

The plague in the Kingdom of Naples (1656-58): diffusion and mortality¹

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Plagues and epidemics were real catastrophes for people living during the Modern Age. However, in Europe, the last severe epidemics broke out during the XVIIth century. As recently it has been told, in the following centuries European epidemics had not the same broad and widespread diffusion, the same lethality, the same peculiarity of “universal disease”².

These considerations are particularly valid in the case of the Kingdom of Naples, that in 1656-58 was struck by a devastating plague, which deeply influenced population growth.

In this paper, firstly, we tend to describe the diffusion of the plague in the Kingdom and, secondly, we try to calculate the mortality in this area after this epidemic.

1. The diffusion

In 1656 a plague epidemic hit the Kingdom of Naples. In the years before, from Algiers the disease had broke out in Spain: in Valencia in June 1647 and in Aragon in the spring of 1648, as well as in several other places of the Spanish areas of Valencia, Andalusia and Catalonia. In 1652 the plague had spread to Sardinia, to finally touch the cities and the territories of Naples, Rome and Genoa.

In the Kingdom, Naples was the first town to be hit by the plague during the months between March and May 1656. The epidemic was in Naples until August and only in December 1656 the capital was officially declared free from the plague.

Meanwhile, the epidemic had already spread widely throughout the Kingdom. Despite measures to restrict the movement of people, many persons fled from the infected capital, not only nobles and clerics, but also common people. So, their flight from the capital facilitated a rapid and widespread diffusion of plague in the other parts of the Kingdom.

Firstly, the plague infected the provinces next to Naples; secondly, the plague spread North and South, reaching areas far from Naples, also thanks to the diaspora from the other territories of the Kingdom. So, because of these easy movements and a lack of control over the territory by central and local governments, in the summer of 1656 the disease had already attacked several Southern Italian provinces.

The plague continued to turn outbreaks throughout the Kingdom in 1657 and again in 1658, saving all alone Terra d’Otranto. The Kingdom was free from plague only at the end of 1658.

So, to conclude, before disappearing, the plague remained in the Kingdom for more than two years, from March or May of 1656 until September of 1658. And finally, on December 11th, the government allowed all the villages of the Kingdom to trade freely among themselves and with the capital; besides, the government removed every obstacle to trade with other foreign territories, such as Rome and Genoa.

2. The mortality in the Kingdom

In its long period in the Kingdom, the plague spread in a lot of towns and villages, causing huge losses to the population affected, especially in the provinces nearest to Naples. Apart from Naples, the plague hit almost half of Southern Italian towns and villages, with peaks of about 90 per cent of villages in Principato Citra and Principato Ultra, of more than 66 per cent in Terra di

¹ To deepen this subject, we refer the reader to: I. Fusco, *Peste, demografia e fiscalità nel Regno di Napoli del XVII secolo*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2007, and I. Fusco, *La peste del 1656-58 nel Regno di Napoli: diffusione e mortalità*, in «Popolazione e Storia», n. 1/2009.

² G. Alfani, *Il Grand Tour dei Cavalieri dell’Apocalisse. L’Italia del «lungo Cinquecento» (1494-1629)*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2010.

Lavoro, of almost 50 per cent in Contado di Molise and in Capitanata, of 33 per cent in Basilicata and Abruzzo Citra, and of about 25 per cent in Abruzzo Ultra and Terra di Bari.

In Southern Italian towns and villages, the mortality was very high, with rates much higher depending on the town. Generally, trying to provide overall figures on victims of the disease, here we can consider some fiscal documentary sources.

In general, fiscal data can give some problems, as they suits above all fiscal needs. However, in our opinion, we must consider them, as currently these data are the only ones that can provide a complete and total picture of the Kingdom.

In particular, we refer to the source defined as “the counting of fiscal fires”. To better explain: in the Kingdom of Naples, periodically the government used to number the households living in every centre. On the basis of these households, also defined “fiscal fires”, every centre in the provinces paid the so-called “direct taxes” (to use a current term). Even though we have to consider that fiscal fires reflected rarely the real figure but more often the households which were presumed to be living in the centres, being the result of bargaining between the Treasury and the towns, however the countings of fiscal fires are able to indicate the trend of growth and decline of population. These countings, therefore, give us an overview of the entire Southern Italian population, not including Naples, the capital, which was not included in them.

