

## Short Articles

---

### NOTES ON SOME PLAGUE PAINTINGS

by

RENATE BURGESS\*

THE MOST famous paintings and designs depicting bubonic plague have at times been criticized for a certain lack of clinical veracity, because they do not show lesions which would make recognition of the disease possible.<sup>1</sup> One can, of course, look approvingly at a plague bubo prominently displayed, admittedly on the thigh instead of in the groin, in representations of St. Roch,<sup>2</sup> one of the patron saints of plague victims, and conclude that its painter and the commissioning authority, the Church, had in mind the same "plague" which we now know to be produced by *Pasteurella pestis*.

The comprehensive work on the plague as a source of artistic inspiration by Brossolet and Mollaret of the Pasteur Institute in Paris<sup>3</sup> shows a number of works of art that do justice to the disease in the same manner. However, artists like Raphael, Rubens, Poussin, and others have created their renowned plague paintings and designs with the genuine intention of depicting this disease, but without showing a single plague bubo. This omission can in some cases be explained by aesthetic considerations. The overall effect of a classical work would be disturbed by a repulsive sight.

Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472)<sup>4</sup> wrote in his *De pictura*: "The ancients painted the portrait of Antigonos (one of his eyes being blind) only from the side of his face where the eye was not lacking. . . ." "It is said that Pericles' head was long and ugly, for this reason he—unlike others—was portrayed by painters and sculptors wearing a helmet." This kind of veiling technique would be easy in the case of plague representations where the axillary and inguinal sites of lesions were usually covered. But if paintings did not show the most distinctive feature of the disease, what others did they represent? It is well known that, far from observing contemporary plague

\*Renate Burgess, Ph.D., is Keeper of Art Collections at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP.

<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Brossolet, 'Rubens et les saints thérapeutes', *Communications au XXIV Congrès International d'Histoire de la Médecine*, Budapest, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Panel painting in the Wellcome collection, No. 4761/1936.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Mollaret and Jacqueline Brossolet, *La peste source méconnue d'inspiration artistique*, Antwerp, Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor schoone Kunsten, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), painter, poet, musician, restorer of the classical style of architecture. His writings shaped the classical style of Renaissance artists. L. B. Alberti, *On painting (De Pictura)*, translated, with introduction and notes by John R. Spencer, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956, p. 76.

### Short Articles

victims, Renaissance and Baroque painters followed literary sources from classical antiquity or the Scriptures, all of which describe symptoms and signs assembled under the term "plague". One of the best known sources was the Plague of the Philistines at Ashdod in the Old Testament compiled c. 800 B.C.<sup>5</sup>

In the wars between the Israelites and Philistines the latter took the Holy Ark of the Covenant from the Israelites and set it up in their own shrine of the idol Dagon at Ashdod. On the following day Dagon's sculptured figure lay upturned and broken on the ground, and the same calamity repeated itself in other places of worship to which the Ark was removed. The threshold of Dagon became taboo for priests and worshippers, a fact which made them feel more helpless still in the face of another sign of divine wrath, for they were smitten with "tumours", in Hebrew "Emerods"; the Vulgate<sup>6</sup> says the site of these emerods was "in secretiori parte natium" (in the most secret parts of the buttocks).<sup>7</sup>

The Vulgate has, after an account of the epidemic a small passage which reads: ". . . and in the midst of the land thereof mice (or rats) were brought forth and there was a great and deadly destruction in the city." The appearance of these mice was, at that time, probably not thought to be responsible for the outbreak of plague. Its cause was believed to be divine wrath because of the sins of both Philistines and Israelites.<sup>8</sup>

The story of the plague at Ashdod has been illustrated in bibles and secular literature as far back as A.D.1250.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to examine how a high-ranking artist of the seventeenth century combined the old epic of the disease with medical experience of his own time. Nicolas Poussin (1593/4–1665) painted his version of "The Plague at Ashdod" in 1630 during a stay in Rome; it is now in the Louvre. The engraving from it by Stephen Picart of 1677, done in the reverse, gives a good reproduction of Poussin's work (Figure 1).

The painter called it once "the miracle of the Ark in the temple of Dagon."<sup>10</sup> One of the possible reasons for the choice of his subject was that a plague epidemic was currently raging at Milan. The painting has been praised for the faithful reproduction of all the features mentioned in the Old Testament story. We see the temple with the fallen idol of Dagon broken in pieces, and the Ark of the Israelites with angels at its corners. The composition with classical architecture receding towards

<sup>5</sup> I Samuel, 5–6, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Biblia* [The Vulgate version . . .], Paris, Robert Stephani, 1545, Regum, 5.

