELLER

Miguel Parets clearly, and with good reason, regretted his decision to remain in Barcelona during the epidemic. At more than one point in his narrative he remarks that it is always a mistake to stay in the city once plague has taken hold. Not only is the risk of disease transmission greatly reduced by leaving, but in the early stages it is easier to find places of refuge. By the time the plague was made official and reaching its peak all refugees from Barcelona were *personae non gratae* everywhere, with roadblocks set up to ensure that “not even a cat could get by”. These refugees would be left to sleep out in the open during their search for some sheltered place in which to spend the obligatory quarantine of forty days. With the benefit of bitter hindsight Parets concludes “I say that it is quite right to flee in order not to suffer from this disease, for it is most cruel”.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Wes Gibbons is a British geologist who was born in London and later lived in Portsmouth and the Channel Island of Sark. He spent the years between 1980 and 2004 immersed in an academic teaching and research career at Cardiff University. During this time he was awarded sabbatical appointments as Visiting Professor at universities in Canada and the USA, and he served as a Secretary of the Geological Society of London. He moved to Barcelona in 2004 and currently lives in Barcelona and Sitges. His publications include books on the geology of Sark, The Weald, Corsica, Spain, Chile, Japan, and Barcelona. *About the Author* on <http://barcelonatimetraveller.com>.

