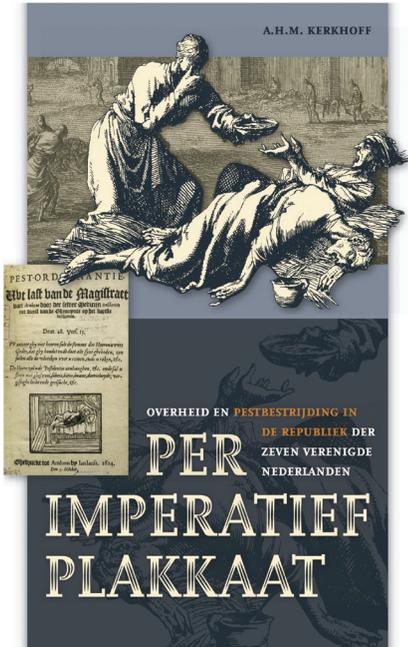


Review

Toon H.M. Kerkhoff, *Per imperatief plakkaat. Overheid en pestbestrijding in de Republiek der Zeven Verenigde Nederlanden*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2020, 298 pp. ISBN 9789087048105.



Rarely has a historical study come out so timely as this study of the Dutch Republic's response to plague epidemics. Published early in 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has made this book tremendously topical. Indeed, it invites comparison with the manner in which governments are struggling to respond to the current pandemic. Although this was of course not directly the intention of its author, Toon Kerkhoff (emeritus professor at the University of Twente, who has published much in the field of Dutch medical history) does reflect in his introduction that the Dutch response to plague in the early modern age may be of interest in the public debate, as measures to prevent or stop epidemics nowadays have proven to be as fraught with tensions as in the Dutch Republic.

Kerkhoff concentrates on measures to prevent and contain plague outbreaks, and builds both on international literature and on previous Dutch studies of plague in the Netherlands. Still indispensable is *De Gave Gods* by Leo Noordegraaf and Gerrit Valk (1988 and 1996), which focuses on the plague in Holland between 1450 and 1668 and is the most comprehensive, book-length treatment of Dutch plague epidemics. Kerkhoff emphatically builds on these earlier studies, often explicitly referring the reader to these. His own focus is mainly on the manner in which Dutch authorities reacted to the threat of plague. Or rather, did not react, for Kerkhoff leaves the reader in no doubt that the Dutch were not exactly forerunners when it came to taking measures to stop the plague. One is somewhat eerily reminded of the comparative slowness of the Dutch government in taking measures to contain the current pandemic, while countries such as Belgium, Germany, and

Denmark were already closing borders and imposing quarantine measures. Much may have changed in the intervening centuries, but the Dutch trading economy is still very vulnerable when flows of traffic and people come to a halt, and Dutch authorities are therefore similarly reticent to curb mobility.

Kerckhoff shows that the seventeenth-century Dutch reluctance to take measures against the plague may not have had to do so much with the medical and theological debates about the dreaded epidemic disease, as with the preoccupation of especially the maritime provinces with keeping open the trade routes on which the Dutch economy depended. Whilst Italian authorities already adopted quarantine and containment measures as early as the fourteenth century, taking the risks to their trading economy in their stride, cities and provinces in the Dutch Republic conspicuously dragged their feet when it came to measures that would interrupt trade. This did not change until an interesting volte-face took place in 1664, because by then neighbouring countries had adopted strict quarantine and containment measures. The Dutch Republic was seen as a likely spreader of plague, and stern measures by other countries forbidding Dutch ships entry forced the States of Holland to finally discuss quarantine measures.

Kerckhoff convincingly shows that these measures were pushed through by Caspar Fagel (1634-1688), then pensionary of Haarlem, who ostensibly ignored the more traditional advice of a hastily assembled committee of physicians. Kerckhoff emphasises how in medical and theological circles the concept of the plague as an all-pervading miasma that was impossible to prevent still dominated. Yet outside the Dutch Republic most governments by now were prone to regard the plague as highly contagious, and thus preventable by quarantining strangers and blocking trade flows. Kerckhoff dedicates an interesting chapter to the manner in which the Dutch Reformed Church viewed the plague and measures against the epidemic, discussing among others the views of some theologians of the Further Reformation, who evidently regarded the plague as a divine intervention in human affairs and therefore opposed measures against it.