<sup>7</sup> J. F. D. Shrewsbury, *The plague of the Philistines and other medical-historical essays*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1964, pp. 13–39. He interprets the signs and symptoms described in the book of Samuel as intestinal disease accompanied by severe tenesmus. The Hebrew word "emerods" is translated into "haemorrhoids". The disease is diagnosed as plague by Raymond Crawford, *Plague and pestilence in literature and art*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1914, pp. 11–12.

<sup>8</sup> Otto Neustatter, *Mice in plague pictures*, reprinted from *Journal of Walter's Art Gallery*, 1941, p. 113, ". . . the obvious conclusion is that the artists of the middle ages and renaissance, having before them a text of Samuel which described an invasion of mice as well as an affliction of plague, simply illustrated the story as literally as they could. Thus, all indications tend to discredit the belief that in these earlier days there existed a popular understanding of the role of vermin in helping to spread plague".

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> Sir Anthony Blunt, *The paintings of Nicolas Poussin. A critical catalogue*, London, Phaidon, 1966, pp. 24–25, No. 32.

### Short Articles

the background provides a stage for the groups of large foreground figures who display violent passions roused by the sudden catastrophe. The short interval of time between the appearance of the first symptoms and death is illustrated by the position and movement of the figures. Although the site of the “tumours” in the Bible story was, according to the Vulgate, in the perineal region, a fact duly repeated in the French and Latin captions of the engraving, the disease the artist had in mind was not a relatively slow intestinal disorder, but the same fulminating and lethal plague that created havoc in the Italian towns in Poussin’s day.

In the picture most of the figures still unaffected by the disease are shielding their noses and mouths, which suggests repulsion from the smell combined with contagion in the air surrounding the sick and dying. This feature was not indicated in the Bible story, but before Poussin’s time the concept of air-borne contagion was already well developed.<sup>11</sup> A dramatic contrast is created between the afflicted and the commiserating and by the young man standing to the right. He is erect and immobilized by shock, his frightened look is directed a little behind him, where a large rat is prominently displayed on a temple step. Following the biblical story, Poussin put a number of mice<sup>12</sup> on the ground, but the significance of this emblematic rat in the foreground can, in connexion with the frightened countenance of the young man, be understood as a symbolic indication of danger. Medical authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw in the regularly repeated appearance of all sorts of rodents before the onset of an epidemic of plague a premonitory sign that had to be taken seriously.<sup>13</sup> Here there seems to be proof of Poussin’s intense participation in the thinking of his time and his intention to represent his theme in all the aspects experience made available to him.

One of the groups that focus attention in the picture is that of the dead woman in the centre foreground, together with her children; one of them, still alive, is trying to feed from her breast, whilst the father is keeping the child away, with the other hand shielding his nose and mouth. Did Poussin see this group in a contemporary plague epidemic, for instance the one in Milan? There was, however, no need for him to observe the real thing. The gradual shaping of this pictorial motif started in antiquity and has been traced forward to a drawing by Raphael Sanzio (1483–1520), over a hundred years before Poussin undertook his painting of the plague.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Hieronymus Fracastorius, *De sympathia et antipathia rerum liber unus. De contagione et contagiosis morbis, et eorum curatione libri III*, Venice, Heirs of L. A. Junta, 1546, chapters V–VII.

<sup>12</sup> The Bible story speaks of mice only, rats were not known in the Orient at the time the book of Samuel deals with (c. 1500 B.C.). See Mollaret and Brossolet, *op. cit.*, note 3 above, p. 107, note 57.

<sup>13</sup> Gabriel Magny, *Rats et peste*, M.D. thesis, Paris, Bonvalot-Jouve, 1907, pp. 15–17. The role played in the thinking regarding plague during the sixteenth and following centuries was that of a warning sign. Magny quotes Laurent Joubert’s *Traité de la peste* of 1566 “. . . on peut prévoir la peste quand on voit un nombre infini de ces petits bestions que les Latins appellent insectes et de puces, punaises, mouches, araignées, etc. . . . ou encore lorsqu’un verra les bêtes qui se logent dans les cavernes et cachots, comme font les rats, taupes, serpents et autres, seront contraints de quitter leurs loges pour se tenir dehors.” Joubert was, according to Magny, the first to mention fleas in connexion with plague, but without knowing their association with rats in the spread of the disease. Other plague treatises are mentioned which contain the same observations.

<sup>14</sup> Sir Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin. The A. W. Mellon Lectures on the Fine Arts, 1958, National Gallery of Washington D.C.*, London, Phaidon, 1967, p. 94, text and note 49. Crawford, *op. cit.*, note 7 above, p. 148.

### Short Articles

Pliny in his *Naturalis historia*<sup>15</sup> tells of a picture by the painter Aristides, who lived in the fourth century B.C. “. . . He was the first of all painters who depicted the mind and expressed the feelings of a human being . . . and also the emotions . . . his works include . . . on the capture of a town, showing an infant creeping to the breast of its mother who is dying of a wound.”

