
Sensory Representations of Plague: The Plague Altar from the Mid-18th Century in St Andrew's Church, Makole, Slovenia

Čutne reprezentacije kuge: kužni oltar iz sredine 18. stoletja v cerkvi sv. Andreja v Makolah, Slovenija

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Abstract

The article examines the sensory experiences associated with death during the plague and contextualises them within a specific historical and geographical framework. The author focuses on the plague altar from the mid-eighteenth century in the Haloze Church of St Andrew in Makole, Slovenia. In particular, she analyses the lower part of the altarpiece, which is attributed to an unknown artist. The plague altar not only conveys religious messages, but also reflects the knowledge and belief in the miasma theory of the time in question, in particular the understanding of the smell of the plague, the regulations on the plague and the organisation of civil protection. These themes vividly illustrate the depictions of the plague on the altar and offer insights into society's reactions to illness and death in this period.

Keywords: plague, plague altar, smell of plague, miasma, Slovenia

Izveček

Članek obravnava čutne izkušnje, povezane s smrtjo v času kuge, in jih kontekstualizira v določenem zgodovinskem ter geografskem okviru. Avtorica se osredotoča na kužni oltar iz sredine 18. stoletja v haloški cerkvi sv. Andreja v Makolah v Sloveniji. Analizira predvsem spodnji del oltarne slike, ki je pripisan neznanemu umetniku. Kužni oltar ne prenaša samo verskih sporočil, ampak odraža tudi znanje in vero v teorijo miazme v obravnavanem obdobju, zlasti razumevanje vonja kuge, predpisov o kugi in organizacije zaščite prebivalstva. Te teme nazorno ilustrirajo upodobitve kuge na oltarju in ponujajo vpogled v odzive družbe na boleznj ter smrt v tistem času.

Ključne besede: kuga, kužni oltar, vonj kuge, miazma, Slovenija

Introduction

a) On the plague altar from Makole

In June 2024, I became aware of the plague altar of St Sebastian in St Andrew's Church in Makole, Slovenia, a significant historical artefact from the mid-eighteenth century. I was intrigued by its role in contemporary folk religiosity and its connection to local narratives about the plague, and arranged to visit the altar. On 22 June 2024, I conducted an interview with the parish clerk, who gave me insights into the altar's significance today and shared stories about the plague that have survived in the community.

The plague altar, which was created between 1751 and 1756 by the sculptor Jožef Štraub, is a wooden altar that was restored in 2018 due to significant damage, and features polychrome statues of angels and saints, including St Charles Borromeo and St Roch, who are depicted as patron saints against the plague. The altarpiece shows a painting of St Peter and St Sebastian, the latter traditionally associated with infectious diseases, holding arrows symbolising his martyrdom.

The lower part of the altar shows a poignant plague scene painted by an unknown artist.



Figure 1: The plague altar in the church of St Andrew in Makole, Slovenia (Kostanjšek Brglez 2022b, 40).

It shows the suffering of the sick and dying, together with figures carrying away the deceased or helping the sick. This artwork reflects the importance of protecting the living from contagion while also emphasising the cultural tradition of honouring the dead, even in the midst of the horrors of an epidemic. The painting also shows a woman holding a handkerchief to her nose to show that she is aware of the unpleasant odour of the corpses, the burnt infected cloths and/or the risk of airborne contagion. This gesture is not only a sign that she recognises the mi-

asma theory, which attributes the transmission of disease to foul air, but also illustrates the human reaction to the devastating effects of the epidemic.

The depiction of the plague at the bottom of the painting made a deep impression on me. I could well imagine the emotions it evoked in those who visited the church and heard stories about the plague that had been passed down through generations. These images, along with the sculptural representations of saints and angels who served as protectors against the plague, acted as a form of visual communication. According to a church representative I spoke to, some older parishioners still occasionally pray for health at this side altar. However, there is currently a lack of information or explanation about this particular depiction. This gap exists because the altarpiece was primarily analysed from an art historical point of view. One art historian noted that ‘the quality of the lower part of the altarpiece’, which illustrates the effects of the epidemic, ‘is not comparable to the surrounding sculptural works on the altarpiece’ (see: Kostanjšek Brglez 2019, 74; Šerbelj 1983, 205), which led to a greater focus on these elements.

b) On altars associated with health and disease

Plague epidemics are remembered in the collective consciousness today as the deadliest. It is therefore not surprising that the responses to them throughout history have been not only medical but also religious (Atalić 2019, 232). In the field of health and illness, altars associated with health and disease serve as powerful metaphors for the focus and practises that individuals and communities use to promote wellness and address health challenges. These altars embody a rich tapestry of cultural meaning, interwoven with spiritual and ritual elements that emphasise their importance in the pursuit of health. Offerings and prayers are made at these sacred sites to implore healing and protection from illness. This reflects a deep-rooted belief in the interconnectedness of the physical, spiritual and communal aspects of health.

Altars associated with health and disease are consecrated structures used in various religious or ceremonial traditions for the offering of sacrifices. These altars serve as the centre of rituals aimed at appeasing deities or spirits believed to influence health and disease. They are often used to invoke protection from illness, express gratitude for healing or ask for forgiveness to alleviate further illness. The plague altar is a particular type of altar whose concept emphasises the community's desire for divine assistance in combatting plagues and epidemics and reflects a deep spiritual connection to health and well-being.

In ancient cultures such as those of Greece and Rome, altars were often dedicated to gods and goddesses associated with health, healing, and disease. Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, for example, had sanctuaries where people made offerings to him in order to find healing. His sanctuaries, called 'Asklepieia' (in Ancient Greek *Asklepieion*; in Latin *aesculapīum*), were places where people sought healing for illnesses. According to Christopoulou-Aletra et al. (2010), over 300 Asklepieia were discovered throughout ancient Greece. Among the most famous temples were Trikka, Epidaurus, Kos, Athens, Corinth and Pergamon. Asclepius' daughters were Hygeia (goddess of health, cleanliness and hygiene) and Panacea (a goddess of universal remedy).

In indigenous and folk religious practises, there were altars or sacred places dedicated to spirits or ancestors who were believed to influence health and disease. Offerings could be made at these altars or rituals performed to protect the community from illness. In his work *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, published in 1987, Mircea Eliade explores the complicated connections between different religious practises and their effects on health and healing. He examines how different cultures incorporate spiritual rituals, beliefs and symbols into their concepts of well-being and suggests that these practises often serve not only as a means of treating physical ailments but also as

pathways to psychological and spiritual well-being. Eliade's analysis emphasises the importance of understanding health in a broader cultural and religious context. He emphasises that healing is often seen as a holistic process that encompasses body, mind and spirit. In this way, he illuminates the ways in which religious traditions shape individuals' perceptions of health and the methods they use to heal.

In mediaeval and Renaissance Christianity, Christian communities erected altars dedicated to saints associated with healing and protection, such as St Roch or St Sebastian, during times of plague. These altars were used for prayers and pleas for deliverance from the plague.

Christian communities' most lasting evidence of their presence are, in particular, the votive churches built in honour of the patron saints against plague epidemics (Atalić 2019, 214). Some of the most important Christian saints who are considered patron saints against the plague are St Roch and St Sebastian, the best-known saints, but also St George, St Edmund, St Beat, St Barbara, St Francis Xavier, St Saturnin, St Coloman, St Anthony, St Aloysius Gonzaga and St Rosalia. In the Christian tradition, these saints are traditionally invoked to protect against the plague. In Slovenia, there are 33 churches dedicated to St Roch and around 30 churches dedicated to St Sebastian ('Sveti Rok – romar in spokornik' n.d.). Furthermore, in churches not dedicated to these saints, there are many plague altars with a combination of several plague saints, and there are also plague signs dedicated to them all over the countryside and in towns.

