

“LIVING WITH DEATH IN THE 1700s”

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Deaths caused by wolves in Lombardy and Eastern Piedmont in the XVIII century

In researching the local history of the Po Valley, the wolf is an almost constant presence; incidents of generally aggressive interaction (in which both man and wolf succumb), historical records, iconography and religious ritual continually make reference to it. It was this constant uncovering of archival documentation on the shadow cast by the wolf which ten years ago made us ponder how the numerous documented cases of man-eating could be reconciled with the “goodist” theories of some contemporary naturalists who insist upon the wolf’s harmlessness toward man. This gave way to a ponderous investigation which has occupied us for some years.(1)

All the data which we will now display, focused on wolf-caused deaths in the XVIII century, originate from this historical-naturalistic work which embraces a period spanning from the XV to the XIX centuries, and encompasses Lombardy, Eastern Piedmont and Italian Switzerland.

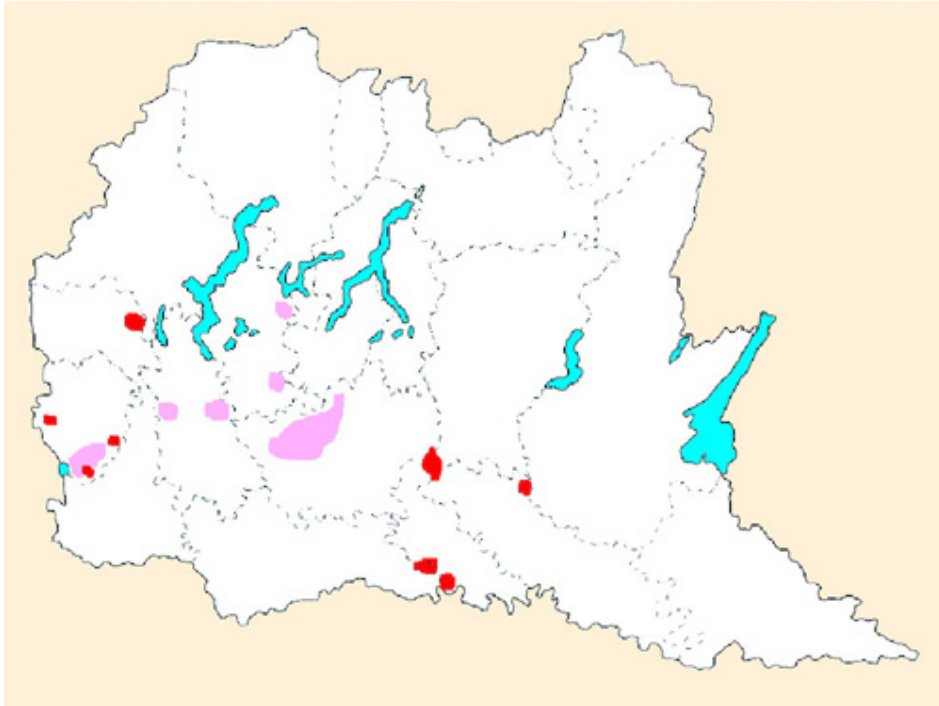
It is wise from the start to underline that deaths caused by wolves are derived from two distinct kinds of event which are almost always detectable in the documentation.

The first, of a more systematic nature, is the result of predatory activity concluding in feeding; the second, more episodic and due to a pathogen, regards the rabid wolf which causes death by transmitting its disease.

These two kinds of aggression were distinctly perceived not just by the authorities or sanitarians of the time, but also by the rural populations. In light of such, it is even more shocking how only modern naturalists can maintain that (unpredictable as the motivations behind wolf attacks are and in the view of denying man-eating) all cases are due to rabies.

The behaviour of wolves and other variables derived from documents allow one, with a good level of precision, to understand the nature of each attack, with the narration of the events and their light-speed temporal dynamics allowing one to see the differences between the two kinds of attack.

