



## Illnesses and remedies

### Health in the correspondence of Francesc de Borja

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### Synopsis

The Monumenta Borgia (MB) collection brings together documents, mainly letters, related to Francesc de Borja (1510-1572), Duke of Gandia, Viceroy of Catalonia and General of the Society of Jesus. The methodical analysis of 2,769 MB documents (Volumes I-VII) evidences important contents of health matters, since almost half of the texts show relatable accounts, offering a wide range of clinical, preventive or therapeutic aspects. In accordance with the initial hypothesis, we verify that the MB enables visualisation of health issues in the 16th century from correspondents, albeit patients or people closely acquainted.

The subgroup of 128 letters written by women, although a minority, is regarded as being especially important, offering a feminine profile with health contents significantly higher than those of men. Women obviously belonged to the elite, erudite aristocracy and monasticism. Prominent figures were Francesca de Castre-Pinós, Duke Joan de Borja's second wife (Father of Francesc), Elionor de Castro, Francisco de Borja's wife, Sister Damiata Trilles, a nurse in Santa Clara, and other nuns from the Borja family; Joan's mother, Sister Maria Gabriela (María Enríquez) or Francesc's daughters and sisters, Sister María de la Creu (María) and Sister Joana de la Creu (Anna), among others.

## Different aspects of health

Almost 3,000 reports related to health have been collected, 78% of which were of clinical or descriptive characteristics, 13.4% therapeutic, 5.6% preventive and 3% of other sorts. From the group of clinical references, a little more than the half of them treated health or illnesses in general, remotely followed by a subgroup with comments on specific ailments (nearly 33%) or referring to deaths (nearly 13%). Of the 761 descriptions of specific pathologies or afflictions to health are notably those caused by violence which, consisting of 203 articles, poses more than a quarter of the total. Apart from sporadic incidents and wars, the documents mention violent actions related to assaults by Berber pirates or Catalonian and Valencian coteries and their repressive companies. Besides knife wounds, gun wounds also appear in the texts illustrating their great expansion in the 16th century. Diverse information about the Inquisition and its victims also appears in them, in particular the Auto-da-fé of 1559 in Valladolid which is extensively narrated. If we exclude violence, the 153 references to fevers constitutes the most numerous group of alterations in health, offering a varied terminology which goes from slow fevers to continuous or cyclic fevers such as tertian fever, quartan fever, double tertian fever or double quartan fever. The next prominent group, mentioned on 61 occasions, is formed by painful or inflammatory processes such as rheumatism, sciatica and gout, among others. Respiratory, digestive, neurological and psychiatric complaints, together with pregnancy and birth, also form a considerable collection, the size of which is between 5% and 6% of the total. In lower percentages are accidental traumas or urine, eye, ear or mouth problems, and so on. Together with the old problems, 'new' illnesses appeared, such as syphilis. Baron Roca, who was imprisoned at that time by Viceroy Borja, suffered from it.

Within the documentary collection we have counted 40 references to epidemics, most of which were after 1550, and were widely dispersed throughout the whole Europe; there is evidence of this in Germany, France and Italy. News abounds in the Iberian Peninsula, notably affecting Castilla La Vieja or specific locations such as Valladolid and Burgos; information was also collected about Andalucía (Seville, Granada) and Murcia. Information of the plague invading the Realm of Aragón is also described and specifically located in Barcelona and Gandia. The Great Plague of Lisbon (1569-1570) deserves a special mention given its apocalyptic dimensions. Only

occasionally types of epidemic such as in the case of yellow fever appear, which was detected during the war of Las Alpujarras. In 1568, the contiguous deaths of two of Francesc de Borja's sisters, Joana Baptista (Isabel) and Joana Evangelista (Anna), have allowed us to detect an epidemic of yellow fever or typhus in Santa Clara's convent in Gandia, which also took out the lives of two nuns more, Dionisia Bona and Clara Tortosa.

Wars, the source of immense damage to health, appear in the MB texts in a more or less explicit way. Clashes between Christians and Turkish-Berbers in Malta (1565) and Lepanto (1571). The battle of Montcontour is an exponent of the disputes between Catholics and Protestants. There is also evidence of the Moorish rebellions and their repression in the Realm of Valencia (Sierra d'Espadà, 1521-1522) or in Granada (Las Alpujarras, 1568-1571). The latter told directly by the Jesuits who accompanied the Cristian army, acquiring special relevance in the texts, the same as the site of Malta, which they found extremely distressing given that they were in Rome. In this sense, other collective calamities are mentioned; the earthquake in Ferrara in 1570 and the shipwreck of the Spanish Armada in 1562 in La Herradura (Màlaga). Finally, in the defeat of the army of Carlos V facing Algiers (1541) the armed conflict and the shipwreck are brought together causing dramatic consequences to health despite their attempt at minimisation, reflected in the correspondence.

In the therapeutic subsection the presence of herbs known as the classical medical material must be noted, for example basil, 'basílico' in the text, (*ocimum basilicum*), aloe (aloe vera), cow tongue (*anchusa azurea*), French lavender, 'butterfly lavender' in the text, (*lavandula stoechas*) and sage (*salvia officinalis*), all of which were sent by the ducal couple, Joan de Borja and Francesca de Castre-Pinós, to her brother, the Viscount of Évol. Rosehip (*rosa canina*) also appears in the text which was sent by Borja's wife, Francesca de Castro, to Francisco de los Cobos, and orange blossom (*citrus aurantium* or *citrus sinensis*), which Sister María de la Creu (María) prepared for her brother Francesc de Borja, when he was General of the Society in Rome. We have also been able to verify three new species of plants of that time; two are American, *lignum vitae* (*guaiacum officinale* or *guaiacum sanctum*), used by Carlos V and by the Jesuit Antonio Araoz, and mechoacan (*ipomoea jalapa?*) intended for the sick Jesuits in Rome. The third plant is from China. Its origin is unclear, Asian (*smilax china*) or American (*smilax pseudochina*), which doctors recommended to the second General

