

The mystery of the plague was "the most terrible of all terrors," as a Flemish cleric wrote to a friend. The plague was compared to a flood and many believed they were witnessing the extermination of mankind. Reaction to this idea that the end of the world was at hand took many forms. "Divers apprehensions and imaginations were engendered in the minds of such as were left alive; inclining almost all of them to the same harsh resolution; to wit, to shun and abhor all contact with the sick and all that belonged to them, thinking thereby to make each his own health secure." This utter abandonment of the infected was described by the Florentine writer Boccaccio in the introduction to his Decameron: "One man shunned another... kinsfolk held aloof, brother was forsaken by brother, oftentimes husband by wife; nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children to fate, untended, unvisited as if they had been strangers." The Pope's physician, Guy de Chauliac, reported on the same phenomenon: "A father did not visit his son, nor the son his father. Charity was dead."

The Black Death

By Dame Gabrielle Loude

Pathology is the study of the nature and causes of disease. Below follow the definitions that will be necessary to understand what the black death is, how it is transmitted, and how it affects its victims.

Plague: 1. Any widespread contagious disease associated with a high death rate. 2. Any highly fatal disease caused by the *Yersinia pestis* infection.

Bubonic Plague: The most common form of plague, marked by a formation of buboes.

Black Plague: An acute severe infection appearing in a bubonic or pneumonic form.

Buboes: Inflamed, swollen or enlarged lymph nodes. The axilla (armpit) and inguinal (groin) nodes are the most commonly affected.

Adenitis: Inflammation of lymph nodes or gland.

The bacteria *Yersinia pestis* is present in infected rats and ground squirrels and is transmitted to humans by the bite of a flea. The flea then regurgitates the blood from the rat or squirrel into the human, infecting the human. Symptoms include a high fever, restlessness, aching limbs, vomiting of blood, staggering gait, mental confusion, prostration, delirium, shock, and coma. Those affected are marked by enlarged lymph glands and severe toxic symptoms, accompanied by intense adenitis or pneumonia. The blackish colorings of the swollen nodes give the disease its name: the Black Death. The swellings continue to expand until they eventually burst, with death following soon after. The whole process, from first symptoms of fever and aches, to final expiration, lasts only three or four days. The swiftness of the disease, the terrible pain, the grotesque appearance of the victims, all served to make the plague especially terrifying. The infection is also spread by respiratory contact after the infection has spread to the lungs. This is Pneumonic Plague, the most contagious form of the disease. Bacteria invade the victim's lungs, which fill with frothy bloody liquid. In this case, death usually occurs in less than three days.

The 14th century had no suspicion that rats and fleas were the carriers, perhaps because they were so familiar. Fleas, a common household pest, were never mentioned in contemporary plague writings, and rats only incidentally, although folklore did associate them with pestilence. (The legend of the Pied Piper came from an outbreak in 1284.) The actual plague bacteria remained undiscovered for another five hundred years.

First Accounts of the Plague.

According to one traditional story, “the plague came to Europe from the town of Caffa, a Crimean port on the Black Sea where Italian merchants from Genoa maintained a thriving trade center. The Crimea was inhabited by Tartars, a people of the steppe, a dry, treeless region of central Asia. When the plague struck the area in 1346, tens of thousands of Tartars died. Perhaps superstition caused the Muslim Tartars to blame their misfortune on the Christian Genoese. Or perhaps a Christian and Muslim had become involved in a street brawl in Caffa, and the Tartars wanted revenge. In any case, the Tartars sent an army to attack Caffa, where the Genoese had fortified themselves. As the Tartars laid siege to Caffa, plague struck their army and many died. The Tartars decided to share their suffering with the Genoese. They used huge catapults to lob the infected corpses of plague victims over the walls of Caffa. As the Tartars had intended, the rotting corpses littered the streets, and the plague quickly spread throughout the besieged city. The Genoese decided they must flee; they boarded their galleys and set sail for Italy, carrying rats, fleas, and the Black Death with them.”

Another reference records a rumor reaching Europe in 1346 of “strange and terrible things happening in the East.” Stories of a horrible plague supposedly arising in China and spreading through Tartary to India and Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt and all of Asia Minor told of a death toll “so devastating that India was said to be depopulated, whole territories were covered by dead bodies, and other areas had no one left alive.” Actual eyewitness accounts were few, but a Flemish priest, basing his remarks on a letter from a friend at the papal court, wrote: “In the East, hard by greater India, in a certain province, horrors and unheard of tempests overwhelmed the whole province for a space of three days. On the first day there was a rain of frogs, serpents, lizards, scorpions, and many venomous beasts of that sort. On the second, thunder was heard, and lightning and sheets of fire fell upon the earth, mingled with hailstones of marvelous size; which slew almost all, from the greatest to the least. On the third day there fell fire from heaven and stinking smoke, which slew all that were left of men and beasts, and burned up all the cities and towns in those parts. By these tempests the whole province was infected; and it is conjectured that, through the foul blast of wind that came from the South, the whole seashore and surrounding lands were infected, and are waxing more and more poisonous from day to day.”

A contemporary Medieval historian, G. G. Coulter, indicates that the Black Death reached Constantinople in 1347, and from there followed the trade route, by Messina and Genoa, to Normandy. This is highly probable in that these routes were the trade routes by which the Eastern spices and silks were taken to European merchants. Much of this trade was carried in galleys from collecting places in the Crimea to Messina in Sicily while other ships from the Levant sailed into Genoa and Venice. A Flemish chronicler wrote of the plague's arrival in one of these ports: “In January of the year 1348, three galleys put in at Genoa, driven by a fierce wind from the East, horribly infected and laden with a variety of spices and other valuable goods. When the inhabitants of Genoa learned this, and saw how suddenly and irremediably they infected other people, they were driven forth from that port by burning arrows and divers engines of war; for no man dared touch them, for if he did he would be sure to die forthwith. Thus, they were scattered from port

to port." G. G. Coulter also sites other accounts that indicate that infected trading ships had reached Messina in October of 1347 with dead and dying men at the oars. These ships had come from the Black Sea port of Caffa in the Crimea, where the Genoese maintained a trading post.

The origins of the outbreak of 1346 are now believed to have originated not in China but somewhere in Central Asia and to have spread west with Mongol armies and traders along the caravan routes. Chinese origin was a mistaken notion of the 14th century based on real but belated reports of huge death tolls in China from drought, famine, and pestilence which have since been traced to the 1330s, too soon to be responsible for the plague that appeared in India in 1346. Called the Black Death only in later recurrences, it was known during this epidemic simply as the Pestilence or Great Mortality. The sickness spread south to north and east to west like a tide.

At first the news caused little concern in Europe. Stories of natural disasters from the East were common, and without the concept of contagion no serious alarms were felt. Tales began to circulate, beginning in the leading European seaports, of the terrible numbers who were dying from it, and by the end of 1346 it was said that the plague was rapidly spreading westward, taking a huge toll of life as it went. "India was depopulated, Tartary, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia were covered with dead bodies; the Kurds fled in vain to the mountains. In Caramania and Caesarea none were left alive."

At any rate, by January 1348 the Black Death had established itself in Sicily and the Italian mainland, penetrated France via Marseilles, and North Africa via Tunis. From Marseilles it spread westward to Spain and northward to Avignon, which it reached in March. Between February and May it hit Rome and Florence. Between June and August it reached Bordeaux, Lyon, and Paris. From Normandy it crossed the channel into southern England. From Italy it crossed the Alps into Switzerland and moved eastward into Hungary.

