The Papal States, at this time, occupied much of central Italy, and the Papal cattle were largely destroyed by rinderpest. Pope Clement XI (1649–1721) charged his personal physician, G. M. Lancini, with finding ways of aborting the pestilence. Lancini accepted Ramazzini's etiological presumption and conveyed this to the Pope who then ordered stern quarantine measures throughout territories under Roman Catholic jurisdiction. His papal edicts imposed the death penalty on farmers not immediately sacrificing sick animals and then quarantining their entire herd.

These stern measures proved to be effective, and in Catholic nations such as Italy, Spain and France, rinderpest was effectively controlled. In the Protestant nations of northwestern Europe, particularly the German states, however, the cattle plague continued unhindered. Transnational debates then ensued, alternately blaming the disease-discrepancies on a papal curse or the failings of Lutheran teachings. Ramazzini and his methods to abate contagion (human or cattle) were largely forgotten.

What is currently known about rinderpest? It is caused by a virus closely related to the measles virus and vulnerable to an effective vaccine. The obstacles hindering total eradication of rinderpest were not a lack of prophylactic vaccines but the unsettling effects of civil wars in Asia and Africa and the helter-skelter migration of refugees—and their cattle. Through transnational, concerted efforts, rinderpest was made extinct by October 14, 2010.

And thus, to one observer, the global eradication of two deadly viral diseases was identified as the most significant event of the 1962–2012 interval. Certainly, their eradication represents the first time that a communicable disease was made extinct through collective human action. Humanity may now hope to hear no further reference to their names other than in Sunday crossword puzzles.

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The author and his spouse/significant other have no financial interests to disclose.

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