Introduction

From high above the Castilian meseta, a swallow gliding and wheeling in and out in search of food or shelter or friends might see a clump of buildings, then wide open space, then more clumps, then more space, the occasional river or wetlands, the inevitable church steeples at the heart of the clumps, with dwellings and a town hall huddled around them, and large or small squares where, if the bird swooped low, it might see people going about their business, lingering to talk, fingering the merchandise. Some towns were more beautiful than others, richer, more important, but they all had the same elements, noises, smells, purpose. There was probably some sort of wall, or there had been at some point. There were shrines scattered about the outlying countryside, among the fields, along the roads leading to neighboring towns and villages and then to the city. There were mills on the riverside, poorer neighborhoods on the outskirts. The local aristocrat might have a grand home in the town, or an estate outside. The kingdom was a body, according to the old commonplace, and each of these iterations, each of its parts, echoed the meaning and organization of the whole.

In the late sixteenth century, this assemblage of structures both physical and mental was visited by plague. It was not the first, it would not be the last, but it was probably the most awful such visitation. On the simplest level, this book is an attempt to figure out what it was like. I wanted to find the ordinary amidst the extraordinary and to see how both poles were embedded in fabrics of law, custom, memory, and the common good. I have tried to follow people as they spoke and surmised and bought and moved while their world crashed and burned. They continued getting up in the morning, milking the cows, dressing their children, gossiping, working, getting along tolerably, suing each other. To the extent that they could, they behaved normally, because that's generally what people want to do. I have followed my people around their towns and cities, but I lose sight of them more than I see them. Was there still any sort of school as the plague approached? How many layers of clothes did they wear when it was cold? What did they talk about with

their neighbors? What were their prayers like in the absence of church gatherings, and did they even say them? What did they most look forward to? What was the farthest away from their town they had ever been? I don't know how to find those stories, and unless they're very lucky, few historians will. I thought of speculating a bit, of adding my stories in with theirs, but I held back. Literature, too, might have helped (it appears here and there in the following pages) but I decided to stick to documents, even if it meant I might miss "the history of what hadn't quite been said," what Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling."[1]

The potential problem with this approach I have chosen is, in a way, similar to that arising from the *alltagsgeschichte* approach to twentieth-century German history. Just as historians' quest to capture everyday life under the Nazis, or under Vichy or Stalin, ran the risk of normalizing people's choices and paths, a relativization that by reducing actions and inactions to their smallest component might be read as an apology, my approach perhaps runs the risk of minimizing the horror, of exaggerating order at the expense of disorder.[2] I recognize that the "disaster history" or "crisis studies" approach might feel more realistic to readers. I agree with the editors who wrote that disasters "reveal how societies operate – who wields power, how cultural and economic assumptions inform people's reactions, who is perceived as part of the community and thus worthy of rescue or protection, and how and to whom resources are allocated."[3] But too often, especially when the disaster being looked at is plague, the assumption is that things fall apart, and I would argue that such an approach, at least in the case of the great Castilian plague, does few favors to my subjects and the structures and challenges they had to deal with every day. Too often, even modern accounts assume pandemonium. This book, then, actually is not so much about the plague as it is about everything else surrounding the plague.[4] The argument is just that: that practices and assumptions continued working as they had for many years; since time immemorial, as people would say. By removing chaos from the scene, simply because I find it nowhere in the documents,

[1] Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 62–3. It is worth remarking, however, that contemporary literature is almost silent on the plague.

[2] For overviews of the historiographic debates see the special issues of *New German Critique* 44 (Spring/Summer 1988) and *The Russian Review* 45:4 (October 1986).

[3] Elinor Accampo and Jeffrey H. Jackson, "Introduction," *French Historical Studies* 36:2 (Spring 2013), 165 (special issue called *Disaster in French History*).

[4] A similar approach was taken by Stuart Schwartz, who used hurricanes as a metanarrative to understand the Caribbean through its responses; Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

I do not mean to say that villagers, townspeople, and even the well-born did not suffer excruciating loss and become undone with sorrow. As Camus wrote, "The plague was bound to leave traces … in people's hearts." But they kept on living. They did not lose their collective mind.[5]

