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Review of Kristy Wilson Bowers, *Plague and Public Health in Early Modern Seville*

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Kristy Wilson Bowers. *Plague and Public Health in Early Modern Seville*. Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2013. 152 pp.

In *Plague and Public Health in Early Modern Seville*, Kristy Wilson Bowers provides an engaging and informative study that explains the seemingly contradictory efforts of early modern municipal authorities to respond to the threat of epidemic disease and the operations of the public health systems that they created. In times of plague local officials in Castilian cities, towns, and villages had the difficult and unenviable task of balancing their municipality's public health concerns against their citizens' desires for economic and social stability and freedom of movement. As she ultimately demonstrates, balancing these concerns involved constant negotiation between municipal authorities, citizens, foreign merchants and travelers concerning the operation of plague protocols rather than their strict and rigid implementation. Through a study of the actions of the authorities in Seville, Bowers proves particularly successful in presenting an early modern view of epidemic and plague, grounded in the lived experience of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spaniards who adapted to the realities and threats of periodic epidemics and plague.

While the immediate setting for Bowers' study is late sixteenth-century Seville, she also addresses the city's relations with its many subject towns and villages, neighboring municipalities, and representatives of Castile's monarchy. During the period studied, Seville ranked as one of Spain's largest cities and ports and — as home of the *Casa de Contratación* — managed and monopolized commercial traffic with the American colonies. These factors both increased the city's exposure to disease and heightened the economic consequences of disruptions in trade brought about by plague. In response to the threat of plague, Seville's city council employed ad hoc temporary health commissions to evaluate suspicions of disease and manage Seville's response to outbreaks in the city itself and its extensive territory. The commission, composed of members of the city council, investigated and collected information concerning possible epidemics, and held the authority to issue orders restricting travel, isolating those suspected of illness, and imposing quarantines. The surviving records of this commission, the *cuadernos de la peste*, from the years 1582 and 1599-1600 serve as the primary sources for this study.

Bowers effectively reviews the variety of beliefs about plague (what caused it, how it spread, who was at risk to contract or spread the disease, and how best to treat the sick) that existed among early modern Spanish medical authorities and everyday *Sevillanos*. Reviewing the reports submitted to the plague commission, she asserts that medical authorities rarely diagnosed an

epidemic exclusively as plague. Moreover they drew from a multiplicity of ideas about disease including Hippocratic/Galenic humoral theories, diverse ideas about contagion, and the role of environmental factors. Notably the diverse views on disease among medical authorities could produce a lack of consensus about the presence and nature of plague, as can be seen in the report of fourteen practitioners to the plague commission in April 1582. The lack of consensus left the members of the commission to rely on their own judgment about imposing, lifting, and mollifying seemingly strict ordinances.

As Bowers describes, the ordinances issued by the commission restricting the movement of individuals and goods was not the city's final word on the regulation of plague. Merchants and other private citizens as well as representatives of subject and neighboring municipalities formally petitioned for exemptions to these directives and had surprising success. In the four months from February to May 1582 the health commission received and deliberated nearly fifty petitions and granted the request of each one. Moreover this process of "restriction, petition, and exemption" was not unique to 1582, but also occurred during the epidemic of 1599-1600. In order to explain these exceptions, Bowers argues that city leaders were concerned with more than avoiding disease, but needed to protect the overall well-being of the community, which included considerations about economic stability and traditional rights of residents. Bowers concludes that those who used official channels to gain waivers were largely successful, while those who did not were subjected to investigation and discipline.

Although Bowers makes use of the same sources, the records of Seville's plague commission, employed in Alexandra and Noble Cook's *The Plague Files: Crisis Management in Sixteenth-Century Seville*, she asks different questions of these sources and focuses her inquiry on the nature of public health responses in early modern Spain and thereby provides a fresh reading of them. However the broad claims that she makes concerning the commission's procedures, its concern with its citizens' perception of its response, and its willingness to negotiate exemptions are based almost exclusively on the surviving records for two years; in the second half of the century, Seville also dealt with outbreaks of disease in 1551, 1557, 1565, 1568, and 1580. Plague commission reports do not survive for these years, but minutes of the city council meetings (except for 1551) do. It is unclear whether Bowers reviewed these records to determine whether or not they provided collaborating evidence, but attention to other years of epidemic disease would have served to strengthen her arguments.

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