Obviously, plague epidemics left their mark on art. In connection with them and other diseases, many works of art were created in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both outdoors and in sacred spaces. In the period in question, we can hardly find a church or parish that did not have at least one plague altar or a depiction of one of the plague patrons (Kostanjšek Brglez 2022a, 52). Just as people in the Baroque period erected plague signs, churches and

altars to commemorate the plague epidemics or to give thanks for their end, they did not give up their belief in the help of the saints later on, either (Kostanjšek Brglez 2022b, 40).

c) On the method of interpretation of the plague altar

In this analysis, I have drawn on Roland Barthes' concepts of *punctum* and *studium* (Barthes 1981) to guide my exploration of the topic. My initial emotional response and personal impressions – which Barthes refers to as *punctum* – served as a catalyst for a more in-depth examination of the historical events and public health implications surrounding the plague in the region, which align with Barthes' notion of *studium*. This dual approach allowed me to combine my subjective experiences with a broader contextual understanding, enabling a comprehensive examination of the interplay between individual perception and collective historical narratives.

According to Barthes (1981, 26–28), the *punctum* is a personal detail in a photograph that 'pierces' or 'pricks' a particular viewer and has a private meaning that has nothing to do with a cultural code. The *punctum* refers to those features of a photograph (in this case the painting) that seem to create or convey meaning without invoking a recognisable symbolic system. This kind of meaning is unique and depends on the reaction of the individual viewer of the image. The *punctum* not only pricks the viewer but also leaves a lasting bruise and evokes a deep feeling of emotion. On the other hand, *studium* refers to the factor that initially draws the viewer's attention to a photograph. It refers to the intention of the photographer (in this case, the painter). The viewers can determine the *studium* of a photograph with their logical, intellectual mind. The *studium* describes elements of an image and not the sum of the information and meaning of the image. The study points to historical, social or cultural meanings that are extracted through semiotic analysis. In other words, you can recognise references to culture and time in the image. Sometimes these are

juxtaposed ideas that contradict each other or make a cultural or political statement, but sometimes they do not. The reference may be abstract or implied. Whatever the context, it captivates the viewer.

In this analysis, the two concepts are linked in such a way that *punctum* signifies an anthropological close-up perspective that reflects what the author considers important, while *studium* refers to a culturally and historically specific context.

The literature I have used to understand the message of the plague altar includes sources such as ethnographic and historical studies, medical texts, legal documents, medical historical accounts and extracts from the literature describing the plague, which form a comprehensive basis for the interpretation of the plague altar.

The Plague: Transmission, Clinical Manifestations and History

a) From the history of medicine about plague

The plague, caused by the bacterium identified by Alexandre Yersin in an outbreak in Hong Kong in 1894 (later named *Yersinia pestis* in his honour), has been responsible for major pandemics throughout history. Understanding the different forms of plague and its transmission is crucial to understanding its devastating impact on society. The spread of the disease usually follows a specific pattern: from wild rodents to urban rats and finally to humans after the rats have died out. Modern medicine distinguishes between three main forms of plague: bubonic plague (nodular plague), which has been the most widespread throughout history, pneumonic plague and septicaemic plague, in which the bacillus is found in inflamed lymph nodes, sputum and blood. Bubonic plague is transmitted by infected flea bites and is characterised by swollen, tender lymph nodes (buboes) near the original site of infection. If left untreated, the bacteria can enter the bloodstream and spread to various organs such as the liver, kidneys, spleen, lungs, meninges and eyes, sometimes

causing an ulcer at the site of the initial infection. If septicaemia occurs early, death can occur before buboes appear. Pneumonic plague, on the other hand, develops either as a complication of bubonic plague or through direct transmission via infected droplets in the air we breathe. It occurs rapidly, with symptoms 1–3 days after infection, and is characterised by severe pneumonia, shortness of breath, high fever and bloody mucus. This form is almost always fatal if untreated and requires antibiotic treatment within 15–18 hours of the onset of symptoms to have the best chance of survival. While human-to-human transmission is rare in asymptomatic cases, pneumonic plague patients can spread the disease to close contacts as it progresses. Therefore, all plague patients must be isolated for 48 hours after starting antibiotics, and pneumonic plague patients must be completely isolated until sputum cultures are negative. Without treatment, the mortality rate is around 50%, with pneumonic plague being particularly deadly if not treated promptly with appropriate antibiotics (Turkington and Lee Ashby 2007, 237–239).

Understanding the different forms of plague and its transmission is crucial to understanding the devastating impact of these diseases on society. Historical records do not always provide enough information about the symptoms to say with certainty what type of plague people contracted and died from. But, while modern science has given us a clear understanding of the mechanisms and forms of plague, this knowledge was not available to mediaeval physicians and the populations who faced the disease. This gap between contemporary and historical medical knowledge is particularly relevant when examining the historical records of plague outbreaks and their impact on mediaeval society.

Among the many health challenges facing mediaeval cities, none was as devastating as the recurring epidemics, especially those that contemporaries referred to as the plague. By far the greatest mass mortality of the Middle Ages was

caused around the middle of the fourteenth century by the pandemic known as the Black Death (bubonic plague), which was responsible for the selective but widespread death of up to a third of the population in the middle of the fourteenth century and which continued to afflict Europe repeatedly until the eighteenth century, and led to a general demographic collapse. Without modern medical knowledge, physicians attributed these outbreaks to various causes, relying mainly on the miasma theory of atmospheric impurity. The Black Death led to the further development of the ‘pestilential miasma’ theory. While fleeing infected cities was considered the best defence, quarantine measures were not widespread in the Middle Ages (Jankrift 2016; Miethke 2016).

b) Slovenian accounts of plague

Among the early medical writers addressing the plague in the Slovenian context, the Renaissance thinker David Verbec, who was active in Germany, made significant contributions. He wrote a critical treatise on the plague in Latin in 1618, *A Book of Medical Investigations on a Disputation on the Plague* (orig. *Exercitationum medicarum super disputatione quadam de peste liber unus*). In this work, he provided a precise description of the disease, which was still widespread in Central Europe at the time, contemplated its nature and transmission and acted against quacks. The treatise proved to be so controversial and misunderstood that he left his position in Ulm and moved to Augsburg in 1620. During his time in Ulm, Verbec wrote several works on the plague. While his *Tractatus de peste* (Treatise on the Plague, Kempten 1617) is only known by its title, his main work *Exercitationum medicarum super disputatione quadam de peste liber unus* (published in Kempten in 1618) offers a comprehensive critique of J. Schegkius’ *De pestis curatione Germanicum consilium* (German Policy on Pest Control). This text examines the nomenclature of the plague, the causes, the symptoms, the clinical forms and the course of the disease. Verbec rejected

theriac¹ and mithridate² as universal remedies and argued in favour of specific treatments. Above all, he analysed the concept of disease ‘seeds’ (*seminarium*) and contagion, distinguishing – in contrast to Schegkiius – between contagion and physical contact (*tactus, contactus*) with the diseased. His vivid description of the symptoms suggests first-hand experience as a physician, while his analysis of contagion both draws on ancient authors and anticipates the later work of Marko Anton Plenčič. A later work, *Exercitationum de peste libri duo* (Investigations About the Plague Book Two, Kempten 1619), which is only indirectly known, could have been a continuation of these studies (Verbec 1618; Mušič 1982).