The republic, a name given to the kingdom as a whole and to every piece of it, was a physical place where Castilians bought and sold and governed and survived and died, but it also was home to more abstract notions such as history, neighborliness, cowardice, and charity. One could also see this division as that of the particular and the universal, two intersecting planes. I have rearranged chronology and geography in my account because it seemed to me that splintering the narrative of the great Castilian plague and anchoring each moment to a place, as I have done, would allow me to understand better the significance of the experience for all the people who made their way through cities, towns, and villages. My point is the simultaneity of things. To quote Peter Burke: "The problem I should like to discuss here is that of making a narrative thick enough to deal not only with the sequence of events and the conscious inventions of the actors in these events, but also with structures – institutions, modes of thought, and so on – whether these structures act as a brake on events or as an accelerator. What would such a narrative be like?"[6]

In the case of this book, the narrative is structured around sites, key places in Castilian communities that not only fulfilled a purpose but provided a perspective. I wish to literally embed the plague and the responses to it throughout the Castilian polity. The seven sites are: Palace, Road, Wall, Market, Street, Town Hall, and Sickbed. From the vantage point of each of these places, whether physically or discursively, things took on a slightly different hue, with different priorities or foci, though similar situations or dilemmas were found everywhere. Whether to lie or tell the truth, how to get money, how to survive, or how to work together – these were choices or circumstances found everywhere, in

[5] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), 251. As the *New York Times* only somewhat facetiously wrote in an appreciation (December 28, 2017) of the late disaster studies pioneer Enrico Quarantelli, "disasters bring out the best in us." Also along those lines, see Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009). In a different vein, a work that appeared just as this one was being finished and which similarly rejects a "trauma aesthetic" is Susan L. Einbinder's *After the Black Death: Plague and Commemoration among Iberian Jews* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). Einbinder found continuity rather than collapse, as I did.

[6] Peter Burke, "History of events and the revival of narrative," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Peter Burke, ed., 2nd edn. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 283–300, p. 291.

every town and at every site. Following the plague through communities offers us a way of understanding the meaning and variations of each site and the conflicts around it, on the one hand, and more universal practices and beliefs, on the other. But though I aim to embrace particular and universal at once, I do not wish to privilege the top at the expense of the bottom, or vice versa. Each choice – to obey, cooperate, flee, protest, succor – embodies both immediate circumstances and deep-seated customs and beliefs that slice vertically and horizontally. "The local and the global cannot be conceived along a series of hierarchically ordered concentric circles widening from small to large," wrote Francesca Trivellato in her excellent essay on microhistory, and the same is true in this study.[7] Nothing necessarily comes before or lies above anything else. Furthermore, nearly every choice could just as easily be manifested in one of my seven sites as in another. There are multiple (infinite) starting points, and each one, to quote Virginia Woolf, is an atom saturated, "to give the moment whole."[8] And, finally, each set of simultaneous and connected circumstances, each context, inevitably affects and suggests its neighboring contexts. Notions of justice and good government bend according to agency, convenience, temporality, and remembered precedent, they are acts that form part of what William Sewell called a sequence of actions "profoundly dependent upon [their] place in the sequence."[9] They are found at court, on the road, in the marketplace, and in the hospital. Perspective matters. So does chronology. Where and when one encountered plague or had to fix a problem, whether at a government meeting or on the road, whether alone or accompanied, determined one's understanding of it. The swallow from above might have thought of towns as units, but it might not have spotted the rips and convulsions as the republic battled to survive. My tour through the towns, with stops at each site, seeks out what the bird's-eye view can't perceive.

There was a political disposition to the relationships and events of the plague in part because there is always a political disposition, but also because this plague took place in Castile, where the common good was wrapped into every decision and every conflict. There was also, obviously, a medical disposition, but there, too, I hope to show that civic

[7] Francesca Trivellato, "Is there a future for Italian microhistory in the age of global history?" *California Italian Studies* 2:1 (2011), np available online at escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq, accessed January 2019.
[8] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, Leonard Woolf, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1954), 136; she was writing about *The Waves*.
[9] William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 7.

organization and news and a sense of history and time could help position the discourse of health. Disputes over quarantine, taxes, or guard duty were not only matters of public health or policing but also statements about past political practices and the meaning of good government. They also were fought out during times of economic crisis and dearth, which gives us another necessary field of analysis. In an entirely different context, Emma Rothschild once wrote, "A social theory of people who make these judgments … must be a theory of people with theories."[10] Acts of prohibition, distribution, publication, punishment, or charity by official entities contained within them both memories of past such experiences and the political and civic convictions that were the foundation of Castilian life – plague or no plague. This is similar to Rothschild's restatement of Adam Smith's thoughts on the writing of history: "Events, in Smith's description, have both external and internal causes, or causes to do with circumstances and causes to do with sentiments. It is the neglect of these internal causes, Smith says, which makes the writings of modern historians 'for the most part so dull and lifeless'."[11] I am proposing that the events of the plague had circumstances and sentiments or, to put it in words much older than Smith's, that plague could be "naturally understood" and "morally understood."[12]

