



PESTES E EPIDEMIAS

ESTUDOS
INTERDISCIPLINARES
EM HUMANIDADES

Coordenadores: **Joaquim Pinheiro** | **Samuel Mateus** | **Mario Franco**

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índice

- 9 Introdução
Joaquim Pinheiro, Samuel Mateus, Mario Franco
- 13 Descrições da peste na historiografia bizantina dos séculos XIV e XV
Rui Carlos Fonseca
- 27 A vulgarização do léxico da peste após a Peste Negra como testemunho
de memória: o caso do Entre-Douro-e-Minho (Portugal)
André Filipe Oliveira da Silva
- 49 Peste, castigo e misericórdia no Funchal quinhentista:
São Tiago Menor, padroeiro e rogador a Deus pelo povo da cidade
Nelson Veríssimo
- 61 “Evitar que o mal não padeça mais avante” – O Regimento da Saúde
de D. João III e a experiência italiana de saúde pública
Edite Martins Alberto, Joana Balsa de Pinho
- 77 A Portuguese Treatise on the Plague:
João Curvo Semedo’s *Tratado da Peste*
Gabriel A. F. Silva
- 91 Cólera e Carnaval em Porto Alegre (RS/Brasil)
na segunda metade do século XIX
Caroline P. Leal
- 107 Santos: porto do café e das epidemias -
experiências, cotidiano e imigração
Maria Izilda Santos de Matos, Bruno Bortoloto do Carmo
- 125 “Subsistências”: Carências e açambarcamentos alimentares durante
a pneumónica de 1918 sob o olhar de um periódico local
Guida Cândido
- 139 Les récits de la peste comme mode de connaissance,
de mémoire et d’identification
Chantal Louchet
- 155 Um Diário convertido em crónicas e um Jornal em forma de romance:
as narrativas de pestilências de Daniel Defoe (1722) e Gonçalo M.
Tavares (2020)
Ana Isabel Correia Martins

- 171 Paisagens pandêmicas na literatura:
não-fruição da paisagem sob estado sanitário de exceção
Fabiano Dalla Bona, Carolina de Castro Wanderley
- 179 O Fenómeno Semiológico das Máscaras em Contexto Pandêmico
Sara Inês Rodrigues Gaspar, Eduardo José Marcos Camilo, Rafaela Norogrande
- 195 As “Bexigas Negras” e os Museus Históricos
Rosa Henriques de Gouveia, Teresa Ferreira, Lina Carvalho, Carlos Robalo Cordeiro
- 203 Pessoas e organizações no quotidiano pandêmico:
uma construção social da realidade?
Pedro Eduardo Oliveira Ribeiro
- 219 O paradigma da peste: Índices de ruptura em situações de calamidade
Rodrigo Barros Gewehr
- 237 O *Ethos* patético e as campanhas de publicidade
“Thank you” durante a pandemia de SARS-COV-2
Samuel Mateus

« Tout le monde sait que les pestes ont une façon de se reproduire dans le monde, mais d'une manière ou d'une autre, nous avons du mal à croire en celles qui nous tombent sur la tête à cause d'un ciel bleu. Il y a eu autant de fléaux que de guerres dans l'histoire, mais toujours des fléaux et les guerres prennent les gens également par surprise ».

Albert Camus, *La Peste*

A Portuguese Treatise on the Plague: João Curvo Semedo's *Tratado da Peste*

GABRIEL A. F. SILVA*

Resumo

João Curvo Semedo (1635-1719) é autor, entre outras obras, do *Tratado da Peste* (1680), um trabalho relativo às origens e causas da peste, e à sua prevenção e tratamentos. O objectivo do presente artigo é divulgar e apresentar este *opus*, que, ao longo do tempo, foi votado ao esquecimento, perceber de que modo segue a tradição deste género de literatura médica da ‘literatura de peste’, e também realçar o seu valor e originalidade. Para esta análise, recorrer-se-á, igualmente, a outros tratados de peste, especialmente àqueles escritos por médicos portugueses.

Palavras-chave: João Curvo Semedo, Peste, Tratados, Tradição médica.

Abstract

João Curvo Semedo (1635-1719) is the author of, among other works, the *Tratado da Peste* (1680), a treatise concerning the origins and causes of the plague, and its prevention and treatment. This article aims to present this *opus*, which has long been neglected, to understand how it follows the tradition of the genre of ‘plague literature’, and to highlight its value and originality. This analysis draws upon other plague treatises, especially those written by Portuguese physicians.