Various resources make references to the estimated population of Europe during the Black Death. It is valuable to refer to these numbers as a base by which to weigh the number of deaths estimated to be caused by the Black Death.

Estimated population of Europe from 1000 to 1352:

1000 - 38 million

1100 - 48 million

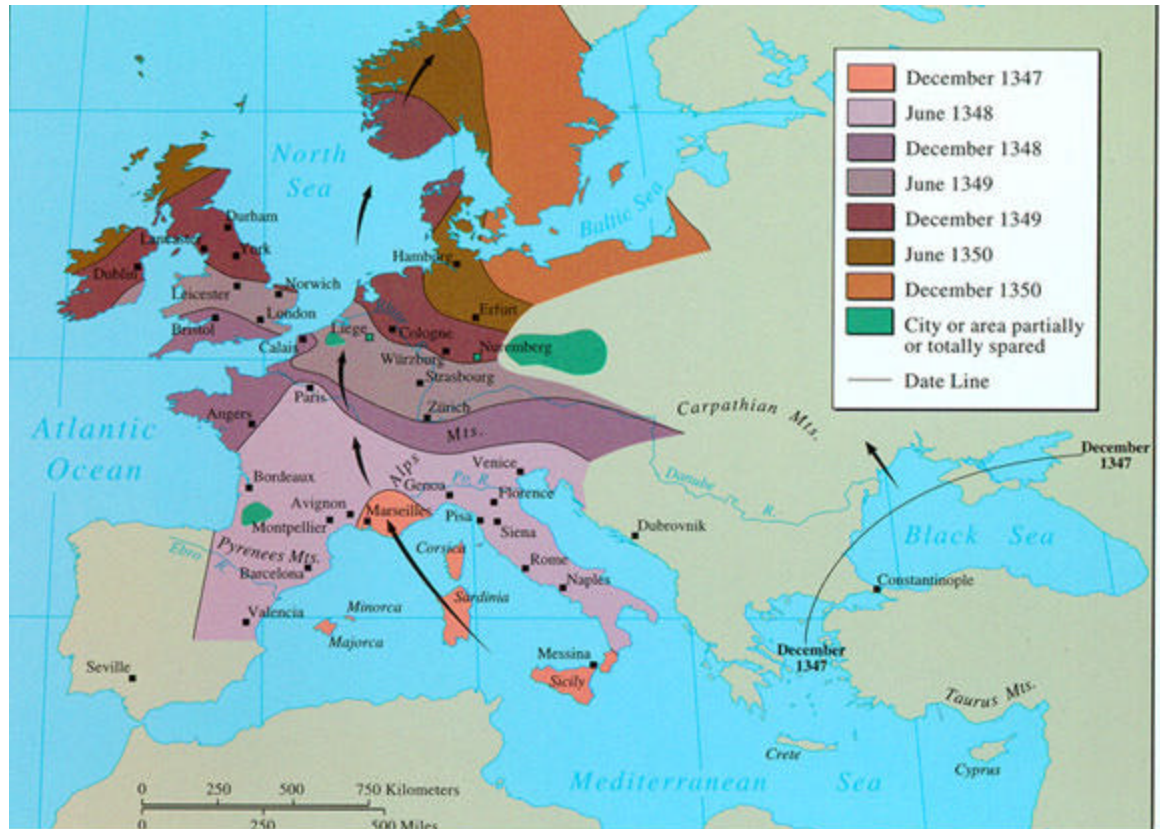
1200 - 59 million

1300 - 70 million

1347 - 75 million

1352 - 50 million

As many as two thirds of the population of many of the major European cities succumbed to the plague in the first two years, mostly due to poor sanitation and living conditions. It is estimated that as many as 25 million people died in just under five years between 1347 and 1352.



It is during this time period that William of Worcester recorded that 7,000 died in Yarmouth. In Norwich, one of the most prosperous cities with a population estimated at 70,000, the Guildhall recorded that 57,374 people perished. In the Yorkshire abbey of Meaux, only ten of the fifty monks survived. In enclosed places such as monasteries and prisons, the infection of one person usually meant that of all. In Ely, 15 of the 43 monks died, in Hickling only one out of ten lived, and in Havingham no one survived. By the best estimates, 5,000 beneficed clergymen died in a single year, about two-thirds of all those in England. At Cornard Parva in Suffolk 51 peasants died and 29 families were entirely obliterated. At Hunstanton in Norfolk, 172 peasants died in the space of eight months. 74 of these left no male heirs and 19 left no heirs at all. The number of villeins bound to the land was becoming permanently reduced. Corn mills were abandoned for lack of folk needing their corn ground, cloth mills stood "empty through the mortality of the pestilence," woodlands were unable to be sold, court fees were not collected, and no manorial services performed. "The manor was fast becoming but a bundle of legal rights." In Rochester it was reported that "men and women carried their children on their shoulders to the church and cast their bodies into a common pit. From thence proceeded so great a stench that hardly anyone dared walk across the churchyard." In Lancashire there were 13,180 dead between September 1349 and January 1350. There were 3,000 dead in Preston, 3,000 in Lancaster, 2,000 in Garstag, and another 3,000 in Kirkham. The story was the same all over England. According to William Dene, a monk of Rochester, more than a third of the land in the kingdom lay untilled. Henry of Knighton, whose accounts of the plague are vivid and comprehensive, described the situation as such: "Many villages and hamlets have now become quite desolate. No one is left in the

houses, for the people are dead that once inhabited them. And truly, many of these hamlets will now forever be empty. That winter there was a terrible lack of men to do any work. The animals were uncared for. All food, all necessities became excessively dear." Ripe fields lay unharvested and livestock unattended. Oxen and mules, sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens ran wild and also succumbed to the pestilence. Knighton reported 5,000 dead sheep in one field alone, "their bodies so corrupted by the plague that neither beast nor bird would touch them." Hungry wolves, descending from the mountains to prey on sheep, "as if alarmed by some invisible warning, turned and fled back into the wilderness." In other areas wolves would attack plague-ridden cities, causing even more panic among the survivors. Due to the lack of herdsman, cattle strayed from place to place and died in hedgerows and ditches. Dogs and cats succumbed like the rest. To those observing these horrors, it truly seemed, like the words of one chronicler, "This is the end of the world."

"Then the grievous plague penetrated the seacoasts from Southampton, and came to Bristol, and there almost the whole strength of the town died, struck as it were by sudden death. There died at Leicester in the small parish of St. Leonard more than 380, in the parish of Holy Cross more than 400; in the parish of S. Margaret of Leicester more than 700; and so in each parish a great number. Then the bishop of Lincoln gave general power to all and every priest to hear confessions, and absolve with full and entire authority except in matters of debt, in which case the dying man, if he could, should pay the debt while he lived, or others should certainly fulfill that duty from his property after his death. In the same year there was a great plague of sheep everywhere in the realm so that in one place there died in one pasturage more than 5,000 sheep, and so rotted that neither beast nor bird would touch them. And there were small prices for everything on account of the fear of death. For there were very few who cared about riches or anything else.... Sheep and cattle went wandering over fields and through crops, and there was no one to go and drive or gather them for there was such a lack of servants that no one knew what he ought to do. Wherefore many crops perished in the fields for want of someone to gather them. The Scots, hearing of the cruel pestilence of the English, believed it had come to them from the avenging hand of God, and--as it was commonly reported in England--took their oath when they wanted to swear, "By the foul death of England."



Personal Accounts of The Black Death.

This first account of plague is from Messina, Italy describing the arrival and initial progress of the disease...

