

PESTILENCE AND PRAYER: SAINTS AND THE ART OF THE  
PLAGUE IN ITALY FROM 1370 - 1600

by

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## ABSTRACT

Stemming from a lack of scholarship on minor plague saints, this study focuses on the saints that were invoked against the plague but did not receive the honorary title of plague patron. Patron saints are believed to transcend geographic limitations and are charged as the sole reliever of a human ailment or worry. Modern scholarship focuses on St. Sebastian and St. Roch, the two universal plague saints, but neglects other important saints invoked during the late Medieval and early Renaissance periods. After analyzing the reasons why St. Sebastian and St. Roch became the primary plague saints I noticed that other “minor” saints fell directly in line with the particular plague associations of either Sebastian or Roch. I categorized these saints as “second-tier” saints. This categorization, however, did not cover all the saints that periodically reoccurred in plague-themed artwork, I grouped them into one more category: the “third-tier” plague saints. This tier encompasses the saints that were invoked against the plague but do not have a direct association to the arrow and healing patterns seen in Sts. Sebastian and Roch iconographies.

This thesis is highly interdisciplinary; literature, art, and history accounts were all used to determine plague saint status and grouping, but art was my foundation. I examined important works of art directly associated with the plague and noted which saints appeared multiple times. The results from that assessment spurred further hagiographic and literary study. It was clear that these saints had multivariant connections to the plague. This study into the lives of the saints reaffirms their placement in the artistic and religious history of the pestilential epidemic of the Medieval and early Renaissance periods.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to “the little guy or gal;” whether it is a saint who is forgotten to time or a person who feels they are not significant. Everyone is important and deserves their own chapter.



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Andrea da Murano, *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Roch*, c. 1475, tempera on wood, 152 x 88 cm, Chiesa di San Pietro da Verona, Venice.

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Campagna Gerolamo, *St. Roch*, 1587, Scuola Grande, Scuola di San Rocco, Venice.

Cesare da Sesto, *Polyptych of St. Roch*, 1523, oil on wood, Museo d'Arte Antica del Castello Castel Sforza, Milan.

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*Niobides Krater*, c. 460-450 BCE, clay red-figure technique, 54 H cm x 56 D cm, Orvieto, Italy (now in Louvre, Paris).

*Pestblätter with St. Sebastian and St. Vincent Ferrer with St. Peter Martyr and St. Roch*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century, vellum, Biblioteca Classense, Ravenna.

*St. Christopher*, 14<sup>th</sup> century, fresco, San Miniato al Monte, Florence.

*St. Christopher*, 1531, woodcut, 11 x 8 in, Spencer Library, Manchester.

*St. Fabian, St. Sebastian, and St. Roch*, 1476, fresco, Chiesa di San Giorgio, Savona.

*St. Gregory's Procession*, 1476, fresco, Chiesa di San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.

*St. Gregory and St. Sebastian*, 15<sup>th</sup> century, woodcut, 20.2 x 13.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

*St. Nicholas of Tolentino saves Pisa from the plague*, n.d., San Nicola, Pisa.

*St. Roch, pictured with the dog who brought him food during his time of suffering, Prayerbook for Joanna of Ghistelles*, c. 1516, parchment, 150 x 105 mm, British Library, London.

*St. Sebastian, St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Peter Martyr, and St. Roch*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Bern, Switzerland.

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Vasari, Giorgio, *The Prophet Gad Offers David a Choice of Three Divine Punishments, San Rocco Altarpiece*, 1537, Museo Diocesano, Arezzo.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Black Death of 1348 is known as the greatest biomedical disaster in European history.<sup>1</sup> Although it was not the first plague epidemic, the Black Death swept through Europe indiscriminately killing the majority of people it came into contact with, and affected society unlike any other natural calamity.<sup>2</sup> The reactions to the plague were often depicted in art because art was one of the most important societal mediums of expression in the Medieval Era.<sup>3</sup> Religious art dominated this period, and saints were the most common religious figures pictured in art. In my thesis, I will explore the most prevalent saints in connection to the plague and discuss their importance during its recurring waves.

The Black Death was not the only plague epidemic that not swept Europe nor was it the last; waves of plague reoccurred between two to twenty years after the Black Death until the early eighteenth century, often appearing for months at a time.<sup>4</sup> These subsequent outbreaks were not as devastating as the initial wave in 1348, but the fact that this epidemic returned so

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1 Norman Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 6.

2 The World Health Organization identifies three major outbreaks of plague: the Justinian Plague in 541 BCE, the Black Death of 1348, and a plague epidemic in China in 1894. Samuel Cohn, "Epidemiology of the Black Death and Successive Waves of Plague in Medical History," in *Medical History*, 74-100 (Cambridge: Cambridge Journals Medical History, 2008), 74.

3 For a comprehensive historical treatment of art after the plague in Florence and Siena from the period 1350 – 1375 see Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

4 Christine Boeckl cites the last outbreak of the bubonic plague to afflict western and central Europe was in 1720. Louise Marshall, "“Waiting on the Will of the Lord:” The Imagery of the Plague" (Ph.D. dis., University of Pennsylvania, 1989), 29 and Christine Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology* (Kirksville: Truman State University, 2000), 107.

frequently kept people constantly aware of eminent death and in fear of not dying well. The *Ars Moriendi* (The Art of Dying Well) was a Latin text from the fifteenth century that provided directions to the procedure of what was seen as a “good death.”<sup>5</sup>

The prominent theory about the advent of the Black Death is that the bubonic plague arrived in Europe from Asia on boats sailing through the Mediterranean Sea. The plague affected port-cities more heavily than in-land cities with little connection to Mediterranean trading; thus the Italian Peninsula, especially Venice, was especially hit. The images in this thesis focus on Italy because of the prolific amount of plague-related artworks created during the period after the initial outbreak in the fourteenth century. After the Council of Trent in the late sixteenth century, many plague-saint images dwindled and the focus eventually centered upon science and medicine.

Medical and historic research indicates that three different strains of plague caused the disease that overwhelmed Europe: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. The three types had slightly different symptoms and mortality rates, but they were all caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*.<sup>6</sup> Bubonic plague was the most prevalent, and its symptoms were commonly pictured in art. A fleabite caused the bubonic strain; after being bitten, there is an incubation period of about one week and then a black pustule surrounded by a red ring appears at the sight

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<sup>5</sup> Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Yersinia pestis* is a bacterium in the intestines of rodents that causes a blockage and is transmitted through a bite by an infected organism. Robert Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 8 and “*Yersinia*,” Center for Environmental Health and Safety, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2010, <http://www.cehs.siu.edu/fix/medmicro/yersi.htm>.

of the bite.<sup>7</sup> Flu-like symptoms then develop as the lymph node nearest the bite begins to swell. This stage is very painful and many doctors would try to reduce the tenderness by draining the pus from the lymph node; ultimately, the cause of death was cardiac arrest.<sup>8</sup>

Pneumonic and septicemic were more rare than the bubonic strain, but they both have mortality rates closer to 100%.<sup>9</sup> Pneumonic plague was transmitted from person to person and the infection is caused when the plague moved into the lungs. The incubation period is half that of bubonic because the body is starved of oxygen. On the other hand, septicemic plague was transmitted through lice fleas, but it has no incubation period and the victim died within a day.<sup>10</sup> The quick incubation period and high mortality rates caused an initial panic in Medieval society. The Sieneese chronicler Agnolo di Tura recorded that “so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.”<sup>11</sup>

Religion already played an important role in the everyday lives of Medieval peoples, and the plague exacerbated the role of religion. Christianity held a distinctive view on illness and healing: suffering was the consequence of human sin and since God was Lord, disease could be both natural and divine.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, epidemics were not considered “diseases of the soul,” but

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7 The common children’s song “Ring Around the Rosy” is a reference to this symptom. Cantor, *Wake of the Plague*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Gottfried, *Black Death*, 8 and Giovanni Boccaccio describes in *The Decameron* that “almost all died after the third day of the appearance of the previously described symptoms...” Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Anna DesOrmeaux, “The Black Death and Its Effects on Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century Art” (MA diss., Louisiana University, 2007), 4.

<sup>10</sup> DesOrmeaux, “The Black Death,” 14.

<sup>11</sup> Gottfried, *Black Death*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Faith Wallis, ed. *Medieval Medicine: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2010), 47.

rather, community experiences that struck both the guilty and innocent.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, communal religious practices, such as processions and festivals, could theoretically combat the pestilential waves. The veneration of saints was an important aspect of the communal Medieval Catholic Church. Saints are sacred men and women decreed to be closer to God than the average person due to their holy actions in life and miracles after death. Saints were not simply interchangeable; Medieval people preferred certain saints to others for a particular “specialty,” these saints are known as patron saints. Certain environmental climates would increase the veneration of these patron saints. The reoccurring epidemics would have been a considerable factor to increase the veneration of saints particularly associated with the plague and death.

Saint imagery is a positive reaction against the plague because people used it to focus their devotions and prayers of hope of deliverance. Saints were invoked as plague intercessors during plague epidemics before the Black Death, but visual plague iconography did not exist before its march across Europe in 1348.<sup>14</sup> This emergence of visual plague iconography may be due to the fact that no other plague outbreak in history caused the same level of destruction as Black Death.<sup>15</sup> The eventual formation of specific iconography drew largely on already existing

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13 In contrast to plague, leprosy was considered “the disease of the soul” and its symptoms the outward manifestation of the sinner. Christine Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 154.

14 Although there are plague literary traditions, there are no illustrations in classical texts depicting epidemics. The first medical account of the bubonic plague is found in Procopius of Caesarea’s *History of the Wars* and there are a number of historians who discuss the 6th century Justinian Plague such as Paul the Deacon and Gregory of Tours. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 36 and 45.

15 Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 6.

religious subjects, such as the Madonna's of Mercy, and classical myth intermingled with Judeo-Christian ideology.<sup>16</sup>

The saints chosen as plague intercessors had specific associations with plague symbolism. Most of the saints' iconography was developed from stories of the saints' lives, such as Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* written in 1266 and expanded upon over the decades.<sup>17</sup> It is through *The Golden Legend* that medieval people learned about the lives of the saints and through these stories they found moral and religious guidance. *The Golden Legend* was a Medieval "best-seller" but fell out of favor in the later Renaissance and Early Modern period with the Council of Trent and succeeding Counter-Reformation.<sup>18</sup> The iconography of saints is developed from the stories in *The Golden Legend* and it is through art that people recalled the tales they were told. This iconography plays an important role in their categorization as plague saints.

### Categorization of Plague Saints

This thesis categorizes plague saints into three broad groups: "first-, second-, and third-tier." The "first-tier" saints are the two universally acknowledged plague saints: Sebastian and Roch. They have the closest association to pestilence and they also appear in the majority of plague-themed artworks. The "second-tier" plague saints, Christopher, Cosmas and Damian, Nicholas of Tolentino, Gregory the Great, and Bernardino of Siena, are also well known saintly

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<sup>16</sup> Christine Boeckl, "Giorgio Vasari's *San Rocco Altarpiece*: Tradition and Innovation in Plague Iconography," In *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 22, no. 43 (2001), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996), 104.

<sup>18</sup> Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art*, 104.

intercessors, but their relationship with the plague varies throughout the centuries. Although there is a large collection of artistic and literary evidence to support their association with the plague, the “second-tier” saints are generally not acknowledged as strictly plague saints in most modern scholarship. The “first- and second-tier” plague saints are also separated into two categories: those who symbolically thwarted the plague due to their plague-arrow symbology present in their martyrdoms, including Sts. Sebastian, Christopher, and Cosmas and Damian, discussed in Chapter I and those who directly healed the plague, including Sts. Roch, Nicholas of Tolentino, Gregory the Great, and Bernardino of Siena, discussed in Chapter II.

The last category is the “third-tier” plague saints and they are discussed in Chapter III. The “third-tier” saints are directly associated with outbreaks of the plague but they do not fall into the categorization proposed for the “first- and second-tier” plague saints: arrows in their martyrdom like Sebastian or direct healing like Roch. For a saint to be considered a “third-tier” plague saint, their connection must not be connected to their duty as a patron saint of a town, city, or individual. The “third-tier” plague saints included in this thesis are Fabian, Vincent Ferrer, and Peter Martyr.

In my thesis, I will highlight the various “first- second-, and tired-tier” plague saints in their respective sections. Although the saints in these sections share iconographic characteristics, I will treat each saint as an individual entry, highlighting important aspects of their *Vitas* or lives and analyzing a selection of plague-themed artwork. After the “first- and second-tier” saints, I will highlight a selection of “third-tier” saints.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Refer to Appx. A: *Saint Categorization Chart* for a simplified tier system, 86.

## CHAPTER I: ST. SEBASTIAN AND “SECOND-TIER” PLAGUE SAINTS

The oldest symbol of pestilence is the arrow; according to James Hall in *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, “the arrow is not merely a weapon, but the traditionally carrier of disease, especially the plague.”<sup>20</sup> Apollo is the Greek god most often associated with arrows; he was one of the twelve Olympians and patron of archery (among other things). Apollo was said to never be without his bow and arrows, articles which he used to inflict judgment and death upon disobeying humans. Homer’s *Iliad* contains the earliest connection to pestilence with arrows. In the *Iliad*, Apollo is described as a “furious” god who “rang death as his shot his arrows” when he avenged the rape of Chryseis.<sup>21</sup>

The arrow as a symbol of the plague also has its origins in the legend of Apollo and his sister, Diana, massacring the fourteen children of Niobe.<sup>22</sup> They were punishing Niobe because she tried to dissuade the women of Thebes from worshiping Leto, the mother of Apollo and Diana, and boasted of her own superior family connections. To humble her pride, Apollo and Diana killed all her children. The scene is described in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and an ancient Greek urn depicts the children of Niobe fleeing from the siblings’ ruthless arrows (Fig. 1.1).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 33.

<sup>21</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 35. See also Appx. B, “Ancient Literature:” *Homer: The Iliad*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 35 and 46.

<sup>23</sup> Apollo is recognized by his bow and arrows and the lyre he carries, and his sister, Diana is a huntress, accompanied by a bow and quiver.

“Phoebus [Apollo] cried ‘Enough! Long complaint delays her punishment!’ [Diana] said the same, and falling swiftly through the air, concealed by clouds, they reached the house of Cadmus.” Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 27, 105, and 231-232. See also Appx. B, “Ancient Literature:” Ovid: *The Story of Niobe*, 88.



The celestial siblings stand in the center of the urn with their bows drawn as their victims lie at their feet.

In ancient traditions, Apollo shared many Christianized traits with God, because he was the cause of destruction but also the purifier and healer.<sup>24</sup> Regarding some of the competition about healing between paganism and Christianity: “Much was at stake because Christianity was a religion of healing. Christianity’s principle rival in the world of late antiquity was not primarily the professional physician, but rather the healing god Asclepius.”<sup>25</sup> Asclepius was Apollo’s son, and the Christian champion over these pagan gods was the early Christian saint.

Although there are strong connections between the pagan world and the Christian world, the “Christianization” of the symbol of the arrow is not merely a continuation of the Greco-Roman tradition. Paganism and Christianity had profoundly different worldviews. For late-antique pagans, the earth and heavens did not interact; there was a chasm that could only be passed after death. In contrast, Christianity breached this abyss to join together the two spheres with saintly-intercessors, the dead who could amplify the prayers of those below.<sup>26</sup>

The symbolism of the plague-arrow also appears in ancient Hebrew literature, and thus provides a direct link to the later Christian traditions.<sup>27</sup> Like the Greco-Roman myths, arrows are

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<sup>24</sup> The Greeks believed that the arrows of the Delean caused illness and death, imagining Apollo as the avenger, the purifier, and the healer since they also prayed to him to grant relief from pestilence. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Asclepius was associated with human physicians: healed within a framework of medical concepts. Wallis, *Medieval Medicine*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4-6.

<sup>27</sup> Although not connected to arrow imagery and plague, Job is an important Hebrew plague figure. Job was cursed with various bodily ills, familial troubles, and distress. The line

symbols of divine punishment in the Old Testament. 2 Samuel 24:10-25 tells the story of the Davidian plague. After King David sinned against God He offered David three forms of penance: 1) seven years of famine, 2) fleeing from your enemies for three months or 3) three days of pestilence.<sup>28</sup> David chose the pestilence, so God brought down vengeance and disease upon His creation by making His “arrows drunk with blood.”<sup>29</sup> Giorgio Vasari includes a rare depiction of the Davidian Plague in the predella panels of his *San Rocco Altarpiece* for the church of the Compagni di San Rocco in Arezzo (Fig. 1.2). This image, *The Prophet Gad Offers David a Choice of Three Divine Punishments*, illustrates King David’s choice between the three forms of penance. As can be seen, arrows as symbols of pestilence appear in both ancient Greco-Roman and Hebrew texts. It is thus logical to continue this assessment and symbolism when discussing Christian plague imagery after the Black Death.

