



**HAL**  
open science

# The Public's Role in Vigilance against Plague and Political Authority in early Eighteenth-Century France

Nicolas Vidoni

► **To cite this version:**

Nicolas Vidoni. The Public's Role in Vigilance against Plague and Political Authority in early Eighteenth-Century France. Sébastien Demichel; Marc Sven Hengerer. *Vigilance and the Plague. France Confronted with the Epidemic Scourge during the 17th and 18th Centuries*, 6, De Gruyter, pp.125-154, 2024, *Vigilanzkulturen / Cultures of Vigilance*, 10.1515/9783111026169-006. hal-04521232

**HAL Id: hal-04521232**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04521232>**

Submitted on 26 Mar 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Nicolas Vidoni

# The Public's Role in Vigilance against Plague and Political Authority in early Eighteenth-Century France

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has seen the revival of rhetorical devices that call upon individuals to participate in the collective fight against such contagion. Such a renewal is predicated upon the participation of two types of entities: individuals and collectives. Individuals must become aware of any imminent danger, adopt whatever preventive gestures may be necessary all while modulating their attitudes and behaviour according to the prevailing prophylactic canons. Collectively, they form groups with different social statuses: the good students and those with generally good codes of conduct, on the one hand, and the objectors, on the other. This latter category have not yet been explicitly fashioned as a group posing any risk to the wider community, yet the demarcation line remains tenuous. The very existence of such a group of objectors partly justifies retaining preventive measures, in which “vigilance” by every member of society is invoked.

This veritable “vigilantism” needs to be called into question, however.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when it comes to examining the past, can we know for certain what specific individual and group attitudes may have formed the basis for people's fear of plague? A number of private manuscripts or autobiographical accounts enable us to catch glimpse of some isolated elements of a plausible answer. The physicians' attitudes were known and they were not unequivocal, to such an extent, in fact, that during the plague outbreak of 1720–1724, the French Crown authorities revived the model of a powerful governing physician by republishing Ranchin's *Opuscules*, a medical treatise which had been written in the wake of the plague outbreak of the decade 1630–1640.

And yet, it can equally be observed how “vigilante” measures were devised and on occasion even implemented; they did indeed have a political impact, and one which studies on plague outbreaks have tended to neglect, at times echoing a form of depoliticisation of public healthcare related issues advocated by governmental authorities – on every level. Such latent forms of political conflict need to

---

<sup>1</sup> We have borrowed this term from Favarel-Garrigues/Gayer, *Violer la loi pour maintenir l'ordre*, pp. 7–33.

be probed in order to enrich our socio-political understanding of anti-plague measures.<sup>2</sup>

For this very reason, a comparative approach between two distinct stratagems adapted for plague prevention in urban conglomerations of comparable size and function might well be well worth considering. In a bid to avoid a uniform vision, which might simply convey the notion of the French Royal State taking charge of containing contagion, it will be insightful to compare how two cities not impacted in a similar fashion by the plague outbreak during the years 1720–1724 coped with that public healthcare emergency.<sup>3</sup> Aix and Montpellier, cities of comparable size and with administrative and political functions that render them similar in multiple respects, lend themselves favorably to such a comparative approach.<sup>4</sup> With their respective estimated population of 20 000 to 25 000, both cities concentrated economic influence if considered in terms of their overall significance in the Kingdom of France. Yet, their status on a provincial scale equally made it viable for them to narrow the scope of those procedures that account for the surveillance measures in place in urban areas and to understand how the various actors were involved in these systems. An initial presentation of these two sanitary regimes imagined at a city level in a bid to “surveil” the contagious outbreak reveals that, in reality, it was more a case of surveilling the general population. The second part of this presentation will enable us to analyse the ramifications of such surveillance measures in terms of the population’s involvement and participation or lack thereof. And, finally, the practical consequences of participating in regulating urban problems will be discussed in an attempt to understand how this particular iteration of plague proved to be both a testing ground and a landmark moment in a new relationship to the “common good” taking form.

---

2 Times of crisis are useful for acquiring an historical understanding of various forms of political conflict. On this topic, see Bourquin/Hamon, *La politisation*.

3 In the vast and profound historiography on this episode of plague, the case of Marseilles has obviously given rise to numerous works, including Carrière/Coudurié/Rebuffat, *Marseille ville morte*. More recently, the policing aspect has been examined in greater depth by Beauvieux, *Épidémie, pouvoir municipal et transformation de l’espace urbain*. For the outbreak of plague in Provence: Bertrand, *La Peste en Provence aux temps modernes* and Buti, *Colère de dieu, mémoire des hommes*. For Arles, Caylux, *Arles et la peste de 1720–1721*.

4 Lepetit, *Les villes dans la France moderne*.

# I Preventive Measures against Plague in Aix and Montpellier

The subsequently published historiography and multiple accounts concerning the contagious outbreak all emphatically demonstrate how systemically and authoritatively the French Crown took charge of the fight to contain the epidemic. While precedents did indeed exist, they did not necessarily serve as a model during the 1720–1724 outbreak in the case of Languedoc and Provence.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the actors involved had to operate in an exceptional manner, ultimately leading to the necessary adjustments in their attempt to make such highly restrictive measures acceptable.

## 1 Different Institutionalised Exceptionalism

Perilous times and the prevailing terror sweeping the cities enabled the institutionalisation of exceptional procedures, i. e., those procedures that did not respect conventional forms of law, or which created precedents that were subsequently ratified by the law.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of both Aix and Montpellier, a pathway which could be characterised as midway and marked by hesitation was followed. Within the framework of reviving conventional plague control measures, fresh practices were introduced, and then indisputably amended in the case of Aix. This discrepancy in approach can be explained by the fact that those measures initially developed during the 1630s and 1640s were revived and supplemented by provisions formulated in the 1660s and 1670s,<sup>7</sup> but these had not been deployed in cities throughout the south of the kingdom for some fifty years. The memory of those practices had to some extent been lost.<sup>8</sup> The fundament underpinning these preventative measures was the so-called *bureau de la santé*, or local health office. Reactivated whenever a

---

5 We can thus read in the archives of the Intendant of Provence and first president of the Parliament of Aix Cardin Le Bret that he does not know exactly how plague prevention measures were constituted in 1630. In the case of Aix, see the recent thesis by Fleur Beauvieux, *Expériences ordinaires de la peste*.

6 Chassaigne/Delaporte/Le Mao, *Peurs urbaines (xvi<sup>e</sup>–xxi<sup>e</sup> siècle)*. On the issue of exceptionalism: Thomas, *L'exception dans tous ses états*; Saint-Bonnet, *L'État d'exception*.

7 Revel, *Autour d'une épidémie ancienne*.

8 Bertrand/Buti, *Le risque de peste*.

city was stricken with an epidemic outbreak,<sup>9</sup> this exceptional institution brought together the city's diverse authorities with the objective of forging a consensus within the dominant social groups in a bid to legitimise forms of public policy which occasionally went against commonplace and routine practice.

In Aix, in the absence of Parliament, an institution holding the upper hand in the city in terms of law enforcement, it traditionally fell upon the city's *avocats*, who served both as lawyers and urban counsellors, to assume responsibility for administering the *bureau de la santé*.<sup>10</sup> During the plague outbreak of 1720–1724, however, these *avocats* were removed from this administrative role. It was Parliament, by way of the *Chambre des vacations* which was sitting in Aix until October 1720, and the royal intendant, who also happened to be Parliament's first speaker, who led the clampdown against the outbreak. Whenever the *avocats* exited Aix to travel to Saint-Rémy de Provence, they entrusted the city's governance to those consuls who had remained in-situ, to the military governor and, more broadly, to the "bourgeoisie" in order to supervise the population and urban areas. Hence, up until October 1720, it was the consular authorities who duly informed the king's prosecutor in Parliament whenever any problems arose, and made a "verbal" request in order to obtain a ruling on the matter in question. Thereafter, it was the First Consul Vauvenargues and the military governor who were in the position to dispense justice. It is worth noting, however, that this narrative actually obscures the multiple difficulties that erupted between the *Chambre des vacations* and Vauvenargues. Indeed, a group of six magistrates refused to leave Aix until January 1721, and opposed any decisions made by Vauvenargues, despite the fact that he had been entrusted with the *office* of "commandant" and appointed director of the *bureau de la santé*.<sup>11</sup>

The standard municipal supervisory framework in Aix for neighbourhood captains was complemented by six health intendents appointed within the *bureau de la santé* and accompanied on the ground by "commissaires" entrusted with executing exceptional operations in times of plague. The Bureau oversaw the entire project, in coordination with the *Conseil de Ville* [City Council] with regard to certain matters. A twofold shift in how they operated unfolded within both these institutions. From a social standpoint, these institutions were not made up in a similar fashion. Aix's *bureau de la santé* brought together, by rotation in groups of seven, 28 members, including ten consuls or erstwhile consuls, seven squires, nine of the above-mentioned

---

<sup>9</sup> For the *bureaux de la santé*, see Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste*; Panzac, *Crime ou délit? La légalisation sanitaire en Provence au XVIIIe siècle*; Hildesheimer, *Le bureau de la santé de Marseille*.