Keywords: João Curvo Semedo, Plague, Treatises, Medical tradition.

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Introduction

Medical literature has, over its history, incorporated a wide range of styles and forms concerning many subjects and topics. One of these was the genre known as ‘plague literature’, which includes treatises that address plagues and their preservation and treatment. At the beginning of the twentieth century, K. Sudhoff produced an extensive compilation and study of many of these texts.¹ Plague treatises were also written by Portuguese physicians, not always in Latin, but rather in vernacular, which may explain why many of them remain neglected by non-Portuguese scholars.

Because of the lack of studies and information about treatises written in Portuguese, my main goal in this article is to study the style and structure of the treatise by João Curvo Semedo, *Tratado da Peste*, published in Lisbon in 1680, strengthening the analysis with other treatises by Portuguese physicians, namely Rodrigo de Castro’s *Tractatus brevis* (1596), Ambrósio Nunes’ *Tractado repartido en cinco partes* (1601), and Manuel Gomes’ *De curatione pestilentiae* (1603).

1. The Author

João Curvo Semedo was a Portuguese physician who studied medicine in Coimbra and went on to practice in Lisbon. He must have had great success since the Portuguese nobility called on his services. Curvo Semedo was considered a great writer, so much so that his younger contemporary Francisco Leitão Ferreira calls him the ‘Portuguese Cicero’.² J. Dias describes him as one of the most underrated and ignored physicians in the history of Portuguese medicine. The importance of Curvo Semedo’s work, also according to Dias, lies not in its quantity, but rather in its influence on Portuguese medicine after him.³ Besides his *Tratado da Peste* (1680), the object of this study, Curvo Semedo is also the author of *Polianteia Medicinal. Notícias Galénicas e Químicas* (1697), his most famous work, and of other treatises of medical practice, namely *Observações Médicas Doutriniais* (1707) and *Atalaia da Vida contra as Hostilidades da Morte* (1720, published posthumously).⁴

1 Sudhoff (1925, pp. 241-291).

2 This reference appears in the *Romance Encomiastico endecassylabo* of Francisco Leitão Ferreira (quotation from Semedo [1707]).

3 Dias (2007, p. 48).

4 For more detailed information on João Curvo Semedo’s biography and works, see Dias (2007, pp. 45-55), and Barroso (2004, pp. 53-57).

The Prologue

The prologues of medical works seem to be usually dedicated to someone important, either to gain someone's favor or acknowledge help with publication. Curvo Semedo's *Tratado da Peste* is not an exception, and he dedicates this small piece to Manoel Telles da Silva, a Portuguese noble.⁵ He starts by justifying the need to write such a work, that its main goal is to prevent the emergence and spread of plague, although he does not mention any specific outbreak that might be afflicting Portugal at the moment of composition. However, he does note that he felt the need 'to compose this small treatise in a hurry' ('compor com pressa este breve tratado').

Semedo's insistent modesty should also be noted. He uses terms and expressions which give an impression of insignificance: 'short' ('breve'), 'so small' ('tam pequeno'), 'my cowardice' ('a minha cobardia'). To compensate for the brevity of his treatise, he states in the prologue that, ultimately, what matters is the good intention behind the offering of such a work. This seeking of indulgence is a literary topos, a *captatio benevolentiae*, a rhetorical strategy not to diminish the treatise, but to show its value. This humility is a way of simultaneously gaining the reader's favor and of valorizing one's work as it exceeds low expectations.⁶

Similarly, in a plague treatise dedicated to Cristóvão de Moura,⁷ Ambrósio Nunes⁸ states the need for it, although a slight work, and hopes that it may be of public utility, aiding treatment of the plague. For instance, Rodrigo de Castro, a Portuguese physician settled in Hamburg, published *Tractatus brevis de natura et causis pestis* to help combat the plague that afflicted the city in 1596.⁹ As a newcomer to this city, he dedicated his work to the senatorial order of Hamburg, by whom he wanted to be well received.¹⁰

5 Manoel Telles da Silva (1641-1709) was the first Marquis of Alegrete, and author of *De rebus gestis Joannis II*, published in Lisbon in 1689. See Câmara and Coelho (2020, p. 843).