Sir Anthony Blunt<sup>16</sup> in his second work on Poussin quotes a mural of the “Massacre of the Innocents” by Ghirlandajo in Sta. Maria Novella, Florence, of the 1440s depicting the event. But even more relevant to our plague picture is the drawing by Raphael, which is called “Il Morbetto” in the well-known engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi (1480–1534) from it. Figure 2 shows this engraving. There is a drawing preserved in the Uffizie at Florence, which is worn out in parts. Some art historians find it too far executed for Raphael, who, when drawing for the engraver, was less artistic in his handling.<sup>17</sup> A much-praised drawing identical with that in the Uffizie, except for differences in execution, was an original from the collection of Sir Thomas Lawrence, the painter (1769–1830). Those who knew it accepted it as a masterpiece by Raphael; unfortunately it is now believed to be lost.<sup>18</sup> Knowledge of this Raphael composition stems from Raimondi’s engraving.<sup>19</sup>

Raphael took the mother-child motif related by Pliny, but in a different context; it is not a warrior who has killed the mother, but a disease. Again he drew inspiration for his plague theme from a literary source, this time Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Aeneas and his men, in search of an ancient fatherland, arrives in Crete, where they are prevented from settling by an outbreak of plague. In translation the text reads:

Scarce stand the vessels hauled upon the beach  
And bent on marriage the young men vie  
To till new settlements, while I to each  
Due law dispense and dwellingplace supply.  
When from a tainted quarter of the sky  
Rank vapours gathering, on my comrades seize,  
And a foul pestilence creeps down from high  
On mortal limbs and standing crops and trees,

<sup>15</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, with an English translation in ten volumes by H. Rackham, London, Heinemann, 1952, Book XXXV, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Blunt, op. cit., note 14 above, *ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> J. D. Passavant, *Rafael von Urbino und sein Vater Giovanni Santi*, Leipzig, F. A. Brockhaus, 1839, p. 487, No. 138. “Unsere Zeichnung ist in allen Theilen . . . mit jenem Stiche übereinstimmend, aufs sorgfältigste mit der Feder gezeichnet, mit Bister schattiert und mit Weiss gehöht sehr vollendet in allen Theilen so durchgeführt, wie es sonst bei den echten Zeichnungen Raphael’s nicht der Fall ist.” Oberhuber, *Raphael’s Zeichnungen*, Berlin, Gebr. Mann, 1972, p. 24. Here the drawing is entered as a work by Raphael, with bibliography containing various opinions.

<sup>18</sup> Auction catalogue of “The Lawrence Gallery”, Ninth Exhibition, June 1834, No. 47. “The pest—well known to the Amateur from the celebrated engraving from it by Marc Antonio. This most splendid and matchless model is of the highest interest; it is executed with the utmost delicacy, on a grey paper, heightened with white; and it is one of the finest drawings in the collection. . . . From the collections of King Charles the First, of England, and T. Dimsdale Esq.” Passavant, op. cit., note 17 above, p. 487. “. . . ich halte daher eine andere (Zeichnung) desselben Gegenstandes im Nachlass Lawrence in London, die sehr frei und geistreich behandelt ist, für den Originalentwurf.”

<sup>19</sup> J. Adam von Bartsch, *Le peintre graveur*, Vienna, 1803–21, No. 417. V. H. Delaborde, *Marc Antoine Raimondi*, Paris, Libr. de l’Art, 1888, pp. 214, 216, No. 189. Measurements 0.197 x 0.255 m. The source of Virgil is mentioned. The engraving has five states, of which only the first two allow Raimondi’s work to be appreciated.

### Short Articles

A season black with death, and pregnant with disease.  
Sweet life from mortals fled; they dropped and died.<sup>20</sup>

Another event of a more comforting nature is related. The hero is lying sleepless on his couch and visited by his home gods:

'Twas night; on earth all creatures were asleep,  
When lo! the figures of our gods, the same  
Whom erst from falling Ilion o'er the deep  
I brought, scarce rescued from the midmost flame<sup>9</sup>  
Before me, sleepless for my country's shame,  
stood plain, in plenteousness of light confessed,  
Where streaming through the sunken lattice came  
The moon's full splendour, and their speech addressed,  
And I in heart took comfort, hearing their behest.<sup>11</sup>

Raphael's drawing gives both scenes. Below human beings and animals around a classical herm are seen attacked by disease. In the dark spot the torch in the hand of a young man reveals lifeless bodies of domestic animals. A woman, seen in profile, lies dead, her body sunk and flaccid. Her child lifting her garment, is restrained by the father (an addition to the Pliny motif) who stumbles forward, with outstretched arm, his other hand protecting his face from "the rank vapours".

