



## Plague and Superstition in the Canary Islands: Inquisitorial Trials (1523-1532)

*Plaga y superstición en Canarias: juicios inquisitoriales (1523-1532)*

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### Abstract

From 1523 to 1532, the plague ravaged the islands of Tenerife and Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, in a tragic decimation of the population, already afflicted by widespread hunger and misery caused by Spanish and Portuguese colonization. This essay discusses how the Catholic Church reacted to the plague by blaming minorities. The Spanish Inquisition, to defeat the plague and ward off what is perceived as the wrath of God, held two ceremonies of propitiatory *auto da fé*. This article uses Inquisitorial sources to construct a kaleidoscopic view of peoples and inserts new micro-stories into the global context of early modern history.

**Keywords:** plague, Canary Islands, Inquisition, superstitions, trials.

### Resumen

Desde 1523 hasta 1532 en las islas de Tenerife y Las Palmas en Canarias, la plaga azotó en una trágica aniquilación de la población, ya afligida por el hambre y la miseria generalizadas, provocadas por la colonización española y portuguesa. Este artículo analiza cómo reaccionó la Iglesia católica a la peste culpando a las minorías. La Inquisición española, con el fin de vencer la plaga y evitar lo que percibía como la ira de Dios, celebró dos ceremonias de auto de fé propiciatorio. Para ello, se utilizan fuentes inquisitoriales a fin de construir una visión caleidoscópica de los pueblos e insertar nuevas microhistorias en el contexto global de la historia moderna temprana.

**Palabras clave:** plaga, Canarias, Inquisición, supersticiones, juicios

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## Introduction

Although the plague is by its very nature a globalizing phenomenon, the historical knowledge we have of it is limited to Western Europe and the Mediterranean. As every pandemic phenomenon it spreads everywhere within the globe, but so far many areas of the Old World, such as Africa and the islands of the Atlantic near the African coast, have been ignored by studies.

Recent studies on the plague have included sub-Saharan Africa, but other relevant parts of the African continent are still missing (Chouin, 2018). The subsequent pages propose to look at the plague from what could nowadays seem a limited and peripheral space, the archipelagos of the Canaries, facing the Maghreb. The aim is to show that the Atlantic archipelagos in the early modern age offers a privileged view to observe phenomena occurring also on the African continent. The richness of the Canary archives permits us to study dynamics that otherwise would remain undocumented.

Among the islands adjacent to sub-Saharan Africa the Canaries, due to their geographical position, were considered borderlands between the Old and New World. The Spanish conquest changed the socio-cultural assets of the islands transforming them from uncontaminated places to centers of economic exchanges. This radical cultural change has left a trace in the sources and nowadays scholars can reconstruct the various aspects of Canarian society, while before the arrival of the Spaniards no written sources were produced in that area.

In this context, the reading and interpretation of sources become important; sources concerning the plague can be observed in connection to societal change related to the plague. It is always a challenge for the historian to trace news concerning the plague when the sources deal with other topics. Within the Canary Islands, for example, the earliest written sources that are extant are Spanish inquisitorial records.

Restoring the history of the plague and consequently its impact on the Canaries will make it possible to re-read the available sources in light of the traces of social crises linked to the pandemic. This could not be reconstructed in any other way due to the absence of specific sources. The plague that hit the Canary Islands in 1523-1532 was the first major epidemic phenomenon after the Spanish conquest there. The years of the plague in the Canaries coincided with an increase in inquisitorial trials.<sup>1</sup> The trials tell of a divine plague sent as a punishment willed by God. Why had such a catastrophic event hit the islands? What was the cause and, above all, who were the culprits?

The Catholic conquerors who had recently established the Holy Office in the Canary Islands (1505) were compelled to find the culprits who they believed brought God's wrath to the Islands. Their anger was stoked by the non-Catholic population of the island, *convertos*, and *moriscos* (mostly enslaved people), which persisted in not respecting Catholic rules and secretly continued to practice their rites. A sacrifice had to be made to appease the wrath of God; this sacrifice was the *auto de fe*.

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1 For further information about the Inquisition in the Canary Islands see Fajardo Spínola (2005).

The following pages frame the stories of the accused people by the Holy Office and explain how the plague affected the society of the Canary Islands. They will also focus on healing practices and remedies for the plague used by the Spaniards (the *auto de fe* and the construction of Holy places) and by enslaved people (magic practices).

