

The great fire of medieval Valencia (1447)

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ABSTRACT: In March 1447, a great fire broke out in Valencia, caused by a former member of the municipal government. This fire destroyed many houses and craft workshops around the Market Square, the economic centre of the city. The municipal government had to compensate the citizens, who had lost everything, and restore everyday life in the area. A versatile Italian watchmaker living in Valencia was chosen to supervise the rehabilitation of the area. Under his direction, the debris was removed. Then after a conscious campaign of urban planning aimed at eliminating any traces of the old Islamic city, the streets were reconstructed according to the norms of the western city.

On 16 March 1447, when night fell and the city of Valencia was getting ready for bed, a terrifying fire broke out in the Market Square ([Figure 1](#)). With unusual strength and speed, the flames began devouring everything, jumping from one street to another and making houses, shops and workshops burn like torches. It was a nightmarish spectacle that must have reminded many of the images of Hell that they had seen on altarpieces. Helpless, the people of Valencia appealed to God and His saints, bringing out in procession the monstrances from all their parish churches, so that the *Corpus Christi* might protect them and put an end to this horror. However, for seven long hours the fire spread, out of control, along the main commercial arteries of the city. In a small area, less than two hectares, but one in which a large part of the city's craftsmen were crowded together, 46 houses were destroyed, and all the tables of the fish market too; there were also 10 deaths and a number of injured.

The local authorities lost no time in attributing the change in the direction of the wind that made it possible to put out the fire to the Virgin Mary.

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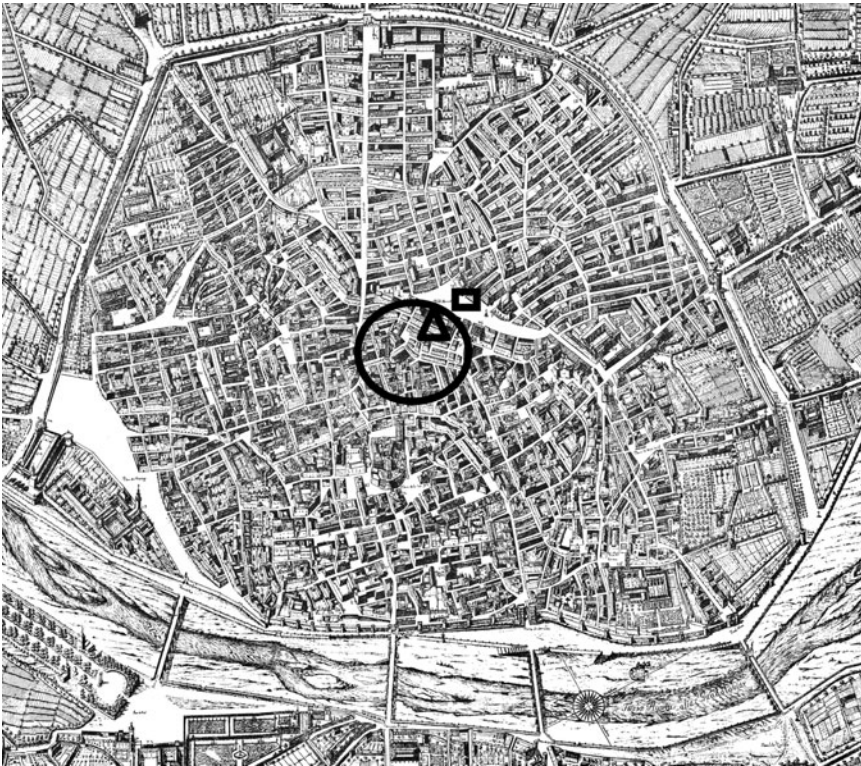


Figure 1: The 1447 Valencia fire on a city plan dated 1709 (south is on top)

Note: The circle marks the affected zone; the triangle the presumed place where the fire began and the rectangle the location of the gallows where the corpses of Paiporta killers were exhibited. It is interesting to note that the plan of this zone, dating from after the fire, shows a more regular planning than the surrounding areas.

However, as far as its causes were concerned, the fire was soon associated with events that had taken place just a few days earlier: the murder of an entire family in an *alqueria*¹ of the nearby village of Paiporta, reportedly perpetrated at the behest of the wife of an important former municipal official, Genís Ferrer, who had been a *jurat* the previous year,² and the summary public execution of the culprits in the Market Square. It was claimed that Ferrer and his associates, in revenge for the ignominious

¹ In the medieval kingdom of Valencia, an *alqueria* was – and still is – a farmhouse with some fields around that was usually in the possession of an urban owner, and cultivated and managed by tenant farmers.

² In the fifteenth century, the six *jurats* represented the collegiate body that held executive power in the municipal government.

spectacle that had taken place on the scaffold in the square, had set fire to it. So, for many years the *Paiporta Crime* and the *Great Market Fire* would be two terrible, intimately related milestones in the collective memory, which were remarked upon by everyone from the municipal and royal chroniclers to the notaries who noted special anniversaries in their documents, and even scholars in their works. Our aim here is to analyse these events, previously neglected by historians, to observe their impact on Valencian society, and to explain how the city reacted to this catastrophe, what political, technical, economic and spiritual mechanisms were set in motion to overcome this difficult situation in the city's development, and how the layout of the streets was restructured in this important part of the city. We have a wide variety of historical sources. There are the accounts of the events, some hitherto unknown, others extremely well known, such as the minutes of the municipal councils and the accounts books of the local institution. They supply us with a wealth of information about the investigation into these events and, especially, the management of the consequences of the disaster.