The study of plague in Slovenian territories has developed through several distinct phases and has been shaped by several generations of historians who gradually developed an understanding of this important epidemiological and social phenomenon. Janez Vajkard Valvasor’s *Die Ehredess Hertzogthums Crain* (1689) provided the first comprehensive account of the plague epidemics in Carniola, documenting outbreaks, folk remedies and social reactions to the disease. Vladimir Travner’s monograph *Kuga na Slovenskem* (1934) represents the next important milestone that systematically dealt with the plague epidemics in the Slovenian lands, focussing on public health measures and mortality rates. Ema Umek’s study ‘Kuga na Štajerskem v letih 1679–1683’ (1958) made an important contribution to the understanding of the last major epidemic in Styria, while Majda Smole wrote a study on the plague in Carniola in the sixteenth century (1957). Božo Otorepec documented the occurrence of the plague in central Slovenia in ‘Gradivo za

zgodovino Ljubljane v srednjem veku’ (1965), mentioning the plague in July 1466 and the ban on the city of Udine travelling to Ljubljana due to suspicion of the plague in June 1496 (Otorepec 1965, X/81, X/94). More recent research has produced new methodological approaches and in-depth regional studies. In his works on the plague, particularly in the Lower Carniola region, Boris Golec (2022) illuminated the epidemiological picture of Lower Carniola and made the radical observation that the sources documenting these epidemics often contain exaggerated death figures, making it difficult to accurately assess the actual situation. Many historical records that mention high death rates are often inaccurate and the demographic consequences of the epidemics were in reality less dramatic than depicted. The epidemics also caused economic difficulties as the closures and quarantines disrupted trade routes, leading to poverty and shortages. Although the epidemics were destructive by nature, their actual consequences were often overlooked, although they remain in the collective memory (Golec 2022). Urška Bratož (formerly Železnik) made important contributions to the understanding of the social aspects of epidemics in the Littoral region. She investigated the plague outbreaks in the towns of the northern Adriatic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, focussing on legal records, containment measures and the impact on the population, especially during the 1630–1631 epidemic in Koper, and comparing the methods of plague control between Venetian Istria and the Austrian territories (Železnik 2007; 2013; 2015; Bratož 2020).

Based on this work, several important findings about the plague in the Slovenian territories have emerged. The disease spread mainly

- 1 Theriac: the term ‘theriac’ comes from the Greek word *θηριακή* (*thēriakē*), which means ‘of wild animals’. It was a complex medicinal concoction containing various ingredients such as opium, myrrh, saffron, ginger, cinnamon and castor oil. Theriac was believed to have protective properties against poisons and was used as a universal antidote in ancient times. It was particularly popular in the Roman and Byzantine eras and was often associated with the treatment of snake bites and other toxic exposures.
- 2 Mithridate: mithridate refers specifically to a type of theriac named after Mithridates VI, the king of Pontus who ruled from 120 to 63 BC. According to historical accounts, Mithridates developed this antidote to protect himself from poisoning, as he was known to have been the target of numerous assassination attempts. Mithridates consisted of various ingredients, similar to theriac, and was considered a general antidote for a variety of poisons. Over time, the term ‘mithridate’ has come to refer to any all-purpose antidote. Both theriac and mithridate reflect the ancient understanding of pharmacology and efforts to create remedies for the dangers of poisons in the environment.

along the trade routes from the Italian harbours through the Karst region into the interior, with major outbreaks occurring in Ljubljana, Celje, Ptuj and the coastal towns between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Together, the authors documented the development of public health measures, from early mediaeval isolation practises to the establishment of formal quarantine stations (*lazareti*) in the seventeenth century. The introduction of the *cordon sanitaire* along the military frontier was particularly significant. Social reactions included the emergence of plague saints (especially Saint Roch), the founding of votive churches and the development of specialised medical practises. The economic impact was severe: some towns lost up to a third of their population during major outbreaks, leading to significant changes in urban development and social structures.

The profound impact of the plague is also reflected in the Slovenian language. The Slovenian language already mentions the word *kuga* (plague) in the Slovenian-Latin German dictionary by Hieronymus Megister from 1603 (Stabej 2023). The term *kuga* is also mentioned by the priest Janez Svetokriški in works published at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century, in the context that the plague is raging in the Italian region (*v laški deželi*), that the plague is coming, that the cattle plague is killing the animals or that someone smells of plague (Snaj 2014). Lexicographers and translators Matija Kastelec and Gregor Vorenc list various terms for the plague in their Slovenian-Latin dictionary (1680–1710): *contagium*, *contagio*, *contagies*, *pestilens* and *pestis*, which is a harmful and deadly disease that kills everyone (Stabej 2014). The Slovenian Linguistic Atlas 1 (Horvat 2011) documents that the lexeme *kuga* (plague) is used throughout Slovenia for ‘serious infectious disease of the lymph nodes, lungs or blood’. While this is the standard literary term, there are some regional variants, such as *pest* or *pešt*, which occur on the Slovenian coast, in the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia and in Austrian Carinthia (Horvat 2011).

Beyond historical and linguistic evidence, the plague also left a significant mark on Slovenian literature. The depiction of plague symptoms in Slovenian literary works – including Fran Ksaver Meško’s *Črna smrt* (1911), Januš Golec’s ‘Zlato in kuga pod križem’ (1934) and Ivan Pregelj’s *Plebanus Joannes* (1920) – shows striking similarities. The core symptoms described throughout include fever, unconsciousness, nausea, chills and pain, which testifies to the uniformity of the plague depictions in these works. In *Črna smrt* (Black Death) and ‘Zlato in kuga pod križem’ (Gold and the Plague under the Cross), the presence of dark spots on the bodies of the victims explicitly indicates bubonic plague. *Plebanus Joannes* offers a distinctive depiction that emphasises additional symptoms: the characteristic smell of the patient, the swollen skin, the presence of pus and the altered physical appearance. In contrast, ‘Zlato in kuga pod križem’ offers a remarkably condensed description of the plague. While the literary depictions vary according to period and style, the basic similarity of the symptoms described remains in all these works, indicating a common understanding of the manifestation of the disease that has persisted throughout Slovenian cultural history (Godec Čizmarevič 2022, 74).

Dr Vladimir Travner, a lawyer and local historian, states in his book on the plague in Slovenia (*Kuga na Slovenskem*, 1934), in which he lists the causes and consequences of this disease based on historical sources, that plague epidemics hit the Slovenian population hard several times in the past. According to Travner, in Slovenia, we can count more than 150 plague years, from 792, when we have the first more precise information about the plague, to 1732, when it occurred for the last time (Travner 1934, 141). Zmazek (2022) states that the plague broke out several times: in the years 1348–1350, 1480 and during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (mainly in the years 1644–1650 and 1678–1683). Until the middle of the sixteenth century, the plague came to Slovenian territory mainly from the east (from Turkey and Hungary,

in connection with the Hungarian and Turkish invasions) and a few times also from the south (from the Republic of Venice, due to lively trade). After 1550, the plague almost always came from the north in Lower Styria and most of Carniola and from the south in Littoral (Primorska) and Lower Carniola (Notranjska), which was related to the political, economic and transport connections of the individual countries at that time. The centres and starting points of the plague epidemics were almost always towns with heavy traffic, and from there the disease usually spread rapidly in the surrounding area. The border regions, especially Podravje, Bela Krajina, Tržaška and Goriška, were particularly frequently and severely affected. The area around Ljubljana and Gorenjska was less affected, as the authorities had already done everything necessary to contain the destructive force of the epidemic before it spread through the heart of Slovenia. The conditions that enabled and accelerated the epidemics were, as elsewhere in Europe, mainly poor hygienic, housing and sanitary conditions (cramped, stuffy and often populated by rodents, fleas and lice, poor and monotonous diet, lack of hygiene, lack of sanitary facilities, lack of or severely inadequate medical care), difficult economic conditions, unfavourable weather conditions (floods, droughts) and other natural disasters (earthquakes, locust attacks) and the associated crop failures and famines (Zmazek 2022).

Travner states that the epidemics claimed so many victims over many centuries – especially in the Middle Ages – because sanitary and hygienic conditions were extremely neglected. Space in the cities was very limited due to the walls. As a result, the streets were narrow and dark. They had no sewerage system. But if there were ditches, they were so narrow and slightly sloped that the heat could not drain away well. In bad weather, it flooded the streets and squares and formed large, dirty and smelly puddles. Rubbish and waste was usually dumped in front of the houses and rarely taken away. The cesspits were usually poorly constructed so that their

contents often spilled into the neighbourhood. Even in larger towns there were stables next to the houses, from which animals (especially pigs) often escaped into the streets and squares. Carrion (dogs, cats, chickens, rats and others) often lay in public places for days and weeks, spreading an unbearable stench. At best, they swept dead animals, waste, rubbish, etc. into nearby streams and rivers, which was even recommended by the infection regulations (e.g. 1625) and city magistrates, e.g. of Ljubljana in 1599. Of course, nobody realised that water was a dangerous carrier of infectious diseases. Livestock was usually slaughtered at home without paying attention to order and cleanliness. Drinking water for humans and animals was taken from public wells, which were not covered but so poorly fenced that contaminated water and other rubbish got into them. Cemeteries were almost always located in settlements around the parish church. These were the normal conditions that prevailed in Slovenia until 1850, when Prussian-style health councils were established in Austria to take care of general hygiene and the proper care of patients (Travner 1934, 23, 24).