## Plague, Minorities and Inquisition

In recent years, the economic and social role played by ethnic-religious minorities in early modern Europe has been at the center of growing historiographical reinterpretation. Many scholars have researched the roles of Jews and Muslims within a period from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, stressing especially the importance of sacrificing minorities in the phenomena of plague.<sup>2</sup>

When disease strikes humans and they suffer, the identification of a scapegoat seems inevitable. To understand the motives behind the persecution of Jews and Muslims in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it is crucial to consider theories about the persecution of minorities in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the context of pandemic diseases. Carlo Ginzburg, for instance, started with a community of lepers in 1321 and looked for the *fil rouge* linking their history and that of other minorities to that of witches and sorcerers; a relationship that lasted until the early nineteenth century. The *fil rouge* is the conspiracy theory that creeps into society to the point of generating hatred toward social groups that exist in minority.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, Jews and lepers were pushed to the margins of society, with the Lateran council of 1215 requiring them to wear special clothes that allowed them to be recognized. Their marginality turned into segregation. Society needs a scapegoat, and the different, the outcast, is considered to be the cause of all the evils afflicting society, including the plague (Ginzburg, 1998, I: 6).

In September 1347, twelve galleys of Genoese from Constantinople landed in Messina. In the holds of the prisons, there were mice carrying the plague bacillus. From Sicily, the epidemic spread throughout Europe. The Jews were immediately blamed, as had happened thirty years earlier, and a new marginalized group was also blamed: beggars. The plague became the cause and justification for the local authorities to persecute minority social groups (Ginzburg, 1998, I: 8-10).

The pattern of persecutions followed that of 1321, with people belonging to minority groups being tortured until they confessed that they had been bribed by enemies of the territory. However, the identity of the minorities under threat had changed. Instead of lepers or Jews, the supposed criminals were now the poor and the beggars. Additional burnings at the stake followed; the conspiracy theory had spread throughout Europe.

On 6 July 1348, Pope Clement VI issued a bill in Avignon condemning the conspiracy thesis and saying not only that innocent Christians had been sentenced to death without fault, but

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<sup>2</sup> For further information see Williman, 1982; Cohn, 2007: 3-36; Chua, 2004; Dinzlacher, 2010: 1519-1521.

also that the Jews themselves died of the plague. He also pointed out that regions, where there were no Jews, had also suffered. But the population did not change their minds; Jews and beggars were guilty.

In 1375, there was another wave of persecution against witches and sorcerers. This time those accused of witchcraft belonged to another minority: they were widows, single women, and midwives. Ginzburg shows how the persecution of different marginal social groups is linked chronologically, geographically, and thematically (Ginzburg 1998, I: 12). It is chronological because the persecution started in 1321 and continued up until 1437; geographical because the persecution expanded from France to Italy and thematic because those persecuted were always seen as different from the greater society. Between the Middle Age and the Early Modern Age, minorities were blamed for the plague and it was not enough to condemn them. God's wrath, caused by sinners, had to be appeased by sacrifices.

### **The Plague as Wrath of God in the Canary Islands**

Due to their geographical position, in the Early Modern Age, the Canary Islands were considered borderlands between the Old and New World. The liminal role is due to the Spanish conquest, this change rapidly shifted Canarian society from being extremely isolated to being multicultural. Within this society, a first group was formed by the natives of the archipelago subordinated to the conquistadors, forced to abandon their polytheistic religion and convert to Christianity. Another group were the so-called "Moors" brought from the northern African coasts as slaves to expand the scarce workforce. At first, the Christian faith was not imposed on them and then they continued to practice their worship; later they converted but kept some traditions.

Maghrebians were not the only Africans to populate the Canary archipelago during the sixteenth century and later. A number of people were brought from sub-Saharan Africa and enslaved. In recent years, research on the West African diaspora has increased, helping to integrate the history of Africa into Atlantic and New World history, including the Canaries. These studies have highlighted how creolized societies, with Cape Verde perhaps the first, were characterized by the presence of both free and enslaved African men and women. For the Canaries, this process seems to have begun toward the beginning of the sixteenth century, but a precise definition of these chronological outlines still eludes us. The Andalusian Castilians who reached the islands constituted yet another group. Among these were the conversos and the conquistadors, who naturally practiced and promoted the Catholic religion of the monarchs.

The conquistadors, having had many years to monitor and evaluate Canarian society as highly varied, even negative in their eyes, influenced the establishment of the Tribunal in the Canary Islands. This varied society attracted the attention of the *Consejo de la General y Suprema Inquisición*, that, with the help of the conquistadors, decided to locate one of its districts in the Canary archipelago, choosing Las Palmas on Gran Canaria, probably because it was the port of the archipelago that had the greatest contact with the three continents (Africa, Europe, and the New World).

The Tribunal of the Inquisition in the Canary Islands was established in 1505. Indigenous, African people, Jews, and Muslims, was considered minority groups and were to become the targets of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century persecution.