St. Sebastian: Martyr (3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century)

St. Sebastian came from a noble family in Gaul. He was a commander in the Praetorian Guards and a favorite of the Emperor Diocletian. Sebastian was secretly a Christian and attempted to protect other early Christians from persecution. The emperor eventually discovered the secret of Sebastian’s faith and sent orders to execute him.<sup>30</sup> According to *The Golden*

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specifically connecting him to plague is Job 27:15 “The plague will bury those who survive him, and their widows will not weep for them.”

<sup>28</sup> See Appx. B, “Religious Literature:” *The Bible: 2 Samuel 24:10-25*, 88.

<sup>29</sup> Louise Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy.” In *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3 (Autumn, 1994), 493. 2 Samuel 24:10-25 is the most commonly illustrated Biblical passage associated with the plague. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Clara Clement, *Saints in Art* (New York: Snova, Nova Science Publishers, 2004), 61.

*Legend*, Diocletian had Sebastian tied to a tree and ordered his archers use him for target practice.

They hit him with so many arrows that he looked like a hedgehog, and they left him there for dead. But within a few days he recovered and was standing on the steps of the palace...Sebastian [said]; ‘The Lord saw fit to bring me to life again so that I could confront you and reproach you with all the atrocities you are committing against the servants of Christ.’ One of the emperors then ordered him to be beaten with clubs until finally he breathed his last.<sup>31</sup>

St. Sebastian is awarded two crowns for his two “martyrdoms:” first by arrows and then by clubs. His body was buried on the Appian Way in the Basilica Apostolorum, which became known as the Basilica di San Sebastino in the seventh century. San Sebastino and its catacombs make up one of Rome’s earliest Christian sites and was an important pilgrimage route.<sup>32</sup>

Although St Sebastian is a third century martyr, his cult was first recorded in the eighth century by Paul the Deacon in the *History of the Lombards*, in which he described a plague in 680 CE in Pavia that ended when an altar was raised to the saint, but there was no specific plague iconography created.<sup>33</sup> Sebastian may have been the first saint to ever be invoked against the

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<sup>31</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Christopher Stace (London: Penguin, 1998), 53. See also Appx. B, “Religious Literature:” *Golden Legend: St. Sebastian*, 88.

<sup>32</sup> Pilgrims were led to Rome with pilgrim guides, which listed venerated graves and shrines. Matilda Webb, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome: A Comprehensive Guide* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 228.

<sup>33</sup> “Then it was said to a certain man by revelation that the pestilence itself would not cease before an altar of St. Sebastian the martyr was placed in the church...And it was done, and after the remains of St. Sebastian the martyr had been carried from the city of Rome, presently the altar was set up in the aforesaid church and the pestilence itself ceased.” John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 125.

plague.<sup>34</sup> After the Black Death, St. Sebastian's martyrdom became a symbolic sacrifice to God. Louise Marshall describes Sebastian's association with the plague in "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy:" "Sebastian acts as a living 'lightning rod,' drawing the plague arrows away from humanity and 'grounding' them harmlessly into his own flesh."<sup>35</sup> The emphasis is on Sebastian's ability to draw the arrows from their intended victims, into himself, and survive his fatal wounds. This action provides hope to those suffering from the plague that they too would be delivered.<sup>36</sup>

The nature of St. Sebastian's unique martyrdom makes him easily recognizable in art. Pictures of this saint are almost always of his martyrdom and he is often depicted as a semi-nude youth either tied to a tree or a column with multiple arrows piercing his flesh.<sup>37</sup> In art, he often gazes heavenward with a noble and spiritual countenance, like the expression he holds in Francesco Botticini's *Saint Sebastian* (Fig. 1.3). St. Sebastian is pierced by six arrows in his torso and is seen gazing up at an angel who carries a crown to place on his head.<sup>38</sup>

Works of art that include active shooters evoke the connection Sebastian has to the arrows of disease because the arches are shooting the figurative "arrows of disease" at him. The

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34 Irene Vaslef, "The Role of St. Roch as a Plague Saint: A Late Medieval Hagiographic Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1984), 45.

35 Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred," 495 and 496.

36 Aberth, *From the Brink*, 133.

37 Sometimes, due to his military background, he is dressed in armor or it lies near his body. Clement, *Saints in Art*, 62.

38 Martyrs are presented with a crown and/or a palm; they serve as symbols of a martyr's victory over death. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 81 and 239.

active shooters also reaffirm his less than sacred nickname: “The Holy Pincushion.”<sup>39</sup> Giovanni del Biondo’s *Triptych of St. Sebastian* was commissioned for the newly built Cathedral of Florence, in which Sebastian was the titular saint for several altarpieces (Fig. 1.4). St. Sebastian unquestionably lives up to the illusion of a pincushion or a hedgehog in this altarpiece. He is riddled with arrow shafts as the archers below continue to barrage him with arrows. The side panels of the altarpiece include scenes from the life of St. Sebastian, ending with his intercession in Florence during a plague outbreak in 1376.<sup>40</sup>

Another influential image of St. Sebastian with active shooters is Benozzo Gozzoli’s *Saint Sebastian protecting the populace of San Gimignano* (Fig. 1.5). In June of 1463, the plague had returned to the town and the government decreed that every church would offer prayers in honor of St. Sebastian.<sup>41</sup> Diane Ahl describes the dire need for the fresco in her book about the artist, *Benozzo Gozzoli*: “The image was needed so urgently in the face of the plague that Benozzo had suspended his work in the choir to paint it.”<sup>42</sup> This image shows an elaborate scene of St. Sebastian’s martyrdom: the archers are below him as usual but Heaven is full of activity, angels and other celestial bodies seem to dance in the sky above Sebastian holding a martyr’s crown. The inscription below reads: “SANCTE SEBASTIANAE INTERCEDE PRO DEVOTO

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<sup>39</sup> Sebastian is also sometimes referred to as a hedgehog. Greg Buzwell, *Saints in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>40</sup> Diana Norman, “Change and continuity: art and religion after the Black Death” In *Siena, Florence, and Padua: Art, Society, and Religion 1280-1400, Volume I: Interpretive Essays*, 177-196 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 190.

<sup>41</sup> “The government decreed that every church in town would offer Masses, prayers, alms, and orations in honor of St. Sebastian ‘so that our benevolent and merciful Lord is placated.’” Diane Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 142.

<sup>42</sup> Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli*, 144.

POPULO TUO,” translated as “Saint Sebastian intercede for your devoted people.”<sup>43</sup> The altarpiece was not simply commemorative of the plague, it was also therapeutic. According to the town’s records, “on the very day of its dedication on July 1464, pestilence is recorded to have ceased through Sebastian’s intercession, and 38 inhabitants were freed from the plague.”<sup>44</sup>

Another type of Sebastian’s plague imagery includes St. Sebastian as a solitary, inactive martyr, which echoes Christ on the cross. Louise Marshall calls this type the *martyred* Sebastian.<sup>45</sup> The image of an inactive martyr is when the shooters are nonexistent, so the focus converges on Sebastian. Like Christ, Sebastian’s body is pierced yet he is still alive. Louise Marshall states in “Manipulating the Sacred” that “the image of Sebastian, martyred and *yet alive*, celebrates his resurrection as proof of his inexhaustible capacity to absorb in his own body the plague arrows destined for his worshipers.”<sup>46</sup> In these images, like Botticini’s *Saint Sebastian*, he usually gazes heavenward with an expression of spiritual clarity and no narrative detail is included to intrude upon the intimate connection between redeemer and devotee (Fig. 1.3).<sup>47</sup>

In Benozzo Gozzoli’s *Saints Nicholas of Tolentino, Roch, Sebastian, and Bernardino of Siena, with Kneeling Donors* the plague saints are in a *sacra conversazione* or “holy

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<sup>43</sup> The inscription is not included in this image. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli*, 144.

<sup>45</sup> The distinguishing feature of this type is its lack of narrative action: the archers are either inactive or, more usually, absent. Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred,” 469.

<sup>46</sup> Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred,” 500.

<sup>47</sup> Clement, *Saints in Art*, 62 and Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred,” 500.

conversation” (Fig. 1.6).<sup>48</sup> Unusually Sebastian is fully clothed in this image; is identified by his name inscribed in his halo and the iconic arrow he holds in his hand. Behind the saints, angels are flying in the sky, directing plague-arrows down to the city below. The donors, kneeling in the foreground, clearly commissioned this work to invoke the saints because the artwork included two powerful “first-tier” saints and accompanying “second-tier” saints and had the angels afflicting the town with disease in the background.

A variation of the *sacra conversazione* formula is the *Madonna della Misericordia* (Madonna of Mercy). The role of the Virgin as an intercessor between God and man is a common theme in medieval art. The plagued-themed *Misericordias* show the Virgin standing, her arms spread wide holding a cloak or mantle, under which she shields saints and donors from the falling arrows.<sup>49</sup> Although the Virgin Mary is the central figure in the *Misericordias*, St. Sebastian is a prominent and reoccurring saint.

Benedetto Bonfigli’s *Madonna della Misericordia* shows the Virgin shielding citizens from plague-arrows with her cloak (Fig. 1.7).<sup>50</sup> The angels flying above look militant, wielding swords and Christ is holding sharp arrows in his hands. There are a multitude of saints surrounding the Virgin, assisting her to protect the people below: specifically Sts. Bernardino of

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<sup>48</sup> A *sacra conversazione* is a “holy conversation” in which saints were grouped together. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 341-342.

<sup>49</sup> Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 336.

<sup>50</sup> This canvas was meant to be carried in plague processions. DesOrmeaux, “Black Death Art,” 93.

Siena, Peter Martyr, and Sebastian.<sup>51</sup> St. Sebastian appears full of arrows, kneeling in prayer and gazing up at Christ. In the foreground, below the Virgin and saints, an angel torments citizens of a walled city and bodies are strewn across the earth.<sup>52</sup> A similar plagued-themed artwork by Bonfigli is the *Il Gonfalone Madonna delle Grazie* (Fig. 1.8). It follows a parallel format as the *Madonna della Misericordia* and was created in the same city, Perugia, only six years afterwards. In the *Gonfalone Madonna* the Virgin stands protecting supplicants and with two angels and Christ overhead, while a city is shown below, but the saints have altered slightly from the previous painting. The only saints accompanying the Virgin are Sebastian and Nicholas of Tolentino; they are both in very similar praying poses. It can be suggested that these *Misericordias* became so formula-like due to the rapid succession in which the artworks were needed during plague outbreaks.

The final type of St Sebastian's plague art is Sebastian directly interceding on behalf a town or city. Giovanni del Biondo's *Altarpiece of Saint Sebastian* contains an intercession-image on one of the altarpiece's wings (Fig. 1.9). The lowest scene of the left-handed wing depicts inhabitants of a town pleading with Sebastian to end the plague. The city is devastated and barren from the deaths of the citizens. In the foreground gravediggers lift a corpse onto a bier as people mourn the loss. It is this scene and the historical record of a plague outbreak in Florence

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<sup>51</sup> St. Francis of Assisi is also identifiable, but as far as I know, he has no connection to the plague. There are three unknown papal saints, perhaps they are St. Gregory the Great and/or Fabian, but more research is needed to identify them.

<sup>52</sup> It is common for plagued-themed artwork to include death scenes with the intercessionary saints. It reinforces the purpose of the image.



in 1376 that supports the hypothesis that this altarpiece was made as a positive reaction against a reoccurrence of the plague.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to art, St. Sebastian is invoked in plague-themes literature and prayers.<sup>54</sup>

Rosemary Horrox's *The Black Death* includes a prayer called: *A prayer made to St. Sebastian against the mortality which flourished in 1349*:

O St. Sebastian, guard and defend me, morning and evening, every minute of every hour, while I am still of sound mind; and, Martyr, diminish the strength of that vile illness called an epidemic which is threatening me. Protect and keep me and all my friends from this plague.<sup>55</sup>

The prayer continues by describing St. Sebastian's life and martyrdom with very little reference to the plague, and ends with this statement:

O martyr Sebastian! Be with us always, and by your merits keep us safe and sound and protect from plague. Commend us to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary, so that when we die we may have our reward: to behold God in the company of martyrs.<sup>56</sup>

This prayer exemplifies the feeling toward death during the plague: the idea of a "good" death.<sup>57</sup>

The faithful should always be ready for the unpredictable death by preparing one's soul beforehand.

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<sup>53</sup> Norman, "Change and Continuity," 193.

<sup>54</sup> A popular rhyme displays his widespread status: "Saint Sébastien, ami de Dieu/Garde-nous de peste en tout lieu." Translated as: "Saint Sebastian, love of God/Protect us from the plague everywhere." Vaslef, "The Role of St. Roch," 46.

<sup>55</sup> Rosemary Horrox, ed. and trans., *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 125. See also Appx. B, "Religious Literature," 88.

<sup>56</sup> Horrox, *Black Death*, 125.

<sup>57</sup> A "good" death meant reuniting with Christ in Heaven, while a "bad" death meant eternal suffering in Hell. DesOrmeaux, *Black Death*, 10.

St. Christopher: Martyr (3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century)

Although St. Christopher is no longer on the Church's official liturgical calendar, because of evidence that he did not actually exist, he was popular in the Middle Ages for his strong protective powers.<sup>58</sup> St. Christopher was a legendary Canaanite called Reprobus (or Offero) of gigantic stature and he wished to serve the most powerful ruler in the world. Christopher wandered the earth in search of such a man and eventually he came into service of the Devil. When he heard that even the Devil was fearful of Jesus Christ, Christopher decided that Jesus must be the most powerful ruler in the world, and he left the Devil in search of Jesus. A nearby hermit told Christopher that he should better use his time by acting as a human-ferry across the river because there was no nearby bridge. One day a child came to him and asked to be taken across. As Christopher continued across the river the child pressed down on his shoulders and the weight became unbearable, Christopher exclaimed "You weighed so much that if I had had the whole world on my back, it could scarcely have felt heavier!"<sup>59</sup> The child told him that indeed he not only had the weight of the world, but the weight of its creator on his shoulders and the child reveled himself to be Jesus Christ.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> In 1969, the Church revised its liturgical calendar and removed saints that had "uncertain" historical proof of their existence. They still carry the title of saint, but are only venerated on a local level. Although St. Christopher was removed from the liturgical calendar, he remains of the most popular Catholic saints. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 70.

<sup>59</sup> Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 175.

<sup>60</sup> The name "Christopher" is from the Greek, meaning "Christ-bearer." Rosa Giorgi. *Saints: A Year in Faith and Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006), 440.

Christ ordered Christopher to plant his staff in the ground and the next day it blossomed and bore fruit. Christopher converted to Christianity on the spot.<sup>61</sup> Once converted, St. Christopher traveled preaching to others. Upon hearing this, the king of Lycia imprisoned and tormented him with instruments of iron and flames. When that had no effect, the king ordered arrows shot at him, and according to *The Golden Legend*:

The king had him tied to a stake and ordered four hundred archers to shoot at him. But their arrows all hung in mid-air, and not one of them could find its target. The king, thinking that Christopher had been killed by his archers, began to mock him when suddenly one of the arrows fell from the air, turned round in mid-flight, struck the king in the eye and blinded him.<sup>62</sup>

St. Christopher told the king to use Christopher's blood to heal his blinded eye. The king ordered Christopher executed, and when his sight was restored, the king promptly converted.<sup>63</sup> The scene with St. Christopher and the Christ-child on his shoulders is the most popular depiction of this saint. Even if the Christ-child is omitted, Christopher is easily recognizable in art by his sheer size, staff, and movement across a river.<sup>64</sup>

There are two important criteria that make St. Christopher a "second-tier" plague saint: arrows from his martyrdom and a popular inscription. As seen in his *Vita*, Christopher was shot with arrows, but also survived. This form of resurrection is mirrored in St. Sebastian's martyrdom; both saints can personify the hope of surviving the plague and can "ground" arrows

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<sup>61</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend vol. 4*, Fordham University: Internet Medieval Source Book. See also Appx. B, "Religious Literature:" *Golden Legend: St. Christopher*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 177.

<sup>63</sup> "When I am dead, make a paste with my blood, anoint you eye with it, and you will recover your sight...' The king took a little of his blood, and laying it on his eye, said: 'In the name of God and St. Christopher!' And at once he could see again." Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 177.