Fires in late medieval Valencia: their prevention and extinguishment

Valencia in the mid-fifteenth century was one of the largest cities in the Iberian Peninsula, if not the largest, with about 40,000 inhabitants inside the walls and perhaps another 20,000 scattered around its outlying districts and in the many *alquerias* in the surrounding countryside. It was a powerful mercantile city with numerous colonies of foreign merchants, and it was also the capital of the kingdom of the same name, whose nobility mostly resided within its confines.³

As in any city of similar importance, fire made an appearance in Valencia with inexorable regularity, attacking any neighbourhood and all kinds of buildings.⁴ In medieval cities, there were many risk factors that made it easy for a fire to break out and ensured that it would be particularly devastating: the houses lit with tallow candles or oil lamps; the great amount of wood used in buildings; the urban layout of narrow streets and a jumble of buildings close together, frequently with external extensions, such as staircases, overhangs and so on; the accumulation in homes and in

³ For some authors, such as P. Iradiel or E. Cruselles, the population of Valencia was around 75,000–100,000 inhabitants at the end of the fifteenth century; for other more pessimistic ones, such as A. Rubio Vela, it would be about 40,000. P. Iradiel, 'L'evolució econòmica', in E. Belenguier (ed.), *Història del País Valencià*, vol. II (Barcelona, 1989), 267–75; E. Cruselles, 'La población de la ciudad de Valencia en los siglos XIV y XV', *Revista d'Història Medieval*, 10 (1999), 45–84; and A. Rubio Vela, 'La población de Valencia en la baja Edad Media', *Hispania*, 190 (1995), 495–525.

⁴ In Florence, for example, 271 fires have been recorded between 1344 and 1380, that is, 7–8 fires a year, occurring all over the city. See M.P. Contessa, *L'ufficio del fuoco nella Firenze del Trecento* (Florence, 2000), 18.

their storerooms of potential fuel (coal, firewood, straw); the abundance of stables and the huge number of industrial premises dotted all over the city, among other factors.⁵ Night-time was especially dangerous; this was when people relaxed and dropped their guard, but also when, despite all the prohibitions, some economic activities such as spinning or weaving continued, out of necessity, by candlelight.

However, although small fires were a habitual part of everyday life, some conflagrations made a special impact on those who witnessed them, and for this reason they were recorded in the sources, before and after the great fire of 1447. The first one of any importance that we have been able to document dates back to the beginning of 1405, and broke out in the plaça dels Caixers (Box Makers Square), not very far from the market, where the painters and the master trunk makers were grouped together. Then, as would be customary later on, it was necessary to resort to demolishing some houses to create a firebreak and thus halt the advance of the flames.⁶ We also know of several civic and religious buildings that were subsequently hit by fire. In 1423, the municipal council informed King Alfonso the Magnanimous that the roof of the hall where they usually met had caught fire.⁷ The fires in the cathedral were equally famous. On 21 May 1469, Whit Sunday, Valencia Cathedral suffered a fire that destroyed the silver high altarpiece, the monstrance and numerous gilded cloths that had been hung there for the celebration.⁸ It seems that the theatrical stage machinery used in this festivity actually caused the fire.⁹

The specific area of the market and of the Fusteria (Carpenters' District), where the 1447 fire began, was the scene of several other fires in the fifteenth century. In 1415, the house of En Perençós in the Fusteria burned down.¹⁰ Years later, at 10 o'clock at night on 21 February 1474, a house on a corner opposite the Carnisseries Majors (Great Butcheries) caught fire, and from there the fire spread to the carrer dels Conills (Rabbits' Street), where eight houses were burned. Although the latter was spared this time, there was another fire some months later and two of its chambers were affected.¹¹ The other Butcheries, the New ones, to the east of the cathedral, were the

⁵ E. Crouzet-Pavan, 'La guerre au feu dans une cité médiévale: un péril et ses limites', in P. Scaramella (ed.), *Alberto Tenenti: scritti in memoria* (Naples, 2005), 65–90 (67–70).

⁶ Ll. Tolosa, X. Company and J. Aliaga (eds.), *Documents de la pintura valenciana medieval i moderna*, vol. III: (1401–1425) (Valencia, 2011), 115–16. The demolition of houses was still being carried out in the seventeenth century. It is recorded in the great fires of Warwick (1694) and London (1666). M. Farr (ed.), *The Great Fire of Warwick. 1694. The Records of the Commissioners Appointed under an Act of Parliament for Rebuilding the Town of Warwick* (Hertford, 1992), XI.

⁷ A. Rubio Vela (ed.), *Epistolari de la València medieval (II)* (Valencia, 1998), 142–3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 177–9.

⁹ M. Miralles, *Crònica i dietari del capellà d'Alfons el Magnànim*, ed. M. Rodrigo Lizondo (Valencia, 2011), 334.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 227 and 428.

scene of another important fire on 22 February 1440, at 10 o'clock at night, with the fire also affecting several nearby houses.¹²

There were also 'smaller' fires, which were still sufficiently dangerous that a municipal law was passed with the aim of preventing them. In 1345, for example, the house of En Major, a spice merchant who lived in the area of the Draperia (Cloth Merchants' District), was burned down as a consequence of the flammable nature of the products he used.¹³ This fact was used by the authorities to ban, for the first time, an activity that was considered dangerous. On 27 July 1345, the production of turpentine and varnishes inside the city and in the outlying districts was prohibited due to the risk of fire 'as making turpentine or varnish is a great danger of burning'.¹⁴

Ovens were also a special risk,¹⁵ so much so that the local laws particularly warned oven keepers that they would have to pay for the damage occasioned by fires that were caused by an oversight on their part. These risks were heightened when the oven keepers started work at night – they might easily fall asleep, so they had to put out their fires or damp them down due to the danger of causing a conflagration.¹⁶ In 1448, Jaume Perfeta, one of the barons of the wheat and bread market in medieval Valencia, was obliged to carry out repairs on an oven that he rented out, with the aim of avoiding fires. He was required to put a stone cover over the mouth and to line the chamber where the bread was baked with clay to prevent it from catching fire.¹⁷

In 1327, the use of fireworks was also prohibited as they gave off sparks that could cause fires. This order was repeated in 1336 and more than a century later, in 1469, when making rockets and bangers was banned in certain streets near the market, such as El Trenc and La Porta Nova. This order was reiterated in 1481, which leads one to doubt that it was obeyed.¹⁸ Fireworks had traditionally been used in Valencia for different

¹² *Ibid.*, 220.

¹³ A. Furió and F. Garcia-Oliver (eds.), *Llibre d'establiments i ordenacions de la ciutat de València*, vol. I: (1296–1345) (Valencia, 2007), 463. It has also been possible to document fires caused in workshops of spice merchants in French and Italian cities. Crouzet-Pavan, 'La guerre', 67; D. Balestracci, 'La lotta contra il fuoco (XIII–XVI sec)', in *Città e servizi sociali nell'Italia dei secoli XII–XV* (Pistoia, 1990), 417–38 (423); D. Rivaud, 'Le feu et la lutte contre les incendies à Bourges (1487–1559)', *Cahiers d'archéologie et d'histoire du Berry*, 132 (1997), 3–10.