<sup>10</sup> Stalh, *Résoudre les divisions religieuses*; Cabasse, *Essais historiques*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), ms fr. 8918, Letter from *chancelier* Daguesseau dated 17 February 1721 to Le Bret, fol. 339r<sup>o</sup>.

*avocats*, and two members drawn from the city's bourgeoisie.<sup>12</sup> Socially targeted recruitment was predicated upon a strong selection principle, for it was those ruling elites who had remained in Aix during the outbreak who effectively ran the *bureau de la santé*. And yet, this Bureau ultimately replaced the City Council and the *bureau de police*,<sup>13</sup> both of which had ceased to convene during the epidemic. The City Council ceased all activity from 28 September 1720 until January 1722, holding just two sessions in 1721.<sup>14</sup> As a rule, however, the City Council rarely if ever convened in Aix. As for the *bureau de police*, it ceased to function between October 1720 and March 1721, and again from May until August 1721.<sup>15</sup> Such an institutional vacuum was not as pronounced in Montpellier.

In Montpellier, however, the situation was less complex, given that Toulouse's Parliament had ordered that a local *bureau de la santé* be revived,<sup>16</sup> and one which was more inclusive than its counterpart in Aix, if considered from a social perspective, for it brought together six consuls, eight royal officers, three *avocats*, eight merchants and two physicians and apothecaries. Furthermore, the absence of plague meant that those permanent institutions responsible for administering Montpellier, namely, the City Council and the *bureau de police*, continued to function – albeit initially at a slower pace – yet without interruption. The City Council stopped convening meetings only in October 1721 while the *bureau de police* never ceased to operate. The least number of meetings was recorded for the months of February and March 1721, with the *bureau de police* meeting just twice in each of those months. Its reduced workload was compensated for by the *bureau de la santé's* quasi-permanent exertions, for it had taken in manpower from both the City Council and the *bureau de police*.

---

12 Archives municipales d'Aix-en-Provence (AMA), GG 526, "Department for those persons who have been chosen to attend the *bureaux de la santé* of this City, which shall convene daily at City Hall, from nine o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock, & from three o'clock after midday until six."

13 With regard to the *bureau de police*, see Sautel, *Une juridiction municipale de police sous l'ancien Régime*.

14 AMA, BB 108, Register of Council Deliberations, 1719–1739.

15 AMA, FF 72, Register of the *bureau de police*, 1719–1722.

16 Archives municipales de Montpellier (AMM), Ruling of the Parliament of Toulouse of 17 August 1720, which ordered the establishment of *Bureaux de santé* in all the towns under its jurisdiction. The plague outbreak of 1720–1724 was seldom mentioned for Montpellier: Dulieu, *La peste à Montpellier*; Dulieu, *La médecine à Montpellier*, vol. 1; the book edited by Cholvy, *Histoire de Montpellier*, briefly mentions this episode. The outbreak in Montpellier has mainly been discussed in relation to the dramatic episode of 1629–1630, which caused several hundred deaths. I refer to my article, *La peste et le gouvernement municipal: Montpellier en 1720–1723*.

This state of legal exceptionalism in Aix and Montpellier therefore needs to be assessed against the reality of how these traditional institutions functioned, for their operations were only completely interrupted whenever plague struck. The *bureau de la santé's* activities would then compensate for any work normally undertaken by traditional institutions in urban governance. Over the ensuing months, a catching-up process unfolded, one which enabled a gradual readjustment between those permanent institutions and the *bureau de la santé*. Such institutional exceptionalism was not self-evident, however.

## 2 Challenges to Exceptionalism

In both Montpellier and Aix, the imposition of such an exceptional sanitary regime was to pose problems and ultimately gave rise to disputes.<sup>17</sup> In Montpellier, these took the form of opposition to the city's lockdown and were instigated by the city's merchants who deemed it unjustified to interrupt trade, particularly given that no evidence of plague had been confirmed in Clapas. Yet, these disputes also represented a form of opposition to participating in any vigilance measures against plague. Hence, on 18 October 1720, less than two months after initiating plague preventative measures, a dispute arose between those merchants appointed by the *bureau de la santé* to guard the city gates and Montpellier's burgher guard. The *bureau's* merchant members (notably Charpentier and Rey) complained to the *bureau* on account of the fact that "officers of the bourgeoisie" had shown themselves "not alone unwilling to lend them a helping-hand, [something] for which they are solely responsible, but on the contrary, with the clear intent of neither recognising the *bureau de la santé's* commissaires nor the deliberations and orders from the self-same Bureau," they had refused to obey them.<sup>18</sup> The merchants pointed out, however, that the rule in force whenever contagion was detected was such that the *bureau de la santé*, under the authority of the commanders, had full authority "without any gainsaying." Furthermore, they called into question Selles, master surgeon, district captain, member of "the staff of the bourgeoisie" who would neither recognize the *bureau* nor its members. Similar incidents occurred at Montpellier's other gates. The *bureau* unanimously decided to urge the Duke of Roquelaure, the city governor, to support them and moreover that he provide a resolution to the issue, and with this end in mind they instantly went to him as a group. Assuming

---

<sup>17</sup> For a comparison between Marseilles and Montpellier, see Beauvieux/Vidoni, *Dispositifs de contrôle, police et résistances*.

<sup>18</sup> AMM, GG 66, Register of the *bureau de santé*, 1720–1721, not page-numbered.

a conciliatory approach, the duke replied that he would summon the troublemakers. Bureau members also approached the intendant, who replied that he found their claims to be “very fair.” Such disputes reveal the political intricacies linked to vigilance, with dominant groups contesting the legitimacy of subordinate groups to participate in maintaining law and order and the surveillance of urban space, even during such exceptional times.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of Aix, it can be more clearly discerned how the control and surveillance regime was effectively circumvented. At once frontal in nature and manifestly directed against Vauvenargues, low-intensity resistance was to be observed behind the opposition by the officers from Parliament. Various social corps and professions practiced resistance: the medical corps, for instance, refused to systematically visit patients, as stipulated in the regulations in the event of any doubt concerning an outbreak of contagion. Hence, in September 1720, it was notably the academic professors who objected to such a systematic approach, arguing that medical visits should be paid for at the rate of 1000 *livres* per month, a sum which had been agreed upon in a contract signed with the consuls at the beginning of September of that year.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the physicians, and in a somewhat more typical fashion, the burghers deserted the city when they were supposed to be on guard duty (28 August 1720), and those men appointed for that very purpose refused to stand guard (5 August 1720).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, in similar circumstances in Montpellier, the traditional *commissaires de quartier* refused to work alongside the bourgeois guard.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Monsieur de Meynier, commander of the bourgeois *guard at porte des Cordeliers*, complained of how the neighbourhood commissaires declined to communicate to him the names of those families and foreigners to be found there. The *bureau de la santé* then deliberated over what ought to be done. The exact reasons were not indicated, yet it does not appear as though it was on account of a census not being undertaken. It can thus be assumed that this new bourgeois guard, overhauled in an attempt to prevent a plague outbreak and to monitor the city, did not get involved with the commissaires, a group traditionally responsible for surveiling urban space, on the grounds that it would deprive the latter of a prerogative according them a certain sense of social superiority. In both instances, those guard corps trained during the public health emergency ended up colliding with traditional so-

---

<sup>19</sup> Concerning the legitimacy to take action in public or communal space, see Cottereau/Ladrière, *Pouvoir et légitimité*.

<sup>20</sup> AMA, GG 524, and Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône (AD 13), B 3702, Parliament registers.

<sup>21</sup> AMA, GG 524, extract from the Parliament registers.

<sup>22</sup> AMA, GG 526, 3 September 1720.



cial and political mechanisms determining the appointment of high-ranking persons to guard over urban spaces. Ultimately, this led to conflicts of precedence and engendered effective opposition throughout the city which hindered the project from establishing a comprehensive surveillance of urban spaces. Such levels of opposition should lead us to investigate, alongside the institutional aspects, how the population was involved in vigilance against plague and how they accepted such exceptional sanitary regimes.

## II The Population's Involvement in Vigilance against Plague

Vigilance regarding plague can be approached in two ways. The first is exemplified in the theoretical and practical works written by physicians and published or republished over the course of the 1720–1724 healthcare crisis. In this medical literature, vigilance was not primarily predicated upon how any given individual would behave, with a prophylactic objective in mind. For example, the above-mentioned Ranchin's *Opuscules ou Traictés divers et curieux en médecine, De M[âitre] François Ranchin, conseiller*, which dates from 1640, does not lay down how anyone ought to behave in order to protect themselves.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it amounted to a government manual or handbook for municipal authorities in times of contagion: the city is viewed as a distinctly general entity in which functionally designated social groups (inter alia, consuls, physicians, *corbeaux* [those who “removed” the corpses of plague victims from the streets and later buried them] must take action. Republished in 1721, Ranchin's tract was distributed across Provence through the intermediary of physicians from Montpellier dispatched to Marseilles (Chicoyneau and Verny) and by the French Crown. The same held true for *Traité de la police*, penned by Nicolas Delamare, the investigating and examining commissaire at *Châtelet de Paris*; this tract, too, was distributed throughout Provence and Languedoc at that juncture.<sup>24</sup> Some twenty pages of its first volume were devoted to “the Epidemic, contagion or plague.”<sup>25</sup> Its core provisions focused on the authorities and the role they should play in preventing the spread of disease and how to stop its propagation. The only individual behaviours mentioned were those concerning people living in a plague-stricken house and who therefore had been forced to isolate themselves. In this *magnum opus* of urban

<sup>23</sup> Ranchin, *Opuscules ou Traictés divers et curieux en médecine*.