<sup>64</sup> Clement, *Saints in Art*, 66 and Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 70.

into their bodies. Christine Boeckl also connects Sts. Christopher and Sebastian through their hagiographies in her article “Giorgio Vasari’s *San Rocco Altarpiece*: Tradition and Innovation in Plague Iconography.” She writes that they were both invoked as plague intercessors during an epidemic in the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>65</sup>

A popular inscription often included with images of St. Christopher is translated as: “Whoever looks on the figure of St. Christopher will assuredly on that date be overcome by no faintness.”<sup>66</sup> It is unclear how this giant-saint became conflated with daily protection, but variations of this inscription were prevalent in art. One example of St. Christopher’s powerful inscription is the sixteenth century woodcut, *St. Christopher* (Fig. 1.10) On the bottom of the image of St. Christopher with the Christ-child crossing a river are these words: “CHRISTOFORI FACIEM DIE QUACUMQUE TUERIS ILLA NEMQUE DIE MORTE MALA NON MORIERIS;” translated as: “On whatever day the face of Christopher thou shalt see on that day no evil form of death shall visit thee.”<sup>67</sup>

The image of St. Christopher was often displayed either in an especially prominent position inside a church or greatly over-sized on the outside a church so that everyone could look upon him and gain his protection that day, such as a fresco in San Miniato al Monte in Florence of an oversized St. Christopher (Fig. 1.11).<sup>68</sup> Even without the specific inscription included, St.

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<sup>65</sup> Boeckl, “*San Rocco Altarpiece*,” 33.

<sup>66</sup> CHRISTOFORI SANCTI SPECIEM QUICUMQUE TUETUR ILLO NAMQUE DIE NULLO LANGORE TENETUR Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 70-71.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Cundall, “A Brief History of Wood-engraving from Its Invention,” The Project Gutenberg eBook, 2012, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/40589/40589-h/40589-h.htm#page20>.

<sup>68</sup> In order to be visible at a distance, the image of St. Christopher was made very large, perhaps the origin of his great size. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 71.

Christopher's iconographic formula serves as a representation of his *Vita* and protection against death.

St. Christopher is depicted most often with Sts. Sebastian and Roch in plague-themed art. Antonio Aleotti created a triptych of the three saints in which St. Christopher appears on Sebastian's right, with his iconic staff and the petite Christ-child on his shoulders. St. Roch is seen on the left of Sebastian. He is depicted with one legging down to present a plague bubo on his thigh (Fig. 1.12). The *Polyptych of St. Roch* by Cesare da Sesto also shows St. Christopher with Roch and Sebastian (Fig. 1.13). The central and largest image is of St. Roch while St. Sebastian and St. Christopher are shown smaller, to either side. On top of these plague-saints are depictions of the Virgin and Child, St. John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. Due to the repetition of the name "John," Sts. John the Baptist and John the Evangelist are most likely included to indicate the donor's name, because neither saint has a specific association with the plague.

In addition to the "first-tier" plague saints, St. Christopher is also associated with the "third-tier" plague saint, Vincent Ferrer. In the *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer*, Vincent is shown as the central figure, flanked by Sts. Christopher and Sebastian (Fig. 1.14). St. Vincent Ferrer is in the center because the altarpiece is named after him, not because he is the most powerful plague saint. Each of the saints depicted serve a different function related to the plague, Sebastian as the original plague saint, Christopher's daily protection against death, and Vincent Ferrer's Dominican connections and plague-related treatise. Thus, they support one another and comforted the viewer, who at once invoked three powerful plague intercessors.

### Sts. Cosmas and Damian: Martyrs (3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century)

Sts. Cosmas and Damian were successful brother-physicians and thus they have an apparent connection to disease, pestilence, and healing. The brothers were part of a group called the *anargyroi*, a word that means the “silver-less ones.”<sup>69</sup> They are characterized by upholding strict principles regarding compensation: they refuse to accept any form of payment or reward for their healing services. Their guideline of free service was so strict that lifelong partners fell out of favor if one suspected the other of violating this principle. According to *The Golden Legend*, a lady named Palladia went to the twin-doctors and they restored her to perfect health. She offered a little gift, which they refused, but she begged them to take it, swearing solemn oaths. Damian eventually accepted the gift because he did not want to disrespect to the Lord but when Cosmas found out he was furious. God came to Cosmas in a dream and told him to forgive his brother and so they continued working together.

With time, the proconsul Lysias heard of their medical success through the Christian faith and summoned them to his court to sacrifice to his idols. When they refused he had them tortured. Lysias saw that it had no effect on them and he became enraged. According to *The Golden Legend*:

[He] had the three other brothers brought out of prison and made them stand by the cross while four of his soldiers shot arrows at Cosmas and Damian. But the arrows doubled back and wounded many in the crowd, while the holy martyrs

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<sup>69</sup> The *anargyroi* were inspired by the instructions of Christ in Matthew 10:1, 5-8: “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely you have received, freely give.” Dimitri Brady, “Chapter 20: Eastern Christian Hagiographical traditions: Eastern Orthodox,” In *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, 420-432 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 420-422.

were not even touched. Thwarted at every turn, Lysias at his wit's end, and next morning had all five brothers beheaded.<sup>70</sup>

In art, Sts. Cosmas and Damian are often depicted in the garb of a physician: "in a scarlet gown, furred well" with an ointment box, a lancet or other contemporary surgical equipment.<sup>71</sup> In the Church Santi Cosma e Damiano, there is a mosaic of important influence that depicts the brothers (Fig. 1.15).<sup>72</sup> The mosaic depicts a passage in the New Testament that describes Christ's Second Coming. Sts. Cosmas and Damian are on either side of Christ, presented by Sts. Paul and Peter. They are dressed in matching yellow tunics and purple cloaks, with identical bearded faces. The martyr with St. Peter, on Christ's left, holds a crown and surgeon box and on Christ's right stands St. Paul, who introduces the other brother who also carries a martyr's crown. Below the mosaic there is an inscription, part of which reads: "MARTYRIBUS MEDICIS POPVLO SPES CERTA SALVTIS VENIT ET EX SACRO CREVIT HONORE LOCUS," translated as: "To the people a sure hope of salvation comes from the martyrs who heal their ills, and the temple before named as sacred has increased in honor."<sup>73</sup>

One visual depiction of their torment by arrows is by Fra Angelico, *The Crucifixion of Saints Cosmas and Damian* (Fig. 1.16). The altarpiece titled *Altarpiece of Cosmas and Damian*, depicts the lives of Sts. Cosmas and Damian, and although the panel with their crucifixion is a

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<sup>70</sup> Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 249.

<sup>71</sup> Clement, *Saints in Art*, 66.

<sup>72</sup> The Church Santi Cosmas and Damian was the first church to be founded in the Forum of Peace in the fifth century. Webb, *Churches and Catacombs*, 126 and 128.

<sup>73</sup> It was believed that if a sick person slept in any of the saints' churches, then they would receive guidance in a dream that would lead to their cure. Brady, "Hagiographical Traditions," 432 and Webb, *Churches and Catacombs*, 128-129.

small piece, it is a good depiction of their failed martyrdom by arrows. The image shows Cosmas and Damian nailed to crosses as their three brothers stand below them and all five are pelted with arrows that turn in the other direction before they reach their intended targets. Some of the archers turn to escape the onslaught, and others fall to the ground dead. The proconsul Lysias is at the bottom right-hand corner in rich garments, he turns his face away from the failed execution. Similarly to St. Sebastian's martyrdom, the brothers also act as "living lightning rods" as described by Louise Marshall.<sup>74</sup> The emphasis is on Cosmas and Damian's ability to draw the arrows from humanity and survive. This action echoes St. Sebastian's and also provides hope to those suffering from the plague.

In addition to images of their martyrdom, Sts. Cosmas and Damian are also depicted with "first-tier" plague saints. Titian's altarpiece, *Saint Mark enthroned with Saints Cosmas and Damian, Roch and Sebastian*, is an example of the association Medieval and Renaissance peoples had of the brothers with the plague (Fig. 1.17). Sts. Cosmas and Damian stand to St. Mark's right, while Sts. Roch and Sebastian stand to the saint's left. According to Clara Clement in *Saints in Art*, this picture was created to commemorate a plague in Venice, and it supports the statement that Cosmas and Damian are "akin to the offices of Sts. Sebastian and Roch."<sup>75</sup>

The brother-physicians halted the epidemic with their experience in healing expressed in their *Vita* and a cult developed early on in connection to their medical powers. Their failed martyrdom with arrows in their *Vita* also provides an iconographic connection to plague arrows.

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<sup>74</sup> The image of the martyred St. Sebastian is a celebration of his resurrection and proof of his inexhaustible capacity to absorb the plague arrows. I am extending this analogy to Sts. Cosmas and Damian. Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred, 500.

<sup>75</sup> Clement, *Saints in Art*, 66.



As evident in James Hall's description of the saints in *Dictionary of Subjects and Saints in Art* their primary role was as plague saints:

Their principle role was that of protectors against sickness, the plague in particular, they therefore appear most often in votive paintings of thanksgiving, standing before the Virgin. They may be grouped with Roch and Sebastian who likewise were invoked against disease.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 79.

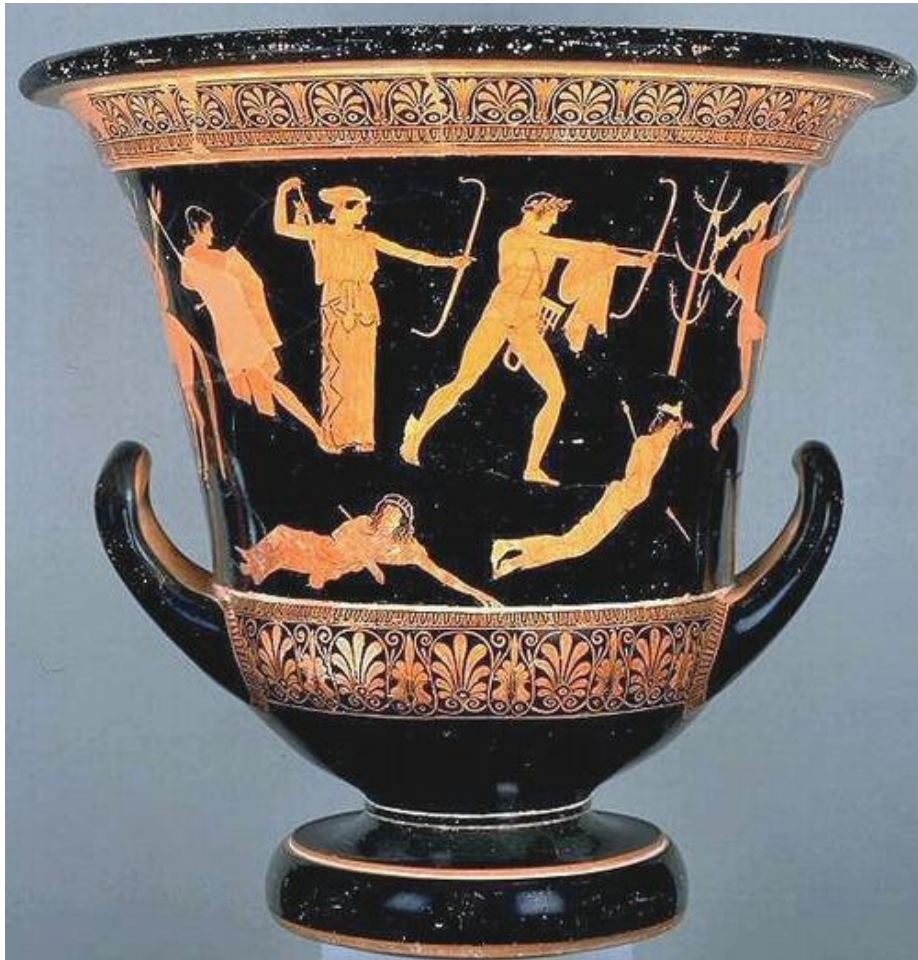


Fig. 1.1

*Niobides Krater*, c. 460-450 BCE, clay red-figure technique, 54 H cm x 56 D cm, Orvieto, Italy  
(now in Louvre, Paris).



Fig. 1.2

Giorgio Vasari, *The Prophet Gad Offers David a Choice of Three Divine Punishments*, San Rocco Altarpiece, 1537, Museo Diocesano, Arezzo, Italy.



Fig. 1.3

Francesco Botticini (Francesco di Giovanni), *Saint Sebastian*, 1446-1497, tempera and oil on wood, 144 x 67 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 1.4

Giovanni del Biondo, *Triptych of St. Sebastian*, c. 1370s, oil on panel, 224 x 89 cm, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.



Fig. 1.5

Benozzo Gozzoli, *Saint Sebastian protecting the populace of San Gimignano*, 1464, fresco, Sant'Agostino, San Gimignano.



Fig. 1.6

Benozzo Gozzoli, *Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, Roch, Sebastian, and Bernardino of Siena, with Kneeling Donors*, 1481, tempera on canvas, 78.7 x 61.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 1.7

Benedetto Bonfigli, *Madonna della Misericordia*, 1464, Chiesa di Gonfalone, Perugia.





Fig. 1.8

Benedetto Bonfigli, *Il Gonfalone della Madonna delle Grazie*, 1470, Chiesa di Maria della Concezione, Perugia.



Fig. 1.9

Giovanni del Biondo, (detail) *Triptych of St. Sebastian*, c. 1370s, oil on panel, 224 x 89 cm, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.



Fig. 1.10

*St. Christopher*, 1531, woodcut, 11 x 8 in, Spencer Library, Manchester.

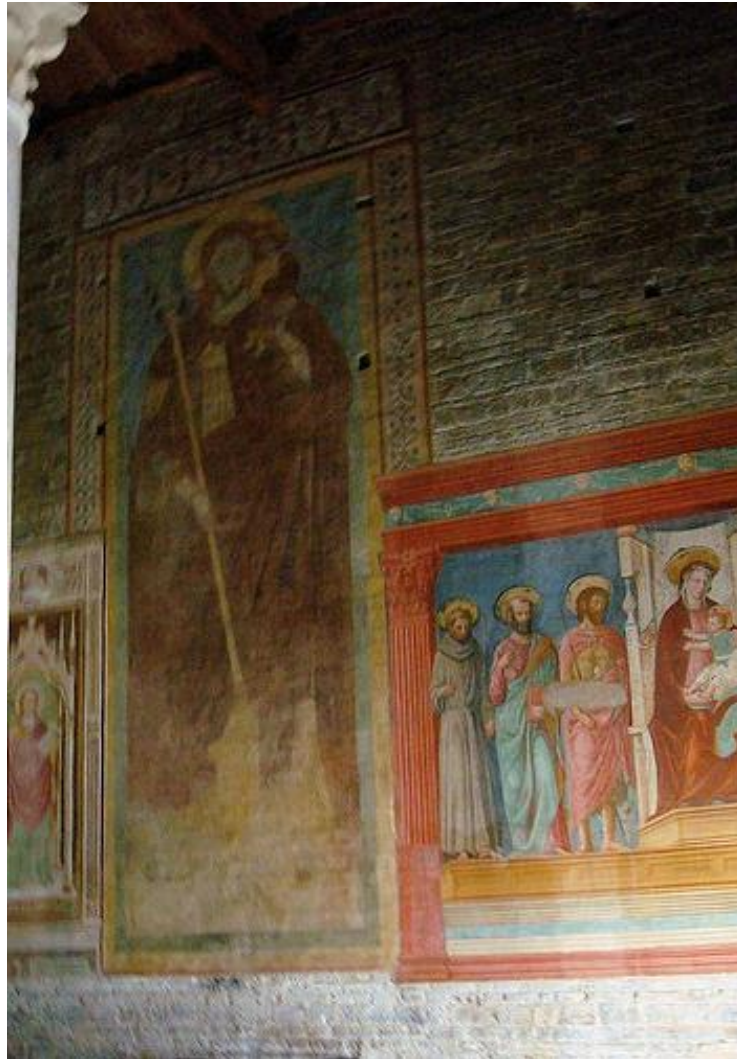


Fig. 1.11

*St. Christopher*, fresco, 14<sup>th</sup> century, San Miniato al Monte, Florence.



Fig. 1.12

Antonio Aleotti, *St. Christopher, St. Sebastian, and St. Roch*, n.d. (active 1494-1527), oil on wood, 164 cm x 59 cm, 164 x 64 cm, 165 x 67 (panels separately), Pinacoteca Comunale, Cesena.



Fig. 1.13

Cesare da Sesto, *Polyptych of St. Roch*, 1523, oil on wood, Museo d'Arte Antica del Castello Sforzesco, Milan.

