

Marchione di Coppo Stefani, *The Florentine Chronicle*

Marchione di Coppo Stefani was born in Florence in 1336. He wrote his *Florentine Chronicle* in the late 1370s and early 1380s. Stefani, Marchione di Coppo. *Cronaca fiorentina. Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, Vol. 30. , ed. Niccolo Rodolico. Citta di Castello: 1903-13.

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/osheim/marchione.html>

Rubric 643: Concerning A Mortality In The City Of Florence In Which Many People Died.

In the year of the Lord 1348 there was a very great pestilence in the city and district of Florence. It was of such a fury and so tempestuous that in houses in which it took hold previously healthy servants who took care of the ill died of the same illness. Almost non of the ill survived past the fourth day. Neither physicians nor medicines were effective. Whether because these illnesses were previously unknown or because physicians had not previously studied them, there seemed to be no cure. There was such a fear that no one seemed to know what to do. When it took hold in a house it often happened that no one remained who had not died. And it was not just that men and women died, but even sentient animals died. Dogs, cats, chickens, oxen, donkeys sheep showed the same symptoms and died of the same disease. And almost none, or very few, who showed these symptoms, were cured. The symptoms were the following: a bubo in the groin, where the thigh meets the trunk; or a small swelling under the armpit; sudden fever; spitting blood and saliva (and no one who spit blood survived it). It was such a frightful thing that when it got into a house, as was said, no one remained. Frightened people abandoned the house and fled to another. Those in town fled to villages. Physicians could not be found because they had died like the others. And those who could be found wanted vast sums in hand before they entered the house. And when they did enter, they checked the pulse with face turned away. They inspected the urine from a distance and with something odoriferous under their nose. Child abandoned the father, husband the wife, wife the husband, one brother the other, one sister the other. In all the city there was nothing to do but to carry the dead to a burial. And those who died had neither confessor nor other sacraments. And many died with no one looking after them. And many died of hunger because when someone took to bed sick, another in the house, terrified, said to him: "I'm going for the doctor." Calmly walking out the door, the other left and did not return again. Abandoned by people, without food, but accompanied by fever, they weakened. There were many who pleaded with their relatives not to abandon them when night fell. But [the relatives] said to the sick person, "So that during the night you did not have to awaken those who serve you and who work hard day and night, take some sweetmeats, wine or water. They are here on the bedstead by your head; here are some blankets." And when the sick person had fallen asleep, they left and did not return. If it happened that he was strengthened by the food during the night he might be alive and strong enough to get to the window. If the street was not a major one, he might stand there a half hour before anyone came by. And if someone did pass by, and if he was strong enough that he could be heard when he called out to them, sometimes there might be a response and sometimes not, but there was no help. No one, or few, wished to enter a house where anyone was sick, nor did they even want to deal with those healthy people who came out of a sick person's house. And they said to them: "He is stupefied, do not speak to him!" saying further: "He has it because there is a bubo in his house." They call the swelling a bubo. Many died unseen. So they remained in their beds until they stank. And the neighbors, if there were

any, having smelled the stench, placed them in a shroud and sent them for burial. The house remained open and yet there was no one daring enough to touch anything because it seemed that things remained poisoned and that whoever used them picked up the illness.

At every church, or at most of them, they dug deep trenches, down to the waterline, wide and deep, depending on how large the parish was. And those who were responsible for the dead carried them on their backs in the night in which they died and threw them into the ditch, or else they paid a high price to those who would do it for them. The next morning, if there were many [bodies] in the trench, they covered them over with dirt. And then more bodies were put on top of them, with a little more dirt over those; they put layer on layer just like one puts layers of cheese in a lasagna.