¹⁴ 'com fer trementina en la ciutat ne encara verniç sie gran peril de metre foch'. Furió and Garcia-Oliver (eds.), *Llibre d'establiments*, 463.

¹⁵ Balestracci, 'La lotta', 424.

¹⁶ G. Colón and A. Garcia (eds.), *Furs de València* (Barcelona 1999), 145 (Book IX – Rub VIII–XLIX).

¹⁷ Archive of the Kingdom of Valencia, *Justicia civil* 3925, quire 5, fol. 11v.

¹⁸ On 30 Jul. 1336, now referring to 'flying' rockets', which the people used irresponsibly, with the consequent danger, in Furió and Garcia-Oliver (eds.), *Llibre d'establiments*, 177 and 305. The order of 1469 in Municipal Archive of Valencia (AMV), *Manuale de Consells* (MC) A-38, fol. 87r (7 Oct. 1469). That of 1481 in A-42, fol. 156r (27 Sep. 1481).

festive celebrations, and they were made by the city's apothecaries, who were gunpowder experts.¹⁹ Years later, in 1526, these same pyrotechnic elements were the reason for a major conflagration, accompanied by a large fire, on exactly the same spot as the one we are studying here.²⁰

On 29 January 1342, the municipal government issued another ordinance to prevent fires in the city, ruling in this case that the people who sold all kinds of goods in the streets could not use branches of pines or other trees, nor even palm branches, as supports for displaying their wares, in places near to where there might be a fire, and especially at night.²¹ Nevertheless, the great legislative push to prevent fires that can be seen for example in Castile or Italy can barely be detected in the municipal regulations of Valencia.²² One is forcibly struck by the fact that there is not a single reference to the control of the trades that habitually used fire, and yet on the other hand the risks possibly caused by recreational and festive activities and by humble peddlers were regulated. As Crouzet-Pavan stated, the fear of fire is lost in the face of the needs of production, and this is demonstrated by the scant number of sentences handed out with regard to the negligence of craftsmen.²³

Arson, either perpetrated or incited, with the aim of making a profit out of the subsequent looting, was also clearly classed as a crime in the laws of Valencia. Anybody who was denounced with the testimonies of five people for trying to cause a fire would be expelled from the city for seven years, but those who actually lit the fire would be judged in the criminal court and would have to repair the damage caused.²⁴ What is more, setting fire to the city could be considered a crime of *lèse majesté*.²⁵ And yet we find few references to fires started intentionally. One example would be the one in En Pellisser's oven, which took place on 31 January 1440. Two slaves were accused of causing the fire and, after they were sentenced, they were dragged through the streets and then hanged. It was a terrible punishment for a terrible crime.²⁶

¹⁹ AMV, *Sotsobreria de murs i valls* (SMV), d3–49 (1447–8), fol. 148.

²⁰ R. Narbona, 'El Nueve de Octubre. Reseña histórica de una fiesta valenciana. Siglos XIV–XX', in *Memorias de la ciudad. Ceremonias, creencias y costumbres en la historia de Valencia* (Valencia, 2003), 173–230 (184).

²¹ Furió and García-Oliver (eds.), *Llibre d'establiments*, 394.

²² M.E. Gómez Rojo, 'Historia jurídica del incendio en la Edad Antigua y en el ordenamiento medieval castellano: implicaciones urbanísticas y medioambientales', *Revista de estudios histórico-jurídicos*, 33 (2011), 321–73.

²³ Crouzet-Pavan, 'La guerre', 74. The one instance in the Middle Ages of a productive activity being banned is the case of a German *mestre de bombardes* and also a bell-founder, who was prohibited from opening a large kiln in Boatella Street in 1394, for safety reasons (AMV, MC A-20, fol. 191r (8 Aug. 1394)).

²⁴ Colón and García (eds.), *Furs de València* (Book IX, Heading VIII, law VII), 114.

²⁵ *Ibid.* (Book IX, Heading IX, law I), 149.

²⁶ Miralles, *Crònica*, 220.

Extinguishing fires

In 1358, following many Italian cities such as Siena, Florence or Venice, Valencia set up a fire service.²⁷ On 17 August of that year, the river Túria flooded the city, making it necessary to carry out a series of works. Taking advantage of the situation, a few days later King Peter the Ceremonious granted the city privilege to create a Junta de Murs i Valls (Board of Public Works). One of its various duties – maintenance of the fortifications (walls, gates, moats), of the sewers and drains or of the network of streets – was that of putting out fires.²⁸ Although there are no traces left of its fire-fighting activity in the Middle Ages, we know that during the sixteenth century the Board had a depot in the Market Square, opposite a fountain, where they kept objects used for putting out fires. As was also the case in Italy, or in other Iberian cities, such as Toledo, water bearers, stonemasons and bricklayers helped to put out fires in the city. With their technical knowledge, they knew better than anyone how to go about demolishing a building and stop the flames advancing.²⁹ But besides these experts, as in any city of the time, when the bells sounded the alarm the local people would turn out en masse, spontaneously, to try to extinguish the fire.³⁰

Also worth noting is the fact that the city was criss-crossed by an intricate network of irrigation channels that made it possible to irrigate the fields but also to service the many craftsmen's workshops and other activities that required a constant supply of water.³¹ This would enable the city inhabitants to have rapid access to water in case of fire, although, as we shall see, it constituted an added danger when there was a major fire followed by a period of torrential rain.

The Great Fire in the Fusteria

The crucial year for Valencia was 1447. Between 26 February and 16 March of that year the two terrible events that we mentioned earlier and which shocked the people of Valencia took place. On the one hand, there was the murder of a woman and three of her children, who lived in an *alqueria* of Paiporta, a village in the countryside near Valencia, and on the other, the fire in the craftsmen's district near the Market Square, where the alleged murderers had been executed and their bodies exposed to

²⁷ In the middle of the fourteenth century, Florence organized a sophisticated system for putting out fires. Contessa, *L'ufficio del fuoco*, 31ff.