Above is Virgil's scene of comfort seen through an arched window. In a ray of light two figures are approaching the man who is reclining on a couch.

To do justice to Raphael's genius in picking up motifs and adapting them to his purpose, we must take a further step and look at the Strassburg edition of Virgil's works of 1502 (Figure 3).<sup>22</sup> Here an anonymous woodcut, done in the primitive style of popular illustrations in early printed books, accompanies the text. To the left is shown an upper chamber, in which Aeneas is lying. Three figures appear at his couch, their names "Mercurius, Jupiter and Pallas" inscribed above their heads. A strip of cross-hatching attempts to reproduce the light of Virgil's apparition. This part of the woodcut obviously served Raphael as a motif in his picture (Figure 2), but he substituted two veiled women for the three gods. In Bartsch's catalogue, the *Peintre graveur*,<sup>23</sup> these figures are called nursing sisters, without reference to the woodcut in the Strassburg edition of Virgil. They may be female saints, for example St. Elizabeth of Hungary who is often represented nursing the sick. In his intuitive grasp of the main theme Raphael drops the dated motif of antique gods for the more topical figures of saints or sisters who bring comfort to the sleepless Aeneas. The ray of light is heightened to a luminous effect.

It is interesting to see how Raimondi's engraving (Figure 2) maintains the antique theme; above the two women's heads is inscribed "Effigies sacrae divom Phrighi." The lettering on the pedestal of the herm below repeats Virgil's text "Linquebant

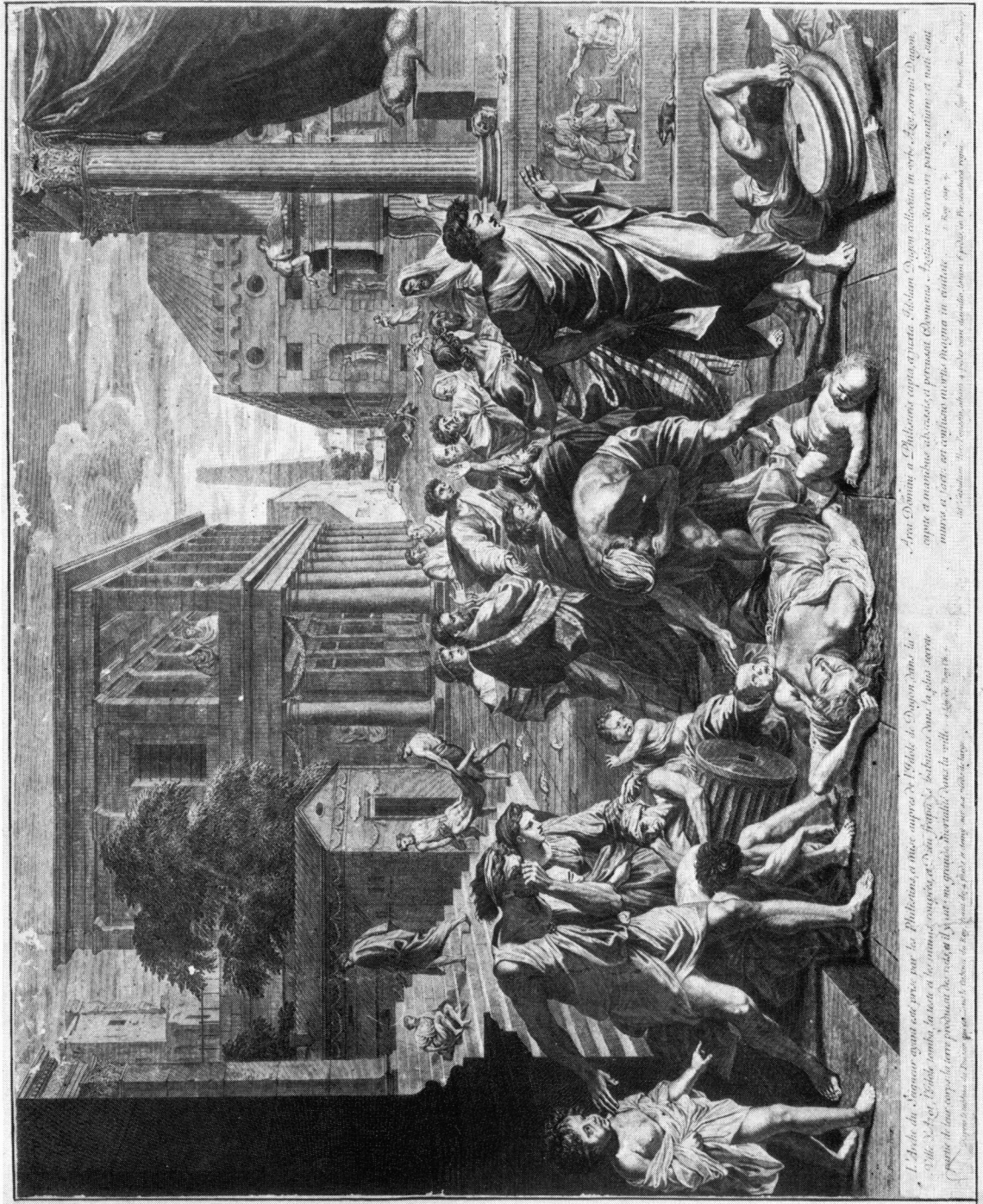
<sup>20</sup> E. Fairfax Taylor, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, translated (into English verse) by E. Fairfax Taylor, London, Everyman's Library [1907], p. 65.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Vergilius Maro, Publius, *Opera Vergiliana docte et familiariter exposita . . . ab Jodoco Badio Ascensio . . . vegio liber: expolitissimus figuris . . . illustrata*, Lyons, J. Bacon for C. Hochperg, 1517. (A reprint of the 1502 Strassburg edition), liber III, facing fol. LXXIX.