Following this example, other authors reported similar conditions. For example, a history professor from Metlika, Zvonko Rus, uses historical sources to describe in literary form how the plague struck Metlika in his book *Metličani, Part I* (2021, 53–54):

Behind the church of St Martin stands a plague sign, which is one of the oldest of its kind and is protected as a monument. In addition to the attacks by the Turks and Uskoks, Metlika was also ravaged by the Black Death. Imagine what Metlika looked like back then: narrow streets, no sewage system, no rubbish collection, no communal services and no communal economy. On these streets, even if they were paved, the townspeople threw everything they didn't need in the houses: rubbish, dead cats, the stinking contents of chamber pots, rags, swill and so on. This heated up on the street

during the day, steamed up and spread the stench in the city air that people breathed in. Furthermore, half-naked children ran through the streets, peeing and pooing wherever they could. And the adults didn't hesitate for too long either. Hordes of hungry cats and dogs and whole swarms of rats were scattered across the city. Even in the houses, they probably didn't pay too much attention to hygiene and bred lice and fleas. The inhabitants of Metlika died like flies and could not be buried on the spot in the parish cemetery of the Three Parishes, but exactly where St Roch's Church stands today, or on the site of the plague sign at St Martin's Church. The inhabitants of Metlika were frequently afflicted by plague, cholera, smallpox, typhus, dysentery and occasionally famine. The most severe outbreaks of plague occurred in 1431, 1510, 1646, 1647 and 1691 and then again from 1720 to 1730, i.e. for ten years.³

Travner explains (1934) that in the years 872 and 873, Slovenia, especially Lower Styria, was hit by extreme heat and drought. At the same time, huge swarms of locusts flew in, devastating the Ptujsko polje in particular. The wind drove them into the Drava, but the waves threw them back onto land. Here, the carcasses of the locusts rotted and spread an unbearable stench. As a result, a major epidemic broke out in Ptuj and the surrounding area, killing many people. In the following years, similar conditions prevailed throughout Europe (Travner 1934, 91). In 1542 and 1543, large swarms of locusts also flew into Carniola and Styria, devouring everything that was green in a very short time. A great famine followed. The rotting carcasses of thousands of animals polluted the air. In 1542, in the area around Celje, especially on the border with Carniola, almost all landowners fled for fear of the plague epidemic. Between Maribor and Kamnica at the end of the nineteenth century, there was a plague sign with the year 1543 as a remind-

er that infected corpses were buried in this place at that time (p. 96).

Ptuj also experienced the horrors of the locust invasion in 1672, exactly 800 years after the invasion of locusts in 872, with swarms again arriving in such massive numbers that they darkened the sun. Strong winds drove them into the Drava River, causing mass drowning. The waves then deposited countless carcasses along the shoreline, where decomposition produced an overwhelming stench. An epidemic followed, which only stopped the following year (Travner 1934, 112).

During the plague, infected human corpses often lay unburied for a long time on roads, fields and in thickets, so that they were torn apart by dogs and wild animals, as for example near Ptuj in 1682. Other bodies rotted for weeks and months in abandoned houses. Such cases occurred mainly in the countryside, where entire houses and settlements often died out, so that there was a lack of undertakers to bury the dead. In the cities, too, piles of corpses often lay in the streets. Everyone ran away from the infected corpses. They spread such a terrible stench that nobody could stay near them. There was also a high risk of infection. That is why everyone – except the gravediggers – was strictly forbidden to touch the corpses. The locals had to hire a brave man as quickly as possible to pull the corpse out of the house with an iron hook on a long pole. It was only in later times (especially after the provisions of the Infection Ordinance of 1710) that corpses were covered with sheets or placed in coffins made of thin wood and incensed. Infected corpses were destined for their own cemeteries outside the towns and villages, which the communities had to take care of. They dug large and deep plague pits in which the corpses were disposed of, sprinkled with quicklime and then raked. They often even buried the apparently dead. When the epidemic ended, common monuments (plague signs) were erected on the common graves of the victims. Here and there the

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

bodies were later exhumed and transferred to regular cemeteries, which had to be done secretly as the authorities did not allow this (Travner 1934, 46, 47).

According to the Chronicle of the parish of St Vid, written by Matej Slekovec⁴ (as cited in Hojnik 2025, 300), the plague began to attack again with devastating force in 1645:

Due to the townspeople's lack of caution, the disease spread throughout St Vid and the Haloze region. The victims suffered from successive and consistent symptoms: violent stomach cramps attacked them one after the other, some had acute chest pains, while others developed buboes characterised by bloody red spots on their bodies. The disease progressed with frightening speed – most of those affected succumbed within 24 hours after feeling a paralysing weakness. Only a few survived for several days and recoveries were extremely rare. The corpses of the deceased were a gruesome sight, as they quickly turned black after death and gave off an overwhelming stench. 'This is death,' people whispered to each other as despair spread through the community. Some residents thought of fleeing, but quickly realised they had nowhere to go – conditions in the neighbouring region of Haloze were just as bad. By July 1645, the epidemic had already affected half of the houses in St Vid. The homes of those infected were quarantined, marked with conspicuous white crosses, and supplies were delivered through the windows to minimise contact. When a death occurred, families resorted to secret burials, usually held at night behind their homes. The toll taken by the plague went beyond the human victims and devastated the local economy. With so many people dead, agricultural labour in the vineyards and fields was neglected. The survivors

faced severe shortages and were unable to meet their tax obligations. In response to these circumstances, the parish priest of St Vid, Tomaž Zahely, asked the provincial government for tax relief for his parishioners – a request that was readily granted by the authorities.

In addition to the descriptions of living conditions, hygiene and the tragedy of rotting corpses and their odour, some Slovenian-language literary works are based on the belief in the cleansing power of fire and smoke. Fire is often associated with rituals and ceremonies aimed at purifying or cleansing people, objects or spaces.

Fumigation was the most important method of preventing the plague. This practise was based on the belief that fire had purifying properties and could clear the air. Various fragrant or smoky woods were used for this purpose, including cypress, pine, juniper, oak and beech. In addition to pleasant scents, unpleasant-smelling substances were also used, including castoreum, galbanum, sulphur, burnt leather, horns and gunpowder. Gunpowder was particularly prized and was used from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth century (Byfleet 2023).

The function and occurrences of the purifying fire were described in detail in James Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1922) in the chapter on the 'Need-fire' and in several places in earlier versions of the book. Frazer claims that the fire festivals are all celebrated periodically at certain times of the year and date back to a very distant time. But apart from these regularly recurring celebrations, farmers in many parts of Europe resorted to a fire ritual at irregular intervals in times of hardship and distress, especially when their livestock was afflicted by a plague. Sometimes the need-fire was referred to as a 'wild fire', no doubt to distinguish it from the tame fire produced by ordinary methods. Among the

4 The first part of the chronicle was written by Matej Slekovec (1846–1903), who worked as a priest in the neighbouring parish of St Mark from 1887. In 1883, he published the section on the outbreak of the plague in the St Vid Chronicle and also published it in *Slovenski gospodar* (see: Slekovec 1883, 142).

Slavic peoples it is called 'living fire'. The history of fire can be traced from the early Middle Ages, when it was described by the Church as a pagan superstition, to the first half of the nineteenth century, when it was still occasionally practised in various parts of Germany, England, Scotland and Ireland. Among the Slavic peoples it seems to have lasted even longer. The usual occasion for the performance of this rite was the outbreak of the plague or cattle-disease, against which the need-fire was regarded as an infallible remedy (Frazer 1922, 638, 639).