From 1523 to 1532, the Canary Islands were devastated by plague, probably caused by lack of food, stagnation of water, felling of forests, lack of precautions and medical assistance, as well as contact with people from infected places. The Canary Islands were already involved in human trafficking at that time, but in 1522 the *concejo tinerfeño* (government council of Tenerife) prohibited the landing of enslaved people from the Maghreb, Madeira, Andalusia, and Africa (the entire Barbary Coast). This was done in hopes of preventing slaves from bringing the plague—which had already exploded in Africa—but the plague arrived anyway (Collantes de Terán, 1977: 439-440).

The difficult situation was made worse by French, English, Dutch pirates, and the Barbary pirates of the nearby Moroccan coasts. The attacks from the sea weakened the islands.

The lack of basic necessities helped enfeeble the population, predisposing it to get sick, which amplified the effect of the plague. The information about the plague of 1523 suggests that the disease especially affected children. It peaked every spring for almost ten consecutive years, leaving a little breathing space only in the winter, probably because of the particular climatic conditions of the Canary Islands. The panicked population sought refuge on the other islands of the Canaries without the plague, which shrunk the population, already halved by plague outbreak and the long battles of conquest against indigenous people (Anaya Hernández, 1992: 130). In 1523, the ecclesiastical council of Canaries and the Holy Office of Gran Canaria met to deal with the plague outbreak and try to understand the reason for the sudden explosion. After a long reflection, on September 23, 1523, they decreed it was the fault of sinners on the islands: “the Lord seeing our sins decided to send us *landres*<sup>3</sup> and with his whip chastise this city, many people have died and many people will die, because many people have sinned and continue to sin and those who can flee” (Millares Torres, 1874: 83-84).

As in Europe during the Middle Ages, the fault was attributed to minorities, including *conversos*, *moriscos*, and indigenous people. The sinners were the heirs of poisoners of wells, the ancient protagonists of the conspiracy theory their sins had to be atoned for with death. The *familiares* (lay people who worked for the Spanish Inquisition) of the Holy Office soon became convinced that the cause of divine indignation was the Jewish and Muslim rites that conversos and secretly practiced. Thus Inquisitor Martin Ximenez decided to enact the first *auto da fè* in the history of Canary Island, (there were six attempts in Seville between 1483 and 1498). The Inquisitor’s decision was supported by a willingness to demonstrate that the Inquisition, as a court of God on Earth, should make a sacrifice to appease God’s wrath (Millares Torres, 1874:85-86).

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3 *Landres* was the term used by the chroniclers of the Canary Islands to indicate the plague of 1523-1532.

### ***Auto da fé as human propitiatory sacrifice to appease the Wrath of God***

The *auto da fé*, literally translated as an “act of faith”, was the most solemn and spectacular expression of the Spanish Inquisition’s judicial activity. It was a demonstration of the public belonging to the Christian religion, to bring sinners tainted with heresy back to the righteous path of Christianity through a public demonstration of punishment. The *auto da fé* served not only to punish the offender, but also to warn the spectators against carrying out similar crimes.

Usually, the ceremony was held either at the city cathedral, the royal palace, or in a large square, unless the defendant was of high social rank, in which case it might be in a less public space. What made the *auto da fé* so spectacular was the dramatic scenography, which was designed to show the balance between civil and ecclesiastical power.

The *auto da fé* passed through several locations, typically the most important places in the city, before arriving in the main square. The procession opened in front of the Tribunal headquarters with the condemned penitents who, barefoot, wearing a special garment called a *sambenito*, and carrying an extinguished candle in their hands, began their parade through the streets (Messana, 2007). The *sambenito* was usually worn for the first time during the procession of the *auto da fé*, but reconciled penitents wore it for some years after the ceremony. Wearing it was a sign of great infamy, not only for the offender but his entire family (Bethencourt, 1994: 366).

Once inside the main square, after all the readings of sentences and the *abiura*, which could last for several days, the ceremony ended with a torchlight procession of all the offenders toward prison. Those sentenced to being burned at the stake had a large public who followed them from the reading of the sentence to the place of execution, which was entrusted to the secular arm of the state and marked by a large white cross (Prosperi in Lobo Cabrera, 2010: 124-126).

Francisco Bethencourt studied the rite of the *auto da fé* within the territories Spanish Monarchy and the Lusitanian Crown, focusing both on written and visual sources. He has used images to make the hypothesis that from the medieval to the early modern age the consolidation of the rite was a public manifestation of the power of the Court. The sequences of the actions become more complicated and meaningful. The images, however, are only from the 17th century and for the previous centuries there are no images (Bethencourt, 1994: 156-157). For this reason, the documentation of the Canary Islands becomes even more precious.

