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Ann G. Carmichael

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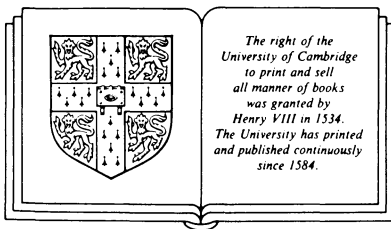
Plague and the poor in Renaissance Florence

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Preface

It has become very popular to assume that changes in the natural world, especially the influence of disease-causing microorganisms, have repeatedly altered the course of human history. Buffeted by forces outside human control, past societies could only bear weak and helpless testimony to disaster. Such has been the usual tone of the history of plagues and epidemic disease: a saga of human efforts to cope with social and demographic catastrophe, spawned by unforeseen and unassailable microenemies.

It is true that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century observers could not have imagined the currently known explanations for recurrent bubonic plagues, nor could they have done more than guess at a germ theory of disease. Nevertheless they responded to epidemics in ways that shaped their perceptions of the causes of plague mortality and that altered the patterns of their deaths. It is the purpose of this book to analyze the evidence for, and causes of, mortality in Florence in the first century after the Black Death of 1348, and to show how changes in infectious diseases and changes in legislation and human behavior interacted.

Thus in the much larger historical picture, it is the purpose of this book to offer weight to the argument that conscious decisions influence patterns of mortality. Not all of the daily tragedies of disease and death are inadvertent. Above all, many such losses are well tolerated and augmented, a legacy that Westerners are often too quick to disown with more comfortable sagas of the terrible dominance of killer microbes felled later by the scientific triumph of humans over nature.

A theme this grand, could a historian ever prove it, is the work of a lifetime of research, not the testimony of one preliminary monograph. This book is but a limited analysis of records from Florence, 1300 to 1500, enhanced slightly with evidence drawn

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from other northern Italian cities of that period. It results from my quest, for almost a decade, to articulate some historical meaning to the list of over 11,000 names of those who died in Florence in 1400, names I encountered when I first opened the second oldest Book of the Dead in the Florentine State Archives. Fifteen years ago I would never have imagined myself counting and recounting deaths recorded in fifteenth-century Florence, and I certainly could not have envisioned the many people I would want to thank for that experience.

Foremost among those who helped and guided me is Ronald G. Witt, who introduced me to the economic and demographic history of medieval and early modern Europe, and led me to Florentine studies. Ron Witt has given his support, wisdom, and encouragement to every phase of this book, answering the earliest naive question I posed, directing the dissertation on which the book is based, and guiding me through every doubt and query that subsequently emerged.

Supported for six years at the outset of my graduate career by the generous funding of the Josiah Macy, Jr., Foundation, I was able to pursue the M.D. and Ph.D. degrees simultaneously, without the need to abandon scholarship for the marketplace. As director of the medical history training program at Duke University, Gert H. Brieger, so patient a teacher, wide-ranging in his knowledge of the history of medicine, allowed me the freedom to wander from the usual paths of medical history. Thereafter my early explorations in the Florentine State Archives would have been fruitless without the substantial help and guidance of David Herlihy, whose encouragement has sustained me ever since. My use of the Florentine Archivio di Stato was improved greatly with a summer fellowship from the Renaissance Society of America, under the direction of Anthony Molho. In extending the boundaries of this study beyond Florence, I am most grateful to the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation for supporting a summer research trip to Venice and to Indiana University for supporting my research in the Mantuan State Archives. All my research was facilitated by the generous help of the staffs and directors of Italian municipal and state archives and libraries. An early précis of my dissertation appeared in the form of an article I wrote, entitled "Plague Legislation in the Italian Renaissance," which was published by *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 57 (1983):508–25. I am grateful for permission to republish some of these materials.

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In rethinking and rewriting the dissertation, and in incorporating the materials collected since then, I would especially like to express my gratitude to my friend and colleague, Helen Nader, and to Edward Muir, both of whom offered extensive commentary and suggestions on revising the entire manuscript. I feel likewise fortunate to have had a brilliant series editor, Charles Rosenberg, who extended valuable criticism.

I also wish to give a special word of thanks to my colleagues M. Jeann Peterson, for her wise and witty comments on various parts of the manuscript, and George C. Alter, for his incredibly patient help as I wrestled with primitive statistical and demographic concepts. Dr. Stephen Ell graciously read and commented on early versions of the more medical chapters; Professors John Norris and Guido Ruggiero saved me from making several embarrassing overstatements. Although I can acknowledge much assistance from others, undoubtedly flaws and errors may remain in the text, and these are my responsibility.

Close friends and family have warmly supported and encouraged me over the years. In Florence Franca Toraldo di Francia's good humor nursed me through the frustrations of both research and learning to speak Italian, while her son and daughter-in-law, Cristiano Toraldo and Frances Lansing Toraldo, gave me the existential support for the career choices I made. My own immediate family, however, suffered longest with the drafts and revisions, but in turn made it all worth doing. Especially my son Gibson, and to him I dedicate the book.