The Slavacist and philologist Radivoj Lenček (1943) confirms Frazer's statements and adds that fire was used by all peoples in various rituals as a means of purification. Even in the non-periodic purification fires, which purified humans, animals and plants by burning and destroying harmful physical and spiritual elements (witches, sorcerers, evil spirits) that haunted all living beings, permanent, recurring fires were lit and corresponding rituals performed. Such fires, known as 'living fire' among Slavic peoples, were most often lit for infectious diseases, against which the 'living fire' was always an effective apotropaic remedy.⁵ The 'living fire' was sacred, as its smoke and ashes were also used for various medicinal purposes. But the most effective form of purification took place in the fire itself, by walking or jumping over the flames. Lenček adds that in Upper Bavaria, for example, cattle were driven through the solstice fire; the sick to get well, the healthy to be protected from the plague and other evils during the year. Sick cattle were often driven through the smoke and flames two or three times so that they were burnt to death. Every year on St Roch's day, Polish farmers drove their cattle through the 'living fire' three times a day to protect them from infectious diseases. Not only the cattle, but also the people could be purified in such a fire. According to Lenček, this is proven by the numerous cases of boys and girls who jumped over bonfires and 'living flames' on various occasions. In

all such and similar cases, the purifying moment plays the greatest role (Lenček 1943, 61).

Given the belief in the purifying properties of fire, it is not surprising that some Slovenian literary works contain detailed descriptions of the plague and the measures taken to combat it. These descriptions are based on the belief that fire has the ability to purify the air and drive away the plague, as well as the idea that smoke can purify the atmosphere. A vivid example of this can be found in the book *The Black Death* (1911) by Franc Ksaver Meško, a writer and priest.

His history-based literary work depicts the period of the plague in Ptuj and the surrounding area and in Hajdina from May 1645 to autumn 1646. Literary figures also remember the plague epidemics in the period from 1623–1625. Meško writes (1931):

The world around them presented them with a marvellous scene. Everywhere they looked, bonfires were burning and smouldering. They were lit for the first time – already during earlier epidemics – by refugees from Ptuj in Haloze. It was an agreed sign to relatives and acquaintances that they were still alive. They were also lit by farmers living alone. According to the custom of the mountain dwellers, they signalled to their distant relatives that they had a corpse in the house. Because why should they signal that they are still alive? Thank God, who still drives away the danger and still tames the murderer! So, the original sign of life itself became a harbinger of death. Slowly, the fires began to be burnt everywhere, for many claimed that fire purifies the air and the smoke kills poisonous germs. So even now the land was full of fires, all shrouded in smoke.

The author also refers to the doctors who helped the infected in various ways, including with incense: 'The doctor distributed the medicines he had brought with him: powder, various

5 Apotropaic remedy: a means of defence against evil which, according to folk belief, has the power to ward off and protect against misfortune.

liquids and incense, with which the room and the whole house were to be fumigated so that the germs would stop and the risk of infection would decrease.' (Meško 1931).

In Croatia, popular belief in connection with the epidemic also included the belief that smoke and ashes could cleanse from disease, and so things were often 'cleansed' with ashes or smoke (Skenderović 2003, 169). Although medicine already knew a great deal about the plague in the eighteenth century, people saw the occurrence of the epidemic as the hand of God punishing them for their sins. This view was supported by the court itself, so that numerous royal letters also spoke of God's punishment and called on subjects to repent and lead a moral life. Alongside this belief, which was supported by both the official government and the church, there were also many superstitions in which some characteristic beliefs emerged that had ancient, pre-Christian roots. Examples of purification with smoke and ashes were everywhere, so it seems that this method was also accepted by the official authorities at the time. The houses of the infected were often burnt, but the authorities simply sprayed some houses with vinegar, which was apparently believed to destroy the infection (pp. 168, 169).

The Capuchin monk Fedele from Zadar described in great detail the disinfection methods used to combat the plague in Split, Croatia, between 1783 and 1784, when the city was completely isolated for fifteen and a half months (Donadini 1988). These methods included various forms of fumigation of the rooms. Fedele writes (Donadini 1988, 79):

When the house is empty, the cobwebs are removed, the house is swept and all the rooms are exposed to the so-called pungent odours of incense for two days, with the doors and windows completely closed. These scents are obtained by placing tarred ribbons, sulphur and cow hooves in the burners. The whole house is then whitewashed with lime and, after drying, incensed twice more with scents, the first time

with the pungent scents just mentioned and the second time with the so-called sweet fragrance, which is obtained from a mixture of frankincense, myrtle, sage, rosemary and juniper berries. With this second scent, the task of deodorising the house is complete. Although all things can be completely dissolved by boiling, soaking or airing, some people, out of excessive fear, allow all or most of these things that could otherwise be saved to burn. Using fire is really the most complete and quickest way that is more than safe. In this way, even the largest house can be completely and perfectly disinfected in a few hours, and the whole city in a few days, so that it would not have to be subjected in any way to the health measures of the city. What I feared most was the danger of a fire breaking out because the beams had caught fire and the rooms were filled with smoke. The fire that I feared so much had actually already broken out. So, if I had not come at the right time and warned the others, the fire would have spread quickly because of all the things that had accumulated and the constant wind.

Another method of sanitising the air, which Father Fedele mentions with great reluctance, is the following (Donadini 1988, 84):

Instead of the laborious and manifold fumigation of houses, it would suffice for this purpose to expose the room to the evaporation and fumigation of quicklime thrown into water. Moreover, this lime dipped in water can later be used to whitewash the walls. And immediately there are extraordinary savings, not only in time and effort, but also in so many additional resources used today for this purpose, and finally in the firewood used when fumigating houses. At the same time, we have got rid of the danger of a fire which had already affected one house here and would have spread to the whole street if the usual strong wind had blown that night.

The Plague Altar of St Sebastian in the Church of St Andrew in Makole: Close View and Interpretation

a) *The upper part of the plague altar*

An example of visual art related to plague is the so-called 'Plague altar' of St Sebastian by the sculptor Jožef Štraub with a plague scene by an unknown painter in the lower part of the artwork, which was created between 1751 and 1756 and is located in the parish church of St Andrew in Makole in Slovenia.

The side plague altar, which was badly damaged, dilapidated, worm-eaten and rotten, was restored in 2018 (Šiles and Radšel 2018).

The wooden altar consists of a wooden background and polychrome statues of angels and saints. In the lower part, there are statues of St Charles Borromeo and St Roch. In the attic of the altar are four more angels, two smaller and two larger, as well as nine angel heads with wings. In the centre is a statue of Jesus Christ with the rays of the sun, with silvered clouds in the background (Šiles and Radšel 2018, 2).

On the left side of the altar is a statue of St Charles Borromeo, who is known for having helped plague patients during the plague in Milan in 1576, and on the right side is a statue of St Roch, the patron saint against the plague.

The wooden painting on the altarpiece shows St Peter, who is depicted with a key because he is traditionally regarded as the keeper of the keys to heaven, and St Sebastian, a patron saint against contagious and sudden infectious diseases. Black clouds can be seen above them, from which lightning bolts shoot down to earth. As it is said that 'such diseases are like an arrow shot secretly', St Sebastian is usually depicted 'tied to a tree or a pillar with arrows in his body' ('Sveti Sebastijan (Boštjan) – mučenec' n.d.). On this plague altar, he is holding arrows in his right hand, the tips of which are pointing away from him. 'Initially, the saint was the patron saint against the plague, later together with St Roch, who slowly took his place' ('Sveti Sebastijan (Boštjan) – mučenec' n.d.).

St Sebastian is one of the most venerated saints. He is the protector (patron saint) against the plague. The rapid cessation of this disease in Rome in 680 is attributed to his intercession. In depictions of St Sebastian, arrows symbolise his role as protector against the plague and his martyrdom. These images, often showing him bound and pierced by arrows, reflect his unwavering faith and courage in the face of persecution. The arrows, which in the past were invoked to protect against illness, symbolise both his suffering and the divine intervention that gives hope to those who suffer. Overall, they embody themes of martyrdom, protection, resilience and divine grace and emphasise the importance of St Sebastian in the context of suffering and healing, especially in times of plague.