<sup>24</sup> BnF, ms fr. 8916, letter from *chancelier* Daguesseau to Cardin Le Bret 26 August 1720, by means of which he sent him *Traité de la Police*, fol. 471r<sup>o</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Delamare, *Traité de la police*, more specific Book IV, “De la Santé”, title thirteen.

policing, the campaign against plague was not fixated on individual conduct, but rather focused on collective practices.

A shift in attitude in this respect only became perceptible in the latter half of the eighteenth-century, when policing measures and hygienic medicine were to come up against one another. In an attempt to achieve a congruous policing of the human body, books penned by physicians were to become more prescriptive in terms of individual conduct. This was the case, for example, with Armand-Pierre Jacquin's *De la Santé* [On Health] published in 1762.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, with regard to the plague outbreak of 1720–1724, medical or policing literature did not seem relevant to the reinstating of vigilance regarding plague, even from a prescriptive standpoint. Another way of seeking to understand such levels of vigilance is therefore to examine the archives pertaining to practices in the field. The focus on alertness can be detected by the degree of attention the authorities paid to urban spaces and to their populations, primarily on the street and the block level, a focus which in due course gave rise to consequential social ramifications.

## 1 Traditional Urban Environments and Countermeasures to Plague

During epidemic outbreaks – to be understood equally as a period in which fear of an epidemic was taking grip and when cities were plague-stricken – the *bureaux de la santé* regularly issued plague regulations, which both reiterated and systematized rules that often already existed over the ordinary course of city life. Hence, emphasis was placed on the risk of contagion and the imperative for prevention,<sup>27</sup> and these regulations summarised typical patterns through which the contagious disease was introduced into the “besieged city.”<sup>28</sup> For this reason, the authorities concentrated on those habitually on the move and so-called dangerous social groups, namely merchants and the poor. The surveillance system's objective was thus to restrict to the maximum possible extent the arrival of any migrants into the city, thereby justifying an exceptional mobilisation of city-dwellers in a bid to safeguard their city.

Those routinely involved in surveilling urban areas were requisitioned and provided with auxiliaries. Montpellier's six governing consuls (each of whom was entrusted with a given *sixain*) thus patrolled the streets more frequently, dur-

---

<sup>26</sup> Jacquin, *De la Santé*.

<sup>27</sup> Cipolla, *Contre un ennemi invisible*.

<sup>28</sup> Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident*.

ing which time they were accompanied by two *capitaines de santé* [health captains] whose duties became permanent in the seventeenth century. And yet, it was the *îliers* who were mobilised in a much more painstaking manner. These *îliers* were in charge of monitoring an *île* or a residential block. A definitive urban presence throughout the seventeenth-century,<sup>29</sup> the *îliers* saw their influence expand as Protestantism was progressively suppressed before and in the aftermath of the Edict of Fontainebleau (1685) which revoked the Edict of Nantes.<sup>30</sup> Their role was revived between the years 1697 and 1700, during a stretch of harsh climatic difficulties and particularly challenging struggles for survival. They were then charged with monitoring the poor,<sup>31</sup> in an attempt to prevent famine and, above all, to defuse any potential social and political dissent which traditionally surfaced during periods of scarcity. Remobilised during the plague outbreak as of 1720, they were then required to execute four crucial missions: to regularly brief the commissaires and provide them with accurate list of accommodation sites or venues where people would congregate such as inns, hotels, or wine taverns; to monitor that anyone hosting a foreigner provided the *îliers* with a *billet de santé* [bill of health] to convey, in turn, the countersigned certificates to the health commissaires; and finally to ensure a painstaking inspection of any domestic servant who had been admitted to the residential block.

In addition, however, to systemising these traditional functions that duly authorised them to enter private spaces, the *îliers* equally assumed the role of informer, especially in order to report on potentially infested sites. This was the case, for example, when an *îlier* informed the consuls on 22 May 1722 that a valet had “maliciously” left his horses’ excrement in the street.<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that this represents the only known denunciation made by an *îlier* during the plague outbreak. One thus wonders whether such a system was truly effective, especially as the mention of a “malicious” desire to contaminate the street might suggest that a personal grudge lurked behind the accusation.

---

29 AMM, BB without archive code, “Illiers 1664–1789,” “Regulation made by Messieurs the Consuls & Viguier of the City of Montpellier, for what concerns the *Isliers* appointed by them in the *Sizains*,” poster, not dated. [1657].

30 In 1679, the *îliers* carried out an exhaustive listing of the city’s inhabitants, marking in the margins whether they were Catholic (“C”) or Reformed (“R”), AMM, BB 334.

31 AMM, BB without archive code, “*Illiers* 1664–1789,” regulation (printed poster) made by the *bureau de police* of the city of Montpellier, for the purpose of establishing the *Isliers*, dated Tuesday 7 February 1696.

32 AMM, GG 18, *bureau de la santé* register 1721–1723, not page-numbered.

And yet, this idea of micro-surveillance<sup>33</sup> rooted in daily vigilance was equally found in Aix, where district captains and commissaires had to monitor people's movements, control *billets de santé* issued and ensure that migrants were in possession of them, especially when, as in July 1720, many people were exiting Marseilles and heading for the "countryside." The *Chambre des vacations* in the Parliament in Aix then revived the standard preventative shutdown provisions in times of plague, after having consulted about which measures had been taken during previous outbreaks.<sup>34</sup> It was only at a later stage, in October 1720, that this traditional system of supervising urban areas was tightened and reinforced. The *bureau de la santé* then appointed a "captain provost or health inspector" during the contagion period.<sup>35</sup> He was assisted in this task by "deputies and guards, valets, porters [for the sick]" in order to isolate any sick person and their relatives in the city's infirmaries. Furthermore, the mayor (premier consul) of Marseilles, Monsieur de Vauvenargues, was exceptionally appointed "commander" of the city and moreover had three military units comprising 30 men each and 28 policemen at his disposal in order to enforce municipal regulations. In a bid to reinforce what could be characterised as municipal manpower, 100 soldiers from the Artois Regiment were garrisoned in Marseilles under Vauvenargues' command. Control over urban space was thus to become both somewhat militarised and professionalised, given that experts in sanitary matters were appointed. They, in turn, reworked the paradigmatic instruments inherited from past experience in the fight against plague. The situation in Aix differed somewhat from that in Montpellier, where troops did not directly intervene, notably on account of the fact that the number of migrants was not of the same order as in Aix, and because the distance to an infected site was much greater.

The actual extent to which the outbreak spread during the winter of 1720–1721 led Intendant Le Bret to devise a general regulation for the province which would prohibit freedom of movement and effectively isolated all inhabitants. Whereupon those inhabitants were examined on an individual basis, a step he referred to as "universal quarantine."<sup>36</sup> Le Bret's scheme was going to deviate from standard pre-

---

<sup>33</sup> Researched and examined by Fleur Beauvieux in the case of Marseilles: Beauvieux, *Épidémie, pouvoir municipal et transformation de l'espace urbain*.

<sup>34</sup> AD 13, B 3702, Parliamentary ruling (*Chambre des vacations*) dated 3 August 1720; BnF, ms fr. 8916, copy of a letter from Le Bret to Le Peletier des Forts, 30 July 1720, fol. 209r°.

<sup>35</sup> BnF, ms fr. 8917, copy of letter from Le Bret to Le Peletier des Forts, 5 October 1720, fol. 29r°. Just as in Montpellier, he only served temporarily, which differs from the case of Marseilles, Hildesheimer, *Le bureau de la santé*, chap. 2.

<sup>36</sup> The initial mention dated from 26 December 1720, BnF, ms fr. 8917, fol. 283r° and especially 690r°. It was enhanced in January and February 1721, BnF, ms fr. 8918, fol. 283.

ventative measures to such an extent that even the chancellor became apprehensive about such a radical initiative and amended Le Bret's draft in a bid to erase its systematicity and exceptional character. This particular episode in Aix, albeit truly exceptional, should therefore not be interpreted as a ready-made path toward an outright and comprehensive regime of exceptionalism. Rather, it was a path marked by hesitation, a sense of trial and error, and experimentation that did not always imply the state authorities' approval.

