

Accidents in Friuli Venezia Giulia: from *ex-votos* to current statistics

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Abstract. The latin term *ex-voto* comes from *ex-voto suscepto* meaning “according to the promise made to the Saints or to the Virgin Mary”. Many of this *ex-votos* and their related grace refer to health or to the accidents occurred. In order to make a general statistic analysis, we took in exam the *ex-votos* painted before the year 1950 and then we compared them with the INAIL data or with data derived from other statistical data sources. What emerges from this research is the relationship between *ex-votos* and the accidents occurred in agriculture, at home, or on a building site. Moreover, thanks to these *ex-votos* it is possible to understand the evolution of the accidents over the years, up to now. The study also confirms that some cases are still present today, like falls from height, which have always been a cause of mortal or serious accident, in the past and now.

Key-words. *Ex-voto*, accidents, agriculture, safety and health.

1. Introduction. Human health has always been very important, since it is deeply connected to everyday life and to the place where people live. Article 32 of the Italian Constitution states that health is a “fundamental right of the individual and [...] a collective interest”, but, as it is possible to guess, even though the world has made a lot

of progress, many accidents continue to happen, not only in workplaces but also in everyday life: on the street, at home and so on. Nowadays, all these accidents are methodically recorded by various organizations, such as the INAIL (National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work), therefore, statistics can be carried out

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to understand how accidents occur and what can be done to reduce them. The collection of data started 50-60 years ago, however, since they were not systematically collected, it is hard to identify the accidents trend over the years from a scientific point of view. A starting question could be: are accidents occurring with more or less frequency in modern life, with workplaces full of machinery, traffic in the streets etc.? And how have accidents changed if compared to the past?

A possible answer to these questions is to find a method of statistical analysis that can be applied to the accidents happened in the past and takes into account data other than those provided by INAIL and ISTAT records. Therefore, we decided to take in exam the painted *ex-voto* kept in some Friulian shrines. A characteristic of these votive paintings – described in many publications – is that they tell us the detailed visual and verbal narrative of the miracle, and when related to an accident they represent the causes and the circumstances of the accident. For this reason, it is possible to classify the *ex-voto* paintings in a systematic way.

The term *ex-voto* comes from the Latin *ex-voto suscepto*, which means “according to the promise made”, and defines gifts (paintings, silver hearts, etc.) exposed in shrines to thank an Entity – God, the Virgin Mary or a Saint – who was asked for the grace or who fulfilled the prayer. Many of these *ex-votos* refer to people’s health or to accidents and the favours received are often in relation with the illness or accident. The details of the event are depicted in a

painting or on a small board of wood. The illustration was not carried out by a professional painter but by ordinary people, who strove to represent the episode in a very realistic way.

The latin acronym VFGA (*Votus Fecimus Gratiam Agamus*) which has come down to us through the Italian *voto fatto, grazia avuta* reveals how ancient this habit is. What is interesting about these pictures is the painting technique, which, like a snapshot, helps us to understand what happened. From the point of view of the culture of accident prevention it is interesting to notice that one of the problems revealed by these votive paintings is the common belief that accidents do not depend on people’s responsibility but on the case, bad luck or the fate. An attitude towards accidents, this, which is still very widespread among many people and which is called external *locus of control*, which means that the cause lies outside one’s own responsibility. A quite dangerous way of thinking, in fact, because it does not support an effective preventive action. Besides, in Italy, statistics have never been taken in proper consideration. In other words, we could say that people prefer to rely on the Saints.

We could discuss a lot about the accuracy of current statistics on accidents, at least for those regarding accidents in agriculture. A first obstacle comes from the way of classifying accidents: for example, people who work for others (outside contractors) are ranked among the craftsmen, even when they are farmers threshing on behalf of other farmers; those who

