

Giovanni Sercambi and Narratives of the Black Death

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Giovanni Sercambi tells us he was born in Lucca as plague devastated the city in 1348 and generally he is held to have died during the plague of 1424. As it did for Boccaccio, plague provided the frame story for Sercambi's *Novelliere*. And plague was an almost constant background in Lucca where he lived, worked and wrote his *Croniche* and his stories.¹ As a result of plague and warfare, population declined across the period in which he wrote.² At critical points epidemics carried away critical political leaders. Sercambi recalled that it was as plague raged in Lucca that he urged Paolo Guinigi to put himself forward, thwart the hopes of those who would bring down the Guinigi family, and take control of Lucchese government.³ It is worth asking just how Sercambi reasoned about plague.

It is now generally accepted that chronicles like Sercambi's tell us less than we would like about the actual series of epidemics that burdened

¹ Giovanni Sercambi, *Le croniche di Giovanni Sercambi*, Lucchese, ed. Salvatore Bongi, *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia* (Lucca, 1892), 19–21. I have used the Rossi edition of Sercambi's stories, *Idem, Il novelliere*, ed. Luigi Rossi (Rome, 1974). See further Michael Bratchel, *Medieval Lucca and the Evolution of the Renaissance State* (Oxford and New York, 2008), and Christine Meek, *Lucca, 1369–1400: Politics and Society in an Early Renaissance City-State* (Oxford and New York, 1978).

² Franca Leverotti, *Popolazione, famiglie, insediamento: le Sei Miglia lucchesi nel XIV e XV secolo* (Pisa, 1992).

³ Meek, *Lucca*, 338–43. Although Sercambi was Gonfaloniere di Giustizia at the time, Meek discounts his claims to have taken a leading role. She is generally suspicious of Sercambi's self-promotion.

Italy and Europe at the end of the Middle Ages.⁴ Many chroniclers did, in fact, try to distinguish between plague and other maladies. Their narratives often included phrases affirming that the signs of plague were manifest. Or that the epidemic was true plague. They believed that there were different causes of mortality and that they could distinguish among them. Yet they rarely described more than rashes, swellings, or even ‘signs’ leaving modern historians to wonder and debate about just what they did see.⁵ Sercambi only occasionally described what he saw, and never very carefully. He seems to have ignored medical distinctions. It has been suggested that Tuscan writers like Sercambi attempted to avoid mentioning *pestilenzia* or *peste* (plague), preferring a more neutral and apparently less threatening *moria* (mortality) or the even more vague *infermità* (infirmity). Chroniclers are said to prefer to ‘circumnavigate disturbing truths’.⁶ This does not really seem to be the case with Sercambi. In the *Croniche* he will use *moria* or *pestilenzia* almost interchangeably. In chapter 530 of Book 1, for example, he entitles the chapter ‘Come una moria...’ but then mentions in the text that God sent a plague (*pistolensa d' anguinaie*). And later he added that this *moria* was especially destructive in Tuscany. And he ends with a prayer that God preserve from the plague (*tale pistolensa*) those who show true repentance. Plague seems to have been a given in Sercambi’s life and he did not seem to need to hide it under various

⁴ Gabriele Zanella, ‘Italia, Francia, Germania: una storiografia a confronto’, in *La peste nera: dati di una realtà ed elementi di una interpretazione* (Spoleto, 1994), pp. 49–135; and Ann G. Carmichael, ‘Universal and Particular: The Language of Plague, 1348–1500’, *Medical History Supplement*, 27 (2008): 19–20. Sercambi will sometimes note a pestilence or *moria* of ‘anguinaie’ but he is never more specific. The extant chronicles reporting plague are discussed and listed in Alfonso Corradi, *Annali delle epidemie occorse in Italia* (Bologna, 1972–72), vol. 1, sub anno.

⁵ David Herlihy and Samuel Kline Cohn, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge, MA, 1997) contains a thoughtful consideration of the descriptions found in fourteenth-century sources. See also the discussions of chronicles in Zanella, ‘Italia’.