And yet for all that, in terms of the degree of the local populace's participation and vigilance, these regulations were predicated upon the mandatory and broad-based participation of each and every city resident; they were not permitted to lodge any strangers and, more generally, they had to avoid taking any risks when maintaining relations or contacts with people from outside the city. At that juncture, towns and cities were defined in the strict sense of the term both physically and materially by their ramparts and fortifications, and moreover as identifiable topographical spaces,<sup>37</sup> which had not been really the case over the preceding months. Finally, in both Aix and Montpellier, one can observe how vigilance primarily operated on the level of the street and residential block, the so-called *îlot*.

## 2 The Scale of Operations: *Îlot* and Street

Places and locales throughout the city where contagion erupted fell automatically under surveillance given how they were those parts of the city destined for communal use. Outbreaks of plague created an opportunity to reaffirm those ordinances regulating the use of urban spaces. Hence, the city's cleaning brigade was revived, and rulings from the monarchical or municipal authorities, notably from the *bureaux de la santé*, duly reminded residents both of their individual and collective obligations to keep the city's thoroughfares clean by piling up any rubbish in front of their dwellings in such a way that those responsible for removing it could pass unhindered through the streets every day. Non-compliance with this mandatory requirement was even subject to criminal proceedings. Hence, an Ordinance of 22 August issued by Aix's *bureau de police* stated that, following a ruling by Parliament's *Chambre des vacations* dated the previous 19 August, storing manure in houses was henceforth prohibited.<sup>38</sup> Any penalties incurred thereafter would in-

---

37 AMA, GG 524, *Ordonnance du Bureau de la police de la Ville d'Aix extraordinairement assemblée* [poster], 22 August 1720.

38 *Ibid.*

volve “[the] whip against the plebs, & an arbitrary fine against the others.” On this occasion, the *bureau de police* reminded residents about the ban on throwing rubbish onto the streets, and the rules authorising street cleaners to remove manure. Article 1 required that every resident sweep in front of their house. Article 3 decreed that the *Balayeurs des Jardiniers* [gardeners’ sweepers] should assemble every morning at 6 at the Place de la Tannerie, where they would be assigned to [sweep] the streets. For this purpose, they were allowed to “enter” backyards, houses and gardens, thus reviving that principle of temporarily and gradually abolishing the difference between private and public spaces for communal actions, all on account of the emergency. Article 4 shored up the erasure of the distinction between private and public spheres, for it pointed out how it would be strictly forbidden to prevent the *Balayeurs des Jardiniers* from fulfilling their duties, under penalty of a judicial sentence which would deprive residents of their rights. It then came down to the issue of how to identify the street-sweepers and their legitimacy to take action, to which Article 5 duly responded: in order to be recognised (both physically as well as in terms of their legitimacy), the sweepers “shall wear the Arms of the City on the upper part of their Stomach.” Finally, the regulation’s binding aspect was secured by the possible mobilisation of the armed forces, given how Article 6 stipulated that the *lieutenant de viguier* [magistrate] and his archers must reinforce the street sweepers in the event of any disturbance. Here, it was not a question of a continuous and permanent manifestation of force. Rather, the idea was that the magistrate imposing these exceptional rules concerning the usage of the Commons had the capacity to both keep a tight rein on and to deploy force.<sup>39</sup>

This formal measure of abolishing any distinction between private spaces subject to common sanitary obligations and public space did not occur in Montpellier, where regulations concerning street cleaning were evoked and republished, but not modified.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, they were invoked whenever the *bureau de la santé* or the *bureau de police* imposed sanctions, and the instructive aspect of such reminders was essential in this respect.<sup>41</sup> Hence, it was the very presence or imminence of a plague outbreak that ultimately facilitated, or rendered acceptable, any modifications to traditional regulations and to their systematisation. Fear, and its corollary vigilance with regard to plague, thus temporarily abolished the distinctly clear demarcation under the Ancien Regime between spaces designated for communal use and private property, a sphere which, in theory, remained

---

<sup>39</sup> Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes*, p. 116.

<sup>40</sup> AMM, GG 18, 17 September 1721, 9 January 1722, 11 March 1722 for public summary of regulations.

<sup>41</sup> On the pedagogical dimension of police regulations and the frequency of their renewal, against the idea of non-application revealed by this renewal, Piasenza, *Polizia e città*, chap. 2.

inaccessible to auxiliaries affiliated with policing institutions. And likewise, the crackdown on those violating that particular sanitary regulation became more severe.

### 3 Vigilance and Law Enforcement's Severity

This level of severity and the ensuing tightening of vigilance measures was to cause a stir amongst the general public. In Aix, no significant upheaval was observed whenever plague struck the city, except among law enforcement personnel in an episode which did not directly involve local residents and to which we will return later. In Montpellier, however, the situation differed on the ground, and that is what led the municipal authorities, in conjunction with the governor and the intendant, to devise a more extensive raft of measures which strove to monitor the entire urban area and to have local residents play a greater role in plague vigilance. This raised the question of whether exceptional vigilance would be acceptable, and local authorities had to win acceptance for their choices by means other than force.

Traditionally, the city of Montpellier had been divided into six districts referred to as *sixains*, each under the authority of a consul. In addition to this division into *sixains*, and at an intermediate level between the *sixains* and the *îles*, so-called *quartiers* were established during the scare that preceded the plague outbreak, following upon several months of reflection and perhaps consultation.<sup>42</sup> For each quartier, a *syndic* was appointed who had three *quarteniers* under his command. Hence, 142 people, primarily artisans or members of minor trades, routinely excluded from participating on the City Council or in the *bureau de la santé*, but not the *bureau de police*, were tasked with controlling urban spaces. Their names did not exactly match those of the *îliers* in place at that time. This expanded recruitment drive could be explained by the longing to render more legitimate a restrictive preventative regime that partly ran counter to the traditional rationales underpinning sociability, in that such a regime sometimes resulted in an intrusion into the intimate sphere (to be understood in both a spatial and social sense).

---

<sup>42</sup> AMM, GG 18. The idea was advanced as early as 14 November 1721, but it only came to fruition in a Regulation of 23 February 1722: "Sub-division made by the consuls and commissaires from the *bureau de la santé* to divide the city into six districts, which were allocated to the six consuls and commissaires from the *bureau de la santé* and the six districts divided into quartiers by number of islands, with the appointment of *sindics* designated to each quartier and three quartermen for each *sindic*, all as follows."

These appointments, however, do not seem to have caused any major disruption in how surveillance operations were supervised, for the number of convictions the *bureau de la santé* meted out did not increase after that point – plague had yet to strike Montpellier – and most incidents the *bureau* dealt with concerned controls at quarantine stations. It is therefore questionable whether these supervisory measures were effective. Though they may well have existed both in law and on paper, they may not have generated any sanctions in practice. It would surely be naive to believe that no infractions occurred (the *bureau de police* were active at that point), but we can undoubtedly assume that micro-regulations predicated upon local networks at a neighbourhood level (here understood as a “living space” and not as an administrative demarcation)<sup>43</sup>, may have existed.

In Aix, aside from certain behavioral traits that local authorities defined as deviant and dangerous, resistance to plague vigilance measures did not originate with the general public. Dissent, however, did surface from amidst the ruling elites, and was sometimes even violent in nature. This degree of opposition can be explained by a long-running affair. On 31 October 1720, a bailiff at the Parliament was mandated to allow a merchant from Aix along with his family enter Marseilles through the St-Jean's Gate. The bourgeois guard officer on duty at that gate, a certain Ripert, a lawyer by profession, refused to allow them enter because he had not received any orders to that effect from Mayor Vauvenargues. According to eyewitnesses, Ripert then “disparaged” Parliament's authority publicly, behaviour which justified, as far as the *Chambre des vacations* was concerned, his subsequent detention and arrest by agents affiliated with the former marshalcy. Alerted of this development, Vauvenargues viewed Ripert's arrest as undue interference in his authority, and duly decided to imprison the bailiff and his archers. The archbishop of Aix sought to mediate in the dispute, but failed just as the joint release of the prisoners was about to happen, because officers from the *Chambre des vacations* subjected Ripert to a *mercuriale* (a humiliating admonition), thus forcing Vauvenargues to follow suit. Both parties wrote to the intendant, to Chancellor Daguessau, and to the Crown Court in an attempt to justify their respective conduct. What really was being called into question – aside from the strife between the *Chambre des vacations* and Vauvenargues – was the authorities' capacity to act, considering the level of vigilance decreed and implemented throughout the city. On account of the prevailing vigilance, the commandant's agent, Ripert refused entry to those persons from outside not in possession of a valid *patente de santé* into Marseilles. His intransigence clashed with those mechanisms underpinning social domination. The officers from Parliament could only interpret Ripert's defiance as a direct attack upon their authority.

---

<sup>43</sup> Cabantous, Le quartier, espace vécu à l'époque moderne.



On multiple occasions, Intendant Le Bret complained about how the self-same officers were incapable of ridding themselves of their traditional practices and customary modes of conduct, to the point of undermining the vigilance measures in place. Some months later Le Bret was obliged to surreptitiously withdraw the rebellious officers. He did not seek to expand the preventative system in order to render it more acceptable, for those amongst the elite, who might potentially be interested in participating in enforcing vigilance measures, were already doing so. Here, there was no willingness to render acceptable, and therefore legitimate, an exceptional surveillance and vigilance regime to a large section of the population.