In the XVIII century, some ninety deaths were revealed to have occurred in Lombardy and Eastern Piedmont caused by wolves either in direct fashion (with predatory intent) or indirect (through the transmission of rabies).



Deaths caused by wolves in Lombardy and Eastern Piedmont in the XVIII century through rabies (red) and man-eating (violet)

Deaths consequential to man-eating wolves in the XVIII century

In the course of the 1700s proceeds a long series of incidents regarding man-eating wolves which, in prior centuries, had bloodied Lombardy and Eastern Piedmont.

The victims are almost exclusively young shepherd boys; the scene of the tragedy is generally a field as the event never occurs in the vicinity of heavily populated areas. It always occurs during the fair season when livestock enters grazing zones and the wolves must feed their spring-born litters.

The attack is directed at the neck or head and the victim is immediately dragged towards a place where it can be hidden; in this phase, the intervention of third parties, be it in the form of adults or bovines, causes the victim to be abandoned. Assuming the victim has not received particularly serious lesions, he/she recovers without any obvious symptom of rabies.

In general, the first attack on a young shepherd is purely accidental considering that domestic animals are the usual focus of the wolf's normal predatory activity. For the predator however, the gratifying experience of an easy prey can take root and become systematic. The wolf, a highly social animal, can transmit this information to its pack and so, most of the time; the incident of man-eating does not remain isolated, but is repeated in the same territory, sometimes for years, until the wolves responsible are eliminated.

Man-eating behaviour is certainly out of the norm for the wolf, but it can arise, despite certain naturalists today (contrary to those of the 1800s who were well acquainted with this reality) tending to completely justify the wolf by blaming everything on rabid individuals. Regarding such, it is interesting to briefly consider a document dated April 23 1463 when, ordering a hunt and establishing "... the presidents of the office of the Provision of the Commune of Como how much has been the violence and rapaciousness of the wolves who for a year now have here killed many human beings..."

they wrote “... *that the rapacious wolf, who not living in accordance to its nature devours Christians..*”(2)

The chronicles are a reminder that in Varesotto in 1704, 16 people were mangled, and despite the hunts that followed, the wolves were not stopped.(3) In the parish archives it has been possible to find a confirmation; in September 17 at Gorla Maggiore, a six year old child died after being bitten by a wolf.(4)

The following year, at Viggìù, March 31, 9 year old Anna Maria, daughter of Giovanni Battista, was devoured by a wolf in the vicinity of the Aglio farmstead where she lived.(5) The case was not isolated; on August 28, 65 year old Maria Campascina, whilst working in the countryside, was killed by a wolf(6) and on September 9, the partially devoured body of 7 year old Annunciata Maria Almasio was found in the torrent of Rebaù in Gorla Maggiore.(7)

The losses probably continued. As the chronicles(8) tell us, in 1714 another 34 people lost their lives to wolves in Varesotto, but for now, we have no confirmation in archive documents.

A few years later, in Novarese, on the June of 1728, a wolf spread terror among the peasants between Ghemme and Oleggio, to the point that “*nearly every day one can hear from one land to another of some youngster either injured or killed by these fierce beasts.*” A detachment of cavalry from Novara was sent to kill the beast, which however mutilated an eight year old girl in Ghemme, a newborn baby abandoned by its fleeing parents, and then injured some other people. In the course of the month, sixteen attacks were counted, and in early July, from Milan, came the Captain of the Cacce who mustered a small army: 350 men armed with tridents, scythes and another 100 and a further 150 armed with rifles and scythes to kill the beast.(9)

In Biellese, from 1691, as far as we can tell, there were no records of youngsters being killed by wolves when, on September 1729, the head and arm of nine year old Bartolomeo Perazzone di Zimone, inhabitant of Cavaglià was discovered after he had been attacked by a wolf whilst he was with his grazing herd.(10) This episode was followed by a new series of deaths, available for reference from preserved documents in six different parish archives, all identical to that which a century earlier, always in Belliese, in the span of seven summers between 1629 and 1635, 31 young people had been killed.