<sup>23</sup> Bartsch, *op. cit.*, note 19 above.





*L'Arche de Noë, qui est prise par les Philistins, et mise auprès de l'Idole de Dagon, dans la ville de Gath. L'Idole tombe de sa base, et se casse en mille pièces. Les habitants de la ville, qui ont été réduits à l'extrême de la famine, se jettent sur les corps morts, et se mangent les uns les autres. Les Philistins, qui ont été vaincus, se retirent dans leur pays.*

*Arche Noë prise par les Philistins, et mise auprès de l'Idole de Dagon, dans la ville de Gath. L'Idole tombe de sa base, et se casse en mille pièces. Les habitants de la ville, qui ont été réduits à l'extrême de la famine, se jettent sur les corps morts, et se mangent les uns les autres. Les Philistins, qui ont été vaincus, se retirent dans leur pays.*

Figure 1. Engraving of the plague at Ashdod by S. Picart after N. Poussin.



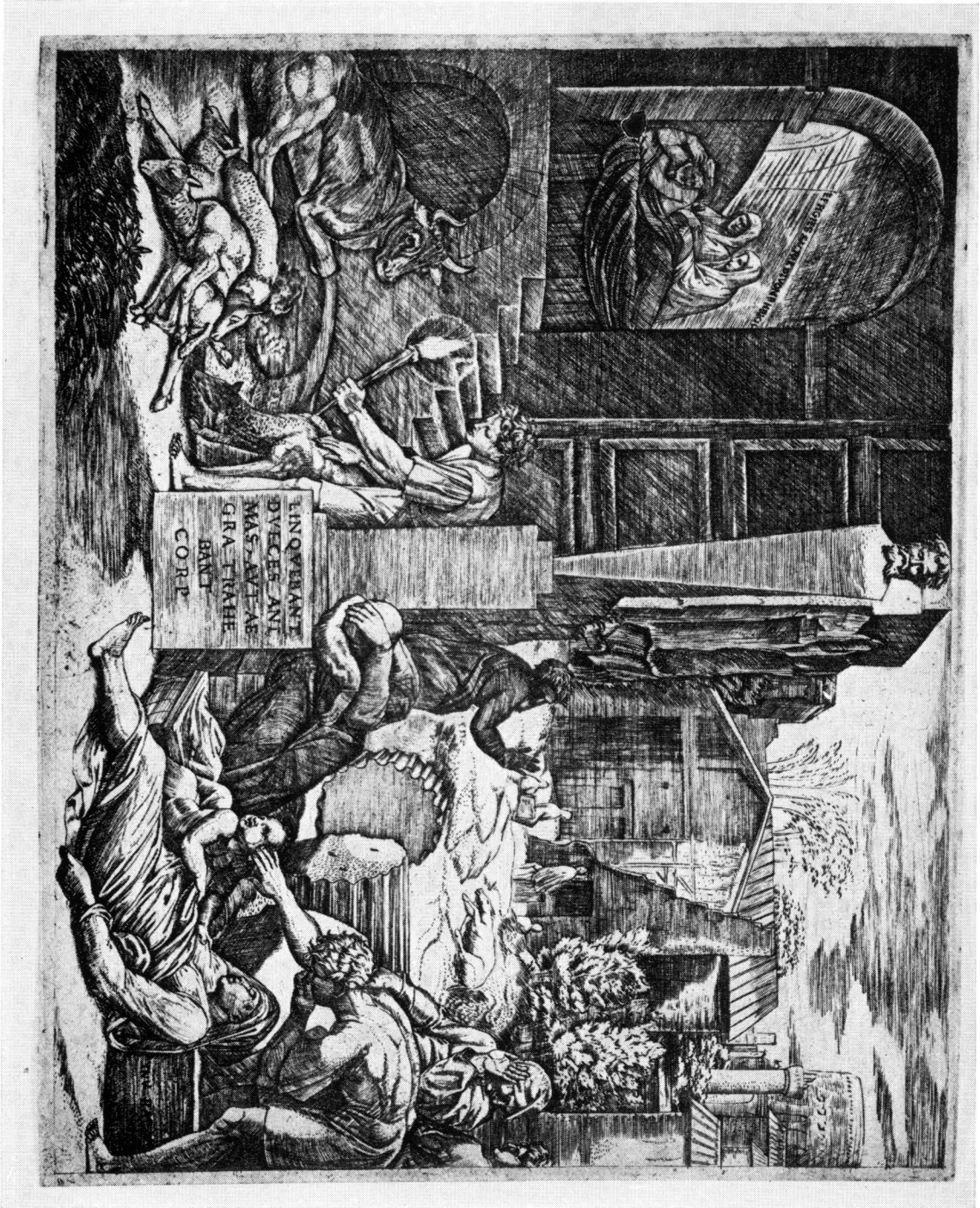


Figure 2.  
'Il Morbetto', engraving by M. Raimondi after Raphael Sanzio.