Coming back to the years we are interested in, comparing the counting of 1648 (the last counting prior to the plague) with the counting of 1669 (the first counting published after the plague), from 1648 to 1669 the Kingdom of Naples lost more than 100.000 fires, as fires decreased from 500,203 in 1648 to 394,721 in 1669: a decrease of 21 per cent (figure 1).

Figure 1. *Decrease of fiscal fires from 1648 to 1669 expressed as a percentage*

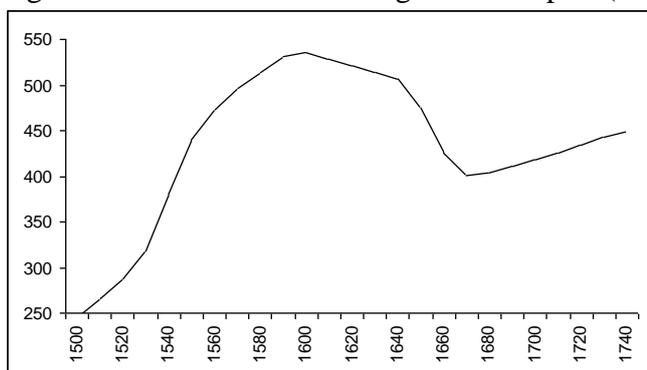
<i>Provinces of the Kingdom of Naples</i>	<i>Decrease of fiscal fires (1648-1669) (%)</i>
Terra di Lavoro	-9.7
Contado di Molise	-14.8
Principato Citra	-36.6
Principato Ultra	-40.5
Capitanata	-24.9
Basilicata	-29.2
Terra di Bari	-14.9
Terra d’Otranto	-18.1
Calabria Citra	-25.3
Calabria Ultra	-17.5
Abruzzo Citra	-16.1
Abruzzo Ultra	-12.8
<i>Totale</i>	<i>-21</i>

Actually, wanting to go even deeper, the sources tell us that, in the Sixties, during the activities that would have lead to the final counting of 1669, towns and villages admitted the existence of the two-thirds of the fiscal fires listed in the counting of 1648. So, we could suppose a loss of fires by 33 per cent after 1656: in short, a loss greater than that provided by the counting of 1669 (-21 per cent). This decrease in fiscal fires (and so in population) was not caused only by the plague, but certainly the plague represented the main cause of the decrease. Suffice to note that, if we compare the fiscal data of 1648 with the ones of 1669, the most significant decline was recorded in just two provinces most affected by the epidemic, namely in the two Principati, where there was a loss of 36.6 percent (Principato Citra) and 40.5 percent (Principato Ultra) (figure 1).

These arguments are right as long as we consider that they are based on fiscal sources, so not able to give a “certain” estimate of demographic decrease. However, these sources can provide the downward trend, after 1656, of Southern Italian population. In particular, as we can see in figure 2, which shows the trend of fiscal fires from 1505 to 1669, there is an increase of fires throughout the

XVIth century, an initial decline during the first half of the XVIIth century and a greater decrease after the plague of 1656.

Figure 2: Fiscal fires in the Kingdom of Naples (1505-1732) (000)



In short, as we can see in this figure, the plague of 1656 was the main cause of the demographic decrease of population in the Kingdom of Naples in the second half of the XVIIth century. Generally, on the basis of information provided so far, it can be assumed that the plague caused the death of about 20-30 per cent of the population. So, we could venture a conjecture: assuming that before the outbreak of the plague Southern Italian population was about 2,500,000 (exactly 2,501,015), after the plague the number of deaths in the Kingdom could range between 500,000 and 835,000 persons³.

In reality, it is likely that the mortality caused by the disease was even higher than the one just indicated. In fact, the hypothesis just advanced is based on a count of the households, but what happened within every household? Generally historians tend to consider every household, living in Southern Italy during the Seventeenth century, composed by an average of 5 persons. But what happened after the plague? Can we still consider valid the factor 5 or do we have to consider another factor, lower than 5?

