

## THE BLACK DEATHS INFLUENCE ON MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

The Black Death, also known as the Black Plague, or the Bubonic Plague killed one third of the population of Europe during its reign in the 13th and 14th centuries. The arrival of this plague set the scene for years of strife and heroism. Leaving the social and economic aspect in a standstill. The phantom of death became a subject of art, music and folklore and it influenced the consciousness of the people. The impact of this mass killer caused enormous chaos and havoc to the Medieval society because of its unknown origin, the unknown causes and preventions, its deathly symptoms and its breakdown of orderly life, therefore religion was greatly affected and changed.

In 1347, a Tartar army under Kipchak khan Janibeg had been besieging the Genoese cathedral city and trading ports of Caffa on the Black Sea for a year. A deadly, ruthless plague hit the besieging army and was killing off soldiers at an unstoppable rate. It was plain to Janibeg Khan that he must call off the siege. But before he decided to retreat, he wanted to give the defenders a taste of what his army was suffering. So Janibeg used giant catapults to hurl the rotting corpses of the plagued victims over the walls of the town. By this means the infection spread among the Genoese defenders. Before long the Genoese were dying from the plague as fast as the Tartars on the outside. A few who thought themselves free of plague took to their ships and headed for the Mediterranean. The deathly disease was unleashed at every port the ship and its crew set foot on. The trading routes contributed to the spread of the disease throughout the continent. In October of 1347, several Italian merchant ships returned from a trip to the Black Sea. These ships carried a cargo of flea infested rats, which had guts full of the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* (the bacteria which causes the plague). Inspectors attempted to quarantine the fleet, but it was too late. Realizing what a deadly disaster had come to them, the people quickly drove the Italians from their city. But the disease remained, and soon death was everywhere. Fathers abandoned their sick sons. Lawyers refused to come and make out wills for the dying. Friars and nuns were left to care for the sick, and monasteries and convents were soon deserted, as they were stricken, too. Bodies were left in empty houses, and there was no one to give them a Christian burial. The terror of this seemingly unstoppable march of death was the unknown nature of its origin. The absence of an identifiable earthly cause gave the plague supernatural and sinister quality.

The plague had stunned Europe and everywhere people were desperate for explanations and answers to their many questions. Most explanations were based on folklore, superstition, and rumor. Blame was frequently placed on travelers and other suspicious outsiders. Some blamed invisible particles carried in the wind, others talked of poisoned wells. An earthquake, which had carved a path of wreckage from Naples to Venice in the summer of 1347, was blamed for releasing gases into the air which poisoned all on whom they fell. The scholars of the University of Paris stated that the Black Death resulted from a triple conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars in the 40th degree of Aquarius, occurring on the 20th of March 1345' but added they didn't know how. Others blamed Jews for poisoning wells which inspired more than 350 massacres across Germany and Switzerland. Many Jews who escaped fled to Poland.

Also, hysterical charges of sorcery and witchcraft were brought against eccentric or unpopular people. The violence against outsiders demonstrated, in a tragically negative manner, the nature and the limits of citizenship in Europe. This was a society which defined itself as Christians

and recurrent plague changed religious practice, if no belief. Ordinary folk had their own theory about the plague: It was plainly God's punishment for man's wickedness. Bands of hooded men, wearing robes marked front and back with a red cross also believed in this theory and that by scourging themselves they can show mankind's repentance. They traveled in parties of 50 to 500, led by a layman. Moving from town to town, singing hymns and sobbing, the men beat themselves with scourges studded with iron spikes. The ritual was performed twice a day in public. The masses worshiped the flagellants, as they were known, as living martyrs. Religious donations soared, pilgrimages swelled. A million Christians trudged to Rome in 1350, a holy year by decree of Clement VI. The pope himself remained at Avignon, sitting between two fires in his private chamber, even in the summer, and rubbing an emerald ring, practices recommended to him to ward off the plague. Many peasants and uneducated folk believed the cause of the plague was a beautiful but an evil witch called the "plague maiden." It was said that when she passed by a house she could infect those inside simply by waving a red scarf through an open window. People seeking tips on avoiding infection were counseled to eat lots of figs and filberts before breakfast or not to sleep on their backs, and less pestilential air ran down their nostrils into the lungs.

The plague occurred from the bite of an infected flea or by a scratch or bite while handling animals. Also it could be contracted from breathing in airborne droplets from people who already had the infection in their lungs. The first symptoms of the bubonic plague often appear within several days: headache and a general feeling of weakness, followed by aches and chills in the upper leg and groin, a white coating on the tongue, rapid pulse, slurred speech, confusion, fatigue, apathy and staggering gait. A blackish pustule usually would form at the point of the fleabite. By the third day, the lymph node begins to swell. Because the bite is commonly in the leg, the lymph nodes in the leg swell, which is how the disease got its name. The Greek word for "groin" is bubon, thus the name. The swelling then becomes tender, and perhaps as large as an egg. The heart begins to flutter rapidly as it tries to pump blood through swollen, suffocating tissues. Subcutaneous hemorrhaging occurs, causing purplish blotches on the skin. The victim's nervous system began to collapse, causing dreadful pain and bizarre neurological disorders. By the fourth day, wild anxiety and terror overtake the sufferer and then the sense of resignation, as the skin blackens and the rictus of death settles on the body.

During all this confusion the church's leadership in the lives of people weakened. Before the arrival of the Black Death the church was seen as one of the wealthiest and most powerful landlords in all of Europe. Unsurprisingly, monasteries, convents, prisons, and other closed communities were doomed when plague was introduced to them. The Convents of Carcassonne and Marseille lost everyone. At Montpellier 133 Dominican Friars died out of 140. When the plague subsided, many towns were left without a priest. Those priests who had not fled but ministered to the dying during the plague were constantly exposed to the disease; many died. Consequently, new priests were often ordained without adequate training, and frequently the selection of priestly candidates was hasty and ill-advised, thus reducing the esteem people had for the church. Everywhere the Church was forced to resort to extraordinary ends to assure at least the semblance of the sacraments for the dying. Bishops in England, faced with a loss of priests to minister the sacraments gave permission to laymen to make confession to each other. Without the guidance and support which the church was recognized saints as models of the godly life and as mediators before God. A whole new series of "plague saints" came into existence along with new religious

brotherhoods and shrines dedicated to protecting the population from the plague.

With the start of the plague Europeans looked desperately for help to answer their many questions, on why God would allow such a thing to occur. People throughout Christendom had prayed devoutly for deliverance from the plague and when their prayers weren't answered they began to change their methods of administering the traditions which were attached to the church. They were left alone to live life without the powerful God which left awe and fear in all, during a very difficult era. Religion affected every aspect of everyday life and without it a new period of philosophical questioning lay ahead.

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