All in all, the determination to expand surveillance measures in the face of plague was contingent upon increased vigilance through mobilising a larger section of the population, yet the *modus operandi* differed in Aix and in Montpellier. Obviously, such large-scale mobilisation aroused resistance from among the Ancien Régime's urban communities, who partly perceived this development as an attack on the equitable division of powers. This explains the envisaged legitimising procedures, whose implications we need to unravel.

### III Political Ramifications of Plague Vigilance

The exceptional nature of this collective and yet differentiated vigilance regime led municipal authorities to publicise and, in a sense, justify these measures. Concurrently, it also enabled them to raise the question of who was most competent to execute and enforce the levels of vigilance required. Finally, it should be noted to what extent these proposals, however innovative they might have then appeared, and which at times even led to the great displeasure of the traditional ruling elites, did retain an eminently conservative dimension at a municipal level (from a polysemic perspective).

#### 1 Proclaiming and Justifying the Exceptionalism

Beyond a quest for consensus, enforcing such exceptional vigilance measures required a publicity campaign in order to make these measures known and subsequently palatable. The initial step was to demonstrate and describe the specific measures involved. For this purpose, regulations were posted frequently and continuously throughout the city. Within the scope of this paper, it is not feasible to make a quantitative comparison with previous episodes of plague. Indeed, the archives in both Montpellier and Aix house considerably more posters for the plague

outbreak of 1720–1724 than for earlier outbreaks and other epidemics.<sup>44</sup> Montpellier's Municipal Archives, for example, have preserved a series of ordinances printed and publicly displayed during the contagion scare.<sup>45</sup> These posters bring together the most relevant texts, as for example the decision by the Parliament of Toulouse to re-establish the *bureau de la santé* in 1720, or ordinances issued by the intendant concerning the transport of goods and various quarantine regulations.<sup>46</sup>

No record of the *bureau de la santé's* ordinance to expand the number of those engaged in plague vigilance is to be found in the archives, nor any ordinances relating to problems encountered in guarding the city's gates. The publication of any decisions taken thus followed several rationales: The first was to bring to the public's attention the practical rules for observing quarantine, regulations that effectively applied to everyone,<sup>47</sup> notably to merchants who, it should be noted, would come to call the city's lockdown into question. The second rationale seems somewhat more covert: not every decision taken in the name of urgency implying the modification of the social and political equilibrium was disclosed. Regulations concerning how to behave toward the plague-stricken, for example, were published, whereas those dealing with the rules for how the *îliers* should supervise houses were not. It would appear, therefore, that a deliberate choice had been made as to what could be publicly announced in relation to plague vigilance, a choice in all likelihood made with the public in mind, and a public to whom the exceptional rules and their stated objectives would apply. All matters concerning the urban "Commons" and which did not call into question corporate privileges or powers was explicitly stated, while the rest, conversely, was played down. In this sense, the vigilance regarding plague contributed to redefining what exactly was public and what concerned the community, challenging that medieval notion of an outright assimilation between community and public affairs.<sup>48</sup>

The considerable number of posters preserved in the archives would suggest a willingness to uphold these regulations, with the aim of generating a model for administrative political initiative that would serve as a reference for any future recur-

---

44 AMA GG 525 Unfortunately, stolen and not recovered.

45 As an example, and without listing all the archive codes of the scattered documents, AMM, GG 56 and GG 62.

46 AMM, GG 56, Ordinance of the Duke du Roquelaure, dated 30 Septembere 1721, *arrêt* by the Toulouse Parliament of 17 August 1720.

47 On the public dimension of these rules, we can point out the significance of the notion of public space and refer to the ever stimulating work supervised by Boucheron/Offenstadt, *L'espace public au Moyen Âge*.

48 Saint-Bonnet, *L'état d'exception*, p. 77.

rences of plague. At the same time, this new model for action duplicated the increased exchanges between the intendants of Languedoc (Basville) and Provence (Lebret), between the latter and the *contrôle général* or with the various local authorities.<sup>49</sup> All the information exchanged thereby generated a body of knowledge concerning plague which served to justify introducing these regulations, their renewal, and ultimately their continuation. The public visibility of these regulations, by way of posters, thus forged a tangible link between vigilance as exercised throughout the city and the monarchy's more global guardianship. Here, similar processes can be observed as those operating in other state bodies, for example, in the police. In the case of Paris, for instance, it is known that the period in which René Argenson acted as *Lieutenance générale de police* (1697–1720) was not just tumultuous in terms of policing techniques but, above all, for their social acceptance. It was equally a time for widespread “police pedagogy” (Paolo Piasenza) involving regulations being renewed, and thus – as confirmed by their frequent republication – far from the notion of police inefficiency.<sup>50</sup> This process is a continuation of that which had already commenced during Colbert's time in power; he made the *contrôle général* the nucleus of the State's apparatus thanks to this ministry's capacity to gather intelligence throughout the length and breadth of the realm.<sup>51</sup> In addition to massively accumulating information, the authorities equally sought to anchor themselves within a tradition of fighting plague. They did so in an outright classic manner by republishing regulations concerning outbreaks of plague, as for example that of 1629 in Aix.<sup>52</sup>

In a similar vein, reprinting medical literature penned by physicians during the seventeenth century made it possible to scientifically justify those plague measures implemented throughout urban areas. Combining knowledge and authority, these reprints thus engendered a second type of justification. This was the case with the above-mentioned publication by Ranchin, whose tract was reprinted both in Languedoc and Provence. Yet, it was equally the case with texts composed during the healthcare emergency, works which acted both as a testimony and a procedural code to be followed. As early as November 1720, for example, Commandant de Langeron had the *Relation succincte Touchant les Accidens de la Peste de Marseille, son pronostic, & sa curation* [Succinct Account concerning Plague related incidents in Marseilles, its prognostic & its cure] printed and distributed throughout Marseilles, a text co-authored by Chicoyneau, Verny, and Soullier, the Montpellier-based physicians dispatched by the court. The text was distributed and subsequently kept in the

---

<sup>49</sup> BnF, ms fr: 8916 à 8919, Le Bret's correspondence during 1720–1721.

<sup>50</sup> Piasenza, *Polizia e città*.

<sup>51</sup> Soll, *The Information Master*.

<sup>52</sup> AMA, GG 524.

Parliament's archives and the municipal archives.<sup>53</sup> While its practical purpose was obvious, it was solely intended for medical practitioners, not for non-professionals. One characteristic of the vigilantism linked to plague to be discerned in these printed writings was that such levels of vigilance did not concern everybody to the same extent, and that such differentiation resulted in – without necessarily intending to – a certain degree of professionalisation of those actors involved in the fight against plague.

## 2 Greater Professional Vigilance

The exceptional dimension of this vigilance was reflected both out in the field and within the administrative offices.<sup>54</sup> First and foremost, there was the more immediate usefulness for any document intended to coordinate such vigilance. In the case of Aix, charts indicating the names of those responsible for monitoring districts were printed and ready to be filled in, with the aim of swiftly offsetting any potential fatalities by completing the charts as the deaths occurred.<sup>55</sup> Montpellier saw the implementation of a similar regime, whereby one can observe how vigilance was reinforced through a burgeoning of bureaucratic procedures. While not a novel development per se, this bureaucratic development was expanded in parallel with the administrative and bureaucratic monarchy and the widespread diffusion of this method of public healthcare policy across the provinces and cities.

The counterpart on the ground for such bureaucratic vigilance was to appoint new agents to operate on the beat within the city. They were specifically assigned to spaces considered as posing a public danger and particularly conducive to spreading contagion. In Montpellier, the Poissonnerie district (an area where commodities imported into the city and potential sources of infection were in close proximity) notably attracted the authorities' attention. These appointments represented a seminal moment, for it thereafter enabled the consuls to install the presence of a "man of probity" in charge of the fishmongers' market, a man who would be responsible for "reporting on a daily basis to the Bureau [*de police*]" any infrac-

---

53 AMA, GG 511, *Relation succincte Touchant les Accidens de la Peste de Marseille, son pronostic, & sa curation*.

54 On the administrative reorganisation during the Regency period, see Dupilet, *La Régence absolue* and Denis, *Une histoire de l'identité*.

55 AMA, GG 524, "Status of the *îles* and persons designated to monitor each of them," together with a printed document, "Regulations for the commissaires entrusted to visit the houses of the City & to examine their interiors."

tions of the trading rules.<sup>56</sup> While based on the model of the health captains<sup>57</sup>, this inspector differed from those officers actively patrolling the city streets by dint of his constant presence within the market area. These auxiliaries, however, were neither officers nor members of the city council; they operated by gleaning information from the fishmongers or from local residents. Hence, they built up an intelligence network that complemented the sanitary regime in place on the ground, thus spreading an awareness for the absolute need for vigilance amongst the population.

