
FRESCOS AND GRAFFITOS AS WITNESSES OF MASS DEATH

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IZVLEČEK

Freske in grafiti kot priče množične smrti

Avtor v članku proučuje odnos prebivalcev Istre do smrti v času velikih epidemij 15. in 16. stoletja. Ta odnos je mogoče razbrati iz del lokalnih mojstrov, slikarjev fresk v istrskih cerkvah, zlasti v delih mojstrov Vincen- ta in Janeza iz Kastva in njuni slavni različici Plesa smrti – Mrtvaškega plesa. Drug tip dokumentarnih virov so grafiti, ki so jih z glagolico napisali preprosti ljudje na omet cerkvenih sten. Ti grafiti na slikovit način odsevajo okoliščine tistega časa, vsakodnevne dejavnosti preprostih ljudi, kljub temu pa niso nikoli omenjeni v kronikah uradne zgodovine. Raziskave zgodovinarjev in zdravnikov odkrivajo načine in razširi- tve določenih epidemij v Istri, načine zavarovanja pred njimi, posledice teh epidemij in status uradne zdra- vstvene zaščite, ki se nanaša na bolnike. Če primerjamo vse tri različne vire, si lahko na slikovit način pre- dstavljamo sliko družbe v tem zgodovinskem obdobju, ki ga je zaznamovala hitra in številna smrt. To je bilo obdobje, ko so se življenjske vrednote zelo hitro spreminjale, zmagoslavje smrti pa je bilo neogibno.

Ključne besede: smrt, kuga, epidemija, 15. stoletje, 16. stoletje, grafiti, freske, zgodovina medicine, Istra.
Key words: death, plague, epidemics, 15th century, 16th century, graffitos, frescos, history of medicine, Istria

Introduction

Regarding to this article, we will pay attention to the frescos from the churches in villages of Beram and Hrastovlje, and to the graffitos carved in the churches in Lovran and Pazin. We will also pay attention to the spreading of epidemics in Istria in fifteenth and sixteenth century, and the presence of doctors at that time and their attitude to- wards mass death and their own death.



Zdravnik in smrt – detajl s freske Ples smrti iz cerkve v Hrastovljah (iz knjige M. Zadnikarja Hrastovlje, foto M. Smrke). ♦ The physician and death – a detail from the fresco Death dance from the Hrastovlje church (from the book of M. Zadnikar Hrastovlje, photo M. Smrke).

Discussion

There was a period of strong extensive epidemics in Istria in fifteenth and sixteenth century (Bertoša 1977: 89-99). Very often old sources tell us about plague, but today we know that the described epidemics were not just the product of plague but also of variola, typhoid, malaria, syphilis and many other diseases (Attali 1984: 61). But plague left the strongest trace because it caused death of an enormous number of people in a very short period. Its causative organism, which today we call *Yersinia Pestis* (Mihaljević 1994: 148-51), was at that time very virulent and as such it caused mass death (Grmek 1962: 705). Due to bad hygiene, inadequate living conditions and deficit knowledge about plague, pestilence spread very quickly. Istria as a transitive territory, was extremely exposed to it. After the tragic experience of Black Death in the fourteenth century, Venetian Republic in 1485 established a supreme institution (*Provveditori alla Sanita*) (Glesinger 1989: 109) for the control of ships that came to Istria from suspicious territories. A special sanitary cordon was organized and it was placed on the border between Venetian and Austrian part of Istria (Muzur, Škrobonja 1996: 211). The cities tried to protect themselves by controlling the ships and by the isolation of passengers. But epidemics continued to spread quickly and strongly.

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It is no wonder that in 15th century iconographic motives of Dance of Death appeared on church walls. All through the Europe this motif was known in the shape of wall paintings, graphic prints, literary forms and even live performances (Fučić 1997: 305-8; Delimo 1986: 103-122), The Dance of Death, in a wall painting form, appeared in Istria in the village of Beram in 1474 (Fučić 1992: 95-102) and in the village of Hrastovlje in 1490 (Zadnikar 1988: 37-41). Before the making of this frescos some strong epidemics appeared. Today we know about the ones that appeared in 1427, 1449, 1456, 1467, 1476, 1478, 1483, 1487 and 1497. All together in 15th century the plague was presented nine times. Around 7000 people died during the epidemics in Trieste from 1477 to 1478. The death took the rich as well as the poor. So in 1497 in Trieste 120 respectable people died as well as over 400 poor people (Glesinger 1989: 107-109).

Dance of Death iconographiely represents all social classes, from a begger to rich salesmen, even cardinals, the Pope and the King. It is interesting that on the frescos in Hrastovlje we can see a doctor. We can recognise him with a bottle of urine, hanging around his waist (Schadewadt 1997: 188-189). This figure warns that the medicine is helpless and that the death is inevitable. The medicine in 15th century was helpless because of the unknown origin of the epidemics. Until the sixteenth century there was no scientific knowledge about the development of the epidemics.

Girolamo Fracastore in 1546 was the first one to notice that pestilence diseases were caused by germs. He thought that the pestilence was caused by living germs which were able to enter into the organism by contact with a sick person or through infected objects or by flying contagious aerosol (Grmek 1962: 188-189). But Istrian doctors had another opinion in 16th century. They had an old conception that the plague was caused by miasma - the sick evaporation which came from swamps around the town (Glesinger 1989: 109).