“At the beginning of October, in the year of the incarnation of the Son of God 1347, twelve Genoese galleys . . . entered the harbor of Messina. In their bones they bore so virulent a disease that anyone who only spoke to them was seized by a mortal illness and in no manner could evade death. The infection spread to everyone who had any contact with the diseased. Those infected felt themselves penetrated by a pain throughout their whole bodies and, so to say, undermined. Then there developed on the thighs or upper arms a boil about the size of a lentil, which the people called "burn boil". This infected the whole body, and penetrated it so that the patient violently vomited blood. This vomiting of blood continued without intermission for three days, there being no means of healing it, and then the patient expired.”

“Not only all those who had speech with them died, but also those who had touched or used any of their things. When the inhabitants of Messina discovered that this sudden death emanated from the Genoese ships they hurriedly ordered them out of the harbor and town. But the evil remained and caused a fearful outbreak of death. Soon men hated each other so much that if a son was attacked by the disease his father would not tend him. If, in spite of all, he dared to approach him, he was immediately infected and was bound to die within three days. Nor was this all; all those dwelling in the same house with him, even the cats and other domestic animals, followed him in death. As the number of deaths increased in Messina many desired to confess their sins to the priests

and to draw up their last will and testament. But ecclesiastics, lawyers and notaries refused to enter the houses of the diseased.”

“Soon the corpses were lying forsaken in the houses. No ecclesiastic, no son, no father and no relation dared to enter, but they hired servants with high wages to bury the dead. The houses of the deceased remained open with all their valuables, gold and jewels.”

“When the catastrophe had reached its climax the Messinians resolved to emigrate. One portion of them settled in the vineyards and fields, but a larger portion sought refuge in the town of Catania. The disease clung to the fugitives and accompanied them everywhere where they turned in search of help. Many of the fleeing fell down by the roadside and dragged themselves into the fields and bushes to expire. Those who reached Catania breathed their last in the hospitals there. The terrified citizens would not permit the burying of fugitives from Messina within the town, and so they were all thrown into deep trenches outside the walls.”

“Thus the people of Messina dispersed over the whole island of Sicily and with them the disease, so that innumerable people died. The town of Catania lost all its inhabitants, and ultimately sank into complete oblivion. Here not only the "burn blisters" appeared, but there developed gland boils on the groin, the thighs, the arms, or on the neck. At first these were of the size of a hazel nut, and developed accompanied by violent shivering fits, which soon rendered those attacked so weak that they could not stand up, but were forced to lie in their beds consumed by violent fever. Soon the boils grew to the size of a walnut, then to that of a hen's egg or a goose's egg, and they were exceedingly painful, and irritated the body, causing the sufferer to vomit blood. The sickness lasted three days, and on the fourth, at the latest, the patient succumbed. As soon as anyone in Catania was seized with a headache and shivering, he knew that he was bound to pass away within the specified time. . . . When the plague had attained its height in Catania, the patriarch endowed all ecclesiastics, even the youngest, with all priestly powers for the absolution of sin which he himself possessed as bishop and patriarch. But the pestilence raged from October 1347 to April 1348. The patriarch himself was one of the last to be carried off. He died fulfilling his duty. At the same time, Duke Giovanni, who had carefully avoided every infected house and every patient, died.”

From Agnolo di Tura, of Siena:

"The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing. . . . It seemed that almost everyone became stupefied seeing the pain. It is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. The victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in the groin, and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. None could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as

best they could, without priest, without divine offices. In many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. I, Agnolo di Tura . . . buried my five children with my own hands. . . . And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world."

Pistoia was a provincial city of about 11,000 in the early fourteenth century located in the region of Tuscany, less than thirty miles northwest of Florence. Its government was run by a small executive council made up of the Anziani or Elders of the People and the Standardbearer of Justice. The chief administrative officers were the Captain of the People and the Podesta who served six-month terms. They could not be Pistoian or even Tuscan. They were allowed limited social contact with Pistoians and their behavior was audited, or "syndicated" at the end of their terms of office. This allowed anyone who felt wronged by their actions to bring charges. The eight Anziani and the Standardbearer of Justice were citizens of the city selected by lot to serve two-month terms from among the citizens of the city who met age, professional and property qualifications. This small council debated all issues and made recommendations to a general city council, the Council of the People, which was required either to approve or reject proposals without amendment. As will be clear from the ordinances, there were virtually no issues which affected life in the city which the government could not debate. The context of the Ordinances was the arrival of the Plague early in the Spring of 1348. Plague probably cost the city and surrounding countryside about one fourth of the total population. The statutes enacted below reflect both the scientific knowledge and the practical issues which this crisis brought to a head.

In the name of Christ Amen. Herein are written certain ordinances and provisions made and agreed upon by certain wise men of the People of the city of Pistoia elected and commissioned by the lords Anziani and the Standardbearer of Justice of the said city concerning the preserving, strengthening and protecting the health of humans from various and diverse pestilences which otherwise can befall the human body. And written by me Simone Buonacorsi notary. . . in the year from the Nativity of the Lord MCCCXLVIII, the first Indiction.

First. So that no contaminated matter which presently persists in the areas surrounding the city of Pistoia can enter into the bodies of the citizens of Pistoia, these wise men provided and ordered that no citizen of Pistoia or dweller in the district or the county of Pistoia . . . shall in any way dare or presume to go to Pisa or Lucca or to the county or district of either. And that no one can or ought to come from either of them or their districts ... to the said city of Pistoia or its district or county on penalty of £ 50 ... And that gatekeeper of the city of Pistoia guarding the gates of the said city shall not permit those coming or returning to the said city of Pistoia from the said cities of Pisa or Lucca, their districts or counties to enter the said gates on penalty of £ 10 ... It is licit, however, for

citizens now living in Pistoia to go to Pisa and Lucca, their districts and counties and then return if they have first obtained a license from the Council of the People

II. Item. The foresaid wise men provided and ordered that no person whether citizen, inhabitant of the district or county of the city of Pistoia or foreigner shall dare or presume in any way to bring ... to the city of Pistoia, its district or county, any used cloth, either linen or woolen, for use as clothing for men or women or for bedclothes on penalty of £ 200. ... Citizens of Pistoia, its district and county returning to the city, district or county will be allowed to bring with them the linen or woolen cloths they are wearing and those for personal use carried in luggage or a small bundle weighing 30 pounds or less. ... And if any quantity of cloth of the said type or quality has been carried into the said city, county or district, the carrier shall be held to and must remove and export it from the said city, county and district within three days of the adoption of the present ordinance under the foresaid penalty for each carrier or carriers and for each violation.

III. Item. They provided and ordered that the bodies of the dead, after they had died, can not be nor ought to be removed from the place in which they are found unless first such a body has been placed in a wooden casket covered by a lid secured with nails, so that no stench can issue forth from it; nor can it be covered except by a canopy, blanket or drape under a penalty for £ 50 of pennies paid by the heirs of the dead person.... And also that likewise such dead bodies of the dead must be carried to the grave only in the said casket under the said penalty as has been said. And so that the foresaid shall be noted by the rectors and officials of the city of Pistoia, present and future rectors of the parishes of the city of Pistoia in whose parish there is any dead person are held to and must themselves announce the death and the district [of the city] in which the dead person lived to the podesta and captain or others of the government of the said city. And they must notify them of the name of the dead person and of the district in which the dead person had lived or pay the said penalty for each contravention. And the podesta and captain to whom such an announcement or notification has been made, immediately are held to and must send one of their officials to the same location to see and inquire if the contents of the present article and other statutes and ordinances concerning funerals are being observed and to punish anyone found culpable according to the said penalty.... And the foresaid shall not be enforced nor is it extended to poor and miserable persons who are declared to be poor and miserable according to the form of any statutes or ordinances of the said city.