6 Cf. Evans (1999, p. 375): 'There are of course continuities between topoi in the prologues represented here and those in modern prologues: the humility topos [...]; the dedication (to a patron or distinguished figure in the Middle Ages; nowadays to family, friends, or intellectual mentors); the acknowledgments [...]; the attempt to outline the work's structure and to explain the book's rationale to the reader'. See also Pinheiro (forthcoming) on the prologues of Rodrigo de Castro's gynaecological treatise.

7 For more information about this Portuguese noble, see Fonseca (2014, pp. 191-192).

8 Born in Lisbon in 1529, this reputed physician developed his career between Coimbra and Salamanca, and among his works a commentary on Hippocrates' *Aphorisms* stands out. For more about Ambrósio Nunes, see Lemos (1991, p. 25).

9 Rodrigo de Castro (c. 1550 Lisbon - c. 1627 Hamburg) was a renowned Portuguese physician of Jewish origin. Besides *Tractatus brevis*, he is also the author of a monumental gynaecological treatise entitled *De uniuersa mulierum medicina*, first published in 1603, and of *Medicus-politicus*, which, among other subjects, deals with the value of medicine (1614). For a translation and study on Rodrigo de Castro's *Tractatus brevis* see Mota, Pinheiro, and Silva (2021). Cf. also Arrizabalaga (2009, pp. 107-124), and Förg (2020, pp. 47-82).

10 Castro (1596, A.3.1).

Usually these physicians recognized that the city or country where they live had good doctors who could surely deal with the plague, but they felt that they had something new to offer the city of which they were a citizen or wanted to be. For instance, the short treatises of Curvo Semedo and Rodrigo de Castro are, as far as we know, their first works. Though neither was a young physician at the time of publication, both treatises serve the purpose of currying favor with local government and allowing them to establish themselves in a specific country or environment with the authorities' recognition.

2. The Structure

Plague treatises' contents generally seem to follow a strict order, the first part dedicated to explaining what the plague is. Curvo Semedo again is no exception. The sections of his treatise are as follows:

1. What is the plague (*Que cousa seja a peste*).
2. What are the signs of the plague (*Que sinais tenha a peste*).
3. Different symptoms and effects of the plague (*Dos diferentes symptomas, e effeytos que causa a peste*).
4. What prognosis of the plague shall be made (*Que prognostico se deve fazer da peste*).
5. Protection against the plague (*Da preservação da peste*).
6. Cure of the plague (*Da cura da peste*).
7. Swellings and rashes that come to those infected by the plague, and various cautions one must take (*Dos inchaços, ou nacidas, que sobrevem aos apestados, e de varias advertencias, que se devem observar*).

Thus, Curvo Semedo dedicates the first pages of his work to explaining what the plague is and by which signs people can recognize it. He states that it is a poisonous disease generated by corruption of the air that suddenly kills and destroys everything. Also notes that certain signs precede the emergence of the plague, namely wars, earthquakes, hunger, or unusual stars and comets. The first signs of the plague are also recognizable through bad air quality, which kills human beings and animals:

Se a corrupção, ou má qualidade procede do ar conhecesse, se virmos que sahindo os homens de suas cazas saões, e com boa saude caem de repente mortos, ou se virmos que as Aves fogem dos seus ninhos, e aparecem poucas pelo ar, ou se indo voando caem de repente mortas, ou se pondose ao ar alguma carne fresca, ou pam mole, se corrompe logo, ou enche de bolor.¹¹

11 Semedo (1680, p. 3). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

We know that corruption or bad quality stems from the air, if men leaving their houses sound and in good health suddenly fall dead, or if we observe birds fleeing their nests, and there are only a few in the air, or in flight they suddenly fall dead, or if when we expose fresh meat or bread to the air and it quickly becomes corrupted and full of mold.

Rodrigo de Castro also followed the same structure. He starts his treatise with the major topic 'De natura, causis, et signis huius cladis', divided into 'Definitio', 'conditio et mos', and 'causae'. Manuel Gomes, in turn, starts his treatise with 'Pestilentiae causae', followed by 'Signa antecedentia, comitantia'. After presenting the origins and causes of the plague, these treatises usually follow a very similar structure concerning methods of protection and, finally, treatment.

