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Evil strangers. The authorities, common people and their fear of strangers

Johannes Dillinger

This text is about some of the darkest elements of the multi-faceted image of strangers in the early modern period. Not only the authorities but also the so-called common people, i.e. peasants and townspeople were obsessed with delusions about the evil machinations of itinerant strangers. We will explore two major complexes: vagrant strangers as experts for treasure and as mercenaries employed in covert warfare.

Among the most curious legendary figures of the popular treasure lore of early modern Europe were the so-called Venetians. In many parts of Central Europe, the common people talked about foreigners speaking a Romance language who had come to search for hidden treasures or gold and silver mines. These people were sometimes known as the Walen (also spelled Wahlen or Walhen, i.e. the French-speakers) or more often as the Venetians. In contrast to most other characters of popular narratives about treasure, the Venetians were spectacularly successful. They could find gold and treasures where the locals could not. The Venetians owed their unbelievable success as prospectors to their magical skills. A most material kind of clairvoyants, they saw caves full of gold in the mountains that were invisible to anyone else. After the Venetians had filled their bags with riches they disappeared as quickly and as clandestinely as they had come. It was said they could make themselves invisible and even magically fly back to their home country. The Venetians rewarded their local helpers and guides very handsomely. However, they were very secretive about their business. The folk tales presented the Venetians as nondescript, small and darkish. Nevertheless, when any of their hosts or relations met the Venetians by some chance in their home town, they lived in palaces and wore the most expensive attire. The treasures they had taken out of other people's countries had made them rich.¹ The Venetians embodied a specific concept of foreignness in popular culture: Their foreignness spelled superiority and exclusiveness, not poverty and exclusion.

¹ J. Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America. A History* (Basingstoke 2012) 79-84; W.-E. Peuckert, 'Walen und Venediger', *Mitteilungen der schlesischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde* 30 (1929) 205-247; R. Schramm ed., *Venetianersagen von geheimnisvollen Schatzsuchern* (Leipzig 1985).

The Venetian magicians were more than just characters from folk tales. At least until the eighteenth century, many people regarded the Venetian wizards as real. Polemics against them were published. These texts changed little between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The authors stated bitterly that their respective home countries were robbed of their gold by foreigners who – in the words of the eighteenth century scientist – ‘know our country and the treasures therein better than we do ourselves.’² The stories about the Venetian magicians had a basis in the economic realities of the early modern period. Some groups of traders from Italy or France did come to the eastern parts of Germany and the western Slavonic regions. Some of them might have been looking for gold or for the precious stones which could be found in the region. However, in all likelihood their real business was glass making. The Italian traders worked for the glass and mirror industry. They were looking for manganese, maybe also for cobalt and alum. Small quantities of these minerals were needed to produce totally clear glass – the basis of the world-famous Venetian mirrors – or blue stained glass. These traders had two good reasons to keep silent about their business: first, they did not want to draw any attention to the secrets of Italian glass manufacturers. Second, they did not want to have to deal with authorities who might have claimed that the foreigners violated princely mining privileges.³ In 1574, a high ranking mining official of the kingdom of Bohemia was very clear about this:

Many people say here in the German lands that various bits of earth are found in a number of territories (...) and strangers and vagabonds take them away (...) and can turn them into gold. I personally do not believe this (...) The bits of earth those vagabonds take with them do not contain any gold and they cannot be turned into gold. Rather, the vagabonds take them to Italy and other places for money as these bits of earth are used as components in glass making and in the colouring of glass.⁴

² F.G. Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der kurfürstlichen und herzoglichen sächsischen Lande* (Leipzig 1788), quote translated in Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 80.

³ H. Wilsdorf, ‘Einführung in die Bergbausagen “Von den Venedigern”’ in: R. Schramm ed., *Venetianersagen*, 217-241.

⁴ L. Ercker von Schreckenfels, *Beschreibung aller fürnehmsten Ertzt- und Bergwerckarten* (Prague 1574), quote translated in Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 80-81.