²⁸ V. Meliό, *La Junta de Murs i Valls. Historia de las obras púlicas en la Valencia del Antiguo Régimen, siglos XIV–XVIII* (Valencia, 1991), 66 and 68.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68; Balestracci, 'La lotta', 432. On Toledo, where from 1490 there was a fire extinguishment service staffed by 12 carpenters; see R. Izquierdo Benito, 'Materiales constructivos en las viviendas toledanas. La vivienda en Toledo a fines de la Edad Media', in J. Passini (ed.), *La ciudad medieval: de la casa al tejido urbano* (Cuenca, 2001), 281–382 (288).

³⁰ On the different ways of organizing the extinguishment of fires in Italian cities, see Balestracci, 'La lotta', 431–4.

³¹ J. Martí, 'La ciudad y el agua', in A. Furiό (ed.), *Historia de Valencia* (Valencia, 1999), 177–82.

public mockery. There are many written testimonies of both events. First, there are four chronicles which mention them.³² However, we cannot give all of them the same degree of credence. The contemporary ones, like Miralles' chronicle or council documents compiled by Carreres Zacarés can be treated as objective documents, dated accurately. But the chronicler always intentionally highlighted whatever seemed appropriate or striking. By contrast, the work of Timoneda and *Annales Valencianos* were written later, and may be regarded as less accurate.

Second, we have a literary testimony, the *Espill*, written by Jaume Roig (†1478), a famous physician. He worked for several institutions, including the local council, some convents and hospitals, and he was doctor to Queen Mary, wife of King Alfonso the Magnanimous.³³ He not only was alive at the time of the events but he was also one of those who attended the tortured prisoners, and can be presumed to have first-hand knowledge of the case.³⁴ But in addition, the *Espill* is an overview of the society, characters, attitudes and events of the first half of fifteenth century Valencia. Many of the characters mentioned in the book are historical. Roig's portrait of Valencia is distinguished by sarcasm as much as realism, especially when he cast his critical eye over Valencian women. Despite his misogyny, however, he provides a valuable account of Valencia during the time of the fire.

And, lastly, the events are included in the documents of the notaries Berenguer Cardona³⁵ (the fire only) and Jaume Vinader.³⁶ All these sources were previously known except for that of Jaume Vinader, which deserves special attention both on account of its novelty and because it provides the most detailed account of events.³⁷ Of all of the accounts, the testimony of the notaries may be judged the most reliable, as they were closest to events, had first-hand knowledge of them and recorded them as soon as they had happened. We are given to understand this by the precision of the details. Later, the accounts would vary, becoming increasingly confused and contradictory.

³² 1. *Crònica i dietari del capellà d'Alfons el Magnànim*, by Melcior Miralles: Miralles, *Crònica*, 226–7. 2. *Memoria Valentina*, by the sixteenth-century writer Juan de Timoneda: J. de Timoneda, *Memoria Valentina*... (Valencia, 1569), sig. Giii. 3. *Libre de memòries de diversos sucesos e fets memorables e de coses senyalades de la ciutat e regne de València (1308–1644)*, intro. and notes S. Carreres Zacarés (Valencia, 1930), vol. II, 583–4; this is a compilation of medieval documents from the city of Valencia collected by the municipality. 4. *Anales Valencianos*, ed. M.L. Cabanes (Zaragoza, 1983), 36; this is an anonymous text based on a fifteenth-century manuscript, copied in 1745.

³³ J. Roig, *Espill*, ed. A. Carré (Barcelona, 2014), 226–7.

³⁴ AMV, MC A-34, fol. 88r (8 May 1448).

³⁵ J. Rodrigo Pertegás, 'Efemérides notariales', *Anales del Centro de Cultura Valenciana*, 8 (1930), 191–201 (196).

³⁶ Archive of the Royal College of the Patriarch, document of Jaume Vinader 9538 (16 Mar. 1447).

³⁷ A. Carré, 'Jaume Roig, autor de l'Espill (segle XV): dels protocols noterials a la literatura', *Estudis Històrics i Documents dels Arxius de Protocols*, 30 (2012), 87–105.

Jaume Vinader offers the fullest account. According to him, on 26 February 1447, the wife of Genís Ferrer, together with her slave Joan, one Bernat Gassó and a further seven individuals – we know the names of two of them, Piera and Joan del Toro – brutally murdered Caterina, the wife of the farmer Joan Alfonso, his two sons aged 22 and 7, and his 5-year-old daughter, in their *alqueria* in the municipality of Paiporta, five kilometres away from Valencia. All four were then thrown down a well. They also stabbed an apprentice several times, and another daughter, aged 13, escaped certain death by hiding under a bed. We do not know the motive for this terrible massacre, and nor is the participation of Genís himself clear. He had been a *jurat* of the city during the year prior to the events, as Vinader said: ‘the fact that he had been a *jurat* during last year was disastrous’.³⁸ The man was not to Vinader’s liking and in the *Libre de memòries* he is also named as the guilty party.

With unusual swiftness, the *jurats* worked flat out to establish the facts. Vinader stated that they met on every one of the 14 days from the crime to the sentence, except for Sundays. It is obvious that they were in a great hurry to teach the murderers a lesson; the people of Valencia must have been anxiously awaiting the spectacle of the execution. The inquiries led the chief justice officer, Vicent Alegre, to send bailiffs to several nearby towns, such as Sagunt, Chiva or Torrent, and they arrested Ferrer’s wife and three of her accomplices.³⁹ Vinader did not want to leave out a single detail of the application of the sentence, a point in which he took particular delight. A woman, her slave and two servants, Gassó and Piera, were dragged to, and later beheaded in, the Market Square in Valencia, one of the few places in a city of narrow streets where the crowd could watch the event, because of its size.⁴⁰ A *palench*, or catafalque, had been built for the execution. The woman’s body lay there all day, and it was buried on the Thursday,⁴¹ whilst the men were quartered and left hanging for three days. On the third day, they were taken down and three pieces were taken to Paiporta, the scene of the crime, while the rest were scattered round about.

