

**WOMEN IN TIMES OF PLAGUE: ECONOMIC CONDITIONS
AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN 17TH CENTURY ROME**

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Resume

The plague started in Rome on June 22-26, 1656 and spread rapidly, reaching mortality peaks in October/November of the same year. It decreased in December/January, with few cases recorded in March/April. The epidemic, which ended in August 1657, represented the last case of ancien-régime mortality, and witnessed a renewed ability to cope with danger through the use of administrative resources.

The investigation proposes an attentive look at widow women who happened to be – in times of scarce freedom – active guardians of their children and administrators of inherited properties. In fact, female conditions changed drastically in case of widowhood: in most cases, women took (partly) possession of economic incomes and activities.

Research hypotheses

In ancient times, a woman's main goal in life was marriage. As opposed to men, a woman's personal and social identity was defined by her civil status (De Giorgio 1996a, Klapisch-Zuber 1996b)¹.

The woman was depicted as an angel of the hearth, whose sole duty was to look after her home, children and husband. Thus from a legal point of view, she was subject to her husband's will and before then to her father's. If we follow this vision of the "housewife", we overlook the fact that she also had an active role in a non-domestic environment.

This vision was veiled by the female stereotype that conditioned their social and economical existence, only widows openly exercised an active role as guardians of their children or trustees of inheritances.

The majority of city statutes permitted widows to either be sole guardian of their underage children or in conjunction with a co-guardian, who was usually a man from her husband's side of the family. Guardianship was a legal institute that conferred less extensive powers of parental authority, that was reserved to the father. Mothers lost their role of guardians with a new marriage. Second marriages placed them in a new family and were subjected to marital authority as an "outsider" as opposed to the paternal line of descent that it was considered offspring belonged to. This constituted a threat for a proper handover of the family name and goods. From an economical point of view the woman, as a widow, gained the management of the family assets. In fact the situation changed only in the case of widowhood, and she could gain access even if not totally, to the family income and any craftsmanship activity (Casanova 1997)².

¹ De Giorgio M., Klapisch-Zuber C. 1996, *Storia del matrimonio*, Laterza, Roma-Bari

² Casanova C. 1997, *La famiglia italiana in età moderna*, Carocci, Roma

The aim of this short paper is to convey the initial results of an on-going survey whose purpose is to look into this female sphere. The focus is on widows who, when faced with multiple economical and family problems, were able to enforce family life by linking their typical female role to a working environment, that up to that moment was carried out by the men. The primary interest was to study a concrete circumstance in which the female sphere was diverted from the strict dictates of the time. Even in ancient regimes, women had a fundamental role in the family economy, working alongside their husbands they also did the housework and looked after the children, but public recognition was only given to the maternal aspect. (Bock 2001)³.

Paradoxically, widowhood could be a “social surrender” for a woman. For this reason the historical period between 1656-1657 has been chosen, during these years many cities of old Italian States, especially Rome, Sardinia, Genoa and Naples were scourged by the plague.

During this epidemic the ratio of male mortality was higher compared to the female one (Beloch 1994)⁴. This obviously created a social fabric of more widows in respect of previous years.

The territorial sample of this survey coincides with the research of two important Roman districts through the parish documents of two ecclesiastical neighbours, on one side Campo Marzio and more specifically S. Maria del Popolo and on the other the Parione district with the Parish of S. Lorenzo in Damaso.

This area was full of all kinds of commercial activity, there were the “vermicelli” (a Roman term for pasta makers) as well as numerous goldsmiths. The district was an excellent place for commerce. In fact this area was host to a street market with many stallholders selling their wares. The bigger shops belonged to grocers and bakers. (Martini 1965)⁵.

³ Bock G. 2001, *Le donne nella storia europea*, Laterza, Roma-Bari

⁴ Beloch K. J. 1994, *Storia della popolazione d'Italia*, Le Lettere, Firenze

⁵ Martini A. 1965, *Arti mestieri e fede nella Roma dei Papi*, Cappelli, Bologna

Rome in the seventeenth century

Rome was a pivotal city of European politics during the 600's. The history of the city may be considered a major point of international interest.

