



**ITALIAN ASSOCIATION SAINT ROCH OF MONTPELLIER
CENTRE FOR STUDIES ON SAINT ROCH - INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE**

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**ROCH OF MONTPELLIER
VOGHERA AND HIS SAINT**

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Introduction

This essay was published, in its original version, in October 2001, with the intent to introduce an agile, but rigorous text, about the '*actual state*' (at that time) of the studies and the research about the life and the legend of Saint Roch. Pierre Bolle and Paolo Ascagni were given the task to compile the text by Daniele Salerno, councilman of the Municipality of Voghera, who had it published in a book accompanied by well-designed graphics, with photos and biographical tables.

Today this essay is largely current, but above all – and not only for its contents – it presents a number of characteristics that allow it to operate as a short introduction to the notably more complex work developed in the «historical-biographical cards» found in our portal (Italian version). We have decided, therefore, to propose it in its entirety, with the opportune corrections and integrations. In conclusion, the text is up-to-date, but prudently, we have preferred not to add any new information unearthed since the date of publication, limiting ourselves to intervene, with the apt corrections, on those parts already present in the original text that, after the latest studies, had to necessarily be integrated.

In this way we have practically maintained unchanged the text written by the two aforementioned authors with the intent for it to be '*commemorative*', considering that this fortunate work has met the approval of a vast number of readers. After all, even if we had inserted a synopsis of the new material found during the latest research, we would have had to alter the global balance of the essay, changing it too much.

In conclusion we can supply the users of our portal with a flowing, easy-to-read text that is rigorous and precise in its contents, condensed in a reduced number of pages, but thorough enough for a first look at the vast world of studies about Saint Roch. Naturally, to expand on the matters mentioned here, it is possible find ample material in the above-mentioned «historical-biographical cards», compiled according to the most classical academic rules, that is accompanied by notes and bibliographical references that, in this introductory essay, we have had to skip for obvious need of brevity.

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First chapter

THE LIFE OF ST. ROCH OF MONTPELLIER

[1] **WRITTEN SOURCES.** The information we have about St. Roch's life is full of divergences and legends. It was mostly drawn from some very old texts, thanks to which we have a series of essential and founded historical data. The principal ones are the following:

- *VITA SANCTI ROCHI* (the life of St. Roch), written in Latin and Italian by the Venetian jurist Francesco Diedo, governor of Brescia, and published in 1479. It was broadly utilised by Ercole Albiflorio for a 1494 work, published in Udine (northern Italy), the same year as *LA VIE, LÉGENDE, MIRACLES ET ORAISON DE MGR. SAINT ROCH* (the life, legend, miracles and prayers of St. Roch) by Jehan Phelipot, a French Dominican.
- *ISTORIA DI SAN ROCCO* (the history of St. Roch), by Domenico da Vicenza. Written in Italian, it is a composition in poetic verses, written from between 1478 and 1480, and was only recently discovered; for this reason, accurate textual studies are still in progress. At the moment, the hypothesis of its deriving from the text written by Francesco Diedo is quite plausible, although the opposite cannot be excluded.
- The so-called *ACTA BREVIORA* (Short Acts). The first known edition is in a collection of *Lives of saints* published in Cologne in 1483. According to some historians, they are the Latin translation of a more ancient Italian text, composed in Lombardy (northern Italy) between 1420 and 1430. Other authors, however, believe that the *Acta breviora* were written after Diedo's work, exactly in 1483. This is the most accredited thesis in the academic world today.
- A German text entitled *DY HISTORY VON SAND ROCCUS* (Vienna 1482) or *DAS LEBEN DES HEILEGEN HERRN SANT ROCHUS* (Nuremberg 1484). This book is often cited as *HISTORICA EX-ITALICA LINGUA REDDITA TEUTONICE AD HONORANDUM SANCTI ROCHI*, in other words as a work translated from Italian into German. Historians conventionally call it *ANONYMOUS GERMAN*.
- Another *VITA SANCTI ROCHI*, by Jean de Pins, a French bishop and ambassador of King Frances the First to Venice. The book, which was clearly inspired by Jehan Phelipot's text, was published in Venice in 1516.
- Finally, *LA VITA DEL GLORIOSO CONFESSORE SAN ROCCO* (the life of the glorious confessor St. Roch), by Paolo Fiorentino, printed in Brescia (1481-1482), and a manuscript of Bartolomeo dal Bovo (1487). These texts, rather short, introduce some news that seem very interesting, but it is necessary to expect the results of more thorough studies.

It is necessary to emphasize that using works of this type (the so-called *hagiographic* kind) are not necessarily the best way to thoroughly establish the biography of a saint and the birth of his cult. They were usually, in fact, written a long time after the course of events and they are not inspired strictly by historical incentive, but, for the most part, by religious, or rather, by moral edification.

This is why the *hagiographic* writers were in the habit of adding legendary traditions, their own inventions and a series of well-known anecdotes drawn from the Bible or from other *Lives of saints*, to their books. This habit may seem to us an absurdity, but the fact is, the intent of the *hagiographic* writer was to introduce a model of Christian life to the reader, to which the central character, the saint, was obliged to have followed during his existence on earth.

Which is why ancient *hagiographies* cannot be used as significant points of reference for the modern historian and do not represent a historical reconstruction of the origin of a local cult, while various testimonies of the liturgical and archaeological types are much more noteworthy. In our case, it is rather irrelevant that many *hagiographic* writers, throughout the centuries, have defended the thesis of St. Roch's death occurring in Montpellier (a fact, as we will see, difficult to reconcile with the absence of unquestionable reports about an early and persistent tradition of a local cult); instead, the early documents from *Voghera* (northern Italy) are infinitely more important. These documents verify the presence in this town of his remains in 1469 and the existence of a festivity honouring St. Roch as far back as 1391, while the first procession in Montpellier was in 1505: over one century later!

[2] **THE SAINT'S NAME.** It may seem strange, but the life of St. Roch is so imprecise that there have even been doubts about his name. In fact, according to some historians (particularly Augustin Fliche), *Roch* would be the transformation of the surname of a *Languedoc* French noble family, the *Rog* or *Rotch*, who were very influential in Montpellier, both politically and economically, during the 8th and 9th centuries; some of these historians, to defend their thesis, affirm that in aristocratic circles, in that period, the first-born was designated with only the family surname.

This hypothesis hardly seems convincing, also because the ancient archives of Montpellier show that *Roch*, *Roc*, *Roca* or *Roqua* were rather frequent titles in all levels of society. Therefore, it is not necessary to resort to the ruse of a *surname that becomes a name* to explain this simple and natural fact: *Roch* is a first name, and in Italy it was already relatively used in the beginning of the thirteenth century.

[3] **HIS FAMILY.** Many writers have gone to great lengths to insinuate that St. Roch's family was of highly noble origins. Some writers speak of regal filiations with the Royal House of France; others prefer the Aragon Majorca families; others devise a theory of his being a descendant, on his mother's side, of St. Elizabeth of Hungary and, on his father's side – through the *Angio* family – of French monarchs.

If we were to point out the most providential theory (but not for this, more reliable than others), we could indicate the one recorded by a Jesuit, Jean Pinius, who names the *De la Croix* family in the «Acta Sanctorum». In fact, in the «Register of consuls and clerics» from Montpellier, we can observe that a man called *Jean De La Croix* filled many important posts from 1356 to 1360, to then become, in 1363, the head consul of the city. This person could be identified as St. Roch's father, but this theory is very doubtful.