⁶ Martin Marafioti, ‘Semantic Distance as a Reaction to Plague in Medieval Italy: Evidence from the Story Collections of Boccaccio, Sacchetti and Sercambi’, *Forum Italicum* 39 (2005): 326–49; the quotation is on p. 326. Marafioti suggests that once plague has been invoked in the frame story of the Decameron, it is not mentioned again. Perhaps, but the issue of the brigata abandoning friends and family remains in the background of these tales of love and fortune. And the brigata does in the end decide to return to the city and to their responsibilities.

euphemisms. Yet the question does remain: what role did plague play in Sercambi's *Croniche*? What was it that he thought he saw?

Sercambi was heir to the Tuscan tradition of dramatic plague narratives. Yet in his *Croniche* plague was in some senses, domesticated. He reported some of the commonplaces recorded about the Black Death of 1348 — but his understanding of a plague's implications was different. He began writing his *Croniche* more than two decades after the Black Death. He was part of the generation that, in Samuel K. Cohn's opinion, was more likely to ignore religious speculation about plague and rather describe material realities.⁷ Cohn's observation is correct to a point. Sercambi did discard some commonplaces, but plague remained a moral and religious marker. He knew Boccaccio's account of plague in Florence and he also seems to have known the rumours of plague circulating in Tuscany. He repeats the stories recounted in the *Sienese Chronicle* ascribed to Agnolo di Tura as well as those found in Pisa. Like them he reports that it was two Genoese galleys stopping at Pisa that brought plague to Tuscany. He agrees that it was in the *piazza dei Pesci* that the sailors passed the 'corruption' to Pisans.⁸

Yet Sercambi's conclusions were quite different. The *Sienese Chronicle* shares with Boccaccio and the Villanis a strong apocalyptic context. For these authors plague was related to recurrent famine and the terrible earthquakes just before the arrival of plague. These convinced Giovanni Villani, at least, that plague marked the judgments to come which Jesus predicted in the Gospels. Matthew 24 reports 'there shall be famines and pestilences, and earthquakes in divers places.' In other accounts gospel writers promise 'roaring seas' and abandonment when fathers will betray sons. And Matthew 24 itself continues that warm hearts will turn cold: that is, charity will die.⁹ These gospel predictions clearly were in the minds of many who wrote.

⁷ The most recent statement of his position on fourteenth-century plagues is Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., 'Triumph over Plague: Culture and Memory after the Black Death', in *Care for the Here and the Hereafter: Memoria, Art and Ritual in the Middle Ages*, ed. Truus van Bueren and Andrea van Keerdam (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 35–54.

⁸ *Croniche*, 1: 95–96.

⁹ The predictions are found in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. The 'Death of Charity' as a commonplace in fourteenth-century chroniclers seems to have been noted first by Robert Hoeniger, *Der Schwarze Tod in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1882), p. 4.

In 1348, shortly before Villani died of plague, he placed plague in the context of gospel predictions of an imminent Last Judgment. He recorded famine, always connected with pestilence, he said. Then came the pestilence itself which he associated with astrological signs and vermin raining from the sky in the East and corrupting all who lived and travelled there. And finally he recorded the earthquakes that early in 1348 struck throughout Northern Italy and parts of Southern Germany — sure signs, he said, of great damages and pestilence. His last entry drew all this together.

Take note reader that these ruins and dangers from earthquakes are great signs and judgements from God. These are not without explanation and divine cause. They are the miracles and signs that Christ predicted while preaching to his disciples. They have to appear at the end of time.¹⁰

Villani's explanation of the end times was part of a widely disseminated vision which included the Cedars of Lebanon prophecy studied by Robert Lerner and the various texts which circulated under the title 'Fifteen Signs of the End of the World'.¹¹ Versions of the Cedars of Lebanon prophecy promise plagues and famines. Other texts promise floods, men and women abandoning their children and giving themselves over to every pleasure. Some texts follow the gospels and expect a cooling of all charity. The Fifteen Signs include floods and astral conjunctions.¹² In fact, by the time chroniclers wrote to describe plague, the abandonment and the death of charity were widely expected. A century earlier Jaques de Vitry had written that as the world moved toward its end 'charity had cooled and no faith could be

¹⁰ Giovanni Villani, *Nuova cronica*, ed. Giuseppe Porta (Parma, 1991), 3: 564–66.