Rome is atypical compared to other important European cities, it is a city of contrasts, an urban centre with no borough or suburbs, surrounded by an extensively cultivated countryside and pasture land, with few inhabitants and an insufficient agricultural production to satisfy the primary needs of its residents (Giuntella 1971)⁶.

Ignorance, scarce literacy, a building fabric mainly of low unhealthy houses with inhabitants living in degrading conditions, these are the characteristics of demotic Rome. In contrast, the noble classes seemed to sparkle in the luxury and beauty of their buildings.

The Roman nobility was closely linked to the Curate, whenever a member of a Roman family ascended the papal throne, it indicated that a role of power had been achieved by one family instead of by another (Fosi 1997)⁷.

The papal family had full participation in the Roman political game, in this way both the cardinal nephew and lay nephews performed an important role next to the Pope. Blood relations were at the core of the papal Court and the Pope's Secretary acquired ever more importance at their side. The role of the cardinal nephew in court was not necessarily a formal political one, the nephew's activity was wide fold: above all within the Pope's blood relations with the accumulation of benefits and prebends, enormous riches passed into the lay branch: thus within the Sacred College as head of a faction of cardinals that housed all the cardinals who were created by his uncle the Pope: finally in the city through the institution of protection agreed to monasteries, charities, national and foreign churches (Visceglia 2002)⁸.

A true middle class with business ability that was very low amongst nobles and landowners, was lacking in seventeenth century Rome.

History is also the narration of administrative chaos (Caravale 1997a, Caracciolo 1997b)⁹, of gangsterism amongst the poor and crime amongst the nobles, of the excessive power of rich families. Papal Rome seems to be more similar to a feudal and parasitical city rather than to a great mercantile or manufacturing city like those in Lombardy or Tuscany.

⁶ Giuntella V. E. 1971, *Roma nel Settecento*, Cappelli, Bologna

⁷ Fosi I. 1997, *All'ombra dei Barberini. Fedeltà e servizio nella Roma barocca*, Bulzoni, Roma

⁸ Visceglia M. A. 2002, *La città rituale: Roma e le sue cerimonie in età moderna*, Viella, Roma

⁹ Caravale M., Caracciolo A. 1997, *Lo Stato Pontificio da Martino V a Pio IX*, Einaudi, Torino

The higher social classes are linked to the curial hierarchy (Ago 1990) and are foreign to the economical life of the city: the middle class seems to have no future, since the city offers little possibility of economical expansion¹⁰. Rome has always lived in the duplicity of being both a municipal and religious capital.

At the end of the 500's economy, justice, urban structure became an increasing expression of religious power, according to Jean Delumeau¹¹, it seems that the majority of Roman barons were not as rich as the cardinals (Delemeau 1979).

Throughout the 600's the contradictions that arose from its being both a religious and capital city are reflected in the practice of excessive power of the richer families who are increasingly linked to the pope and isolated from the people.

The pestilential plague reaches Rome

The period between the XIV and XVIII centuries was distinguished by the presence of terrible plague epidemics in many European states (Bergdolt 2002)¹².

The last epidemic surge that caused a high number of deaths in Italy was in 1656-57. This affected central and insular Italy and in particular some parts of Sardinia, Rome Naples and Genoa (Cipolla 1974)¹³.

The epidemic started and spread in these three cities and was fought by the administrative bodies in different ways. In Naples alone there were 150,000 deaths (excluding suburbs) over a population of about 300,000 with a curtailment of 50% (Sonnino 1982a, Traina 1982b)¹⁴. The plague had a violent effect on the demographic structure of Genoa, in fact of the recorded 73,170 inhabitants before the epidemic, only about 4,000 were immune, with a mortality rate reaching a peak of 80%.

All the evaluations of the time that have been confirmed by recent studies on the subject, indicate that between 45,000 and 55,000 Genoese died during the epidemic (Beloch 1994). Rome had the lowest rate of mortality, i.e. about 8%.

