

Heroes in Dark Times



Saints and Officials Tackling Disaster (16th-17th Centuries)

*edited by
Milena Viceconte, Gennaro Schiano
and Domenico Cecere*



viella

sanctorum

AISSCA
ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA PER LO STUDIO DELLA SANTITÀ, DEI CULTI E DELL'AGIOGRAFIA

SANCTORUM.
SCRITTURE, PRATICHE, IMMAGINI

11

SANCTORUM. SCRITTURE, PRATICHE, IMMAGINI
collana dell'Aissca - Associazione italiana
per lo studio della santità, dei culti e dell'agiografia

Direzione

Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, Tommaso Caliò, Luigi Canetti, Umberto Longo, Raimondo Michetti, Francesca Sbardella, Daniele Solvi, Elena Zocca

Comitato editoriale

Valentina Ciciliot, Barbara Crostini, Angela Laghezza, Anthony Lappin, Luca Pezzuto, Alessandro Serra, Serena Spanò, Andrea Antonio Verardi

Heroes in Dark Times

Saints and Officials Tackling Disaster
(16th-17th Centuries)

edited by

Milena Viceconte, Gennaro Schiano and Domenico Cecere

viella

Copyright © 2023 - Viella s.r.l.
Tutti i diritti riservati
Prima edizione: febbraio 2023
ISBN 979-12-5469-223-3
ISBN 979-12-5469-302-5 (e-book)

This volume was translated into English and made open access thanks to funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 759829). The *DisComPoSE* research project is hosted by the University of Naples Federico II, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici.



The translations from the Spanish were done by Simon Berrill, while those from the Italian are by Aelmuire Helen Cleary.

Cover illustration: Anonymous, *St Gennaro Halts the Lava of Vesuvius* (detail), from Nicolò Carminio Falcone, *L'intera istoria della famiglia, vita, miracoli, traslazioni e culto del glorioso martire S. Gennaro*, Naples, nella stamperia di Felice Mosca, 1713



viella
libreria editrice
via delle Alpi, 32
I-00198 ROMA
tel. 06 84 17 758
fax 06 85 35 39 60
www.viella.it

Contents

Introduction	7
I. <i>Conventions and Topoi</i>	
ANNACHIARA MONACO People, Institutions and Saints: A Linguistic Analysis of <i>Relazioni</i> on the 1631 Eruption of Vesuvius	21
MAITE IRACEBURU JIMÉNEZ “The Hand of God” in News Pamphlets on Disasters of Natural Origin: Lexical and Discursive Strategies	41
GENNARO SCHIANO “Tú sola siempre nuestro amparo has sido”: The Prayer to the Virgin in the <i>Llanto de Menardo</i> by Duarte Núñez de Acosta	67
ANTONIO PERRONE The Hero <i>Topos</i> in Southern Italian Lyric Poetry on Catastrophes	89
II. <i>Gestures, Perspectives and Images</i>	
JOSÉ A. ORTIZ Devotion and Epidemics: The Relevance of St Vincent Ferrer in Outbreaks of Plague	113
RAMON DILLA MARTÍ A Virgin from the Sea: The Mercedarians and the Cult of the Madonna di Bonaria, Protector of Seafarers	137

SARA CAREDDA	
The Madonna di Bonaria: Images and Iconography from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic	157
MILENA VICECONTE	
The Other Hero: Viceroy Monterrey in Literary and Figurative Sources on the 1631 Eruption of Vesuvius	183
III. <i>Management and Communication</i>	
BEATRIZ ÁLVAREZ GARCÍA	
<i>Pro serenitate</i> Public Prayers During the Floods of the Guadalquivir in the 17 th Century: A Study Using <i>Relaciones de Sucesos</i>	209
GENNARO VARRIALE	
Heroes at the Epicentre: Our Lady and Saints in the Earthquakes of the Hispanic Monarchy (16 th -17 th Century)	231
FLAVIA TUDINI	
Narrating the 1687 Lima Earthquake: Institutions and Devotions in the Face of Catastrophe	259
VALERIA ENEA	
Seeking the Protector Saint: Cults and Devotions in Palermo after the 1693 Earthquake	287
MARCO PAPASIDERO	
“ <i>In segno della ricevuta gratia</i> ”: St Angelus, Protector of Licata from Plague, Storms and Natural Catastrophes	305
JUAN MANUEL LUNA CRUZ	
Digital Maps and Information Networks in the Early Modern Era: Some Cases of Disasters and Heroes	335
Contributors	363

MARCO PAPASIDERO

“In segno della ricevuta gratia”: St Angelus, Protector of Licata from Plague, Storms and Natural Catastrophes*

The cult of St Angelus in Licata dates back to at least the late Middle Ages. The oldest *Life* of the saint is that of the so-called “Enoch”, which already circulated around the mid-15th century.¹ The story tells that Angelus was born into a family of Jews who had converted to Christianity. When his parents died, he and his brother John entered the convent on Mount Carmel, in Palestine. In 1218, he was in Rome to submit the new rule of the order to Pope Honorius III, where – according to a tradition that is not historically reliable – he met the founders of the two great mendicant orders, Francis and Dominic. The inclusion of this episode is clearly intended to give a certain authority to the Carmelites as a new mendicant order on par with the Franciscans and the Order of Preachers. From Rome, Angelus then went to Sicily where he preached in various cities including Palermo and Agrigento. Again according to the hagiographic account, when Angelus reached Licata, he met the man who was to kill him shortly afterwards. Berengario della Pulcella was a local lord who had an incestuous relationship with his sister Margherita. Margherita became a convert but Berengario did not, and he killed Angelus on 5 May 1220 while he was preaching at the church of Santi Filippo e Giacomo.² Although only some of the episodes in Angelus’s hagiography bear up to historical

* This paper is part of the *NeMoSanctI* project (*New Models of Sanctity in Italy (1960s-2000s): A Semiotic Analysis of Norms, Causes of Saints, Hagiography, and Narratives*), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 757314).

1. Ludovico Saggi, *S. Angelo di Sicilia. Studio sulla vita, devozione, folklore*, Rome, Institutum Carmelitanum, 1962, pp. 150-225.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 214, 216, 218, 220.

scrutiny, the cult that must have developed in Licata after his death is much more solidly grounded.

The cult of St Angelus spread in Licata and in the Carmelite convents from at least the middle of the 15th century. Like one of the other ancient Carmelite saints, Alberto degli Abbati, or da Trapani, Angelus just received the approval of his cult from the pope, without a formal canonisation.³ On 27 September 1457, Callixtus III issued a bull – which was actually published by Sixtus IV on 31 May 1476 – giving permission to annex the chapel of the saint to the Carmelite convent in Licata, although this did not take place until 1605.⁴ The papal bull came just a few months after the provincial chapter of Sicily, held in Licata on 8 May of the same year, during which it was established that the feast of St Angelus would be celebrated every year and that his image would be painted. Also dating to the second half of the 15th century are the other references to Angelus in the Carmelite Breviary (*Breviarium Carmelitarum*, Cl, II, 215, Ferrara municipal library), the Carmelite Missal (first incunable printed on 14 August 1490 in Brescia) and in various martyrologies, even composed in the following decades, through to the *Roman Martyrology* of 1583.

So, the martyrdom of St Angelus and the conservation of his relics at Licata gave rise to both a new cult and a new patronage. The previous protectors of the city were the patron saints of the 12th-century church where Angelus had been martyred, dedicated like many others in Sicily to the apostles Philip and James the Less. What is now the sanctuary of St Angelus was built from 1564 on to replace the smaller, earlier church, and it, in turn, was replaced starting in 1626 by another, larger building to accommodate the numerous pilgrims and as a result of the vow the city made to the saint for deliverance from the plague.

Evidence of the cult of St Angelus in Licata is modest up to the late 16th and early 17th century. One of the key events was the translation of the relics from the original silver urn in which they had been preserved since 1486 to a much more elaborate silver urn made by the Modica

3. Ludovico Saggi, “Alberto degli Abati, santo”, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. I, 1960 [consulted online: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alberto-degli-abati-santo_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alberto-degli-abati-santo_(Dizionario-Biografico))]; Ludovico Saggi, “Alberto degli Abati, da Trapani”, in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, vol. I, 1961, pp. 676-680; Filippo Burgarella, “Profilo storico-biografico di Sant’Alberto degli Abbati nella Sicilia del suo tempo”, *Carmelus*, 53 (2006), pp. 131-156.