Even when the traders' business declined at the end of the sixteenth century, the people in the regions they had visited remembered them and turned the secretive foreigners into the stuff of legends.⁵

The rumours about foreigners searching for treasure or precious minerals had a way of focussing on real people. In seventeenth and eighteenth century Slovakia, foreign peddlers from the neighbouring regions – Silesians, Poles, Bohemians – as well as Italians and Swiss, who came to sell innocent household items like mousetraps, were collectively under suspicion of being magicians wanting to rob the Slovak Tatra mountains of their treasures. Until the early twentieth century strange signs scratched into some stones in the Tatra mountains, which might have been of natural origin or be mere childish doodles were regarded as Venetians' symbols indicating – if one only knew how to read them – the way to some mineral vein. Similar signs were also found in Saxony.⁶

Among the reasons why the Venetians kept their hold on the people's imagination were the books supposedly written by them. These so-called Walenbücher (Walloon books, i.e. books of the Italian- or French-speakers) contained instructions where to find mineral veins, as a rule: gold veins. They combined mining knowledge with magical elements such as advice about the best times to go searching for gold. Mostly, these books described the way to mineral veins and spots where mining would be profitable. The earliest examples of these books dated back to the fifteenth century. They were readily bought and sold at least in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some were written as if they were aide-memoirs of Venetians which had been lost by them or taken from them. The people who were interested in these books apparently did not care why the Italian-speakers did not write their booklets in Italian and why anybody would sell a book that showed the way to a secret gold mine. One of the reasons why the Tatra seems to have attracted a number of treasure hunters was certainly that it was mentioned in a number of such treasure hunters' manuals between the late seventeenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ A Walenbüchlein from 1803 dealt with treasure in Saxony:

⁵ Wilsdorf, 'Einführung', 226-227.

⁶ Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 81-82.

⁷ E. Boehlich, *Das älteste schlesische Walenbuch* (Breslau 1938); R. Altmüller ed., *Ein steirisches Walenbüchlein* (Vienna 1971); G. Eis, *Kleine Schriften zur altdutschen weltlichen Dichtung* (Amsterdam 1979) 438; Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 82-84.

If you go from the village of Stolpen to Tholenstein castle (...) go up the hill where the castle stands, go to the right on the way that leads to Rückersdorf village (...) You will go through a pine wood and through a deadfall where you can see right through the wood. And before long you will come to a stone with a Venetian sign on it, it is the sign of a bishop, and if you are there, then go further to the right, to the South for the length of four fields. Then you will come to a small valley, there you will soon see deep in the valley a tree which looks like a man with one arm reaching out. Under this tree there is enough wealth buried to feed a thousand men.⁸

A description from Thuringia written in 1716 required the use of the divining rod: Between the towns of Greiz and Riechenbach near the horses' ford in the river in the vicinity of the arms' smithy upstream you find rich gold veins on the right. Search with the rod. The opening of the mine shaft will not be far away.⁹ That all the details given in the books actually depicted real places is highly questionable. Nevertheless, the books suggested that foreigners had a minute knowledge of the topography of one's own country. This was most disturbing: if some foreigners knew one's own home better than oneself, did that not mean that one was hopelessly inferior to the strangers, not even master in one's own land? The Venetians seemed like the ultimate spies: strangers whose country you know virtually nothing about while they know everything about your country. In a way, the Walenbücher challenged the very distinction between own and other. If foreigners and strangers knew more – and more practically useful things – about your own home than you, what was left that you could really call your own? Put a bit more positively: if one wanted to know all there was to know about one's own homeland one had to read a book written by a foreigner.

The Venetians were just the most prominent example of a special type of the legendary treasure hunter: the stranger with superior knowledge. In a number of societies, from fifteenth century Central Europe to nineteenth century Illinois, we encounter folk tales about mysterious strangers looking for treasure. All of them displayed certain characteristics akin to those of the Venetians. The strangers were shadowy and shift

⁸ A. Meiche, *Sagenbuch des Königreichs Sachsen* (Leipzig 1903) 895-896; <http://archive.org/details/SagenbuchDesKoenigreichsSachsen>, accessed 4 March 2013.