Over time, the auxiliary's stationary nature was to become an obstacle in terms of fulfilling his mission, and those responsible for the *bureau de police* gradually extended their sphere of jurisdiction all while expanding the scope of their assignments. Hence, after 1738, these inspectors became responsible for reporting any offences committed within the city bounds.<sup>58</sup> In practice, they concentrated on the markets and adjacent streets, with a view to uncovering any illegal transactions in foodstuffs. The period during which Montpellier succumbed to fear of a plague outbreak was, as elsewhere throughout the realm, a time for experimenting with various vigilance measures across urban areas, and Montpellier's Poissonnerie district was to become *the* testing ground for vigilance-based innovative policing measures in urban settings.

Such an experimental approach was equally evident in Aix, where, for example, the Regulation of September 1720, which instituted "extraordinary" manpower with a special legal status in an attempt to monitor local residents and their neighbourhoods, partly abolished the demarcation line between the private and public spheres. The Regulation's preamble clause is worth quoting, especially given how it was issued at a time in which Aix was yet not stricken by contagion:

Whilst sanitary conditions in this City are excellent, nevertheless it is deemed prudent at this time by those responsible for the people to carefully listen out for any rumors of Contagion, with the needs of each individual [in mind], & with the help of the Commissaires to learn about all that is happening inside houses in the city, which may have to do with the common interest.<sup>59</sup>

According to the consuls, the effective solution was to select "people of probity"—employing the identical term to the one adapted in Montpellier—in order to document everything that was happening within the city, as well as to "make regular &

---

<sup>56</sup> AMM, FF 286, Register of the *Délibérations du bureau de police*, 24 August 1723.

<sup>57</sup> Dulieu, *La peste à Montpellier*, p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Vidoni, *La police et les étrangers à Montpellier au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*.

<sup>59</sup> AMA, GG 524, *Règlement pour les sieurs commissaires qui ont le soin de visiter les maisons de la Ville & d'en examiner l'intérieur*.

frequent visits to houses in their sub-division.”<sup>60</sup> The dreaded prospect of plague breaking out thus opened up the way for potentially fresh approaches in terms of preventive administrative policy in both cities. But what seems to have changed from 1720–1724 onwards, both in Montpellier and in Aix, was the perennial character of the sanitary mechanisms enabling municipal authorities to get to know conditions on the ground and to ensure vigilance regarding plague. Indeed, in November 1720,<sup>61</sup> notwithstanding the contagious outbreak, Vauvenargues managed to convene the commissaires appointed to the city districts in an attempt to instruct them to draw up an exhaustive listing of local residents – a proposal he had been working on for several weeks. This meticulous assignment was completed at the beginning of December, when 18 000 inhabitants were counted in Aix. The led the intendant to write: “This is a quite a lot of people to feed and cater for, because they all need to be confined and provided with all life’s necessities.”<sup>62</sup>

One also notes that in October 1720, by way of an Ordinance of the 27<sup>th</sup> day of that month, Intendant Le Bret duly systematized this sanitary regime on a provincial scale; he ordered all Provençal communities to draw up a list of residents and record the population’s movements (both in terms of fatalities and mobility) in order to hinder the further spread of plague.<sup>63</sup> To his subsequent astonishment, this measure was applied without encountering any tangible difficulties and moreover that the population had been forbidden to move about within the province.<sup>64</sup> All told, an outbreak of plague, whether through the fear it engendered or the real harm it inflicted when striking an urban area, was highly conducive to experimentation and innovation in terms of surveillance and vigilance techniques. Vested with exceptional powers, the authorities dared to innovate by expanding their knowledge base concerning cities, populations, and specific urban spaces. The uniqueness of the eighteenth century, however, to be observed in the aftermath of the plague outbreak, lies in the degree to which such sanitary regimes were upheld and proved to be durable. Such durability could not only be explained by the dominance of the authorities in place, but also by the bureaucratic direction the French Royal State had been adopting from the Regency onwards, a propensity which rendered these novel means of implementing administrative measures useful, necessary, and legitimate. They thus redefined and repurposed the municipal

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> BnF, ms fr. 8917, copy of a letter to Le Peletier des Forts dated 20 November 1720, fol. 396r°.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, copy of a letter to Daguessau dated 9 December 1720, fol. 449r°.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 260r°.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, copy of a letter to Daguessau dated 9 December 1720, “[...] and what surprises me is that in some places the people themselves are willing to execute them,” fol. 449v°.

and state authorities' "capacity to take action"<sup>65</sup>, without calling into question, however, the cardinal objective behind such vigilante policies, namely: to maintain social order.

### 3 The Conservative Dimension of this Vigilance

The raft of measures ultimately enabling not only such levels of vigilance regarding plague itself but also their imposition thus required justification for targeting all social categories. But more generally, it could be observed that beyond some disagreements arising between elite groups, vigilance measures presented an opportunity to robustly reaffirm the cities' social structuration, serving as a reminder just to what extent certain social groups were subjugating the "poor." Given how the poor were to be recast as a dangerous social category, the upper echelons availed of this pressing need for vigilance to remind themselves of just how imperative it was to safeguard society by protecting themselves from the poor. As with the shift in sovereignty during the nineteenth century as identified by Michel Foucault, a shift which reinforced the right to live and to die with a right to make subjects<sup>66</sup> live or die, plague outbreaks were used to justify tighter controls over the poor in a bid to prevent them from dying. In a similar vein, two major types of justification were to be encountered in Montpellier and Aix.

The first set forth how the poor had been designated as one of the chief carriers of the contagion. Municipal administrators, whether consuls or intendants, no longer hesitated to forcibly equate poverty and the risk of contamination. Montpellier's consuls set this down in writing in the registers of urban deliberations,<sup>67</sup> as did the sub-delegate in Marseilles and Intendant Le Bret.<sup>68</sup> The prevailing notion of how the poor constituted a major vector in spreading the epidemic was explained in more practical terms by the consuls in Aix. At the *bureau de la santé's* meeting on 13 August 1720, Consul Viviens informed everyone present that a lot of people were selling rotten fruit in the market place and at the city's crossroads.<sup>69</sup> Given their low prices, the "poor" would then eat that rotten fruit, which in turn risked causing "impurities" that would ultimately lead to the emergence of serious diseases. Whereupon it was decided that local health intendents should set out in search

---

<sup>65</sup> Mannoni, *Une et indivisible*.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, p. 213f.

<sup>67</sup> AMM, BB 413, 17 December 1720, fol. 65v°.

<sup>68</sup> BnF, ms fr. 8916, letter dated 4 August 1720 to Le Peletier des Forts, fol. 240r°: Le Bret wrote how death only strikes "poor people" malnourished because of high prices.

<sup>69</sup> AMA, GG 526.

of all bad fruit. Sanitary vigilance thus exposed the social, economic and political disparities that led to gaping inequalities in the face of the epidemic and that impelled the authorities to intensify quality control of any traded comestibles.

Differentiated solutions in accordance with the social and economic conditions were thus envisaged, in keeping with the structural inequalities pervading society under the Ancien Régime. For the city of Aix, punishment for the poor came in the form of whipping, lest they breached any regulations, a penalty not inflicted upon “the others.”<sup>70</sup> More broadly, the solution envisaged was a systematic preventive confinement for all those “without means.”<sup>71</sup> It should be noted how the physician Ranchin had already called for this preventive solution during his lifetime, although it was not unanimously supported, given how the rectors at Hôpital de la Charité opposed this decision in 1720.<sup>72</sup> The *Chambre des vacations* was then called upon; they thoroughly supported the *bureau de la santé*'s decision to indiscriminately lock up all the poor and went against the hospital rectors. Such measures to confine the poor were also justified by way of posters displayed in the streets, the preamble for which revealed to extent to which this decision was meant to ensure preserving social harmony by also soliciting alms from “charitable persons.” A close bond was thus reaffirmed between rich and poor, one which somewhat obscured and glossed over those removal measures meant for the “poor.” A similar mechanism was also triggered in Montpellier, where Madame de Basville, the intendant's wife, notably organised exceptional charitable deeds. And yet, in the case of Languedoc, the consuls did not opt for an outright lockdown for the poor. Instead, they settled for keeping anyone suspected of being ill at a distance, in infirmaries and at a later stage on farm buildings outside the city's precincts, yet they never envisaged a general confinement. Here, these less stringent measure can be explained by Languedoc's relative distance from Marseilles, as well as the deplorable state of the community's finances, especially impacted at that juncture by problems linked to the drastic devaluation of banknotes in circulation.

The second aspect of such misgivings toward the “poor” was the notion that they, as a social group, constituted not just a physical and biological threat, but also a political one. This concern was frequently mentioned in the records of deliberations and the archival records concerning practice in the field. In the case of Montpellier, it was to some degree the matter of a loan the city had to take out in order to finance medicines and charitable works that opened up the debate

---

<sup>70</sup> AMA, GG 524, Ordinance of the *bureau de Police* of the City of Aix extraordinarily convened, dated 22 August 1720.

<sup>71</sup> AMA, GG 526, decision dated 18 August 1720.