4. Ludovico Saggi, “Angelo di Sicilia, santo”, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. III, 1961 [consulted online: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/angelo-di-sicilia-santo_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/angelo-di-sicilia-santo_(Dizionario-Biografico))]; Saggi, *S. Angelo di Sicilia*, p. 227.

silversmith Lucio de Arizi. The relics are still conserved in this urn, which was recently restored. The translation took place on the 5 May 1623⁵ – the commemoration of the saint’s death – and an inquiry on his miracles was also launched to gather evidence connected with devotion to the saint from the citizens of Licata and the surrounding areas who could relate the benefits they, or their family and friends, had received. The original documents of this inquiry were drafted between 1625 and 1627 by the notary Giacomo Murci and are no longer available.

Currently, we have two exemplars of the work.⁶ The first, dating to 1640, is an authenticated copy made by the notary himself based on the original deeds to be sent to the Prior General of the Carmelite Order, Teodoro Straccio, and now conserved in the Archivum Generale Ordinis Carmelitarum in Rome. It occupies the entire codex and consists of 156 pages. The exemplar is complete, without any damaged or missing parts, and consists of: the frontispiece (1r); an illustration showing St Angelus and the city of Licata (2r); an index of the documents and the witness testimonies (3r-4v); documents (5r-8v); testimonies (9r-153v); notes and the notary’s concluding remarks (153v-155v); and an illustration showing the silver urn of the saint (156r). The second exemplar is conserved in the library of Cagliari University (Manoscritti, ms. 216). It is contained in a paper manuscript and is an authenticated copy written in 1627 by the notary Francesco Attardo. It is composed of 160 pages, missing those from page 2 to 7. It is substantially the same as the copy already mentioned, apart from some graphic variations and the absence of the index and a few of the first documents that were on the missing pages. It consists of: a frontispiece (1r); documents (8rv); testimonies (9r-158v), notes and the notary’s concluding remarks (158v-159r); and an illustration of the previous urn (138r).⁷

5. Saggi, *S. Angelo di Sicilia*, pp. 282-286.

6. The two copies of the work are the following: *Miracula et beneficia misericordia Domini intercedente Sancto Angelo virgine et martyre, sacerdote carmelita Ierusalemitano, protectore civitatis dilectissimae Leocatae hac in curia spiritali solemnii testificatione descripta*, authenticated copy (1640) by the notary Giacomo Murci, Rome, Archivum Generale Ordinis Carmelitarum (henceforth AGOC), Post. III 2; and *Miracula et beneficia misericordia Domini intercedente Sancto Angelo virgine et martyre, sacerdote carmelita Ierusalemitano, protectore civitatis dilectissimae Leocatae hac in curia spiritali solemnii testificatione descripta*, authenticated copy (1627) by the notary Francesco Attardo, Cagliari, Biblioteca Universitaria, Manoscritti, ms. 216.

7. Since the edition is currently being prepared and cannot be referenced, quotations will be taken from the manuscript in AGOC (henceforth *Miracula et beneficia*).

There are 113 testimonies, 92 made by men and 21 by women (18.5%). A significant number of witnesses are educated, know how to write or have specific titles (doctor, physician, etc.), and 19 of them are religious (8 secular clergy, 8 friars, 1 nun and 2 clerics), while all the others are laypeople. Some episodes are recounted by many witnesses; others by just a few or only one. This information – especially that relating to the people involved – can be compared with that from other canonisation processes carried out in Sicily around the same time. The case of the canonisation of Benedetto da San Fratello, known as Benedict the Moor,⁸ which has been studied by Giovanna Fiume and Marilena Modica, is particularly relevant. Thirty-three women and 64 men⁹ took part in the ordinary inquiry of the process in 1594, whereas in that carried out in Palermo in 1620, women represented only 28% of the total.¹⁰ Even more significant was the inquiry carried out in San Fratello in the same year, when 52.2% of the testimonies were supplied by women.¹¹

Another useful comparison is with the two *in partibus* inquiries held in Randazzo, respectively in 1533 and 1573, to gather evidence of the life, virtues and miracles of the Blessed Luigi Rabatà. In the first inquiry, four of the 11 witnesses were women (36.3%), but in the second only two out of 12 (16.6%).¹² The Licata case therefore appears to be in line with other Sicilian examples in terms of a fairly low number of female witnesses – dramatically lower than the exceptional 1620 case of Saint Benedict in San Fratello – although the testimonies are frequently related to specifically female issues (difficult childbirth, care of children, etc.).

The documents of the inquiry are a mine of information on devotion to the saint, and also on the cultural and political history of Sicily at the turn

8. See *San Benedetto il Moro: santità, agiografia e primi processi di canonizzazione*, ed. by Giovanna Fiume and Marilena Modica, Palermo, Assessorato alla Cultura, 1998; Giovanna Fiume, “La ‘via legale’ alla santità. I primi processi di beatificazione di Benedetto il Moro (1591-1626)”, *Quaderni Storici*, 34, 100/1 (1999), pp. 151-172.

9. Giovanna Fiume, *Il santo moro. I processi di canonizzazione di Benedetto da Palermo (1594-1807)*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2002, p. 52.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

12. Marco Papasidero, “Il beato Luigi Rabatà: aspetti del culto e pratiche taumaturgiche”, in *Un territorio nella storia: il Valdemone ionico dal Medioevo all’età contemporanea, Atti del Convegno in memoria di Giuseppe Giarrizzo (Forza d’Agrò - Savoca, 6-7 May 2017)*, ed. by Antonio Baglio, Salvatore Bottari and Giuseppe Campagna, Rome, Aracne, 2019, pp. 197-208.

of the 16th century.¹³ One of the recurrent topics is the plague that struck various cities in Sicily in 1624,¹⁴ and Licata in 1625, just two years after the translation of the relics to the new urn. Judging by the testimonies, the epidemic did not cause a large number of victims in the city.

The notary Giacomo Murci clearly expounds the reasons for the launch of the process inquiry, with himself as notary: “per maggior memoria di tale glorioso miracolo et acciò li posterì restassero con maggior devotione appresso il loro protectore”, summoning “li presenti testimonii al numero di cento”.¹⁵ The objective of collecting the evidence was to set down in writing “quanto in decto tempo di peste soccesse, giaché molti, mediante l’intercessione di decto sancto, furo libberati et preservati dal decto male”,¹⁶ and other miracles through which various ailments were cured (hernias, gallstones, diseases of the eye, wounds, etc.) and dangers averted (accidents and attacks). It was also aimed at enshrining the memory of facts and episodes that would otherwise have been lost, especially “giaché li libri dove si notavano li miracoli del decto sancto erano per l’antichità consumati”.¹⁷ The start of the miracle inquiry process was therefore a historical and memorial operation, driven by spiritual requirements (memory of the saint’s protection) and historical and documentary exigencies (recording the events to prevent the memory of what had occurred from being lost).

The relaunching of the cult of St Angelus took place in a very precise context and period. On the one hand, there was the Counter-Reformation climate that evolved during the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which – also through the new religious orders – contributed to a reawakening of interest in the saints, as well as personal spirituality exemplified in the spread of the practice of the rosary, also mentioned several times in the *Miracula et benefitia*. On the other hand, there was the great devotional fervour of Sicily in the early modern age – first under Aragon dominion and later under Spanish – characterised by important cults. For instance, the Marian

13. See Davide Soares da Silva, *Le epidemie di peste (tra '500 e '600) e lo sviluppo della scritturalità in Sicilia*, MA thesis, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literature, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, 2009.

14. Calogero Valenti, “Due episodi di peste in Sicilia, 1526 e 1624”, *Archivio storico siciliano*, 10 (1984), pp. 5-88.

15. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 139v.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, f. 140r.

title of the *Virgen de Monserrat*, associated with a statue venerated in the namesake monastery of Barcelona, spread widely in southern Italy and elsewhere, as did numerous local cults that acquired new momentum at this time. An example of the latter is the very important cult of Santa Rosalia, who enjoyed a huge increase in devotion with the discovery of her relics on Monte Pellegrino above Palermo in 1624 and her being credited with having brought the plague of 1624 to an end.¹⁸ The cults travelled with great speed from one place to another, as demonstrated by the fact that St Angelus of Licata too was included in the pantheon of the patron saints of Palermo in 1626, a sign of trust in the efficacy of his protection against the plague.