In the presentation of the disease, like Castro, who references the Noric plague described in the third book of Vergil's *Georgics*,¹² Semedo also shows knowledge of 'canonical' past plagues which became famous, namely that of Tasos, described by Hippocrates, and the Athenian plague, described by Thucydides.¹³ Curvo Semedo, however, seems to have a pronounced taste for plague-related curiosities. He presents a group of plagues whose effects were particularly severe, and strange:

No tempo de Clemente Quinto houve outra de tão venenosa qualidade, que bastava que o apestado olhasse para alguma pessoa, para que logo cahisse morta: tão toxicados erão os espiritos visivos como se fossem de bazelisco.

Reynando Sancho Primeyro houve outra em que todos morrião bocejando.

No tempo de Cardano houve outra em que, dando hum espirro, logo morrião [...]. Visto pois que a peste he inimigo tão cruel e causa effeytos tão estupendos, serà necessário por grande cautela, e empenho em prezervarnos della, para que se nos não pegue.¹⁴

In the time of Clement V there was another [plague] of such a poisonous quality that it was enough for the infected to look at someone else for them to fall dead, so toxic were the visual spirits, as if they were from the basilisk.

In the reign of Sancho I there was another in which people died by yawning.

In the time of Cardano there was another in which people quickly died by sneezing [...]

Thus the plague is an enemy so cruel and has such astonishing effects that it is necessary to take great caution and effort to protect against it, so that it does not affect us.

Curvo Semedo offers a brief exploration of these episodes which seems to be based more on popular belief than a scientific basis. He may be using these powerful examples to impress upon his readers the sudden and nefarious effects of plague, and also to reinforce the relevance and need of writing this treatise.

12 Rodrigo de Castro quotes Verg., *Georg.* 3.478-481.

13 Curvo Semedo may be referring to Hipp., *Epid.* 3.8 and Thuc. 2.2-54.

14 Semedo (1680, p. 7).

2.1. Methods of protection

Regarding protection against the disease, plague treatises usually include a section concerning good practices of avoidance.¹⁵ Curvo Semedo divides his into three categories: the cleaning of spaces, objects to use, actions to do or to avoid. These measures are depicted by small episodes that illustrate the negative effects of not doing what is prescribed, namely the reappearance of the plague.

Curvo Semedo starts by referring to the ventilation of closed spaces and advises avoiding people or objects suspected of being contaminated. He says that they must be purified, otherwise they can start a new plague, even many years later, as happened in Venice.¹⁶ The danger of dogs is also mentioned, because of their wandering and the risk of them bringing the plague into people's homes:

He bom conselho deytar fora da terra (em que ha, ou se teme a peste) todos os cães ou matalos, porque como estes animais comem muitas immundicias, com facilidade se lhes pega a qualidade pestilente, e entrando pelas cazas da gente sam podem communicar o contagio, sem que se advirta de onde veio o dano.¹⁷

It is good advice to drive out all dogs from the areas (where the plague is found or is feared), or to kill them, because since these animals eat filthy things, pestilence easily catches them, and, entering in healthy people's houses, they can communicate the contagion without warning of where it came from.

People are thus advised to get rid of or kill dogs because they may bring the plague to their houses, and because people do not realize that dogs are the source of contamination. This sanitary measure seems to be commonplace in plague treatises. Cohn, studying Italian plague treatises, notes that the same decision was made in many Italian cities during plagues.¹⁸ Rodrigo de Castro takes a more restrained approach: he does not mention killing animals, but advises that their movement be controlled, as a measure to limit contamination:¹⁹

15 *Qua ratione debeat unusquisque se praeservare a peste* (Girolamo Mercuriale); *Da preservação da peste* (Curvo Semedo); *De ratione praeservandi a Peste* (Rodrigo de Castro); *Que puede auer preservación en el mal de la peste* (Ambrósio Nunes); *Remedia praecautionia, sanantia* (Manuel Gomes).

16 Semedo (1680, p. 11).

17 Semedo (1680, p. 12).

18 Cohn (2010, p. 86): 'He [Giovanni Filippo Ingrassia] charged that the city was littered with dead animals, especially cats and dogs, and that their carcasses should not just be swept from one street to the next, but should be thrown into the sea or, better, buried appropriately'.