IV. Item. In order to avoid the foul stench which the bodies of the dead give off they have provided and ordered that any ditch in which a dead body is to be buried must be dug under ground to a depth of 2 1/2 braccia by the measure of the city of Pistoia.

V. Item. They have provided and ordered that no person of whatever condition or status or authority shall dare or presume to return or to carry to the city of Pistoia any dead body in or out of a casket or in any manner on penalty of £ 25 of pennies paid by whoever carries, brings, or orders [a body] to be carried or brought for each occasion. And that the gatekeepers of the said city shall not permit such a body to be sent into the said city on

penalty of the foresaid fine by each gatekeeper at the gate through which the said body was sent.

VI. Item. They have provided and ordered that any person who will have come for the burial or to bury any dead person cannot and may not be in the presence of the body itself nor with the relatives of such a dead person except for the procession to the church where it will be buried. Nor shall such persons return to the house where the defunct person lived or enter into that house or any other house on the said occasion on penalty of £ 10

VII. Item. They have provided and ordered that when anyone has died no person should dare or presume to present or to send any gift before or after burial to the former dwelling place of such a dead person or any other place on the said occasion or to attend or to go to a meal in that house or place on the said occasion on penalty of £ 25.... Children, carnal brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews of such a dead person and their children, however, shall be expected [from this provision].

VIII. Item. They have provided and ordered that in order to avoid useless or fruitless expenses no person should dare or presume to dress in new clothing during the period of mourning for any dead person or during the eight days after that, on penalty of £ 25 of pennies for whoever contravenes [this] and for each time. Wives of such dead persons however, shall be exempted; they can be dressed in whatever new clothing they wish without penalty.

IX. Item. They have provided and ordered that no paid mourner... shall dare or presume to mourn publicly or privately or to invite other citizens of Pistoia to go to the funeral or to the dead person; nor may anyone engage the foresaid mourner, hornplayer, cryer or drummer.

X. Item. So that the sounds of bells might not depress the infirm nor fear arise in them [the Wise Men] have provided and ordered that the bellringers or custodians in charge of the belltower of the cathedral of Pistoia shall not permit any bell in the said campanile to be rung for the funeral of the dead nor shall any person dare or presume to ring any of these bells on the said occasion.... At the chapel or parish church of the said dead person or at the friary if the person is to be buried at a church of the friars, they can ring the bell of the chapel, parish church or the church of the friars so long as it is rung only one time and moderately, on the foresaid penalty in the foresaid manner [for each violation].

XI. Item. They have provided and ordered that no one shall dare or presume to gather or cause to gather any persons for the purpose of bringing any widow from the former habitation of a dead person, unless at the time she is being returned from the church or cemetery where such a dead person was buried. [Blood relatives] of such a widow, however, wishing to bring the widow from the house at times other than at the time of burial may send up to four women to accompany the said woman, who is to be brought from the foresaid house of the dead person....

XII. Item. They have provided and ordered that no person should dare or presume to raise or cause to be raised any wailing or clamor over any person or because of any person who has died outside the city, district or county of Pistoia; nor on the said occasion should any persons be brought together in any place except blood relatives and associates of such a dead person, nor on the said occasion should any bell be rung or caused to be wrung, nor announcements be made through the city of Pistoia by mourners, nor on the said occasion should any invitation [to join the mourners] be made on a penalty of £ 25.... It must be understood, however, in any written ordinances speaking of the dead and of honoring the burial of the dead that the foresaid shall not have force in the burial of the body of any soldiers of the militia, doctors of laws, judges or physicians whose bodies, because of their dignity, may be honored licitly at burial in a manner pleasing to their heirs.

XIV. Item. They have provided and ordered that butchers and retail vendors of meat, individually and in common, can not, nor ought to hold or maintain near a tavern or other place where they sell meats, or near a shop or beside or behind a shop any stable, pen or any other thing which will give off a putrid smell; nor can they slaughter meat animals nor hang them after slaughter in any stable or other place in which there is any stench on a penalty of £ 10.

XXII. Item. So that stench and putrefaction shall not be harmful to men, henceforth tanning of hides cannot and must not be done within the walls of the city of Pistoia on penalty of £ 25....

XXIII. Item. For the observance of each and every provision contained in the present articles and everything in the article speaking of funerals of the dead, of butchers and retail vendors of meats, they provided and ordered that the lord podest[^] and captain and their officials charged pro tem with the foresaid [duties] shall and must proceed against, investigate, and inquire. . . concerning acts contrary to the foresaid [ordinances], and cause whatever of the foresaid ordained to be reviewed as often as possible, and punish the guilty by the foresaid fines. . . . Also any person may accuse or denounce before either the said podest[^] or captain any persons acting against the foresaid or any of the foresaid or the content of the said statutes or ordinances. And such denunciations or accusers shall, can and may have one fourth of the fine after it is levied and paid, which fourth part the treasurer pro tem of the treasury of the said city shall be held to and have to pay and give to the said accuser and informer as soon as the fine and penalty have been paid. And sufficient proof shall be offered by one witness worthy of belief, or four persons of good reputation who have learned [of the contravention]. . . .

Medical treatment & Prevention

Cities were among the hardest hit and tried to take measures to control the epidemic. In Milan, city officials immediately walled up houses found to have the plague, isolating the healthy in them along with the sick. Venice also took sophisticated and stringent quarantine and health measures, including isolating all incoming ships on a separate island.

Houses all over Europe were marked with crosses to show where the disease had struck. The dead were carted away in for burial. Cities were overcrowded and had poor sanitation making them ideal incubators for the disease. Londoners were reported to have buried corpses in mass graves 6 feet deep by 6 feet wide by 100 yards long.

The disease seemed to disappear in winter, but only because fleas are dormant then. Each spring, the plague attacked again, killing new victims. The black death of 1347 subsided in 1351. Another epidemic 1361 and again in 1369 and another every decade for the rest of the century.

Few doctors, referred to as Beak Doctors, remained to treat the sick. The nose of their sinister costume was supposed to act as a filter and was filled with materials saturated with perfumes and alleged disinfectants. The lenses were supposed to protect the eyes from the miasmas.



Some doctors recommend the burning of aromatic woods and herbs; others suggested special diets, courses of bleeding, new postures for sleeping and many other remedies. The very rich were even reported trying medicines made of gold and pearls. The terrible truth is that nothing seemed to work. Flight was the best option, and if one could not fly, then all that remained was resignation and prayer. Many believed that the disease was transmitted upon the air, probably because the smell from the dead and dying was so awful. In response, the living turned to scents to ward off the deadly vapors. People burned all manner of incense: juniper, laurel, pine, beech,

lemon leaves, rosemary, camphor, and sulphur. Handkerchiefs dipped in aromatic oils were used to cover the face when going out.

One report recommended what steps to take in order to keep safe from the disease: "No poultry should be eaten, no waterfowl, no pig, no old beef, altogether no fat meat. . . . It is injurious to sleep during the daytime. . . . Fish should not be eaten, too much exercise may be injurious . . . and nothing should be cooked in rainwater. Olive oil with food is deadly. . . . Bathing is dangerous. . . ."

In time, other writings appeared from the pens of educated men on the best ways to avoid the plague.