<sup>72</sup> AD 13, B 3702, *arrêt* dated 11 October 1720.



on the poor during the latter half of 1720. Cash collections were made from the city's elites. Still, on 17 December 1720, the *bureau de la santé* deemed the sum collected as insufficient, and the first consul, Ranchin, exaggerated the city's predicament at the *Conseil des Vingt-Quatre* in an attempt to acquire additional credits. He argued at great length that the peril facing them was not only sanitary but also social and political:

It is also a question, through this foresight of which we have spoken, of protecting ourselves from the rebelliousness of which poor people are capable, which could be prevented by reasonable rations, which would scarcely be a lesser good, [and] by Avoiding the poor's rebelliousness and grumbings than by safeguarding ourselves from contagious disease.<sup>73</sup>

This notion of "foresight" can be encompassed within a broader conceptual framework regarding vigilance, which, to some extent, was exercised at the municipal government level. The monarchical authorities, however, did not exercise such foresight; rather, it was the consular and city authorities, emanating from the "Community" comprising all city dwellers who embodied such care. Following a paternalistic conception of power, it was the consuls' sense of responsibility and their insightful knowledge of people's living circumstances that determined their policy to purchase wheat, medicines and other commodities. Furthermore, the First Consul Ranchin never hesitated to declare this publicly in his attempt to mitigate any opposition that might arise amongst the ruling elites to this onerous policy,<sup>74</sup> and to adopt an unprecedented interventionist approach justified by such exceptional circumstances. He thus asserted that the example of Marseilles

should affect us and awaken us [to the fact] that we are the administrators of a city whose mediocre services have been raised from a quite small number of families, and at the same time we know the poverty of a very large number of those we call poor people, especially at present because work has been stopped with the wool we used to receive from Marseilles and which we cannot receive for some time to come, we have many humiliated families whose needs are only too well-known and so-called commodious private individuals whose habitual status has been degraded on account of the decrease in their incomes, and the leading city-dwellers who have fled, who have not come to the rescue [of the poor] as much as they might have done at another time.<sup>75</sup>

Given how those traditional mechanisms underpinning solidarity could no longer function, plague vigilance was to culminate in an unprecedented level of interven-

---

<sup>73</sup> AMM, BB 413, fol. 69r°.

<sup>74</sup> On 29 November 1720, Ranchin had already expressed the wish to avoid "the grumbling by the poor and the Rich," AMM, BB 413, fol. 61v°.

<sup>75</sup> AMM, BB 413, fol. 66v°.

tionism that modified municipal government's practices in order to preserve the prevailing social order.

The dominant political figures in Aix, responsible for governing the city during the outbreak, were no different in their public declarations. Hence, members of the *bureau de la santé* would justify their policy of buying medicines and confining poor beggars to the infirmaries on account of "foresight" that drew upon past experience.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, they expanded the scope of their vigilance to watch over certain specific groups, namely foreign beggars – who were to be expelled – and the disreputable poor, i. e. those lacking any means of subsistence. Such a watchful eye over these groups was justified by the desire to achieve the "salvation of the poor and the rich as a whole,"<sup>77</sup> which could be interpreted as preserving the habitual hierarchical social order. Some days after 17 December 1720,<sup>78</sup> the decision was taken to indiscriminately lock up the poor, and this sort of temporary "great confinement"<sup>79</sup> was coupled with increased surveillance and vigilance of people's behaviour. Indeed, Article 9 in the Regulations for the Commissaires designated to inspect residential dwellings in August 1720 stipulated that these commissaires shall notify the public prosecutor in Parliament should ever they encounter "people with bad lifestyles & whose debaucheries scandalise & infect the public through their defilements."<sup>80</sup> Here, a threshold had been crossed between individual conduct relating to morals and the spread of plague, which was not the case in Montpellier. Vigilance was therefore adapted to respond to this growing sense of disquiet among the dominant classes. As confirmed by the *bureau de police's* archives, during the extraordinary session of 30 July 1720, the consuls duly reported how they were both attentive to and afflicted by the "widespread groans of people who could not get any bread crying aloud in the streets."<sup>81</sup> The paternalistic conception of the municipal authorities' role to provide food for city residents was yet again to become discernible, and consuls found themselves in agreement with the poor against those bakers who had shuttered up their shops. Following this episode, a parliamentary ruling was procured, which dictated that bakers in Provence not leave their native city.<sup>82</sup>

One final point needs stressing in relation to this vigilance regarding contagion envisaged as an instrument for maintaining social order, namely, its ensuing

---

76 AMA, GG 524, extract from Parliament register, 13 August 1720.

77 AMA, GG 526 *bureau de la santé*, deliberation dated 13 August 1720.

78 Ibid., deliberation of 20 August 1720.

79 We have borrowed the term from Michel Foucault.

80 AMA, GG 524, *Règlement pour les sieurs commissaires*.

81 AMA, FF 72, fol. 22r°.

82 AD 13, B 3702, ruling dated 30 October 1720.

memory in future years. Plague literature, notably that of a medical character, as well as historical accounts published in the contagion's aftermath, have highlighted this sense of "foresight" and the level of consideration local authorities needed to pay to the general populace.<sup>83</sup> Such vigilance was multi-sensory, involving not only the eyes and ears, but also a tactile relationship with urban and social spaces. Rooted in individual emotions – those of the agents in charge of maintaining public order and keeping watch – vigilance had to respond to any potential collective emotion – especially those of the poor. In Montpellier, however, local authorities took this process of memorialising their actions yet a step further: by way of a narrative written in the wake of the epidemic. They inscribed this particular episode of plague into the city's history, incorporating it into the *registre du cérémonial consulaire*, a register containing accounts of Montpellier's consuls heroic deeds.<sup>84</sup> This register highlights the role the monarchical and consular authorities played, and can be interpreted both as a justification of what had been done – and well done – and as a handbook for any future leader in the event of a fresh epidemic outbreak. And yet, the key ingredient in forging the relationship between the authorities and the population was the degree of attention the former paid to the latter. Such attentiveness revealed a wide-ranging interpretation of vigilance, thereby concealing several layers of meaning, for it can be understood both as a series of technical and temporary measures designed, on one hand, to safeguard the city from plague, but on the other, as a trustworthy relationship with the community itself and toward common everyday practices, which imposed, in exceptional times, exceptional measures that implied outright obedience from the public. Hence, vigilance formed part of that aspect of pastoral power which Michel Foucault identified as characteristic of the modern era.

## Conclusion

The raft of measures taken to combat plague in Aix and Montpellier reveals, beyond certain similarities, varying degrees of vigilance. Obviously, these were not only predicated upon the contagion's geographical proximity, but also on past

---

<sup>83</sup> Martin, *Histoire de la dernière peste de Marseille, Aix, Arles et Toulon*; Jauffret, *Pièces historiques sur la peste de Marseille*.

<sup>84</sup> AMM, BB 202, "Report of what has transpired in the city of Montpellier between 2 August 1720 and 2 October 1722 of how the city remained gripped in fear of being stricken by the contagious disease because of that which afflicts the city of Marseilles and which subsequently attacked almost all the rest of the provincial part of Gevaudan and Sevens", pp. 95–101. I refer to my article with Lacour, *La peste dans le Cereimonial des consuls*, pp. 33–39.

and immediate experiences that determined whether to revive erstwhile techniques and, sometimes, launch innovative approaches, one of which primarily focused on prohibiting all movement within Provence and Languedoc, and required adapting the latest surveillance techniques for getting to know the population's conduct and movements. Public acceptance of such innovative techniques, including those deployed in Montpellier, could not be taken for granted. The measures envisaged required political justifications built around two sets of arguments: the need to control the population in a bid to prevent and combat an outbreak of plague, and the determination to legitimise these new measures. Ultimately, this had the effect of involving the population in this vigilance regarding plague in a new way. Of course, the level of involvement was differentiated according to the economic, political and social role of those categories mobilised. Individuals were not yet agents in surveilling themselves; rather, it was the social groups who were mobilised all while respecting the prevailing social hierarchies. For this reason, the "poor" were to become the object of the authorities' close scrutiny, and a whole cluster of intermediaries were required to implement this surveillance and plague vigilance, employing a finely honed territorial network and on an intensely local scale. The general public's involvement was therefore both gradual and uneven, yet they were nonetheless to eventually become both the actor and the object of their own surveillance. Entirely political in character, the goal of vigilance was to maintain social order by combining extraordinary and, for some, authoritarian and violent means of action. The numerous protests, particularly prior to an outbreak in periods in which a "fear of plague" was taking grip, demonstrated how wielding power did not proceed smoothly, even during exceptional times. Hence, public support was sought, a support that made it possible to give nuance to the idea of an absolutism coming from above and from the king, an absolutism which would make it possible to save the kingdom from the epidemic. What ensued once the King's Council assumed control of the fight against plague in September 1720 was anything but a transparent and coherent sanitary regime. In reality, those years between 1720 and 1724 were characterised by a series of local adjustments, of trials and errors, experiments and setbacks.