The danger was already signaled in 1727 in a plea sent by the Commons of Benna, Verrone, Massazza and Candelo to the Duke of Savoy asking permission to “*take up arms*” because “*.. for some time here wolves and foxes in great numbers have introduced themselves, and continuously pass by, often causing serious damage.. the worst being caused by the aforementioned wolves who frequently attack and kill bovine beasts, giving even people reason to fear..*”(11)

There is no way to know if this series of calamities was in some way connected to those of the prior year which blooded Novarese, and the case in Cavaglià. For all we know, it remained isolated in that year of 1729. However, in the next summer, on June 25, again in Cavaglià, 12 year old Giovanni Battista Giaretti was killed by a wolf whilst surveying his grazing herd.(12) This time, the case was not isolated, and in July 17, the wolf killed 10 year old Giuseppe Cabrio.(13) Some days journey away, on the 10th of the next month, still in Cavaglià, two year old Caterina Cabrio was attacked and partially eaten.(14) In the following year, still in Cavaglià, 8 year old Margherita Garrone was attacked in a vineyard in the vicinity of her house. When her body was discovered, the wolf had eaten her innards.(15) The tragedy assumed even greater proportions in the spring and summer of 1732 in which the parish archives of Verrone, Cavaglià, Salussola, Zimone and Benna recorded eight more

young deaths caused by wolves. On March 27, still in Cavaglià, a wolf attacked 4 year old Domenica Maria Rodda in a vineyard close to her home. She died of injuries to her face and abdomen(16). On the 30th of the next month, 6 year old Margherita Noé was mangled in Sussola(17). On April 14, Anna Maria Ferrero od Roppolo was buried after being killed by a wolf(18). On April 27, in Benna, wolves mutilated 14 year old Maria Borri Piombin(19).

At Zimone, on Holy Saturday, 13 year old Domenica Pozzo died torn apart by a wolf not far from his home(20). On July 11, 12 year old Anna Caterina Barbero of Salussola was devoured(21). Verrone recorded two more young people being killed by wolves(22).

In the following four years, from what has been possible to ascertain, no other cases were recorded, but on October 31 1736, in Massazza, 8 year old Maria Francesca Baijs, whilst picking vegetables with other young people in a field behind her house, was attacked by a wolf which, with its prey between its jaws, ran toward the wood known as Vagliogna. There, by chance, it was intercepted by Giuseppe Badone and his son Carlo, who were gathering brushwood. The two readily intervened with pitchforks, forcing the wolf to abandon the girl who was by then dead from deep wounds to the throat.(23)

On July 5 1737, the wolf, having returned to Benna, killed 11 year old Caterina Messerano while she was grazing her flock in the woods.(24) On September 4, at Massazza, whilst surveying grazing livestock near Cascina Ronco, it was the turn of twelve year old Angela Maria Badone, and the following day, in Vallepitola, his body was found completely devoured. The few remains: the head and some bones were buried the following 7th.(25) At Salussola, on the following October 10, the devoured corpse of 12 year old Maria Azeglio was recovered.(26)

The bad season passed without losses, but they resumed in the summer of 1738, when, at Salussola, on June 29, wolves mutilated 14 year old Maria Lozia(14), and on August 26, the same manner of death was suffered by 12 year old Margherita Cracco.(12)

Even this time, the phenomenon, as it appeared, ceased abruptly, and resumed only after approximately 70 years at Castelletto Cervo. In the years between 1729 and 1738, in Biellese, the resurfacing of man-eating behaviour in wolves cost the lives of 19 young people; 14 girls and 5 boys, of which for 17 it is possible to ascertain their ages: the girls were between the ages of 2 and 14, while the boys were between 9 and 12.