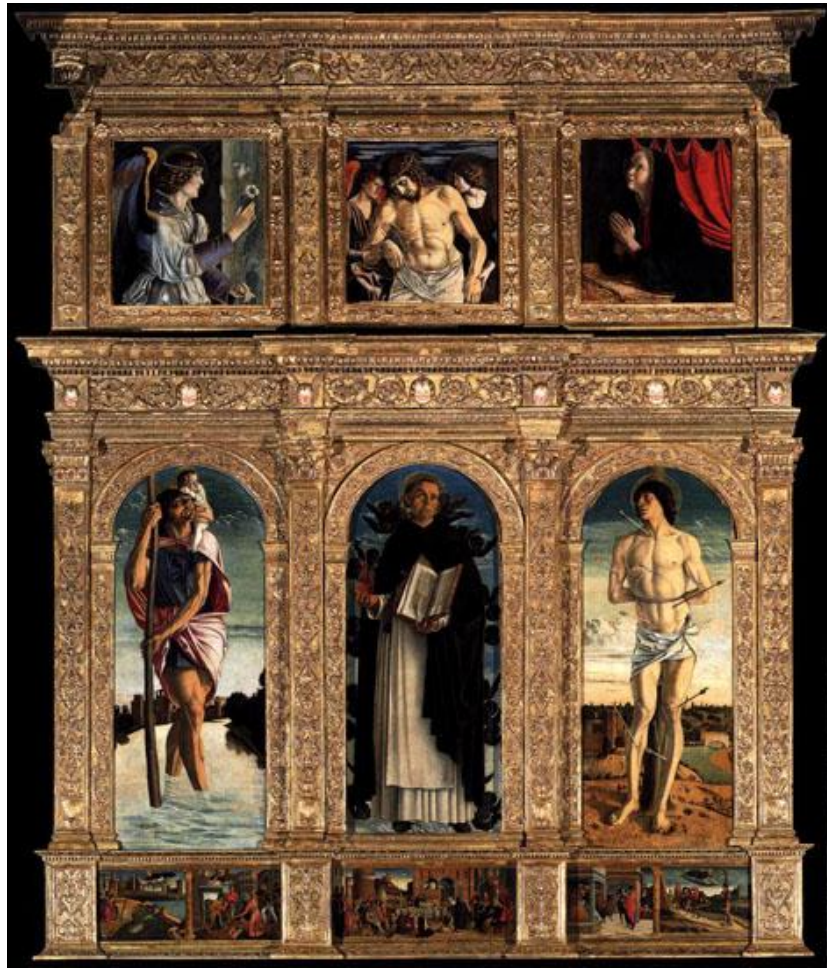


Fig. 1.14

Giovanni Bellini, *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer*, c. 1465, tempera on panel, 167 x 67 cm (panels separately), Chiesa di Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Venice.



Fig. 1.15

*Apse Mosaic*, 6<sup>th</sup> century, mosaic, Church of Santi Cosma e Damiano, Rome.





Fig. 1.16

Fra Angelico, *The Crucifixion of Saints Cosmas and Damian*, c. 1438-1443, tempera on wood, 38 x 46 cm., San Marco, Florence (now in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

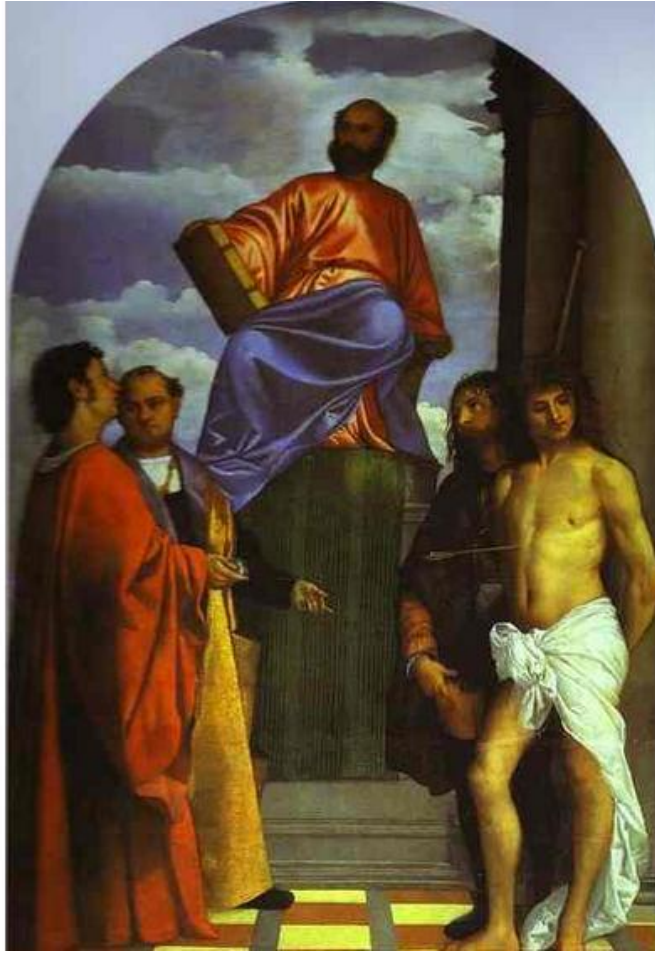


Fig. 1.17

Titian, *Saint Mark enthroned with Saints Cosmas and Damian, Roch and Sebastian*, c. 1510-1511, oil on wood, 230 x 149 cm, Santa Maria della Salute, Venice.

## CHAPTER II: ST. ROCH AND “SECOND-TIER” PLAGUE SAINTS

The act of healing is an important theme in Christian literature. According to Faith Wallis in *Medieval Medicine*, “Christianity was a religion of healing” and in the Medieval period, when medicine was still in its infancy, the saints were the figurative “healers.”<sup>77</sup> Healing is a common trait among saints because it recalls the powers of Christ from the New Testament, and it remained an important miracle toward canonization.<sup>78</sup> The saints included in this section are all connected through their plague healing powers. Whether it is through ritual acts such as processions or direct contact healing, each of these saints alleviated and cure plague victims.

### St. Roch: Hermit (c. 1295 – 1327)

The major source of information on the life of St. Roch comes from the anonymous and undated account of the saint’s life known as the *Acta Breviora*. It is not until Francesco Diedo’s *Vita of St. Roch the Confessor*, that we have any possible dates or points of reference for his life.<sup>79</sup> Both hagiographic entries were created to celebrate St. Roch’s life and promote his cult to further his canonization, not to provide accurate historical data. Due to the vague timeline

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<sup>77</sup> Wallis, *Medieval Medicine*, 47.

<sup>78</sup> By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the papacy was making inquiries on the miracles of a proposed saint. In hagiographical writings, the principle marks of sanctity were the prophetic gift, death in a manner of sanctity and thaumaturgic (healing) power. André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 34.

<sup>79</sup> Francesco Diedo wrote the *Vita of St. Roch the Confessor* more than 100 years after Roch’s supposed death to serve as a reason for his veneration and canonization. Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred,” 503.

provided by the *Acta Breviora* and *Vita of St. Roch*, it is difficult to place the commencement St. Roch's plague-centered cult.<sup>80</sup>

St. Roch was a wealthy French youth from the town of Montpellier and he no longer wanted the burden of wealth, so he sold his goods and left on a pilgrimage to Rome. On his way, Roch stopped in various towns, healing those afflicted with the plague. According to the *Acta Breviora*:

After he came to the sick and blessed them all in the name of Jesus Christ, he fearlessly touched each patient that they declared immediately that a saintly man had come among them, because he had already extinguished so much pain of the fever throughout the entire hospital...And he delivered from the most savage plague through the sign of the cross and the memory of the Passion of Jesus Christ whomever he touched.<sup>81</sup>

During his stay in Piacenza, St. Roch heard the voice of an angel tell him that he will wake up the next morning inflicted with the plague. The plague is described as hitting him like a "deadly dart" in his hipbone.<sup>82</sup> In order not to be a nuisance to those around him, Roch left the hospital in favor of isolation in a nearby forest. There, a dog kept Roch alive, and after some time, God decided to free him from the plague and told him to begin his journey homeward. Once he returned home, Roch, emaciated and unrecognized, was mistaken for a stranger and a spy. He was put into prison and remained there until his death, five years later. When he died, a tablet

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<sup>80</sup> Irene Vaslef includes English versions of the *Acta Breviora* (179-190) and *Vita of St. Roch the Confessor* (191-218). Vaslef, "The Role of St. Roch," 191.

<sup>81</sup> Note that the author emphasized that St. Roch's actions were through Jesus Christ. Saints could only perform miracles because God allowed it. Vaslef, "The Role of St. Roch," 182.

<sup>82</sup> Note the continuing arrow/dart imagery from Chapter I.

was found in his cell inscribed with these words: “Those suffering from the plague, fleeing to the protection of Roch, will escape that most violent contagion.”<sup>83</sup>

Although, St. Roch is not mentioned until the fifteenth century, and is thus a late addition to the pantheon of saints, his cult quickly gained widespread reputation in connection to the plague.<sup>84</sup> The earliest recorded confraternity devoted to the saint is in Clermont l’Hérault in 1410, started by Bishop Jean de Lavergne.<sup>85</sup> In Louis Marshall’s article “Confraternity and Community: Mobilizing the Sacred in Times of Plague,” confraternities are defined as “religious organizations that encouraged devotion and promoted charity among the laity.”<sup>86</sup> During the plague outbreaks, many confraternities were formed in honor of St. Roch. The competition for St. Roch in confraternities was so great that in 1485, the Venetians stole his remains from Montpellier and founded the Scuola di San Rocco with their new relic.<sup>87</sup> In Italy, confraternities were called a *scuola* and they denoted an association to a guild.

The Scuola di San Rocco stole St. Roch’s relic because in 1484 Venice underwent a severe outbreak of the plague and it was believed that his relics could protect the city from another wave. Relics were an important aspect of Medieval worship because it was believed that by being in close proximity to an object or the body of a saint could increase the power of prayer.

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<sup>83</sup> Vaslef, “The Role of St. Roch, 216. See also Appx. B, “Religious Text:” *Golden Legend: St. Roch*, 88.

<sup>84</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 57.

<sup>85</sup> Vaslef, “The Role of St. Roch,” 153.

<sup>86</sup> Towns large and small had confraternities, and they were the patrons of many works of art. Louise Marshall, “Confraternity and Community: Mobilizing the Sacred in Times of Plague” In *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy: Ritual, Spectacle, Image*, ed. Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>87</sup> Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 275, Vaslef, “The Role of St. Roch,” 148 and Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 58.

The interior of the Scuola is decorated with artworks painted by Tintoretto executed between 1564 and 1587 and other mediums and artists; many of the works of art include St. Roch. One sculpture of St. Roch is by Campagna Gerolmo in 1587 (Fig. 2.1). St. Roch is dressed as a Medieval pilgrim, described in the *Acta Breviora* as: “scarlet garment and inexpensive cloak, round wrap, and not accompanied by anyone, his head covered by a cap, a leather knapsack hanging from his shoulder, [and] a pilgrim’s staff placed in his right hand.”<sup>88</sup> Although St. Roch could easily be confused with other pilgrim saints, such as St. James, he is distinguished from them because he shows the viewer his femoral bubo or indicates on his thigh where he was struck with the plague.<sup>89</sup> St. Roch is also sometimes depicted with an angel and/or a dog. The dog recalls the nobleman’s dog that fed Roch to keep him alive and the angel often heals his plague bubo.

An example of St. Roch’s iconography in art is a page from the *Prayerbook for Joanna of Ghistelles* (Fig. 2.2). In this image, St. Roch is in his typical pilgrim’s outfit and an angel lifts his cloak to show a plague bubo on his right thigh, which a dog sits patiently by his side with a piece of bread in his mouth. This image combines two different parts of Roch’s *Vita*: the first is his isolation in the forest with the dog and the second is when God healed his infection, indicated by the angel. Even with no text, the story of St. Roch’s life, death, and protection is conveyed.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Vaslef, “The Role of St. Roch,” 181.

<sup>89</sup> A bubo is a swelling of a lymph node. Modern medicine confirms that femoral buboes were the most common because fleas bit the victim’s exposed legs more frequently than other parts of the body. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 21.

<sup>90</sup> The image of the angel healing St. Roch’s recalls a scene from the *Aeneid*, in which Doctor Japex removes an arrow from Aeneas’s leg. The angel takes the place of the doctor, kneeling by the patient and treating his wound. Although the image is highly Christianized, it still evokes the

Numerous chapels, altarpieces, and works of art were dedicated to Roch. St. Roch is displayed prominently in a painting commissioned by the confraternity of Arezzo commemorating a wave of the epidemic that swept through the town in 1477 (Fig. 2.3).<sup>91</sup> This painting is titled *Saint Roch interceding with Christ on behalf of Arezzo*. The title clearly displays the purpose of the painting: to plead with God to end the plague. St. Roch kneels in the foreground, prominently displaying a bare thigh where it is understood that a “deadly dart” struck him. He is the largest and most prominent character in the image. In the distance angels fly over a walled city, torturing people with plague arrows as Christ gazes down detached. By St. Roch’s gaze up at Christ, it is understood that he is asking Christ to end the plague. The contemporary worshipers knew that it is only through God’s power that miracles happen.

Roch also appears with other plague saints in plague *sacra conversazione*. In *Saints Nicholas of Tolentino, Roch, Sebastian, and Bernardino of Siena, with Kneeling Donors* all the saints are shown of identical size and prominence, suggesting that each of them were equally important to the donors who invoked them (Fig. 2.4). As stated in Chapter I, the wave of pestilence that spurred the donors to commission this work is artistically rendered in the background. St. Roch and the “second-tier” saints Nicholas of Tolentino and Bernardino of Siena are both categorized as healer saints. St. Roch was invoked with St. Sebastian in 69% of the

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ancient tradition of plague-arrow symbology and iconography. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 58.

<sup>91</sup> Marshall, “Confraternity and Community,” 33.

invocations with the plague from the twelfth to seventeenth century, and he became the primary saint from the sixteenth century on.<sup>92</sup>

### St. Nicholas of Tolentino: Augustinian Friar (1245 – 1305)

St. Roch was not the only plague-healer saint that was invoked during the outbreaks of the plague. I will now discuss the "second-tier" saints underneath him: Nicholas of Tolentino, Gregory the Great, and Bernardino of Siena.

St. Nicholas was born near Fermo, Italy in 1245; he later joined the Augustinian Order and devoted his life to preaching. He is known as Nicholas of Tolentino because he settled at Tolentino, where he died in 1305. Although Nicholas healed the sick, there were no extraordinary healing miracles or stories in his *Vita*. Although he was not canonized until 1446, St. Nicholas was a widely venerated saintly healer and he was not associated with the plague until 150 years later with the first Tuscan plague altarpieces created during the fifteenth century.<sup>93</sup> Although during his life and canonization there is no connection to Nicholas and plague (because he lived before 1348 and during no other plague outbreak), Nicholas was believed to help souls exit of Purgatory and enter into Heaven. This heavenly intercession was relevant to the plague because it caused so much widespread death.<sup>94</sup> Thus, it is through St. Nicholas' Purgatory association and his promotion through his confraternity that he became

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<sup>92</sup> Vaslef, "The Role of St. Roch," 43.

<sup>93</sup> Marshall, "Waiting," 147.

<sup>94</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 86.



related to the plague. In art, Nicholas is depicted wearing the black habit of his order, often holding a crucifix intertwined with a lily.<sup>95</sup>

St. Nicholas was attributed with ending an outbreak in Pisa first recorded in 1449.<sup>96</sup> The altarpiece, *St. Nicholas of Tolentino saves Pisa from the plague*, was created and carried in regular procession to thank Nicholas for his intervention (Fig. 2.5). The altarpiece was kept in the oratory of S. Maria della Spina, under the care of the Pisan Commune, and so it is a civic rather than an Augustinian commission. This altarpiece represents a new iconography for St. Nicholas; in which the commission is not of his *Vita*, but of a specific action in which Nicholas is towering protectively over a miniature of the city of Pisa, grasping a bunch of plague-arrows.<sup>97</sup> Images of an interceding saint provide human suffering distance from an often-malicious divinity; Nicholas stands directly between devious celestial beings and the helpless city.

Two other altarpieces also include Nicholas exclusively protecting Tuscan cities from the plague: *St. Nicholas of Tolentino saves Empoli from the plague* by Bicci di Lorenzo and *St. Nicholas Saving Florence from the plague* by Giovanni Paolo (Fig. 2.6 and 2.7). In the panel *St. Nicholas of Tolentino saves Empoli* Christ clearly aims the arrows at the unsuspecting city (Fig. 2.6). St. Nicholas does not acknowledge Christ, but simply acts of his own accord, thwarting the divine wrath. He catches the arrows in his left hand, and holds his iconic lily flower in his right.

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<sup>95</sup> Lilies are symbols of purity and virginity in saints. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 231.

<sup>96</sup> The Augustinian Order encouraged his veneration in the wake of the plague. By the late fifteenth century, his plague cult had spread to northern Italy. Marshall, ““Waiting,”” 150 and 157.

<sup>97</sup> Marshall, ““Waiting,”” 150.

On the other hand, in *St. Nicholas Saving Florence* a death scene is depicted (Fig. 2.7). In the foreground a man carries a coffin into a house, where presumably someone has just died of the plague. Citizens appear fearful of leaving the protection of their homes to venture out into the city due to the widespread death, but in the background, a priest is leading a procession with candles and votive offerings to encourage God to cease the widespread death. St. Nicholas protectively floats above the cityscape holding his hand out in blessing. In contrast to the previous images, there are no celestial beings shooting arrows, but the cause of the death is clear.<sup>98</sup> *St. Nicholas Saving Florence* is dated 1456, a year devastated by epidemic.