Immediately afterwards, Melcior Miralles recorded another significant event: the fire in the Market Square. According to him, while the bodies of those executed were still in the square the fire broke out in the Fusteria. Although the coincidence is surprising, neither Miralles nor Vinader connected the two events. However, it is difficult to believe that there

³⁸ ‘qui en l’any prop passat desastradament fon feyt jurat de València’.

³⁹ On 25 May 1447, the payment was noted of 750 *sous* for all the journeys that had been necessary for this case, and for the costs of the custody and execution of the condemned people (AMV, MC A-33, fol. 293v). The day before, an extra payment had been made of a further 500 *sous* to the city’s *racional*, a sort of accounts auditor, related to Genís Ferrer (*ibid.*, fol. 291v).

⁴⁰ J. Sanchis Sivera, *Vida íntima de los valencianos en la época foral* (Altea, 1993), 89–90.

⁴¹ According to Miralles’ *Crònica*, the woman’s body was left on the scaffold for four hours and it was then taken to the Magdalenes’ Dominican nunnery for burial (226).

was no link between them, and this may be the reason why the author of the *Libre de memòries* introduced the fact that Genís Ferrer had been the arsonist, acting in revenge for what had been done to his wife. It seems that the people also believed this. In all the sources, Genís' wife is the chief culprit for inciting the crime, but in the misogynistic context of works like *Espill*, nothing else could be expected. Moreover, for Jaume Roig the connection between the two events, crime and fire, was based on the fact that the fire was extinguished because God was grateful for the previous day's sacrifice made by the people of Valencia to punish such an ignominious crime. What a prodigious example of dialectic skill to demonstrate that God was on the side of the municipal authorities!

The notary Vinader also gives approximate information about the area affected by the fire. He tells us exactly where it began: 'in the third house of the Fusteria, behind Santa Maria de la Mercè, counting from the corner of the Mercè',⁴² and he goes on:

The whole Fusteria was burned down; that is, from the corner of the Mercè to the house of Bartomeu Quintana, whose house faces that of En Miró, the barber, with a street in between them. And the said fire crossed over to the houses opposite, and all the other part of the Fusteria was burned, that is, from the house that is by the gate of the Santa Caterina cemetery to the first house that belongs to a spice merchant in the Porta Nova, in front of the workshop called En Conill's. Besides that, all the houses of El Trenc and from La Pelleria to La Peixateria were burned. Also burned were the houses between the carrer dels Serrallers and the bend that comes back to La Pelleria. And the houses were also burned that are in the main street of La Pelleria, which goes towards Sant Martí, up to the junction where there is a well. And besides this four more houses were burned, two on either side of the carrer de la Pelleria that goes to the exchange house, behind La Draperia de llana.

We can see from this description that there was a great variety of artisanal activities in the parish of Sant Joan and the market area. The document contains references to up to six different trades concentrated in the small affected area. As the municipal sources say, the fire began at about 9 o'clock at night and was active for seven hours. The flames grew so enormous that they spread to other streets, despite the first vain attempts to put them out; these attempts included the hiring of carpenters and bricklayers, who worked round the clock to fight the fire, and the purchase or hiring of numerous water containers (*cànters*, *portadores*) and tools with which to demolish the adjoining houses and remove the rubble, the cost of which amounted to the considerable sum of 2,089 *sous* and 11 *deniers*.⁴³

At this point, the citizens resorted to divine mercy. According to Vinader and Roig, this was the reason they managed to get the wind to change direction and extinguish the flames. The Almighty heard the prayers of the faithful, who had taken the monstrosities of many parish churches out

⁴² 'En lo tercer alberch de la Fusteria, a les espatles de Sancta Maria de la Mercè, començant a comptar al cantó de la Mercè.'

⁴³ AMV, *Claveria Comuna* O-23, fol. 225r-v.

into the streets, as if it were Corpus Christi Day, and formed a procession, begging Him to take pity on the people of Valencia.⁴⁴ As usual, the causes that explained the facts for the people of the time were both earthly and divine. On the one hand, there were the alleged actions of Genís Ferrer's associates, and the material state of the city. Thus, Sanchis Guarnier includes a quote by the lieutenant general of the kingdom, according to which the fire in the Fusteria was due 'to the wooden constructions that stood in the street, in front of the houses, used for selling or by the craftsmen to work on'.⁴⁵ Indeed, from that moment on carpenters were prohibited from having this type of construction and working outside their houses. But along with these material causes were those of a theological or moral nature, always present with regard to catastrophes anywhere in the medieval west.⁴⁶ Divine vengeance brought about by continual sinful acts was thus behind this disaster, and therefore only actions aimed at placating this godly wrath would be able to halt the fire.⁴⁷

In any case, the fire finally abated. Then, the real problems began: restoring everyday life in such an important area, and attending to the many people affected.

Reacting to the disaster

First, the victims had to be taken care of. For, apart from the dead and injured, the fire had left a trail of disaster: people who had lost everything, not just their home and all their personal belongings, but also their businesses and their work tools. In a process similar to what happens these days when a place is declared a 'catastrophe area', the municipal authorities passed urgent measures partially to alleviate the situation of those affected, beginning with a campaign to collect alms among the local people, appointing four *prohoms* for each of the 12 parishes, while they began to organize the clear-up of the area.⁴⁸ But although the municipal rhetoric starkly describes the situation of the victims who 'were now poor and destitute', the money from the local government, or rather from the Junta de Murs i Valls, of which the ecclesiastic and military orders of the

⁴⁴ This attitude was very common in the face of catastrophes of all kinds in the medieval city. A. Riera i Melis, 'Catàstrofe, pànic i ritualitat a la baixa Edat Mitjana. La resposta de la societat catalana als terratrèmols de 1427–1428', *Afers*, 69 (2011), 375–408. For France, J. Berlioz, 'Le lendemain des catastrophes naturelles au Moyen Âge', in J. Jouanna, J. Leclant and M. Zink (eds.), *L'homme face aux calamités naturelles dans l'Antiquité et au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2006), 165–82 (172–4).

⁴⁵ 'los postics e porxes de fusta parades fora los dits albercs, és estada causa d'ocasió del dit foc'. M. Sanchis Guarnier, *La ciutat de València. Síntesi d'Història i de Geografia Urbana*, 7th edn (Valencia, 1997), 137.