¹¹ Robert E. Lerner, *The Powers of Prophecy: The Cedar of Lebanon Vision from the Mongol Onslaught to the Dawn of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 1983); William W. Heist, *The Fifteen Signs before Doomsday* (East Lansing, Michigan, 1952).

¹² A selection of apocalyptic texts are collected and translated by Bernard McGinn in his edition of *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-En-Der, Joachim of Fiore, the Franciscan Spirituals, Savonarola* (New York, 1979). See also Robert E. Lerner, 'The Black Death and Western European Eschatological Mentalities', *The American Historical Review* 86 (1981): 533–52. The 'Fifteen Signs' and other apocalyptic texts also appear in the collection of Antonio Pucci, a Florentine cantastoria whose work was known to Sercambi: Antonio Pucci. *La pestilenzia del 1348* (Florence, 1884); and idem, *Libro di varie storie*, ed. Alberto Varvaro (Palermo, 1957).

found in the world? He added as a sign of this cooling ‘the son shall assault the father and the daughter shall rise up against her mother. The Holy will be indistinguishable from the profane’.¹³

Giovanni Villani’s brother Matteo continued his brother’s narrative and underlined the social disruption brought on by plague. He echoed Boccaccio’s observation of widespread abandonment.¹⁴ The *Sienese Chronicle* attributed to Agnolo di Tura uses almost identical language twice, when describing plague in Pisa and later in Siena. The chronicle goes on in language that also seems to echo the long tradition of apocalyptic prophecy:

The human tongue cannot recount the horrible nature of the thing. Indeed one could call blessed those who did not see the horror. ... Father abandoned child, wife husband and one brother another. The one fled from the other because this contagion attacked by breath and seemed to pass by sight. And so they died. No one could be found to bury the dead either for love or money. ... No one mourned the dead because everyone expected to die. So many did die that everyone thought it was the end of the world. ... And those who survived were like madmen and almost senseless.¹⁵

Plague brought other disasters to the mind of the compiler of the *Sienese Chronicle*. The chronicler reports in the wake of plague a series of earthquakes in San Sepolcro, to the east of Arezzo and high in the Apennines. Perhaps because of his anxieties over the moralities, he chooses to add to his account a commonplace tale probably related to the accounts of the Wild Host which can be traced throughout the Medieval West.¹⁶ He reports just before the earthquake one of the judges of the Podestà was awakened and heard voices, ‘Smite them!’

¹³ Jacques de Vitry, *The Historia Occidentalis of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. John Frederick Hinnebusch (Fribourg, 1972), p. 76.

¹⁴ Matteo Villani, *Cronica: Con La Continuazione Di Filippo Villani*, ed. Giuseppe Porta (Parma, 1995).

¹⁵ ‘Cronaca maggiore attribuita a Agnolo di Tura del Grasso (a. 1300–1351); in *Cronache sensi. Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 2nd edn (hereafter *RIS*²), ed. Alessandro Lisini and Fabio Iacometti, 15 (Città di Castello, 1939), p. 555.

¹⁶ Ottavia Niccoli, ‘The Kings of the Dead on the Battlefiel of Agnadello’, in *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore, MD, 1991), pp. 71–100, provides a gripping account of the apparitions after the dramatic defeat of Venice and an introduction of the wider phenomena.

And the other answered 'No! Because matins have not been said at the church of Sant'Agostino.' The judge reported what he heard to the Podestà who ignored the warning and when matins had been sung, he again heard the order to smite them 'and immediately there was a violent earthquake that destroyed the palace of the Podestà.'¹⁷ A later version of the same story was included in a collection of 'examples,' by Fra Filippo degli Agazzari. In his version the voices belonged to a host who exclaimed 'We are the men of arms of the devil and we go to destroy the Borgo a San Sepolcro.'¹⁸ The chronicler fully expected that all the signs of the Last Days would be fulfilled.