1. *The plague in Licata*

Catastrophes represent one of the crucial occasions on which Christians have, over the centuries, made recourse to the protection of their patron saints.¹⁹ Plague in particular is possibly the evil most famously to be averted through divine intercession, normally through recourse to miraculous images and relics.²⁰

The plague of 1625 arrived in the city in June and died out in August, although the testimony suggests that there were still some cases of infection. According to the priest Orazio Contrera, the epidemic had entered Licata through a “figliolo popolano, il quale stava in un cortile nel

18. Sara Cabibbo, *Santa Rosalia tra terra e cielo*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2004.

19. On disaster narrations, see *Récits et représentations des catastrophes naturelles depuis l'Antiquité*, ed. by René Favier and Anne-Marie Granet-Abisset, Grenoble, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme-Alpes, 2005; *Pestes, incendies, naufrages. Écritures du désastre au dix-septième siècle*, ed. by Françoise Lavocat, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011; *Historical Disasters in Context: Science, Religion, and Politics*, ed. by Andrea Janku, Gerrit J. Schenk and Franz Mauelshagen, London-New York, Routledge, 2012; *Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples: Politics, Communication and Culture*, ed. by Domenico Cecere, Chiara De Caprio, Lorenza Gianfrancesco and Pasquale Palmieri, Rome, Viella, 2018.

20. Sheila Barker, “Miraculous Images and the Plagues of Italy, c. 590-1656”, in *Saints, Miracles and the Image: Healing Saints and Miraculous Images in the Renaissance*, ed. by Sandra Cardarelli and Laura Fenelli, Turnhout, Brepols, 2017, pp. 29-52. On the plague in Sicily, see the treatise written by the chief physician Ingrassia relating to the Palermo epidemic of 1624-1626: Gianfilippo Ingrassia, *Informatione del pestifero et contagioso morbo* [1576], ed. by Alfredo Salerno, Aldo Gerbino, Maria Buscemi, Tania Salomone and Renato Malta, Palermo, Plumelia Edizioni, 2012.

quartiere chiamato di sancto Angelo”.²¹ The boy’s illness was kept secret and he had contacts at home with other people, so the infection spread. This first alleged case of the plague was then joined by another involving Tofano Bellavia and his wife and sister.²² The priest Giuseppe Perconti was asked to visit their home on several occasions to hear the confessions of the mother and sister who were suffering from a high fever that prevented them from going to church. This episode is mentioned by numerous witnesses and contributed to an even wider spread of the infection, especially because it took place at a very early stage before the disease had been identified or the respective safety measures – quarantine, barring of access to civic buildings – implemented. Here, I am not concerned with reconstructing the chain of transmission, the number of people who came into contact with the first victims, how the disease spread or how it was checked. I will instead focus on how the citizens of Licata addressed this potential catastrophe, emphasising the way they interpreted what was happening and felt that otherworldly aid was indispensable.

The evidence contained in the deeds of the inquiry shows that many of the witnesses and inhabitants of Licata were firmly convinced that the limited spread of the “male contagioso” was due to the direct intervention of St Angelus. These statements are well circumstantiated and derive from deductions based on what the citizens saw happening around them. The main sign of the saint’s intervention is identified in the fact that the infection began in several houses that were part of the confraternity or “company” of Sant’Angelo, in the district where his sanctuary was and is still located.²³ As stated by the first witness, Don Carlo Giliberto, archpriest of the church of Santi Filippo e Giacomo in Licata – later replaced by that dedicated to St Angelus, begun in 1626 and opened for worship in 1662 – and in many other testimonies, God sent the plague “prima d’ogn’altro nel quartero della chiesa d’esso santo et in un cortiglio [courtyard] di case della compagnia del decto sancto”.²⁴ The idea that Angelus was responsible for preserving much of the city of Licata from the plague is a constant in the witnesses’ narration

21. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 66r.

22. *Ibid.*, ff. 13r-14r.

23. Calogero Carità, *La chiesa di Sant’Angelo e la festa di maggio a Licata*, Licata, La Vedetta, 2020. The first references to the confraternity date to 1 January 1575, when it was officially confirmed by the Bishop of Agrigento, Cesare Marullo. See Saggi, *S. Angelo di Sicilia*, p. 299.

24. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 10r.

of the epidemic. Don Carlo also stresses that “per comune parere questo [the end of the epidemic] fu per l’intercessione del decto sancto”.²⁵

And while the people of Licata attribute the end of the pestilence to the saint’s intervention, the outbreak of the plague too has a supernatural origin. The agent behind the arrival of the epidemic is God himself, who, according to the witnesses, wished to inflict this scourge on the city:²⁶ “Per ultimo piasse a Dio nel prossimo mese di giugno mandare il decto morbo contagioso in questa città et quello attaccato quasi per tutta la città, suo borgo et campagna. Il decto santo tratenne la mano di Dio, giaché in un istante, scoperto, il male s’estinse”.²⁷

The saint therefore acquired the tutelary function – constantly evoked in the text – of preserving the city of Licata from danger and catastrophe, treating it with an attitude of absolute privilege. This confirms the idea that saints are the “invisible friends” of men, who can resort to them in time of need.²⁸ More specifically, Angelus shows himself ready to intercede with God, who is perceived as more remote. Indeed, the words of Don Carlo Giliberti evoke the image of a punitive God (“piasse a Dio [...] mandare il decto morbo contagioso”), whose otherwise catastrophic action is tempered by the intervention of the saint who “tratenne la mano di Dio”.

Even though just a few days after the first infections the physicians realised that they were dealing with plague and took measures to stem the spread – quarantine, the establishment of a *lazaretto*, checks and monitoring of symptoms – in the deeds of the inquiry, supernatural action appears to predominate over human.²⁹ For instance, the Carmelite Antonio Serravilla stresses that human action alone would not have sufficed to stop the spread of the disease, and that only the protection of St Angelus – who was regularly invoked by the citizens – was able to save Licata: “il decto

25. *Ibid.*

26. From the testimonies, we learn that the disease also affected Trapani and Palermo (witness Giulio Bennici, *Miracula et benefittia*, f. 11r.). For Modica, which was struck by plague two years later, see Raffaele Poidomani, *La peste a Modica nel 1626: monografia storica in base ad atti e documenti originali*, Ragusa, CAFLAC, 1966.

27. *Miracula et benefittia*, f. 10r.

28. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981.

29. See Maria Silvana Pellizzeri, “Medici e appestati nella Sicilia del Cinquecento”, in *Malattie, terapie e istituzioni sanitarie in Sicilia*, ed. by Calogero Valenti, Palermo, Ciso, 1985, pp. 99-111.

male s’estinse poiché ingegno humano non haveria bastato estinguerlo, se non la protectione d’un tanto et tale protectore”.³⁰

In actual fact, the “ingegno humano” does also come into the witnesses’ accounts, especially when they are physicians. The surgeon Giovanni Battista D’Ognibeni frequently went to help the sick and treat them in the *lazaretto* or to diagnose their illness. Agostino Infrigola did the same, offering aid to the sick “spontaneamente per amor di Dio et servitio della patria”³¹ since he was “esperto nella cura di simili morbo”³² and practiced “nell’arte della cirugia, essendo stato da anni vintiocto incirco in Barbaria et nella città d’Algeri schiavo”,³³ as such areas were frequently struck by the plague. D’Ognibeni was also one of the first to identify the disease, and was summoned along with other physicians before the councillors of the city, informing them that “veramente essere decto morbo contagioso et vera peste”.³⁴ The public announcement that it was indeed the plague was made on 13 June 1625 which – as many of the witnesses, including the physician, recalled – was the feast of St Anthony of Padua. Judging by the physician’s words, the medical opinion was that the prospects were not good: “essi medici furo di parere non si potesse remediare, et essere decta infermità irreparabile respecto alli tanti parti decto male s’havea attaccato et non senza gran rovina della città”.³⁵

In actual fact, starting from the day of its identification, the infection began to abate to the extent that “il decto male terminò infra giorni quindici”.³⁶ It is interesting that all the witnesses giving evidence in the inquiry, even the physicians, were agreed in considering what happened to be a miracle. What struck them most was the speed with which the epidemic was halted, without causing widespread illness. The priest Orazio Contrera took up a very clear stance, emphasising that the ending of the plague “non si deve né può attribuire né a remedii né ad ordine usato, ma alla sola intercessione del sancto apresso Dio, nostro Signore”.³⁷

30. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 16v. Similar words are found in the testimony of Giuseppe de Ramundo (f. 34r).