The arrows of pestilence are deeply rooted in many languages. The Hebrew words for plague (*maggefah*, *negef*, *naga*, *makkah*) all imply a blow. The English word 'plague' comes from the Latin *plaga*, which is derived from the Greek *πληγή*, meaning blow. Similarly, the French word *fléau*, which means both flail and plague, comes from the Latin *flagellum* and Greek *θλιβω*, afflicted. In Arabic, the term for plague evokes the idea of being 'stung' or 'pricked', reminiscent of the snakes or arrows associated with the disease (Payne Crawford 1914, 8–9).

St Roch, also known as St Rocco, is often invoked as a protector against plague and infectious diseases. His symbolism is rich and complex, reflecting both his life and the historical context in which he became a figure of veneration. St Roch is primarily regarded as the patron saint of those suffering from infectious diseases, especially the plague. This association stems from his own life story, in which he was involved in the plague outbreaks of the fourteenth century. His actions are an example of compassion and selflessness, qualities that play a major role in times of crisis. In artistic representations, St Roch is often depicted as a pilgrim with a shell, together with a staff and a dog. The dog symbolises loyalty and comradeship. In some stories, it is said to have brought him bread when he was in



Figure 2: The lower part of the painting in the plague altar is by an unknown painter and depicts everyday life in times of plague. Makole, Church of St Andrew, Slovenia (a detail from Šiles and Radšnel 2018, 26).

isolation because of the plague. This symbolism emphasises the themes of support and care, both divine and earthly. St Roch is often depicted with a wound on his thigh caused by the plague. This visible sign is a reminder of the human suffering and trials that occur during an epidemic. It also symbolises the healing that can come from faith and the importance of caring for the suffering.

b) The lower part of the plague altar

In addition to these obvious symbols of the plague, the lower part of the plague altar in Makole shows harrowing scenes from everyday life during the plague epidemic. This part of the painting by an unknown author shows a plague scene in which the dying and sick lie or sit on the ground in various states of suffering (nine adults and one infant), while four men and a woman look after them, carry the deceased away on stretchers, or offer help to those still clinging to life. The dying or dead figures are depicted naked; only their genitals are covered with a cloth. This was a common artistic convention in Christian religious paintings and symbolised respect for the deceased. This conscious artistic decision preserves human dignity, even though it depicts the most devastating circumstances of mass death. The cloth covering symbolises an important cultural and religious tradition that has preserved decency in the depiction of death, even under the catastrophic conditions of the plague.

Of particular note is the subtle yet disturbing motif of the infant next to a half-naked mother figure. This compositional choice is reminiscent of the gruesome reality documented in cultural narratives from the region – infants attempting to suckle from deceased mothers (Tomažič 1990, 66; Ramšak 2022, 669). While the painting preserves a certain religious decorum, the folk tales from the same cultural area of Pohorje offer more explicit descriptions of this phenomenon.

The story *The Merchant's Son* ('*Trgovčev sin*', Tomažič 1990) from Pohorje takes this motif to an even more disturbing level by showing a desperate child feeding on the dead. What may appear to be exaggerated folklore finds its visual equivalent, albeit in a more restrained form, in the altar painting. Both depictions capture the same fundamental horror – the reversal of nurturing motherhood through death, with the child instinctively seeking nourishment from the mother who can no longer give it.

These textual-visual parallels show how both religious art and folktales address a collective trauma, even if the religious art maintains certain boundaries of propriety that the folktales transgress by explicitly mentioning an unconscious mother lying on the floor and a crying child beside her, sucking blood from an open vein on her arm (Tomažič 1990, 66). The subtle suggestion of the image and the explicit description of the narrative are complementary strategies for preserving the cultural memory of the profound disruption that the plague caused even in the most basic human relationship – that between mother and child.

On the left side of the painting, a woman is depicted covering her nose with a handkerchief in her right hand, probably due to the stench of dead. With her left hand, she offers the handkerchief to a sick man sitting on the ground. He stretches out his arms towards her to protect himself from infectious miasmas. This detail of the painting, showing the woman covering her nose to avoid inhaling miasma, indicates at least two things: firstly, that people were aware

of the transmission of the disease and that they took simple self-protective measures. That the stench must have been unbearable can also be inferred from other details of the scene, such as the green grass, bright green trees in the background, and the bare-footed men with rolled-up sleeves carrying away the corpses, from which we can conclude that the painter has depicted an epidemic tragedy in warm weather, such as late spring, summer or early autumn. The woman in the picture holding a handkerchief to her nose indicates not only protection against stench, but also an understanding of the concept of miasma.

This scene reflects the contemporary understanding of disease transmission, which was based on the miasma theory. In this context, it is interesting to mention Marko Anton Plenčič (1705–1786), a Slovenian doctor who studied medicine in Padua and worked at the Faculty of Medicine in Vienna, who was firmly convinced that all infectious diseases were caused by living pathogens. In 1762, his first book was published under the title *Opera medico physica*.⁶ Plenčič's practical experience in treating patients with infectious diseases and the influence of his professor, Carlo Crogrosi, who had written a book on contagious diseases in cattle in 1714, made him realise that his ideas were correct. Plenčič carried out experiments with variolisation and proved that variola was caused by a specific pathogen. He was also convinced that the scarlet fever infection was caused by airborne germs that entered the body through the skin or respiratory organs. Plenčič applied his idea of specific pathogens of infectious diseases to veterinary medicine, agriculture and the economy. One hundred years before Pasteur, Plenčič explained the causes of infection with contagious diseases in humans, animals and plants and described the characteristics of disease agents (Stropnik 1998, 153–156).

This theory about the transmission of diseases through the air, which dates back to antiquity, was well known among the people, which is why the painter depicted it as protecting the respiratory tract with a handkerchief.

Based on the painting, which shows a plague scene, we can analyse the symptoms depicted to determine the probable nature of the plague. What we can observe in this artwork is that several plague victims are being cared for or carried away. Most importantly, however, there are no visible buboes (swollen lymph nodes) nor dark skin lesions (plague spots), the victims appear to be lying down or being carried and the scene suggests acute onset and high mortality.

Given the absence of the buboes typical of bubonic plague and the apparently rapid progression suggested by the scene, it is probably pneumonic plague. Pneumonic plague is transmitted directly from person to person through respiratory droplets, has an acute onset, has an extremely high mortality rate if untreated, does not produce the characteristic buboes of bubonic plague, and the primary symptoms are respiratory/pulmonary rather than visible external manifestations.

Since the first symptoms of pneumonic plague (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control n.d.) appear 1 to 3 days after infection, with chest pain, production of thick mucus in the lungs, shortness of breath and death within 24 hours, it is possible that the woman in the painting is covering her airways with a handkerchief because she is even the slightest bit aware of the disease, since this form of plague was transmitted by droplets. It could be a sign of her fear of infection and her desire to protect herself and others during the epidemic. The painting appears to depict the horrific reality of caring for and disposing of victims during an outbreak of pneumonic plague.

⁶ Full title: *Opera medico physica, in quatuor tractatus digesta, quorum primus contagii morborum ideam novam una cum additamento de lue bovina, anno 1761. epidemice grassante sistit. Secundus de variolis, tertius de scarlatina, quartus de terra motu, sed precipue illo horribili agit, qui prima novembris anno 1755. Europam, Africam, et Americam conquassabat.* The book was translated into Slovenian in 1998 under the title *O bolezenskem kontagiju: nova ideja*.

The depiction of naked dead and sick people whose genitals are covered for reasons of decency on the plague altar also shows that people were aware of the risk of infection through clothing and it is supported with other sources. The nakedness of the dead and sick depicted on the plague altar can be explained by the hygiene measures taken to contain the disease.