The death or cooling of charity was a widely predicted sign of the Last Days and it was expected to follow earthquake and plague. Abandonment and plague had been connected since Paul the Deacon's description of plague in early medieval Rome. It was a key element in Boccaccio's frame story in *The Decameron*. And whether from Boccaccio, or from the apocalyptic texts, numerous chroniclers also included descriptions of abandonment.¹⁹ The abandonment predicted in apocalyptic texts became such a powerful plague image that writing later Marchione di Coppo Stefani included a fanciful description of how an abandonment might have occurred.

¹⁷ *Cronaca senese*, 557.

¹⁸ Filippo degli Agazzari, *Gli assempri di Fra' Filippo degli Agazzari*, ed. Pietro Misiatelli (Siena, 1922), no 55. The story is paraphrased and partially translated by William Heywood, *The 'Ensamples' of Fra Filippo: A Study of Medieval Siena* (Siena, 1901), pp. 292–94.

¹⁹ Among the chroniclers of plague who use variants of the *topos*, 'fathers abandoned sons', see 'Monumenta Pisana ab anno MLXXXIX usque ad annum MCCCLXXXIX, deducta et continuata usque ad MCCCCVI. Auctore anonymo nunc primum luci donatur e manuscripto Codice Bibliotcae Mediceo-Laurentianae', in *RIS*, ed. Ludovico Antonio Muratori, 15 (Milan, 1729) col. 1021; Marco Battagli, 'Anonymi Itali Historia a temporibus Friderici II Augusti usque ad annum MCCCLIV', in *RIS*, ed. Ludovico Antonio Muratori, 16 (Milan, 1730), col. 286–86; Pietro Azario, 'Liber Gestorum in Lombardia', in *RIS*², ed. Francesco Cognasso, 16:4 (Città di Castello, 1925–39), 35–36. And there are others who are so taken with the abandonment *topos* that they use it to describe other crises. See *Storie Pistoresi MCCC–MCCCXLVIII*, *RIS*², 11, ed. Silvio Adrasto Barbi (Città di Castello, 1907), 40 describing a siege in 1305 'e per la grande fame che v'era dentro ventarono sì spietati tra loro, che lo padre cacciava li figliuoli e le figliuole.' Although the plague was pre-plague, the manuscript in which the chronicle is found post-dates the Black Death.

And many died of hunger because when someone took to bed sick, another in the house, terrified, said to him: 'I'm going for the doctor.' Calmly walking out the door, the other left and did not return again. ... There were many who pleaded with their relatives not to abandon them when night fell. But [the relatives] said to the sick person, 'So that during the night you did not have to awaken those who serve you and who work hard day and night, take some sweetmeats, wine or water. They are here on the bedstead by your head; here are some blankets.' And when the sick person had fallen asleep, they left and did not return. ... No one, or few, wished to enter a house where anyone was sick, nor did they even want to deal with those healthy people who came out of a sick person's house. And they said to them: 'He is stupefied, do not speak to him!' ... Many died unseen. So they remained in their beds until they stank. ... When the mortality ended, those who found themselves with cloth of any kind or with raw materials for making cloth were enriched. ... And such it was that those who had nothing found themselves rich with what did not seem to be theirs and they were unseemly because of it. Women and men began to dress ostentatiously.²⁰

Marchione Stefani's text is clearly a fictional account of all he had heard about plague. Some parts certainly ring true, but the rest seems a combination of rumor and expectation. In this he probably was not unusual. Many may well be describing what they expected rather than what they observed. In sum, this vision is probably more imagined than real. Knowing the popular apocalyptic literature, Marchione doubtless expected to find social disruption. In fact, many have suggested, there are signs that individuals and governments were more responsible than Villani or other chroniclers suggest.²¹

Sercambi too sees God's hand in the *moria*. But he never associates it with the gospel expectations of Last Days. Rather, like the plagues God sent on Egypt, plague in Sercambi's writings seems to demand

²⁰ Marchione di Coppo Stefani, 'Cronaca Fiorentina', in *RIS*², 30:1, ed. Niccolò Rodolico (Città di Castello, 1903), rubric 643.