Moreover, according to a number of sources, his parents were called *Jean* and *Libère* and they belonged to a wealthy family, perhaps noble or perhaps related to distinguished middle-class merchants. There is also a theory that his mother was an Italian woman, from Lombardy, who went to Montpellier to get married. But as in the case of the *Rog* family, the «hypothesis Delacroix» is not acceptable too, and rather, some documents induce us to reject it with well motivated reasons.

The fact remains however, that the bishop Jean de Pinius gives a different name for St. Roch's mother (not *Libère*, but *Franca*) and that, above all, making saints part of the noble class is, in truth, a common practice in many *hagiographic*-style works. That is why we cannot attribute too much value to this supposed testimony, even if it is not to exclude entirely. It is noteworthy, however, that the reference to a presumed *royal*

bloodline of our Saint is reported in only some of the earliest sources (particularly in the *Acta breviora*).

[4] **HIS NATIVE CITY.** One item that is common in all the *hagiographies* about St. Roch is his birth in Montpellier, a *Languedoc* city in southern France, ten kilometres from the Gulf of the Lion. It is the principal town of the department of Hérault and has been the seat of the diocese since 1536 (in the Middle Ages, the diocese seat was in Maguelonne). Its original name was *Mons Pessulanus* and it is still an important cultural and commercial centre.

In 1204, Peter of Aragon ceded Montpellier to the bishop of Maguelonne, but in 1214 it was established as a republic. In 1258 James of Aragon became the lord of the city, which was joined to the Kingdom of Majorca in 1276. In 1349 it was transferred under the direct control of the French monarchy, but because of continuous political and social upsets during those years, it definitely became part of the Kingdom of France only in 1383, by the hand of Charles 6th. The city lived a distinct phase of its history from 1567 to 1622, when it fell under the influence of the *Huguenots*, the French Protestants.

In the Middle Ages, Montpellier was governed by a lord, who wielded judicial power and military sovereignty, and by an assembly of twelve consuls, which oversaw legislative, administrative and fiscal activities. The city was very famous, among other things, for its renowned and venerable university, particularly the faculties of medicine and law. Moreover, the city was located along the road that pilgrims took to go to Santiago of Compostela in Spain, and this crossroads notably increased its prestige and importance.

[5] **CHRONOLOGICAL DATA.** For many centuries, the dates of St. Roch's life and death remained indisputable, but they have recently been questioned, particularly by prestigious historians such as Antonio Maurino, Augustin Fliche and François Pitangue.

The so-called *Traditional Chronology* dates back to Francesco Diedo's *hagiography*, which indicated 1295 as his year of birth and 1327 as his year of death; to tell the truth, the commemoration days of the Saint are still often calculated on the basis of these dates.

Instead, the *New Chronologies* use the *Acta breviora* as a point of reference. This work contains no specific dates; it hinges, above all, on the famous episode of the Papal Audience, in an attempt to reconcile this episode with historical reality. But we will go into further detail in a subsequent paragraph; for now it is enough to say, taking into account the several variations, then, St. Roch would have been born from between 1345 and 1350 and he would have died from between 1376 and 1379; he would have reached Rome in 1367-1368 and he would have arrived in *Piacenza* in 1371, consequently, he would have been arrested either shortly thereafter, or around 1374.

Undoubtedly these re-elaborations introduce some solid and interesting elements, but we cannot deny that uncertainty remains, as, for example one of elements of 'proof' held among the most important. In fact it is true that from 1295 to 1327 there were no epidemics of bubonic plague, but it is also true that, in the Middle Ages the word *plague* was used very loosely, generally referring to a myriad of epidemic illnesses.

In conclusion, these *two* chronologies both introduce interesting elements, even if, in fact, lately, the majority of historians seem to be inclined towards the second interpretation (1345-50 / 1376-79).

[6] **HIS CHILDHOOD.** According to early sources, St. Roch's parents could not have children, and only after a period of intense prayers, Divine Grace granted them this most desired gift (but it is almost superfluous to underline that even this episode was used quite frequent in early *Lives of saints*). The infant was born with a scarlet figure of the cross on his chest and, since his mother fasted every Wednesday and Saturday, he too refused nourishment. St. Roch grew up in a climate of deep religiousness and he showed a precocious vocation towards Christian charity.

Being Montpellier was hit by the plague, both in 1348 and in 1361 (over 150 dead every month!), it is probable that, early on, he developed a deep awareness and sensibility for the afflicted and, in general, the sick and the suffering – that is, if we accept the most recent chronological hypothesis.

His infancy was marked by one of the darkest periods of the whole history of the Church. The papacy had moved in 1309 from the secular seat in Rome to Avignon, and despite the strong and dignified personality of a number of pontiffs, it is certain that the disproportionate interference of the kings of France was excessive. On the other hand, the reforming actions of the so-called *Mendicant Orders* (particularly Franciscans and Dominicans), who were also well known in Montpellier, became more and more important and incisive.

About this subject, we should remember that, according to some writers, St. Roch would have studied at the local Dominican school, and he would have then joined the Franciscan «Third Order»; but this information is not historically verifiable, and, for some historians, it is completely made up.

[7] **HIS CALLING AS A PILGRIM.** St. Roch's decision to become a pilgrim coincided with the painful loss of his parents, who died one right after the other, when he was about twenty years old. He was the sole heir of his family's fortune, but after having made an undeniably radical choice of following the Christian faith, he decided to sell everything, to distribute his wealth to the poor (monasteries, hospitals, shelters for women) and to wear the clothes of a pilgrim.

Pilgrimage is a centuries-old phenomenon, common to various religions during human history, which has always tried to develop its aspects of internal purification, longing for sacred and spiritual devotion along with moral strength, beyond the most urgent request for a particular *favour*, principally, healing. In the Christian framework, pilgrims have always held a preference for the sacred places of the Holy Land, as well as the tombs and relics of saints and martyrs; Jerusalem, Rome and Compostela are certainly among the most well known sites.

During the Middle Ages, Europe had a wide-ranging network of hospices and centres of reception that were managed by special confraternities, ecclesiastics or friars, and, in some cases by laymen who were dedicated to the assistance of pilgrims. Moreover, the generosity of individuals often constituted a solid reference point for anyone who decided to set out on a pilgrimage; not for nothing that, during this time, unselfish «*hospitality towards a pilgrim*» was considered an *act of mercy*, and would be well-received by God.

Our Saint decided to embark on a pilgrimage of penitence in the direction of Rome, to revere the tombs of apostles and martyrs. Naturally, he dressed according to the traditional style of pilgrims: a hat with a wide brim to protect himself from the rain; a staff (the so-called *bourdon*), a hollowed-out gourd to use as a water-bottle; a long

cloak (which, in the future was destined to be called a «*sanrocchino*» (that is, like-the-cloak-St.-Roch-used); some shells to draw water from rivers and a sack slung over his shoulder.

The departure of pilgrims was usually acknowledged with a religious ceremony of consecration and benediction. «*In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, receive this sack, symbol of your peregrination to the tombs of the saints and apostles Peter and Paul, " and "receive this staff, to help you walk during your pilgrimage, so you can be triumphant over all of the Enemy's ruses (..) And, once you have reached your goal, may you return to us in joy, for the Grace of God*».

[8] **THE PLAGUE.** The route followed by St. Roch and the places that he went are additional elements of uncertainty, but some basic facts do exist, on which we can satisfactorily reconstruct the few crucial years of his intense life. His stay in Italy was totally conditioned by the presence of the terrifying scourge of the plague, which killed a vast number of people during the Middle Ages.

The plague is an infectious disease that strikes men and animals and is transmitted from one person to another or, more frequently, caught from the fleas found on mice and other rodents. The first historically verified case was the so-called «*Justinian plague*», which struck the Mediterranean basin in the seventh century; the most recent epidemic lasted from 1894 to 1920, but some evidence dates to 1994, particularly in India.