From Italy came this advice: "In the first instance, no man should think of death. . . . Nothing should distress him, but all his thoughts should be directed to pleasing, agreeable and delicious things. . . . Beautiful landscapes, fine gardens should be visited, particularly when aromatic plants are flowering. . . . Listening to beautiful, melodious songs is wholesome. . . . The contemplating of gold and silver and other precious stones is comforting to the heart."

Some sought to avoid the plague by isolation; others believed in revelry and merry-making. "There were those who thought that to live temperately and avoid all excess would count for much as a preservative against seizures of this time. The wealthy would band together, disassociating themselves from all others, and form communities in houses where there were no sick. They lived a separate and secluded life, which they regulated with the utmost care, avoiding every kind of luxury, but eating and drinking very moderately of the most delicate viands and the finest wines, holding converse with none but one another lest tidings of sickness or death should reach them, and diverting their minds with music and such other delights as they could devise. Others maintained that to drink freely, to frequent places of public resort, and to take their pleasure with song and revel was the sovereign remedy for so great an evil."

"When the government acts to prevent or control a calamity, but the calamity persists, people turn to cures. Many believed that the disease was transmitted upon the air, probably because the smell from the dead and dying was so awful. So, the living turned to scents to ward off the deadly vapors. People burned all manner of incense: juniper, laurel, pine, beech, lemon leaves, rosemary, camphor and sulfur. Others had handkerchiefs dipped in aromatic oils, to cover their faces when going out. Another remedy was the cure of sound. Towns rang church bells to drive the plague away, for the ringing of town bells was done in crises of all kinds. Other towns fired cannons, which was new and made a comfortingly loud ding. There were no ends to talismans, charms, and spells that could be purchased from the local wise woman or apothecary. Many people knew of someone's friend or cousin who had drunk elderberry every day, or who had worn a jade necklace, and who had survived the dreaded disease."

The pope, at one point, sent to Paris to obtain the opinions of the medical faculty there in 1348. They studied the problem for a time and returned a report. The good professors opined that the disaster was caused by a particularly unfortunate conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars in the sign of Aquarius that had occurred in 1345. This conjunction cause hot, moist conditions, which cause the earth to exhale poisonous vapors.

Medical thinking, trapped in astrology and leechcraft, stressed air as the communicator of the disease, ignoring sanitation or visible carriers. The rumors of the East told of "foul blasts of wind" which carried the infection to Europe, and the idea that the plague was caused by a corrupted cloud of mist or smoke, which destroyed the land it passed over, became widely accepted. Some thought this cloud had been drawn up by the sun from the stagnant depths of the sea. Others blamed zodiacal influences and planetary alignments. In France, King Philip VI the asked medical faculty of the University of Paris for a report on the affliction which was threatening all human life. With careful thesis, antithesis, and proofs, the doctors described it to a triple conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars in the 40th degree of Aquarius said to have occurred on March 20th, 1345. They acknowledged, however, effects "whose cause is hidden from even the most trained of intellects." The verdict of the masters of Paris became the official version. Borrowed, copied from Latin into various vernaculars, and carried abroad, it was accepted everywhere, even by Arab physicians, as the scientific answer.

Popular opinion, on the other hand, viewed the plague as a scourge from God. If the plague was a manifestation of divine anger, then Christians should do all they could to assuage that anger. From this simple impulse came the flagellants: "barefoot in sackcloth, sprinkled with ashes, weeping, praying, tearing their hair, carrying candles and relics, sometimes with ropes around their necks or beating themselves with whips, the penitents wound through the streets, imploring the mercy of the Virgin and saints at their shrines." These processions, at first authorized by the pope and often lasting as long as three days, were attended by as many as 2,000 and accompanied the plague everywhere and helped to spread it. They inflicted all sort of punishments upon themselves, trying to atone for the evil of the world, sacrificing themselves for the world's sins in imitation of Jesus. The flagellants showed a tendency to kill Jews they encountered, and even killed clergymen who spoke against them. In October 1349 the pope condemned them and ordered all authorities to suppress them. But flagellants reappeared in times of plague well into the fifteenth century.



Here are a couple of descriptions of the flagellants from contemporary chroniclers. The first is from Jean de Venette.

“While the plague was still active and spreading from town to town, men in Germany, Flanders, Hainault and Lorraine uprose and began a new sect on their own authority. Stripped to the waist, they gathered in large groups and bands and marched in procession throughout the crossroads and squares of cities and good towns. They formed circles and beat upon their backs with weighted scourges, rejoicing as they did so in loud voices and singing hymns suitable to their rite and newly composed for it. Thus, for 33

days they marched through many towns doing penance and affording a great spectacle to the wondering people. They flogged their shoulders and arms, scourged with iron points so zealously as to draw blood."

Jews, accused of poisoning water or practicing witchcraft which brought on the plague, suffered the anger of mob violence over a wide area. There were massacres, especially in the cities along the Rhine River, and many more cases of the Jews being expelled from towns. On one day in Strasbourg in 1349, nearly 200 Jews were burned to death by an angry mob. Pope Clement VI issued two bills in the summer of 1348 forbidding the plunder and slaughter of the Jews. He pointed out that the Jews were suffering as severely as the Christians. Yet in September 1348, Zurich closed its gates to the Jews.

'To the people at large there was only one real explanation -- whether from bad air or planets, the plague was the wrath of God. A scourge so sweeping and unsparring without any visible cause could only be seen as Divine punishment upon mankind for its sins.'

Christians had long venerated saints as models of the godly life and as mediators before God, in this case an angry and vengeful one. A whole new series of "plague saints" (like St. Roch) came into existence along with new religious brotherhoods and shrines dedicated to protecting the population from plague. The recurrence of plague also affected the general understanding of public health. Beginning in Italy in the 1350s there were new initiatives aimed at raising the level of public sanitation and governmental regulation of public life.

This second account is from the medieval historian Jean Froissart, from his history of the Hundred Years' War.

...the penitents went about, coming first out of Germany. They were men who did public penance and scourged themselves with whips of hard knotted leather with little iron spikes. Some made themselves bleed very badly between the shoulder blades and some foolish women had cloths ready to catch the blood and smear it on their eyes, saying it was miraculous blood. While they were doing penance, they sang very mournful songs about nativity and the passion of Our Lord. The object of this penance was to put a stop to the mortality, for in that time . . . at least a third of all the people in the world died.

Lasting effects of the Black Death

The economy was probably hit the hardest of all the aspects of Europe. The biggest problem was that valuable artisan skills disappeared when large numbers of the working class died. Therefore, those who had skills became even more valuable than the rich people. The society structure began to change giving the poor more say. The peasants and artisans demanded higher wages. Serfs seeking liberation from tilling their Lord's land were told by decree and statute to return to their master's duties. With no one to enforce these decrees, serfs began to leave their land and not engage in the planting of crops. Unattended crops and stray animals died of starvation because of the lack of care. Several domesticated animals were reduced to roaming in the forest. Farming communities became rare. The lack of sufficient law enforcement personnel promoted lawlessness. People called "Bechini" pillaged homes, murdered and raped. They dressed in red robes with red masks and with only their eyes showing.

Financial business was disrupted as debtors died and their creditors found themselves without recourse. Not only had the creditor died, his whole family had died with him along with many of his kinsmen

Construction projects stopped for a time or were abandoned altogether. Guilds lost their craftsmen and could not replace them. Mills and other special machinery might break and the one man in town who had the skill to repair it had died in the plague. It is common to see surviving documents advertising for specialists in towns across Europe, often offering high wages. The labor shortage was very severe, especially in the short term, and consequently, wages rose. Because of the mortality, there was also an oversupply of goods causing prices dropped. Between those two trends, the standard of living rose.