²¹ Gene A. Brucker, 'Florence and the Black Death', in *Boccaccio: Secoli Di Vita*, ed. Margo Cottino-Jones and E. F. Tuttle (Ravenna, 1975), pp. 21–30. On social dislocation and the realism of Boccaccio's text, see Shona Kelly Wray, 'Boccaccio and the Doctors: Medicine and Compassion in the Face of Plague', *Journal of Medieval History* 30 (2004): 301–22.

moral reflection. Like Boccaccio, some of whose stories reappear in the *Novelliere*, Sercambi frames his collection of stories in an account of plague — in this case in the 1370s.²² In Boccaccio's frame, the *brigata* flees the plague and Boccaccio means his readers to reflect on Love, Fortune and finally on the irresponsible actions of his young people.²³ His worldly *brigata* seems to exhibit the expected cooling of love and charity as they leave behind the needy in Florence as they search out a pleasant place to relax and divert themselves.

Sercambi, who alluded to the apocalyptic images in framing his *Novelliere*, explained that God had empowered angelic and malign spirits to send fire, water and blood from the heavens. But these events are not announcing the Final Things. Rather, this happened, he explains

... because human nature is drawn toward the opposite of Good and desires to follow that, the divine power of God had been disposed to send those signs he sent to Pharaoh that we might mend our ways and abstain from vice. And yet we remain, with hearts hardened like that of Pharaoh, waiting the final sentence which will bring eternal penalties. Is it any wonder if now in 1374 the mortality has come ... ?²⁴

Sercambi's *brigata* thus is responding to God's warning. Their travels, under the guidance of a cleric and with a strong penitential aspect, were very different from Boccaccio's carefree band. Sercambi mentions the plagues sent to a hardened Pharaoh more than once. He believes Italians too have hardened hearts, as hard as Pharaoh's. Yet he expects eventually, like Pharaoh, they will learn from these examples and turn

²² Marafotti, 'Semantic Distance', 339, 347, notes 21–25.

²³ Aldo Bernardo, 'Plague as Key to Meaning in Boccaccio's *Decameron*', in *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth-Century Plague*, ed. Daniel Williman (Binghamton, NY, 1982), pp. 58–60, at p. 53.

²⁴ *Novellierre*, 1: 4–5. No plague was reported in Lucca in 1374. There is no fully convincing explanation for why Sercambi chose that year. The best guess may be Luciano Rossi's. He suggests that 1374 was the year when the Guinigi began to dominate Lucchese politics. As a member of the Guinigi faction, Sercambi was sensitive to their position of leadership. The 'eccelentissimo omo' Aluizi who becomes the leader of the *brigata* is an allusion to Francesco Guinigi and a veiled comment that Paolo Guinigi also needed to lead Lucca. See *ibid.* 6, n. 4.

to a life of true penance. His travellers clearly resemble the Bianchi of 1399 who will be extensively described later in Sercambi's *Croniche*.²⁵

Plague then fits well in the structure of Sercambi's *Croniche*. He explains that he wrote his *Croniche* in order to recount the story of Lucca's *Libertas*²⁶ — how the city had lost and then regained its liberty. Further, the *Croniche* began as a meditation on the civic nature of liberty, the virtues necessary to maintain civic liberty. As Sercambi wrote, it became an explanation of how liberty, in the sense of freedom from foreign domination, had come to depend on the Guinigi family and ultimately on the despotism of Paolo Guinigi. Sercambi's narrative proceeds through the presentation of exemplary events summed up in poems or aphorisms. In discussing a Lucca caught in the endless skirmishes involving Pisa and Florence he quotes Aesop's Fables

The frog and mouse prepared to fight
'til they were eaten by a passing kite!