The most tremendous contagion of this illness occurred during the Middle Ages, from 1346 to 1353, the years of the so-called «*Black Plague*», which gradually spread from the highlands of central Asia to the whole known world. According to historians' calculations, at least twenty million died in Europe alone, equal to one-third of the whole population of the time. It is superfluous to point out what psychological, social, moral, as well as material, effects a scourge of this kind must have had on the history and civilization of the entire Middle Ages, which were shaken from the foundations up. It is evident that, in absence of the plague, the saga of humanity would have taken a completely different course.

It is important to state that Francesco Diedo decided to compile his famous *Vita Sancti Rochi* (1479) during an epidemic, even if it was not the plague. We have already said that, in the Middle Ages, because of scarce scientific knowledge, the term 'plague' was used to designate the most disparate epidemic illnesses; there are illnesses that for us are only simple and annoying forms of influenza today, but in those days they were very serious pathologies, often with deadly effects.

Besides, the recurrent presence of the plague or other contagious illnesses in Europe, up until the 19th century, was one of the principal motives of the diffusion of the cult of St. Roch, which grew prodigiously: in fact, in the space of only fifteen years it widened its sphere of influence in northern Italy, Austria, Germany (up to Lübeck), Belgium and France, including Paris.

[9] **HIS ARRIVAL IN ITALY.** As we have already said, it is very difficult to identify the route in Italy St. Roch took, despite the fact that a lot of cities boast about his presence or stay.

According to the suggestive hypothesis of François Pitangue, the first verifiable stop could be identified in *Acquapendente*, a town in *Lazio* (central Italy), in the province of

Viterbo. Here, running up against people in prey of panic, St. Roch asked to be welcomed in a local hospital; a man named Vincent, moved by his young age, tried to dissuade him because there were many sick with the plague. But that was the very reason for which the Saint wanted to enter: he intended to help the suffering, to live totally by the example of Christ.

According to a *Life* about the blessed *Giovanni Colombini*, who lived during the 14th century, one of his most devoted followers was a man called Vincent. The founder of the «*Gesuati*» (not to be confused with the «*Gesuiti*», that is the Jesuit Order), after having introduced the statutes of his order to the pope, contracted the plague on his way back to *Siena* (in Tuscany). Putting these various bits together, Pitangue affirms that St. Roch must have arrived in Acquapendente on 25 or 26 July 1367. But as you can notice, the hypothesis is founded on indirect elements, and is rather forced. We must also not forget that the biography about Colombini was written in the 17th century.

In any case, St. Roch temporarily postponed his entry to Rome and he started to roam about central Italy, bravely following (or madly, from another point of view!) the development of the contagion. He had, in fact, made it a habit to make the sign of cross on the foreheads of the sick and to invoke the Trinity of God for their recovery, pronouncing an 'exorcism' formula, which became conventional. «*May God destroy you from your roots, rip you apart, may he eradicate you from the houses that you possess and cancel you from the earth of the living, in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*». And, for this extraordinary demonstration of Christian faith, God decided to make him an instrument of his Grace, granting him the faculty of miraculously healing many afflicted.

[10] **THE PAPAL AUDIENCE.** One of the most renowned episodes of St. Roch's life is his meeting with the pope, an event that supports one of the testimonies for the *new chronology* of his life. In fact, from 1309 to 1377, the popes were in *Avignon*, and in that period only one pontiff went to Rome for a brief stay, between 16th October 1367 and 5th September 1370.

The pope in question was Urban 5th, a Frenchman who had also been a teacher at the University of Montpellier. At a certain point he decided to re-establish the see of the papacy in Rome, despite strong internal opposition; subsequently, however, he had to return to Avignon, where he died a few months afterwards. It would be his successor, Gregory the Eleventh, to definitely close the long period of exile in France, above all, thanks to the insistence of St. Catherine from Siena.

Admitting that Urban 5th had been the pope St. Roch met, we have to suppose that our Saint reached Rome between the end of 1367 and the beginning of 1368. While in the cradle of Christianity, he generously did all he could for the sick and the suffering; and it was in a hospital that he performed his most famous miracle, that is, the healing of a cardinal, who, out of gratitude, brought him to be presented to the pope. It is difficult to identify the previously mentioned hospital as the Hospital of the Holy Spirit. The only element that can support this theory is that it was founded by the blessed Guy, son of William the Eighth of Montpellier. Frankly there is not enough evidence to substantiate the facts; therefore it is another theory, just like so many others.

Historians have made many sufficiently founded conjectures about the identity of the prelate, also because in various works there are very different factors. A very

suggestive proposal claims him as *Anglico Grimoard*, the brother of Pope Urban 5th, but it is not truthfully possible to consider this theory more reasonable than so many others; moreover it is not even certain that he was a cardinal, because, according to François Pitangue, the character in question could be identified as *Gaillard de Boisvert*, the temporary regent of the «*Sacra Penitenzieria Apostolica*» (the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary).

In any case, this mysterious 'cardinal' had contacts with the maximum levels of the Roman Curia, and he could easily organize a papal audience for his healer. St. Roch humbly knelt in front of Urban 5th, but not even the pontiff could resist his fascination, pronouncing an inspired «*It seems to me that you come from Heaven!*».

St. Roch's stay in Rome, based on the *new chronology*, would have ended in 1370-1371. But, in this case, too, we are trying to follow a historical reconstruction that, at the moment, cannot be accepted as absolutely certain.

[11] **THE EVENTS IN PIACENZA.** The situation seems to become clearer when St. Roch enters Piacenza and lives a sequence of episodes that, as they appear in the various texts, look as if they are historically more reliable. If we accept the *new chronology*, his entry into the city could have been in July 1371.

Our Saint went into a hospital to continue his work of comfort and assistance to the sick. But according to tradition, one night he heard a voice in a dream that told him: «*Roch, stand up, you are cured of your illness*». He immediately understood he had been stricken by the plague; cured in his soul of sin, he had to suffer the illness of his body as a trial of purification. Tormented by a painful swelling in his groin, he was thrown out of the hospital, to laboriously drag himself as far away as possible to a nearby wood so he could be alone and die in peace.

His place of shelter, according to unverifiable local tradition, has been identified as *Sarmato*, approximately seventeen kilometres from Piacenza. Here he was able to quench his thirst and calm down the pain in his wound, thanks to a fountain of water, which miraculously gushed out of the ground. St. Roch's «fountain» and «cave» can still be visited today.

But his worst problem was his hunger. It was solved thanks to the appearance of his most famous and inseparable companion, who was destined to be immortalized throughout the centuries in innumerable artistic and traditional representations. We are obviously speaking about «St. Roch's dog», who befriended him and brought him a piece of bread every day, taking it from its master's table.

This person, *Gottardo*, came from a wealthy family. He had left Piacenza for his summer residence to escape the plague. Becoming suspicious of his dog's comings-and-goings, he decided to follow it one day, and, as a result, he met St. Roch. Heedless of the diseased Saint's pleading to stay away from him, Gottardo insisted on helping him and, day after day, he gained an ever-greater knowledge of Christian doctrine.

Gottardo ended up becoming one of his disciples; he decided to sell all his properties and to advocate poverty, like Christ. He went so far as to wear a coarse sack, begging for bread in Piacenza, much to the amazement and shame of his acquaintances. He discovered St. Roch's name only at the moment of his complete recovery, just before they said their final, intensely emotional goodbyes. The two great friends would never see each other again.