⁹ J.C. von Pachelbel-Gehag, *Ausführliche Beschreibung des Fichtel-Berges* (Leipzig 1716), quote translated in: Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 83.

characters. Nobody seemed to know their names. They managed to find the treasure the locals had looked for in vain or had not even known about. The strangers vanished again taking the treasure with them. In all cases, the strangers proved to be annoyingly, indeed dangerously superior to the locals. In a story from Illinois, strangers find a treasure and disappear with it, leaving only 'prints of a kettle' supposedly filled with gold in a recently dug pit. One of the Illinois locals interviewed by the folklorist Neely in the 1930s expressed his frustration in what might be a typical comment in this type of treasure narrative: 'This was one time I sat on a pot of gold and didn't know it.' The typical comment with which the expert stranger gives his view of the situation can be found in a number of German tales about the Venetians, even though we find it first in a tract on the natural resources of the Fichtelgebirge printed in 1542: 'The Germans often throw a stone at a cow which is more valuable than the cow.' Or, as Illinois folklore has it, Indian treasure experts used to say: 'The white man has no judgment. If he had he would be shoeing his horses with gold shoes.'¹⁰ These comments seem to be matter-of-fact which makes the undertone of contempt even more acidic.

As we have seen, the Venetians, the wizards who discovered treasures and mineral veins, were figments of early modern imagination based on Italian prospectors. However, there were very real treasure wizards in early modern Europe. In trials against treasure hunters we encounter time and again a certain kind of rural magician or soothsayer who claimed to be able to find hidden treasures. Among these treasure magicians or treasure frauds were many vagrants. These itinerants were very different from the mysterious Venetian travellers whom the rumours of the mining areas spoke of. Most of the real itinerant treasure magicians seem to have been very poor. At best, they did odd jobs for the village people; most of the time they seem to have begged in the streets for their livelihood. In the well-documented example of the Duchy of Württemberg, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at least eleven out of fifteen treasure magicians were vagabonds. This was by no means an exception: the early modern treasure magicians in Luzern and in western Austria lived in similar circumstances. Almost all treasure hunters active in the region of Zurich were poor foreigners. It is difficult to say whether these itinerant treasure magicians

¹⁰ C. Neely, *Tales and Songs from Southern Illinois* (Menasha 1938, reprinted Carbondale 1998) 111, 114, 116-119, verbal quotation 118; C. Bruschi, *Des Vichtelbergs gründliche Beschreibung* (Nuremberg 1542) 14-15.

believed in their own magic or whether they were mere tricksters. At any rate, they offered their services as treasure experts for a certain fee to everybody willing to embark on a treasure hunt. Homeless people offered their services as treasure hunters because this was one of the very few lucrative ways to make a living that was open to them. Magical treasure hunting – if it was taken serious or if it was just a confidence trick – seems to have been conceived of as a way out of a situation that was otherwise socially and economically hopeless.¹¹

It became part of the imagery of the treasure magician that he was a stranger or even a foreigner. Some tramps working as treasure experts understood this and turned it to their advantage. They stressed and exaggerated their foreignness and claimed to come from very far away. This helped them to convince their employers of their unique quality – it might have seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime chance to secure the services of these allegedly exotic experts. The sixteenth-century lawyer Christoph Besold mentioned a Saracen prisoner of war who had supposedly helped to find a treasure in Italy. This was an extreme but by no means exceptional case. In the first years of the seventeenth century, vagabonds working as treasure wizards in Swabia reportedly came from Prague, the Balkans and even from Turkey. Religion was part and parcel of the construction of foreignness. In the late sixteenth century, a treasure fraud from the English West Country, Judith Philips, claimed that she came directly from the pope. Some tricksters in the German Protestant lands maintained that they had studied with the Jesuits in Rome. A journey to Rome, the mysterious and faraway capital of a denomination that many Protestants saw as powerful but shadowy and threatening, must have looked good on the ‘resume’ of a magician.¹²