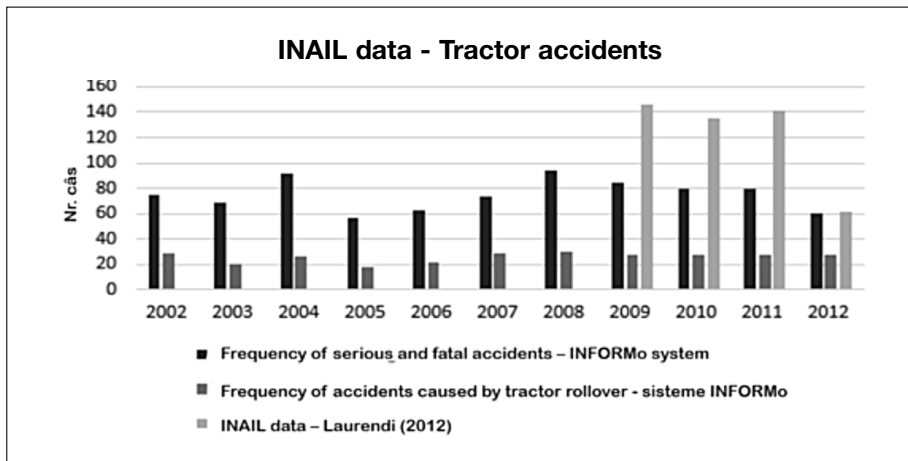


Figure 1. Tractor accidents, comparison between INFORMo data and INAIL data.

take care of gardens are classified as people working in the service activities (according to the new ATECO codes).

However, only accidents happened to workers registered with the INAIL end up in statistics, so children, retired people (quite numerous in agriculture) and those who work in their spare time are not included in statistics.

Just to get an idea of the differences in data that emerge in modern statistics, here is the situation of accidents caused by a tractor (Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that even in case of mortal or serious accidents the number of cases can be very different if we take in consideration the InforMo System (National Surveillance System of Fatal Accidents at work) data or the INAIL and ASAPS data (Association of Supporters and Friends of the Traffic Police). The ASAPS statistic is based on the monitoring of acci-

dents reported in the newspapers, on the Internet and other media.

Considering the 2010 data (Figure 1 and 2), in fact, we notice that InforMo detects 80 serious accidents, whereas INAIL nearly 140 and ASAPS about 150. This can produce a misunderstanding in finding out the most dangerous points for a job, hence, statistical methodology should be improved.

2. Material and methods. To make a statistic of accidents happened in the past, we focused on *ex-votos* painted before 1950, then we compared them with the INAIL data and other statistical sources. The graph in Figure 3 shows how the different kinds of accidents or causes of death can be inferred by *ex-votos*. This pyramid illustrates a proportion of 10 more or less serious accidents for each fatal accident. The *ex-votos* examined for this case correspond generally to serious accidents.

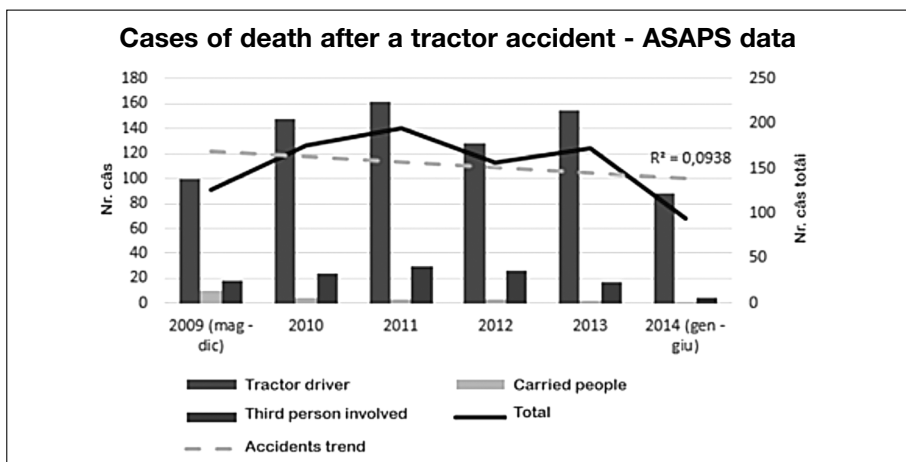


Figure 2. Cases of death after tractor accidents, ASAPS data.

