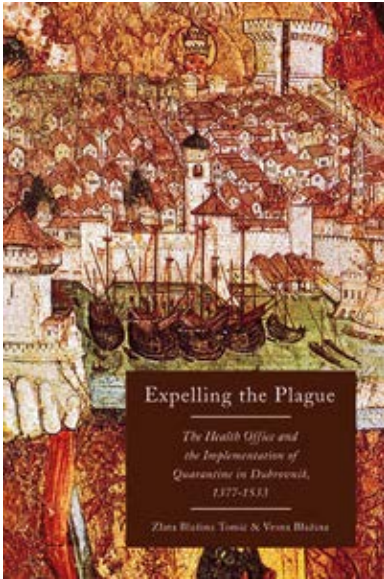


Zlata Blažina Tomić – Vesna Blažina

## EXPELLING THE PLAGUE: THE HEALTH OFFICE AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF QUARANTINE IN DUBROVNIK 1377–1533

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The book *Expelling the Plague* is a completely revised and substantially expanded version of the Croatian book *Kacamorti i kuga: utemeljenje i razvoj zdravstvene službe u Dubrovniku* [Cazamorti and the Plague: Founding and Development of the Health Offices in Dubrovnik] (Zagreb – Dubrovnik, Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2007.) written by Zlata Blažina Tomić. Helped by her coauthor Vesna Blažina they have together prepared a comprehensive, easyread, but simultaneously meticulous and scientifically thorough study about one piece of Dubrovnik history which is

globally unique, important and valuable.

Authors have added several new chapters, updated and enlarged bibliography, and carefully prepared the English version for a wider audience. This is exemplified in the best way by a new Introduction and Chapter 1 (“History of Dubrovnik”), first providing the methodological and general context in which the book was created, and the second giving a short introduction and

presentation of the Dubrovnik Republic history and cultural development as a necessary key for understanding the book. The second Chapter (“The Plague Phenomenon and Plague Epidemics in Dubrovnik”) was also written for the new edition, giving important information about the plague phenomenon in general and an introductory overview of plague outbreaks in Dubrovnik.

Chapters 3 (“Health Culture: Pharmacies, Hospitals, Physicians, and Suregons”) and 4 (“Founding and Development of the Health Office, 1390–1482”) were enlarged and represent an unavoidable reference for any further medicohistorical research on Dubrovnik. Chapter 3 reveals new physicians who worked in Dubrovnik, brings new information about the Republic’s hospitals and it is supplemented with a new section on pharmacists. It should be stressed that authors bring the summary table of physicians and surgeons who served in Dubrovnik from 1280 to 1600 on ten full pages, recording their names, salaries, dates of contract and years of service. Chapter 4 discusses the birth of the Health Office in Dubrovnik, thoroughly examining the first such public health regulations in the world (the first quarantine regulation in the world, dated in 1377!) and compares them with similar regulations in other neighbouring areas, especially Venice, as the strongest competitor of Dubrovnik at the Adriatic Sea. They include the names of health officials, their duties, the modes of their election, especially stressing their high respect and esteem in the hierarchy of state offices.

Next 5 chapters are the heart of the book, based primarily on systematic examination of the central archival source for this topic – *Libro deli Signori Chazamorbi* – a medical book held by the health officials. Chapter 5 (“Control of Arrivals in Dubrovnik, 1500–1530”) brings the analysis of surveillance of incoming people and goods in the Republic in the first third of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Figures and tables concerning statistics of traveller’s arrivals and their number are also given. Chapter 6 (“The Disastrous Plague Epidemic of 1526–27”) deals with especially disastrous plague outbreak in 1526, presenting the pessimistic everyday life in those two hard years and all the problems the Health Office had, combating not just one of the worst medieval pestilence but struggling with dispiritedness of the people who started to neglect health measures. The next Chapter (“Plague Survivors as Plague Workers”) brings out an intriguing history of the *resanati*, the persons who had recovered from plague. Those commoners were a highly mistrusted social class, but they were badly needed as people with stronger immunity to the new waves of plague, because they could work with the infected, dig graves and