The theory about the origin of the plague was also connected with the way of protection. Even the Antique doctors Hypocrate and Galen didn't know a single rational method for the protection from plague. What people thought best was to escape momentarily, quickly and to a far off place (Bazala 1963: 72). The doctor in Koper, Leandro Zarotti, also used the method of escaping in 1554, when the plague appeared in Koper. He went to Venice and said that his contract was made only for normal situation in the city, but not during the plague epidemics (Glesinger 1989: 87).

250 That was not the only case. For example, doctors were going away from the city during the big plague epidemics in Dubrovnik in 1526 because they didn't want to take care of plague patients, and they were afraid to go to any patients (Jeremić, Tadić 1939: 94). In those cases the barbers took the place of the doctors (Orlić 1962: 28-32). They performed chirurgical actions on the plague buboes and we can only imagine how dangerous that was. For example the barber from Koper caused the plague epidemic with his doing in 1632 (Glesinger 1989: 111). The towns also lost doctors because of the lack of money for doctors to pay.

After the epidemics in Pula in 1557 the town was so poor that it couldn't afford a doctor. The similar situation happened at the end of the century in Koper (Glesinger 1989: 86). During the absence of preventive and therapeutical medical practice people used their own methods of protection. People also expected help from God and that is why a lot of prayers, processions, and gifts were common. A great number of vow churches, altars and pictures came into existence. Some of them finished, but some works were interrupted because of the new epidemics, and than the survivors finished the rest.

In the churches we also find graffitos about death. These are graffitos written in ancient Croatian letter - *glagoljica* and were carved into the walls at the holy place. They were done by people who knew how to write, usually priests or their pupils, but sometimes also by illiterate people who would carve pictures and symbols of their prayers. That is how the graffitos became living witnesses of one whole "little history", the history that was not taken down by historians and which didn't say anything about the Kings, nor about the state but about a little man and his preoccupations (Fučić 1997: 116-168; Rudelić 1984: 262). Especially interesting for this work are wall graffitos which inform us about death. So in the parish church of St. Nicholas in Pazin we find the following graffito: "*Ja pop Grgur Jerković peh moju mladu mašu na let Gospodnji 1557. dan 2. maja miseca i tada biše v Pazini velika morija*". (I, the pope Grgur Jerković, made the service on the 2nd day of May 1557, and that day, in Pazin was a big death.) (Fučić 1982: 278).

This tells us that on the 2nd of May 1557 there was a big death in Pazin, meaning that there was an epidemic which killed a great number of people. A medical historical research witnesses that in 1557 a great epidemic of plague caught Istria and that it was especially strong in Trieste and Izola (Glesinger 1989: 110). Obviously it also spread to the Austrian part of Istria, to Pazin. From the other graffito we found out about a possible course of the epidemic which is in parish church of St. George in Lovran; with the following content: "*Va ime Božje i Devi Marije, amen. 1558, miseca sektembra na dan*

14. *Ta dan se v Lovrane javi nagla smerti umre do 50 ljudi.*” (In the name of God and St. Virgin Mary, Amen. The 14th of September 1558. The sudden death struck in Lovran on that day, and almost 50 persons died) (Fučić 1982: 235).

This graffito shows us that the epidemic also spread even further to the east on the other side of mountain Učka, to Lovran, on the 14th September of 1558, 50 people died in that city. Nearly a year and a half passed between graffito in Pazin and the one in Lovran. We don't know whether the pestilence was constantly present at that time or was the Lovran death same kind of new pestilence or recidive, but those information tell us a lot about frequent presence of mass death on that territory.

In the Lovran church we also find a graffito which was written a bit earlier in 1549 which was signed by his author priest pupil Marko: “*To govore mrtvi živomu: Ča me gledaš ale ča se čudiš? Ale ne znaš da sam bil i jas včera kako si ti danas, a ti oćes biti zutra kako sam jas danas*’ 1549, to pisa žakan Marko.” (The dead speak to the living: Why are you looking at me or why are you surprised. Don't you know that yesterday I was what you are today, and that tomorrow you will be what I am today. 1549, this wrote priest pupil Marko.) (Fučić 1982: 236).

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In this graffito which obviously followed some tragic event in the city and which is a prophetic announcement of future tragic events, shows us attitude of a young man about death. Although the expressive form was taken from the famous theme of three dead man and three living which was known all through Europe in 15th century (Delimo 1986: 94-103). Pupil Marko told us in a vernacular way about an almost friendly talk of a dead man, as the one with more experiences, to a living one who was obviously surprised. There is no sadness in that writing because the one who is being addressed by a dead man knows how his life might end, but he also knows the words of Luke the evangelist: “Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised.” Lk24, 5-6 (New Testament 1968: 223). In those tough times these words of confidence were a salivation.

Conclusions

From these examples which mention graffiti of common people on the walls of holy places, from expressive strength of the iconographic motif of Dance of Death and from the researches about the numerous and powerful epidemics in Istria during the time of the making of mentioned graffiti and frescos, and finally from the research of the present doctors, their doctrines and relations toward the sick we can assume that the sudden and mass death during the 15th and the 16th century has changed drastically the social situation and the scale of life values.

Ethical relationship doctor - patient, has also changed drastically. The doctors responsibility had been replaced by the escape from duty and the escape from the sick. So, on one hand we have the care for oneself under the cost of their reputation, while on the other hand, their is an oncoming death that turns the survivors toward the protection of God and religious hope.

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