The idea that poor, homeless people were experts in treasure seems very curious to the modern mind. The notion that the poor treasure magician was a foreigner, indeed the whole construction of foreignness, even exotism, that surrounded them might have helped to mask the apparent contradiction between obvious poverty and special skill in treasure hunting. If the itinerant magicians were non-normal people, did the rules of normalcy apply to them? Here, we have to take pre-modern mentality into account. At least in the early modern countryside, economic mentality anathematized ‘selfish’ profit-seeking and fiercely upheld the ideal of

¹¹ Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 153-160.

¹² Ibidem, 160-161.

common good. Treasure hunters tried to better themselves without engaging in economic competition that might have damaged the social fabric of traditional village society. However, magical knowledge and skills that would help to find a treasure might in themselves disturb the delicate equilibrium of rural society. Such potentially disruptive knowledge was 'safe' only with the outsiders, i.e. with persons that did not belong to the village community and came only briefly into contact with it. Thus, vagrants were the ideal treasure magicians. Vagabonds as treasure experts made cultural sense within the framework of the traditional mentality of the economy. This cultural coherence of the imagination of vagrants as treasure magicians eclipsed the contradiction between the expert knowledge of the itinerant treasure magician and his poverty. By attributing magical powers to the vagrant as an outsider, the village society stabilized itself. At the same time, the idea that vagabonds had special magical knowledge suggested that this magical knowledge was essentially available. It was not permanently in the village as a source of conflict and inequality, but it was still within reach.¹³

The vagrant paid the price of this societal construction of magical power: the vagabond's role as the outsider par excellence was vigorously confirmed, indeed the suggestion that vagabonds were magicians gave vagrancy a new dimension. The attribution of magical knowledge to the vagrant, the little-known stranger, made him even more of a shadowy figure and any knowledge about him even more problematic. To be sure, some vagabonds profited from these ideas about their alleged magical knowledge as frauds or treasure experts in the pay of well-to-do peasants or burghers. Some of them earned their living in that way for years.¹⁴ However, in the long run any ideas about itinerant strangers as magicians hindered their social integration and deepened the aversions and suspicions against them.

The itinerant strangers and vagabonds who used magic to find minerals or treasure troves were harmless in comparison to the vagabonds who allegedly ran crime syndicates. The idea of vagabonds as agents of organized crime was one of the variants of an *idée fixe* of early modern Europe: the notion that there were secret organizations of vagrants. Beggars and vagabonds were supposed to form secret societies. The source materials allude to fraternities of vagabonds, societies of beggars and even kingdoms of vagrants. The alleged 'monarchie d'argot' was even supposed to have

¹³ Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 192-203.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 142, 153, 161, 166-167.

their own estates and diets.¹⁵ On closer inspection, the pre-modern vagabond organizations turn out to have been mere fictions, literary fantasies that mingled with reports of a sensation-seeking early modern 'yellow press'. The basis of these fantasies were probably state or church institutions that were used to control the lowest stratum of society. So-called beggar kings that appear in the source materials were officials who policed vagrants. Even the much-fabled vagabond's court on the Kohlenberg near Basel was by no means autonomous but under the close supervision of the city magistrate.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the idea that vagabonds had some kind of organization carefully hidden not only from the preying eyes of spiritual and secular authorities but also from the common burghers and peasants was deep-rooted and widespread. The contemporaries expected the worst from these vagrant organizations. Early modern Europe feared networks of arsonists. Almost all of these arsonists were supposed to be vagrants, most of them simple itinerant street beggars. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries hundreds of homeless people were arrested as members of arsonists' gangs.¹⁷ Under torture most of them confessed to belong to huge conspiracies. There were rumours about arsonists' organizations consisting of several hundred persons. It was said that a conspiracy involving no less than 10.000 people was responsible for the 'grand feu' that had destroyed 300 houses in the town of Troyes in 1524. More than twenty years later, the bishop of Troyes was warned that 1.000 arsonist plotters had returned to finish their work of destruction.¹⁸ The organizations of arsonist vagrants were supposed to work for foreign powers. The list of authorities who

¹⁵ R. Jütte, *Arme, Bettler, Beutelschneider. Eine Sozialgeschichte der Armut* (Weimar 2000) 237-241.