31. *Ibid.*, f. 23v.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, f. 22v.

34. *Ibid.*, f. 21v.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, f. 66v.

Therefore, St Angelus's intervention on behalf of Licata is made up of two aspects: on the one hand, the *general* and providential defence of the city, resulting in a relatively small number of victims;³⁸ on the other, the *particular* assistance given to individual victims, many of whom testified that they had been miraculously cured through the saint's intervention via practices connected with recourse to the relics.

As also happened in other cities struck by the plague, in Licata the epidemic brought about a suspension of normal liturgical practices and religious life. The chaplains of the main church of the city suspended the administration of the sacraments for fear of spreading the disease and, sometimes, of being infected themselves.³⁹ However, so that the faithful would not be completely deprived of the sacraments, the priest Giulio Bennici – *vicario* of Licata and delegate of the Visitor General of the Diocese of Agrigento – exhorted the witness Don Angelo De Labiso to go to the home of a sick woman, Costanza Gaeta, to hear her confession. Later, after administering the sacrament of extreme unction, another that the chaplains refused to administer, Don Angelo contracted the disease. Nevertheless, the testimonies reveal that people were allowed to visit the church of the saint to collect the holy water. As the Carmelite priest Giovanni Antonino Marchi recounts, the people continued to request the water and, after having been cured of the plague – even though they had not previously admitted that they were infected for fear of being taken to the *lazaretto* – they also brought many *ex votos* to the church, including alms for masses, oil for the lamps and wax for the candles,⁴⁰ as well as votive pictures. Sadly, no trace of such pictures has been found, even in the inventory ordered to be drawn up in 1992 by the then rector Don Antonino Todaro.

2. *The previous plague of 1575*

Although most of the evidence relates to the plague of 1625, there are also some brief references to that which struck Licata in 1575. Only

38. “Senza la perdita di molti” declared Vito Guglielmotta: *ibid.*, f. 18r.

39. *Ibid.*, f. 14v. Giulia Calvi provides a fascinating overview of the social problems in the city connected with the plagues of the 17th century: Giulia Calvi, *Storie di un anno di Peste*, Milan, Bompiani, 1984.

40. *Miracula et beneficia*, f. 28r.

two witnesses mention what happened that year, both of an age such as to remember it in person. The archpriest Carlo Giliberto, who was 68 at the time of the testimony and under 20 in 1575, refers to it as the “old plague”,⁴¹ a severe epidemic that caused many deaths throughout the Kingdom of Sicily. However, he also confirms that, as in the recent plague, Licata had come off lightly in the earlier one too.

The statement made by the notary Antonino Strega at the age of 74 again confirms that, as in the later episode, at the time “per l’intercessione del decto sancto pochissimi si moriro con decto male et foro tanto minor numero che non tanti sogliono morire annualmente con infermità ordinarii in decta città”.⁴² In this case, too, the protection of the city was entrusted to the saint, who ensured a very low mortality rate, actually lower than that of other normal pathologies. But this was also due to the trust that the citizens placed in St Angelus, as they “recorrevano alla devotione del decto santo, lavandosi con decta acqua, quale li preservava dal decto male”.⁴³ This water was therefore one of the principal weapons in the fight against infection.

Although only mentioned briefly by two witnesses, the plague of 1575 nevertheless remained in the memory as a species of potentially catastrophic precedent that had affected numerous cities in the kingdom and that had been thwarted by the saint’s action. The evocation of this episode is undoubtedly a way of recording all the miracles performed by St Angelus that the witness recalls, and also a reminder of how he had already demonstrated the same benevolence towards his faithful. Such loyalty is one of the key motifs in the text: only by turning to the saint, invoking his intercession and remaining faithful to him is it possible to obtain the hoped-for assistance. Further, all the requests for intercession made to other saints – St Lucia, St Rosalia, St Roch and others – or to Our Lady (especially the Madonna of Trapani in the Carmelite sanctuary)⁴⁴ also included St Angelus in the invocation.

41. *Ibid.*, f. 9v.

42. *Ibid.*, f. 71v.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Gabriele Monaco, *La Madonna di Trapani: storia, culto, folklore*, Naples, Laurenziana, 1981; Vincenzo Scuderi, *La Madonna di Trapani e il suo Santuario: momenti, opere e culture artistiche*, Trapani, Edizioni del Santuario della Madonna di Trapani, 2011.

3. *Public and collective devotional and therapeutic practices*

While the evidence of the inhabitants of Licata attributes the cessation of the two plagues to the intervention of St Angelus, it should be remembered that such intervention was explicitly invoked and implored through private devotions and public liturgies. The public devotional practices involving the community, or performed by the Carmelite friars for the city, included the Forty Hours,⁴⁵ the exposition of the relics and the commitment to provide the faithful with holy water from the spring and oil from the lamp. The water, in particular, is one of the principal elements of devotion in Licata, since tradition holds that a spring flowed forth miraculously on the site of the saint's martyrdom.⁴⁶ Moreover, the use of miraculous waters was not new to the Carmelite cults in Sicily. The prototype was definitely that of Sant'Alberto of Trapani, which was prepared in various sites dedicated to the saint by immersing one of his relics in it.⁴⁷ Another case is that of the Blessed Luigi Rabatà in Randazzo, whose relics were used to prepare a "medicine" of a similar kind that the faithful would take in church to be cured of their illnesses.⁴⁸ Beyond the Carmelite cases, a similar practice is also recorded with the relics of St Placidus in Messina.⁴⁹ Sicily hence offered a number of therapeutic cults involving recourse to water and to the preparation of specific thaumaturgical beverages, among which Licata was particularly prominent.⁵⁰ The water from the miraculous

45. Costanzo Cargnoni, "Quarante-heures", in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 12/2 (1986), pp. 2702-2723; Marina Caffiero, *La politica della santità. Nascita di un culto nell'età dei lumi*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1996, pp. 157-165.

46. Saggi, *S. Angelo di Sicilia*, pp. 289-292.

47. Jean-Marie Sansterre, "Signes de sainteté et vecteurs de 'virtus' dans les miracles postumes du carme Albert de Trapani relatés aux XIV^e-XV^e siècles", *Analecta Bollandiana*, 133 (2015), pp. 433-441; Marco Papisidero, "Terapia e taumaturgia nei 'miracula' di sant'Alberto da Trapani", *Hagiographica*, 25 (2018), pp. 149-174.

48. Pio Simonelli, *Il B. Luigi Rabata carmelitano. Studio sulla figura e sul culto. Testo dei processi canonici del sec. XVI*, Rome, Edizioni Carmelitane, 1968; Papisidero, "Il beato Luigi Rabatà"; Marco Papisidero, "A laudi Deu". *Luigi Rabatà tra storia, memoria e pratiche devozionali*, Rome, Edizioni Carmelitane, 2019, pp. 62-66.

49. Erminio Gallo, *Placido. Il discepolo di Benedetto descritto da Pietro Diacono*, Trapani, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2020, pp. 172-180.

50. On the practice of preparing drinks by immersing relics into liquids such as water and wine, see Pierre-André Sigal, *L'homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale: XI^e-XII^e siècle*, Paris, CNRS, 1985, pp. 49-56.

spring was also delivered to merchants and found its way to various places in the Mediterranean, confirming the ease with which the cults travelled in the early modern age in perfect continuity with the Middle Ages, and hence regardless of the impact of the Reformation, which outrightly condemned such practices.

As we learn from the Carmelite priest Gaspare Galluzzo,⁵¹ despite the situation of emergency, the friars of the convent celebrated the Forty Hours exposition. This liturgical devotion was particularly widespread in the 16th century and generally, but not always, took place during the Easter period, as it referred to the forty hours that the body of Christ is traditionally believed to have remained in the tomb.⁵² Although the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is not described in detail, it is easy to decipher it as one of the actions involved in the solemn recourse to divine aid. The exposition is, in itself, an act charged with both symbolic and semiotic value, in that it activates and releases the miraculous virtues of the Blessed Sacrament that are normally kept concealed.⁵³ The exceptional trust in the miraculous power of its exposition is confirmed by the words of the witness: “Facendosi per li padri del convento del decto sancto li Quaranthori in decta chiesa, il decto male subito terminò”.⁵⁴ The devotional practice was carried out by the friars, who thus ensured their spiritual assistance. As a result, the Carmelite sanctuary appeared as a place filled with miraculous *virtus*, capable of saving the city through the prayers raised to the saint.