St. Nicholas of Tolentino's intercession with epidemics in Tuscany is due to the Augustinian Order's powerful support. They locally fostered his cult for many decades by encouraging local confraternities and promoting his intercession as a powerful thaumaturge.<sup>99</sup> Pisa was the providential seat of the Augustinian Order, and thus a fitting place to promote a powerful saint of the Order. Louise Marshall suggests in her Ph.D. dissertation, "'Waiting on the Will of the Lord: the imagery of the plague,'" that Nicholas never gained widespread recognition outside his Order.<sup>100</sup>

St. Nicholas of Tolentino was also included in artwork not associated with his Order. One example of St. Nicholas in art outside of his order is *Saints Nicholas of Tolentino, Roch, Sebastian, and Bernardino of Siena, with Kneeling Donors* (Fig. 2.4). Here he appears here the

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<sup>98</sup> This image was originally misattributed as Nicholas performing a resurrection due to the prominent coffin but it actually represents his intervention on the behalf of a plague-stricken city. Marshall, "'Waiting,'" 154.

<sup>99</sup> Marshall, "'Waiting,'" 152.

<sup>100</sup> Marshall claims that his cult as a plague saint never fully developed beyond the confines of the Augustinian Order. Marshall, "'Waiting,'" 147.

same size as his “first-tier” plague saint companions: Roch and Sebastian. Neither St. Roch, Sebastian, nor Bernardino of Siena have any relation to the Augustinian Order, and they are each important plague saints. Thus this painting is related to the cessation of the plague, not connected to the Order. Another image in which St. Nicholas appears as a prominent plague saint, comparable to a “first-tier” saint, is the *Il Gonfalone Madonna delle Grazie* (Fig. 2.8). Here, he appears as the only other companion to St. Sebastian. St. Nicholas of Tolentino and St. Sebastian are assisting the Virgin as she protects the kneeling population underneath her mantle. Nicholas’ inclusion in these images is important because it demonstrates that he is more than a celebrated Augustinian Friar, he is a highly sought out plague intercessor.

#### St. Bernardino of Siena: Franciscan Friar (1380 – 1444)

St. Bernardino was born near Siena, Italy in 1380 to a powerful and wealthy family. Bernardino joined the confraternity of *disciplinati* (penitents) when the plague struck Siena in 1400 and he organized the care of the sick and dying. After this episode in his life, he entered into the religious life as a Franciscan friar. After 1406, Bernardino focused the rest of his life on traveling and preaching and became known as one of the greatest medieval preachers, focusing heavily on reform and penance. John Arnold describes the prevalent type of preaching during the plague in *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, “one could have extraordinary sermons such as those encouraging people to go on crusade, those begging divine reprieve from the horrors of

plague, the penitential sermons preached by Bernardino da Siena around Tuscany...”<sup>101</sup> By Bernardino’s death, he was considered one of the greatest Italian saints; his canonization was quickly proclaimed in 1450.<sup>102</sup>

In art, he is readily recognizable in art because he is portrayed as an old, weary man, in the dress of a Franciscan friar, a brown or grey habit tied by a rope belt with three knots, and with the letters IHS in a circle of flames.<sup>103</sup> St. Bernardino of Siena also appears in the plague-centered *sacra conversazione*, *Saints Nicholas of Tolentino, Roch, Sebastian, and Bernardino of Siena, with Kneeling Donors* (Fig. 2.4). Bernardino appears as his iconography dictates: an old man in a Franciscan habit, this time, he holds a book that represents his sermons. Behind the saints, angels are flying in the sky, directing plague-arrows to the city below and the donors kneel to beseech the saints to intervene. Another plague-themed image St. Bernardino figures prominently in is the *Madonna della Misericordia* (Fig. 2.9). St. Bernardino appears opposite the popular and iconic Sebastian, suggesting Bernardino also has an elevated status as a plague saint.

In contrast to Sebastian’s position as a symbolic “lightning rod” for plague arrows, Bernardino has a direct connection to the plague with his work with the sick and his many plague-related sermons.<sup>104</sup> His sermons were powerful tools that convinced many people to

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<sup>101</sup> Due to the oral nature of preaching, we do not have many examples of preaching transcribed by listeners. John Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 43-44.

<sup>102</sup> “Bernardino of Siena,” *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* (The H.W. Wilson Company Database: Biography Reference Bank, 2000).

<sup>103</sup> IHS is the abbreviation of the name Jesus in Greek. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 48 and 165

<sup>104</sup> Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred,” 496.

reform their “sinful” lives. Epidemics were societal problems, thus, adjusting society’s values through reform was seen as a way to alleviate God’s punishment of plague.

### St. Gregory the Great: Pope and Doctor of the church (540 – 604)

Gregory the Great is known for a multitude of accomplishments; he is one of the most influential Popes of the Middle Ages and a Doctor of the Catholic Church.<sup>105</sup> Gregory was born c. 540 CE and was elected Pope in 590 CE. He was very active with his writings, ministry, and development of the Roman liturgy. Among his great achievements is proactive leadership in assembling a procession to end the plague afflicting Rome in 590. According to *The Golden*

#### *Legend:*

One day the Tiber overflowed its banks and rose so high that its waters poured over the city walls and caused the collapse of many houses...the whole atmosphere was polluted with the stench of [the dead sea serpents’] rotting bodies. A terrible pestilence ensued, called the bubonic plague, and people claimed that they could actually see arrows falling from heaven and striking victims down.<sup>106</sup>

It is reported that Gregory saw the Archangel Michael wiping a bloody sword and replacing it back into his sheath: a sign that the plague was at its end. This angel appeared above Hadrian’s Tomb now called the Castel Sant’Angelo.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Four influential ecclesiastical writers had received the title of Doctor of the Church by the Middle Ages: St. Gregory the Great, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome; but there more recognized Doctors of the Church. Sarah Thomas, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>106</sup> Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 92. See also Appx. B, “Religious Literature”: *The Golden Legend: St. Gregory*, 88.

<sup>107</sup> See the bronze statue now atop the Castel Sant’Angelo commemorating this legendary act. Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 93.

In plague imagery, Gregory is depicted in the midst of his procession, with the dead and dying surrounding him and/or the Archangel Michael. In most images, St. Gregory is depicted in his papal attire. An example of St. Gregory's papal costume can be seen in a fifteenth century woodcut in which Gregory is depicted with Sebastian (Fig. 2.10). St. Sebastian is recognized by the labels: "Sancto Sebastiano" and "Martyr Christi" above and below him; similarly, St. Gregory is identified by the words "Sanctus Gregorius" and "Pontifex Domini." Even without the labels, Gregory is clearly a papal saint: he wears the triple-tiara, long robes of a Pope and holding a staff and book. The staff is a symbol of Christ as the shepherd of the Christian sheep; the Popes carry staffs because they are believed to be the descendents of Christ through his Apostle Peter.<sup>108</sup>

St. Gregory not only survived the sixth century pestilence, but he was the first Pope to organize a plague procession.<sup>109</sup> Processions were opportunities for collective expressions of piety and ways of actively venerating a particular saint or the Virgin Mary. A procession may either escort a saint's relic or image through a city or it may be a community pilgrimage to a particular holy site for celebration.<sup>110</sup> In the Medieval period, the concept of sin and sickness were closely related.<sup>111</sup> Processions were seen as healing actions in which society performed a

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<sup>108</sup> The related text of the New Testament are found in the parables in Luke 15:3-7 and John 10:1-18. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 289.

<sup>109</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology*, 81.

<sup>110</sup> The Church in the medieval period was very communal. Brian Phillips, *The History of the Church in Art* (California: Getty Publications, 2008), 187.

<sup>111</sup> In contrast to the plague, leprosy was considered "the disease of the soul" and its symptoms the outward manifestation of the sinner. Although both the bubonic plague and leprosy decay the body, society treated the sufferers very differently. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 154.

necessary action to release the city from the plague's deathly grasp because epidemics were seen as nondiscriminatory experiences that struck the guilty and innocent. Biblical epidemic precedents, such as the Davidian Plague, played an important part in affecting medieval peoples' understanding of the plague outbreaks they experienced. During the Davidian plague in 2 Samuel, David organized public good works and community processions to appease God.<sup>112</sup>

The oldest known fresco of St. Gregory's procession is in San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome. *St. Gregory's Procession* was painted in reaction to the plague of 1476 (Fig. 2.11).<sup>113</sup> Although the fresco is in poor condition, it clearly depicts the same image as the other two processional stories. St. Gregory is in the midst of leading a crowd as men expire around him. The sense of mass carnage and a community-wide panic are evident. Gregory's success story serves as a reminder to the faithful that while they are undergoing a reappearance of the bubonic plague, there is hope for deliverance. As can be seen, St. Gregory the Great had a clear reputation as a plague intercessor, there was art commissioned including him that was related to the plague, and there is literary evidence of his intercessory powers.

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<sup>112</sup> The Davidian Plague and King David's response of giving alms to the poor and organizing building of religious buildings greatly affected medieval experiences of pestilence. See also Appx. B, "Religious Literature": *Bible: 2 Samuel 24:10-25*, 88.

<sup>113</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 57.



Fig. 2.1

Campagna Gerolamo, *St. Roch*, 1587, Scuola Grande, Scuola di San Rocco, Venice.





Fig. 2.2

*St. Roch, pictured with the dog who brought him food during his time of suffering, Prayerbook for Joanna of Ghistelles, c. 1516, parchment, 150 x 105 mm, British Library, London.*



Fig. 2.3

Bartolomeo della Gatta, *Saint Roch interceding with Christ on behalf of Arezzo*, c. 1470s,  
Museo Medievale e Moderno, Arezzo, Italy.



Fig. 2.4

Benozzo Gozzoli, *Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, Roch, Sebastian, and Bernardino of Siena, with Kneeling Donors*, 1481, tempera on canvas, 78.7 x 61.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 2.5

*St. Nicholas of Tolentino saves Pisa from the plague*, n.d., San Nicola, Pisa.



Fig. 2.6

Bicci di Lorenzo, *St. Nicholas of Tolentino saves Empoli from the plague*, 1445, tempera on panel, Museo dell'Collegiata, Empoli.



Fig. 2.7

Giovanni di Paolo, *St. Nicholas Saving Florence*, 1456, 50 x 43 cm, Chieda di San Agostino in Montepulciano (now in the Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna).



Fig. 2.8

Benedetto Bonfigli, *Il Gonfalone della Madonna delle Grazie*, 1470, Chiesa di Maria della Concezione, Perugia.



Fig. 2.9

Benedetto Bonfigli, *Madonna della Misericordia*, 1464, Chiesa del Gonfalone, Perugia.



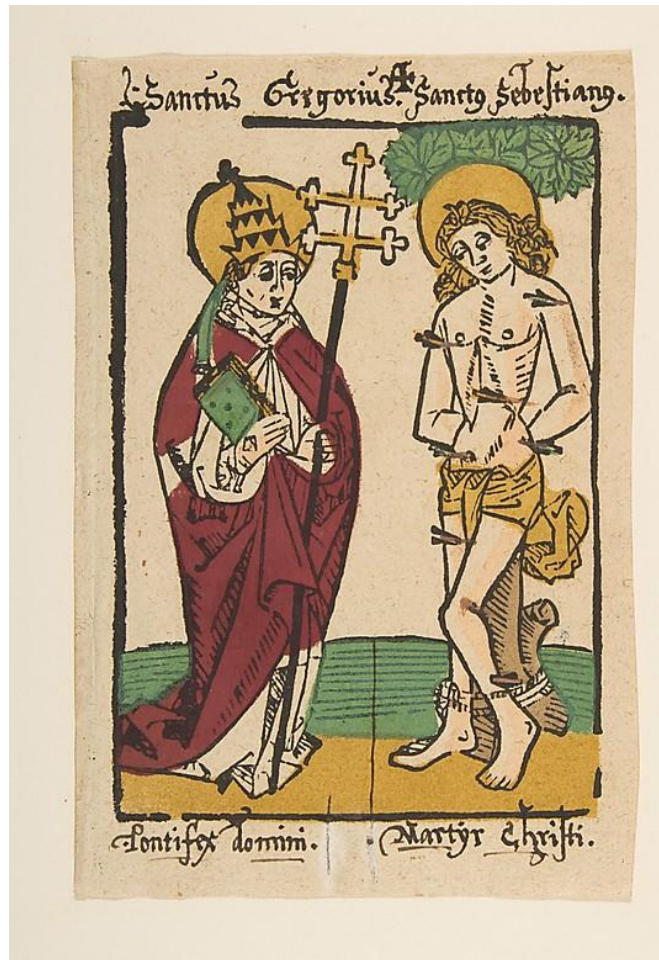


Fig. 2.10

*St. Gregory and St. Sebastian*, 15<sup>th</sup> century, woodcut, 20.2 x 13.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 2.11

*St. Gregory's Procession*, 1476, fresco, San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.

### CHAPTER III: “THIRD-TIER” PLAGUE SAINTS

The “third-tier” plague saints discussed in this chapter are directly associated with outbreaks of the Black Death and appear in art about the plague but they do not fall into the categorization proposed for the “first- and second-tier” plague saints. Unlike the saints in St. Sebastian’s group, these plague saints have no arrow imagery in their martyrdoms even though arrows as general symbols of pestilence and disease appear in their artwork. Also unlike saints in St. Roch’s grouping, these saints have no direct connection to healing. Their association to the plague is sometimes unclear in literary and historical accounts but they appear in multiple plagued-themed artworks and are known plague intercessors. The saints included in this chapter are Sts. Fabian, Vincent Ferrer, and Peter Martyr.

#### St. Fabian: Pope and Martyr (3<sup>rd</sup> century)

According to *The Golden Legend*, St. Fabian was chosen as Pope because a dove settled on his head when he came to Rome after the death of the previous Pope. Doves are symbols of the Holy Ghost (or Spirit) and in art doves often denote a holy man or woman.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the clergy and laity believed that Fabian had favor from Heaven and they chose him unanimously as the next Pope.<sup>115</sup> St. Fabian was Pope for fourteen years, eventually martyred under Emperor Decius in 250 CE.

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<sup>114</sup> The symbol of the dove as the Holy Spirit came from the words of John the Baptist in John 1:32, “I saw the spirit coming down from heaven like a dove and resting upon him.” Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 112.

<sup>115</sup> “And anon a white dove descended from heaven and rested upon his head, and when the people saw that they marveled much, and all they by common accord chose him for pope.”

St. Fabian is depicted in papal attire and his other identifying marker is his feast day companion, St. Sebastian.<sup>116</sup> Feast days are days to remember a particular saint or group of saints and they are important markers in the medieval liturgical calendar. St. Sebastian is then Fabian's only connection with the plague. An example of a work of art in which the two saints are seen together is *Saint Fabian and Sebastian* by Giovanni di Paolo (Fig. 3.1). St. Fabian is on the left and his richly decorated costume is a stark contrast to the nudity of St. Sebastian. At the bottom of the image are two kneeling Brothers of the Confraternity of the *Misericordia*.<sup>117</sup> Although, St. Fabian's association to the plague is solely through St. Sebastian, he is included in this thesis as a "third-tier" plague saint because of the works of art in which St. Fabian is depicted with other plague saints, thus supporting the hypothesis that medieval peoples related him with the plague.

According to Diana Norman in her article "Change and continuity: art and religion after the Black Death" in *Siena, Florence, and Padua: Art, Society, and Religious 1280-1400*:

In 1367 the Venetian Nicoletto Semitecolo signed and dated a series of painted panels which, in all possibility, formed a reliquary cupboard that stood upon the altar of Saints Sebastian and Fabianus in Padua Duomo. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Saint Sebastian and his companion Fabianus were standardly invoked as protectors against the plague...it seems likely that this commission for a painted reliquary had some connection with Padua's second outbreak of plague in 1362.<sup>118</sup>

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Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, vol. 2, Internet Medieval Source Book. See also Appx. B, "Religious Literature:" *Golden Legend: St. Fabian*, 88.

<sup>116</sup> Their feast day is January 20<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>117</sup> The Confraternity of the *Misericordia* is a lay brotherhood devoted to the Seven Works of Mercy. *Saints Fabian and Sebastian*, Giovanni di Paolo. The National Gallery.

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-di-paolo-saints-fabian-and-sebastian>.

<sup>118</sup> Norman, "Change and Continuity," 187.

As indicated by Diana Norman's excerpt, Fabian was also clearly invoked against the plague alongside St. Sebastian as a stand-alone saint.