The symptoms described by physicians and other witnesses are mostly those of bubonic plague, the disease known today to be caused by the pathogen *Yersinia pestis*, though some deaths may have been due to other causes. That said, I must make two things clear at the start: I am not taking a firm stand on this question, as I honestly don't much care what the exact disease was or was not, though bubonic plague seems the obvious choice. Doctors at the time fussed over whether it was "true plague" or just "*secas*" and sometimes used what might have been euphemisms to avoid the deadly word.[13] I refer to the disease as plague or peste or contagion, understanding these generic terms to more or less mimic the terms contemporaries used. Second, I am fully aware that over the past couple of decades there has been a fierce debate among historians of medicine regarding the nature of the pathogen that killed millions

[10] Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 157.
[11] Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments*, 7, citing Smith's lectures.
[12] David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 234, on Jacme d'Agramont, a fourteenth-century medical professor in Lérida who wrote a plague treatise.
[13] *Secas* could be sores or swellings, also a euphemism for buboes; Daniel Defoe called them tokens. They are often mentioned in conjunction with *carbuncos*, which has a similar meaning though it might also signify anthrax.

in what has come to be known as the Second Pandemic, running from the fourteenth-century Black Death through the eighteenth century. I will elaborate more on this debate in Chapter 3, where I discuss contagion, and in Chapter 7, but for the moment let me say simply that I have concluded from the scientific literature that diseases mutate and that the identity of hosts and vectors may also have varied over time. It was not as simple as the fleas and rats paradigm. Such a flexible, though admittedly not rigorous approach, allows us to account for anomalies in how the disease moved from town to town and from person to person. Most notably, contemporaries believed the epidemic was passed through direct physical contact with people or certain objects, and I have resolved to honor that belief.[14]

"The great Castilian plague of 1596–1602" arrived on a boat, the "*Rodamundo*," coming from Dunkirk and/or Calais which in November docked in Santander.[15] By the end of the plague's wanderings, perhaps half a million people were dead.[16] Some towns reported that they had lost one-third or one-half their population. This book mostly follows the destruction in the northern half of the Iberian Peninsula, though the death tolls in the south, especially Seville, were probably proportionately greater.[17] The first places affected were, obviously, Santander, and then the rest of the Cantabrian region. The disease moved west to Galicia

[14] Bibliographic citations are in subsequent chapters, but for now the best and most recent summation is Guido Alfani and Tommy E. Murphy, "Plague and lethal epidemics in the pre-industrial world," *The Journal of Economic History* 77:1 (March 2017), 314–43, esp. p. 321.

[15] The expression is from James Casey, *Early Modern Spain: A Social History* (London: Routledge, 1999), 37.

[16] That would represent around 10 percent of Castile's population. For a concise demographic synthesis see Vicente Pérez Moreda, "The plague in Castile at the end of the sixteenth century and its consequences," in *The Castilian Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: New Perspectives on the Economic and Social History of Seventeenth-Century Spain*, I. A. A. Thompson and Bartolomé Yun Casalilla, eds. (Past and Present Publications, Cambridge University Press, 1994), 32–59; this article is an abridged version of a chapter in his much broader *Las crisis de mortalidad en la Espana interior (Siglos XVI–XIX)* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1980). See also the landmark Bartolomé Bennassar, *Recherches sur les grandes épidémies dans le nord de l'Espagne a la fin du XVIe siècle. Problèmes de documentation et de méthode* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1969). Both writers, along with Bernard Vincent, "La peste atlantica de 1596–1602," *Asclepio* 28 (1976), 5–25, p. 11; and Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *The Golden Age of Spain, 1516–1659*, trans. James Casey (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 174, accept the half-million figure.

[17] Two recent books in English on plague in Seville are Kristy Wilson Bowers, *Plague and Public Health in Early Modern Seville* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013); and Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook, *The Plague Files: Crisis Management in Sixteenth-Century Seville* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), which actually concerns an influenza epidemic. I occasionally wander south as well.

and east to the Basque Country, then down through Álava, La Rioja, Burgos, Valladolid, Segovia, Toledo, and Madrid. It jumped around, skipping some places altogether and making return visits to others. There was plague in Lisbon as well, probably taken there aboard another ship, and it was in Andalusia and Morocco, which also may have represented a separate wave.[18] Madrid was sick already in 1597, well before most other cities (except for Santander), another sign of atypical transmission, in this case because the city was a hub. Because this book is thematic, not chronological, it moves around from place to place. Each town had its own peculiarities, of course, but in general the story is the same.