In fact, the notion of vigilantism made it viable to operate more subtly, at both local and individual levels, the idea of a power that exists because it is exercised. For this to be accomplished necessarily required a greater or lesser involvement by individuals or by certain individuals. In the case of the Ancien Régime cities, the prevailing inegalitarian and hierarchical social order resulted in an unequal participation in the measures to fight contagion, with the ruling elites, including intermediate groups, becoming active in this vigilance regarding plague in an attempt to protect themselves chiefly from the "poor." Poor people were still perceived ambiguously, treated not only as a needy group and the object of charity and of anti-

plague measures, but also an eminently dangerous group ever-ready to revolt and spread the epidemic. The period during which vigilance regarding plague spread constituted a time for exploring and reinforcing municipal government procedures, which in turn not only concealed contradictions and dissent, but also opened up ways to systemising certain innovative mechanisms for controlling urban areas and their residents. Viewed from this perspective, vigilance participated in renewing power practices; it crept into the heart of the relationship between city dwellers and their rulers. In so doing, vigilance contributed to transforming urban governance because it gave both a new meaning and new forms to the notion of community and of the Commons.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources (Archives)

Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône (AD 13):

B 3702: Parliamentary records

Archives Municipales d'Aix (AMA)

BB 108: Register of the Council's deliberations, 1719–1739

FF 72: Register of the *bureau de police*, 1719–1722.

GG 511: *Relation succincte Touchant les Accidens de la Peste de Marseille, son pronostic, & sa curation*, Arles, Gaspard Meunier.

GG 524–526: Ordinances, extracts from the registers of Parliament, regulations, deliberations concerning the plague outbreak of 1720.

Archives municipales de Montpellier (AMM):

Series BB: files relating to the *illier*; plague reports.

FF 286: Register of deliberations by the *bureau de police*, 24 August 1723.

GG 18: Register of the *bureau de santé* 1721–1723

GG 56: Ordinances and *arrêts* related to the plague outbreak of 1720.

GG 66: Register of the *bureau de santé*, 1720–1721.

Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)

ms fr. 8916 à 8919: correspondence related to the plague outbreak of 1720

### Primary Sources (Publications)

Delamare, Nicolas: *Traité de la police*. T. I. Paris 1705.

Jacquín, Armand-Pierre: *De la Santé, Ouvrage utile à tout le monde*. Paris 1762.

- Jauffret, Louis-François: *Pièces historiques sur la peste de Marseille et d'une partie de la Provence, en 1720, 1721 et 1722*. Marseille 1820.
- Martin, Arnoul: *Histoire de la dernière peste de Marseille, Aix, Arles et Toulon. Avec plusieurs aventures arrivées pendant la contagion*. Paris 1732.
- Ranchin, François: *Opuscules ou Traictés divers et curieux en médecine, De M[aitre] François Ranchin, conseiller, Médecin & Professeur du Roy; Chancelier & Iuge de la Faculté de Médecine, en l'Université de Montpellier*. Lyon 1640.

## Secondary Literature

- Beauvieux, Fleur: Épidémie, pouvoir municipal et transformation de l'espace urbain: la peste de 1720–1722 à Marseille. In: *Rives méditerranéennes*, 42 (2009), pp. 29–50.
- Beauvieux, Fleur: *Expériences ordinaires de la peste. La société marseillaise en temps d'épidémie (1720–1724)*, thèse soutenue le 9 décembre 2017 à l'EHESS-Marseille, sous la direction de Jean Boutier.
- Beauvieux, Fleur/ Vidoni, Nicolas: Dispositifs de contrôle, police et résistances pendant la peste de 1720. Une étude comparée de Marseille et Montpellier. In: *Études héraultaises* 55 (2020), pp. 2–11.
- Bertrand, Régis: La Peste en Provence aux temps modernes. Sources et représentations. In: *Provence Historique*, 189 (1997), pp. 401–412.
- Bertrand, Régis/Buti, Gilbert: Le risque de peste dans la culture et la vie de la France d'Ancien Régime. In: Leca, Antoine/Vialla, François (Eds.): *Le risque épidémique. Droit, histoire, médecine et pharmacie (colloque d'Aix-en-Provence, novembre 2002)*. Aix-en-Provence 2003, pp. 97–112.
- Biraben, Jean-Noël: *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens*. Paris-La Haye 1975.
- Boucheron, Patrick/Offenstadt, Nicolas (Eds.): *L'espace public au Moyen Âge. Débats autour de Jürgen Habermas*. Paris 2011.
- Bourdieu, Pierre: *Méditations pascaliennes*. Paris 1997.
- Bourquin, Laurent/Hamon, Philippe (Eds.): *La politisation. Conflits et construction du politique depuis le Moyen Âge*. Rennes 2010.
- Buti, Gilbert: *Colère de dieu, mémoire des hommes. La peste en Provence, 1720–2020*. Paris 2021.
- Cabantous, Alain: Le quartier, espace vécu à l'époque moderne: ambiguïtés et perspectives d'une histoire. In: *HES* 3 (1994), pp. 427–440.
- Cabasse, Prosper: *Essais historiques sur le parlement de Provence, depuis son origine jusqu'à sa suppression. 1501–1790*. Paris 1826.
- Carrière, Charles/Coudurié, Marcel/Rebuffat, Ferréol: *Marseille ville morte: la peste de 1720*. Marseille 1988.
- Caylux, Odile: *Arles et la peste de 1720–1721*. Aix-en-Provence 2009.
- Chassaing, Philippe/Delaporte, Adèle/Le Mao, Caroline (Eds.): *Peurs urbaines (xvi<sup>e</sup>–xxi<sup>e</sup> siècle)*. La Crèche/Pessac 2022.
- Cholvy, Gérard: *Histoire de Montpellier*. Toulouse 2011.
- Cipolla, Carlo M.: *Contre un ennemi invisible. Épidémies et structures sanitaires en Italie de la Renaissance au xvi<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris 1992.
- Cottureau, Alain/Ladrière, Paul (Eds.): *Pouvoir et légitimité. Figures de l'espace public*. Paris 1992.
- Delumeau, Jean: *La Peur en Occident. Une cité assiégée (xvi<sup>e</sup>–xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle)*. Paris 1978.
- Denis, Vincent: *Une histoire de l'identité, France, 1715–1815*. Seyssel 2008.

- Dulieu, Louis: La peste à Montpellier. In: *Études héraultaises*, 5/6 (1984), pp. 13–18.
- Dulieu, Louis: *La médecine à Montpellier*. T. III: *L'époque classique*. Paris 1983–1986.
- Dupilet, Alexandre: *La Régence absolue. Philippe d'Orléans et la polysynodie (1715–1718)*. Seyssel 2011.
- Favarel-Garrigues, Gilles/Gayer, Laurent: Violent la loi pour maintenir l'ordre. Le vigilantisme en débats. In: *Politix*, 115/3 (2016), pp. 7–33.
- Foucault, Michel: *"Il faut défendre la société"*. Cours au Collège de France, 1976. Paris 1997.
- Hildesheimer, Françoise: *Le bureau de la santé de Marseille sous l'Ancien Régime. Le renfermement de la contagion*. Marseille 1980.
- Lepetit, Bernard: *Les villes dans la France moderne (1740–1840)*. Paris 1988.
- Mannoni, Stefano: *Une et indivisible. Storia dell'accentramento amministrativo in Francia, I. La formazione del sistema (1161–1815)*. Milan 1994.
- Panzac, Daniel: Crime ou délit? La législation sanitaire en Provence au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. In: *Revue Historique* 557 (1986), pp. 39–71.
- Piasenza, Paolo: *Polizia e città. Strategie d'ordine, conflitti e rivolte a Parigi tra sei e settecento*. Bologne 1990.
- Revel, Jacques: Autour d'une épidémie ancienne. La peste de 1666–1670. In: *RHMC* 17/4 (1970), pp. 953–983.
- Saint-Bonnet, François: *L'État d'exception*. Paris 2001.
- Sautel, Gérard: *Une juridiction municipale de police sous l'Ancien Régime. Le Bureau de police d'Aix-en-Provence. Thèse pour le doctorat en droit, soutenue le 7 juillet 1945*. Paris 1946.
- Soll, Jacob: *The information Master. Jean-Baptiste Colbert's secret state intelligence system*. Ann Arbor 2009.
- Stalh, Hugo: *Résoudre les divisions religieuses et maintenir l'ordre provincial sous le règne de Louis XV*. Paris 2021.
- Thomas, Jan (Ed.): *L'exception dans tous ses états*. Marseille 2007.
- Vidoni, Nicolas: La peste et le gouvernement municipal: Montpellier en 1720–1723. In: *Annales du Midi* 295/4 (2016), pp. 389–409.
- Vidoni, Nicolas: La police et les étrangers à Montpellier au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Du contrôle policier au contrôle politique. In: Brogini, Anne et al. (Eds.): *Mobilités en Méditerranée. Quotidiens, contrôles, assistances (XVI<sup>e</sup>–XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*. Saint-Denis 2020, pp. 227–237.
- Vidoni, Nicolas/Lacour, Pierre-Yves: La peste dans le Cérémonial des consuls. Présentation, édition et commentaire d'une relation de la peste en 1720–1723. In: *Études héraultaises* 55 (2020), pp. 75–80.