⁴⁶ Berlioz, 'Le lendemain', 174–8.

⁴⁷ According to Jaume Roig, the market was a place where numerous frauds and deceptions took place, carried out especially by the female sellers. For this reason, God had ordered a punishment of biblical dimensions. See verses 7482 to 7593 of the *Espill*.

⁴⁸ AMV, MC A-33, fols. 278v–279r (30 Mar. 1447).

corts (local parliament) were also a part, did not begin to flow in the form of aid until May 1448, when the allocation of 75,000 *sous* for subsidies was passed, obtained, as always, through a new issue of public debt.⁴⁹

It is true, nevertheless, that the municipality did advance 22,000 *sous*, which would be shared out unequally among 52 people. This, we suppose, depended on their losses, which must have been assessed in some way. They were mostly small amounts that did not come anywhere near to covering what had been lost, although we should bear in mind that in many cases the craftsmen referred to here did not own the properties that had burned down, but rented them. They were tenants, *logaters* in the language of the time, and what was assessed was the furniture, the tools and the raw materials that they kept there. The professional group most represented were the carpenters with 18 members. They received aid of up to six different amounts (800, 600, 440, 400, 100 and 50 *sous*); this is logical, given that the fire had begun in the Fusteria, and it may also be an example of the hierarchical nature of this profession.⁵⁰ There were also spice merchants (three); second-hand clothes sellers (three); bakers (two); haberdashers (two); a shoemaker; a hosier; a swordsmith; a painter; a tailor, a cheese maker; a box maker; a broker; a priest and a Muslim from Paterna. There were six women, of whom four were widows. Only three of them state their husband's trade (a notary, a carpenter and a shopkeeper), and two more figure as the wife of a craftsman (the same one?) supposedly still alive. Apart from them, there were six men whose profession or social rank we do not know. Most of them received almost symbolic amounts, of between 50 and 100 *sous*. Only the lords of La Peixateria (Fish Market), who were jointly allocated 1,000 *sous*, and a nobleman, Jaumot Escrivà, who was offered much more, 3,500 *sous*, in return for staying in the municipality in which what had been his palace was sited, were fortunate enough to receive larger amounts.⁵¹ This list of people affected by the fire paints a picture for us, in any case, of a very broad social spectrum in which craftsmen and the trades associated with retailing predominate, as is logical in what was the mercantile centre of the city.⁵²

In order to minimize the damage to the city's economy, the restoration work had to begin immediately. The first problem was the huge number of buildings that had collapsed, especially in the carpenters' district, and also in the one behind it, occupied by *drapers de llana* (woollen cloth merchants), and in the carrer dels Arrossers (Rice Sellers' Street), which in those days ran through the middle of the site of the present-day exchange building. Running underneath those buildings, as it does today, was the moat bordering the old Islamic walls. After their destruction in the middle

⁴⁹ AMV, MC A-34, fol. 89r (11 May 1448).

⁵⁰ On the carpenters in medieval Valencia, see T. Izquierdo Aranda, *La fusteria a la València medieval (1238–1520)* (Castellón, 2014).

⁵¹ AMV, MC A-34, fols. 84r–85r (9 and 10 May 1448).

⁵² Some requests for compensation, however, were also rejected, such as the one made by the weavers and wool carders of the district (AMV, MC A-34, fol. 86v (11 May 1448)).

of the fourteenth century it was converted into the city's main sewer.⁵³ However, the accumulation of earth and bits of rubble blocked this sewer up, which prevented the solid waste from draining away and moreover was especially dangerous in the event of rain as it interrupted the city's network of irrigation channels and could cause flooding.⁵⁴

And so, on the day after the fire, the *sotsobrer* of the Junta de Murs i Valls, Miquel Martorell, formed a brigade of about 20 workmen who began clearing up the area with the help of large baskets, on still very hot ground that burned their feet, forcing them to water it again and again, and it made them tremendously thirsty.⁵⁵ This small group was not big enough to manage the enormous task of cleaning up the devastated area, and the number of *manobres* that were hired rose during the next few days until there were more than 40 on some days. Horses were also paid for; the rubble was taken by them and thrown into the bed of the river Túria. On 4 April, the singular figure of Petro Vetxo (Pietro Vecchio), almost certainly an Italian, burst onto the scene. Today we would undoubtedly refer to him as an 'engineer'. He must have been brought to the Iberian Peninsula by King Alfonso the Magnanimous, who commissioned him to make a clock for the Royal Palace in Valencia in 1437. Later, he continued to work for the crown, producing guns, especially culverins, a military innovation of the period; he was ordered to make 40 culverins for Xàtiva castle in 1439.⁵⁶ In 1444 and 1445, he took part in the preliminary works for the construction of a channel in the Russafa marsh and in the Montcada irrigation channel, to the north of the city.⁵⁷ In 1446, he went to Tortosa to work on the levelling of the Ebro irrigation channels.⁵⁸ He then returned to Valencia, where he made and maintained the clock for the new cathedral tower – today known as Miquelet as well as making a face for it in 1447.⁵⁹ He was, then, well

⁵³ On the process of transformation of the old Islamic wall and the appearance of this sewer or *vall vell*, see V. Lerma, 'La ampliación de la muralla y el nuevo recinto urbano', in A. Furió, J.V. García Marsilla and J. Martí (eds.), *Historia de Valencia* (Valencia, 1999–2001), 141–5; and A. Serra Desfilis, 'Ingeniería y construcción en las murallas de Valencia en el siglo XIV', *Actas del Quinto Congreso Nacional de Historia de la Construcción* (Burgos, 2007), vol. II, 883–94.

⁵⁴ On the system of channels inside the city and their functions, see J. Martí, 'Las venas de la metrópoli. Séquies, rolls i cadiretes en la ciudad de Valencia', in *Contexto geográfico e histórico de los regadíos de la huerta de Valencia* (Valencia, 2000), 102–27.

⁵⁵ AMV, SMV d³-49, fol. 12r–v.