The *auto da fé* was used several times during the plague in the Canaries. Indeed, it was considered wholly indispensable to counter the Black Death. The reconstruction of the first *auto da fé* (on 24 February 1526) comes from the historian Millares Torres, a prominent 19th Century resident of the Canary Islands. When Torres learned that the bishopric had decided to demolish the building housing the Inquisition, he contacted a carter with a donkey to seize all possible documents (Siemens, 1995: 11). Torres organized the documents and entered them in a Collection of Documents of the history of the Canary Islands which on his death was given to the Museo Canario. He was the first to study the manuscripts and reconstruct the history of the Canary Islands Inquisition.

These documents also made clear that the Island had been affected by the disease, including the plague and he began to investigate, trying to understand how the government had dealt with the plague.

What he learned was that eighteen men and women had been chosen to undergo the *auto da fé* to ward off the plague. Eight were sentenced to death: five *conversos*, one person naturalized in Tenerife, two natives of Las Palmas. All were members of minority groups. Millares compiled a detailed list of the “chosen”, which shows the nature of their crime, their place of origin, and their occupations:

Alvaro Gonzales, *converso*, from Castil Blanco in Portugal, naturalised in Las Palmas, shoemaker. Convicted of heresy for preaching and teaching the law of the Jewish people.

Mencia Baez, his wife, sentenced for heresy and for preaching Jewish laws.

Silvestre Gonzales, their son, for the same reasons, with the aggravating circumstance of being a heresiarch; before being burned alive, he was tortured and whipped publicly. The punishment included the confiscation of the property of all three.

Alonso Yanez, from Villaviciosa, Spain, naturalized in Tenerife as an apostate, as far from the Catholic faith. The penalty included the confiscation of his property, as well as the stake.

Alonzo and Costanza de la Garza of Las Palmas, confiscation of property and condemned to burn at the stake for being heretics.

Diego de Valera, *converso*, convicted of heresy and being a heresiarch, teaching the art of Jewish law, offending Christ, the Catholic faith and the Holy Church.

Pedro Gonzales, based in Las Palmas, *converso*, heretic, and preacher of the law of Moses. (Millares Torres, 1874: 87-88)

These eight people, after being sentenced, had to be released to the secular arm, under the jurisdiction of the civil authority, because the Inquisition, as a court of God, could not be stained with such violent actions. The secular arm was responsible for preparing the bonfires and enforcing the sentence. The accused were usually people who had relapsed, having converted from another faith to Catholicism, and then fallen back into what the church called error.

In addition to those sentenced to death, ten people were reconciled; although they were convicted of heresy, their sins were deemed “minor” meaning that reconciliation was possible. From the transcripts reported by Millares, we can see that they were also mostly minorities, *conversos*, and *moriscos*:

Juan and Diego, *morisco*, enslaved, established in Gran Canaria.

Duarte Gonzales, *converso*, of Gran Canaria.

Francisco, *morisco*, enslaved of Juan de Maluenda.

Francisco, *morisco*, enslaved of Diego Herrera.

Hector Mendez, *converso*, from Portugal.

Herman Rodriguez, native of Seville, *converso*.

Juan, *morisco*, enslaved, from Canaria.

Juan Castellano, of Genoa, for heresy.

Ana Gonzales, *conversa* of La Palma.

Fernando Jayan of La Palma, for blasphemy. (Millares Torres, 1874: 9193)

The proceedings of *auto da fé* continued until the condemned were executed. They were taken from the Plaza de Santa Ana square to the Quemadero de la Cruz or Plaza de la Herca, where the stake awaited.

The formal ceremony gradually prepared victims and spectators for the execution. Crowds, clergy, the government, and victims moved from one square to another. Once the victims were placed at the stake and the fuel was lit, the public waited for the sinners to become ash. The cathedral bells rang after the fair a death knell to remind victims of their fate. The spectators eventually returned to their homes, confident that the plague would cease, absolutely convinced that they had witnessed an atoning sacrifice, worthy of the glory of God, that would invite his clemency. However, the plague did not subside.

In 1527, Inquisitor Ximenez was replaced by Luis de Padilla, who immediately decided to restore the practice of sending the *sumarias* (procedural papers) to the court of Seville, entreating them to vote to subordinate the Canarian court to the Seville court, a reminder that the Canaries were rarely if ever in full control. The independence of the Canarian Court was eventually restored in 1568 by the Inquisitor Ortis de Funes. Meanwhile, de Padilla, convinced that the plague was continuing because of the constant sins committed by heretics, continued the work of rooting them out. According to Padilla, as shown in extracts from the trials, heretics and idolaters were practicing their “diabolical spells”, the consequence of their covenant with the Devil. For Padilla, this meant that the lessons of the previous ceremony had been so insufficient as to be rendered null (Millares Torres, 1874: 94).