Žepič, who analysed pandemic criminal law (2022), notes that although European countries faced devastating plague pandemics, there was no significant criminal intervention by the state in pandemics until the sixteenth century, except in some Mediterranean coastal towns and northern Italian cities. The prosecution of sanitary offences was the responsibility of the sanitary magistrates, who had broad criminal jurisdiction. The 'pandemic criminal law' was characterised by harsh punishments reminiscent of martial law, by the criminalisation of both commission and omission, of intentional and negligent offences and by the abandonment of the principle of legality when this was already an established legal principle (Žepič 2022, 50). The Plague Statute that Visconti issued for Reggio in Modena in 1374 stipulated that infected persons had to leave town immediately and isolate themselves in the countryside until they recovered or died. The isolation lasted at least ten days and also applied to those who were in contact with the infected persons. The property of infected persons was confiscated, contaminated movable property was destroyed and wilful spreaders could expect to have their property confiscated. The admission of infected refugees was prohibited under threat of the death penalty (pp. 53–54).

With this kind of pandemic criminal law, we can explain why the dying and dead are depicted naked on the plague altar in Makole. Their clothes were destroyed, burnt, so that the infection could not spread further.

The white smoke on the left side of the artwork – which at first glance could be mistaken for a fluffy white cloud – could have a double meaning. On closer inspection, however,

we can see that the smoke is actually rising from the top of the hill and stands out against the sky. On the one hand, it could be the smoke from burnt, infected clothing, which is also confirmed by the depiction of the naked bodies. On the other hand, it could be a representation of the miasma itself, as in popular belief the plague was associated with the appearance of mist, smoke or vapour.

This interpretation could stem from the belief, based on observations of the plague in Switzerland, Austria, Germany and Iceland (Kropej-Telban 2022, 30; Gunnell 2001, 49; Travner 1934, 76.), that the plague could also appear in the form of mist, smoke, vapour or a cloud that settles in the valley and kills people and livestock (Kropej-Telban 2022, 30). From the mouths of people dying of the plague, it escapes like a cloud of blue vapour, which can penetrate various objects and, when it comes out, causes the plague (Travner 1934, 76), which corresponds to the description of a miasma.

Vinko Möderndorfer, who was the author of the first comprehensive systematic work on the folk medicine of the Slovenes (1964), also explains that fire was considered a natural disinfectant. In some places, when the plague spread, every stranger who entered the place had to pass through the fire and only then were they allowed to come into contact with the people. In Lower Carniola (Dolenjska), on the evening of the bonfire, everyone jumped over the fire three times to be protected from the plague. In Bela Krajina, bonfires were lit in the courtyard during the plague and the cattle were driven through them (Möderndorfer 1964, 31). The ethnographer Jožef Pajek reports that the tradition of lighting bonfires on Easter morning, called 'vuzenice', survived in Styria until the end of the nineteenth century, and at the same time people firmly believed that the plague would not reach the place where the smoke from these bonfires was lit and that the buckwheat would not wither (Pajek 1884, 84).

By zooming in and focusing the image, we can also understand the sense of horror of the

moment. The two men on the right, carrying the corpse on a stretcher, are visibly affected by the situation. The first (on the right), who almost literally walks out of the painting, has wide-open, almost bulging eyes, and the man behind him is screaming in horror and crying in agony, which we can see through his open mouth. The figure's protruding eyes are also strikingly reminiscent of exophthalmos, a medical condition characterised by an abnormal protrusion of the eyeballs and usually associated with Graves' disease – an autoimmune disorder affecting the thyroid gland. My main interpretation focuses on how the depicted features effectively convey the psychological horror of the plague and the traumatic burden of dealing with the dead. The bulging eyes and agonised facial expressions powerfully convey the overwhelming horror and suffering that prevails during epidemics. As a secondary observation, the figure's facial hair (a goat beard) could possibly be a goitre (enlargement of the thyroid gland), given the painter's obvious anatomical inaccuracies elsewhere, such as the poorly executed right arm of the deceased being car-

ried. This secondary medical interpretation is speculative and certainly not the primary angle through which I am analysing the work. Nevertheless, it creates an interesting, if unintended, parallel between the historical artistic depiction and contemporary medical understanding. While I acknowledge that I may be projecting modern medical knowledge onto historical art, the primary meaning remains the artist's powerful depiction of plague terror, with any medical subtext only serving to enrich our appreciation of how effectively the visual elements convey human suffering during historical epidemics.

The columnar sign with a pyramid roof and a niche⁷, the only masonry object in the painting, indicates that the painted scene is of local significance and originates from Makole or its surroundings, as Christian columnar signs of spiritual significance built in this way are often found along country roads and are particularly common in alpine and pre-alpine areas. The presence of a columnar sign with a pyramid roof and a niche in the background and the religious symbolism above this painting suggest that re-

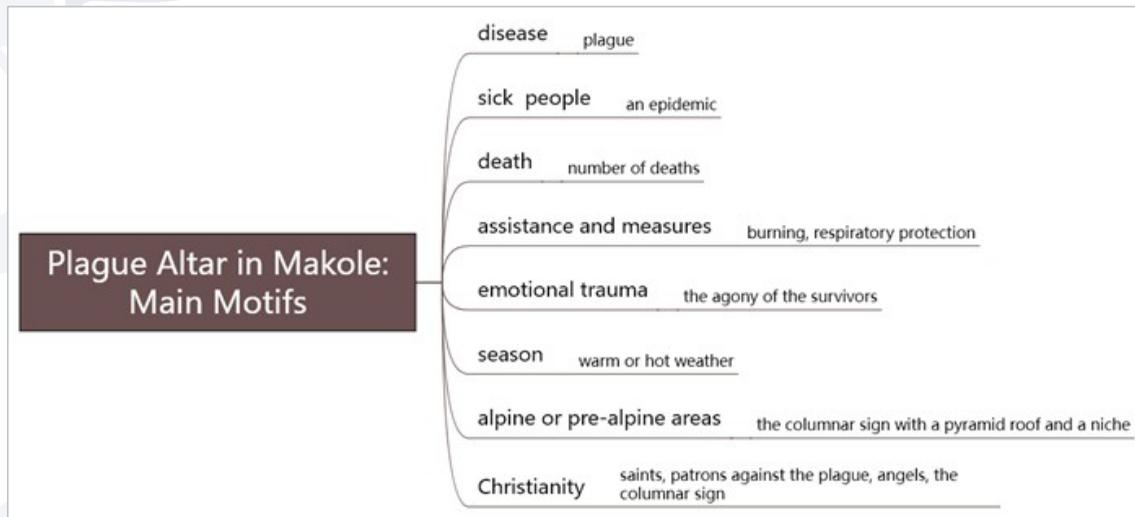


Figure 3: The main motifs of plague altar in the church of St Andrew in Makole, Slovenia (mind map created by Mojca Ramšak (2025))

7 The art historian Marjan Zadnikar (1964, 20) cites this chapel from the painting of the plague altar in the parish church in Makole as an example of the existence of columnar signs (*slošno znamenje*) in the eighteenth century

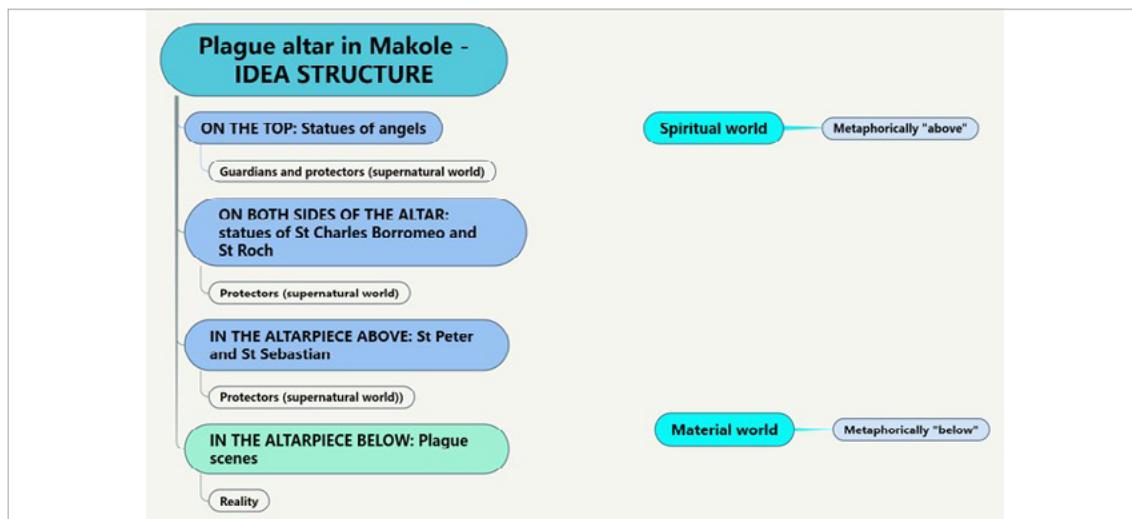


Figure 4: The idea structure of plague altar in the church of St Andrew in Makole, Slovenia (mind map created by Mojca Ramšak (2025))

religious institutions played an important role in plague epidemics.