Kerckhoff calls this chapter a reconnaissance, and indeed it whets the appetite for a more comprehensive history of the medical and theological debates. Noordegraaf and Valk already remarked that the debate about the contagiousness of the plague continued beyond the seventeenth century, and that the great amount of contemporary works on the plague would be a fruitful area of study. As Paul Slack has shown in his succinct *Plague. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2012), the jury on the disease's contagiousness was still out in the nineteenth century, so perhaps we should not judge seventeenth-century physicians and theologians too harshly. Intriguingly, but only more or less mentioned in passing, when discussing plague measures in the Southern Netherlands, Kerckhoff suggests that already in the sixteenth century Catholic theologians regarded the plague not as divine punishment, but as a natural, contagious, and therefore avoidable disease. Clearly, Kerckhoff's foray shows that a comprehensive study of the large body of early modern Dutch plague literature and the debate about its contagiousness is still very much overdue.

Asides like these are interesting, but Kerckhoff's main research interest is the development of quarantine and containment measures. He discusses at length how eventually preventive plague measures became a matter for the States-General, who issued such measures whenever the plague threatened to enter the Dutch Republic. On the whole, it

appears that such measures tended to be comparable and alike, and Kerkhoffs exhaustive treatment might try the patience of the average reader as his study subsequently becomes a trifle repetitive. However, this is admissible given the scant attention paid to these quarantining measures by previous Dutch plague historians. Moreover, the Dutch measures were highly effective, preventing the plague from ever ravaging the Dutch Republic again. Of course, the Dutch were assisted by the fact that by the early eighteenth century most European countries rigorously quarantined strangers and ships coming from plague-infested areas. And as the plague by this time apparently came mostly from the Ottoman Empire, far from the Dutch Republic, it was less likely to reach the Netherlands.

In this context, it is interesting that Kerkhoff, among others in an appendix, points to recent research – too recent even to have been included in Slack’s account – which suggests the plague was never endemic in Europe, but could only be imported from Asia and never sustain itself independently in Europe beyond a year or two, due to biological constraints. Hence quarantining and containment effectively kept the plague out of Europe. Countries that adopted such measures – such as Denmark, Austria, and the Dutch Republic – were never again troubled by major outbreaks. Indeed, reading both Kerkhoff’s and Slack’s books, it appears that after 1700 the European plague was increasingly (though not exclusively) a problem on the Mediterranean seaboard. These new insights show that despite the ink already spilled on the subject of the plague, this most iconic of epidemic diseases still has not yielded all its secrets.

In such a wide-ranging book, minor blemishes are perhaps unavoidable. Some digressions on general history could perhaps have been cut out. While of use in a history for a wider audience, in a book aimed specifically at specialists these digressions only serve to delay the narrative. The English King Henry VIII is confused with the first king of that name, and the maps with English place names are out of place in a wholly Dutch language book. It is furthermore unclear what the source is of the letter of the Duke of Milan to the city of Piacenza in 1399, concerning plague measures. Kerkhoff calls Piacenza Placentia – its Latin name – and refers to the duke as Johannes Sfortia, but no Giovanni Sforza ever was Duke of Milan, and certainly not in 1399 when Gian Galeazzo Visconti ruled the roost in Lombardy. It makes one wonder where this letter comes from.

But no book is wholly perfect and these minor errors should not deflect from the great value of *Per imperatief plakkaat*. Kerkhoff’s thorough study of the Republic’s plague measures, based on a great deal of archival research on the one hand and on international literature on the other hand, lifts the veil on the plague and the Dutch in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and puts the development of seventeenth-century attitudes to the disease – when it was still a real threat – in a new and intriguing perspective. At the same time, his rich book demonstrates that the last word on the plague in the Netherlands has not been written yet, offering tantalising avenues of further research into early modern Dutch attitudes to epidemic disease. As such, it is an important addition to the study of plague in the Dutch Republic. Perhaps the current pandemic will stimulate further research on an epidemic disease which has dominated European pathology for such a long time and, as Slack points out, is still with us – be it mostly far from European shores.