The diabolical practices that reignited the wrath of God had to be fought with a second *auto da fé*. On June 4, 1530, the second *auto da fé* was enacted: a sermon relating to the circumstances of the return of the plague was read out, citing the various transgressions of the condemned.

There was one novel aspect of the second *auto da fé*: cardboard statues representing sinners condemned *in absentia*. Widely used in Roman and Canon Law, this practice was taken up by medieval and modern Inquisitors. It burnt at the stake, so to speak, those who had died before their sentencing or fled from the Tribunal. Not only did it ensure that sins did not remain unpunished, it reminded the public that the reach of the Inquisition went past this life and into the next. The effigies were usually half-length cardboard representations supported by rods, with the name of the sentenced person, their residence and crime written on them to narrow the gap between the effigies, and the actual people. In some cases, for example in Barcelona, double-sided statues were created to represent spouses whom the Court had condemned together, both to punish sinners together and reduce costs (Lea, 1906: 215). The Canarian court created six cardboard statues, representing six enslaved men: Francisco y Alonso (slaves of Alonso Perez), Francisco (slave of Francisco Perez de Espinosa), Hernando (slave of Pedro Gomez Tamborino), Andres (slave of Mari Calva), Manuel Cuban (slave of the Sheriff of Telde) captured from the Maghreb.<sup>4</sup> Their story is peculiar and makes us better understand how the Spanish Inquisition acted in its territories. The six had been forcibly converted to Christianity and then baptized. They tried to escape in a small boat, hoping to return home, and continue practicing their own religion, or so the Inquisition assumed, based on their direction

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4 Archivo Museo Canario, Colección Bute, Vol. V, Folio 271-272.



of travel. Unfortunately, as evidenced by the trial, their boat was wrecked on the voyage and they drowned. Nonetheless, the Inquisitors decided the crimes committed must be punished.

The sentence was issued on March 13, 1530, and posted in the Church of San Juan in Telde, a town in Gran Canaria. In addition to the six enslaved people, an additional nine convicts, Juan de Tarifa, sentenced in effigy, and Maria Hernandez, Pedro Martin and Maria, Pedro Hernandez, Juan, Bartolome Perez, and Pedrianes and Pedro, reconciled were the protagonists of the second *auto da fê* were (Lea, 1906: 215).

The reconciled had all been accused of being heretics because they were faithful to their old Jewish practices; the other penitents were Muslims. The story of Juan de Tarifa, a merchant from Seville who had moved to Gran Canaria, demonstrates how these trials were conducted. He was accused of being a *converso*, with witnesses testifying that Juan de Tarifa's slave had explained how he always avoided eating pork and prevented the maid from buying and cooking it in his household. Imprisoned and irrefutably condemned to the stake, de Tarifa hung himself in his cell from a beam. His body, along with his cardboard effigy, was given over to the secular arm, as the Court could not tolerate leaving such an affront to their system and religion unpunished. The verdict stipulated that his assets were to be confiscated for forty years (after which they would be returned to his heirs), and barred his children from holding office. The audience, as Millares tells us, was not happy with the spectacle they had seen, as if the burning of cardboard rather than real bodies rendered the tribute to God null and void and negated the apotropaic aspect of the rite. The statues and bones were defenseless and perhaps this is why they aroused no emotion in the spectators? The emotion was necessary to make the ritual sacrifice, an event imbued with *pathos* for a double purpose, to convince God to ward off the insidious evil and to cleanse people of the tincture of sin, through a collective cathartic release.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the plague did not end with the *auto da fê*, or the torture. Millares said that surely it is significant that the *auto da fê*, the bloodiest event in the Inquisitorial history of the Canary Islands, was carried out precisely to ward off the plague, showing how closely superstition and local calamities were entwined inside people's minds. God, as omnipotent Father of all of humanity, punishes his children for their bad behaviour. They must repent to atone his punishment.

## **Others remedies: medication, magic and holy places**

### ***Medication***

The *auto da fê* was the most extreme attempt to attract God's clemency, but other remedies were also used to ward off the plague, including medical, ritual, and spiritual ones that involved the construction of new places of worship.

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5 Archivo Museo Canario, fol. 271-272.