Later in discussing his difficult relationship with Lucca's lord, Paolo Guinigi he concluded

In good times many are your friends;
When your fortune turns, their friendship ends.²⁷

Thus, his descriptions of plague are of a piece with his moral reflections and aphorisms. They offer examples or images that he believes reveal important truths about Lucca and Italy.

The context in which Sercambi describes plague thus is resolutely moral and political. Sercambi clearly is aware of the broader scientific and medical questions of plague but they mean little to him. Where Boccaccio offered the possibility of celestial causes for the corruption,

²⁵ Daniel Ethan Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca, 1993). Sercambi recounts the Bianchi in *Croniche* 2: 300–71. The Bianchi's travels, of course, are punctuated by plague outbreaks, but in the case of the Bianchi, plague was not the reason the penitential movement began.

²⁶ On the Chronicle, see Duane J. Osheim, 'Chronicles and Civic Life in Giovanni Sercambi's Lucca' in *Chronicling History: Chroniclers and Historians in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Sharon Dale, Alison Williams Lewin and Duane J. Osheim (University Park, PA, 2007), pp. 145–169.

²⁷ Both aphorisms are quoted from Osheim, 'Sercambi's Lucca', 152. On the *Croniche* in general, see *ibid* as well as Franca Ragone, 'Le "Croniche" di Giovanni Sercambi: composizione e struttura dei prologhi', *Annali dell'Istituto italiano per gli studi storici* 9 (1985–86): 5–34.

Sercambi dismisses astral influences. Further he does concede that plague seems to kill indiscriminately. He admits that many innocents died along with the wicked. His famous illumination of angels of death both shooting arrows and pouring pots of corruption seems to be a concession that while the arrows may be directed toward the guilty, the pots of corruption poured out indiscriminately also afflicted the innocent.²⁸ As he said in describing 1348,

Since because of our sins God provided signs through famine, as I have recounted, and with all that men did not repent nor forgive insults, but rather they continued to plan even greater evils, the great power of God resolved to punish though a mortality those unbelievers and those who persisted without cease in evil deeds regardless of the fact that many innocent would perish in the mortality that God promised.²⁹

Yet the context for Sercambi remains resolutely moral and political. Throughout the *Croniche* he seems to have a sense of a divinely regulated 'Moral Economy,'³⁰ of right and wrong which was the key to understanding phenomena like plague. In the *Croniche*, plague and other phenomena were both warnings and judgements. Initially Sercambi tells us he was moved simply to tell the story of how Lucca lost its liberty and once again regained it. As he wrote, however, his understanding of the role of divine justice in the unfolding of Lucca's history deepened.

Sercambi explains his method most clearly in a series of chapters in which he discusses Rome during the pontificate of Boniface IX. In the 1390s Boniface was supported by Malatesta IV (Malatesta of Rimini) whom the pope had appointed senator of Rome. Sercambi recounts

²⁸ A line drawing reproducing Sercambi's illumination can be found online at <<http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/>>. Colour reproductions are found in Ottavio Banti and Maria Louisa Cristiani Testi, *Le illustrazioni delle Croniche di Giovanni Sercambi nel codice Lucchese* (Genoa, 1978).

²⁹ *Croniche*, 1: 95.

³⁰ The phrase is derived from E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present* 50 (1971): 76–136. Thompson used it to describe an idealized remembrance of market relationships. It was used in a broader sense of idealized economic and cultural relationships in James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, 1976), while still describing material relationships. It has since been used in numerous contexts.

how in an act widely considered unjust, Malatesta, as part of the papal struggle against the Roman commune, executed a number of Roman nobles he considered rebellious. Sercambi understood this to violate what I am calling his sense of moral economy. It is worthwhile quoting Sercambi at length:

... but in matters such as these, since humans can do nothing to mend the situation, one must expect that God can do all, and all the misdeeds can be mended and all crimes punished.