Therefore, relics played a major role in private devotional and therapeutic practices, since they were used for individual cure; at the same time, they were also used in collective rituals to implore the aid of the saint. It was once again Carlo Giliberto who recorded how, in June 1624, a year before the plague arrived in Licata, “si fecero varii et diversi processioni acciò si placasse Dio, con uscire le decte sante reliquii del detto sancto martyre per tutta la città, andando ogni persona discalsa, pregando il Signore per la liberatione di decte città [Trapani, Palermo, Castelvetrano, Castronovo, Cammarata, etc.] et preservatione di questa”.⁵⁵ The relics were

51. The celebration of the Forty Hours is also confirmed by Giovanni Giacomo La Scalia (*Miracula et beneficia*, f. 29v).

52. *Ibid.*, f. 19r.

53. See Massimo Leone, “Wrapping Transcendence: The Semiotics of Reliquaries”, *Signs and Society*, 2/1 (2014), pp. 49-83.

54. *Miracula et beneficia*, f. 19r.

55. *Ibid.*, f. 9v.

hence displayed and carried in procession, symbolically and physically touching on the various parts of the city in such a way that the infection would not reach or linger in them.⁵⁶

Among the other practices of “miraculous treatment” implemented to halt the spread of infection was that described by the priest Orazio Contrera, which entailed sprinkling the holy water in the houses: “S’ordinò fra questo che ogn’uno spargesse per le case acqua del benedecto fonte del glorioso sancto”,⁵⁷ as also confirmed by the notary Giacomo Murci.⁵⁸ Far from being a hygienic precaution, the sprinkling of holy water in the home signified a symbolic and miraculous decontamination. Since the water was replete with the *virtus* of the saint, it was capable of sanctifying the homes that were one of the primary sites of infection, in what was almost an operation of public health. The holy water apparently possessed a formidable power to prevent contagion, so that when it was applied to someone or something, it halted the spread of the disease. This therapeutic and anti-contagious quality was further confirmed by Francesco De Caro, *utriusque iuris doctor*, who justified the fact that everyone went to wash themselves in the water by explaining that “evidentemente si conosceva chi [that] preservava dalla infectione”.⁵⁹ In the absence of drugs that were effective against the plague, the remedies furnished by the saints were perceived as a powerful means of healing. They were applied like medicine: the water was drunk or used for washing, while fragments of the wooden reliquary casket were placed in contact with the body or even consumed like medicinal preparations.⁶⁰

The saint’s protection of the areas under his patronage frequently led to a permanent ratification, which was not only part of the collective

56. Kim Knott, “Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion”, *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 41/2 (2005), pp. 153-184; Kim Knott, “Geography, Space and the Sacred”, in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. by John R. Hinnells, London-New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 476-491; David Chidester, “Space”, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 329-339.

57. *Miracula et beneficia*, f. 66r. See also the testimony of the notary Giacomo Murci (f. 127r).

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, f. 68v.

60. See Luigi Canetti, “‘Olea sanctorum’. Reliquie e miracoli fra Tardoantico e alto Medioevo”, *Olio e vino nell’alto Medioevo. Settimane del Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo*, 54 (2007), pp. 1335-1415.

memory but also affected the local civil and religious calendar. The protection attributed to St Angelus during the plague of 1625 led the local religious and civil authorities to move the saint’s feast day from 5 May to 16 August, as referred by Francesco De Caro, among others: “Et in breve con tucto ciò havesse decta infermità dilatatosi per tutta la città, suo borgo et compagnia, per il quale ricevuto benefitio questa città ha transferito la festa, palio et fera del decto martyre, suo protectore, perpetuamente dalli cinque di maggio a 16 d’agosto”.⁶¹

The transfer of the feast and the related initiatives – the palio and the fair – marked the new positioning of the day for honouring the saint within the liturgical calendar.⁶² Indeed, when catastrophic events involved the intervention of a supernatural agent in the preservation of the faithful, they often had a concrete impact on liturgical and civil life. The consecration of a feast day for the saint that transferred his memory from one day to another signified acknowledging his ability to alter the course of history.

Finally, the day on which the infectious disease was identified as the plague coincided with the feast day of an important saint: Anthony of Padua. This coincidence is commented upon in various testimonies, including that of Francesco Perconti, who wrote: “fu alfine a 13 di decto mese dechiarato per reale et veridica peste, che fu il giorno di sancto Antonio di Padova”.⁶³ The reference to St Anthony is not supernatural: his aid is not invoked, nor is he considered to have helped the city. Nevertheless, it shows us a sense of time that is strongly anchored to the liturgical calendar.⁶⁴

The specific protection against the plague that St Angelus was able to offer the city of Licata is also illustrated in an important iconographic source contained in the manuscript copy of the inquiry into miracles conserved in the Carmelite Archive in Rome (Fig. 1). The image shows the saint with his principal attributes – the palm of martyrdom, threaded onto which are the three crowns symbolising virginity, martyrdom and doctrine, in Carmelite dress with a dagger in his chest.⁶⁵ In the background

61. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 72r.

62. The transfer of the feast day is also mentioned by Francesco Grugno (*Miracula et benefitia*, f. 111v) and the priest Andrea Lombardo (f. 139r).

63. *Ibid.*, f. 35v.

64. See Jacques Le Goff, *A la recherche du temps sacré. Jacques de Voragine et la Légende dorée*, Paris, Perrin, 2011.

65. The same attributes, with some variations, are also present in the iconography of St Peter Martyr. See Saggi, *S. Angelo di Sicilia*, p. 312.



Fig. 1. Anon., *The Carmelite St Angelus protecting Licata from the Plague*, in *Miracula et beneficia* (AGOC POST. III 2).

is a settlement, to be identified with Licata. At top left, set upon a cloud, is Christ holding an arrow pointing downwards, and hence towards Licata. Based on a long tradition going back to antiquity, the arrow is a symbol of the plague, attribute of Apollo who employed it to scourge mankind with the deadly disease. This symbolism traversed the Middle Ages, so that St Sebastian – who epitomised the saint martyred by being shot with arrows – also became one of the principal saints invoked against the plague.⁶⁶ Therefore, in line with the idea expressed by the witnesses that

66. Franco Cardini, “Il Sogno e il Mistero: le frecce di San Sebastiano, ovvero quello che sognò il Priore di San Pietro Scheraggio”, in Franco Cardini, *Le mura di Firenze inargentate: letture fiorentine*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1993, pp. 17-28; Sheila Barker, “The Making of a Plague Saint: Saint Sebastian’s Imagery and Cult Before the Counter-

the disease was sent by God, the 17th-century image in the manuscript shows Christ holding the arrow since he is to be understood as the agent of the epidemic. However, St Angelus protects the city, not only because he watches over it from the hill on which he is shown, but also through the gesture of his right hand. Further, his kneeling position indicates the posture of praying to God, fully demonstrating that he wishes to protect Licata. Finally, a legend that appears to emerge from the mouth of the saint reaching up to Christ contains the supplication to the Lord: “Recordare Domine testamenti mei”. The reference is to the antiphon *Recordare, domine, testamenti tui*,⁶⁷ which was amply documented in the Middle Ages and which is listed in the *Cantus Manuscript Database* among the antiphonaries drawn up between the 10th and 16th centuries.⁶⁸

The antiphon is related to the Old Testament episode of the three days’ pestilence that the Lord sent upon Israel under David through the angel (2 Sam 24:15). But before the allotted time was up, the Lord took pity and told the angel to stop: “It is enough: stay now thine hand”.⁶⁹ The words put in the mouth of St Angelus refer to those of the antiphon, which in turn is based on the biblical story. The crucial theme is God’s intervention in favour of Israel by halting the plague that He himself had sent. However, in the case of St Angelus in the illustration, there is a small variation on the antiphon, where the Lord is invoked and exhorted to recall *testamenti tui*, and hence His pact with Israel that it would not be destroyed. Instead, in the engraving, it is the saint who addresses these words to God – and not the assembly – by virtue of the pact that he has symbolically entered into with Him (*testamenti mei*). It seems plausible that this lexical change refers to the saint’s martyrdom and his merit with God, by virtue of which he can request and be granted that He shall not strike the city of Licata with plague.