Bartolomé Bennassar, in his 1969 study, *Recherches sur les grandes épidémies*, suggested that others follow his lead and together create a document-based history of the plague in Castile at the turn of the century. No one took him up on it, and it was upon reading his work that I decided to try, though my questions are different from his and I do not share some of his assessments. While Bennassar wished to tie Castile together geographically, I do so conceptually. I cannot pretend to assess the epidemic's overall demographic impact, though historians seem to agree that plague cannot be held primarily responsible for Spain's subsequent enormous economic difficulties. Nor, I'm afraid, do I offer conclusive economic or demographic data for any particular town or city. One final methodological clarification: this book is not a comparative study, and therefore there is no mention, except in passing, of France, Italy, or England. (I cannot imagine that any historian of France, Italy, or England has ever had to apologize for not comparing her material with that of Spain.) All these places suffered from various waves of epidemics and each had its own approach. My interest lies elsewhere, in the experience of plague in a particular political and civic setting.

Each of my seven sites, then, are anchors. I am beginning the plague's journey at a place I call Palace, a misnomer and possibly a problematic starting place, though one has to start somewhere. "Palace" means the court, the monarchy, the law, the discourse and ideology of political organization and loyalty. Even when the crown was not an active participant in the struggle to fend off or conquer the plague – and part of my argument is that the action took place not in the Palace but in the towns – still the king was an omnipresent interlocutor, albeit a theoretical or silent one. From there, this chronicle travels throughout the republic. It goes down Roads and meets a variety of travelers, obstacles, news, and goods.

[18] Pérez Moreda, "The plague in Castile," 34, says the Portuguese case might have been an independent epidemic, as it first appeared in Lisbon in 1597, part of a larger Atlantic port problem.

It comes up against the Wall, where it either gets in or it doesn't. It reaches the Market, where food, livestock, and money, all radically diminished, changed hands. It travels down town Streets, where the sounds and smells and sight of plague transformed ordinary landscapes. It walks into the Town Hall, where leaders debated what to do as they applied both punishment and indulgence to their distraught citizens. And, finally, it reaches what I am calling the Sickbed, where medicine and prayer were invoked to relieve patients unlucky enough to have been caught at the end of this tortuous odyssey.

In this world that I am attempting to recover, disease was not simply a metaphor. It was a problem and a calamity, or sometimes an opportunity, but not something that stood for sin or evil or otherness, though it is also true that for some observers epidemic and hardship spelled confirmation of the end of Spain's glory years. Death was certainly terrifying, but the disease as such was not categorized as a "demonic enemy" resulting in the scapegoating of its victims.[19] Nor did it necessarily set off collective madness or social disorder. Nor did the reaction mark a stark contrast with allegedly post-Enlightenment rational responses. Given what they had to work with, denizens of late sixteenth-century Castile were admirably responsible. Theirs was not a world without logic. Nor was there a particular outburst of religiosity that I can detect. There were processions, of course, and presumably people prayed for it to go away, but that is neither surprising nor excessive. Language blaming their sins for the debacle and praising God's mercy for its departure often sound formulaic, which is not to say the language was not taken seriously, only that it was brief and episodic.

I am aware, as I have said, that this approach marks a contrast to what one might expect. It certainly is not what literary sources have always told us. As Paul Slack wrote, "One can never be entirely sure about the extent to which chroniclers of epidemics concentrated on social dislocation, the failure of doctors, flights to and from religion, rumours of poisoned wells, and similar phenomena simply because Thucydides and later writers down to Defoe taught them to look for them."[20] Here is part of

[19] Susan Sontag's language has been reproduced widely, but these words come from her February 23, 1978 article in *The New York Review of Books*.

[20] Paul Slack, "Introduction," in *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, Terence Ranger and Paul Slack, eds. (Past and Present Publications, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9. Slack says the first English translation of Thucydides appeared in 1667. In Spain it circulated in Latin already in the fifteenth century; the first Spanish-language version in the Biblioteca Nacional dates from 1564. Nicolás Bocángel [also Bocangelino], *Libro de las enfermedades malignas y pestilentes, causas, pronósticos, curación y preservación* (Madrid: Luis Sánchez, 1600), for example, cites him on pp. 65 and 87.