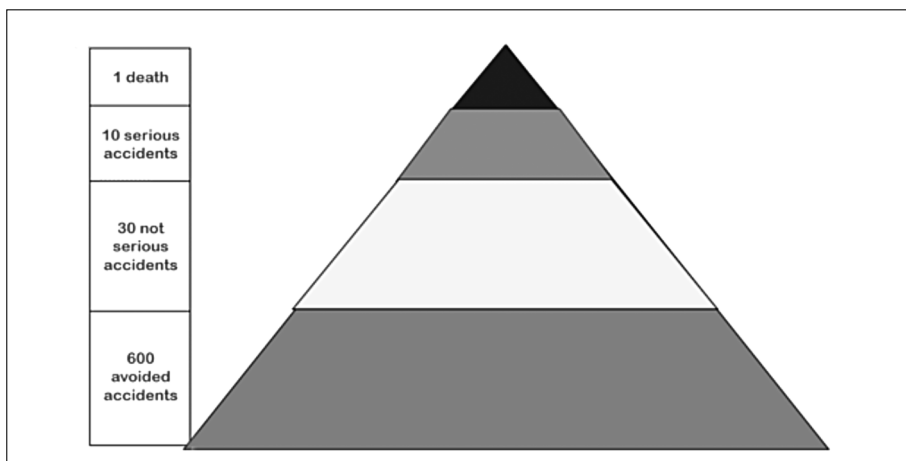


Figure 3. Fatal accidents, serious and not serious accidents, avoided accidents, average proportion.

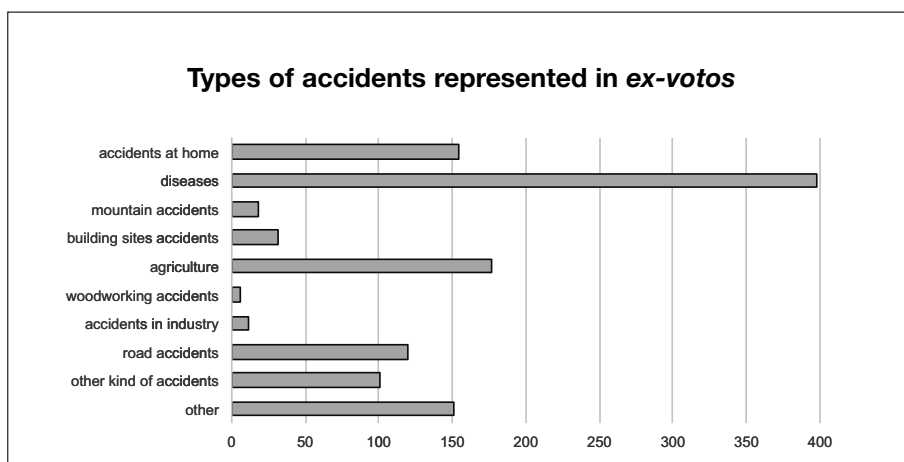
From what we can understand looking at the paintings, an *ex-voto* rarely converges in the lower part of the pyramid, that represents avoided accidents.

The graph casts a light on the huge number of accidents and diseases

which occurred in the past in everyday life or at work.

Table 1 shows the origin of *ex-votos* we analyzed for our statistics.

The statistics originated by *ex-votos* are not direct, therefore, they

Figure 4. Types of accidents represented in *ex-votos*.Table 1. *Ex-voto* provenience.

<i>Shrines place</i>	<i>Shrine territory</i>	<i>Reference accidents</i>	<i>Number of</i>	<i>Period</i>
Saint Antony	Gemona	Gemona and around places	406	1824-1988 (+15 dal 1600)
Virgin Mary of Castelmonte	Cividale	All Friuli	108	1600-1970
Virgin Mary of the Graces	Udine	Udine and places around	386	1750-1975
Carnia shrines	Carnia	Carnia	130	1650-1970
Natisone Valley shrines	Natisone Valley	Natisone Valley	145	1800-1970

are less precise than current statistics. We have considered more than a thousand *ex-voto* described in books which report all the cases discovered in the following churches (first column of Table 1).

3. Results. In Friuli, in the 1950s, about 80% of the population was employed in agriculture, for this reason the highest number of

workplace accidents occurred in fields or with animals.