Gottardo is traditionally considered a member of the noble family, *Pallastrelli*, and his name is linked to a famous fresco that can still be seen in St. Ann's church in Piacenza, next to the hospital of «Our Lady of Bethlehem». The fresco originally represented the Virgin Mary with St. Joseph, but the image of St. Roch was added afterwards.

Some historians have therefore theorized that, in reality, it shows his true likeness, painted by Gottardo (who was also put into the fresco by an anonymous painter, a long time after). Various experts have, however, rejected this premise since the fresco is much too recent to be considered authentic.

Gottardo is, moreover, also considered the author of the presumed first *hagiography* of St. Roch, the (lost) work from which following writers would have drawn information. But this is also difficult to demonstrate, so it remains in the realm of speculation, considering that, after his separation from Roch, there is no more information about Gottardo. Some texts only say that *he died, consumed by his virtuous efforts, in a solitary place and in a distant country*.

[12] **THE SAINT'S FINAL YEARS.** After leaving Piacenza, information about St. Roch, as usual, once more becomes uncertain, and early written sources clearly show, at this point, to be based on indirect sources, legendary traditions and confused reports. In any case, the concluding details are almost identical, apart from his place of death, which, as we will see, has been erroneously conveyed.

St. Roch, during his journey, was caught up in the unstable political situation of the time, that is, in a dangerous state of war; he was looked at with suspicion for his pitiful conditions, he was taken for a spy, was arrested and brought in front of the governor of the locality.

Interrogated, he refused to reveal his name, so as not to break the solemn vow made to God: to abdicate every noble privilege and to present himself – only and exclusively – as a stranger and as a «*humble pilgrim and servant of Jesus Christ*». This attitude, in that climate of tension, obviously emphasized the suspicions of the authorities, which decided to throw him into a gloomy jail.

St. Roch spent the next five years there. He lived this period as a sort of «purgatory» for penitence of his sins. With death approaching, a number of miracles occurred (this is very typical of every *hagiography* about saints). It is actually more probable that he asked God to answer a prayer, that is, to heal the ill who invoked his name in the memory of Christ. Death arrived, according to tradition, the 16th of August, the day after the festivity of the Assumption – always according to the *new chronology* – in one of the years from 1376 to 1379.

The final revelation is one of the better known episodes cited in *hagiographies* of the Saint. Observing the scarlet cross on his chest, there since his birth, the mother of the governor immediately understood who he was: «*he was the son of John of Montpellier*». In conclusion, the governor himself was, in actuality, (!) St. Roch's uncle, either on his mother's side or his father's – depending on which work you read.

In this case, as in many others, we have to note that this scene of recognition is another «commonplace», typical, not only of hagiographic *Lives of saints*, but also of the Bible and even of ancient mythology. In any case it was Jean de Pins who modified the tradition of the governor being not his paternal uncle, but his maternal uncle, and who first spoke about the Italian origins of his mother. These declarations are not

demonstrable, but they have become an artificial expediency to defend the thesis of the arrest and the death of the Saint in Lombardy. But as we will see, conjectures such as these can be based on other documentation.

[13] **HIS DEATH IN VOGHERA.** For many centuries, Montpellier was indicated as St. Roch's place of death, while some historians (particularly Augustin Fliche) identified the «*Angleria*» cited in the *Acta breviora* with the town of Angera, near Lago Maggiore in northern Italy. A further hypothesis about supposed «*German territories*» was rejected immediately as absolutely far-fetched.

We must also refuse the thesis of Montpellier, for a long series of motives, starting from the fact that the first indication of a cult venerating the Saint dates to 1505, and precisely, a procession dedicated to St. Roch and to St. Sebastian. Other presumed evidence, that could be dated to 1415-1420, is rather controversial, and in any case, even accepting it as real, it is dated much later than one of the documents found in Voghera, of which we will talk about later. Furthermore, at the time, the Law university of Montpellier still invoked its usual protectors, Saint Fabian and Saint Sebastian, against the plague. Could something of the sort happen in the city that should have had in its possession the tomb, a church and the body of the saint most invoked by all of Christianity for divine protection against the scourge of the plague?

With regards to Angera, we are really on the wrong track, because there is no proof whatsoever about possible wanderings of the Saint in neighbouring areas (and absolutely nothing about relics). There could be, instead, a probable misunderstanding between the names *Angleria-Agera/Angera* and *Viqueria/Voghera*. This is explained very well by the meticulous and convincing elucidations made by Antonio Niero, one of the greatest scholars of St. Roch. "*The shift (..) from Ugera, a popular variant of Agera or, in German, Ughera, to Voghera, [is] not improbable, because of the names Ughera-Vughera, [...] considering the replacement of «U» with «V» which was very common in Latin phonetics*".

Early sources consider the fact that St. Roch arrived in a territory «*where discord reigned*». Certainly, without any difficulty, this description suits the area from Piacenza to Voghera extremely well, since the Duchy of Milan – whose frontiers were always agitated owing to wars, annexations or territorial losses – had a hot spot in that very location. From 1371 to 1375, particularly, Bernabò Visconti conducted a full-scale war against the league represented by Pope Urban 5th and coordinated by Amadeus 7th of Savoy to defend papal possessions from the voracious Milanese.

In Visconti's territories, and especially in border zones or in places of heavy traffic, pilgrims devoted to the pontiff were certainly not well seen, and even less so if they appeared reticent, as St. Roch must have; the fear of spies was very strong, and the smallest suspicion was enough to open jail doors. So, we cannot exclude that St. Roch had succeeded in travelling as far as Lago Maggiore, or even France, but it is more probable that he had been arrested long before.

After all, in that period Galeazzo 2nd, Bernabò's brother, had reinforced the fortifications of *Broni*, *Casteggio* and, especially, *Voghera*, a strategic point of great importance. Parma had entered the dominion of Milan, and Piacenza was the epicentre of the dispute; some high prelates from *Emilia-Romagna* had been incarcerated, so the clash with the Vatican had reached levels of maximum tension. We can reasonably suppose that St. Roch was arrested around Broni – as Pitangue sustains – to then be brought in

front of Visconti's military superintendent, *Castellino Beccaria*. Perhaps one of his collaborators was the Saint's jailer, the man who later discovered, according to hagiographic writers, to be his uncle.

But the substantial factors that give further credibility to the hypothesis of St. Roch dying in Voghera, are basically two: the presence of his body and his relics, documented in 1469 and stolen in 1483, and the most important document, kept in the Historical Archives, and inserted in a register of «*Statuta civilia et criminalia*» (civil and criminal laws) and dated 1391. We will speak about this evidence in the next chapter.

Second Chapter

RELICS AND LITURGICAL TESTIMONIES THE DECISIVE ROLE OF VOGHERA

[1] **THE IMPORTANCE OF RELICS AND LITURGICAL TESTIMONIES IN SUPPORT OF THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE SAINT.** The problem of the relics of St. Roch is still more complex than the question of his *hagiographies*. As you will have noticed, historians' studies, until today, have mainly considered the hagiographic texts that are connected to two great traditions: the *Vita Sancti Rochi* by Francesco Diedo and the *Acta breviora*. The former places the life of the Saint from 1295 to 1327, while the latter does not mention dates.

Many authors have utilized these works to try to discern, inside the stories, what «*facts and deeds*» of the Saint they could use in their own chronologies; this is always a very hazardous method, as hagiographic reports had often been compiled a long time after the events and they had therefore inevitably taken on a style all their own. As we have already said, hagiographic works were written to edify believers, rather than to develop reliable historical reconstructions. Writers in the Middle Ages did not care so much to record a historical work as to illustrate how the individual conformed to an exemplary model of sanctity.