The depiction of real, sensory scenes of the plague and the supernatural world, such as angels and saints, on the plague altar serves as a link between the spiritual and the material. It is no coincidence that the real world with the plague scenes is depicted in the lower part of the painting, because in a religious context, everyday life, human experiences and emotions, which the viewer can understand and experience on a physical level, are metaphorically 'below', while the metaphysical level of the depiction with protectors against the plague and guardian angels is 'above'. In art and religion, real-life scenes can be used to illustrate moral values (in this case, helping others) or historical events that are important to the community (in this case, plague epidemics). By combining real scenes with supernatural symbols such as angels and saints, a space for reflection and spiritual experience is created that encourages the viewer to think about their place in the world and their relationship with higher powers. It could be said that the depiction of real plague scenes in the context of art and religion serves as a means of communication, enabling the viewer to understand and tap into

deeper religious truths by connecting the material and spiritual levels. The viewer can identify with the scenes of suffering and at the same time seek solace in supernatural symbols. This interaction between the viewer and the art can lead to a personal spiritual experience. The plague altar as a work of art not only presents the spiritual aspect, but also offers the viewer psychological support in difficult times. The artistic expression acts as a therapeutic tool that has helped people deal with fear and uncertainty in times of plague epidemics.

Many altars with patron saints against the plague were erected in the surroundings of Makole (e.g. in many places on Pohorje and at its foot, such as St Barbara (in Malahorna), St Blaise (in Slovenska Bistrica), St Francis Xavier (in Vitanje, Slovenska Bistrica, Kot and Slovenske Konjice), St George (in Slovenske Konjice, Ritoznoj, Slovenska Bistrica and Hoče), St Roch (in Vitanje, Janževski Vrh, Kovača vas and Prihova), St Sebastian (in Vitanje, Slovenska Bistrica, Prihova and Golika), and St Valentin (in Gorenje pri Zrečah and Prihova) (Ramšak 2019, 45–52, 104–106; 2022, 670).

In the parish of Makole, which includes 13 villages, there are 16 chapels and three signs,

2 of which are plague signs (Žnidar 2012, 62). At the crossroads in the village of Savinsko, there is a pillar-shaped plague sign from the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which, according to the locals, is more than 500 years old and has been restored several times (pp. 77–78). On the main Poljčane-Majšperk road, near the former Marolf Inn under Štatenberg Castle, there is a column-shaped plague sign from the second half of the seventeenth century (p. 98).

Plague signs, individual saints, and patron saints against the plague, which can be found in churches, chapels and other monuments, bear witness to the historical presence of the disease, the fear it caused and the deep belief in the power of healing through the intercession of the saints. Throughout history, the presence of plague signs and the veneration of certain saints reflect the profound impact the disease had on communities, often leading to the adoption of rituals and prayers to gain divine protection. These practices not only served as a source of comfort in times of crisis, but also emphasised the cultural and spiritual importance of faith in overcoming adversity.

Conclusion

To summarise, the plague altar from the parish church in Makole, Slovenia, is a poignant reminder of the profound impact of epidemics on both art and everyday life. This artistic representation not only reflects the fears and struggles of communities in times of crisis but also epitomises the resilience and hope that emerge in the face of adversity. The altar is a testament to how art can capture the collective memory of a society struggling with loss and uncertainty, while providing solace and a sense of continuity. As we navigate our own challenges in the current post-Covid-19 era, the lessons we learn from such historical artefacts remind us of the enduring human spirit and the way creativity can provide solace and meaning amidst the chaos of an epidemic.

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Summary

This article explores the sensory experiences associated with death during plague outbreaks within a specific historical and geographical context. The author focuses on the plague altar from the mid-eighteenth century in the Haloze Church of St Andrew in Makole, Slovenia, created between 1751 and 1756 by the sculptor Jožef Štraub. Particular attention is given to the lower part of the altarpiece, painted by an unknown artist, which depicts harrowing scenes of everyday life during plague epidemics.

The plague altar conveys religious messages and reflects contemporary knowledge and belief in miasma theory, particularly understandings of plague odour, plague regulations, and civil protection organisation. The lower painting shows nine adults and one infant in various states of suffering, while four men and a woman provide care or carry away the deceased on stretchers. Notably, a woman covers her nose with a handkerchief due to the stench of corpses, indicating awareness of airborne disease transmission according to miasma theory.

The analysis employs Roland Barthes' concepts of *punctum* and *studium*, using the viewer's personal emotional response as a starting point for broader historical and public health interpretation of plague in the region. The article surveys the history of plague in Slovenian territories from the earliest eighth-century records to the final eighteenth-century outbreaks, examining cultural and spiritual responses to epidemics, including beliefs in the purifying power of fire and smoke.

The altar represents a connection between spiritual and material worlds, with realistic scenes of suffering in the lower part symbolising earthly experience, while saints and angels in the upper part represent supernatural protection. The work serves as visual communication of collective trauma and hope during difficult times.

Povzetek

Članek obravnava čutne izkušnje, povezane s smrtjo v času kuge, in jih umešča v določen zgodovinski kontekst.

vinski ter geografski okvir. Avtorica se osredotoča na kužni oltar iz sredine 18. stoletja v haloški cerkvi sv. Andreja v Makolah v Sloveniji, ki ga je med letoma 1751 in 1756 ustvaril kipar Jožef Štraub. Posebno pozornost namenja spodnjemu delu oltarne slike neznanega avtorja, ki prikazuje grozljive prizore vsakdanjega življenja med kužno epidemijo.

Kužni oltar ne prenaša le verskih sporočil, temveč odraža tudi takratno znanje in vero v teorijo miazme, zlasti razumevanje vonja kuge, predpisov o kugi in organizacije zaščite prebivalstva. Spodnji del slike prikazuje devet odraslih oseb in enega otroka v različnih stanjih trpljenja, medtem ko jim štirje moški in ena ženska nudijo pomoč ali odnašajo umrle na nosilih. Posebej opazna je ženska, ki si zaradi smradu trupel pokriva nos z robčkom, kar kaže na zavedanje o prenašanju bolezni po zraku v skladu z razumevanjem miazme.

Analiza temelji na Barthesovih konceptih *punctum* in *studium*, kjer osebni čustveni odziv gledalca služi kot izhodišče za širšo zgodovinsko in javnozdravstveno razlago kuge v regiji. Članek vključuje pregled zgodovine kuge v slovenskih deželah, od najzgodnejših zapisov iz 8. stoletja do zadnjih izbruhov v 18. stoletju, ter preučuje kulturne in duhovne odzive na epidemije, vključno z verovanji o čistilni moči ognja in dima.

Oltar predstavlja povezavo med duhovnim in materialnim svetom, kjer realni prizori trpljenja v spodnjem delu simbolizirajo zemeljsko izkušnjo, medtem ko svetniki in angeli v zgornjem delu predstavljajo nadnaravno zaščito. Delo služi kot vizualno sporočilo o kolektivni travmi in upanju v težkih časih.