The first general graph (Figure 4) presents the distribution of *ex-votos* by type of accident. Almost half of them refers to diseases or accidents happened at home. A quarter of them are agricultural accidents (*ex-votos* relating to the industry are still rare) and accidents happened on the street with wagons, horses etc. Another good

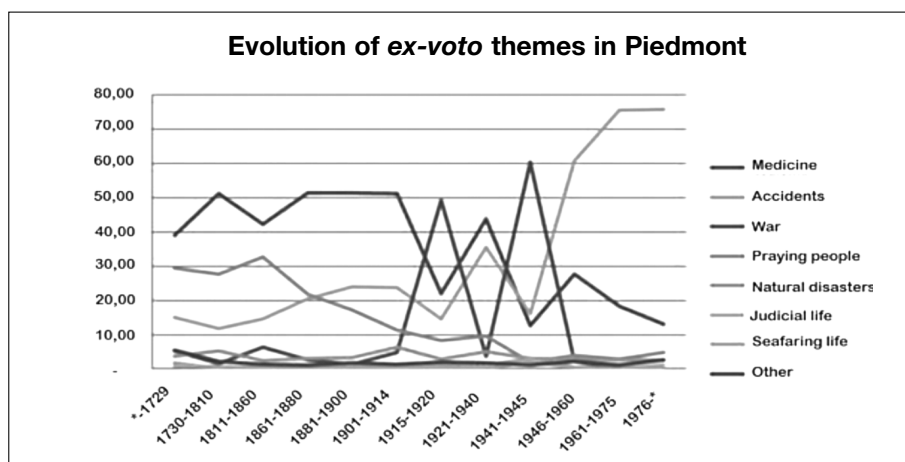


Figure 5. Evolution of *ex-voto* themes in Piedmont.

portion is given by accidents occurred to bricklayers.

This distribution of *ex-voto* can be also found in other studies (Figure 5).

It is interesting to notice that, in the last century, in Friuli Venezia Giulia, many diseases, such as the contagious ones, have disappeared from painted *ex-voto*, while accidents are still present.

This is due not only to the use of antibiotics, but especially to the fact that culture has changed. An accident, in fact, is still considered something caused by circumstances (the fate), while as far as diseases are concerned, nowadays, people usually prefer to rely on medical treatment rather than to hope for a miracle.

Comparing current accident rates to those depicted in *ex-voto* paintings, we notice that proportions have not changed over time: exception made for diseases, home accidents, agriculture accidents and accidents on building

sites are still very frequent (Vega Engineering 2013).

Another type of accident that is still present today is the case of falls from a height.

In fact, according to *ex-voto* paintings, about 50% of accidents that happened at home or around the house are precisely falls from windows, stairs, woodpiles, and so on (Figure 6).

From this information, we can understand that handrails, the height of the windows and the firmness of the terraces are now much better regulated.

As we can see in Figure 7, even on building sites the majority of accidents were falls from a height, especially from scaffoldings, which, in the past, were certainly not so safe.

However, even today, in spite of the approval of many laws and codes on the safety of building sites, it is possible to find situations in which scaffoldings are not well made, as it is

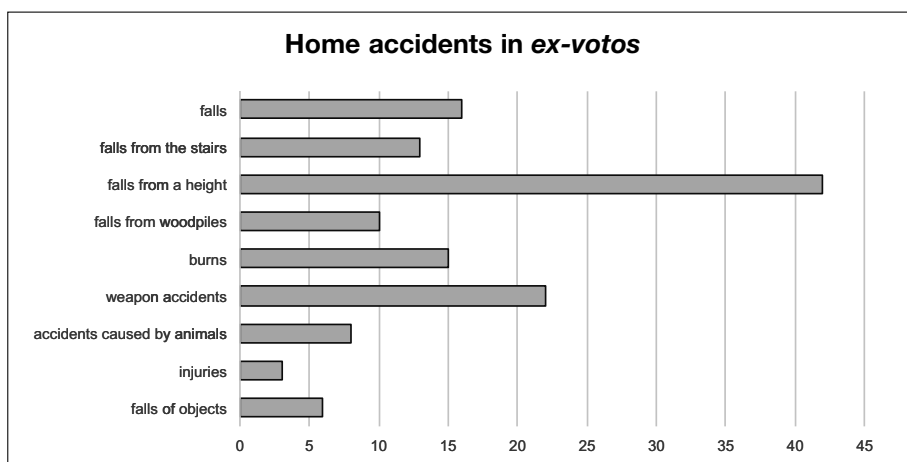


Figure 6. Home accidents in *ex-votos*.