19 The same is recommended in *Advertências* (1801, pp. 14-15). Regarding the control of animals, Ambrósio Nunes (1601, p. 97) notes that barbers and others must keep their shops and living spaces clean to avoid infecting the air, and because dogs and cats may eat contaminated filth. This measure was probably taken from the treatise of Thomaz Alvarez and Garcia de Salzedo (1598, p. 3).

Nam haec animalia, praeterquam quod immunda sunt, hinc inde uagantur, et nonnunquam infectas aedes ingressa, uenenum attrahunt, quod postmodum ad sanos accedentia exspirant.²⁰

Because these animals [i.e., pigs and dogs], besides being unclean, walk around, and have sometimes entered infected houses, they attract the poison, which they then exhale upon healthy people whom they have approached.

Many other measures recommended by Curvo Semedo concern the fumigation of houses with air purifiers, and holding close to the nose or the heart pleasant-smelling objects made of ingredients that may help avoid being infected by the plague, namely benzoin, musk, orange peel, among many others. Excessive practice of physical exercise and of sexual intercourse is not recommended, because it heats the body and attracts contagious air.²¹ Towards the end of the part concerning methods of prevention, Curvo Semedo notes that the safest procedure is to take the afflicted person to a healthy place, with vegetation, excellent water, and the presence of old people being offered as proofs of a wholesome environment.²²

Curvo Semedo seems to give less importance to other basic measures of inhibiting infection, notably the avoidance of close social interaction. This latter is also among the typical measures of plague treatises proposed to avoid the contagion, such as hand washing, and avoiding handshakes or kissing.²³ This was suggested by Rodrigo de Castro, who was a proponent of social distancing:

Quamquam uero porrigendi manum consuetudo optima et laudabilis sit, mihi tamen conducibilis uideretur, si, quam diu contagium durat, alio salutationis genere homines uterentur.²⁴

Although the habit of handshaking is great and commendable, it seems to me that it would be better if people used another means of greeting as long as the contagion lasts.

20 Castro (1596, C.3.2).

21 Semedo (1680, pp. 17, 21).

22 Semedo (1680, pp. 22-23).

23 Cohn (2010, p. 12): 'Others recommended simple sanitary measures – washing hands with warm water after coughing and defecating, covering mouths and noses with bread or sponges soaked in vinegar and rose water when near the infected, and simply avoiding public places and especially enclosed ones, such as churches, in times of plague'. Cf. Manuel Gomes (1603, p. 16): *Mundities ante omnia commendanda [...]* *facies saepe lauanda, manusque* ('Cleaning is recommended above all [...] the face and hands must be washed often'). The same measures are recommended by Mercuriale (1577, p. 105).

24 Castro (1596, C.2.2). Manuel Gomes also recommends the avoidance of close contact between people: *Vitanda etiam hominum frequentia* (1603, p. 17).

Cleaning measures of all kinds were highly recommended by physicians from the very beginning in order to avoid the spread of plagues. Even if such recommendations varied slightly from physician to physician, plague treatises devoted, as seen, at least one section to these good practices. For its lengthiness and exclusive dedication to preventive measures, I mention the Portuguese treatise *Advertências dos meios que os particulares podem usar para preservar-se da peste*. This work, published in Lisbon in 1801, is a compilation of preventive measures regarding the avoidance of the plague. It does not deal with the origins or cure of the disease, only with preventive and cleaning measures that individuals must adopt to avoid being infected. The compiler clearly states that these are measures to be taken by private individuals, and that responsibility falls to them, not the public authorities, even if many measures seem, or are, harmful. To sum up, the *Advertências* seeks to make people more responsible in the fight against the pandemic:

Sim he o objecto deste papel procurar persuadir aos particulares a importancia de se praticarem á risca as Determinações da Authoridade Publica, posto que ás vezes sejam rigorosas [...] e tambem he o objecto mostrar os meios, que os particulares por si mesmos podem pôr em prática, para estarem mais a salvo deste flagello da Natureza Humana.²⁵

It is the purpose of this paper to persuade individuals of the importance of practicing to the letter the Determinations of the Public Authorities, even if sometimes these are challenging [...] and it also has the purpose of showing the means that individuals themselves can use to be safer from this scourge of Human Nature.