Effects in the countryside were just as severe. Farms and entire villages died out or were abandoned as the few survivors decided not to stay on. When Norwegian sailors finally visited Greenland again in the early 15th century, they found only wild cattle roaming through deserted villages.

Whole families died, with no heirs, their houses standing empty. The countryside, too, faced a short-term shortage of labor, and landlords stopped freeing their serfs. They tried to get more forced labor from them, as there were fewer peasants to be had. Peasants in many areas began to demand fairer treatment or lighter burdens.

Just as there were guild revolts in the cities in the later 1300s, so we find rebellions in the countryside. The Jacquerie in 1358, the Peasants' Revolt in England in 1381, the Catalanian Rebellion in 1395, and many revolts in Germany, all serve to show how seriously the mortality had disrupted economic and social relations.

The plague had no permanent effect on the course of politics, but it did take its toll. King Alfonso XI of Castile was the only reigning monarch to die of the plague, but many lesser notables died, including the queens of Aragon and France, and the son of the Byzantine emperor. Parliaments were adjourned when the plague struck, though they were reconvened. The Hundred Years' War was suspended in 1348 because so many soldiers died. But it started up again, soon enough. City councils were ravaged. Whole families of local nobles were wiped out. Courts closed down and wills could not be probated.

Effects of the Plague on Art

One of the most striking examples of the effects of the Black Death on art can be seen in tomb sculptures. A great lord was buried in a sarcophagus: the body was in a coffin, which in turn was in a larger stone casing that was usually decorated. The sides might be decorated with religious carvings, but the lid of the tomb often held the likeness of the one entombed. Where previously these sculptures showed the lord in his armor with his sword and shield, or the lady in her best clothes, and both in full bloom of health, around 1400 we begin to see a disturbing change. The sculptures of some (only some -- this was never the dominant style) show half-decomposed bodies with parts of the skeleton clearly visible. The clothes draping the body were rags, and some showed worms and snails burrowing in the rotting flesh.

The *danse macabre*

A similar brutality appeared in paintings, too. Here the style has a name: the *danse macabre*, the Dance of Death. The motif shows skeletons mingling with living men in daily scenes. We see peasants at a harvest festival, or workmen at a construction site, or hunters in a forest. And in each scene, mingled with the living, are skeletons: skeleton horses carry corpses to the hunt; peasant girls dance with death; a skeleton receives an infant from its baptismal font. The juxtapositions are shocking, for they catch us at our merriest moments and remind us of horror and loss. It is even more striking when you realize that these works were commissioned. These are no paintings wrung out by tortured souls in isolation. These are works specifically requested by churches or monarchs or city councils, and they were displayed in public places. Not only did artists render these frightening images, their patrons paid for them, displayed them, and ordered more.



The onset of the Black Death, was described by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375).



I say, then, that the years of the beatific incarnation of the Son of God had reached the tale of one thousand three hundred and forty eight, when in the illustrious city of Florence, the fairest of all the cities of Italy, there made its appearance that deadly pestilence, which, whether disseminated by the influence of the celestial bodies, or sent upon us mortals by God in His just wrath by way of retribution for our iniquities, had had its origin some years before in the East, whence, after destroying an innumerable multitude of living beings, it had propagated itself without respite from place to place, and so calamitously, had spread into the West.

In Florence, despite all that human wisdom and forethought could devise to avert it, as the cleansing of the city from many impurities by officials appointed for the purpose, the refusal of entrance to all sick folk, and the adoption of many precautions for the preservation of health; despite also humble supplications addressed to God, and often repeated both in public procession and otherwise by the devout; towards the beginning of the spring of the said year the doleful effects of the pestilence began to be horribly apparent by symptoms that showed as if miraculous.

Not such were they as in the East, where an issue of blood from the nose was a manifest sign of inevitable death; but in men a women alike it first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumors in the groin or the armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg, some more, some less, which the common folk called *gavoccioli*. From the two said parts of the body this deadly *gavocciolo* soon began to propagate and spread itself in all directions indifferently; after which the form of the malady began to change, black spots or livid making their appearance in many cases on the arm or the thigh or elsewhere, now few and large, then minute and numerous. And as the *gavocciolo* had been and still were an infallible token of approaching death, such also were these spots on whomsoever they showed themselves. Which maladies seemed set

entirely at naught both the art of the physician and the virtue of physic; indeed, whether it was that the disorder was of a nature to defy such treatment, or that the physicians were at fault - besides the qualified there was now a multitude both of men and of women who practiced without having received the slightest tincture of medical science - and, being in ignorance of its source, failed to apply the proper remedies; in either case, not merely were those that covered few, but almost all within three days from the appearance of the said symptoms, sooner or later, died, and in most cases without any fever or other attendant malady.

Moreover, the virulence of the pest was the greater by reason the intercourse was apt to convey it from the sick to the whole, just as fire devours things dry or greasy when they are brought close to it, the evil went yet further, for not merely by speech or association with the sick was the malady communicated to the healthy with consequent peril of common death; but any that touched the clothes the sick or aught else that had been touched, or used by these seemed thereby to contract the disease.

So marvelous sounds that which I have now to relate, that, had not many, and I among them, observed it with their own eyes, I had hardly dared to credit it, much less to set it down in writing, though I had had it from the lips of a credible witness.

I say, then, that such was the energy of the contagion of the said pestilence, that it was not merely propagated from man to man, but, what is much more startling, it was frequently observed, that things which had belonged to one sick or dead of the disease, if touched by some other living creature, not of the human species, were the occasion, not merely of sickening, but of an almost instantaneous death. Whereof my own eyes (as I said a little before) had cognizance, one day among others, by the following experience. The rags of a poor man who had died of the disease being strewn about the open street, two hogs came thither, and after, as is their wont, no little trifling with their snouts, took the rags between their teeth and tossed them to and fro about their chaps; whereupon, almost immediately, they gave a few turns, and fell down dead, as if by poison, upon the rags which in an evil hour they had disturbed.

In which circumstances, not to speak of many others of a similar or even graver complexion, divers apprehensions and imaginations were engendered in the minds of such as were left alive, inclining almost all of them to the same harsh resolution, to wit, to shun and abhor all contact with the sick and all that belonged to them, thinking thereby to make each his own health secure. Among whom there were those who thought that to live temperately and avoid all excess would count for much as a preservative against seizures of this kind. Wherefore they banded together, and dissociating themselves from all others, formed communities in houses where there were no sick, and lived a separate and secluded life, which they regulated with the utmost care, avoiding every kind of luxury, but eating and drinking moderately of the most delicate viands and the finest wines, holding converse with none but one another, lest tidings of sickness or death should reach them, and diverting their minds with music and such other delights as they could devise. Others, the bias of whose minds was in the opposite direction, maintained, that to drink freely, frequent places of public resort, and take their pleasure with song and revel,

sparing to satisfy no appetite, and to laugh and mock at no event, was the sovereign remedy for so great an evil: and that which they affirmed they also put in practice, so far as they were able, resorting day and night, now to this tavern, now to that, drinking with an entire disregard of rule or measure, and by preference making the houses of others, as it were, their inns, if they but saw in them aught that was particularly to their taste or liking; which they, were readily able to do, because the owners, seeing death imminent, had become as reckless of their property as of their lives; so that most of the houses were open to all comers, and no distinction was observed between the stranger who presented himself and the rightful lord. Thus, adhering ever to their inhuman determination to shun the sick, as far as possible, they ordered their life. In this extremity of our city's suffering and tribulation the venerable authority of laws, human and divine, was abased and all but totally dissolved for lack of those who should have administered and enforced them, most of whom, like the rest of the citizens, were either dead or sick or so hard bested for servants that they were unable to execute any office; whereby every man was free to do what was right in his own eyes.