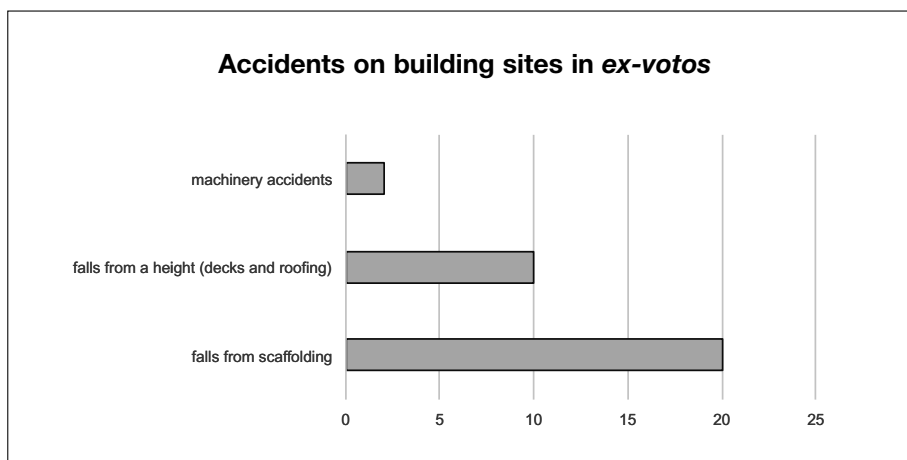


Figure 7. Accidents on building sites in *ex-votos*.

proved by the current number of accidents (Vega Engineering 2013).

Also other types of accidents that still occur quite frequently can be found illustrated in *ex-votos*. For instance, there are road accidents and accidents caused by means of transport:

wagons overturned, horses got frisky and so on. Although roads were not as crowded as they are nowadays, they were narrow, with many bends. In addition, we must consider that wagons were often in very bad condition, and they could not carry heavy weights.

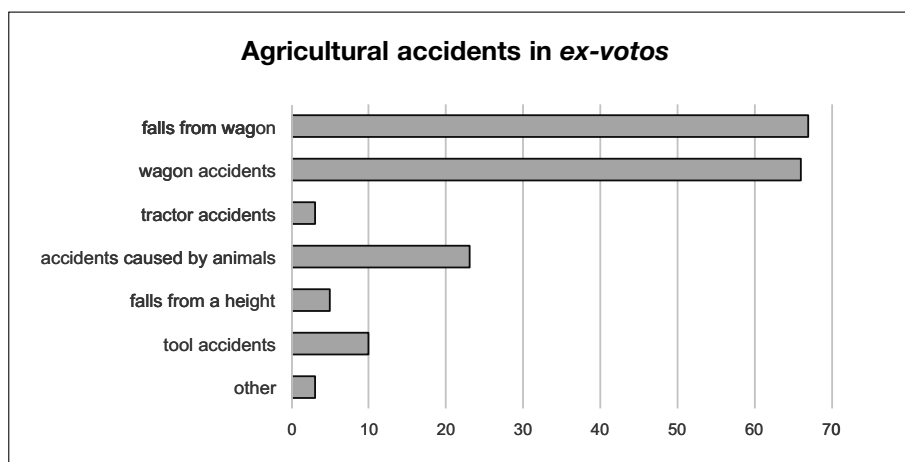


Figure 8. Agricultural accidents in *ex-votos*.

As we said, the *ex-voto* paintings show the dynamics of an accident and let us discover that most of the cases occurred with a wagon. The most frequent case was the fall from the wagon, which was used to transport materials (hay, gravel, wood), sometimes together with people, or it was frequently used to carry around people with their tools. Nowadays wagons are no more used to transport people and the streets are wider and asphalted, with fewer holes than the gravel and dirty roads of the past. Despite this, today the greatest danger derives from tractors, which carry people, as the wagons used to do, and a large number of accidents, are caused by speeding (tractors now go over 40 km/h) and road traffic.