The beccamorti [literally vultures] who provided their service, were paid such a high price that many were enriched by it. Many died from [carrying away the dead], some rich, some after earning just a little, but high prices continued. Servants, or those who took care of the ill, charged from one to three florins per day and the cost of things grew. The things that the sick ate, sweetmeats and sugar, seemed priceless. Sugar cost from three to eight florins per pound. And other confections cost similarly. Capons and other poultry were very expensive and eggs cost between twelve and twenty-four pence each; and he was blessed who could find three per day even if he searched the entire city. Finding wax was miraculous. A pound of wax would have gone up more than a florin if there had not been a stop put [by the communal government] to the vain ostentation that the Florentines always make [over funerals]. Thus it was ordered that no more than two large candles could be carried[in any funeral]. Churches had no more than a single bier which usually was not sufficient. Spice dealers and beccamorti sold biers, burial palls, and cushions at very high prices. Dressing in expensive woolen cloth as is customary in [mourning] the dead, that is in a long cloak, with mantle and veil that used to cost women three florins climbed in price to thirty florins and would have climbed to 100 florins had the custom of dressing in expensive cloth not been changed. The rich dressed in modest wools, those not rich sewed [clothes] in linen. Benches on which the dead were placed cost like the heavens and still the benches were only a hundredth of those needed. Priests were not able to ring bells as they would have liked. Concerning that [the government] issued ordinances discouraging the sounding of bells, sale of burial benches, and limiting expenses. They could not sound bells, sell benches, nor cry out announcements because the sick hated to hear of this and it discouraged the healthy as well. Priests and friars went [to serve] the rich in great multitudes and they were paid such high prices that they all got rich. And therefore [the authorities] ordered that one could not have more than a prescribed number [of clerics] of the local parish church. And the prescribed number of friars was six. All fruits with a nut at the center, like unripe plums and unhusked almonds, fresh broadbeans, figs and every useless and unhealthy fruit, were forbidden entrance into the city. Many processions, including those with relics and the painted tablet of Santa Maria Impruneta, went through the city crying out "Mercy" and praying and then they came to a stop in the piazza of the Priors. There they made peace concerning important controversies, injuries and deaths. This [pestilence] was a matter of such great discouragement and fear that men gathered together in order to take some comfort in dining together. And each evening one of them provided dinner to ten companions and the next evening they planned to eat with one of the others. And sometimes if they planned to eat with a certain one he had no meal prepared because

he was sick. Or if the host had made dinner for the ten, two or three were missing. Some fled to villas, others to villages in order to get a change of air. Where there had been no [pestilence], there they carried it; if it was already there, they caused it to increase. None of the guilds in Florence was working. All the shops were shut, taverns closed; only the apothecaries and the churches remained open. If you went outside, you found almost no one. And many good and rich men were carried from home to church on a pall by four beccamorti and one tonsured clerk who carried the cross. Each of them wanted a florin. This mortality enriched apothecaries, doctors, poultry vendors, beccamorti, and greengrocers who sold of poultices of mallow, nettles, mercury and other herbs necessary to draw off the infirmity. And it was those who made these poultices who made a lot of money. Wool workers and vendors of remnants of cloth who found themselves in possession of cloths [after the death of the entrepreneur for whom they were working] sold it to whoever asked for it. When the mortality ended, those who found themselves with cloth of any kind or with raw materials for making cloth was enriched. But many found [who actually owned cloths being processed by workers] found it to be moth-eaten, ruined or lost by the weavers. Large quantities of raw and processed wool were lost throughout the city and countryside.

This pestilence began in March, as was said, and ended in September 1348. And people began to return to look after their houses and possessions. And there were so many houses full of goods without a master that it was stupefying. Then those who would inherit these goods began to appear. And such it was that those who had nothing found themselves rich with what did not seem to be theirs and they were unseemly because of it. Women and men began to dress ostentatiously.

## PISTOIA, "ORDINANCES FOR SANITATION IN A TIME OF MORTALITY"

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/osheim/pistoia.html>

Pistoia was a provincial city of about 11,000 in the early fourteenth century located in the region of Tuscany, less than thirty kilometers northwest of Florence. Its government was in the hands of a small executive council made up of the Anziani or Elders of the People and the Standardbearer of Justice. The chief administrative officers were the Captain of the People and the Podesta who served six-month terms. They could not be Pistoian or even Tuscan. They were allowed limited social contact with Pistoians and their behavior was audited, or "syndicated" at the end of their terms of office. This allowed anyone who felt wronged by their actions to bring charges. The eight Anziani and the Standardbearer of Justice were citizens of the city selected by lot to serve two-month terms from among the citizens of the city who met age, professional and property qualifications. This small council debated all issues and made recommendations to a general city council, the Council of the People which was required either to approve or reject proposals without amendment. As will be clear from the ordinances, there were virtually no issues which affected life in the city which the government could not debate. The context of the Ordinances was the arrival of the Plague early in the Spring of 1348. Plague probably cost the city and surrounding countryside about one fourth of the total population. The statutes themselves reflect both the scientific knowledge and the practical issues which this crisis brought to a head.