Another work that refers to the specialised protection against pestilence of St Angelus is conserved in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Morrocco, Tavarnelle Val di Pesa (Florence). The painting by Nanno da

Reformation”, in *Piety and Plague: From Byzantium to the Baroque*, ed. by Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester, Kirksville, Truman State University Press, 2007, pp. 90-131.

67. The full text is: “Recordare domine testamenti tui et dic angelo percutienti cesset jam manus tua ut non desoletur terra et ne perdas omnem animam vivam” (*Cantus Manuscript Database*: <https://cantus.uwaterloo.ca/>).

68. See <https://cantus.uwaterloo.ca/search?t=recordare+domine+testamenti+tui>.

69. King James Version, 2 Sam 24:16.



Fig. 2. Nanno da San Gimignano, *Martyrdom of St Sebastian with Saints Angelus and Roch*, Tavarnelle Val di Pesa (Florence), Church of Santa Maria del Carmine al Morrocco. © Wikimedia Commons.

San Gimignano, dating to 1643, portrays Angelus together with two other important saints invoked against the plague, St Sebastian and St Roch, demonstrating that Angelus was invoked against the plague even beyond Licata and that he acquired this particular fame and specialisation within the Carmelite order (Fig. 2).⁷⁰

Unfortunately, none of the numerous *ex votos* mentioned in the deeds of the inquiry have survived. This makes it impossible to analyse the images of the saint on the votive pictures donated by the faithful between the end of the 16th and the early 17th century, which would have revealed many details of the portrayal of Angelus's heroic action against the plague.

70. The church of San Rocco in La Valletta, Malta, conserves a 17th-century painting by Stefano Erardi portraying St Angelus and St Roch at the feet of Mary Immaculate. I should like to thank Pierangelo Timoneri for having pointed out these two works.

4. *Individual protection*

While most of the witnesses mention Angelus’ overall protection of the city of Licata as an important memory of collective defence,⁷¹ many of the accounts also include references to precise episodes of healing involving individuals that make a significant contribution to the history of disease and medicine in the early modern age. The number of these episodes illustrates the profound and widespread belief in the supernatural aid offered by the saint to the many individual citizens who requested his help. From this perspective, the inquiry into miracles relating to St Angelus is identical to the processes carried out in Palermo and San Fratello for Benedict the Moor, which offer a large number of miracles and prodigies attributed to the saint’s intercession.

I have selected just one of these numerous miraculous episodes related to the plague as an example of both narrative structure and of the healing practices involved. The witness Caterinuccia Pirrello, illiterate, who at the time of her statement was twenty-one years old, recounted that her son Angelo had caught the plague, realising this because there emerged “nella mano sinistra una papola quanto un bono tarì, con un boczo socto la scilla destra, con grandissima febre et stordimento”.⁷² The sign of the disease was unequivocal: a papule the size of a coin above his left hand and a bubo in the right armpit, accompanied by fever and intense dizziness. The child – who was four years old and named after the saint, and who was “già votato et vestito [...] dell’habito del glorioso vergine et martyre carmelitano” as a sign of devotion and protection – had caught the plague. Caterinuccia and her mother-in-law decided to make recourse “all’intercessione di decto santo”.⁷³ Having taken the oil from the lamp that burned above his relics, “quello lo mese sopra decta papula et boczo di decto figliolo, non cessando per tutta la nocte d’invocare il nome di decto santo l’agiutassi”.⁷⁴ The application of the miraculous unguent was accompanied by the continual invocation of the saint’s name, imploring the hoped-for miracle.

71. See Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris, PUF, 1950; Ugo Fabietti, Vincenzo Matera, *Memoria e identità. Simboli e strategie del ricordo*, Rome, Meltemi, 1999; Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

72. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 92v.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*, ff. 92v-93r.

The invocation of the name, together with the use of contact or secondary relics and efficacious liquids, is clearly one of the most common rituals for invoking a miraculous cure. The continuance of the invocation “per tutta la nocte” indicates not only the level of despair and the gravity of the situation, but also the need to literally assail the saint with requests for aid so that he would yield and intervene.⁷⁵ The results of the long healing ritual became evident the following day: “al decto figliolo li passò la febre, spario il boczo et insieme si desiccò decta papola”.⁷⁶ The disappearance of the bubo and the drying up of the papule were recognised as signs of the saint’s intervention. He had exercised his individual protection over Caterinuccia’s little boy, albeit by virtue of the family’s devotion and citizenship of Licata. Here, as is often the case, the account also extends to a second miracle. Four days after her son was cured, Caterinuccia developed the same symptoms: pain in her right armpit accompanied by a large swelling and fever. The healing process was therefore repeated, particularly in view of the success it had already had in her home.⁷⁷

The final section of the miracle testimonies included in the inquiry almost always contains a reference to the offering of an *ex voto* at the sanctuary of St Angelus. Frequently, this was in the form of a small votive image. In this case, however, Caterinuccia and her mother-in-law thanked the saint “con portarli una tovaglia, et li fecero celebrare dui messi, una cantata et l’altra lecta”.⁷⁸

Another aspect of devotion to the saint during the epidemic that is worth mentioning is the protection and presence that he demonstrated to his faithful even when they were “barragiati” – that is, isolated in their homes, usually for forty days – or taken to the *lazaretto* that had been set up in the area known as Giarretta close to the river Salso that crossed the city, in the vicinity of the church of the Madonna di Loreto. With the advent of the plague, the city councillors had indeed ordered that sick people should remain in isolation at their homes, in the city or the countryside, and were to be taken to the *lazaretto* if they contracted the disease. Naturally, the *lazaretto* was a place that one

75. This approach is, moreover, not very different from that employed by the saint himself in relation to God, as well as being the essence of religious prayer when imploring aid from a supernatural helper. St Angelus obtained from God the protection of the city from the storm through “li suoi caldi prieghi” (see § 5).

76. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 93r.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

was not always certain to return from. In these circumstances, especially in the case of isolation in the home, the faithful are always described in the act of invoking and praying to the saint and performing healing rituals, all of a distinctly medical-miraculous quality.

Numerous statements collected during the process reveal that a number of infected people preferred not to inform the councillors of Licata or the health authorities about their state of health, to avoid the risk of being taken to the *lazaretto*. For instance, Luca Perconti, brother of the already mentioned physician Francesco Perconti, was in quarantine at his brother's house when he realised that he was becoming ill. Nevertheless, “esso testimonio non palesò decto dolore a nessuno”,⁷⁹ resorting instead to a piece of wood from the coffin of the saint which had been given to him by his brother, who had received it from the health officials. Concealing having the disease was therefore justified by not wanting to go to the *lazaretto*, but also indicated a total trust in the saint. In fact, Perconti and his family devoted themselves exclusively to the practice of treatment through relics, dividing amongst them the available piece of wood “et parti si mangiaro et parti esso testimonio più volte con quello toccava in decto dolore”.⁸⁰

The reading of the events recorded in the deeds of the process reveals that, although St Angelus protected the city by drawing the plague to his own district and ensuring that it ended after a short time, there was a certain spread of the infection that affected various people who had to resort to the aid of the saint. The action of St Angelus was therefore twofold: collective protection aimed at preserving Licata as a whole from the threat of the plague, and direct action in individual cases that had, so to speak, evaded the overall protection of the city.

The devotional practices recorded for the period of the plague definitely originated several centuries earlier, since they are connected with the oil from the saint's lamp, the water from the spring and also another oil that gushed forth from the spring – namely, the site of martyrdom – on certain occasions. Plausibly, these practices can be dated back to at least the 15th century. On the other hand, given the particular quality of the liquids used for healing and their close connections with the hagiography and cult of St Angelus, they could not have existed prior to the cult, for instance in relation to other saints of the city or, more specifically, to saints Philip and James.

79. *Ibid.*, f. 96r.