If we consider the gender (men and women) we notice that men and children were more frequently involved than women in this kind of accidents (Figure 8), since once women did not

use the wagon to move or they did it very rarely. Many children were involved because they accompanied their father in fields, so they were on the wagon with him. Also today, although women and men are equal in many jobs, tractors are driven almost exclusively by men.

Another aspect to consider about the work in the past is that everyone had animals. Women were more involved in this kind of accidents, because they milked the cows, especially when the men were away from home because of other works. In Figure 10 we see that men were involved in this kind of accidents more than women because many accidents caused by animals occurred at the workplace.

This traditional division of labour appears clearly in Figure 11, in which we can see that women were the majority of people involved in accidents in which the victim fell



Figure 9. Wagon accidents in *ex-votos*, people injured.

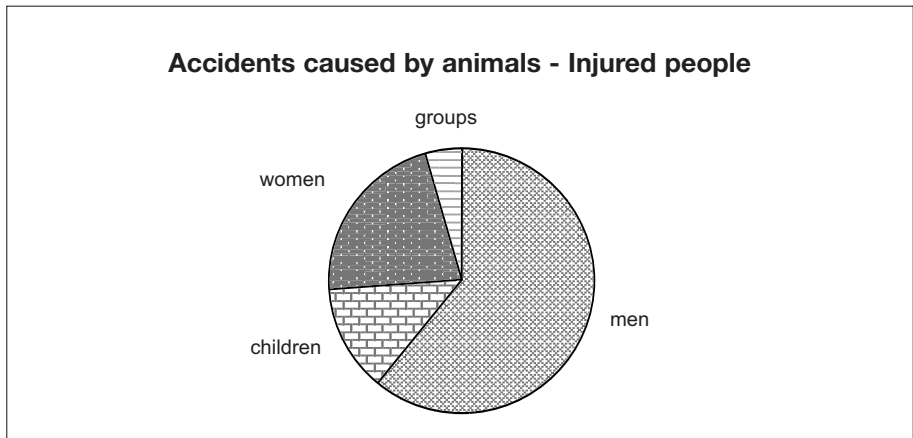


Figure 10. Accidents caused by animals, injured people.

down from the barn or into the shaft of the barn. These accidents were caused by the fact that cows were looked after mainly by women, who, before milking them, used to throw the hay down from the hayloft.

Considering now the causes of road accidents, we find the whole evolution

of the road traffic: from carriages, wagons and frisky horses to cars and bicycles (Figure 12). The most represented mean of transport seems to be the train. In fact, many *ex-votos* regard train accidents, but this kind of accidents is certainly over represented. Undoubtedly, people believed that

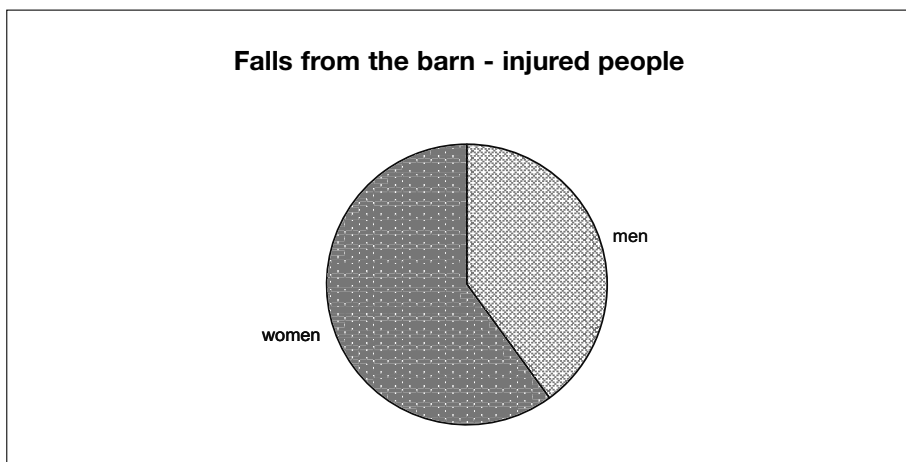


Figure 11. Falls from the barn, injured people.