Among the medical remedies, there was vinegar, used as an antiseptic to avoid the spread of the infection. Vinegar has always been considered a purifying element, and doctors rubbed their faces with vinegar to not become infected. Herbal remedies were also used, wrapped in bindings around the limbs. The sources do not give specific references to help us understand what they were made of or what they did, only that they were used to *animar el corazón* (raise the spirits) (Anaya and Betancor, 1992: 829). The consumption of certain foods such as chicken, eggs and lamb were recommended; the use of beef, goat, and most fish were not recommended. Among other preventive measures, it was customary to purify the environment by burning aromatic plants such as rosemary, dog rose, or thyme. Precious stones were also believed to protect people from disease.<sup>6</sup>

However, the only reliably effective remedy was avoiding contact with other people, by preventing those who manifested plague symptoms from leaving their house. The Tenerife decrees contain numerous provisions meant to isolate one island from the other. The government installed lookouts in town with the ports—Daute and Anaga—to warn of the arrival of boats. Boats were forbidden to dock and even threatened with sinking, even if they brought certificates proving the health of those on board from the port of origin. If they succeeded in docking, they were quarantined or, as it was called in the Canary Islands, strayed, usually in the Port of the Horses, one of the largest in the Islands. Sailors had to burn the clothes they brought and remain under surveillance until the health deputies of the *Cabildo* (government of Canary Islands) certified the absence of infirmities (Millares Torres, 1874: 134).

The ineffectiveness of medical measures always signaled a renewed need for spiritual measures. These included, in January 1526, a donation to the Cathedral of 3000 *maravedí* (coin) for the annual procession of S. Sebastián, a saintly protector against the plague. The historian Alonso De Espinosa spoke of his miracles in this context, telling of a Lanzarote woman named Margarita Franquiz who arrived in Gran Canaria in 1531, and was stricken with the plague, but was healed by relying on the Virgin of the Candelaria (Serra Ráfols, 1970: 285; Espinosa, 1980).

## ***Magic***

The natives of the Canary Islands, before the Spanish Conquest, devoted themselves to astrology and divination. Their way of life and their spirituality was upended by the dogmas of the Catholic kings, but not entirely abandoned. The relationship between astrology and magic is ancient and in the Middle Ages, texts crossed between Islamic and Christian countries, including, for example, *Al Kindi's De Radiis*.<sup>7</sup> This systematization of the theory of celestial radiations was the cornerstone of Natural Magic and strongly influenced Renaissance philosophical thought (Gandolfi, 2019: 146). Astrology and magic come together in “talismanic magic”, which uses stones, herbs, aromas, coins, dice, and music. A dividing line in medieval times between legal and illegal magical astrology is found in the representation of talismans. If the talismans represented exclusively the celestial figures of the constellations, they were not considered demonic, but if letters appeared along with the constellations the astrology

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6 Archivo Museo Canario, Colección Bute, Vol. V, Folio 132.

7 The *De Radiis*, was, along with the Picatrix, the main manual of the natural magic of the Middle Ages.

moved into the forbidden realm. Talismans with scriptures were considered a form of destiny magic (Weill-Parot, 2002: 365-367). The link between divination astrology and magic appears frequently in the trials of the Spanish Inquisition in the Canary Islands, for instance in the case of Francisca López, a woman known to the Holy Office in 1520, because she had been accused of performing rites that used pins to pierce an image of Christ. Four years later, she was renamed as *hacer unas suertes* (practicing the art of divination), the goal being to see how many people would die during the epidemic; *hacer suertes* was a ritual practice, well known among African people who, as we will see, incorporated Catholic influences, to the point of creating hybrid ritual practices.<sup>8</sup> The alleged witch, in a 1524 trial, declared that she performed the ritual to find out if people would die or not on the islands, and describes it thus:

I summon four times three palms with God and St. Mary and with St. Peter and Paul and the apostle Santiago and all the Saints of the Court of heaven and four dead in iron and with all the devils of the butchery of hell and moving with four dice and four palms saying that just as those men loved us so they—people—get up or stretch out.<sup>9</sup>

Francisca López was practicing divination using dice and coins together with the intercession of the Saints. In this context, “get up” and “stretch out” can probably be understood as living or dying; she is trying to figure out if many people will die from the plague or not.

Millares also notes that the Inquisition Court documents mentioned Jewish rites and “Mahometan” ceremonies carried out by Portuguese *conversos* and slaves from the Maghreb, who practiced “mysterious precautions” that caught the public eye, but he does not give more specific information about these ceremonies, probably because they were not the focus of his study (Millares Torres, 1874: 86). The process used against Francisca López, the woman accused of witchcraft, is very important because it contains the only explicit reference to its links with the plague. We can, however, make a few hypotheses about the African and native remedies that may not have been explicitly connected to the plague, but were mentioned in the trials.

I suggest that the Inquisitors did not consider the remedies of the African people beneficial and that they did not want to increase public awareness of them and therefore avoided putting them on trial. Interestingly, during the plague years we find sources referring to witnesses in Canarian trials talking about healing practices of African people that the inquisitors called spells and the witnesses healing practices. Also mentioned were objects from Africa that the inquisitors saw as proof of the Africans’ pact with the Devil. In the case of the plague, there are no witnesses who could prove that they had been healed. The plague did not favor survivors.