St. Fabian is also depicted with the two universal "first-tier" plague-saints: Sebastian and Roch. In a fresco in the Chiesa di San Giorgio in Savona, Italy (Fig. 3.2) St. Roch is left of St. Sebastian. St. Roch's is the most damaged but his pilgrim's cloak is clearly visible and he has lowered his leggings to show the plague bubo on his thigh. St. Fabian could easily be confused with another papal saint, such as St. Gregory, but due to his close association with St. Sebastian, he is identified as the papal saint to Sebastian's right. St. Fabian is not only directly associated with two "first-tier" plague saints, but also included in a chapel erected and dedicated specifically for the alleviation of the plague.

If St. Fabian was only depicted with St. Sebastian in art it would be inconclusive to call him a plague-saint because then it could be assumed that images that show them together are only related because of their common feast day. With the inclusion of St. Roch (who does not share a feast day with the two saints) the images certainly relate to a plague outbreak. Thus, St. Fabian can safely be categorized as a "third-tier" plague saint.

#### St. Vincent Ferrer: Dominican Friar (1350 – 1419)

St. Vincent Ferrer was born in Valencia in 1350; he was a Dominican friar and preacher. He is best known for his tireless work for the unity of the Catholic Church during the Great Schism.<sup>119</sup> St. Vincent also worked to convert many heretical groups, such as the Waldensians

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<sup>119</sup> During the Great Schism (1378-1415), there were two Popes, one in Rome, Italy and the other in Avignon, France.

and Cathars. In art, he is depicted in a typical Dominican habit: a white tunic underneath a long black cloak, and he holds a book and a flame in his outstretched hand.<sup>120</sup> The book St. Vincent's has represents his famous treatise on spiritual life, titled *Tractatus de Vita spirituali*. Mark Zucker theorizes in his article "Problems in Dominican Iconography: The Case of St. Vincent Ferrer" that it is this treatise that provides St. Vincent's one association to the plague. In his treatise, St. Vincent writes: "I am a plague-spot in soul and body..."<sup>121</sup> Although a small statement, this passage is important because there was an apparent visual connection with St. Vincent Ferrer to the plague.

St. Vincent is invoked in plague art. One prevalent type of plague artifact are *Pestblätter*, or "plague sheets;" they are prayers, or pages printed with the images of popular plague saints used as devotional objects.<sup>122</sup> One such plague sheet from Ravenna, Italy depicts two "first-tier" plague saints and two Dominican saints (Fig. 3.3). On the right of center, St. Roch is accompanied by Peter Martyr and on the other side is St. Sebastian is with a Dominican friar, identified as St. Vincent Ferrer. St. Roch is dressed in a pilgrim's outfit, showing the bubo on his thigh; St. Peter Martyr is identified in art by a sword splitting his skull and his iconic Dominican

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<sup>120</sup> The Dominicans are also known as the Black Friars due to their long black cloaks with a white habit underneath. A flame is a symbol of religious ardor. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 109 and 127.

<sup>121</sup> Zucker doubts the influence of this statement in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and if it is sufficient in itself to explain why Vincent came to protect against the plague. Mark Zucker, "Problems in Dominican Iconography: The Case of St. Vincent Ferrer" In *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 13, no. 25 (1992), 187.

<sup>122</sup> Zucker, "Dominican Iconography, 187. *Pestblätter* pages are important because art and formal literature is often written after a plague wave, while these simple, printed plague votives were frequently commissioned while the disease raged. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 60.

habit. St. Sebastian stands out as the only semi-nude figure, with arrows protruding from his body and the controversial Dominican friar next to St. Sebastian is identified as St. Vincent Ferrer because of the similar arrangement this plague sheet has to the *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Roch* by Andrea da Murano (Fig. 3.4).

The format of the plague sheet is the same as the *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Roch* (Fig 3.4). St. Sebastian is on the left with St. Vincent Ferrer, and St. Peter Martyr is on the right wing with St. Roch next to him. St. Roch and St. Vincent Ferrer, as the titular saints of this altarpiece, share the central panel. Below, small-scale donors pray to the four saints and the lunette contains the Virgin Mary and other Dominican friars and nuns.<sup>123</sup> Due to the similar layout and time-span, it is then likely that St. Vincent is the Dominican friar holding a book in the plague sheet (Fig. 3.3). Mark Zucker proposes in his article “Problems in Dominican Iconography” that “perhaps the altarpiece was commissioned on the occasion of the plague that swept through Venice and its mainland territories in 1478; and perhaps, on a more popular level, the [plague sheet] woodcut was issued in connection with the same event.”<sup>124</sup>

In the *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer* by the Ghirlandaio workshop, St. Vincent appears with the two “first-tier” plague saints, Sts. Sebastian and Roch (Fig. 3.5). They flank him on either side, as donors kneel below. The saints are directly in between the human donors and God in the lunette above, emphasizing their role as intercessors. The visual representation of Sts. Sebastian, Vincent Ferrer, and Roch in between the humans and God illustrates the idea of

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<sup>123</sup> They are included in the altarpiece due to their connection to Sts. Vincent and Peter’s religious community, not the plague.

<sup>124</sup> Zucker, “Dominican Iconography,” 187.

veneration. According to Jacalyn Duffin in *Medical Miracles: Doctors, Saints, and Healing in the Modern World*:

Invocation establishes a connection between the venerated one, who is already dead, and a sick human being, who is still alive, if only barely. Recall that according to religious tenets, only God can work miracles...The success of an appeal can become a sign that the saint must be with God.<sup>125</sup>

On the other hand, in the *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer* by Giovanni Bellini painted for the Dominican Church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, St. Vincent appears with the “first-tier” plague saint Sebastian and Christopher (Fig. 3.6).<sup>126</sup> Zucker argues that because St. Vincent Ferrer does not appear with the two “first-tier” plague saints, Sebastian and Roch, that this altarpiece must not be connected to the plague.<sup>127</sup> As discussed in Chapter I, St. Christopher, although not the primary patron of the plague, is an important “second-tier” plague saint and his appearance in this altarpiece only confirms that it is associated with the plague.

#### St. Peter Martyr: Dominican Friar and Martyr (1205 – 1252)

St. Peter Martyr was born in Verona in 1205; he joined the Dominican Order and became an inquisitor. Peter traveled and preached against heretical groups, specifically the Cathars. A Cathar killed him on his way back to Milan; St. Peter Martyr is also sometimes known as St.

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<sup>125</sup> Jacalyn Duffin, *Medical Miracles: Doctors, Saints, and Healing in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 146.

<sup>126</sup> St. Vincent’s position in this altarpiece can be read as a symbol the Dominican church, Santi Giovanni e Paolo, but due to his appearance in the Bern panel and the Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Roch (both of which are not connected to a Dominican church), his position in this altarpiece is also connected to the plague.

<sup>127</sup> Zucker, “Dominican Iconography,” 190.



Peter of Verona or Milan: Verona because he was born there, and Milan because he was martyred on the road to Milan. *The Golden Legend* relates his untimely death:

Then it happed on a time, as he went from [Como] to Milan for to seek the heretics, he said openly in a predication that the money was delivered for to slay him. And when he approached nigh the city a man of the heretics, which was hired thereto, ran upon him and smote him with his falchion on the head, and gave and made to him many cruel wounds, and he that murmured not ne grudged not, suffered patiently the cruelty of the tyrants...<sup>128</sup>

The “falchion” described in *The Golden Legend* is often illustrated as a sword or axe. Like St. Vincent Ferrer, Peter Martyr is depicted in the iconic black Dominican habit, with an axe or sword embedded in his skull. Thus, he is easily identified in art. St. Peter is sometimes shown holding a palm, representing his martyrdom, and a lily, representing his virginity. Neither his life as a Dominican inquisitor nor his martyrdom have any connection to plague-arrows or directly to plague healing.

Peter Martyr is included in many plague-themed artworks such as, the *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Roch* (Fig. 3.4). St. Peter Martyr is also included in a plague *sacra conversazione*, the *Madonna della Misericordia* (Fig. 3.7). The image clearly relates to the plague because the Virgin Mary extends her mantel to shield the donors from the plague-arrows. Peter Martyr is depicted on the left-hand side of the Madonna, directly behind St. Sebastian. His name is inscribed on his halo but it is unnecessary because the sword splitting his skull clearly identifies Peter. Although there is no historic or literary evidence for St. Peter Martyr’s association with the plague, there is an obvious artistic connection. Even though this connection is obscure to modern plague-scholarship, it is evident that Medieval peoples sought St. Peter’s

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<sup>128</sup> Voragine, *Golden Legend*, vol. 3, Internet Medieval Source Book. See also Appx. B, “Religious Literature”: *Golden Legend: St. Peter of Milan*, 88.

intercession when invoking plague saints because he appears with “first-, second-, and third-tier” plague saints in supported plague altarpieces and panels.

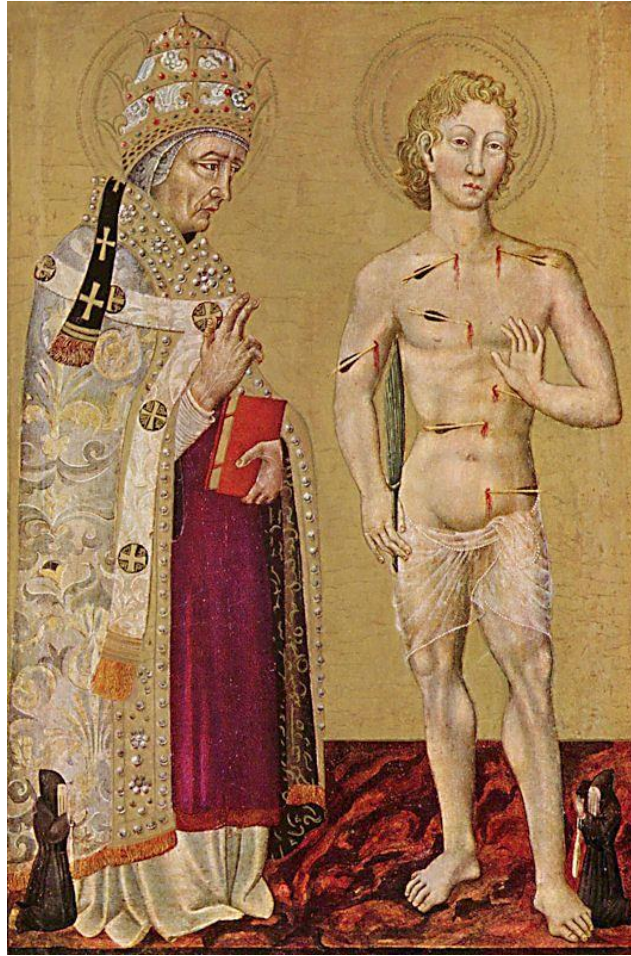


Fig. 3.1

Giovanni di Paolo, *Saint Fabian and Sebastian*, c. 1475-1482, 84.5 x 54.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, London.



Fig. 3.2

*St. Fabian, St Sebastian, and St. Roch, 1476, fresco, Chiesa di San Giorgio, Savona.*



Fig. 3.3

*Pestblätter with St. Sebastian and St. Vincent Ferrer with St. Peter Martyr and St. Roch, late 15<sup>th</sup> century, vellum, Biblioteca Classense, Ravenna.*



Fig. 3.4

Andrea da Murano, *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Roch*, c. 1475, tempera on wood, 152 x 88 cm, Chiesa di San Pietro da Verona, Venice.



Fig. 3.5

Ghirlandaio workshop, *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer*, 1493-97, Museo Civico, Rimini.

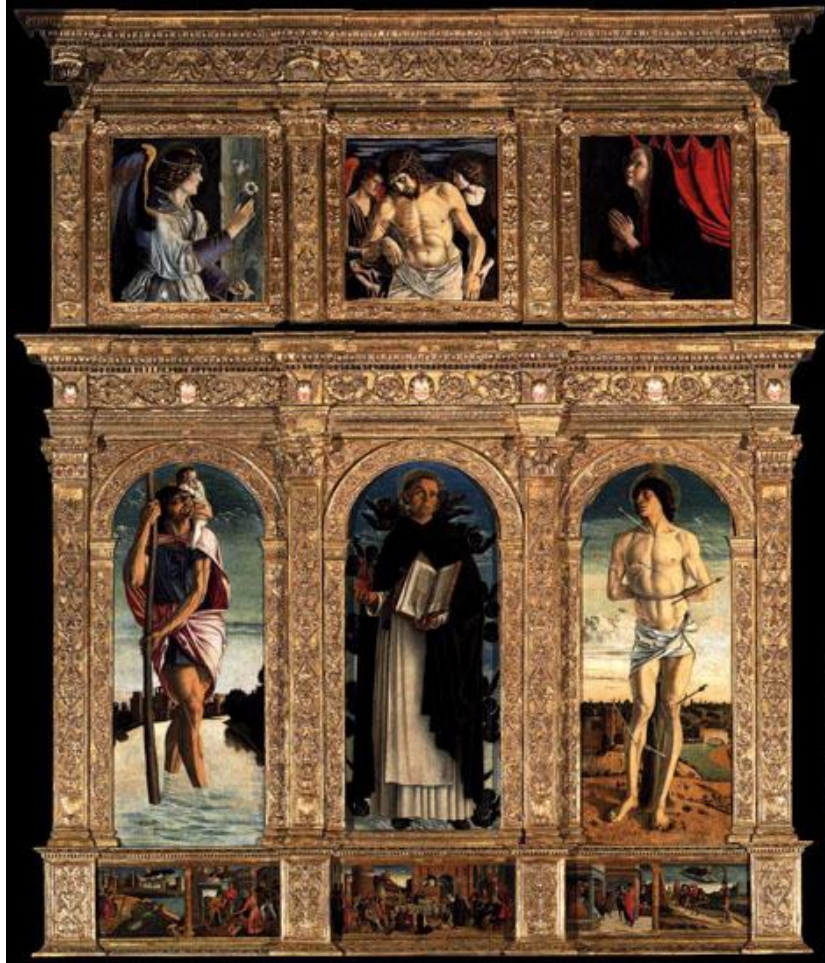


Fig. 3.6

Giovanni Bellini, *Altarpiece of St. Vincent Ferrer*, c. 1465, tempera on panel, 167 x 67 cm (panels separately), Chiesa di Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Venice.





Fig. 3.7

Benedetto Bonfigli, *Madonna della Misericordia*, 1464, Chiesa del Gonfalone, Perugia.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout Christianity, holy men and women called saints were venerated to assist with human ills, problems, and disasters. The Black Death of 1348 and its recurring plague waves served as a catalyst for the increase in veneration of saints associated with the plague, pestilence, epidemic, and healing. Although there were other plague epidemics before the Black Death, none were so destructive and encompassing.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, visual plague iconography developed with the onset of the Black Death. This iconography developed from plague tradition and preexisting associations, such as arrows, returned with the plague outbreaks.

Saints were venerated for a particular set of specialties they were deemed to have, either connected to their *Vita* or a previous miracle. The saints most sought out during the waves of epidemic are St. Roch and St. Sebastian, thus, they are considered “first-tier.” These two saints were not the only plague saints, but the most famous and the ones who are associated with modern-day plague scholarship. The “second-tier” saints are categorized by their association to the plague iconography of either St. Sebastian or St. Roch and saints that cannot be categorized with either “first-tier” saint are considered “third-tier” saints.

Although, “second- and third-tier” saints are not as commonly studied in modern scholarship, they were evidently important to those who sought out their intercession because they appear in plague literature, prayers, and art. With the advent of modern medicine, and the

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<sup>129</sup> Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 6.

end of the plague waves, these “lesser” plague saints disappeared from plague scholarship and were no longer considered important. Today, many scholars mainly attribute St. Sebastian and Roch as important plague saints. In my thesis, I argued that the “second- and third-tier” saints were equally important to those who venerated them in the late medieval to early Renaissance periods and, they should not be cast aside and overshadowed by the popular veneration of St. Sebastian and St. Roch.

Each “second- and third-tier” plague saint has a unique relationship to protecting or healing the faithful from the plague. Many of them have other innovations and celestial responsibilities that are necessary and directly related to the plague, such as Christopher’s daily protection from death, the medical healing of Sts. Cosmas and Damian, and Purgatory assistance of St. Nicholas of Tolentino. Many scholars want to discredit these saints association as plague patrons because of their other invocations, but I believe that it is due to these other celestial powers that medieval peoples sought their intercession as plague saints.

Many of these “second-and third-tier” plague saints have direct associations with pestilential symbols or plague in their *Vitas*. For example, Sts. Cosmas and Damian have the same plague-arrow symbology as St. Sebastian and St. Bernardino of Siena cared for those dying of the plague, like St. Roch. These associations reinforce their relationship with pestilential healing, but many scholars overlook these “minor” connections to the plague. My thesis analyzed the minor and seemingly unimportant links to the plague and uncovered that to Medieval peoples, these connections were strong and evident, even if they are not to most modern scholarship.