Diego Laínez to treat his final illness. Regarding food, considered medicine too, were significant mixtures of honey and sugar, such as pink sugar, pink honey or quince jam, with or without cinnamon (*cinnamomum verum*); the products were mainly produced in Gandia. There is a reference to spirits as a therapeutic remedy and two references to pharmaceutical compositions: the elaboration of Hamech as a remedy for melancholy, and alkermes, reflected metaphorically. The appearance of Fitero and Alhama of Granada baths show active hydrotherapy. Evacuation of humours, bleeding or laxative processes are mentioned on 31 occasions and the administration of cupping glasses on one. Correspondence in itself was sometimes an important psychotherapeutic instrument as can be seen in some of the letters from Joan de Borja to her brother-in-law or from Francesc de Borja to his son Carles.

The MB contain 37 references to hospitals as active centres for the poor and sick, guest houses and the possibility of reusing buildings. Around twenty places were identified, mainly in Italy and the Iberian Peninsula. In particular, Sant Marc hospital in Gandia, quoted in Francesc de Borja's testamentary disposition; Tavera's hospital in Toledo mentioned by one of his architects, the Jesuit Bartolomé Bustamante; the Españoles, in Asti (Italy), because of its distinct financing, based on the quotes of soldiers; the Goa (India), because of its distant location with active participation of the Jesuits.

Doctors, surgeons, barbers or physicians are mentioned on 87 occasions, identifying the person in 14 cases. Prominent figures appear like Ferrán López de Escoriaza, Francisco Valles and Fernando de Mena, among others. As well as two doctors from Gandia, Melcior Ruíz and Martí Escobar, related to the Ducal House, or the editors of a report for Borja, Martín Santacara and Pedro Gálvez. Duke Joan de Borja recommended to his brother-in-law a Moorish-Valencian doctor, whose identity is unknown. The attitude towards medical professionals was usually respectful and the doctors' orders were followed, although there are some detractive comments, which were occasionally openly denigrating.

Preventive and conservative attitudes have been identified in 166 comments, most of which show that Society gave priority attention to the health of its members, following Ignatian spirituality in the Constitutions. Visitors informed on questions like the diet of school-children, the condition of buildings, or medical attention motivated by resolute

decisions from the General. The Jesuit leaders of Rome stipulated guidelines, such as those intended to avoid excessive exposition to epidemics or to reduce the dangers in trips. Once in a while, health was used as an argument to justify certain attitudes, requests or decisions. In this way illness was used to ask for transfers, avoid journeys or evade undesired meetings. On the other hand, good health could condition or reinforce admission to the Society or the wish of a Jesuit to travel on far away missions.

### The health of Francesc de Borja

With respect to Francesc de Borja's own health, the combination of the MBs and biographies show for a fact that, during the first period of his life (1510-1550), he was in good or, at least, acceptable health. An episode of a spleen complaint, when he was about 12 years old, and some quartan fever in the court are notable, given the little information available on his childhood and youth. The courtier Borja would have been obese because of an excess of food, a problem that he would drag through to his viceregal period (1539-1543), at the end of which he suffered drastic weight loss due to a severe diet which he maintained for the rest of his life. In Gandia (1546), the pro-Jesuit Duke was considered by Andrés de Oviedo as being a person of a 'healthy complexion'. Borja's serious illnesses were during his Jesuit period (1550-1572). In Portugal (1557) he was affected by an epidemic of yellow fever, an acute feverish complaint, which was also suffered by his companion Dionisio Vázquez. In 1568, already General of the Society, Francesc suffered from fevers for over 6 months, which he ultimately overcame. Finally, on the return of his last diplomatic trip, by papal order, Borja reached Rome, where he finally died after suffering from a long fever. During the embalment of his body, a focus of pleural empyema in his pleural cavity which had previously been undetected was found by his doctors and this probably caused his death. Besides the incidents mentioned, Borja suffered from frequent bouts of gout and flatulence which, together with his cyclic fevers (tertian and quartan), form a spectrum of chronic illnesses; these accompanied him throughout a large part of his life. On the other hand, the MB documents and biographies mention occasional afflictions like tonsillitis, urinary problems, rectal haemorrhages, and other ailments (paralysis of his index finger, loss of teeth, loss of vision and hearing problems). Towards the end of his life, Borja was a faithful follower of his doctor's orders, following the prescribed medication, as well as the recommendations of superiors with regards to health.

The little information available from this period makes it difficult to assess the attitude of the young Borja towards other people's health, apart from the emotional shock of the Empress' death. As Viceroy in Catalonia, he pursued and executed malefactors, increasing and decreasing repression, occasionally following the orders of Carlos V. In accordance with the imperial rule, he also sought preventive armistice and agreements between conflicting companies, urban well-being in Barcelona, protected people's health and took an interest in prisoners and the poor. In Gandia, a Jesuit Duke in secret, visited the ill, built preventive walls, restored the hospital and made provisions to help indisposed students. As a member of the Society and because of his increasing responsibility, Borja protected the health of the Jesuits according to the doctrine of Loyola, which was followed by Laínez and transmitted by Polanco.

The information quoted from the MBs does not endorse the hagiography of a poorly Francisc de Borja. His letters show a similar profile of other correspondents with respect to the interest of their own health or that of others. The chronological intersection between the *Diario espiritual* and the correspondence shows that, on different occasions, the situation of illness did not impede their daily work. Borja integrated illness into his approximation to God through pain (his 'friend'), but his responsibilities compelled him to continue his work which, together with contemplation, formed part of his own spirituality.