3. The sources

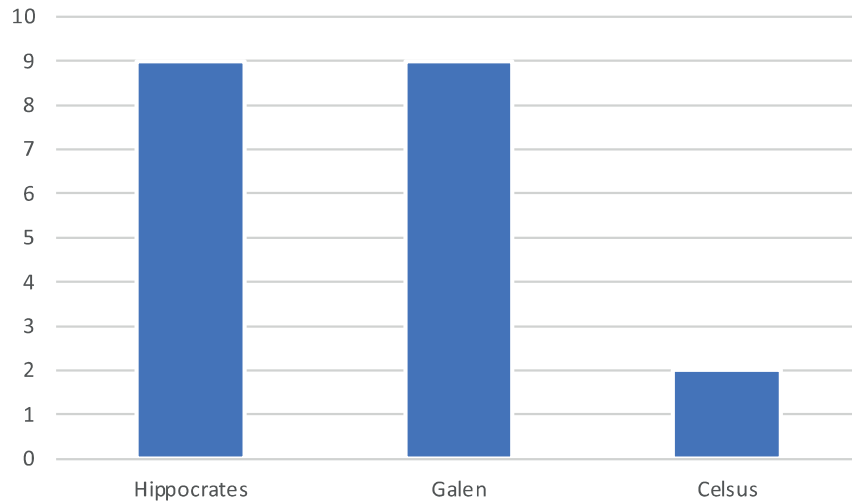
Like his predecessors, Curvo Semedo shows in his *Tratado da Peste* a deep knowledge of what his fellow physicians had written concerning the origins and treatment of plagues. However, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, he preferred to write in Portuguese, perhaps due to a desire or need to be understood on a more local level or by a broader public in a time when the knowledge of Latin was probably more limited. By writing it in Portuguese, he ensured that his treatise was accessible not only to physicians but also non-specialist laypeople, like barbers or surgeons, who could take from it information useful to fight the plague or its spread, because most preventive measures did not need a skilled hand.

Looking at the sources used or quoted in *Tratado da Peste*, it is possible to see that Curvo Semedo was acquainted with a wide range of authors, from classical antiquity to his present day. As Cohn noted, fourteenth-century physicians did not give importance to authors like Hippocrates or Galen, because ancient authors offered no knowledge

²⁵ *Advertências* (1802, p.1).

on curing plagues.²⁶ Two centuries later, however, Curvo Semedo, like some of his peers, gives more prominence to ancient authors and uses their testimonies.

Fig. 1 - Ancient physicians mentioned and quoted by Curvo Semedo



According to the above figure, Hippocrates and Galen are frequently mentioned by Curvo Semedo, nine times each, while Celsus has only two mentions. Curvo Semedo's knowledge of Hippocrates and Galen most likely came from Latin translations, as was common at the time.²⁷ An innovation of Curvo Semedo, helpful for readers of his work, is that he not only mentions his sources but also quotes them in marginal notes. In the main text, Semedo only refers to the name of his source, followed by a sequential number. In the margins, he gives his reader more information about the source used: author, name of the work, and sometimes at least a partial Latin quotation from the work he consulted. Also, the page number of the edition he is consulting is given. This amount of information allows for easy identification, or at least offers a strong indication, of which books he consulted or knew.

Regarding Hippocrates, for example, it seems most probable that Curvo Semedo used Janus Cornarius' edition of the *Opera Omnia*.²⁸ It is possible to see that, besides the text quoted in the margins, he also indicates the name of the Hippocratic work, and the number of the folio where the quotation can be found, which sometimes corresponds exactly with the edition of Janus Cornarius. Thus, Curvo Semedo was well acquainted with ancient physicians, giving his readers a clear sign of his erudition and