80. *Ibid.*

5. *The storm of the early 17th century*

In addition to the pestilences, the deeds of the process also record another “catastrophic” event in which the saint’s protection proved essential. This was a terrible storm, indicated in the text by the Sicilian term *draghonara*, which means “tempest, heavy rainfall, downpour”.⁸¹ However, it is mentioned by only three witnesses, confirming that this event did not leave a particularly strong mark in the collective memory. According to the accounts of Giuseppe Carletto, Francesco Grugno and Marco de Averna, on 22 September about twenty years before – possibly in 1605 – at around three in the morning, a violent storm with high winds and heavy rain (“un gran tempo di pioggia et venti grandissimi”)⁸² struck the city of Licata, which, as Giuseppe Carletto recalled, appeared to be almost submerged (“che [the city] pareva si volesse sobbissare”).⁸³

After the storm blew over, the settlement appeared to have suffered relatively little damage. Carletto, who lived just behind the tribune of the church, declared that his house had been struck by one of the beams, although no one was injured.⁸⁴ Francesco Grugno recounted that a house had collapsed close to the military district, burying a Spaniard, but when the rubble was removed, he was found alive because, as the witness said, “havia in quel precinto invocato il nome di decto sancto”.⁸⁵ Therefore, in the recollection of the witnesses, the protection of St Angelus was ubiquitous, and there was no event that did not involve him.

Nevertheless, the roof of the church was badly damaged, and the beams had been carried by the water and wind even beyond the city. As Francesco Grugno specified, the wind had come in “dalla porta piccola del campanaro”.⁸⁶ The miraculous aspect suggesting the saint’s intervention was the fact that the lamp set in front of the relics had not been extinguished (“senza smorzare la lampa che era dinanti decte sancte reliquie”).⁸⁷ The

81. *Vocabolario Siciliano*, vol. I, ed. by Giorgio Piccitto, Palermo, Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, 1977, p. 921.

82. *Miracula et beneficia*, f. 25r.

83. *Ibid.*

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*, f. 112r.

86. *Ibid.*

87. *Ibid.*, f. 25r.

councillor Marco de Averna provided additional details, describing the condition of the chapel of the relics during the first inspection:

[...] et essendo esso testimonio in quell' hora chiamato come giorato, [...] andò in decta chiesa [...] et vicino il cancello di legname della cappella di decte sancte reliquii, nella quale trovò la lampa quale sole ardere dinanti decte ste reliquii accesa con gran stupore, giaché decto temporale non havea havuto forza di smorzarla [...]. Et havendo venuto l' altri giorati et perché loro tenevano le chiave della grada di ferro delle decte sancte reliquii, havendo quelle aperte, le trovorno senza nessuna lesione, neanco il dammuso né l' ante cappella dove era decta lampa [...].⁸⁸

In his detailed description, De Averna notes that the relics were found substantially intact and had suffered no damage and, more significantly, that, despite the fierce wind, the lamp was still lit, all of this being seen as a sign of supernatural action. The general interpretation, as passed down by the three witnesses, was that St Angelus had averted the divine castigation evidently intended to strike the entire city (“nostro Signore voleva castigare decta città ma s'oppose il decto nostro protectore con li suoi caldi prieghi”).⁸⁹ In order to save Licata, the saint decided to unleash all the violence of the storm upon his own church, which was indeed severely damaged: “Ma volse il santo ricevere tutta la rovina sopra della sua chiesa”.⁹⁰ For this reason, too, the city and the confraternity of the saint undertook the reconstruction of the roof as a sign of their gratitude towards St Angelus.

Although it was only briefly described by a few witnesses, the episode of the storm clearly indicates how all natural events were effectively interpreted as supernatural. Even this potential catastrophe was a way of demonstrating the protection of the patron saint. This special assistance is identified in many aspects, albeit all connected with the saint's abode.⁹¹ The lamp that is not extinguished and continues to burn over his relics, the intact casket and the damage suffered by the church demonstrate the saint's wish to take upon himself the storm's destructive potential, to the advantage of the city.

88. *Ibid.*, f. 123v.

89. *Ibid.*, f. 25v.

90. *Ibid.*

91. Edina Bozóky, “La ‘maison’ des saints et les miracles”, in Edina Bozóky, *Le Moyen Age miraculeux. Etudes sur les légendes et les croyances médiévales*, Paris, Riveneuve, 2010, pp. 98-110.

6. *St Angelus as protector from earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic*

The devotion to St Angelus has persisted over time, and there are records of the numerous occasions on which Licata resorted to the saint to avert natural disasters of various kinds. Currently, his feast is celebrated on both 5 May, the anniversary of his death, and on 16 August. As mentioned, the latter date was established after the plague of 1625 as a commemoration of the deliverance of the city from the disease.

There are also other occasions over the year when a mass is celebrated to commemorate other calamities, in this case earthquakes. The first is 11 January, recalling the earthquake that struck Sicily in 1693 and that destroyed Noto. The second is 28 December, the anniversary of the earthquake of 1908 that destroyed Reggio Calabria and Messina.⁹² In both cases, the city of Licata gave thanks to its patron saint for his protection. On these occasions – or at least on the 11 January anniversary – the exposition of the relics was celebrated as a tangible sign of the protection and presence of the saint. Nowadays, the urn containing the relics is displayed only on the 11 January commemoration and remains in exposition for three days on the high altar; on the other occasions, only the chapel containing the urn is opened. Nevertheless, on the important 800th anniversary of the martyrdom of St Angelus in 2020 – extended as a result of the pandemic – a recognition of the relics was carried out together with an extraordinary exposition.⁹³

The protection of St Angelus from natural calamities such as earthquakes, storms and pestilences also made him a powerful intercessor during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁴ More specifically, in addition to the numerous requests for help addressed to him by the devout through the Facebook page of the sanctuary – which was inaccessible due to rules for the prevention of infection – two further liturgical actions were implemented. On 25 March 2020, a prayer of intercession and benediction with the relics of the saint took place, during which a placing of trust in Christ and St Angelus was recited, explicitly requesting deliverance from the pandemic that was placed in direct

92. There is a third commemoration on 5 February in memory of the collapse of the cupola of the church around 1805. See Vincenzo Bruscia, *Un amico di S. Francesco morto a Licata*, Milan-Rome, Gastaldi, 1950, p. 36.

93. My thanks to Giacomo Vedda for providing this information.

94. See Marco Papasidero, “Miraculous Images and Devotional Practices in Italy at the Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic”, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 16/1 (2022), pp. 127-155.

relation with the pestilences in which the saint had provided his protection over the centuries. More specifically we read: “You, who once interceded to deliver Licata from the plague and who have always shown yourself to be its protector, continue to protect us even today and invoke deliverance from this disease”.⁹⁵ The second initiative took place on 29 March 2020, with a prayer recited simultaneously in Licata and in Mdina (Malta) by the Carmelites and the faithful followers of the martyr saint. As stated in the post published on the Facebook page of the sanctuary, the prayer was aimed at obtaining the saint’s protection “in this pandemic and scourge of COVID-19, as happened during the plague of 1675-1676”.⁹⁶ In other sanctuary posts, too, the prayer initiatives are always set in relation to the outbreaks of plague from which Licata was protected, especially that of 1675.

The prayers and hymns of popular tradition also contain references to Angelus’s specialised protection from natural disasters. At the end of one of the prayers to the saint, we read: “Continue to protect them [the people of Licata] from all scourges”, whereas in the hymn composed and set to music by the canon Vincenzo di Palma in 1920 we read: “Deliver us from the scourges / [...] From hunger, plague and war, / From the tremor of the earth / Preserve us, O great martyr / O glorious protector!”⁹⁷ The reference to natural catastrophes, such as famine, plague and earthquakes, is supplemented by the evils caused by man, such as war.

These examples connected with earthquakes and the recent pandemic show not only how recourse to St Angelus is still alive in Licata, but also how he is seen as the special protector against all natural disasters. Referring to his generic protection of the city is a fine engraving by Arnold van Westerhout (1651-1725), to a design by Sebastiano Conca (1680-1764), included in Carlo Filiberto Pizolanti’s *Delle memorie istoriche dell’antica città di Gela nella Sicilia*, published in Palermo in 1753.⁹⁸ It

95. “Licata prega il suo patrono sant’Angelo”, Santuario Sant’Angelo Licata Facebook page, 2020 (consulted online: <https://www.facebook.com/santuariosantangelo.licata/posts/1807332652735320>).