¹⁶ G. Frantisek Graus, 'Organisationsformen der Randständigen. Das sogenannte Königreich der Bettler' in: H. Gilomen, P. Moraw and R. Schwinges eds., *Frantisek Graus: Ausgewählte Aufsätze (1959-1989)* (Stuttgart 2002) 351-368; Jütte, *Arme*, 219-221, 239-241.

¹⁷ J. Dillinger, 'Organized Arson as a Political Crime', *Crime, History and Societies*, 10 (2006) 101-121; K. Helleiner, 'Brandstiftung als Kriegsmittel', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 20 (1930) 326-349; P. Roberts, 'Arson, Conspiracy and Rumour in Early Modern Europe', *Continuity and Change* 12 (1997) 9-20; B. Scribner, 'The Mordbrenner Fear in Sixteenth-Century Germany: Political Paranoia or the Revenge of the Outcast?' in: R. Evans ed., *The German Underworld. Deviants and Outcasts in German History* (London 1988) 29-56.

¹⁸ Roberts, 'Arson', 20.

allegedly engaged in secret warfare against their enemies by hiring vagabonds as arsonists is long and impressive. A few examples will suffice.

In sixteenth century France, the Flemish and the Spanish were said to have paid for the conflagration of various towns. During the protracted tensions between France and the Empire in the sixteenth century, French and German authorities suspected each other of planning arsonist attacks. In German Catholic territories, tramps supposedly paid by German Protestant princes were accused of fire-raising. In the Protestant territories, tramps supposedly paid by Catholic princes or even by the pope himself suffered the same fate. In 1541, the Protestant authorities even demanded that the emperor took action against the alleged Catholic plot. In German Habsburg countries there were rumours about arsonist attacks organized by the Hussites in the 1420s, by the Venetians in early sixteenth century and the Turks from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Rivalling petty aristocrats in Germany were said to use arson as a weapon against each other. In 1517, there were rumours about the Bundschuh, a group of peasant rebels from South Germany. The rebels were supposed to have enlisted the help of a huge organization of vagrant jugglers, beggars, and tramps. The itinerants were said to maintain the Bundschuh's communication network. In addition to that, the rebellious peasants had allegedly paid them to raise fires in various villages in order to cause confusion while the peasant troops gathered for a surprise attack. The law enforcement agencies of South German principalities claimed that the Bundschuh and his secret auxiliary troop of vagabonds were active in about one hundred villages on both sides of the Rhine. The London fire of 1666 was not only blamed on shadowy agents of Catholic powers but also on foreigners such as Dutch and Frenchmen who lived in Britain. Probably the best-known arsonist conspiracy is the one French aristocrats were accused of during the revolutionary period. They were said to have enlisted the help of vagrants to spread terror and confusion. This arsonist scare is today aptly known as the *Grande Peur*.¹⁹ Obviously, any political or denominational

¹⁹ J. Dillinger, 'Freiburgs Bundschuh', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 32 (2005) 407-435; Idem, 'Organized', 102-112; M. Spicker-Beck, *Räuber, Mordbrenner, umschweifendes Gesind* (Freiburg 1995) 126-129, 137-138; Roberts, 'Arson', 12, 14, 17-18, 22; Helleiner, 'Brandstiftung', 327-335, 341-343; Scribner, 'Mordbrenner', 29-35; G. Lefebvre, *La Grande Peur de 1789* (5th edition; Paris 1988), 81-155; J. Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident* (Paris 1978) 178-179.

adversary could be suspected to engage in covert warfare using terrorist groups as a secret army.