Not a few there were who belonged to neither of the two said parties, but kept a middle course between them, neither laying the same restraint upon their diet as the former, nor allowing themselves the same license in drinking and other dissipations as the latter, but living with a degree of freedom sufficient to satisfy their appetite and not as recluses. They therefore walked abroad, carrying in the hands flowers or fragrant herbs or divers sorts of spices, which they frequently raised to their noses, deeming it an excellent thing thus to comfort the brain with such perfumes, because the air seemed to be everywhere laden and reeking with the stench emitted by the dead and the dying, and the odors of drugs.

Some again, the most sound, perhaps, in judgment, as they were also the most harsh in temper, of all, affirmed that there was no medicine for the disease superior or equal in efficacy to flight; following which prescription a multitude of men and women, negligent of all but themselves, deserted their city, their houses, their estates, their kinsfolk, their goods, and went into voluntary exile, or migrated to the country parts, as if God in visiting men with this pestilence in requital of their iniquities would not pursue them with His wrath wherever they might be, but intended the destruction of such alone as remained within the circuit of the walls of the city; or deeming perchance, that it was now time for all to flee from it, and that its last hour was come.

Of the adherents of these divers opinions not all died, neither did all escape; but rather there were, of each sort and in every place many that sickened, and by those who retained their health were treated after the example which they themselves, while whole, had set, being everywhere left to languish in almost total neglect. Tedious were it to recount, how citizen avoided citizen, how among neighbors was scarce found any that showed fellow-feeling for another, how kinsfolk held aloof, and never met, or but rarely; enough that this sore affliction entered so deep into the minds of men and women, that in the horror thereof brother was forsaken by brother nephew by uncle, brother by sister, and oftentimes husband by wife: nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children, untended, unvisited, to their fate, as if they

had been strangers. Wherefore the sick of both sexes, whose number could not be estimated, were left without resource but in the charity of friends (and few such there were), or the interest of servants, who were hardly to be had at high rates and on unseemly terms, and being, moreover, one and all, men and women of gross understanding, and for the most part unused to such offices, concerned themselves no further than to supply the immediate and expressed wants of the sick, and to watch them die; in which service they themselves not seldom perished with their gains. In consequence of which dearth of servants and dereliction of the sick by neighbors, kinsfolk and friends, it came to pass—a thing, perhaps, never before heard of—that no woman, however dainty, fair or well-born she might be, shrank, when stricken with the disease, from the ministrations of a man, no matter whether he were young or no, or scrupled to expose to him every part of her body, with no more shame than if he had been a woman, submitting of necessity to that which her malady required; wherefrom, perchance, there resulted in after time some loss of modesty in such as recovered. Besides which many succumbed, who with proper attendance, would, perhaps, have escaped death; so that, what with the virulence of the plague and the lack of due attendance of the sick, the multitude of the deaths, that daily and nightly took place in the city, was such that those who heard the tale—not to say witnessed the fact—were struck dumb with amazement. Whereby, practices contrary to the former habits of the citizens could hardly fail to grow up among the survivors.

It had been, as to-day it still is, the custom for the women that were neighbors and of kin to the deceased to gather in his house with the women that were most closely connected with him, to wail with them in common, while on the other hand his male kinsfolk and neighbors, with not a few of the other citizens, and a due proportion of the clergy according to his quality, assembled without, in front of the house, to receive the corpse; and so the dead man was borne on the shoulders of his peers, with funeral pomp of taper and dirge, to the church selected by him before his death. Which rites, as the pestilence waxed in fury, were either in whole or in great part disused, and gave way to others of a novel order. For not only did no crowd of women surround the bed of the dying, but many passed from this life unregarded, and few indeed were they to whom were accorded the lamentations and bitter tears of sorrowing relations; nay, for the most part, their place was taken by the laugh, the jest, the festal gathering; observances which the women, domestic piety in large measure set aside, had adopted with very great advantage to their health. Few also there were whose bodies were attended to the church by more than ten or twelve of their neighbors, and those not the honorable and respected citizens; but a sort of corpse-carriers drawn from the baser ranks, who called themselves *becchini* and performed such offices for hire, would shoulder the bier, and with hurried steps carry it, not to the church of the dead man's choice, but to that which was nearest at hand, with four or six priests in front and a candle or two, or, perhaps, none; nor did the priests distress themselves with too long and solemn an office, but with the aid of the *becchini* hastily consigned the corpse to the first tomb which they found untenanted. The condition of the lower, and, perhaps, in great measure of the middle ranks, of the people showed even worse and more deplorable; for, deluded by hope or constrained by poverty, they stayed in their quarters, in their houses where they sickened by thousands a day, and, being without service or help of any kind, were, so to speak, irredeemably devoted to the

death which overtook them. Many died daily or nightly in the public streets; of many others, who died at home, the departure was hardly observed by their neighbors, until the stench of their putrefying bodies carried the tidings; and what with their corpses and the corpses of others who died on every hand the whole place was a sepulchre.

It was the common practice of most of the neighbors, moved no less by fear of contamination by the putrefying bodies than by charity towards the deceased, to drag the corpses out of the houses with their own hands, aided, perhaps, by a porter, if a porter was to be had, and to lay them in front of the doors, where any one who made the round might have seen, especially in the morning, more of them than he could count; afterwards they would have biers brought up or in default, planks, whereon they laid them. Nor was it once twice only that one and the same bier carried two or three corpses at once; but quite a considerable number of such cases occurred, one bier sufficing for husband and wife, two or three brothers, father and son, and so forth. And times without number it happened, that as two priests, bearing the cross, were on their way to perform the last office for some one, three or four biers were brought up by the porters in rear of them, so that, whereas the priests supposed that they had but one corpse to bury, they discovered that there were six or eight, or sometimes more. Nor, for all their number, were their obsequies honored by either tears or lights or crowds of mourners rather, it was come to this, that a dead man was then of no more account than a dead goat would be to-day.

In the year of the Lord 1348 there was a very great pestilence in the city and district of Florence. It was of such a fury and so tempestuous that in houses in which it took hold previously healthy servants who took care of the ill died of the same illness. Almost none of the ill survived past the fourth day. Neither physicians nor medicines were effective. Whether because these illnesses were previously unknown or because physicians had not previously studied them, there seemed to be no cure. There was such a fear that no one seemed to know what to do. When it took hold in a house it often happened that no one remained who had not died. And it was not just that men and women died, but even sentient animals died. Dogs, cats, chickens, oxen, donkeys sheep showed the same symptoms and died of the same disease. And almost none, or very few, who showed these symptoms, were cured. The symptoms were the following: a bubo in the groin, where the thigh meets the trunk; or a small swelling under the armpit; sudden fever; spitting blood and saliva (and no one who spit blood survived it). It was such a frightful thing that when it got into a house, as was said, no one remained. Frightened people abandoned the house and fled to another. Those in town fled to villages. Physicians could not be found because they had died like the others. And those who could be found wanted vast sums in hand before they entered the house. And when they did enter, they checked the pulse with face turned away. They inspected the urine from a distance and with something odoriferous under their nose. Child abandoned the father, husband the wife, wife the husband, one brother the other, one sister the other. In all the city there was nothing to do but to carry the dead to a burial. And those who died had neither confessor nor other sacraments. And many died with no one looking after them. And many died of hunger because when someone took to bed sick, another in the house, terrified, said to him: "I'm going for the doctor." Calmly walking out the door, the other left and did not return again. Abandoned by people, without food, but accompanied by fever, they