# P. Vergilij Maronis

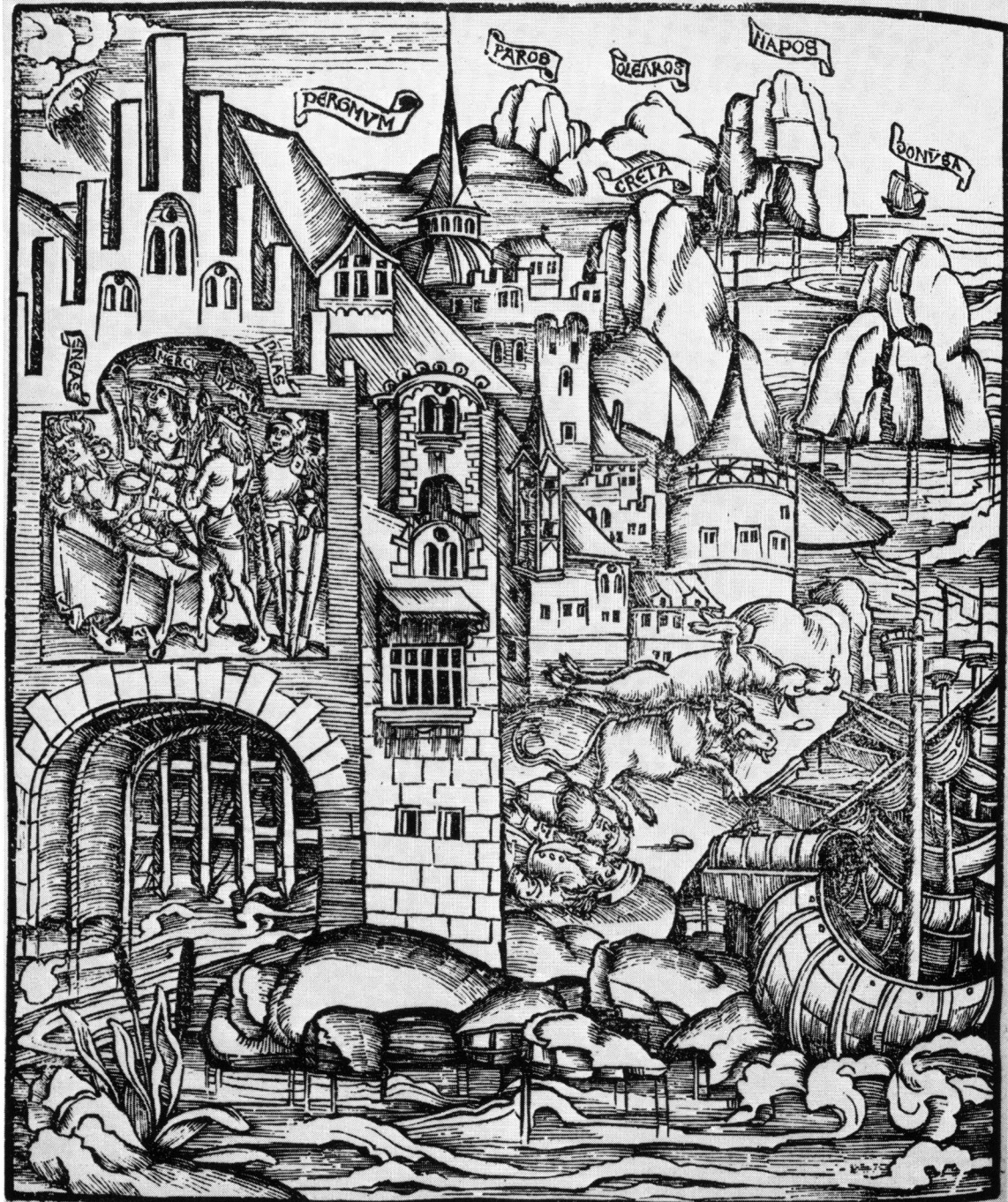
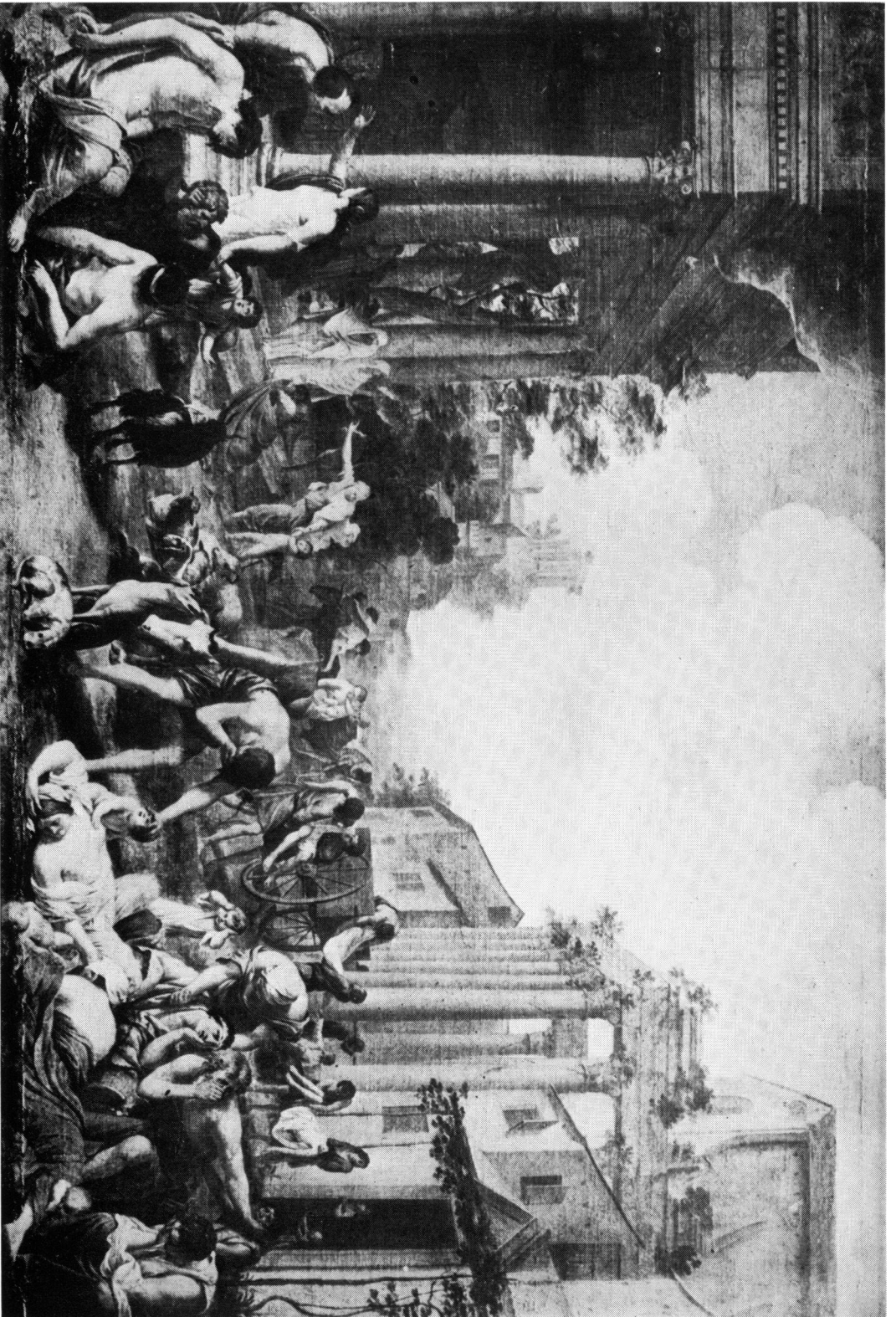


Figure 3.

Woodcut of the plague in Virgil's Aeneid, liber III, facing Folio LXXIX.