The records of trials against alleged fire-raisers present them as a kind of mercenaries. The culprits confessed that they were addressed by some shadowy emissary of an enemy potentate. This person told them to commit arson in a certain region, mostly without giving any particularities concerning the exact location, time or rationale for the arsonist attack. The foreigner provided the beggar with tools such as gunpowder and slow-matches, and paid him immediately. In other versions of that story, the person making contact with the would-be arsonist was another vagrant who had earlier been hired by foreign agents to form a gang of fire-raisers. Most source materials reveal no further organizational structures of the alleged arsonist groups. All contacts were said to have been established quite by chance. Out of organizational difficulties further meetings did not take place, in many cases they had not even been planned. The suggestion that foreign powers paid vagabonds in advance for dangerous and criminal acts appears to be highly questionable. The near complete lack of organizational structures would have left the arsonist's 'principal' without any effective means of control.²⁰

Real mercenary armies worked in a very different way. First of all, early modern mercenaries as a rule knew the recruitment officer who contracted them or at least the military leader they agreed to work for. Before they joined the ranks of the respective army they did not receive any pay aside from a small sum that enabled them to get to the mustering place. After that, they were under strict military control.²¹ There are no records to prove that any of the supposedly aggressive powers ever really invested money in tramps as fire-raisers. It is therefore safe to assume that organizations of arsonist vagabonds never existed. The arsonist conspiracies were delusions of over-eager law enforcement agencies and a crisis-shaken, paranoid public. The arsonist scare was similar to the fear of witches or to the craze about Jewish ritual murder.

However, the authorities believed in the existence of organized groups of vagabond arsonists. The consequences of their fear of organized arson were real enough: Europe's princes passed severe laws against vagrants collectively suspected as fire-raisers. Harmless beggars were

²⁰ Dillinger, 'Organized', 105-109.

²¹ Ibidem, 106-109; Idem, 'Freiburgs', 421-422.

apprehended and executed.²² The organization of fire-fighting as well as policing, even state-building itself made considerable progress under the assumption that cities and whole countries were in danger of being burnt down. The concrete measures taken during the Grande Peur in order to fight the alleged itinerant arsonists revealed the strength of the revolutionary potential in France in 1789.

The organized vagabonds in the pay of some enemy power were not necessarily arsonists. In a number of cases they were said to spread epidemics by wilfully poisoning fields and wells. In some cases, itinerants were accused of both: having torched villages and spreading poison. In 1546, Johann Friedrich I of Saxony and Philipp of Hessen together issued a warrant for arsonists and poisoners who were allegedly in the pay of the pope. In France, the Huguenots were rumoured to employ poisoners and incendiaries during the 1560s. In 1557 the authorities of Lyon asked Geneva for assistance in their search for a Spanish traveler. This resourceful criminal was supposed to have a box full of poisonous powder and apples which emitted flames, apparently some kind of firebomb.²³

Of course, anti-Semites accused the Jews of poisoning the wells. The anti-Semite variant of the fear of mass poisoning was certainly the most destructive one. Nevertheless, it is just one of the various forms the poison scare took. Antiquity and the Middle Ages had already feared poisoners in the pay of foreign powers who supposedly caused epidemics.²⁴ In the 1320s, rumours about a conspiracy that aimed at the destruction of Christendom by mass poisoning led to major upheavals in France: lepers supposedly wanted to spread their disease with the help of some venom. Muslim leaders and Jewish middlemen were said to finance and organize this mass murder.²⁵ Several years later, in the context of the Black Death, a similar

²² Dillinger, 'Organized', 114-119; Helleiner, 'Brandstiftung', 337-349; Spicker-Beck, *Räuber*, 187-271; Roberts, 'Arson', 20-24.