⁵⁶ Both references respectively in J. Sanchis Sivera, 'Relojes públicos en Valencia en los siglos XIV y XV', *Almanaque Las Provincias* (1914), 223–31 (230–1); and in J. Castillo Sainz and L. P. Martínez Sanmartín, 'Economies d'escala i corporacions preindustrials: conflictes gremials per la captació d'oficis', in Ll. Virós i Pujolà (ed.), *Organització del treball preindustrial: confraries i oficis* (Barcelona, 2000), 63–80 (64).

⁵⁷ T. Glick, *Regadío y sociedad en la Valencia medieval* (Valencia, 1988), 142, 144 and 367.

⁵⁸ J. Vidal Franquet, *Les obres de la ciutat. La activitat constructiva i urbanística de la Universitat de Tortosa a la baixa edat mitjana* (Barcelona, 2008), 441.

⁵⁹ AMV, MC A-33, fol. 292r (24 May 1447), and A-34, fol. 218v (4 Jul. 1449). These figures were not infrequent in the fifteenth century. We also have the nearby case of Huguet Barxa, of French or possibly Sardinian origin, a strict contemporary of Vetxo, who worked in Majorca and made clocks, mounted stained-glass, constructed buildings and, above

known to the municipal authorities, and he had experience in hydraulic engineering, such as the levelling of channels. It is therefore no surprise that just a few days after beginning work in the Market Square he proposed a change of strategy and the *jurats* accepted it. The strategy consisted of not having to take the rubble so far away and instead piling it up mostly in the western part of the square, which led onto carrer de la Bosseria (Handbag Manufacturers' Street). This raised the ground level to enough of a slope that the water in the Rovella channel and the old moat would continue to flow, which undoubtedly made the work of a *livellador* (leveller) with the same high level of experience as Vetxo necessary.⁶⁰

In the next few days, the market square was the scene of an authentic spectacle of industry, with over 40 horses and their masters moving rubble and debris from one side to another.⁶¹ Dozens of baskets were purchased, and the workmen were directed by *sobrestants*, or foremen, who nevertheless had to follow the orders of Vetxo's men. On 12 April, for example, one of the Italian's men, Bernat Pastor, was organizing the removal of earth and rubble next to the Magdalene nunnery, and the other, Miquelet, was ensuring that this same earth was dumped where Petro Vetxo wanted it.⁶² In no time at all, the Bosseria district was full of material, and other nearby areas were sought, such as the farmyard of the convent of Sant Francesc, in the part of the so-called Barri dels Peixaters, located in this case to the east of the market.⁶³ Vetxo stayed there among the *sobrestants*, who called him master (*mestre*), until 29 April, when he disappears from the accounts. Nevertheless, the work continued for a while, and on 11 May, an interesting novelty was introduced, which tells us how concerned the leaders of the Junta de Murs i Valls were about the immediate profitability of the work they were doing. They saw that, now there was less work, paying the workman by the day meant that they worked more slowly. This made it necessary to employ numerous foremen to make sure that the workmen kept up a brisk pace, and so it was decided that from then on they would no longer be paid on a daily basis (*per jornal*), but by piecework, that is, by the dozen basketfuls emptied (*tiraven per dotzenes*), at a rate of 13 *deniers* the dozen.⁶⁴ It seems that there must have been an argument over this system, especially when the distance between the places of collection and dumping was too far, because some

all, was a sculptor. A. Juan Vicens, 'La actividad escultórica de Huguet Barxa. Nuevas perspectivas', *Archivo Español de Arte*, 87, 347 (Jul.-Sep. 2014), 209–26.

⁶⁰ On 4 Apr. 1447, Vetxo proposed this change with the aim of reducing costs (AMV, SMV d³-49, fol. 25r-v). Vetxo was paid 4 *sous* a day, like any master builder, and he was aided by two 'mozos' or apprentices, called Bernat Pastor and Miquelet, who were each paid daily wages of 2.5 *sous* (*ibid.*, fol. 33v).

⁶¹ AMV, SMV d³-49, fol. 25r-v.

⁶² *Ibid.*, fol. 32v.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, fol. 35v (14 Apr. 1447). On the creation of this district, see J. Torró and E. Guinot, 'De la *Madina* a la ciutat: les pobles del sud i la urbanització dels extramurs de València (1270–1370)', *Saitabi*, 51–2 (2001–02), 51–103.

⁶⁴ AMV, SMV d³-49, fol. 60r-v.

days later they distinguished between those who *tiraven per dotzenes* and those who worked *per jornal*.⁶⁵ In any case, the system must have worked, because by the end of May the square was clean enough for the council to decide that the Corpus procession, the medieval city's main festivity, could pass through there as it did every year, and for this cloth canopies were arranged over the square.⁶⁶

There was, then, especial interest in publicly demonstrating that everything was back to normal, but the catastrophe had its consequences. These included the decision to move the carpenters to an area on the edge of the city, and certain minor accidents that were perhaps related to the structural damage caused by the fire. These also included the payment for damages (*empejoraments*) made to four residents of carrer de la Pelleria (Second-hand Dealers' Street) on 23 November 1447, and the accident that happened in a house in carrer del Trenc, where several walls collapsed killing people in August 1448.⁶⁷ But far more important than all these incidents was the fact that the Junta de Murs i Valls appeared as the institution that led all the process of rebuilding and the new planning of the devastated area, and this demonstrates the important role played in the city by public power, which was the primary influence on urban layout. After the fire in the Market Square, the municipal government launched itself into restructuring the area, creating new streets, aligning the existing ones and trying to introduce the ideals of western Christian urban planning to the city as they had been expounded some decades earlier by Francesc Eiximenis.⁶⁸ This famous Franciscan writer came from Girona and was established in Valencia from 1382 to 1408, where his theories determined much of the municipal politics. He even wrote a book about urban government, the *Regiment de la cosa pública*, that local councillors ordered to have always chained to their desk. Eiximenis wanted to erase the Islamic past of the city, and he advocated a model of a town with straight and wide streets organized orthogonally, a city inspired by Occitan *bastides*, and so, indirectly, by Roman cities, with their rectangular shape and two main streets crossing in a central square, where civic and religious power lay.⁶⁹

Thus, following these principles, in the next two years after the great fire more expropriations were carried out by the city government in the area

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 69v (23 May 1447).

⁶⁶ AMV, MC A-33, fol. 291v (24 May 1447).