The last episode of man-eating in the 1700s had as its setting the current outskirts of Milan. This occurrence(29) caused a notable social alarm, and saw the varying interventions of Pietro Verri, Beccaria and finally Spallanzani who bought the taxidermied carcass of the man-eating wolf for the Natural History Museum of Pavia. The tragedy began like this: on the evening of July 4, 1792, 10 year old Giuseppe Antonio Gaudenzio returned home at Cusago without the cow he had taken to graze in the wood. His father sent him back to find it, but the boy did not return the following morning and the father, journeying through the wood, found the cow, but could not find a trace of his son. Only a few days later were the little boy's bloodied clothes and some remains discovered. Some days after July 8, at Limbiate, 8 year old Carlo Oca, whilst grazing his flock with other young people, was grabbed on the throat by a wolf and dragged into the forest: his body was found soon after, partially devoured. Along the road between Cascina Pobbia and Corbetta, on the following 10th, a wolf leaped from a hedge and dragged away 6 year old Giuseppa Saracchi who was on the road with her sister. What remained of her body was found in a vineyard half a mile from the attack site. The social alarm began to grow and the authorities established a bounty of 50 zecchini, which was later

elevated to 150, and the Milanese nobles Borromeo, Litta, Crivelli, Castiglioni and others promised further rewards for the slayer of this wolf, but in vain. The losses continued, and it was decided to call some expert hunters from Valsassina. On August 4, at Senago, 8 year old Antonia Maria Beretta, who was grazing her flock with other young people, was attacked and dragged by the wolf toward a wood. The intervention of the people present interrupted the predation, but the girl died shortly after from serious neck injuries. On the following 3rd, at Assiano, now part of the Commune of Milan, a wolf grabbed 13 year old Domenico Cattaneo by the throat whilst he was grazing his flock with others, and dragged him. The few, near completely devoured remains were recovered a few days later in Cazzarate wood. The next day, at Arluno, 10 year old Giovanna Sada, whilst in the company of other children whilst grazing her flocks, was bitten by the wolf on the torso, and dragged for an moment. She was then dropped and the beast began eating her throat. On August 7, the civilian army offered to give guns and bayonets to the community in order to hunt this wolf. On the morning of August 11, the beast was once again in Milan, in the zone of San Siro, where it surprised a group of young people gathering herbs and grabbed 12 year old Regina Mosca by the throat. The crowd ran to her cries and put the wolf to flight, which subsequently dropped the dead girl. On the evening of the same day, in Boldinasco, it attacked 12 year old Dionigi Giussano, and dragged him, but the intervention of an adult drove off the wolf, which dropped the living but badly hurt boy. On the 14th, the hunters of Valsassina, seeing the ineffectiveness of their hunts, decided to return to their mountain home. In the meantime, many citizens presented ingenious and sometimes curious trapping projects in order to catch the beast. On the evening of August 16, whilst grazing her flock in Groana di Barlassina, Caterina Zerbi, and, immediately after, 13 year old Anna Maria Borghi were attacked by the wolf which dragged the latter by the throat; the intervention of a peasant drove off the wolf, but the girl was dead by then. In the following 21st, 13 year old Giuseppa Re, whilst in the company of other girls gathering wood in the wood of Chiappa Grande di Bareggio, was attacked by the wolf, and her partially devoured body was recovered 600 feet from the kill site. The next day, in the early afternoon, the girl Maria Antonia Rimoldi of Mazzo, while sitting in the shade of a nut tree, was grabbed by the wolf under the eyes of various people, the intervention of which caused the beast to leave its victim after 600 feet, who died the following day from her injuries. On September 2, at Lainate, 14 year old Gerolamo Boscone, who was grazing his flock with other boys, was attacked by the wolf, but managed to escape it. The wolf therefore grabbed his twin sister Giovanna by the throat. The intrepid boy readily intervened, and the sister, left wounded, survived this misadventure. The incident concluded on September 18, when a wolf, thought to have been responsible for the killings, was captured in a pit and killed outside the Vercellina Gate of Milan.