**Figure 4.**  
Painting of the plague at Ashdod by P. van Halen at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.  
(Reproduced by courtesy of the Wellcome Trustees.)



### Short Articles

dulces animas, aut aegra trahebant corp.” (They left their sweet lives or dragged along their sick bodies.)

Poussin must have seen this engraving either in Paris or Rome. In his hand (Figure 1) the simplicity and immediacy of Raphael’s interpretation undergoes transformation into a highly pathetic baroque scene. Subsequently his composition became the model for several artists.

One of them was Pieter van Halen (1612–1687) of Antwerp who is not well known in modern art historical literature. A manuscript of the St. Luke’s guild of Antwerp published in 1907 states that he was a renowned artist who became Dean of the guild in 1650.<sup>24</sup> Another contemporary source is the *Gulden Cabinet* by Cornelis de Bie,<sup>25</sup> an art critic, whose work was published in 1662. He calls Pieter van Halen an artful master, whose subjects were drawn from foreign history and poetry; he praises van Halen’s landscapes.

A plague painting by van Halen in the Wellcome collection, No. 2113/1938, is signed and dated 1661 (Figure 4). The theme is, like Poussin’s, the plague at Ashdod; the temple is closely copied, as well as the group comprising the dead woman with man and baby. Van Halen would have seen Poussin’s painting of 1630 either in Rome, or an early engraving from it.<sup>26</sup> The young man to the left, who is attacked by the disease, has the physical fullness and suppleness of a figure by Rubens, whose works van Halen saw in Antwerp Cathedral, his own home town. His style is that of an eclectic, pleasing painter of historical subjects whose interest lay in descriptive details, such as the death-cart to the right and numerous gracefully moving women and children, their faces too small to show any deeper expression. His handling of the romantically overgrown architecture that combines classical with contemporary styles, is worthy of the praise accorded him. The spacious distance of landscape and wide, sunny sky forms a balanced relief to the crowded foreground. Like Poussin and Raphael before him, his figures show no plague lesions.

The examination of a small group of plague pictures reveals the fact that, although dependent on a rich tradition of literary sources and pictorial antecedents, they display features of contemporary experience of the disease. This is more noticeable in the Poussin painting, where the emblematic figure of the rat can perhaps be taken as a sign language for current ideas about epidemics. On the other hand, any salient features regarding historical events conveyed by these works of art can only have the value of supplementary information, if compared with written sources.

#### SUMMARY

A small group of painted and graphic works of art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries representing plague scenes is examined for the degree of historic veracity their artists have achieved in the interpretation of the theme. Before going into detail

<sup>24</sup> Fernand Donnet, *Het jonstich versaem der Violieren, geschiedenis der Rederijkkamer de Olijftak Sedert*, 1480, Antwerp, J. E. Buschmann, 1907, p. 255.

<sup>25</sup> Cornelis de Bie, *Het gulden Cabinet van de edele, vry schilder const*, Antwerp, Jan Meyssens, 1662, p. 401.

<sup>26</sup> An engraving by J. Baron in Rome is entered in A. Andresen, *Catalogue des Graveurs de Poussin* (translated by G. Wildenstein), in *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 1962, 60: 153. A date for this engraving before 1650 is discussed by Martin Davies and Anthony Blunt, *Some corrections and additions to M. Wildenstein’s “Graveurs de Poussin . . .”* in *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 1962, 60: 209.



### *Short Articles*

it is made clear that the most obvious clinical signs of plague, the buboes, are not likely to be represented, because the axillary and inguinal site of the lesions is usually hidden in artistic representations of the human figure. In the case of the perineal "tumours" quoted in the Old Testament story of the "Plague of Ashdod", a famous literary source, a representation is out of the question.

Any suggestion that artists received their impressions of the nature of an epidemic from mere observation of the reality can be dismissed, in view of the complex tradition of pictorial and literary influences dominant in the artistic production of the period.

A key work for this kind of art is Nicolas Poussin's "Plague of Ashdod" of 1630, in the Louvre. First and foremost it retraces the Old Testament story in all its details adding to it reminiscences of a Raphael drawing via Raimondi's engraving. This Raphael-Raimondi composition is in turn based on a different literary plague source by Virgil and derives a pictorial motif from an antique painting; it also betrays in the adaptation of a merely structural pattern, at which illustration Raphael might have looked when he read Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Apart from the features in Poussin's painting that were passed on by tradition, there are signs giving evidence of a definite experience he gained from medical knowledge of his own time concerning theories of contagion and probably also observations of plague epidemics.

A later plague painting by Pieter van Halen of 1661, owned by the Wellcome Trust, is described. In theme and composition it follows closely on Poussin, without repeating his realism and grandeur.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. J. B. Trapp and Mr. W. Schupbach for valuable advice regarding sources.