

The Black Plague

This first account is from Messina, and it described the arrival and initial progress of the disease.

“At the beginning of October, in the year 1347, twelve ships . . . entered the harbor of Messina traveling from the Far East. In their bones they bore a disease that anyone who spoke to them, or those who had touched or used any of their things, were seized by a mortal illness and could not 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. Then a boil developed on the thighs or upper arms about the size of a lentil. This infected the whole body, and penetrated it so that the patient vomited blood. This vomiting of blood continued without intermission for three days, there being no means of healing it, and then the patient expired.

Thus the people of Messina dispersed over the whole island of Sicily and with them the disease, so that innumerable people died. 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.”

Michael Platiensis (1357)

1. How did the plague get to Europe?
2. How did people react to this Plague?

Treatment of the Sick

Boccaccio quite rightly attributes this behavior to fear of infection. The corpse had to be removed as quickly as possible, to a distant burial, in a common ditch, with many other victims. Frequently, lye was sprinkled about the mass graves to prevent the spread of the disease. Multiple and anonymous burials called into doubt all the reassuring hope that each body was destined for resurrection. The plague incited new tension between the living and the dead, even between the living and the sick. Like AIDS victims today, the sick had become the enemy.

“Sick relatives were cared for not otherwise than dogs. They threw them their food and drink by the bed, and then they fled the household. Finally, when they died, strong rustics came from down from the mountains...in return for big pay, they carried the dead to burial. No relatives, no friends showed concern for what might be happening. No priest came to hear the confession of the dying, or to administer the sacraments to them. People cared only for their own health.”

1. Describe the treatment of the sick during the Plague.

Persecution of the Jews

As with other disasters, a renewed religious fervor and fanaticism bloomed in the wake of Black Death. In many parts of Europe, rumors circulated that Jews caused the plague by deliberately poisoning the wells in Christendom. Fierce pogroms frequently resulted in the death or banishment of most of the Jews in a town or city. By 1351, 210 Jewish communities had been exterminated, and more than 350 separate massacres had occurred. This persecution was often done, not solely out of religious hatred, but as a way of attacking the Kings or Church who normally protected the Jews. It was a way of lashing out at the institutions who had failed them. Because fewer Jews died from the Black Death, inevitably Jews looked suspicious. An important legacy of the Black Death was to cause the eastward movement of what was left of north European Jewry to Poland and Russia, where it remained until the 20th century.

If the plague was a manifestation of divine anger, then Christians should do all they could to alleviate that anger. From this simple impulse came the flagellants: bands of people who wandered through towns and countryside doing penance in public. 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 kill clergymen who spoke against them. In October 1349 the pope condemned them and ordered all authorities to suppress them.

1. How were Jews treated by Christians during the Plague? Why?
2. What were the flagellants? Why did they act the way they did?

The Effect on the Economy

The economy was hit hard by the plague because 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 formally poor laborers 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. 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 began to roam the forest. Farming communities became rare. The lack of sufficient law enforcement personnel promoted lawlessness. People began pillaging homes, murdering and raping people. They dressed in red robes with red masks and only their eyes showed. The horror of the Black Death had taken on a new victim, the economy.

1. How did the Plague cause economic problems?

The Effect on Art and Children in Europe

As a result of death in the church, written language was almost lost and whole churches were abandoned. Art was changed forever. A few of the sculptures of the time showed worms and snails munching on the diseased. There are a number of paintings containing people socializing with skeletons. Artists abandoned the old ways of painting things idolized by the Christian religion. They were so depressed by the death that surrounded them that they began to paint pictures of sad and dead people.

Children were greatly affected as well. Not only were the children affected physically, but also mentally. Exposure to public nudity, craziness, and abundant death was premature. The death of family members left the children facing death and pain at an early age. Parents even abandoned their children, leaving them to the streets instead of risking the babies giving them the dreaded "pestilence". Children were especially unlucky if they were female. Baby girls would be left to die because parents would favor male children that could carry on the family name.

1. How was art affected by the Plague?
2. How were children affected by the Plague?

Giovanni Boccaccio from the *Decameron* (1353)

In the year of Our Lord 1348 the deadly plague broke out in the great city of Florence, most beautiful of Italian cities. Whether through the operation of the heavenly bodies or because of our own iniquities which the just wrath of God sought to correct, the plague had arisen.... It spread without stop from one place to another.... Neither knowledge nor human foresight availed against it, though ... advice was broadcast for the preservation of health....

...Various fears and superstitions arose among the survivors, almost all of which tended toward one end -- to flee from the sick and whatever had belonged to them. In this way each man thought to be safeguarding his own health. Some among them were of the opinion that by living temperately and guarding against excess of all kinds, they could do much toward avoiding the danger; and forming a band they lived away from the rest of the world. Gathering in those houses where no one had been ill and living was more comfortable, they shut themselves in. They ate moderately of the best that could be had and drank excellent wines, avoiding all luxuriousness. With music and whatever other delights they could have, they lived together in this fashion, allowing no one to speak to them and avoiding news either of death or sickness from the outer world.

Others, arriving at a contrary conclusion, held that plenty of drinking and enjoyment, singing and free living and the gratification of the appetite in every possible way, letting the devil take the hindmost, was the best preventative of such a malady; and as far as they could, they suited the action to the word. Day and night they went from one tavern to another drinking and carousing unrestrainedly. At the least inkling of something that suited them, they ran wild in other people's houses, and there was no one to prevent them, for everyone had abandoned all responsibility for his belongings as well as for himself, considering his days numbered....

Many others followed a middle course, neither restricting themselves in their diet like the first, nor giving themselves free rein in lewdness and debauchery like the second, but using everything to sufficiency, according to their appetites. They did not shut themselves in, but went about, some carrying flowers in their hands, some fragrant herbs, and others divers kinds of spices which they frequently smelled, thinking it good to comfort the brain with such odors, especially since the air was oppressive and full of the stench of corruption, sickness and medicines....

Although the members of these different factions did not all perish, neither did they all escape....

...So great was the multitude of those who died in the city night and day, what with lack of proper care and the virulence of the plague, that it was terrible to hear of, and worse still to see. Out of sheer necessity, therefore, quite different customs arose among the survivors from the original laws of the townspeople.

1. How did people deal with the plague?
2. Why were the people acting in these ways?