The inquisitor considered the brutal sacrifice of the *auto da fé*—which, after all, conformed to Catholic canon law—more reasonable and appropriate than possible healing practices that came from the non-Catholic world.

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8 Archivo Museo Canario, Colección Bute, Vol. XI serie I, folio 215.

9 Archivo Museo Canario, Fondo Inquisición, CLII-2, folio 186b.

Witches' objects (scissors, mirrors, stones, and bags) were perceived as having magical uses, and Inquisitors were often astonished when they found them in the houses of the accused women, understanding the women to be using the objects improperly, which was a sign that a pact had been made with the devil. My interpretation, based on an extensive research on both this period and later ones, is that it was the movement of these objects from another culture, from their African homelands to Canarian society and their re-insertion in another space, a sort-of mental and spatial reconfiguration of an object, that conferred on the so-called witch her "power". It is her relationship with the objects that turned a woman into a witch, thus generating the Inquisitorial accusation. Indeed, simply owning objects such as those mentioned above that were on a list drawn up by demonologists in the treatises, was inherently illegal, as the act of *hacer suerte*, though certainly a less serious crime than being a *morisco* or *converso* during the plague times.

Secondly, I would highlight that during the plague years, Spaniards in the Canaries slowed down overseas trade in order to avoid further spreading the disease (Anaya Hernández, 1996: 129).

It is possible that heresy and apostasy were the only crimes to be prosecuted and punished during the plague period since they were seen as closely linked. Indeed, once the plague began to wane, from 1529 on, cases of *brujería* began to resurface, with complaints against women for having *chupados sangre de niños* (drunk the blood of children) beginning. This date marks the real beginning of the hunt for *brujas* in the Canary Islands, and from then on, there was a series of Inquisition trials that explained the ritual practices, including healing. The inquisitors called women who could heal people *brujas curanderas* (charlatan witches). Their understanding of ritual practices can be found in the trial of Catalina Luzarda, a native of Fuerteventura Island who was accused of treating people with superstitious practices. Luzarda specialized in treating headaches with pieces of camel skin, *gofio* (typical food of the Canary Islands), and *piedra de ara* (altar stone). This stone, if placed on the head of the sick person accompanied by words that the witness defined as magical, was able to heal the headache. The magic words were invocations to heaven, made with hands facing upward; the ritual practice was made up of objects, words, and gestures. The placing of the hand on the head of the invalid is defined by the inquisitor, in a marginal note, as sacred as if it were a baptism. Viewing the ritual through a Eurocentric and Christian approach allowed the inquisitor to connect the gestures typical of Christian-Catholic rites with gestures addressed to the sky, and thus allowed him to see the ritual as a perversion of Christianity. Precisely for these reasons, he condemned the witch.<sup>10</sup>

In other areas where the Spanish Inquisition operated, including the Caribbean, a reconstruction of magical rites is possible from the sources. The Caribbean and the Canary Islands had similar geographic positions, a presence of enslaved people from Africa, and a syncretized mix of indigenous and exogenous people, leading to hybridized cultures. Some of the approaches used in the Caribbean to ward off plague may have been similar to those used in the Canaries. There were ritual specialists called *piaches*<sup>11</sup> who lived in huts and sang through the night, imitating dogs, cats, and sometimes nocturnal birds, in the hope of casting away demons and thus eradicating plague (Gómez, 2017: 86).

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10 Archivo Museo Canario, Colección Bute, Vol. XI serie I, folio 150-003.

11 Term *piaches* means "masters of witchcraft among the Indians" and was used by the Catholic friars.

### ***Holy places***

Another means of combating the plague was by constructing holy places dedicated to saints who protected against the plague; a lot of money was invested in building churches (Lobo Cabrera, 1981: 42). The hermitage of the *Nuestra Señora de los Reyes* was built at the beginning of 1526 in the extreme south of the city of Las Palmas. In April of the same year, a donation of 90 ducats was registered to complete the work. In fact, according to an extract from the *Cabildo* Cathedral, where a sort of “religious vow” is recorded, a correlation was noted between the construction of the church, the intercession of St. Mark, and the plague epidemic: “the Lord and the plague of the island are appeased and up to 90 ducats are given to perfectly complete the work of the House of St. Mark and that this church remains under the administration of the government” (Viera y Clavijo, 2007: 21-55).

The building process was costly and slow and was finally completed in 1531, which coincided with the end of the plague. According to the notes of architect Próspero Casola (1599), he destroyed the hermitage because of the Dutch invasion, but it was rebuilt a year later by the will of Don Rodrigo de León, who commissioned the image of *Nuestra Señora de los Reyes* in Seville (Jiménez Sánchez, 1944: 9).