In the name of Christ Amen. Herein are written certain ordinances and provisions made and agreed upon by certain wise men of the People of the city of Pistoia elected and commissioned by the lords Anziani and the Standardbearer of Justice of the said city concerning the preserving, strengthening and protecting the health of humans from various and diverse pestilences which otherwise can befall the human body. And written by me Simone Buonacorsi notary. . . in the year from the Nativity of the Lord MCCCXLVIII, the first Indiction.

First. So that no contaminated matter which presently persists in the areas surrounding the city of Pistoia can enter into the bodies of the citizens of Pistoia, these wise men provided and ordered that no citizen of Pistoia or dweller in the district or the county of Pistoia . . . shall in any way dare or presume to go to Pisa or Lucca or to the county or district of either. And that no one can or ought to come from either of them or their districts ... to the said city of Pistoia or its district or county on penalty of £ 50 ... And that gatekeeper of the city of Pistoia guarding the gates of the said city shall not permit those coming or returning to the said city of Pistoia from the said cities of Pisa or Lucca, their districts or counties to enter the said gates on penalty of £ 10 ... It is licit, however, for citizens now living in Pistoia to go to Pisa and Lucca, their districts and counties and then return if they have first obtained a license from the Council of the People ....

II. Item. The foresaid wise men provided and ordered that no person whether citizen, inhabitant of the district or county of the city of Pistoia or foreigner shall dare or presume in any way to bring ... to the city of Pistoia, its district or county, any used cloth, either linen or woolen, for use as clothing for men or women or for bedclothes on penalty of £ 200. ... Citizens of Pistoia, its district and county returning to the city, district or county will be allowed to bring with them the linen or woolen cloths they are wearing and those for personal use carried in luggage or a small bundle weighing 30 pounds or less. ... And if any quantity of cloth of the said type or quality has been carried into the said city, county or district, the carrier shall be held to and must remove and export it from the said city, county and district within three days of the adoption of the present ordinance under the foresaid penalty for each carrier or carriers and for each violation.

III. Item. They provided and ordered that the bodies of the dead, after they had died, can not be nor ought to be removed from the place in which they are found unless first such a body has been placed in a wooden casket covered by a lid secured with nails, so that no stench can issue forth from it; nor can it be covered except by a canopy, blanket or drape under a penalty for £ 50 of pennies paid by the heirs of the dead person.... And also that likewise such dead bodies of the dead must be carried to the grave only in the said casket under the said penalty as has been said. And so that the foresaid shall be noted by the rectors and officials of the city of Pistoia, present and future rectors of the parishes of the city of Pistoia in whose parish there is any dead person are held to and must themselves announce the death and the district [of the city] in which the dead person lived to the podesta and captain or others of the government of the said city. And they must notify them of the name of the dead person and of the district in which the dead person had lived or pay the said penalty for each contravention. And the podesta and captain to whom such an announcement or notification has been made, immediately are held to and must send one of their officials to the same location to see and inquire if the contents of the present article and other statutes and ordinances concerning funerals are being observed and to punish anyone found culpable according to the said penalty.... And the foresaid shall not be enforced nor is it extended

to poor and miserable persons who are declared to be poor and miserable according to the form of any statutes or ordinances of the said city.

IV. Item. In order to avoid the foul stench which the bodies of the dead give off they have provided and ordered that any ditch in which a dead body is to be buried must be dug under ground to a depth of 2 1/2 braccia by the measure of the city of Pistoia.

V. Item. They have provided and ordered that no person of whatever condition or status or authority shall dare or presume to return or to carry to the city of Pistoia any dead body in or out of a casket or in any manner on penalty of £ 25 of pennies paid by whoever carries, brings, or orders [a body] to be carried or brought for each occasion. And that the gatekeepers of the said city shall not permit such a body to be sent into the said city on penalty of the foresaid fine by each gatekeeper at the gate through which the said body was sent.