¹⁰ Ago R. 1990, *Carriere e clientele nella Roma barocca*, Laterza, Roma-Bari

¹¹ Delumeau J. 1979, *Vita economica e sociale a Roma nel Cinquecento*, Sansoni, Firenze

¹² Bergdolt K. 1997, *La peste nera e la fine del medioevo*, Piemme, Milano

¹³ Cipolla C.M. 1974, *Storia economica dell'Europa pre-industriale*, Mulino, Bologna

¹⁴ Sonnino E., Traina R. 1982, *La peste del 1656-57 a Roma: organizzazione sanitaria e mortalità*, CISP, Bologna.

According to appraisals made by Cardinal Gastaldi, who was nominated *Sanitatis Commissarius generalis* during the plague, described the measures he adopted to control the epidemic in his *Tractatus de avertenda et profiganda peste* (Bologna 1684) in which some evaluations regarding the mortality rate during the epidemic are related, we note: *in Urbe et Leomocomiis* 1,373, *in Transiberina Regione intra Claustrum* 1,500, *in Ghetto et Hebraeorum Leomocomiis* 1,600.

Some chronicles explain the low mortality percentage as the result of the timely and efficient politics of intervention applied by the Pope and his collaborators in preparing a valid defence system for the city.

On 20th May 1656 the ecclesiastical state no longer allowed entrance to people, merchandise or anything else coming from Naples. However the ban came too late, as a few days later news came from the hospital of Civitavecchia that two people had died of “suspected infection” (Del Panta 1980)¹⁵.

The plague entered Rome at the beginning of June: a Neapolitan soldier who was apparently the first victim was admitted to the hospital of S. Giovanni in Laterano. (Corradi 1863)¹⁶.

The next one was a Neapolitan fisherman, followed by three members of the innkeeper’s family with whom he was staying.

Sources allegedly indicate the arrival of the plague at the end of June 1656 and spread, reaching its peak of mortality and morbidity in October-November, gradually decreasing in December-January and there were finally very few cases in March-April. It disappeared completely in August 1657.

An ideal mode of prevention, protection and control of the illness was fine-tuned in Rome. Each decision of the city, in terms of prevention and health was taken by the Congregation of Health of which Cardinal Gastaldi was nominated *Sanitatis Commissarius generalis*.

The magistracy was founded in 1630 by Urban VII – who was attributed with the merit of not letting the plague enter Rome in that year – and expanded by Alexander VII in 1656. This congregation was composed of 10 Cardinals, the General Treasurer and the Governor of Rome.

¹⁵ Del Panta L., *Le epidemie nella storia demografica italiana (XIV-XIX)*, Loescher, Torino

¹⁶ Corradi A. 1863, *Annali delle epidemie occorse in Italia dalle prime memorie fino al 1850*, Bologna.

Doctors and surgeons of the district were nominated to visit the sick in their own homes and report the same. Three commissioners were assigned on the boundaries of Naples, the city gates were closed: eight cardinals guarded the doors of the city, i.e. S. Paolo, S. Giovanni, Portese, S. Pancrazio, Cavalleggeri, Angelica, Del Popolo and lastly Porta Pia.

The entire island of S. Bartolomeo became a hospital for the city. The hospital was divided into two sections: one for the “nasty” and the other for the “dubious”.

Further hospitals were opened in other parts of the city when the epidemic spread.

The congregation, whose responsibility was to control the course of the epidemic in the city, published various bans restricting activities, economical and social life, i.e. the cancellation of feasts and ceremonies, the prohibition of cruising on the Tiber during the night, doctors were not allowed to leave the city, some markets were suspended, tramps and beggars were expelled.

Compared to the plague in Milan in 1630, there were no processes for spreaders of the infection or scenes of collective frenzy, the organised community in Rome was more rational and tolerant.

There was a massive disinfection of the Roman houses and streets: 157 houses were expurgated in the week from 14th to 21st December 1656; in January of the following year the number of houses rose to 1,295.