This concluded the tragic story of man-eating wolves in the XVIII century, but the problem did not end there. In the first quarter of the 1800s, new, serious outbreaks bloodied the countryside of Lombardy and Eastern Piedmont.

Deaths by rabies transmitted by wolves in the XVIII century

Documentation from the 1700s indicate that at least 52 people were attacked by rabid wolves in 11 outbreaks. The number of deaths is not always correctly verifiable, as they occurred at different times, and frequently in hospitals in localities different to those of the attacks; all the same, the number should not be inferior to that of the wounded, for whom at that era, there was no valid remedy to combat rabies.

When a rabid wolf entered a populated centre, biting all in its path, it became a lethal vessel of the terrible illness which in the following weeks, would claim many victims, even among the adult population. One cannot of course say that the beast in these cases applied a predatory technique; it bit

wherever it could, anything within reach, and never obviously tried to drag the victim, never mind mutilate it. It was this behaviour and mode of aggression which resulted in the stormy adoption of preventative measures in regard to rabid wolves, which were perceived as distinct from man-eating wolves by the populace, and prevention was the only applicable measure in the face of a lack of proper medication; the wounded were cared for only in largely useless, experimental ways for delaying the lethal conclusion of the disease.

In the 1700s, the most serious consequences of rabies were documented in the Milanese valleys. The first incident occurred at Socina where, on April 29 of 1711, a rabid wolf emerged from the Oglio woods at Tinazzo, and rushing through the fields of San Lino of Belvedere and San Giovanni a Longe, bit over 100 heads of livestock; all of which died within 40 days and had to be buried. At the Ronca locality, it attacked a flock. Two shepherds managed to kill it with pitchforks, but died from bites suffered during the fight.(30)

After some 50 years, another incident with graver consequences, began in Orio Litta on the night of November 21, 1765(31) when a she-wolf, originating from the woods around Adda, bit the dog of Paolo Angiolo Pozzone who intervened and received bites to the hand and arm. The animal reached Valisella district and bit the hand of Valentino Folli. Arriving at Cascina de Strozzi, it attacked Bernardo Pagano, lacerating his face, ear and thigh. Passing through the Ratti district, it attacked Innocente Bossi, giving him 10 bite wounds to the head, face and hand. Around midday, it attacked a horse, then, driven off by the coachman, it headed to Corte Sant'Andrea, where it injured 3 men and 2 women. It then attacked a convoy of 10 carriages directed to Ospedaletto, injuring 2 horses and 2 men. At Mezzana, it attacked some fishermen, biting only the clothes of one, then, by the road, it encountered and knocked over Maria Maddalena Maroni who was heading with other women to the Orio market, injuring her head. Upon arriving at the house of Carlo Rossi, it knocked him to the ground and bit his head and face. However, Rossi pinned the wolf beneath him in order to suffocate it, and with the help of his nephew Lorenzo, managed to kill it. Almost all those who were bitten on the head were in danger of death, and were immediately taken to Lodi hospital. The carcass of the she-wolf, before being buried in a pit four arms deep with limestone, was dissected by a medic, who then sent the autopsy report to Milan. In his second correspondence, he added: “*...examining attentively the work of the murderous beast before it was killed, all points to judging it rabid... in our lands, if not rabid or desperately hungry, it is infrequent for a wolf to attack the human race...*” Contemporarily, an order was given to destroy and bury all dogs which had in any way come in contact with the wolf, as well as those which were absent from their kennels during the incident. Regarding the three horses, their masters were invited to either destroy them or cauterize their wounds, though they were ordered to kill them the moment they showed any rabid symptoms. Of the 16 people bitten, at least 14 perished.