And because of this I say, so that everyone should abstain from wrongdoing, they should take account of what God shows through his signs and conclude that such signs are because of our sins. Do not say that such a sign is natural, or such a pestilence is caused by an unhealthy location [*mal sito*], or that a battle and death is caused by one man's hate for another, or that a flood is caused by nature, or that such a lord was deposed because his time had come. Since almost all, or the major, part of men of this world are reduced to saying that these signs either proceed from Nature or from the Will of God, I have wanted to say, and I do say, that the signs that are now present are because of our sins and not from Nature. God does all so that we poor people should abstain from vices and sins. Take, for example, what God promised against the Pharaoh when he held the people of God in bondage, then he sent numerous pestilences and ultimately death.³¹

Following this explanation, he shows how God's actions can be understood. In the following chapter Sercambi reports on a terrible wind that struck throughout central Italy toppling houses and taking lives. He adds that this wind was sent by God and that in the collapse of buildings on the Campidoglio in Rome 'Malatesta himself was wounded by many blows.' And Sercambi concluded that this was both a sign and a judgment. 'Now whoever wishes to say this was not done by God and for our sins errs greatly.'³²

In almost every case, we find this same method followed when Sercambi discusses plague. Occasionally he will vaguely describe the malady. In 1371, he says deaths were caused by 'the mortality of a deadly swelling in the groin, swellings in the armpits, boils and pustules and

³¹ *Croniche*, 2: 229. On Malatesta and the Roman commune see Arnold Esch, *Bonifaz IX. und der Kirchenstaat*, (Tübingen, 1969), pp. 249–64.

³² *Croniche*, 2: 230.

bubos' (*la moria a morine d'anguinaie, sossitelli, bolle, e faoni*).³³ But the characteristics of the disease or even its morbidity do not really give him pause. He rather searches for an event or phenomenon that he could associate with plague. In some cases plague is the cause of these events, in others it seems to result from them.

The second great epidemic, in 1363, is a case in point. This plague has been of great interest since it was nearly as devastating as the plague of 1348. But beginning with the plague of 1363, historians argue one can begin to find a recognition of the periodicity of plague and even a rough sense of an epidemiology.³⁴ Although Sercambi wrote with the experience of numerous epidemics, he really never exhibited any sense of the path of the recurrent epidemics. He was neither expecting nor looking for a material cause.

In this case, Sercambi believed he saw a political explanation. Lucca had been under Pisan occupation since 1342 and because of a renewed war between Florence and Pisa, that occupation became harsher after 1362. It was then that Pisans discovered several Lucchese had been collaborating with the Florentines in the hope that the Pisans could be driven out. Several conspirators were arrested and eleven citizens were executed by the Pisans. And it was these wars, tumults, and reprisals that convulsed northern and western Tuscany which in Sercambi's words led to the 'mortality that the [Divine] Providence sent to reign during the wars'.³⁵ In his telling, in fact, it was the plague that led to the execution of the Lucchese, 'because mortalities always introduce other evils.' He explains that the captured Lucchese were offered their freedom if they could raise 5000 florins of a 10,000 florin fine within 24 hours. A few of the prisoners succeeded, but the eleven

³³ *Croniche*, 1:206.

³⁴ Ann G. Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, 1985). In a number of works, Samuel K. Cohn has argued that 1363 represents the real turning point in plague mentalities: see *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore, MD, 1997); and *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe* (London and New York, 2002).