The most significant measure, whose purpose was to isolate the poor, the Jews and the sick, was the closing and enclosure of part of the Tiber where the plague had hit more – from 22nd June to 10th October 1656 – the Ghetto was also closed from 18th July to 15th December 1656 (Sonnino 1980a, Traina 1980b).

Two cemeteries were built for burials at the gates of the city in the lawns of Castel Sant’Angelo and in the field next to the Basilica of S. Paolo.

Burials were made in two very deep graves and covered with lime and earth to avoid the release of stench and the separation between Jews and Christians was strictly observed.

There was no record of terror or desperation amidst the people of Rome during the fourteen months of the infection, that in contrast was so characteristic of the cities of Genoa and Naples.

Similarly, the ecclesiastical authority’s behaviour of arranging quick interventions for the prevention and resistance of the disease, perhaps also linked to its late and phased out arrival, did not give much rise to process infectors or any form of irrational behaviour in approaching the disease.

The demographic upturn subsequent to the pestilence was slow, if we consider that numerous strong attractions were available in Rome for immigrants, to compensate for the void left by the epidemic, beyond the natural recovery among the population through new weddings and births.

In fact, the population increased from Easter 1658 to a mere 103,000 and it was only in 1672 that the population reached the same amount recorded shortly before the contagion.

The alteration of the national demographic fabric provoked by the described events was such that it decreased the average family size from 4 members in 1656 to 3.6 in 1657; in 1658 it increased to 3.7 and only in 1672 it went up to 4.2. The ratio of male deaths to female victims was quite high (166.7) compared to normal times (138.1). It was normal for there to be a higher proportion of males to females, as at the time Rome had a high male immigration (Sonnino 1998)¹⁷.

The high percentage of male victims of the plague may be traced to the distinctive demographic structure of the Roman population, as the most hit were the classes of young adults and simultaneously where there was a high presence of male immigrants.

The decrease of males in community during the years of the plague may also be related to the exodus out of Rome by this category of individuals and subsequent return at the end of the infection.

The plague of 1656-57 was also the last phase of an old system of mortality and somehow seemed to testify the acquired ability of the Papal State to deal with phenomena of danger, using every available resource, especially administrative commitment.

San Lorenzo in Damaso

The Church of S. Lorenzo in Damaso is located in Parione, a very important district both from an economical and cultural view.

The parish has always taken care of the souls since ancient times: originally this was the duty of the canons of the Chapter House and thereafter Pius V erected the perpetual vicar parish (5th November 1571).

With Cardinal Savelli's edict (23rd August 1569), the church's main role as baptismal font for 37 parishes was renewed.

¹⁷ AA. VV. 1998, *Popolazione e società a Roma dal medioevo all'età contemporanea*, il Calamo, Roma

The records of births related to S. Lorenzo In Damaso, kept in the Historical Archives of the Vicariate of Rome¹⁸, were available as from 1561, the registers of marriages from 1575 and a year later, i.e. 1576, the records of deaths.

The documents *Status Animarum* were started in 1593 that are full of information on the territorial structure of parishes (Sbrana 1877a, Traina 1977b, Sonnino 1977c)¹⁹.

The demographic trend of the resident population improved a year after the plague in 1657, this fact may be due to the renewed immigration on account of the important economical role of the area.

In fact as mentioned earlier, the Parione district was one of the richest in workshops with a high level of employment, also in consideration of the fact that there was a communal market.

It follows that the presence of immigrants was very high, that apart from balancing out the demographic losses due to the plague, it confirms the predominantly masculine social structure.

In fact, the aggregate male population switches from 2,000 in 1656 to 2,600 in 1657 compared to the female population that passes from 1,000 to 1,400 in the same years.

This datum remains unchanged after the spread of the disease, despite there being a great rate of male mortality during the epidemic due to the continual flow of immigrants.

There is no evidence of deaths caused by the plague in the *Liber Defunctorum Laurenty in Damaso*, as the parish priest only recorded those who died within his parish. Whilst those who died in hospital were only registered in the hospital records.