It is probable that the contagion had spread among the animals of the area, as in December 24 of 1765, at Cassano d'Adda(32) another rabid wolf bit some people, then, whilst crossing Cascina Rancata, bit a young boy and various farm dogs. Upon arriving at Dosso in the evening, it attacked Vittore Gariboldo's face, severely disfiguring him and on Christmas Eve, entered Rivolta d'Adda through the Porta San Michele. It immediately attacked the guard on duty, biting his hat and escaped, leaving him miraculously unharmed. After the alarm, two soldiers tracked down the wolf whilst it attacked a corporal. However, upon escaping, it bit the arm of Rosanna Raimonda, the face of her daughter and knocked Barnabino Pallavinci to the ground. The soldiers found the wolf, which before being killed, had managed to again attack the corporal and the face of a soldier trying to fire his weapon. His comrades managed to kill it with gunshots. The following Christmas day, it was stated that many houses had bite marks on their doors; those attacked by the wolf were a dozen.

After these serious incidents, on December 28 at Padino(33) another wolf was sighted, it too probably rabid, which bit into plants. On the following 31st a wolf, probably the same one, attacked a traveller who managed to save himself by throwing himself into an irrigation channel.

Some years later, at San Colombano, Lambro, on March 15 1767(34), another rabid wolf bit 5 people before being killed. In the course of this event, the beast was confronted by a bull belonging to Columbano Raffa, who was saved from the wolf by the bovine's intervention.

Biellese, still remembered for cases of man-eating, also suffered cases of deaths caused by wolf-spread rabies. The first of these occurred at Mottalciata in at the night of Festa dell'Assunta in 1747 when a large wolf bit the head of 65 year old Antonio Selva, who died of his injuries. The following day, it injured the face of 50 year old Margherita Colombo and her husband Vincenzo: both of whom died from rabies, the former on the 6th, the latter on the 19th of September. On the same night, it also attacked 30 year old Giovanni and 60 year old Giacomo Sappino, both of whom died respectively on the 12th and 19th of September.(35)

Some 20 years later at Netro, on the morning of December 23, 1768, a rabid wolf bit 4 people on the country paths, spreading the contagion: on January 12, 12 year old Eusebio Zanati died, on February 4, a 65 year old priest followed suit. The wolf then reached the Ciserbi district, attacking another person who fortunately was left unharmed.(36)

On the February of 1777, a new case was recorded in Salussola: a rabid wolf attacked 15 year old Maria Lacchia, who died of rabies on March 5.(37)

Some years later, a true carnage occurred at Varallo Sesia.(38) On April 17 of 1781, a wolf, descending from mount Salbianca headed to Cillimo, where it bit the arm of a young girl. It then headed to Varallo, attacking Pier Antonio Zanolio and upon arriving at the Loreto oratory, viciously bit the face and neck of 33 year old Angela Margherita De Gasperi, only to then turn on her father, who shielded by his clothing, defended himself with his cane. After reaching the walls of the Orsoline college at the gate of the village, the wolf was driven off by mules and projectile rocks, but upon reaching the Baraggia windmill, attacked another girl. After crossing Mastellone, it bit Maria Maddalena Del Grosso on the cheek. It then pounced on Caterina Danelli, tearing off part of her nose, then biting the head of Giambattista Scagliotto, who fell whilst trying to escape. In the vicinity of the San Giovanni oratory, it bit Giuseppe Del Grosso and his mother, then escaped toward mount Vaso. At the San Pietro oratory, it tore off the ear of Domenica Folghera. Throughout the land, alarm bells were sounded with hammers, the wounded were immediately sent to hospital and 300 armed men rapidly left to search for the beast while in the meantime, the bells were sounded in neighbouring lands. The wolf, after reaching Barattina, bit a man and 3 women. Near Pozzallo, it bit Carl' Antonio Prino and Giacomo Zaquino, then at Camasco, it bit Domenica Prina. The wolf pounced on Marta Bordiga, who managed to repel it with a pitchfork. It therefore bit Domenica Bordiga and another woman. Upon reaching Morondo, it attacked a young woman and a boy, then returned to Pozzallo where it bit Domenico Raito on the jaw and Marianna Magna on the flank. Resuming its mad escape, it bit Domenica Marotta's throat and broke Giovanni Comola's nose. On Sacro Monte, whilst mass was being performed to pray for liberation from the beast, the rifleman Giovanni Antonio Camaschella managed to mortally wound the beast: a male of approximately 5 years of age which was carefully dissected. That wolf, in just one day had attacked at least 26 people, a dozen of which were fatally wounded and between the following March 5-June 15, in just the parish of Varallo, 10 deaths from rabies were recorded following the attacks.