²³ Anonymous, *Des Churfuersten zu Sachsen etc. Vnd Landgrauen zu Hessen etc. Offen Ausschreiben Der Mordbrenner vnd Vorgiffter halben: Die vom AntiChrist dem Babst zu Rom abgefertiget Deuschland mit Mordbrandt vnd vorgifftung zubeschedigen* (Wittenberg 1546); G. Farinelli and E. Paccagnini eds., *Processo agli Untori* (Milan 1988); Roberts, 'Arson', 24; J. Dillinger, 'Terrorists and Witches: Popular Ideas of Evil in the Early Modern Period', *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004) 167-182: 176.

²⁴ K. Leven, 'Poisoners and 'Plague-Smeared'', *The Lancet* 354 (1999) 53-54; A. Borst, *Lebensformen im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt 1982) 374-376.

²⁵ C. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (New York 1992) 47-75.

episode from Narbonne shocked the public. In 1348, a group of beggars was apprehended near Narbonne. The beggars confessed that they had been hired by the English to wreak havoc in France. They confessed that they had been paid to spread poison randomly.²⁶ In the 1570s Geneva feared vagrants from Savoy who allegedly used a mysterious venom that caused the plague. The Habsburgs had allegedly paid tramps who had brought the plague to Milan. The people of Lyon feared that Protestant powers would hire vagrants to spread plague poison in their town. Travellers from France were said to have wilfully brought the plague to London in 1666. In the seventeenth century, itinerants from Italy supposedly poisoned whole villages in Southern Germany by smearing venom on the church doors. The fear of the 'untori', the salve-smearers who caused epidemics by spreading poison, indiscriminately plays a major role in Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi Sposi* (1840-1842).²⁷ A deep-rooted idea about epidemics belongs into this context: until the present day, vagrants, migrants, travellers, all kinds of strangers have often been suspected of carrying diseases. Beyond the necessities of quarantine, the epidemic itself is represented as an outside force connected with strangers.²⁸

The ridiculously small sums of money shadowy agents of some foreign potentate allegedly offered the vagrants for burning down or poisoning defenceless towns were no sufficient motive for their crimes. Time and again we find in the sources the conviction that itinerant beggars were evil.²⁹ When Daniel Defoe called the devil himself a vagabond and explained that Satan was most pleased with the life style of vagrants, he only drew a half joking conclusion from an old tradition.³⁰ Vagrants were supposed to hate society with a mindless hatred the Christian charity they

²⁶ J.-N. Biraben, *Les Hommes et la Peste en France et dans les Pays Européens et Méditerranéens* (Paris 1975) i, 58-59.

²⁷ Roberts, 'Arson', 14; M. Dinges, 'Pest und Staat' in: M. Dinges and T. Schlich eds., *Neue Wege in der Seuchengeschichte* (Stuttgart 1995) 71-103: 94-95; A. Pastore, *Crimine e Giustizia in Tempo di Peste nell'Europa Moderna* (Bari 1991) 3-24.

²⁸ Delumeau, *Peur*, 112, 131-133, 190-191; for modern forms of this idea see: P. Sarasin, *Anthrax. Bioterror als Phantasma* (Frankfurt 2004).

²⁹ B. Geremek, *Les Fils du Caïn. L'Image des Pauvres et des Vagabonds dans la Littérature Européenne du XVe au XVIIe Siècle* (Paris 1991) 357-362; Idem, *Les Marginaux Parisiens aus XIVe et XVe Siècles* (Paris 1976) 340-348; Delumeau, *Peur*, 92-193; Jütte, 'Arme', 209-219; Dillinger, 'Organized', 122-123.