In this sense, it is often difficult to confidently distinguish a reliable *fact* from a «common place» drawn from lives of other saints or from Holy Scriptures. Concentrating all of their attention on works of this kind, many historians have excessively neglected other types of very interesting, and often more reliable, sources. This is the case of archaeological finds (mainly relics) and of liturgical testimonies, which have the advantage of helping us to understand *where* and *when* a cult originated, independently from what hagiographic writers stated.

The *Bollandistes*, from a famous seminary of Belgian Jesuits and the authors of *Lives* of all the saints, have been using accurate scientific criteria for centuries to establish, with the utmost possible certainty, *where* and *when* a saint died, rather than to utilize *hagiographic* works, it is much more important to try to identify the location where – before anyplace else – a liturgical tradition and a well-rooted and continuous veneration of relics were celebrated.

In the same way, the calendar day dedicated to the celebration of the saint is a much more valuable indication than the presumed year of death (often made up by the hagiographic writer), because it constitutes the symbol, the 'signature', so to say, of the saint, which allows us to distinguish him from all the others. And so, we will see that it is by using truly these «*hagiographic coordinates*» in liturgical time and space – as the *Bollandistes* technically call them – that the evidence in Voghera takes on noteworthy meaning and significance.

It is, therefore, for lack of interest and methodological competence, or because of the complexity of the effort, that the majority of writers have limited themselves to consider only two institutions concerning the existence of relics, one in Arles and the other in Venice, while the true facts are much more complex and often obscure.

But before setting out on this difficult route, it is absolutely essential to underscore that some of the earliest hagiographies – *Vita sancti Rochi* by Francesco Diedo (1479) and

the *Acta breviora* (1483) – never mention the presence or the relocation of any relics. This fact seems to show, at the very least, the difficulty early writers had in accurately identifying in which location the earliest tradition of a cult had originated.

Regarding this subject, only Diedo tried to describe the expansion of the cult, having it derive from the Council of Constance (1414). We will see that this attestation is not only denied by the facts, but also by several items that we identify with the propagation of the cult today. One fact is, however, certain: when, in 1479, Francesco Diedo, took shelter in *Salò* from the epidemic that was raging in Brescia, and wrote his *Vita sancti Rochi*, he did not know that in Voghera the relics of the Saint had been venerated at least since 1469, nor that his name had been renowned since the end of the fourteenth century.

[2] **THE ARLES VERSION.** This version, found in the «*Franciscan Martyrology*» (1638) by *Arturo del Monastero* (Arthur of the Monastery), affirms that *Jean le Meingre de Boucicault*, Marshal of France, transported the relics from Montpellier to Arles in 1372. However this attestation is absolutely unsustainable; as already noted by other historical studies, Jean le Meingre – who was born in 1365 and died in 1421 – was only seven years old at the time...

Despite the efforts of various generations of French historians (and not only), all further attempts to reconcile this chronology at all costs with the genealogy of the Boucicault family, lead to a few absurdities. At most, we can affirm with certainty that, in the beginning of the sixteenth century, there were a number of relics in Arles, taking into consideration that the same Arthur of the Monastery mentions a donation of some relics made on 2nd June 1501 by the Trinitarians of Arles on behalf of various monasteries of the same order present in the Kingdom of Grenada (Spain).

This act followed a «*Brief*» by Pope Alexander 6th on 4th February of the same year that encouraged the donation of this pious gift in the name of the reconstruction of the Catholic faith in that region, which had recently been liberated from Muslim rule.

It is interesting to note that this act maintains that the Marshal of Boucicault was the donor, but in a version that many historians have avoided proposing: in fact, speaking of the origins of the various relics, including St. Roch's, Montpellier is never quoted, but Jerusalem is – and Pierre Bolle has shown that the date of the presumed transfer (1372) was false! In conclusion, we can affirm that this fanciful credence was generated by a counterfeit document.

[3] **THE VENETIAN VERSIONS.** But there are also some relics in Venice, confirmed for certain long before Arles, because in 1485 the patriarch *Maffeo Girardi* informed the Heads of the «*Consiglio dei Dieci*» (Council of Ten) that the «*Scuola Grande di San Rocco*» (the Confraternity of St. Roch) had acquired the famous relics from a place that he called «*Ugeria*», that is Voghera. This source cannot be denied, since a copy of the letter of 13th May 1485 is in the registers of the «*Consiglio dei Dieci*», as is the relative and consequent decree.

These facts are therefore ascertained, but this basic attestation has to explain where the precious remains came from and how they were acquired. There are, in any case, many different versions on this subject.

- For *Marcantonio Sabellico*, a contemporary of the facts, and author of «*De situ urbis Venetae*» (1490), the relics came from «*Gallia*», that is, from France – as Diedo said.

- In the 1485 edition of the «*Supplementum chronicarum*», Giacomo-Filippo da Bergamo (also called Foresti) did not indicate their place of origin, but he spoke about their transfer to the church of *San Giobbe* (St. Job) in Venice, at the extreme point of *Cannaregio*, an odd location that disappeared in all the following editions. Instead, in the 1516 revised edition, for the first time, the origin of the relics was attributed to the «*diocese of Tortona*» (which also includes Voghera).
- During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a number of Venetian chroniclers began to support the theory that the relics had been acquired through a sale with some merchants, defined «*German*» by some writers. It is the case of the same Giacomo-Filippo, but in another, Venetian, and posthumous, edition of his «*Supplementum*» (1535), and in some works that we today would call tourist guides, such as «*Venetia città nobilissima et singolare*» by Francesco Sansovino (1581), «*Mercurius Italicus*» by Ioannis Henrici (1628), «*Il ritratto di Venezia*» by Domenico Martinelli (1684).
- In 1674, in a work by Francesco Ciapetti, the now classical tale about *Frate Mauro* (Friar Mauro) appears for the first time under the form of a printed book (and therefore destined to widespread readership). He was a monk belonging to the *Camaldoli* Order, in the monastery of *San Michele da Murano*, who, while in jail, had made a vow to go to Voghera to look for the Saint's relics. He then brought the body of St. Roch back to Venice in March 1485, after a first unsuccessful attempt because of the vigilance of the guards. Others supporters of this thesis were Giorgio Fossati (1751) and Flaminio Corner (1761).

This version is based on a process of authentication of the relics presided over by the Venetian Patriarch in 1485 and recorded in a long act on parchment that is still kept in the Archives of the «*Scuola Grande di San Rocco*» in Venice. This document presents various complex questions of internal 'conflicts', but some parts are decisive for our historical studies.

[4] **COMPARISON WITH THE SOURCES FROM VOGHERA.** It is necessary to specify that the main problem is the comparison of these versions with the official sources from Voghera. In effect, the May 1483 registers of the General Town Council (the so-called «*Liber provisionum*») confirm the fear of a theft of relics from the ancient church of St. Henry – the current St. Roch –, the strengthening of surveillance, the theft itself and, lastly, the arrest of the suspected author, a *frate Giovanni Teutonico* (Friar John Teutonic or John, the 'German Friar').

This rather obscure story ends a few days later with the statement that the relics were *in their place*, as if everything had been silently restored to cover a scandal, to avoid alarming the population, or harming the reputation of the hospital of St. Henry (which was in the rooms of the present oratory of St. Roch). And in 1485, what can we find in the famous registers? Absolutely nothing...

There are some more recent versions (but few are credible) showing a theft of relics by twelve monks in Montpellier, or else, a deal – camouflaged as a theft – involving someone called *Alvise Dal Verme*, having to do with the Voghera nobility, *Friar Mauro* and the Confraternity of Venice. This second hypothesis, integrated with the above-mentioned documents, is probably the most reasonable. In any case, as you can see, it is very difficult to sort out the myriad entanglements of this story...