weakened. There were many who pleaded with their relatives not to abandon them when night fell. But [the relatives] said to the sick person, "So that during the night you did not have to awaken those who serve you and who work hard day and night, take some sweetmeats, wine or water. They are here on the bedstead by your head; here are some blankets." And when the sick person had fallen asleep, they left and did not return. If it happened that he was strengthened by the food during the night he might be alive and strong enough to get to the window. If the street was not a major one, he might stand there a half hour before anyone came by. And if someone did pass by, and if he was strong enough that he could be heard when he called out to them, sometimes there might be a response and sometimes not, but there was no help. No one, or few, wished to enter a house where anyone was sick, nor did they even want to deal with those healthy people who came out of a sick person's house. And they said to them: "He is stupefied, do not speak to him!" saying further: "He has it because there is a bubo in his house." They call the swelling a bubo. Many died unseen. So they remained in their beds until they stank. And the neighbors, if there were any, having smelled the stench, placed them in a shroud and sent them for burial. The house remained open and yet there was no one daring enough to touch anything because it seemed that things remained poisoned and that whoever used them picked up the illness.

At every church, or at most of them, they dug deep trenches, down to the waterline, wide and deep, depending on how large the parish was. And those who were responsible for the dead carried them on their backs in the night in which they died and threw them into the ditch, or else they paid a high price to those who would do it for them. The next morning, if there were many [bodies] in the trench, they covered them over with dirt. And then more bodies were put on top of them, with a little more dirt over those; they put layer on layer just like one puts layers of cheese in a lasagna.

The beccamorti [literally vultures] who provided their service, were paid such a high price that many were enriched by it. Many died from [carrying away the dead], some rich, some after earning just a little, but high prices continued. Servants, or those who took care of the ill, charged from one to three florins per day and the cost of things grew. The things that the sick ate, sweetmeats and sugar, seemed priceless. Sugar cost from three to eight florins per pound. And other confections cost similarly. Capons and other poultry were very expensive and eggs cost between twelve and twenty-four pence each; and he was blessed who could find three per day even if he searched the entire city. Finding wax was miraculous. A pound of wax would have gone up more than a florin if there had not been a stop put [by the communal government] to the vain ostentation that the Florentines always make [over funerals]. Thus it was ordered that no more than two large candles could be carried[in any funeral]. Churches had no more than a single bier which usually was not sufficient. Spice dealers and beccamorti sold biers, burial palls, and cushions at very high prices. Dressing in expensive woolen cloth as is customary in [mourning] the dead, that is in a long cloak, with mantle and veil that used to cost women three florins climbed in price to thirty florins and would have climbed to 100 florins had the custom of dressing in expensive cloth not been changed. The rich dressed in modest woolens, those not rich sewed [clothes] in linen. Benches on which the dead were placed cost like the heavens and still the benches were only a hundredth of those needed. Priests

were not able to ring bells as they would have liked. Concerning that [the government] issued ordinances discouraging the sounding of bells, sale of burial benches, and limiting expenses. They could not sound bells, sell benches, nor cry out announcements because the sick hated to hear of this and it discouraged the healthy as well. Priests and friars went [to serve] the rich in great multitudes and they were paid such high prices that they all got rich. And therefore [the authorities] ordered that one could not have more than a prescribed number [of clerics] of the local parish church. And the prescribed number of friars was six. All fruits with a nut at the center, like unripe plums and unhusked almonds, fresh broadbeans, figs and every useless and unhealthy fruit, were forbidden entrance into the city. Many processions, including those with relics and the painted tablet of Santa Maria Inpruneta, went through the city crying our "Mercy" and praying and then they came to a stop in the piazza of the Priors. There they made peace concerning important controversies, injuries and deaths. This [pestilence] was a matter of such great discouragement and fear that men gathered together in order to take some comfort in dining together. And each evening one of them provided dinner to ten companions and the next evening they planned to eat with one of the others. And sometimes if they planned to eat with a certain one he had no meal prepared because he was sick. Or if the host had made dinner for the ten, two or three were missing. Some fled to villas, others to villages in order to get a change of air. Where there had been no [pestilence], there they carried it; if it was already there, they caused it to increase. None of the guilds in Florence was working. All the shops were shut, taverns closed; only the apothecaries and the churches remained open. If you went outside, you found almost no one. And many good and rich men were carried from home to church on a pall by four beccamorti and one tonsured clerk who carried the cross. Each of them wanted a florin. This mortality enriched apothecaries, doctors, poultry vendors, beccamorti, and greengrocers who sold of poultices of mallow, nettles, mercury and other herbs necessary to draw off the infirmity. And it was those who made these poultices who made a lot of money. Woolworkers and vendors of remnants of cloth who found themselves in possession of cloths [after the death of the entrepreneur for whom they were working] sold it to whoever asked for it. When the mortality ended, those who found themselves with cloth of any kind or with raw materials for making cloth was enriched. But many found [who actually owned cloths being processed by workers] found it to be moth-eaten, ruined or lost by the weavers. Large quantities of raw and processed wool were lost throughout the city and countryside.

This pestilence began in March, as was said, and ended in September 1348. And people began to return to look after their houses and possessions. And there were so many houses full of goods without a master that it was stupefying. Then those who would inherit these goods began to appear. And such it was that those who had nothing found themselves rich with what did not seem to be theirs and they were unseemly because of it. Women and men began to dress ostentatiously.

In the said year, when the mortality stopped, women and men in Florence were unmindful of [traditional modesty concerning] their dress. And ordinances were passed concerning this giving authority to the Judge of the Grascia to enforce these ordinances. The tailors made such boundless demands for payment that they could

not be satisfied. Authority was granted [to the judge] that he should handle all matters himself. Servants were so unhappy about the very high prices [they paid] that it was necessary to make great efforts to restrain [the price rises]. The workers on the land in the countryside wanted rent contracts such that you could say that all they harvested would be theirs. And they learned to demand oxen from the landlord but at the landlord's risk [and liability for any harm done to the animal]. And then they helped others for pay by the job or by the day. And they also learned to deny [liability for] loans and [rental] payments. Concerning this serious ordinances were instituted; and [hiring] laborers became much more expensive. You could say that the farms were theirs; and they wanted the oxen, seed, and loans quickly and on good terms. It was necessary to put a brake on weddings as well because when they gathered for the betrothal each party brought too many people in order to increase the pomp. And thus the wedding was made up of so many trappings. How many days were necessary and how many women took part in a woman's wedding. And they passed many other ordinances concerning [these issues].

Resources

History of England by Henry Knighton, in *Source Book of English History*, by E.K. Kendall

<http://history.idbsu.edu/westciv/plague>

<http://www.insecta-inspecta.com/fleas/bdeath/Black.html>

<http://orb.rhodes.edu/textbooks/westciv/blackdeath.html>

<http://www.godecookery.com/plague/plague09.htm>

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/boccacio2.html>

From Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, M. Rigg, trans. (London: David Campbell, 1921), Vol. 1, pp. 5-11

<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/intro.html>

Tabers Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary

The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval Europe by George Holmes.

The Last 1000 Years

What Life was Like in the Age of Chivalry

The Medieval Village by GG Coulton

America's Old World Frontiers

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