The hermitage of la Vera Cruz was also built to combat the plague in 1524. It was built on a site that had housed a *casa de la mancebía*, a brothel, where many sins were thought to have been committed. The *consejo*—a government deed—noted that this was done as a religious vow in hopes of receiving divine clemency. The image of *Cristo de la Vera Cruz* was placed inside, and was the subject of strong veneration and a procession, thanking God for his oncoming clemency (Arias Marin de Cubas, 1986: 282).

The hermitages of San Telmo and San Roque were also built during the plague. The first was designed in 1522 as a shelter for sailors and fishermen, founded by a Portuguese or Galician sailor who had received grace from San Telmo. The hermitage was built at the ancient pier in the north of the city of Las Palmas, at the end of *Calle Triana* near the wall. It was set on fire in 1599 by the attack of Van Der Does, meaning the current construction dates back to the eighteenth century. The hermitage of San Roque was due to be founded prior to 1523, but funds for the construction only arrived when the plague hit the island. It was built in the fertile plains of reeds and vegetables where Pedro de Vera’s—an important plantation owner—sugar factory was located (Lobo Cabrera, 2006: 52). It was one of many constructions and methods that Canarian authorities used to ward off the plague.

## **Conclusion**

This essay aims to reconstruct the history of the plague that hit the Canary Islands in the period immediately following the rediscovery of these islands by the Spaniards. The reconstruction has been made possible thanks to the interpretation of two different types of sources which, taken singularly, barely dealt with the plague (sources such as trials, or buildings of holy places), but once combined, made it possible to restore a decade of history that had almost gone lost. These sources allow us to interpret and measure the impact that the plague had on the socio-political dynamics of the Canarian society. The analysis of the data highlighted

how the Spaniards tried to react to this tragic event. First, they tried to understand why the pandemic had come. As had already happened in the European context two centuries ago, the only reason for the catastrophe could be found in the revenge of the divinity angered by the behavior of the members of society considered sinners. The perpetrators were often minorities, “outsiders” of the society, who came from other ethnic backgrounds and types of faith. These outsiders were turned into scapegoats.

As we have experienced ourselves, the plague is by its very nature a globalizing phenomenon and yet the historical knowledge we have of it is limited to Western Europe and the Mediterranean, with only a few recent studies that are starting to open up to the African continent. The possibility of inserting the Canary Islands into a global context opens up to different aspects of global history.

The same sources suggest the existence of a large margin of investigations into the global context. One of the relevant outlooks of this global aspect is the role held by the Canary Islands in relation to the enslaved people’s trade; it is important to know the connections of people who have for centuries gravitated around the Atlantic islands. The trial of the six enslaved people sentenced to effigy serves as an example. They moved from the Canaries to the Maghreb; this connection is provided by the sources. And it is from these very sources that the historian seeks to reconstruct the trajectories and to unexpectedly fill a gap on an Early Modern history field that has been scarcely documented due to limited sources.

Another example of the interaction between the Inquisition and the plague from a global perspective is the Francisca López trials, the “witch” put on trial. It may be possible to broaden the perspective over the years, because the trials of women as witches increased over the decades after this, in connection with the increase in the African diaspora, the slave trade, and the practices of archival keeping. The documentation becomes clearer, more abundant, and widespread, and we gain much more information about the people that come from the West and Sub-Saharan Africa so that it is possible to detail a long-term process up to the early nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> The Canarian context in the 1500s, therefore, represents the start of an ongoing process that continued into consecutive centuries, one of minority persecution tied to religious tensions.

The Canary Islands stand at a crossroads between different continents, as well as a crossroads between different cultures, situated snugly between America, Europe, and Africa. The Islands have acted as a mixing point for these various cultures, as well as a melting pot for their different peoples. This has created a varied society, one which is enlightening to our understanding of cross-cultural interactions in the Early Modern Age. These interactions were not always benevolent, as this article demonstrates. Sometimes the final result was violent persecution.

Nonetheless, these analyses of *auto da fé* offer micro-histories that fit neatly into a wider context. The analysis of the persecutions of the plague gives us some kind of sense of the ethnic composition of Canaries society during this period of colonization. It also gives us some

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12 My dissertation focuses on witchcraft in the Canary Islands between the 15th and 19th centuries. I am currently studying 300 trials. Through the micro-stories of enslaved people, I am reconstructing the circulation of magical practices between Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

sense of the structural mechanisms by which the Spanish Inquisition operated here and in other territories. The Canaries Islands acted as a bridge, where people often passed through, arriving and departing from different worlds, worlds of Spanish piety and apotropaic *auto da fé*, worlds of African magic and superstition and mystical rites (Quintana, 2007: 25). It prefigured some of the later witches' trials in Europe. It prefigured the tensions between colonizer and colonized. This article acts as a window looking to the Canarian society, during the period of plague persecution. But through that window, there is still much to be explored.

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