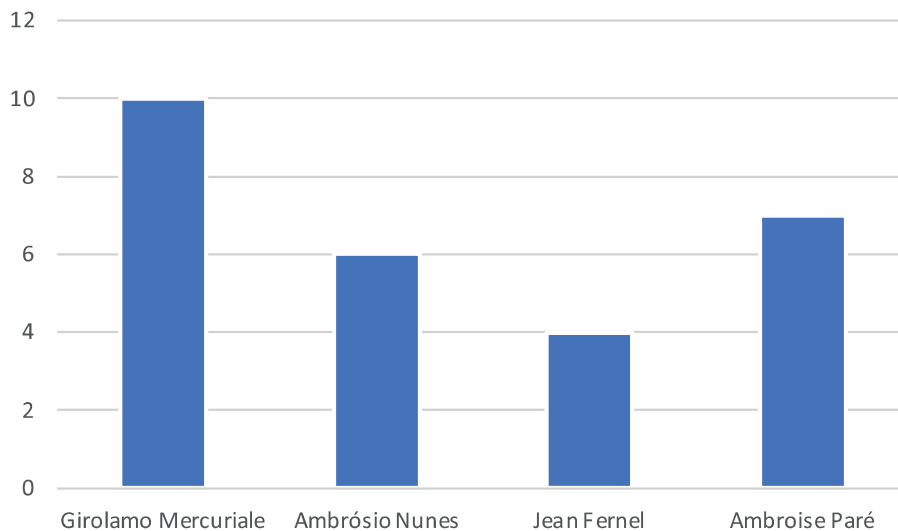
26 Cohn (2010, p. 10).

27 On the dissemination of the knowledge of ancient Greek sources, see Siraisi (1990, pp. 50-55).

28 I followed the edition published in Lyon in 1555, *Hippocratis Coi Medicorum Omnium Longe Principis, Opera quae apud nos extant omnia*.

knowledge of the sources. He took advantage of the Latin editions and translations of the works of Greek physicians, showing knowledge of them and drawing on them for useful information.²⁹ By writing in Portuguese and using verbatim marginal Latin quotations of other physicians, Curvo Semedo broadens the target audience of his book, making it accessible and useful to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Fig. 2 Selection of Renaissance physicians quoted and mentioned by Curvo Semedo



The number of contemporary sources quoted or mentioned by Curvo Semedo is very extensive, and this second graphic shows only a few Renaissance authors whom he quotes the most.³⁰ This selection of authors shows that Curvo Semedo was acquainted with the tradition of plague treatises, and used this knowledge to give authority and enrich his own treatise. Among their vast medical literary production Ambroise Paré (1510-1590), Girolamo Mercuriale (1530-1606), and Ambrósio Nunes (1529-1611) were composers of plague treatises. Curvo Semedo was therefore using these authorities, among others, to affiliate himself to this branch of medical literature. However, when comparing figures 1 and 2, one can note that Curvo Semedo gives more attention to the writings of his contemporaries, rather than to ancient sources. Regarding authorities from antiquity, only three names are represented, nonetheless the number of Renaissance or contemporary authors is way superior. Mercuriale, for instance, is

29 This respectful attitude to Hippocrates and Galen is evident not only through quotations of their works, giving them the status of *auctoritates*, but also in the way they are described by Renaissance physicians. For example, in Castro's *Tractatus brevis*, Hippocrates is called *uetustissimus auctor*, and Celsus is dubbed *Hippocrates latinus*.

30 The Renaissance or contemporary sources of Curvo Semedo number around 30 authors.

quoted ten times, which is more than Hippocrates or Galen, and Paré's number of quotations is very approximate to those of the Greek physicians. Having this in mind, this seems to show that Curvo Semedo had knowledge of ancient physicians' theories regarding plagues, and found them useful to his work, but also that he was an erudite man, and was well informed about the best medical literature produced from the Renaissance to his own time, using it as an authority and model for his treatise.

If plague treatises have a strong, and obvious, influence on Curvo Semedo's *Tratado da Peste*, his erudition and knowledge goes beyond these texts. In composing his own treatise, Curvo Semedo complements the information presented with other works whose content was useful for this medical purpose: I note, for example, treatises concerning fevers, namely Cipriano Maroja's *Tractatus de febribus*, or Alessandro Massaria's *De febribus*.³¹

Conclusion

In a time when Latin was likely inaccessible to the majority of the reading public, Curvo Semedo wrote his *Tratado da Peste* in Portuguese and gave it a strong component destined to non-specialist readers, thus making it accessible and useful both to Portuguese speakers and specialized physicians. He shows a perfect knowledge of the tradition of plague treatises and uses a structure common to this kind of literature. Curvo Semedo's erudition reveals itself not merely through the medical knowledge presented concerning theories of contagion or the preparation of treatments, but also through the extensive medical bibliography he uses and quotes.

Due to the neglect to which this treatise has long been unjustly subjected, it is urgent to recover it and other plague treatises, both in Latin and Portuguese, and give them the deep study they need and deserve, focusing not only the tradition to which they belong, but also their originality.

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