Thus the deaths caused by the plague were simply never recorded in the parish registers. A case in point that underlines the peculiarity of the source, regards an entire family belonging to this ecclesiastical district in which three deaths through the plague were recorded both in the hospital and in their homes. The Saluzzi family with Luca Antonio, his wife Cecilia and their two children Stefano and Leonora respectively 9 and 2 years old appear in the *Status Animarum* dated 1655.

Luca Antonio died on 30th October 1656 in the *lazarettum insula urbis* at only 30 years of age. Consulting the *Status Animarum* of the subsequent years, there is no further trace of the original nucleus except for the young wife who went to live with her sister, who was

¹⁸ ASVR

¹⁹ Sbrana C., Traina R., Sonnino E. 1977, *Gli stati delle anime a Roma dalle origini al secolo XVII*, La Goliardica, Roma.

also a widow, and her sister-in-law. Only the death of the son Stefano is recorded in the *Liber Defunctorum* prior to his father and sister's death, as the the other two deaths were registered in the hospital records.

Another interesting datum is that the young widow went to live with three members of the family who were all women and above all widows. Cecilia got married again in 1658 to a cobbler - whilst her first husband was a notary in the district - her second husband belonged to the diocese of Rieti and marrying Cecilia he went to live in the district of goldsmiths. At the time of the wedding, Giovanni (Cecilia's second husband) was only twenty two years old whereas Cecilia was thirty. The *Status Animarum* shows no records of any children in subsequent years.

By marrying Cecilia, young Giovanni improved his economical status.

Santa Maria del Popolo

The jurisdiction of the parish of S. Maria del Popolo was very wide, owning the land and vineyards that were outside Porta Salaria more or less from Acqua Acetosa as far as Fonte di Papa (Monte Rotondo) inclusive; outside Porta del Popolo as far as the Storta and on the Nomentana up to Casal dè Pazzi.

The parish records for births were available from 1562, in 1575 for marriages, in 1623 for deaths and finally in 1601 for those regarding the *Status Animarum*. As in the previous one, the rate of masculinity was very high in this parish.

Whilst the rate of mortality for the two sexes was similar, both categories were afflicted with a heavy demographic loss caused by the plague. It is quite evident how in this case, the situation hardly changed after the plague. It is important to underline that this feedback comes from the fact that there were many deaths in the two analysed categories and it is reckoned that the incidence of the epidemic wave from 1656-57 hit 43% of the female population and 75% of the male population.

However the disease did not cause a great overturning of the demographic state, as differently from other Roman parishes, the mortality rate did not revolutionize the existing social structure.

The pestilential scourge, despite claiming victims, hardly changed the gap of numbers between men and women.

In the *Status Animarum* of S. Maria del Popolo, the parish priest also did a "counting of the souls" relating to the single districts they belonged to.

This extremely scrupulous behaviour of the parish priest allowed not only a detailed examination of the general demographic trend of the parish but also of the single districts they belonged to.

The districts in question are Borghetto, Oca and Ripetta. Some of the women living in these districts who became widows after the plague, were investigated regarding their family and economical affairs.

The information contained in the parish registers shows a demographic fall, in both the districts of Oca and Ripetta between 1656 (the year the plague started) and 1657 (the year the plague ended), whilst the Borghetto district was more stable.

Examining the documents at ASVR regarding the Ripetta district, a further case of a widow financing her late husband's economical activity has been found, similarly to the case in the parish of S.Lorenzo in Damaso.

Cross checking the *Status Animarum* with the Book of Deaths and Marriages, it has been possible to reconstruct detailed events in connection with the private and economical affairs of another woman during the plague.

Consulting the status of marriages there is evidence of Gio Antonio and Caterina's wedding, a widower and widow, but we can know for certain that only Caterina's first husband "died by fever and blight"; sure enough Franco, Caterina's first husband, died in the hospital in October 1656.

Franco Reghini was 56 years old and was a pasta make. Six months after his death, Caterina got married again to Gio Antonio, a man from Recanati who owned a tavern there. An intriguing element is that even though Gio Antonio owned a commercial activity in his hometown, he decided to get married and move to Rome with his seventeen old son; as a matter of fact, there is evidence of the new family nucleus in the *Status Animarum* of subsequent years.