³⁰ Daniel Defoe, 'The Political History of the Devil' [London 1726], I. Rothman and R. Bowerman eds. (New York 2003) 62, 75, 179.

were offered could never quench. Already in late Antiquity theological authors considered vagrants as sinful or even as beyond salvation. They lived outside of the parishes and were therefore not subject to the ‘cura animarum’ and the church discipline.³¹ The influential *Liber Vagatorum* had suggested that all itinerant beggars were frauds.³² Anti-Semitism helped to fuel the hatred of poor itinerant strangers. During pogroms, Jews were driven from their homes or forced to submit to baptism under the condition that they gave up all their worldly possessions. Many of them ended up as itinerant beggars. Two suspicious groups, Jews and vagabonds, mingled. The strange legend of Ahavasverus fitted remarkably well into this set of imaginations: it told the story of the Jew Ahasverus who had refused to let Jesus rest on his threshold on the way to Calvary. Jesus cursed the Jew to wander the world restlessly till the end of time.³³

Tramps who were arrested as fire-raisers were even forced to repeat the condemnation of vagrants as evil persons themselves: when the itinerant street beggar Hans Spydelin confessed before the criminal court of Urach (Dukedom Württemberg) in 1526 that he had belonged to a gang of fire-raisers he said by way of explanation: ‘There is no more accursed and no more evil man or beast than a beggar’.³⁴ The indiscriminate, and irrational destruction caused by huge fires or epidemics was thought to be the expression of the all-consuming evil of vagrants. The vagabonds in the pay of enemy powers who allegedly started fires and wilfully spread diseases were more than just evil strangers employed by other evil strangers. In this set of imaginations, the evil that was really at work in the alleged organizations of itinerant arsonists and poisoners was not that of the hostile forces which were supposed to pay the vagabonds. It was the beggars’ supposedly indiscriminate will to destroy that was the necessary precondition of all the machinations of foreign powers. Whereas in the popular mind these powers were exchangeable and never came to the fore, the evil organization of vagrants was the centre of attention and constituted the salient feature of these conspiracy theories.

³¹ E. Schubert, *Fahrendes Volk im Mittelalter* (Bielefeld 1995) 111-121.

³² R. Jütte, *Abbild und soziale Wirklichkeit des Bettler- und Gaunertums zu Beginn der Neuzeit Sozial- mentalitäts- und sprachgeschichtliche Studien zum Liber Vagatorum (1510)* (Cologne 1988).

³³ K. Bergdolt, *Der Schwarze Tod in Europa* (Munich 1994) 132-133, 144-145; Delumeau, *Peur*, 296-298; A. Baleanu, *Ahasver: Geschichte einer Legende* (Berlin 2011).

³⁴ Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart, A 43 Bü 3.

Evidently, the vagabond arsonists or poisoners had a most important secret: that of their own assignments and that of the identity of their employer. Thus, they had vital bits of information the authorities as well as the common people threatened by their criminal activities would have needed desperately. Very like the so-called Venetian and the itinerant treasure magicians, the vagabond arsonists and poisoners supposedly knew something neither the authorities nor the 'ordinary' people knew. They seemed to have secret knowledge that would have been most important for the government agencies, for the villagers and the burghers. In this respect, lowly outsiders were regarded as being most unpleasantly superior to the settled people and their lords. Of course, the strangers' knowledge was not the academic learning of the clergy or the universities, not the know-how of the experts for administration, the hoard of information available to the merchant elite, the practical knowledge of peasants and artisans or simply the experience based wisdom of the aged. It was a secret and secretive knowledge, and yet it was of great significance. To be sure, vagabonds sold their knowledge or could be forced to share it with the authorities. Nevertheless, it was obtainable only from them. This specific construction of knowledge was part and parcel of the image of the itinerant stranger. It was even more unnerving because this knowledge was essentially about the spheres of the non-itinerants. The dangerous knowledge of the strangers was no insider knowledge about themselves. Rather, it was about treasures hidden in the settled people's home country or about secret attacks on their towns and villages.

In a way, the most threatening aspect of the itinerant strangers was that they were not truly strangers. There was always some kind of familiarity about them, or rather, they were more familiar with oneself than they were to oneself. Little was known about the strangers, but they were supposed to know a great deal. They were supposed to know what really mattered: where riches were hidden in one's own country or what sinister plans one's enemy had in mind. Thus, the most threatening thing about the strangers was that they were not strange enough.