disinfect suspicious goods, without high risk of being infected. The authors stress very well that some measures towards commoners, especially towards *resanati*, were sometimes too exaggerated and far too unjust. This is especially evident in a comparison with the offenders of health regulations from the patricians' class presented in Chapter 8 ("The Health Officials and the Patricians"), who became a real problem for health office authorities and resist to their obedience. Chapter 9 ("Concealing Symptoms of Plague, Importing Suspicious, and Other Offences") shows a variety of health measures offences, their punishment and change of regulations over time dealing with different offences.

The Conclusion is fairly opened with probably the most important highlight of the book: "In 1377, the aristocratic citystate of Dubrovnik, situated on Dalmatian Adriatic coast of presentday Croatia, became the first government in the world to formulate, develop and apply the concept of quarantine." (p. 229) In this concluding chapter the authors clearly list, comment and stress the most important features of the Republic's health office, their forerunning policies, and their global importance as one of the brightest moments in the history of western medicine and western culture in general.

Additionally, the authors provided three Appendices. The first one, entitled "The State Archives of Dubrovnik", is an overview of the Archive with a special stress on its high importance for general European and global history and culture. The authors state quite correctly: "The Archives constitute (...) the most valuable cultural heritage of Dubrovnik." (p. 242) Appendix B ("Diversis on the Import and Export Trade in Dubrovnik") brings a segment of very important book of Filip de Diversis concerning his commentary on the Republic's great geographical location and people's talents which made Dubrovnik one of the most vivid and most important sea ports in the world at the time. Final Appendix ("The Testament of Angelo Leticia") serves as the best example of a source which can provide several insights in the basic everyday life – a last will. The last will of a prestigious patrician is taken to show the richness of relations (between family members, between owners and the goods, varieties of possessions etc.). These Appendices represent the culmination of the book, and not just a decorative addendum, because they bring to the wider audience the smell of archival paper and give insight into the everyday life of the prestigious Republic of Dubrovnik.

The technical equipment of the book should be especially underlined. With 55 pages of endnotes and 29 pages of references every reader has a

precise and easy guide through enormous literature used in this book. In addition, the authors provided detailed Index which make this book useful to many specialists from different fields. The book includes 28 figures, 5 facsimiles, and 4 tables which harmoniously complement and enrich the text.

The effort of Zlata Blažina Tomić and Vesna Blažina made in their investigation and the preparation of the book is enormous and deserves maximal respect and esteem. The book is valuable in several highly important dimensions.

First, it is a fully systematic first class medicohistorical study of a globally relevant topic based on archival sources and extensive number of relevant published literature. One pearl of the Dubrovnik State Archive historical treasure – *Libro deli Signori Chazamorbi* – is finally adequately valorised. This is a great step not just for the medical history of Dubrovnik and Croatia, but an important historical piece in general investigation of the Croatian history.

Second, this book represents a unique promotion of Dubrovnik revealing its place and importance in the history of healthcare. Written in English, this book is an excellent ambassador of Dubrovnik and Croatia by bringing a piece of rich cultural heritage, thus visible and available to the wider audience.

Third, the book provides an insight into unique public health policy already implemented at the end of the 14th century which in global context is an extraordinary cultural and civilizational step forward in the history of medicine in the western world, medicine we know today as the official one.

Fourth, this topic illustrates the statement that history can be important teacher, relevant for contemporary problems and open questions. Dubrovnik Health Officials represents an extraordinary example of braveness and usage of pure rational capacities, and creative power of judgment in combating the a disastrous enemy – plague. They are a monument of human endeavour, persistence and prudence. They are also the reminders of unquestionable human capacity to adapt, to develop and to search for new solutions.

Igor Eterović