Nonetheless, it certainly seems risky to contest the fact that Voghera had a fundamental role in the story of St. Roch's relics. In fact, as the registers of the General

Council show, it is sure that in the town some relics were already venerated in the year 1483. And, furthermore, it is difficult to question a resolution made by the same General Council attesting to the presence of the Saint's relics in the church of St. Henry (28th February 1469); the Council register is missing, but we possess a copy of the original text transcribed in 1788.

And after all, the most important element is really this: beyond the divergences among various versions, their location, their fantasies, their unlikelihood, the role of Venice or that of Arles, the hypothesis of a sale rather than a theft... what is certain is that Voghera can feel honoured to be in the possession of two direct and official sources. We are speaking about real, bona fide *official records* that have not undergone alterations or narrative re-elaborations and that, moreover, coincide with each other.

One document is dated 1469, the other 1483, and both attest to the existence, beyond the presence of the relics, of a cult dedicated to St. Roch. They are, today, among the oldest known testimonies in Italy and in Europe, the first ones speaking of relics.

If we think, besides, that Voghera lies in the centre of a region where devotion to St. Roch is extremely entrenched (as Antonio Niero's works – of which we will speak about in the following pages – clearly explain), we can indeed doubt about the French origin of the cult that supposedly started in *Languedoc*. After all, a liturgical source seems to further confirm these data; that is, the citing of a festivity for St. Roch contained in the chapter of holidays to commemorate, inside Voghera's «*Statuta civilia et criminalia*» (the Statute of civil and criminal law), officially approved by Gian Galeazzo Visconti in 1391. Town Archives still keep two hand-written copies: one incontestably of that period and the other that contains some parts compiled after 1480.

It is evident that a document of this kind, dated 1391, represents a really extraordinary testimony, being precedent to the other two (already of exceptional value) by almost eighty years!

[5] **VOGHERA AS THE CENTRE OF THE CULT OF ST. ROCH.** In conclusion, the only problem about this document is its early date, to the point that we may wonder if the *Roch* of this document is really the same saint. We, in fact, know about a saint with a similar name, *Roch*, *Racho* or *Rochon* (in Latin *Ragnobertus*), bishop and martyr of Autun; and it is common knowledge the particular charm that French saints have always had in this region – for example, as in the case of *St. Bovo*, the patron saint of Voghera.

Two clues allow us to believe that the reference in the 1391 Voghera calendar relates to our Roch of Montpellier, the saint of the 16th of August. Firstly, all the names of saints are quoted in the Latin genitive and our Saint's is really «*sancti Rochi*» and not «*sancti Rochonis*», as the bishop of Autun's would be. Secondly, the 'position' of the festivity within the list seems to fall in mid-summer. As we know, Roch is traditionally celebrated the 16th of August, while the festivity of *Rochon* of Autun is in January.

On the other hand, our most recent research has also evidenced a frankly disconcerting number of liturgical coincidences (and confusion) between the two cults; this is however a very technical topic, which we cannot debate in an essay such as this one. In any case, at present it seems certain that the cult was born among Voghera and Piacenza, it exploded in Venice and it reached France in a following periode.

Anyway, to begin, if we want to be absolutely sure that the saint of Voghera is our pilgrim, the healer of those ill with the plague, we need to find a connection, a

reference between the 1391 calendar of festivities and the presence of his relics, in 1469, in the church of the hospital St. Henry.

That is exactly what we recently tried to do, systematically reading through the *official records* of all the General Town Councils, from 1378 to 1500. But despite a meticulous job, it was not possible to find any particular reference that allows us to incontestably affirm that there was, in this region, a continuous presence of a cult of St. Roch.

However, in the parish of St. Roch there is another, more recent, but very interesting document. It is the *official document* about a controversy, in 1584, between the Chapter of St. Lawrence and the Dominicans of Saint Mary of Mercy, to decide who exactly was the owner of the Chapel of St. Roch and its relative statute (for celebrating sacred functions), and if it was possible to bury the dead there.

The declarations of various witnesses, who were often advanced in age, are very interesting. Everybody affirmed to have always heard that the church held the relics of the Saint, but nobody said that they had been stolen, although one century elapsed from the presumed theft by the Venetians... and despite the fact that the youngest witness was not less than 81 years old. This would confirm that the 1483 deal had cleverly been covered up.

As we can see, the story of relics and the beginnings of the cult are still far from being cleared up, and therefore it definitely seems that only the discovery followed by the critical analysis of new documents can allow us, one day, to propose an adequate explanation. Certainly, the topographical distribution of different sources and the splitting up of centres of documentation obviously do not facilitate things. In fact, research needs to be coordinated among various and distant places: in Voghera – the Town Archives, the Parish of St. Roch and the Church of St. Lawrence; in Tortona – the Episcopalian Curia; in Venice – the State Archives, the archives of the «*Scuola Grande di San Rocco*» (that is the Confraternity), of the Patriarchy and even of the churches and of the small parishes having to do with the history of the Confraternity, such as St. Mary of the Friars, *San Pantaleone* or *San Tomà*.

In any case, once again, this early series of geographical and chronological clues shows us that the origin of the cult of St. Roch could reasonably have begun in Voghera. And this impression is considerably strengthened by the careful examination of other potential localities, particularly those where the various *hagiographies* would inevitably lead us, as, for example, Montpellier. So, it is impossible not to be amazed, making the due comparisons, by the extremely flimsy written and archaeological testimonies of that period in Montpellier, as well as by the fact that the local cult is incontestably more recent and geographically less common and widespread.

Another phenomenon encourages us to continue in our research. The issue is the decidedly particular role that Voghera had as a stopover along the roads pilgrims took. It is, in fact, at the crossroads of two routes pilgrims used very frequently in the Middle Ages: on one side, the road that goes south from Milan to Rome, passing through Genoa and Liguria and then into Tuscany; on the other side, the road that begins in the Piedmont region from Turin and Alessandria, passing through Voghera and Piacenza and then continuing to Rimini, where the pilgrims embarked for Palestine (unless they made a detour for Venice, to visit its extravagant sanctuaries). Voghera was, therefore, one of the points of intersection of the «*Palmeri*» – the pilgrims going to Jerusalem – and the «*Romei*», without counting those Italians going to Santiago of Compostela, who took these already traditional routes.

In Voghera, in the fourteenth century, there were at least ten hospices for pilgrims. The oldest were St. Peter's, near the bridge over the *Staffora* River (operational at least since 714) and St. Henry's, named in honour of the German emperor, Saint Henry 2nd, who had founded it himself during his journey to Italy, therefore between 1004 and 1014. In 1497 the Dominicans annexed this hospice and the adjacent church, and in 1525 restoration work was planned, giving rise to the existing church of St. Roch.

The St. Henry hospice for pilgrims was situated on the flank of this important road, the old «*Via Emilia*», which coincides in a large part with the so-called «*Via Francigena*». It was situated on the road to Tortona, near the southwest entrance of the town, called *Porta Rossella*. Towards the east, the subsequent stopovers were Broni and Piacenza, approximately a day on foot from one town to the next. Besides the numerous hotels and hospices, the vocation of these pilgrimage centres was expressed through the fervent veneration of a pilgrim who had died along the route. In this particular case the pilgrim venerated was *San Contardo*, in Broni, but also in Piacenza.