We can assume that the tavern in Recanati that Gio Antonio owned did not have the same economical income as Caterina's and should this be true, it is easy to understand why the man decided to abandon his tavern and go the Rome with his son.

Thus men who married widows made a social and economical leap.

There is evidence in the parish of S. Maria del Popolo of a further event that supports this assumption of social and economical improvement being gained by a man marrying a widow, precisely in the above mentioned district of Borghetto.

Temperanza's husband died of the plague and the woman was left alone with her two daughters, Giustina and Maddalena (respectively five and fifteen years old).

The *Status Animarum* gives some very interesting information on this family prior to Lorenzo's (Temperanza's husband) death.

First of all, judging from Lorenzo's profession i.e. a buffalo herdsman, it may be assumed that the family enjoyed a good income and this is relevant in order to base assumptions in this survey.

Temperanza married Antonio, who was from Milan, on 26th July 1658 and they went to live in her house with the daughters she had from her first marriage. There is evidence in the *Status Animarum* that Temperanza did not have any more children, nor were there any further family members in her second marriage.

The most relevant datum is that Lorenzo's trade was "inherited" by Antonio who carried it on with profit.

It may be assumed that this wedding was profitable for both the wife and the husband.

A man's working support was welcomed in a female family like Temperanza's and it is also true that the "inherited" profession guaranteed an excellent economical subsistence.

This further example clarifies how important it was for a woman in ancient times, to have the support of a man.

As already mentioned in the introduction, throughout the 600's and in modern times there is no concept of a woman as a social entity being detached from the control of a man; a woman was always placed under the "control" of a masculine figure, her father before marriage and then her husband. The female figure has always been tied to the domestic world, a woman was neither socially nor economically independent, her image was subordinate to the social reflection that was imposed on her, i.e. daughter, wife and finally mother.

Being aware of this social reality is it easy to understand what pushed many widows, who had a good income and would have been quite autonomous, to get married again very quickly since her decision would not have been for economical but for social reasons.

Bearing this in mind, we can understand Temperanza who was left alone with two daughters and her need to remarry not even a year after her first husband's death.

Conclusions

The documents that are filed in the ASVR have enabled us to reconstruct and understand the daily lives of some of the captioned women.

Examining their lives in a difficult period of time that was scourged by the plague, it is easy to comprehend the great practicality of these women.

On the contrary, the only time they were relatively free to decide their own lives was when they became widows, in fact this was a social status that permitted their economic independence and above all they were the leading actor in handling the working affairs she inherited from her husband.

During the 600's women did not mourn their husbands for very long, as the difficulties connected to their daily lives without the presence of a man, sent them quickly back to their practical existence and the problems a widow had to face. Without a man nearby her social existence was very difficult, a masculine figure denoted tranquility, in fact parish priests kept a greater check on single women as there was no social identity for widows who were separated from marriage or cohabitation with the family men who dominated them (Groppi 1997)²⁰.

Widowhood was short lived because of the difficulties linked to the acceptance of a female as a single entity with the ability to live permanently and morally without the supervision of a man. Parish priests kept a closer watch over them for fear of any eventual immoral behaviour in the absence of a man. For this very reason there were numerous charitable entities that welcomed them and helped them economically.

The importance of this fact has partly changed the research on parish documents.

The initial assumption in this survey of a long widowhood has proved to be incorrect, as the practicality of women of the time led them to reduce their solitude.

However this fact did not restrict the survey but shifted it to the role of the widow's new husband. Quite often the men who married widows were much younger, with the aim of improving their economical and social standing.

This was well known information: i.e. the difference in age and the economical status of the spouses was chiefly related to the women.

The typical social improvement of an existing status was not solely attributable to women but also to the men who married the widows.

Without doubt, the analysis during this project has been shifted to another level, from the impossibility of a long period of solitude and her ability to manage her inherited economical activity, to an analysis of the route a man made by marrying a widow.

²⁰ Groppi A. 1997, *I conservatori della virtù*, Laterza, Roma-Bari

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