Thucydides's famous description of the collapse of Athenian society: "The catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or of law… In other respects also Athens owed to the plague the beginnings of a state of unprecedented lawlessness. Seeing how quick and abrupt were the changes of fortune which came to the rich who suddenly died and to those who had previously been penniless but now inherited their wealth, people now began openly to venture on acts of self-indulgence which before then they used to keep dark… As for what is called honour, no one showed himself willing to abide by its laws… No fear of god or law of man had a restraining influence."[21] James Longrigg has noted that many subsequent writers paid Thucydides "the most sincere form of flattery" in essentially cribbing his terrible and moving description, and that was true during the great Castilian plague as well. But Longrigg makes the very important point that the Greek chronicler's theme was, precisely, "the disintegration of Greek society. He is describing the processes by which social and political violence can undermine reason. The plague serves as a catalyst which expedites these processes."[22] Thus there was purposefulness in his account, not mere description. The prospect of the destruction of political order in a society as steeped in the notions of good government and republicanism as Castile was bound to disturb and horrify readers. Boccaccio's plague also led to social collapse, the pathology of the body politic as well as of the human body. "In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city," he wrote. "It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbours and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them."[23] Contrast this with Virgil's image of Aeneas carrying his father and the hearth-gods out of the burning city of Troy: "So come, dear father, climb up onto my

[21] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 155 [II:52–3].
[22] James Longrigg, "Epidemic, ideas and classical Athenian society," in *Epidemics and Ideas*, Terence Ranger and Paul Slack, eds., 21–44, pp. 27, 33.
[23] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 52–4.

shoulders!/I will carry you on my back. This labor of love/will never wear me down. Whatever falls to us now,/we both will share one peril, one path to safety."[24] That was more like it, and indeed the haunting image of fathers abandoning their sons, and vice versa, is a recurring one in Spanish plague accounts. A chronicler of the monarchs Isabel and Ferdinand described an early sixteenth-century plague in words repeated by virtually every historian of the era: The epidemic "entered throughout the Kingdom of Granada and throughout all of Castile … and thus the pestilence was general and universal … Fathers could not depend on their children nor children on their parents, and the living fled from the dead and the living fled from each other…"[25] The most famous treatise-writer during the plague at the end of the century, Luis Mercado, remarked in general of the plague: "It is a miserable turn of fortune for any city, town, or village to be touched or contaminated by any sort of pestilent affect, and if one does not speedily and carefully manage to cut it off, it will quickly grow with such furious cruelty that parents will abandon their children and women their husbands, and everyone will just look out for himself, leaving what they most love and what most pains them in the hands of the most cruel and fatal illness that can befall them …"[26] Philip II (r. 1556–1598) also hired physician Miguel Martínez de Leyva to write a treatise, in the prologue of which Leyva wrote: "I decided to write down the proper regimen against pestilence, as it is a thing of such great disorder and causes so much terror and fear and great ruin among people." Rulers, ministers, and doctors are confused and vanish, he wrote, "and relatives shun one another, denying their blood and progeny." Later on, describing the disease and its causes, he wrote, "Parents flee from their children and children from their parents, and relatives and friends put distance between themselves."[27] In France, as well (and probably most everywhere else), the trope was powerful. "Plague, noted Isaac Quatroux in 1671, 'cuts and severs all ties of blood and friendship.' Mothers and fathers abandoned their stricken and children, children their stricken parents…"[28]

[24] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 2006), 99 [lines 880–3].
[25] Andrés Bernaldez, *Historia de los Reyes Católicos Don Fernando y Doña Isabel* [Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, vol. 70.] (Madrid: Atlas, 1953), 567–773, pp. 728–30. The chronicle was published sometime before 1513.
[26] Luis Mercado, *El libro de la peste del Dr. Luis Mercado con un estudio preliminar acerca del autor y sus obras por el Dr. Nicasio Mariscal* [1598] [Biblioteca Clásica de la Medicina Española, vol. 1] (Madrid: Imp. de Cosano, 1921), 227–8.
[27] Miguel Martínez de Leyva, *Remedios preservativos y curativos para en tiempo de la peste; y otras curiosas experiencias* (Madrid 1597), prologue and 76v.
[28] Colin Jones, "Plague and its metaphors in early modern France," *Representations* 53 (Winter 1996), 97–127, p. 110.