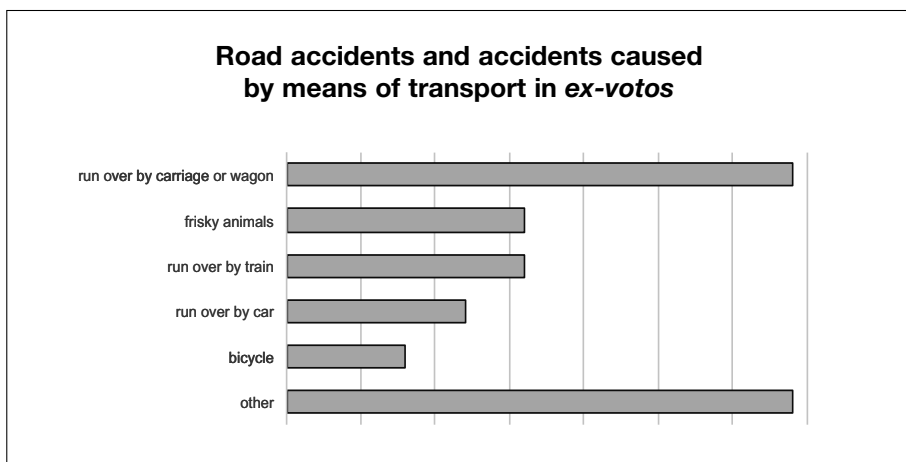


Figure 12. Road accidents and accidents caused by means of transport.

being run over by a train and manage to survive was a fact that deserved an *ex-voto* to The Holy Virgin of Castelmonte or to a Saint.

To conclude our statistics on *ex-votos*, we took in exam the “other causes of accidents” (Figure 13). Among them, the most interesting

one is war. As it is well known, during the 20th century Europe and Friuli underwent two World Wars that caused death and destruction. Thus, many *ex-votos* painted in those years regard war facts. War, like a train, was a force that could not be taken under control, hence salvation was

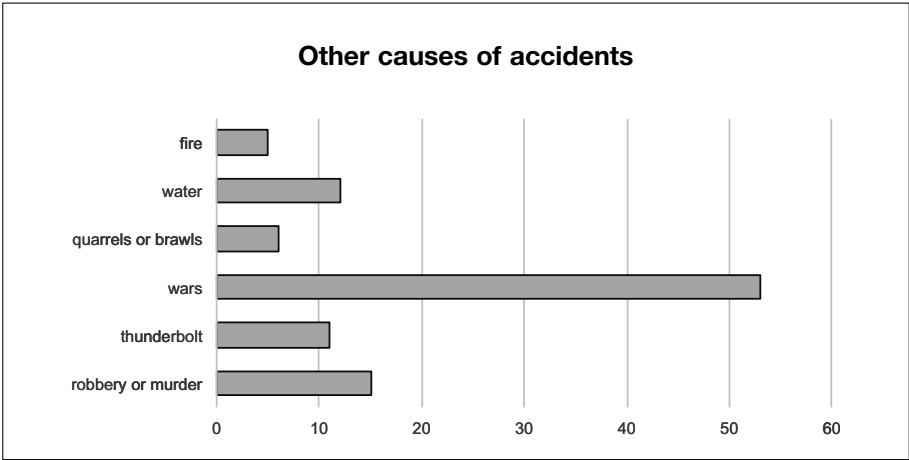


Figure 13. Other causes of accidents in *ex-votos*.

considered something extraordinary to be thankful for.

4. Conclusions. This research shows that most *ex-votos* represent accidents that happened at home, in agriculture or on a building site. By observing the *ex-votos* we can understand the evolution of accidents over time, up to now. Thanks to our study, we can conclude that some kinds of accidents are always the same. For example, falls

from height, which have always been a cause of serious or mortal accidents, both in the past and today.

Furthermore, the study is useful to understand which direction should be taken in the prevention of accidents, since, if the circumstances in which an accident occurs remain unchanged over time, it means that that particular kind of accidents is concerned with some habitual form of behaviour and therefore is an ever-present danger.

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