

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Florence Under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City** *by John Henderson*

Hardback, 376 pages  
Yale University Press  
August 2019

This book describes the plague epidemic in Florence of 1630 and, to a lesser extent, its return in 1632-33. The author addresses the many facets of the epidemic in which the city's inhabitants were faced with a terrifying, deadly, poorly understood pestilence. In some Italian cities, over half the population succumbed. The phrase "under siege" in the title of the book reflects the parallels with being at war.

Chapters of the book cover: the development of the epidemic; public health, quarantine and cordon sanitaire; and religious and legal involvement. The *Sanita* (Public Health Board) played a pivotal role. The Lazaretti were greatly feared. The spread of plague was variously blamed on divine punishment, foul air, the Jewish Ghetto, beggars and prostitutes. It strikes me how many parallels there are in human behaviour between this and more recent epidemics, for example, the AIDS epidemic. Although the poor were regarded as contributory to the plague epidemic, there was compassion; religious orders performed charitable duties and the legal system was often benevolent.

The book is extraordinarily detailed and well researched. About 80 pages are taken up with Notes and Bibliography and an Index. It contains many relevant and useful tables, maps and graphs, and also has a good variety of colour illustrations which put the narrative in perspective. At the same time, it is easy to read because the author has a comfortable narrative style and he intersperses complex factual matters with personal stories, often tragic, from legal and other records.

*Florence Under Siege* should appeal to a broad variety of readers from the academic to the interested lay reader. With a medical background, I found it interesting to look at an epidemic, largely from other viewpoints, and to appreciate its massive impact upon all aspects of society. All in all, an extraordinarily fascinating book about which it is hard to find anything critical to say.

**William Dibb**  
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