Notes

AP: Parish Archive

ASCo: State Archive of Como

ASMi: State Archive of Milan

ASNo: State Archive of Novara

ASVI: State Archive of Varallo

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- 2) ASCo, Comune, vol. 86 carta 118
- 3) Brambilla L., 1874 - *Varese e il suo circondario*. Varese
- 4) AP S. Maria Assunta, Registro dei defunti, in Carnelli L., Cisotto G. e Deiana A., 1990 - *Gorla Maggiore. Biografia di una Comunità*. Corbetta.
- 5) AP Viggiù, Registro dei defunti
- 6) idem
- 7) AP S. Maria Assunta, Registro dei defunti, in Carnelli L. ed altri *op.cit.*
- 8) Giampaolo L., 1960 - La "Topografia della Pieve di Arcisate" di Nicolò Soriani nella sua prima stesura. Anno 1728. Varese.
- 9) ASNo, Contado di Novara, cart. 220
- 10) AP Cavaglià, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1979 - *Storia della Chiesa Biellese: le Pievi di Vittimulo e Puliaco*. Biella.
- 11) AP Benna in Lebole, 1980 - *Storia della Chiesa Biellese: La Pieve di Puliaco II*. Biella
- 12) AP Cavaglià, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1979 - *op. cit.*
- 13) idem
- 14) idem
- 15) idem
- 16) idem
- 17) AP Salussola, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1979 - *op. cit.*
- 18) idem
- 19) AP Benna, Registro dei defunti in Lebole, 1980 - *op. cit.*

- 20) AP Zimone, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1979 – *op. cit.*
- 21) AP Salussola, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1979- *op. cit.*
- 22) AP Verrone, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1979 – *op. cit.*
- 23) Crovella V. 1965 – *Notizie sui lupi*. Bollettino Parrocchiale di Masazza in Lebole, 1980 - *op. cit.*
- 24) AP Benna, Registro dei defunti in Lebole, 1980 – *op. cit.*
- 25) Crovella V. - *op. cit.*
- 26) AP Salussola, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1979 – *op. cit.*
- 27) idem
- 28) idem
- 29) ASMi, Sanità, P.A., cart. 91
- 30) Burloni P.F., (s.d.) – *Sommario delle cose più notabili del Castello di Soncino*, ms. in Rossi E., 1987 – *Soncino vol. II*. Castelvetro Piacentino.
- 31) ASMi, Sanità, P.A. cart. 91 e 182
- 32) ASMi, Sanità, P.A. cart. 182
- 33) ASMi, Sanità, P.A. cart. 91
- 34) idem
- 35) AP Mottalciata S. Vincenzo e AP Mottalciata S. Maria, Registri dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1980 – *op. cit.*
- 36) AP Netro, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1992 – *Storia della Chiesa Biellese: la Pieve di Biella VII*. Biella.
- 37) AP Salussola, Registro dei Defunti, in Lebole, 1979 – *op. cit.*
- 38) ASVI, documento a stampa, con la dettagliata descrizione delle aggressioni. ASVI, Fondo Ospedale SS. Trinità, Registro dei Ricoveri, Registro dei Conti e Registro dei Convocati della Curia Superiore della Valsesia. AP Varallo, Registro dei Defunti.