In addition to the popular plague saints presented in this thesis, many towns and villages venerated a local saint as their primary plague saint. John Aberth discusses some famous local plague saints in *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*:

Local saint cults were also resorted to by plague sufferers: during the first outbreak of the Black Death in 1348, Sicilians were devoted to the point of town rivalry to the Blessed Virgin Agatha of Catania, whereas Englishmen in the west country visited the shrine of St. Thomas Cantilupe of Hereford...<sup>130</sup>

Many of these local saints cannot be considered “third-tier” saints because their plague invocation cannot be connected to their duties as a patron saint. For example, St. John the Baptist is the local patron saint of Florence, Italy and he was included in plague prayers as a general protector of that city, not due to his connection to plague-specific safeguard. Many local saints were indeed the patron saint of the town or city and were sought after for protection from the epidemic.

Some later saints that may be considered tiered plague saints but who were not included in this thesis are: Sts. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), Thecla (1<sup>st</sup> century CE), Rosalia (1130-1166), Francesca Romana (1380-1440), and Blessed Bernard Tolomei (1272-1348).<sup>131</sup> They have all appeared specifically as saints associated with plague imagery but they are all out of the scope of this thesis or there is little artistic evidence to support their categorization as a plague

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<sup>130</sup> The popularity of these saints is attested by the number of children named after them. Aberth, *From the Brink*, 126.

<sup>131</sup> The Fourteen Holy Helpers may also be connected to the medieval plague. Due to time limitations, not all alternative plague saints have been mentioned here. Although many saints were invoked against the plague, the criteria set out in the introduction to this thesis provide a guideline to discerning which saints can be considered plague saints.

saint in art. St. Charles Borromeo cared for the sick during the outbreak in Milan in 1576 and he is commonly associated with St. Francesca Romana, she was a Roman noblewoman who devoted her life to the relief of the suffering during the plague.<sup>132</sup> Similarly to St. Charles and Francesca, Blessed Bernard Tolomei offered relief to the sick and is depicted in many plague votives.<sup>133</sup> Sts. Thecla, Francesca Romana, and Rosalia are three of the most popular female plague intercessors, but were rarely depicted in Medieval art. According to Christine Boeckl, in *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, “In the Baroque period, [the female plague saints] were frequently depicted in *ex-votos*, rather than shown tending the sick or saving a city, as did their male counterparts.”<sup>134</sup>

Although the outbreaks of the plague continued into the eighteenth century and plague saints continued to be venerated, the Council of Trent (1545 – 63) and the Age of Enlightenment greatly altered the prominence of many plague saints. Attitudes towards illness began to change, and medicine eclipsed the ancient reliance on spiritual and community measures to cure disease. The Protestant and Catholic Reformations also affected plague art because the reformation movements restated the Church’s long-time position on the veneration of images.<sup>135</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>132</sup> Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 76 and 135. For more information on St. Francesca Romana see George Kaftal, “Three Scenes from the Legend of Santa Francesca Romana,” In *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, vol. 11, 50-61 (1948).

<sup>133</sup> For more information on Blessed Bernard Tolomei see John T. Spike, “The Blessed Bernard Tolomei Interceding for the Cessation of the Plague in Siena: A Rediscovered Painting by Giuseppe Maria Crespi,” In *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal*, vol. 15, 111-116 (1987).

<sup>134</sup> An *ex-voto* is a promise or undertaking that a believer pledges to Jesus, the Madonna, or saints, requesting protection against danger, disease, accident, etc. *Ex-votos* were typically humble art objects, and we do not often find surviving examples of *ex-votos*. Philips, *The History of the Church*, 219 and Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 60.

<sup>135</sup> Boeckl, *Images of Plague*, 108.

eneration of many of the lesser-known plague saints, the “second- and third-tier” saints, died off as science and religious change affected worship, but the two most famous plague saints, Sebastian and Roch, however, survived this dramatic religious revolution.

## **APPENDIX A: SAINT CATEGORIZATION CHART**

## APPENDIX A: SAINT CATEGORIZATION CHART

### "First-tier" Plague Saints

- St. Sebastian: Martyr (3rd century)
- St. Roch: Martyr (c. 1295 - 1327)

### "Second-tier" Plague Saints

- St. Christopher: Martyr (3rd century)
- St. Cosmas and Damian: Martyrs (3rd - 4th century)
- St. Nicholas of Tolentino: Augustinian Friar (1245 - 1305)
- St. Gregory the Great: Pope and Doctor of the Church (c. 540 - 604)
- St. Bernardino of Siena: Franciscan Friar (1380-1444)

### "Third-tier" Plague Saints

- St. Fabian: Pope and Martyr (3rd century)
- St. Vincent Ferrer: Dominican Friar (1350 - 1419)
- St. Peter Martyr: Dominican Friar and Martyr (1205-1252)



## **APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTAL LITERATURE**

## APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTAL LITERATURE

### ANCIENT LITERATURE

#### HOMER

##### *The Iliad: Book 1, 8-9*

Thus did [Chryse] pray, and Apollo heard his prayer. He came down furious from the summits of Olympus, with his bow and his quiver upon his shoulder, and the arrows rattled on his back with the rage that trembled within him. He sat himself down away from the ships with the face dark and night, and his silver bow rang death as he shot his arrows in the midst of them. First he smote their mules and their hounds, but presently he aimed his shafts at the people themselves, and all day long the pyres of the dead were burning.

For nine whole days he shot his arrows among the people...

Thereon the seer spoke boldly. "The god," he said, "is angry...He will not deliver the Danaens from pestilence till Agamemnon has restored the girl without fee or ransom to her father and has send a holy hecatomb to Chryse. Thus we may appease him."

#### OVID

##### *Metamorphoses: Book 6, 204-312: The Story of Niobe*

The goddess (Leto) was deeply angered, and on the summit of Mount Cynthus she spoke to her twin children. 'See, it will be doubted whether I, your mother, proud to have borne you, and giving way to no goddess, except Juno, am a goddess, and worship will be prevented at my altars through all the ages, unless you help me, my children. Nor is this my only grief. This daughter of Tantalus has added insult to injury, and has dared to put her children above you, and has called me childless, may that recoil on her own head, and has shown she has her father's tongue for wickedness.' Latona would have added her entreaties to what she had related, but Phoebus cried 'Enough! Long complaint delays her punishment!' Phoebe said the same, and falling swiftly through the air, concealed by clouds, they reached the house of Cadmus.

There was a broad, open plain near the walls, flattened by the constant passage of horses, where many wheels and hard hooves had levelled the turf beneath them. There, a number of Amphion's seven sons mounted on their strong horses, and sitting firmly on their backs, bright with Tyrian purple, guided them using reins heavy with gold. While Ismenus, one of these, who had been the first of his mother's burdens, was wheeling his horse's path around in an unerring circle, and hauling at the foaming bit, he cried out 'Oh, I am wounded!' and revealed an arrow fixed in his chest, and loosing the

reins from his dying hands, slipped gradually, sideways, over his mount's right shoulder...The archer god Apollo was moved, though already the dart could not be recalled: yet only a slight wound killed the boy, the arrow not striking deeply in his heart. The sisters, with black garments, and loosened hair, were standing by their brothers' bodies. One, grasping at an arrow piercing her side, falling, fainted in death beside her brother's face. A second, attempting to comfort her grieving mother, fell silent, and was bent in agony with a hidden wound. She pressed her lips together, but life had already fled. One fell trying in vain to run, and her sister fell across her. One tried to hide, while another trembled in full view. Now six had been dealt death, suffering their various wounds: the last remained. The mother, with all her robes and with her body, protected her, and cried out 'Leave me just one, the youngest! I only ask for one, the youngest of all!' While she prayed, she, for whom she prayed, was dead. Childless, she sat among the bodies of her sons, her daughters, and her husband, frozen in grief. The breeze stirs not a hair, the color of her cheeks is bloodless, and her eyes are fixed motionless in her sad face: nothing in that likeness is alive. Inwardly her tongue is frozen to the solid roof of her mouth, and her veins cease their power to throb. Her neck cannot bend, nor her arms recall their movement, nor her feet lead her anywhere. Inside, her body is stone. Yet she weeps, and, enclosed in a powerful whirlwind, she is snatched away to her own country: there, set on a mountain top, she wears away, and even now tears flow from the marble.

## RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

### THE BIBLE

#### *2 Samuel 24:10-25: The Davidian Plague*

<sup>10</sup> And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.

<sup>11</sup> For when David was up in the morning, the word of the LORD came unto the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying,

<sup>12</sup> Go and say unto David, Thus saith the LORD, I offer thee three *things*; choose thee one of them, that I may *do it* unto thee.

<sup>13</sup> So Gad came to David, and told him, and said unto him, Shall seven years of famine come unto thee in thy land? or wilt thou flee three months before thine enemies, while they pursue thee? or that there be three days' pestilence in thy land? now advise, and see what answer I shall return to him that sent me.

<sup>14</sup> And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the LORD; for his mercies *are* great: and let me not fall into the hand of man.

<sup>15</sup> So the LORD sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed: and there died of the people from Dan even to Beersheba seventy thousand men.

<sup>16</sup> And when the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough: stay now thine hand. And the angel of the LORD was by the threshingplace of Araunah the Jebusite.

<sup>17</sup> And David spake unto the LORD when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house.

<sup>18</sup> And Gad came that day to David, and said unto him, Go up, rear an altar unto the LORD in the threshingfloor of Araunah the Jebusite.

<sup>19</sup> And David, according to the saying of Gad, went up as the LORD commanded.

<sup>20</sup> And Araunah looked, and saw the king and his servants coming on toward him: and Araunah went out, and bowed himself before the king on his face upon the ground.

<sup>21</sup> And Araunah said, Wherefore is my lord the king come to his servant? And David said, To buy the threshingfloor of thee, to build an altar unto the LORD, that the plague may be stayed from the people.

<sup>22</sup> And Araunah said unto David, Let my lord the king take and offer up what *seemeth* good unto him: behold, *here be* oxen for burnt sacrifice, and threshing instruments and *other* instruments of the oxen for wood.

<sup>23</sup> All these *things* did Araunah, *as* a king, give unto the king. And Araunah said unto the king, The LORD thy God accept thee.

<sup>24</sup> And the king said unto Araunah, Nay; but I will surely buy *it* of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the LORD my God of that which doth cost me nothing. So David bought the threshingfloor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

<sup>25</sup> And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD was intreated for the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel.

## JACOBUS DE VORAGINE

*The Golden Legend*, William Caxton, ed. 1483. Fordham: Internet Medieval Sourcebook

*Vol. 2, 103, "Of S. Fabian the Martyr"*

S. Fabian was a citizen and burgess of Rome, and it happed when the pope was dead that the people assembled for to choose another pope. And S. Fabian came to the election for to know who should be elect and chosen to that dignity. And anon a white dove descended from heaven and rested upon his head, and when the people saw that they marvelled much, and all they by common accord chose him for to be pope. This holy man

Fabian, after when he was pope, he ordained throughout all the countries, seven deacons, and to them seven subdeacons, for to write the lives of martyrs.

There was an emperor in his time named Philip, which was much sinful, and came boldly in the vigil of Easter in to the church for to be houseled and communed, whom the pope drove away and denied to him the communion, until he had gone and shriven him of his sins, and let him stand among the seculars. This holy pope also ordained the chrism in the church. Then at the last when he had been pope thirteen years Decius the emperor commanded to smite off his head, and so he was crowned with the crown of martyrdom the year of our Lord two hundred and fifty-three.

*Vol. 2, 104, "St. Sebastian"*

It happed that two brethren german, very christian men and noble of lineage named Marcus and Marcellianus, were taken and constrained by the emperor for to worship and do sacrifice unto the idols, and there was given to them thirty days to be in prison without to receive death for their christian faith, within which time they might counsel and advise themselves whether they would do sacrifice to the idols or to leave, and their friends were suffered in this time of respite to come to them in prison, for to entreat and revoke them from their faith for to save their lives...

And then Marcellianus and Marcus were sore tormented and bound to a pillar, and as they were so bound they said: Lo! how good and joyful it is brethren to dwell together. To whom the provost said: Ye wretches, do away your madness and deliver yourselves, and they said: We were never so well fed, we would that thou wouldest let us stand here till that the spirits should depart out of our bodies. And then the provost commanded that they should be pierced through the body with spears, and so they fulfilled their martyrdom. After this S. Sebastian was accused to the emperor that he was christian, wherefore Diocletian, the emperor of Rome, made him come tofore him, and said to him: I have always loved thee well, and have made thee master of my palace; how then hast thou been christian privily against my health, and in despite of our gods? S. Sebastian said: Always I have worshipped Jesu Christ for thy health and for the state of Rome, and I think for to pray and demand help of the idols of stone is a great folly. With these words Diocletian was much angry and wroth, and commanded him to be led to the field and there to be bounden to a stake for to be shot at. And the archers shot at him till he was as full of arrows as an urchin is full of pricks, and thus left him there for dead. The night after came a christian woman for to take his body and to bury it, but she found him alive and brought him to her house, and took charge of him till he was all whole. Many christian men came to him which counselled him to void the place, but he was comforted and stood upon a step where the emperor should pass by, and said to him: The bishops of the idols deceive you evilly which accuse the christian men to be contrary to the common profit of the city, that pray for your estate and for the health of Rome. Diocletian said: Art thou not Sebastian whom we commanded to be shot to death. And S. Sebastian said: Therefore our Lord hath rendered to me life to the end that I should tell you that evilly

and cruelly ye do persecutions unto christian men. Then Diocletian made him to be brought into prison into his palace, and to beat him so sore with stones till he died. And the tyrants threw his body into a great privy, because the christian men should make no feast to bury his body, ne of his martyrdom. But S. Sebastian appeared after to S. Lucy, a glorious widow, and said to her: In such a privy shalt thou find my body hanging at an hook, which is not defouled with none ordure, when thou hast washed it thou shalt bury it at the catacombs by the apostles. And the same night she and her servants accomplished all that Sebastian had commanded her. He was martyred the year of our Lord two hundred and eighty seven.

*Vol. 3, 27-31, "St. Gregory"*

After, for the corruption of the air, the pope Pelagius died, and then S. Gregory was elect of all the people to be pope, but he refused it and said that to that dignity he was not worthy, and for the right great mortality, ere that he was sacred pope he made to the people a sermon and said: Right dear brethren, well ought we to have doubt of the scourge of God ere that we feel it, and yet we ought to fear it, and to turn and forsake our sins, lo! ye may behold the people die ere they beweepe their sins; think ye then in what point he cometh in the presence of the judge that hath had no time to bewail his sins. The houses be void, the children die in the presence of father and mother, suddenly, so that they have little time to die, wherefore every man amend his life while he hath time for to repent him of his evil deeds and sins, ere that the judge call him from the mortal body. He saith by the prophet, I will not the death of a sinner, but I will that he return and live; much soon the judge heareth the sinner when he converteth from his sins and amendeth his life. By such manner admonested he to the people their health, and he ordained to make procession in all the churches much solemnly for to impetre and get mercy for this mortality. When the procession was done he would have gone privily out of Rome, for to eschew the office of the papalty, but against that the gates were kept so that he might not issue. At the last he did do change his habit, and so much did with the merchants that they brought him out of Rome in a tun upon a cart. And when he was far out of the town, he issued out of the tun and hid him in a ditch, and when he had been therein three days the people of Rome sought him all about. Anon they saw a pillar shining descend from heaven straight upon the ditch in which S. Gregory was; and a recluse, a holy man saw that by that pillar angels descended from heaven to S. Gregory and after went up again. Anon then S. Gregory was taken of the people and after the ordinance of holy church he was ordained and sacred pope against his will, for he was much debonair, humble and merciful to rich and poor, and to great and small. Well may he apperceive that readeth his writings how oft he complained of this great charge that he was charged withal, to which he said he was not worthy thereto, and also he might not hear that any should praise him, ne in letters ne in words. And alway he was in great humility and accounted himself more meek and low after that he was pope than tofore, insomuch that he was the first of the

popes that wrote: *Servus servorum Dei*, that is, servant of the servants of God. He had great cure and was busy to convert sinners; he made and compiled many fair books, of which the church is greatly illumined. He was never idle, how well that he was always sick. He converted the English people to the christian faith by three holy men and good clerks that he sent thither, that is to wit Augustin, Mellitus, and John, for to preach the faith. And because the mortality ceased not, he ordained a procession, in the which he did do bear an image of our Lady, which, as is said, S. Luke the Evangelist made, which was a good painter, he had carved it and painted after the likeness of the glorious Virgin Mary. And anon the mortality ceased, and the air became pure and clear, and about the image was heard a voice of angels that sung this anthem: *Regina cæli lætare*, etc., and S. Gregory put thereto: *Ora pro nobis, deum rogamus, alleluia*. At the same time S. Gregory saw an angel upon a castle which made clean a sword all bloody, and put it into the sheath, and thereby S. Gregory understood that the pestilence of this mortality was passed, and after that it was called the Castle Angel.