In short, we cannot exclude that the promise of new, rigorous and careful studies will show that this was the case of Voghera with St. Roch. If continuity and location of the cult from 1391 to 1469 were to be proved, we could consider a local devotion having its origin in the burial of a pilgrim, the cult of whom hagiographic writers of the 15th century would have personalized by stylising it considerably, according to the characteristics of this category of writing.

In this way, underneath the varnish of the legend, could we perhaps hope to find the true origins of the cult and – who can say? – to attain with greater certainty the true aspects of a Saint who holds the particularity of being one of the most popular in the world... but at the same time, one of the saints most shrouded in mystery.

Third Chapter

CULT AND POPULAR DEVOTION

[1] **CANONIZATION.** The spreading of the cult of St. Roch was almost immediate and has assumed vast dimensions through the centuries. Still, as for his canonization, we have to move in the shades of uncertainty, to the point that we do not even know with precision the official date of elevation of St. Roch to the glory of sainthood.

In the early *hagiographies*, only Diedo affirms that the initiative was taken in 1414 by the Council of Constance, who claimed he had been saved from the plague by the intervention of St. Roch; subsequently some writers have supported the hypothesis of a confusion with the Council of Ferrara (1437-1439), but acts and documents of the time do not say anything on the subject.

Therefore, It is no surprise that some historians had reservations about the historical truth of his canonization, but the vast diffusion of his cult leads us to believe that Roch became a saint by *«popular fervour»*, according to a practice that was certainly not unusual in the medieval period. In a few cases, some writers have specified the names of a small number of pontiffs, as well as some of the so-called *antipopes*, that is, those not recognized by the Church, who seem to have officially ratified his cult. Among the former, Martin 5th (d. 1431) is mentioned, and among the latter group, Clement 7th (d. 1394), Benedict 13th (overthrown in 1409) and John 23rd (d. 1419). But these hypotheses are frankly devoid of any basis.

It is, instead, certain that the situation became clearer towards the sixteenth century. In 1499 Alexander 6th gave his authorization to a Roman confraternity dedicated to St. Roch, while in 1547 Paul 3rd had him included in the *«Franciscan Martyrology»*. But *"the popular devotion already accepted all over the world"* was so vast that, in 1590, Sixtus 5th asked the Venetian ambassador in Rome to bring him *"particular authentic information about his life and miracles"* in order to officially canonize him, being it unthinkable *"to remove St. Roch from the illustrious number of other saints"*, because of the *"scandal that would arise from such news!"*.

The *«Roman Missal»*, after all, already included among its rituals a specific mass for our Saint, while Gregory 14th (d. 1591) had his name added to the *«Roman Martyrology»*. Finally, in a text dated 16th July 1629, Urban 8th invoked, for himself and for all Romans, the protection of St. Roch against epidemics, to then exalt the great virtues of the *healer saint* in a *«Brief»* the following 26th October. In conclusion, as Odo de Cissewrote in the sixteenth century, *"the compassion and affection Christians have for him are so strong that, without further inquiries into his sanctity, the Church and its leader have tacitly recognized his devotion"*.

[2] **DIFFUSION OF THE SAINT'S CULT.** The rapid and vast affirmation of the cult of St. Roch is borne out by the innumerable artistic, cultural, charitable and devotional displays. It is without doubt that he is the most popular saint all over the world throughout the history of the Church. Originating in Italy and making its way into Germany, and then the Netherlands and lastly in France, the cult spread outside of Europe too; among the innumerable examples, we could mention Punta San Roque (California) and Boston in the United States, Buenos Aires in Argentina, Cabo Sao Roque in Brazil, Dekwané in Lebanon, but also in Haiti, Madagascar, Indochina...

In Italy, according to data still to complete, there are over sixty communities or hamlets dedicated to him, while churches, chapels and oratories raised in his honour number around three thousand; the parishes dedicated to St. Roch (alone or with other saints) are at least two hundred and sixty.

The oldest evidence seems to date back to the fifteenth century. However, even if Lodi and Limone are often remembered for their churches, Brussels and Avignon for their pictorial or sculptural representations, and Maguelonne for its liturgical calendar, the relative dating (and in some case the attribution to St. Roch) are rather controversial.

Also the news about the presumed altar dedicated to the Saint in Montpellier, inside a Dominican chapel, is unreliable, and besides, the first confraternity was established in the church of «*Notre-Dame des Tables*» only in 1661 (while in Italy there were already some confraternities in the beginning of the fifteenth century); the city had a church dedicated to St. Roch much later, in 1830, by altering the previous designation, dedicated to St. Paul.

In conclusion, except for the case of the chapel in Brescia (1469), we can affirm that the devotion to St. Roch had already taken root in northern Italy in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, particularly in Lombardy and in Venice, but as we have seen, the cult in Voghera was already present in 1391; besides, it would seem that the name of our Saint was associated to that of St. Lucy, in 1394, in a confraternity in Padua (but this confirmation is controversial).

The extraordinary success of his cult is easily explained, considering that he was immediately venerated as the most successful protector against the terrible scourge of the plague. For this reason, sacred places dedicated to him were built just about everywhere; even the French King Louis the fourteenth had a Parisian church rebuilt and dedicated to him in 1653, not too far from the Louvre.

But above and beyond the plague, what undoubtedly influenced the extraordinary diffusion of his cult in Europe, starting from the end of the fifteenth century, was the prominent commercial and religious role (as the point of departure for pilgrimages in Palestine) of Venice, where, around 1480, the prestigious and frequently visited «*Scuola di San Rocco*» was established. Also the oldest editions of *hagiographies* date back to this period: *Das leben des heiligen herrn Sant Rochus* in Vienna in 1482 and in Nuremberg in 1484, the *Acta breviora* in Cologne in 1483 and in Louvain in 1485, the Dutch translation of the *Acta* in Hasselt about 1488 and Jehan Phelipot's French version in Paris, in 1494.

After Venice, the most important devotional centre since the end of the fifteenth century was Nuremberg. To this respect, it is interesting to consider a family of merchants belonging to the German community in Venice, the *Imhoff* – who were involved in the famous «*Fondaco dei tedeschi*» (the German warehouse) and in the Confraternity – that brought the cult of St. Roch to this Bavarian city, giving it an incomparable impetus and making it a genuine family emblem. Some excellent compositions by Heinrich Dormeier confirmed that in ten years' time they raised an altar to him in the church of St. Lawrence, established a confraternity, started the custom of the procession... and they even built a cemetery for the victims of the plague, which is unmistakably imposing and distinctive still today.

Initially St. Roch was associated, both in devotional practices and images, to other saints who were mostly venerated for their protection against illnesses, such as St.

Sebastian, St. Blaise, and Saints Cosma and Damian. But in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Roch acquired a dominant role, not only as protector from the plague, but also from every type of epidemic illness, from the most serious to the least dangerous ones, from those of men to those of animals. By extension, therefore, he well soon became the protector in general of animals, of fields and of country life, which resulted in extremely widespread devotion.

We also need to bear in mind that St. Roch was traditionally considered a member of the Franciscan «Third Order», with papal confirmation in 1547; obviously the friars of St. Francis did much to encourage his cult, and, moreover, in 1694 Pope Innocent 12th gave them the specific task to solemnly celebrate the festivity of the Saint. And, last but not least – a curiosity – quarrymen, stone layers and extractors considered him their patron because of an obvious (and superficial) play on words.

[3] **ART AND POPULAR TRADITIONS.** Representations of St. Roch are also obviously very plentiful, but in their variety they present some common elements. St. Roch is almost always portrayed as an older man, generally with a beard and wearing the typical outfit of pilgrims. Sometimes his scarlet cross is shown engraved on his chest, but more often the wound of the plague can be seen, usually in the middle of his thigh and customarily on his left leg; this detail, at the beginning very realistic (and also rather brutal), became less evident as time went on, to be covered by a bandage.