96. “Affidamento a Cristo e a sant’Angelo da recitare in comunione spirituale oggi 25 marzo 2020 alle ore 19:30”, Santuario Sant’Angelo Licata Facebook page, 2020 (consulted online: <https://www.facebook.com/santuariosantangelo.licata/posts/1807965412672044>).

97. From the official website of the sanctuary: http://www.santuariosantangelo.it/santo/preghiere_e_canti.htm.

98. Ciro D’Arpa, “La Madonna di Ravanusa nei Raguagli di padre Ottavio Gaetani: l’incisione di Giovanni Federico Greuter tra istanze civiche e ragioni artistiche”, *Rivista*



Fig. 3 Arnaldo Westerhout (engraver); Sebastiano Conca (inventor), in Carlo Filiberto Pizolanti, *Delle memorie istoriche dell'antica città di Licata nella Sicilia*, Palermo, 1753.

shows St Angelus with his habitual attributes: the palm of martyrdom with the three crowns, the sword carried by a cherub and the Carmelite habit. Added to these is a lily carried by another angel and the saint's hand raised in benediction (Fig. 3). The saint is shown set upon a cloud in the sky, protecting the city of Licata shown below with its port.⁹⁹ The engraving does not make any explicit references to either earthquakes or the plague, merely presenting the saint as protector; overlooking the city, he symbolically guarantees its protection and control. This iconographic model – very common, especially in the early modern period and after the

dell'Osservatorio per le Arti Decorative in Italia, 8 (2013), note 51 (consulted online: http://www1.unipa.it/oadi/oadiriv/?page_id=1761).

⁹⁹ The same subject is shown in a 17th-century painting originating from the convent of Licata.



Fig. 4. Anonymous, 20th-century holy card showing St Angelus blessing the city of Licata.

Counter-Reformation – persisted almost unaltered into the 20th century. A 20th-century coloured holy card shows the same subject as Westerhout’s engraving (Fig. 4), with the saint in much larger dimensions than the city, and with rays of light emanating from the saint and from the cloud beneath him, illuminating the city. This graphic motif once again shows the special protection and the grace that Angelus grants to his faithful in Licata.

7. Conclusion

The cult of saints acquired new impetus in the period of the Counter-Reformation. The major theological discussions and the erudite investigations into the historic validity of the hagiographical traditions –

such as that of the Bollandists, who published the first volume of the *Acta Sanctorum* in 1643¹⁰⁰ – were scarcely reflected in traditional contexts where the gestures of devotion, such as the use of miraculous water in Licata, were handed down from father to son. However, the new outburst of devotional fervour in Sicily at the beginning of the 17th century materialised in the recognition of new or renewed cults – for instance, those of Santa Rosalia and of St Benedict in San Fratello – and their importance and heroic dimension were also confirmed by the production of sumptuous reliquary caskets that were exposed for the adoration of the faithful.¹⁰¹ The veneration of the saints and the acknowledgement of their protection of the cities emerged from the Counter-Reformation as an element that strengthened Catholic culture as one of the most representative aspects of its long history.

In general, the deeds of inquiry into miracles reveal very clearly how, in the minds of the citizens of Licata, or at least those directly involved in the process, the plague had been sent by God but, more importantly, the end of the pestilence was to be attributed to the intervention of St Angelus. The natural/supernatural duality was hence resolved by the inadequacy of human action to quell or attenuate the infection and the necessary recourse to the saint.

The catastrophes described in the text – the two plagues and the storm – illustrate how both the witnesses and the hagiographical documents and those of the process reveal a vision of the origin of the adverse events consistent with the Christian religious imagination. These events are caused by God, allowed or voluntarily willed by Him to punish the city for its sins. There is no reference to a malign origin for such catastrophes. The cause of the catastrophic events of a medical-sanitary (plague) or atmospheric (storm) nature is not natural. Although the event originates in the sphere of nature, this is seen merely as the context in which it arises. The real cause is to be identified in the supernatural sphere, in which God and the saints are the principal agency of catastrophes. The storm from which

100. Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Work of the Bollandists Through Three Centuries, 1615-1915*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1922; Gian Domenico Gordini, “L’opera dei bollandisti e la loro metodologia”, in *Santità e agiografia. Atti dell’VIII Congresso di Terni*, ed. by Gian Domenico Gordini, Genoa, Marietti, 1991, pp. 49-73.

101. Briefly: that of Santa Rosalia made in 1639, that of Sant’Angelo, dating to 1623, and that of Santa Lucia in Syracuse, composed of a late 16th-century statue set upon a later urn, offered to the city in 1620.

St Angelus protected Licata is, for instance, defined as a consequence of the fact that “nostro Signore voleva castigare decta città”,¹⁰² a will to which “s’oppose il decto nostro protectore”.¹⁰³ The saint’s action is hence almost in competition with and in opposition to that of God, and the main channel through which he intervenes is prayer (“con li suoi caldi prieghi”).¹⁰⁴ The result is a species of chain in which the citizens of Licata invoke the favour of the saint (request for action), who in turn prays to God not to act against them (request for inaction).

For Licata, St Angelus is the supernatural helper to be turned to in times of difficulty. As recorded in the testimony of Francesco Grugno, the citizens “non cessassero nelli loro calamità di raccomandarseci”.¹⁰⁵ Disasters and catastrophes are the collective occasions that most severely test the community’s relation with its patron saint, and it is in such moments that the patron’s capacity to protect the city is confirmed. The fact that the people of Licata can rely on St Angelus to provide the necessary safeguarding is confirmed during the collective emergency – and not just at times of personal need – by the prompt response they know he can provide. While the hagiography and the notarial report on the miracles¹⁰⁶ contribute to consolidating this awareness, these undoubtedly build on the existence of a profound faith in the saint based on previous experience of protection.

St Angelus’s protection of the citizens of Licata was consolidated in the collective memory by an epitaph produced by the notary Giacomo Murci on commission from the councillors, which was installed in the chapel of the relics to “descrivere un tale et tanto miraculo”.¹⁰⁷ Also very interesting is the dual safeguard offered by the saint: protection of the city, seen as a community requiring collective aid, and the personal protection of the sick individuals and those in need of a miracle.

One of the key themes emerging in the narration of the catastrophes in the documents is that the saint’s help is seen primarily as a “taking upon himself”. We have seen how, during the plague of 1625, the citizens

102. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 25v.

103. *Ibid.*

104. *Ibid.*

105. *Ibid.*, f. 111v.

106. *Notai, miracoli e culto dei santi. Pubblicità e autenticazione del sacro tra XII e XV secolo. Atti del Seminario internazionale* (Rome, 5-7 December 2002), ed. by Raimondo Michetti, Milan, Giuffrè, 2004.

107. *Miracula et benefitia*, f. 127r.

considered the rapid decline in infection miraculous, noting how it had begun in some houses belonging to the confraternity of St Angelus, as if it were a special sign that this was where the disease had first struck. We have also seen how, during the storm, only the church was damaged, a sign that the saint preferred to sacrifice his own dwelling to save the city from destruction. The “taking upon himself” is therefore pivotal to the image of a saint who takes direct action to protect his faithful, sacrificing his own specific locations like an “invisible friend”.¹⁰⁸ God and saint appear to cover thematically different roles: God punishes and chastises;¹⁰⁹ the saint helps, welcomes and safeguards, fulfilling all the roles of physical, spiritual and symbolic proximity normally performed by a guardian. The tutelary function of the patron saint is therefore confirmed by the statements and evidence in the *Miracula et beneficia* of St Angelus, which offer a clear picture of the complex cultural history of early 17th-century Sicily.

108. Apropos this type of supernatural intervention, a similar case can be mentioned. In 1576, the city of Cosenza was struck by plague. Tradition holds that the infection ceased spreading only when the entire population rushed to invoke the help of Our Lady. More specifically, while praying in front of the Byzantine icon of the *Madonna del Pilerio*, one of the faithful noticed that a bubo had appeared on the face of the image. In this case, too, as the contagion receded over the following months, the episode was interpreted and consigned to collective memory as a sign that the Virgin – who became the patron saint of the city after the event – had wished to take the disease “upon herself” to protect the citizens.

109. Apropos the storm that struck Licata at the beginning of the 17th century, Francesco Grugno stated that “si crede che Dio volse dimostrare rovinare tutta decta città et occidere quanti personi erano in quella” (*Miracula et beneficia*, f. 112r).