³⁵ The plague and aftermath are recounted in *Croniche*, 1: 117–19. On this see Meek, *Lucca*, 4–5.

did not 'and thus, Sercambi concludes, Lucca's people and her wealth were consumed'.³⁶

The economic decline Sercambi associated with Pisan occupation continued throughout the fourteenth century. To Sercambi's mind it was associated with the rising factional tensions in the city, and political crises most often were in times of plague. Francesco Guinigi came to play an increasingly prominent role in Lucchese politics and society in the 1370s, in the wake of an epidemic, and at the time Sercambi set the pilgrimage that frames his *Novelliere*. Perhaps the best example of how Sercambi reasons about plague is his explanation of the plague of 1390.³⁷ Since the emergence of a powerful Guinigi faction in Lucca, struggles among powerful families had been escalating. By 1390 the Guinigi faction was opposed by an anti-Guinigi party headed by the Forteguerra family, wealthy bankers and patricians. As was typical in Italian communes, the Guinigi faction attempted to control elections to communal councils through the manipulation of the *tasca*, the process whereby bags were created holding the names of those eligible for public office. In 1390, the Guinigi removed the name of a Forteguerra leader from the electoral bag and placed it in a subsidiary bag from which replacements for those unable to serve were to be chosen. It was widely understood to be an insult, and heightened political tensions in the city and among the numerous Forteguerra partisans in the countryside. This marked renewed struggle in the years before the final and complete domination of Lucca by the Guinigi party.³⁸ Sercambi himself was very much involved in party politics, but this is how he explains the strife:

The Divine Goodness, seeing that the citizens and countrymen of Lucca had risen up in such discord, and not wishing to take away the free will [which characterizes] reasonable men, allowed them to distinguish for themselves the good from the evil. Seeing in all this that discord grew and that the old examples were little valued, and since nothing else worked, the [Divine] Wisdom concluded that they would have to

³⁶ *Croniche*, 1: 117–19. On the context of this crisis see Christine Meek, *The Commune of Lucca under Pisan Rule* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 101–103.

³⁷ *Croniche*, 1: 260–61.

³⁸ The incident in 1390 is discussed in Meek, *Lucca*, pp. 259–62; see pp. 257–68 for a discussion of factional struggle between 1385 and 1392.

be drawn from their evil intentions through fear of divine judgement. Thus it suited Him that first in Lucca and then in the countryside the mortality should come [in the form of swellings] in the groin and armpits, boils and pustules. ... And among those who died was Bonagiunta Schiezza; it was he who since he was an assessor [of the Tasca] revealed to messer Bartolomeo [Forteguerra] that he had been *spicciato* [that is, his name had been placed in the special reserve bag for replacements].³⁹

The rather insulting, special treatment Bartolomeo Forteguerra received is difficult to understand. He and his faction remained important, yet perhaps even more alienated from the Guinigi. The death of Bonagiunta seemed to Sercambi to indicate God's judgment against someone who to Sercambi's mind was spreading faction and ill will. The spread of plague in the city and the countryside, thus, was just confirmation that God was reminding the Lucchese that there was such a thing as a moral economy, that faction had to be kept in check.

As he looked at war and schism in western Christendom, he again comes back to his belief that this is why there seems to be continuous plague. It is a sign, but not, as Villani believed, of the Last Things. Rather they are 'examples,' he would say, signs reminding us of the necessary moral bargain:

And so he who has understanding, will come to perceive [the truth about] these events and abstain from vices and live in charity, loving God and aiding his neighbor. And God in his mercy will protect us from plagues and from infernal punishments.⁴⁰

Sercambi, and many Italians like him, did move away from apocalyptic speculation as plague returned again and again. But they did not necessarily move toward a search for material causes or cures. Townsmen like Sercambi understood the material and spiritual worlds as intimately connected. It seemed logical that disasters like plague must be connected to the problems that convulsed the world in which they lived. Periodicity or transmissibility of disease was not the first thing they noticed. Sercambi believed he understood the problem and it was at heart moral. He offers an example of Carlo Ginzburg's

³⁹ *Croniche*, 1: 260–61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2: 234–35.

observation, 'One does not always find what one is looking for, but it is very difficult to find what you do not want to find.'⁴¹

⁴¹ Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi, *Giochi di pazienza: Un seminario sul Beneficio Di Cristo* (Turin, 1975), 183. This book is, in effect, a meditation on how one puzzles out reality from the past. On the book, and on the problem of the historian's task, see Anne Jacobson Schutte's retrospective appreciation of the book in a special issue of *Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 137–41.