Gottardo's dog started to appear between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, usually lying down at the feet of the Saint and with a roll of bread in its mouth; in the same way, it is easy to find many representations of St. Roch in the company of an angel.

Renowned artists such as *Ghirlandaio*, *Correggio*, *Tiziano*, *Rubens*, *Van Dyck*, *Strozzi*, *Reni*, *Veronese* and *Botticelli* all produced works of art with our Saint as the subject. *Tiepolo* is the author of one of the most suggestive paintings, St. Roch in front of the Divine Light, which is possible to find in manifold reproductions.

But the most outstanding work is without doubt *Tintoretto's*: a series of paintings that admirably describe the most significant episodes of the Saint's life, kept in the homonym Venetian church (and many other works of art are found in the splendid «*Scuola Grande di San Rocco*»). Lastly, we must mention the magnificent glass decorations in the church of *Saint-Etienne d'Elbeuf*, one of the finest examples of representations that are not either paintings or sculptures.

It is really impossible to linger over folkloristic traditions because the diffusion of popular devotion, as we have recalled various times, has always been (and is) extremely varied and fanciful. The cult is divulged in innumerable ways even today: from the solemnity the celebration of the Saint's name day, up to the particular devotion reserved for his relics.

In some countries there are prizes given to dogs that – just like St. Roch's dog – have distinguished themselves for their loyalty to their master; in other localities bread or water are blessed in the memory of the miraculous divine intervention in Sarmato, or in reference to the fountain in Montpellier; and, there are countless handcrafted items of sacred images reserved for processions, vows, particular benedictions, or for local traditions.

A final curiosity: the name *Rocco* is used rather frequent in Italy. It is not comparable to names such as Joseph, John, Anthony or Mary, but it is especially widespread in the

south, particularly in *Puglia*, in some zones of *Campania* and in the city of *Potenza*; according to some studies, Rocco is the fifth most frequent name in the whole south. In *Veneto*, its verbal root appears in many surnames (for example, *Roccato*).

[4] **THE ROLE OF VOGHERA.** As we have already said, the first attestation of a local cult might date as far back as 1391, that is, only one decade after St. Roch's death (obviously with reference to the *new chronology*, which outlines his life in the period 1345/50 - 1376/79). After all, the presence in Voghera, for over one century, of his relics, easily allows us to suppose that a much-felt popular devotion developed in this town and in the surrounding areas.

A strong indication is the geographical distribution of parishes dedicated to St. Roch, which are present in all Italian regions except *Val d'Aosta*, *Molise* and *Sardinia* (mind you, we are speaking about parishes, not about churches in general). Well, in northern Italy there are 152 parishes, 60 in the central zone and 48 in the south. For our purpose, it is important to point out the statistics concerning the number of parishes present in the surrounding regions; precisely, 27 in *Liguria*, 40 in *Piemonte*, 41 in *Lombardy*, 30 in *Veneto* and 25 in *Emilia-Romagna*.

The importance of these numbers, as Monsignor Antonio Niero says, is the fact that, if "*from a geographical point of view, the concentration of parishes dedicated to St. Roch in the Padana valley is surprising*", it is necessary to remember that "*a not insignificant influence was practiced by the devotional centres of St. Roch in Voghera and Venice. Voghera lies near the southwestern border of Lombardy with Piedmont, on the road to Alessandria and Genoa, at the base of an imaginary triangle with Piacenza, with its vertex in Bobbio. Voghera is a devotional geographical crossroads of primary importance. If we consider that the parishes of St. Roch in Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy – the three regions that border Voghera – total 108, that is, over half of the parishes dedicated to St. Roch in the Padana valley, we cannot exclude that such intensity depends on the tradition of the cult of the saint in Voghera*".

The influence of commercial arteries has certainly been crucial; in fact, many highly populated towns are along these roads: the «*Via Emilia*», from Milan to Piacenza and down to Rimini; the coastal zone of Liguria (Genoa, Chiavari, La Spezia), with southeast routes towards Tuscany (Lucca) and to the northeast towards the diocese of Tortona (six parishes); the roads towards the northern countries, from Novara to Bergamo, from Brescia to Trento, from Udine to Gorizia; the coast of Campania, with Naples and Aversa, and the coast of Abruzzo, with Chieti and Vasto; eastern Sicily, along the zone of the Messina Straits.

Voghera played a fundamental role in the diffusion of the cult of the most popular saint in the whole history of Christianity; and the fulcrum of local devotion is obviously in the parish church of St. Roch. It was originally built in honour of Saint Henry 2nd, probably after his canonization (1146); this German emperor had, in fact, stayed in Italy from 1004 to 1014, and in Voghera he had a hospital built, called *of the Saviour*.

Benedictine monks from the monastery of St. Saviour in Pavia most probably managed it; the church was given over to the Dominicans in 1497, after, therefore, the so-called 'theft' of his relics (in 1483, according to official sources in Voghera, or in 1485, according to the fanciful version of Friar Mauro).

After the plague of 1524, the heads of the church decided to rebuild it and to dedicate it to St. Roch; work on it started in 1525, continuing on and off for many years and was

completed only thanks to the intervention of the «*Confraternita del Santissimo Nome di Gesù*» (Confraternity of the Holy Name of Jesus), often referred to as the Confraternity of St. Roch.

The church's consecration occurred around 1577, but further work went on for many years. The new church preserved two small fragments of the Saint's arm: they seemed to have been overlooked during the 'theft', since, following a shrewd common custom, they would have been kept, as a precaution, in a separate place. According to local tradition, whose origin cannot be documented with certainty, the discovery of these relics would date back to 1497.

In any case, we can say that the parish still keeps, besides the silver reliquary that holds the above-mentioned fragments, a small coffin containing a card bearing the words «*Hic jacuit corpus Sancti Rochi*» (the body of St. Roch lay here) and a sheet of paper with this attestation: «*This is the small coffin found in the walls of the Church of St. Roch, made of walnut and lined with fustian cloth and shut with two strong locks, inside of which there was the body of St. Roch, recorded in 1497*». As we have said, unfortunately we have no trace either of these *records* or of other documents of the same kind.

Returning to the historical events of the church of St. Roch, on 22nd March 1814, Pope Pious 7th stopped for one hour during his triumphal return in Italy following the Napoleonic persecution; in the middle of the 19th century, this church – in a period of anticlerical fury – was scornfully utilized as barracks for soldiers, and, in 1924, it was officially declared a national monument. Before taking on its current appearance, it was seriously damaged during the Second World War by the dramatic aerial bombardment on 23rd August 1944. The earliest reports found regarding the Confraternity of St. Roch in Voghera, as we have already said, was in occasion of the rebuilding of the church, but from the relative documents we can deduce that it was active before 1577. It terminated its activities after four centuries, in 1912.

Finally, we want to bear in mind that, as indicated by an ancient tradition dating back to the late Middle Ages according to some local historians, St. Roch should be considered the co-patron of Voghera, together with *St. Bovo*. We have no proof to confirm this attribution, but we cannot exclude that, among the papers in the Historical Archives, we may find the documents to solve at least this dilemma. We hope that in the near future we can carry on more accurate research, in the hope to reveal at least one of the Voghera mysteries of St. Roch. Recent discoveries, however, indeed seem to confirm this thesis as well-founded: in 2005 Fabrizio Bernini published a document – a sentence of Francesco Dal Verme (1553), count of Voghera – that invoked, as saints patrons, *Lorenzo* (Lawrence), *Rocco* and *Bovo*.

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