*Vol. 3, 68-71, "St. Peter of Milan"*

S. Peter the new martyr, of the order of the friars preachers, was born in the city of Verona in Lombardy. His father and mother were of the sect of the Arians. Then he descended of these people like as the rose that cometh of the thorn, and as the light that cometh of the smoke. At the age of seven years, when he learned at the school his credo, one, his eme, which was a heretic, demanded of him his lesson, and the child said to him: *Credo*, till to *creatorem cœli et terræ*; his uncle said to him that he should no more say so, for God hath not made temporal things, the child affirmed that he ought to say none otherwise, but so as he had learned, and that other began to show him by authority his purpose; but the child, which was full of the Holy Ghost, answered so well and wisely that his uncle departed all confused, and all achauffed, said to the father that he should take away his son from school, for he doubted when he shall be great that he should turn against their law and faith, and that he should confound them. And so it happed, and so he prophesied like as Caiaphas did, but God, against whom none may do, would not suffer it for the great profit that he attended of him. Then after, when he came to more age, he saw that it was no sure thing to dwell with the scorpions. He had in despite father and mother. and left the world whiles he was a clear and a pure virgin. He entered into the order of the friars preachers there, whereas he lived much holily the space of thirty years or thereabout, full of all virtues and especial in defending the faith, for love of which he burnt. He did much abstinence for to bring his flesh low, he fasted, he entended to wake by night in studying and in prayer when he should have slept and rested, and by day he entended to the profit of the souls, in preaching, in confessing, and in counselling, in disputing against the heretics and Arians, and in that he had a special grace of Jesu Christ, for he was right sore founded in humilty. He was marvellously piteous and debonair, full of compassion, of great patience, of great charity, and of steadfastness. So

ripe and so well ordained in fair manner that every man might behold as in a mirror, in his continence and in his conversation. He was wise and discreet, and so emprinted in his heart that all his words were firm and stable. Then he prayed many times to our Lord that he would not let him die but by sufferance of martyrdom for him and for his faith. And thus as he prayed God accomplished in the end.

*Vol. 4, 53-56, "St. Christopher"*

And when he had long sought and demanded where he should find Christ, at last he came into a great desert, to an hermit that dwelt there, and this hermit preached to him of Jesu Christ and informed him in the faith diligently, and said to him: This king whom thou desirest to serve, requireth the service that thou must oft fast. And Christopher said to him: Require of me some other thing, and I shall do it, for that which thou requirest I may not do. And the hermit said: Thou must then wake and make many prayers. And Christopher said to him: I wot not what it is; I may do no such thing. And then the hermit said to him: Knowest thou such a river, in which many be perished and lost? To whom Christopher said: I know it well. Then said the hermit, Because thou art noble and high of stature and strong in thy members, thou shalt be resident by that river, and thou shalt bear over all them that shall pass there, which shall be a thing right convenable to our Lord Jesu Christ whom thou desirest to serve, and I hope he shall show himself to thee. Then said Christopher: Certes, this service may I well do, and I promise to him for to do it. Then went Christopher to this river, and made there his habitacle for him, and bare a great pole in his hand instead of a staff, by which he sustained him in the water, and bare over all manner of people without ceasing. And there he abode, thus doing, many days. And in a time, as he slept in his lodge, he heard the voice of a child which called him and said: Christopher, come out and bear me over. Then he awoke and went out, but he found no man. And when he was again in his house, he heard the same voice and he ran out and found nobody. The third time he was called and came thither, and found a child beside the rivage of the river, which prayed him goodly to bear him over the water. And then Christopher lift up the child on his shoulders, and took his staff, and entered into the river for to pass. And the water of the river arose and swelled more and more: and the child was heavy as lead, and alway as he went farther the water increased and grew more, and the child more and more waxed heavy, insomuch that Christopher had great anguish and was afeard to be drowned. And when he was escaped with great pain, and passed the water, and set the child aground, he said to the child: Child, thou hast put me in great peril; thou weighest almost as I had all the world upon me, I might bear no greater burden. And the child answered: Christopher, marvel thee nothing, for thou hast not only borne all the world upon thee, but thou hast borne him that created and made all the world, upon thy shoulders. I am Jesu Christ the king, to whom thou servest in this work. And because that thou know that I say to be the truth, set thy staff in the earth by thy house, and thou shalt see to-morn that it shall bear flowers and fruit, and anon he



vanished from his eyes. And then Christopher set his staff in the earth, and when he arose on the morn, he found his staff like a palmier bearing flowers, leaves and dates. And then Christopher went into the city of Lycia, and understood not their language. Then he prayed our Lord that he might understand them, and so he did. And as he was in this prayer, the judges supposed that he had been a fool, and left him there. After this Christopher was brought tofore the king, and the king commanded that he should be beaten with rods of iron, and that there should be set upon his head a cross of iron red hot and burning, and then after, he did do make a siege or a stool of iron, and made Christopher to be bounden thereon, and after, to set fire under it, and cast therein pitch. But the siege or settle melted like wax, and Christopher issued out without any harm or hurt. And when the king saw that, he commanded that he should be bound to a strong stake, and that he should be through-shotten with arrows with forty knights archers. But none of the knights might attain him, for the arrows hung in the air about, nigh him, without touching. Then the king weened that he had been throughshotten with the arrows of the knights, and addressed him for to go to him. And one of the arrows returned suddenly from the air and smote him in the eye, and blinded him. To whom Christopher said: Tyrant, I shall die to-morn, make a little clay, with my blood tempered, and anoint therewith thine eye, and thou shalt receive health. Then by the commandment of the king he was led for to be beheaded, and then, there made he his orison, and his head was smitten off, and so suffered martyrdom. And the king then took a little of his blood and laid it on his eye, and said: In the name of God and of S. Christopher! and was anon healed. Then the king believed in God, and gave commandment that if any person blamed God or S. Christopher, he should anon be slain with the sword.

*Vol. 5, 3-7, "St. Rocke"*

S. Rocke was born in Montpelier, which is a town of great name upon the border of France, and was born of noble progeny. His father was lord of Montpelier, and was named John, and was come of the noble house of France. And though he was noble of birth, and rich of lordship, he was also virtuous in all humanity...when he had finished his father's commandments he decreed to leave the country of Montpelier and to make and seek other divers pilgrimages, and clad him with the habit of a pilgrim, and covered his head with a bonnet, a scrip on his shoulder, and a pilgrim's staff in his right hand, and so departed.

And after many desert places he came to Rome, but tofore he came into a town called in Latin Aquapendens, where as was a common and hard pestilence, which, when Rocke knew of many by the way, he desirously went unto the hospital of that town, called Water-hanging, and gat with great prayers and labour of one Vincent, which had the rule of the hospital, that he might there, day and night, serve the sick people. Vincent was afeard and dreaded lest Rocke, which was a young flowering man should be smitten with pestilence. But after that he came, them that were sick he blessed in the name of Christ,

and as soon he had touched the sick men they were all whole. And they said and confessed as soon as and this holy man Roche was come in. All they that were vexed and sick, and the fire of pestilence had infected, he extincted it and delivered all the hospital of that sickness. And after he went through the town, and each house that was vexed with pestilence he entered, and with the sign of the cross and mind of the passion of Jesu Christ he delivered them all from the pestilence. For whomsoever Rocketouched, anon the pestilence left him. And when the town of Water-falling was delivered from the contagion of the pestilence, Roche went to the city of Cesena which is a great city of Italy, which no less pestilence vexed, and he in a short space delivered it from the pestilence. And from thence he came to Rome, which was then so full of pestilence that unnethe in all the town could not be found one house void thereof...

And S. Roche, as a pilgrim doing penance, entended, burning in the love of God, toward his country and came to a province of Lombardy called Angleria, and applied him toward Almaine, where the lord of his province made war with his enemy, whose knights took S. Roche as a spy, and delivered him to their lord as a traitor. This blessed saint, always confessing Jesu Christ, was deputed unto a hard and strait prison, and the blessed Roche patiently went into prison and suffered it gladly. Where day and night remembering the name of Jesu, he commended him to God, praying that the prison should not disprofit him, but that he might have it for wilderness and penance. And there he abode five years in prayers...

And in the end of the third day the angel of God came to S. Roche, saying thus: O Roche, God sendeth me for thy soul, of whom in this last part of thy life that what thou now desirest thou shouldest now ask and demand. Then S. Roche prayed unto Almighty God with his most devout prayer, that all good christian men which reverently prayed in the name of Jesu to the blessed Roche might be delivered surely from the stroke of pestilence. And this prayer so made, he expired and gave up the ghost.

Anon an angel brought from heaven a table divinely written with letters of gold into the prison, which he laid under the head of S. Roche. And in that table was written that God had granted to him his prayer, that is to wit, that who that calleth meekly to S. Roche he shall not be hurt with any hurt of pestilence....

*Vol. 5, 82-83, "SS. Cosmas and Damian"*

They were learned in the art of medicine, and of leechcraft, and received so great grace of God that they healed all maladies and languors, not only of men but also cured and healed beasts. And did all for the love of God without taking of any reward. There was a lady which had spent all her goods in medicines, and came to these saints, and anon was healed of her sickness, and then she offered a little gift to S. Damian, but he would not receive it. And she sware and conjured him by horrible oaths that he granted to receive it, and not for covetise of the gift, but for to obey to the devotion of her that offered it, and that he would not be seen to despise the name of our Lord of which he had been conjured. And when S. Cosmo knew it, he commanded that his body should not be laid after his

death with his brother's. And the night following our Lord appeared to S. Cosmo and excused his brother. And when Lysias heard their renomee he made them to be called tofore him, and demanded their names and their country. And then the holy martyrs said: Our names be Cosmo and Damian, and we have three other brethren which be named Antimas, Leontius, and Euprepus, our country is Arabia, but christian men know not fortune. Then the proconsul or judge commanded them that they should bring forth their brethren, and that they should all together do sacrifice to the idols. And when in no wise they would do sacrifice, but despised the idols, he commanded they should be sore tormented in the hands and feet. And when they despised his torments, he commanded them to be bound with a chain and thrown into the sea, but they were anon delivered by the angel of our Lord, and taken out of the sea, and came again tofore the judge. And when the judge saw them, he said: Ye overcome our great gods by your enchantments; ye despise the torments and make the sea peaceable. Teach ye me your witchcraft, and in the name of the god Adrian, I shall follow you. And anon as he had said this two devils came and beat him greatly in the visage, and he crying said: O ye good men, I pray you that ye pray for me to our Lord, and they then prayed for him and anon the devils departed. Then the judge said: Lo! ye may see how the gods had indignation against me, because I thought to have forsaken them, but I shall not suffer my gods to be blasphemed. And then he commanded them to be cast into a great fire, but anon the flame sprang far from them and slew many of them that stood by. And then they were commanded to be put on a torment named eculee, but they were kept by the angel of our Lord, and the tormentors tormented them above all men, and yet were they taken off without hurt or grief, and so came all whole tofore the judge. Then the judge commanded the three to be put in prison, and made Cosmo and Damian to be crucified, and to be stoned of the people, but the stones returned to them that threw them, and hurt and wounded many of them. Then the judge, replenished with woodness, made the three brethren to stand by the cross, and commanded that four knights should shoot arrows to Cosmo and Damian, but the arrows returned and hurt many, and did no harm to the martyrs. And when the judge saw that, he was confused in all things, he was anguishous unto the death, and did do behead all five brethren together.

## GILLES LI MUISIS

*A prayer made to St. Sebastian against the mortality which flourished in 1349*, Rosemary Horrox, trans., ed., *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1994), 125.

O St Sebastian, guard and defend me, morning and evening, every minute of every hour, while I am still of sound mind; and, Martyr, diminish the strength of that vile illness called an epidemic which is threatening me. Protect and keep me and all my friends from this plague. We put our trust in God and St Mary, and in you, O holy Martyr. You, citizen of Milan, could, through God's power, halt this pestilence if you chose. For it is known to

many that you have that merit: to Zoe, whom you miraculously healed and restored to health, and to Nicostratus her husband. You comforted martyrs in their time of trial, and promised them the eternal life which is the reward of martyrs. O martyr Sebastian! Be with us always, and by your merits keep us safe and sound and protected from plague. Commend us to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary, so that when we die we may have our reward: to behold God in the company of martyrs.

#### GUILLAUME DUFAY

*O Blessed Sebastian*, 15<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph P. Byrne, *Daily Life during the Black Death*, trans. Christine Darby (Westport: The Greenwood Press, 2006), 108.

O blessed Sebastian, great is thy faith  
intercede for us with our Lord Jesus Christ that we may be freed from the plague  
and sickness of the epidemic.  
Amen.

*O Saint Sebastian*, 15<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph P. Byrne, *Daily Life during the Black Death*, trans. Christine Darby (Westport: The Greenwood Press, 2006), 108-109.

O Saint Sebastian, always, evening and morning, at all hours and moments, while  
I am still of sound mind, protect and preserve me and,  
O martyr, break the power over me of the harmful sickness called epidemic.  
Do though defend and guard  
from such plague  
me and all my friends,  
who confess ourselves guilty  
to God and holy Mary  
and thee, merciful martyr.  
Thou, a citizen of Milan,  
hast the power, if though hast the will,  
to cause this pestilence to cease  
and obtain a boon from God,  
for it is well known to many  
that thou hast earned merit with him.  
Thou dist heal Zoe the dumb  
and restore her healed  
to her husband Nicostratus,  
doing this in wondrous wise.  
In the conflict thou didst console  
the martyrs and promise them

life everlasting,  
owed to martyrs.  
Amen.  
O martyr Sebastian  
Do though ever remain with us and by thy merits guard,  
heal, and govern us who are in this life,  
and protect us from the plague,  
presenting us before the  
Trinity, and the holy Virgin Mother.  
And may we end our lives  
in such a manner that we have as reward  
both in the company of martyrs  
and the sight of God the merciful.  
O with what wondrous grace  
did Sebastian, the renown martyr, shine,  
who wearing the uniform of a soldier,  
but concern for his brethren's palm of  
martyrdom comforted their bloodless hearts  
with the word bestowed on him by heaven.

## SECULAR LITERATURE

### PAUL THE DEACON

#### *History of the Lombards: Chapter V*

In these times during the eighth indiction (A.D. 680) the moon suffered an eclipse; also an eclipse of the sun occurred at almost the same time on the fifth day before the Nones of May about the tenth hour of the day. And presently there followed a very severe pestilence for three months, that is, in July, August and September, and so great was the multitude of those dying that even parents with their children and brothers with their sisters were placed on biers two by two and conducted to their tombs at the city of Rome. And in like manner too this pestilence also depopulated Ticinum so that all citizens fled to the mountain ranges and to other places and grass and bushes grew in the market place and throughout the streets of the city. And then it visibly appeared to many that a good and a bad angel proceeded by night through the city and as many times as, upon command of the good angel, the bad angel, who appeared to carry a hunting spear in his hand, knocked at the door of each house with the spear, so many men perished from that house on the following day. Then it was said to a certain man by revelation that the pestilence itself would not cease before an altar of St. Sebastian the martyr was placed in the church of the blessed Peter which is called "Ad Vincula." And it was done, and after the remains of St.

Sebastian the martyr had been carried from the city of Rome, presently the altar was set up in the aforesaid church and the pestilence itself ceased.

## GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

### *The Decameron: 3-8.*

Let me say, then, that thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had already passed after the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God when into the distinguished city of Florence, more noble than any other Italian city, there came the deadly pestilence. It started in the East, either because of the influence of heavenly bodies or because of God's just wrath as a punishment to mortals for our wicked deeds, and it killed an infinite number of people. Without pause it spread from one place and it stretched its miserable length over the West. And against this pestilence no human wisdom or foresight was of any avail; quantities of filth were removed from the city by officials charged with this task; the entry of any sick person into the city was prohibited; and many directives were issued concerning the maintenance of good health...it began in both men and women with certain swellings either in the groin or under the armpits, some of which grew to the size of a normal apple and others to the size of an egg (more or less), and the people called them *gavoccioli*... almost all died after the third day of the appearance of the previously described symptoms...

And in this great affliction and misery of our city the revered authority of the laws, both divine and human, had fallen and almost completely disappeared...the sick were abandoned by their neighbors, their parents, and their friends...

Very few were the dead whose bodies were accompanied to the church by more than ten or twelve of their neighbors, and these dead bodies were not even carried on the shoulders of honored and reputable citizens but rather by gravediggers from the lower classes...[the neighbors] would drag the corpse out of the home and place it in front of the doorstep where, usually in the morning, quantities of dead bodies could be seen by any passerby...

Nor did a bier carry only one corpse; sometimes it was used for two or three at a time.

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