To try to answer this question, we have calculated the number of persons living in every fiscal fire in 1660, that's to say after the plague. To do this calculation, we have used some information, found in several local studies and ancient sources. From our calculations, we mention here very quickly, it appears that, after the plague, the persons in each fiscal fire were less than 5. In particular, in 1660 every fiscal fire seemed to be composed of an average of 3.53 people.

Therefore, considering not the factor 5 but the lower factor 3.5 and multiplying this lower factor by the number of fiscal fires in 1660, we get a population of 1,445,619 in 1660 in the Kingdom. If we then subtract this figure from the Southern Italian population in 1648 (2.501.015), we get a loss of 1,055,396 persons after the plague, that is to say a loss of 42 per cent of the population before the plague. This loss of 42 per cent is higher than the one of 20-30 per cent, considered before and based only on the calculation of the fiscal fires.

3. The mortality in Naples

This calculation does not include Naples. In fact, Naples was a unique town. It was not only the capital of the Kingdom, the place where the viceregal court used to live, an important crossroads of trade and foreign merchants, the main centre of attraction for rich and poor people from provinces, but also the largest town in the Kingdom and one of the biggest cities in Europe, second only to London and Paris in terms of its population size.

³ In particular, we have multiplied the fiscal fires of 1648 by a factor of 5 (generally considered valid for this period), that is to say that every household was composed by 5 persons. In this way, we have obtained the inhabitants of the Kingdom before the plague (2,501,015). As the mortality rate was around 20-30 per cent, and perhaps even higher - we have seen in this paper -, around 33 per cent, we have calculated the 20 per cent (500,203) and 33 per cent (833,671) of 2,501,015.

Numerous contemporary sources testify that Naples was densely inhabited. However, the historian's task becomes hugely complicated when one attempts to quantify the Neapolitan population. In fact, there is a lack of reliable and complete data for this period, which would enable us to clarify the actual population of the capital. Besides Naples, unlike the other cities in the Kingdom, does not even have any fiscal records for the period, as the Neapolitan population was exempt from "direct" taxation and a land register.

Nonetheless, writings from the period sometimes give some indication of the number of inhabitants in the capital. Nevertheless, these figures can only be considered as "hypotheses", however indicative they may be, of the city's population. Generally, we can say that, before the plague, Naples was populated by around 400,000.

The huge population of the capital gives an idea of the huge damage that a plague epidemic could cause within such a large city. In this sense, the epidemic that struck Naples in 1656 did indeed cause disasters. Once again, it is difficult to guess at the quantities, providing an accurate number of deaths. However, trying to convey a figure, the number of deaths would range from a minimum of 200,000 to a maximum of 600,000 people. In general, the higher figures appear in contemporary writings, which often tended to exaggerate the extent of the devastation as they were frightened by the speed and seriousness of events.

Generally, we can probably consider that the city's population was reduced by around half. In short, trying to venture a conjecture about the deaths in Naples, if we consider that in 1648 the capital was populated by around 400,000, we might suppose that around 200,000 persons died in Naples. Overall, adding the 200,000 people of Naples to the 1,055,396 of the other parts of the Kingdom, we could reach the conclusion that the plague caused the deaths of approximately 1,255,396 persons in the whole Kingdom. This means that the plague caused the death of more than 43 per cent of previous population.

4. Conclusion

Thanks to the sources so far consulted and the main available references, it has been possible to reconstruct the "path" of the plague of 1656-58 in the Kingdom of Naples.

Something "new" has emerged from this research and it concerns the cronology of the plague. The disease, commonly known as "the plague of 1656-57", lasted for a longer time, until 1658.

Another "new" thing is about the high levels of mortality caused by the disease. Although it is difficult to give exact figures, we have proposed some new quantitative data on deaths in Naples and in the Kingdom. We have concluded that the plague caused the deaths of about 1,250,000 persons throughout the Kingdom, with mortality rates that varied from 42-43 per cent in the Kingdom as a whole to about 50 per cent in Naples.