VI. Item. They have provided and ordered that any person who will have come for the burial or to bury any dead person can not and may not be in the presence of the body itself nor with the relatives of such a dead person except for the procession to the church where it will be buried. Nor shall such persons return to the house where the defunct person lived or enter into that house or any other house on the said occasion on penalty of £ 10

VII. Item. They have provided and ordered that when anyone has died no person should dare or presume to present or to send any gift before or after burial to the former dwelling place of such a dead person or any other place on the said occasion or to attend or to go to a meal in that house or place on the said occasion on penalty of £ 25.... Children, carnal brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews of such a dead person and their children, however, shall be expected [from this provision].

VIII. Item. They have provided and ordered that in order to avoid useless or fruitless expenses no person should dare or presume to dress in new clothing during the period of mourning for any dead person or during the eight days after that, on penalty of £ 25 of pennies for whoever contravenes [this] and for each time. Wives of such dead persons however, shall be exempted; they can be dressed in whatever new clothing they wish without penalty.

IX. Item. They have provided and ordered that no paid mourner... shall dare or presume to mourn publicly or privately or to invite other citizens of Pistoia to go to the funeral or to the dead person; nor may anyone engage the foresaid mourner, hornplayer, cryer or drummer.

X. Item. So that the sounds of bells might not depress the infirm nor fear arise in them [the Wise Men] have provided and ordered that the bellringers or custodians in charge of the belltower of the cathedral of Pistoia shall not permit any bell in the said campanile to be rung for the funeral of the dead nor shall any person dare or presume to ring any of these bells on the said occasion.... At the chapel or parish church of the said dead person or at the friary if the person is to be buried at a church of the friars, they can ring the bell of the chapel, parish church or the church of the friars so long as it is rung only one time and moderately, on the foresaid penalty in the foresaid manner [for each violation].

XI. Item. They have provided and ordered that no one shall dare or presume to gather or cause to gather any persons for the purpose of bringing any widow from the former habitation of a dead person, unless at the time she is being returned from the church or cemetery where such a dead person was buried. [Blood relatives] of such a widow, however, wishing to bring the widow from the house at times other than at the time of burial may send up to four women to accompany the said woman, who is to be brought from the foresaid house of the dead person....

XII. Item. They have provided and ordered that no person should dare or presume to raise or cause to be raised any wailing or clamor over any person or because of any person who has died outside the city, district or county of Pistoia; nor on the said occasion should any persons be brought together in any place except blood relatives and associates of such a dead person, nor on the said occasion should any bell be rung or caused to be wrung, nor announcements be made through the city of Pistoia by mourners, nor on the said occasion should any invitation [to join the mourners ] be made on a penalty of £ 25.... It must be understood, however, in any written ordinances speaking of the dead and of honoring the burial of the dead that the foresaid shall not have force in the burial of the body of any soldiers of the militia, doctors of laws, judges or physicians whose bodies, because of their dignity, may be honored licitly at burial in a manner pleasing to their heirs.

XIV. Item. They have provided and ordered that butchers and retail vendors of meat, individually and in common, can not, nor ought to hold or maintain near a tavern or other place where they sell meats, or near a shop or beside or behind a shop any stable, pen or any other thing which will give off a putrid smell; nor can they slaughter meat animals nor hang them after slaughter in any stable or other place in which there is any stench on a penalty of £ 10.

XXII. Item. So that stench and putrefaction shall not be harmful to men, henceforth tanning of hides can not and must not be done within the walls of the city of Pistoia on penalty of £ 25....

XXIII. Item. For the observance of each and every provision contained in the present articles and everything in the article speaking of funerals of the dead, of butchers and retail vendors of meats, they provided and ordered that the lord podest<sup>^</sup> and captain and their officials charged pro tem with the foresaid [duties] shall and must proceed against, investigate, and inquire. . . concerning acts contrary to the foresaid [ordinances], and cause whatever of the foresaid ordained to be reviewed as often as possible, and punish the guilty by the foresaid fines. . . . Also any person may accuse or denounce before either the said podest<sup>^</sup> or captain any persons acting against the foresaid or any of the foresaid or the content of the said statutes or ordinances. And such denunciations or accusers shall, can and may have one fourth of the fine after it is levied and paid, which fourth part the treasurer pro tem of the treasury of the said city shall be held to and have to pay and give to the said accuser and informer as soon as the fine and penalty have been paid. And sufficient proof shall be offered by one witness worthy of belief, or four persons of good reputation who have learned [of the contravention]. . . .

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