⁶⁷ In the first case, it was the second-hand clothes sellers Francesc Cardells who received 200 *sous*, Gabriel Esteve 100 *sous*, and Joan Guillem and Joan de Bonaventura, each with 50 *sous* (AMV, MC A-34, fol. 39r); the second was dealt with in the municipal council session of 20 Aug. 1448 (*ibid.*, fol. 122r).

⁶⁸ A. Furió and J.V. García Marsilla, 'La ville entre deux cultures. Valence et son urbanisme entre Islam et Féodalité', in S. Bourdin, M. Paoli and A. Reltgen-Tallon (eds.), *La forme de la ville de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance* (Rennes, 2015), 37–55.

⁶⁹ See J. Molina, 'Francesc Eiximenis et les images de la ville idéale dans la Couronne d'Aragon', in P. Gilli (ed.), *Les élites lettrées et mécénat dans les pays de la Méditerranée occidentale au Moyen Âge* (Montpellier, 2007), 74–98.

than in the whole century. There were more than 100 in total, designed to eliminate overhangs, align streets, or get rid of many of the flat-topped walls or cul-de-sacs that existed in the city as remains of Islamic urbanism, when streets were subordinated to the spacious houses of the different clans.⁷⁰ Additionally, it seems that at that time the imposition of this urban planning discipline became a special goal of the local authorities as part of a longer-term campaign, so in May 1448 the council decided to allocate, every year from then on, an item of its 'budget' of no less than 10,000 *sous* for 'demolition of projections and railings for the embellishment of the said city'.⁷¹ In the regeneration of the market area, the opening up of a new street must have been especially important. It ran from the Magdalenes' nunnery to L'Argenteria (Silversmiths') and La Pelleria (Second-hand Dealers'), an artery that on later maps of the city appears as carrer Nou (New Street), and whose course had been rejected 66 years earlier, in 1382, for the curious reason that the agglomeration of pedestrians in the narrow streets near the market and the exchange building was a sight that made the city 'very famous in faraway places'.⁷²

In any case, as we can see, urban reform was not concentrated so much on the square itself as on the streets that led into it. This is just the opposite of what was to happen later, for example, in many Castilian cities, whose *plazas mayores* (main squares) are both the result of an urban planning ordinance of the Catholic kings of 1480, updated by Philip II in 1573, and often the action of fire, which provided an opportunity to reorganize the mercantile districts of these cities. We can see examples of this phenomenon in Valladolid after a big fire in 1561; in Madrid, with the successive fires in its Plaza Mayor in 1631, 1672 and 1790, or in León, whose market caught fire in 1654, and again in 1695.⁷³ However, in Valence, the Market Square occupied an elongated space bordered by the ancient Islamic walls that had proved a useful place to perform celebrations such as tournaments organized by King Alfonso the Magnanimous in the 1420s.⁷⁴ Thus, no transformation was necessary, although at some point, probably in the

⁷⁰ They are included in almost all the folios of MC A-33 and A-34. See on this J.V. García Marsilla, 'Valorar el precio de las viviendas. Poder municipal y mercado inmobiliario en la Valencia medieval', in C. Denjean and L. Feller (eds.), *Expertise et valeur des choses au Moyen Âge, I: Le besoin d'expertise* (Madrid, 2013), 139–52.

⁷¹ AMV, MC A-34, fol. 89r (11 May 1448). On this subject, see A. Serra Desfilis, 'El Consell de Valencia y el embellecimiento de la ciudad (1412–1460)', in *Primer Congreso de Historia del Arte Valenciano* (Valencia, 1993), 75–9.

⁷² AMV, MC A-17, fol. 290r (7 Jun. 1382).

⁷³ R. Estudio and J. Sanz Hermida, *Historia y literatura del incendio de Valladolid de 1561* (Valladolid, 1998); P. Montoliú Campos, *Madrid, villa y corte: historia de una ciudad* (Madrid, 1996), 108–11; A.I. Arias Fernández, 'Los incendios de la plaza mayor de León', *Argutorio*, 30 (2013), 80–2. For a smaller city, see M. Carballo Álvarez, 'Trifulcas, agresiones y otras rivalidades. Incendio y reconstrucción de la villa de Llanes', *Roda da Fortuna [Poder y violencia durante la Edad Media peninsular (siglos XIV y XV)]*, 2 (1/1) (2013), 455–69 (460–8); M. Bastide, 'Toulouse après l'incendie de 1463', *Annales du midi*, 80 (1968), 7–26.

⁷⁴ See J.V. García Marsilla, 'El poder visible. Demanda y funciones del arte en la corte de Alfonso el Magnánimo', *Ars Longa*, 7–8 (1996–97), 33–47.

sixteenth century, porticos were built on it as we can see in the first surviving representations of the city, dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Of course, the fire in Valencia is by no means comparable in its extent or in its consequences to the most famous fires in the early modern and contemporary periods: those of London in 1666 or Chicago in 1871, which brought about radical changes in the urban layout and even in the architecture of both cities.⁷⁵ But there are unquestionably common patterns that speak to us of the fragility of cluttered urban housing built with highly inflammable materials, which could at any moment be plunged into chaos by fire. At the same time, we see how fire often led to changes in the city's planning policy, new ideas for arranging the map or building methods, which otherwise would perhaps have taken much longer to be implemented, or may never have been. In the case of Valencia, the great fire of 1447, linked as we have seen to a case of revenge after the public show of a summary execution, reinforces this feeling of pre-industrial societies' defencelessness in the face of catastrophe, and above all it seems to have acted as a last push for them to begin the regulation of the urban layout, eliminating most of the Islamic legacy once and for all. Likewise, the municipal management of fire-fighting, and especially of the recovery of the city afterwards, eventually consolidated in Valencia the predominance of the public sphere in matters of urban planning, sanctioned by law since the thirteenth century, but often rivalled by private initiatives by local people or speculators. The great fire in medieval Valencia was, as in many other European cities, a landmark in local history, understood to begin with as a divine curse, but which above all established *a posteriori* methods of action in matters of urban organization and the prevention of future calamities.

⁷⁵ S. Porter, *The Great Fire of London* (Stroud, 1996); and P. Bennie, *The Great Fire of Chicago of 1871* (New York, 2008).