

## Disease and History: The Black Death

Behold, a pale horse; and his name that sat on him was Death.

—Revelation 6:8

There is a Reaper whose name is Death,  
And, with his sickle keen,  
He reaps the bearded grain at a breath,  
And the flowers that grow between.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

We all labour against our own cure, for death is the cure of all diseases.

—Thomas Browne

Ring around the rosie,  
Pocket full of posies,  
Ashes, Ashes,  
We all fall down. . . .

—Children's rhyme

### **The Black Death Arrives**

*In October 1347, a Genoese fleet docked in Sicily at the port of Messina. The entire crew was either dead or dying, afflicted with a disease that clung, as the chronicler noted, "to their very bones." The ship had arrived from the Black Sea region and was filled with grain for ready distribution. Also aboard were the omnipresent rats, Black rats, infested with fleas that, in turn, harbored the *Yersinia pestis* bacillus. Before the fleet could be quarantined, the rats had run down the ropes and into the city. Over the next four years, the scene would be repeated again and again. The Black Death had arrived.*

*The mere words "Black Death" have an ominous ring about them. They dredge up images of rotting corpses, broken families, and despair. The people of Europe were devastated by a disease they did not understand nor were prepared to suffer. It was an epidemic of such magnitude that one-third to one-half of the population of Europe was killed. In a recent study by the Rand Corporation, the Black Death ranked as one of the three greatest catastrophes in the history of the world. It did much more than eliminate people; it altered the very foundation of medieval life and jeopardized the unity of Western Civilization.*

*The Black Death is a general term for a combination of bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic plague strains. All three raged in the epidemic of 1347–1351. By far the most common was the bubonic variety. These bacteria are usually transmitted by the bite of an infected flea; the disease has an incubation period of about six days. The victim has symptoms of high fever (103–105° F), sweating, chills, rapid pulse, and swelling of the lymph nodes, especially in the groin or armpit. Hemorrhaging then occurs under the skin, producing blackish blotches called buboes, from which the bubonic plague derives its name. This hemorrhaging produces a kind of intoxication of the nervous system that is perhaps responsible for the delusions and psychological disorders that accompany infection. Bubonic plague is the least virulent of the three strains, but nevertheless results in the death of 50–60 percent of its victims. Pneumonic plague is more lethal (killing 95–100 percent) and more easily transmitted since it is based in the lungs and is spread by simple coughing. Like bubonic plague, septicemic plague usually depends on transference by an insect and is the most virulent strain of all. A rash forms within hours and death occurs in a day. This type of plague is nearly always fatal.*

*But it is not enough to talk only of the pathology of the strain. Diseases exist in an environment, and conditions may not be conducive to the survival of the bacterium or the transmitting agent. Cold, for example, limits the flea's activity, and humidity of less than 70 percent kills it. Therefore, plague outbreaks were restricted to the summer and early fall. Another important factor in the sweeping devastation of the plague must have been the general health of the population of Europe. From the tenth to the mid-twelfth century, Europe's population increased 300 percent, to about eighty million people—higher than it had been for a thousand years. This was generally the result of improved agricultural techniques and inventions, as well as the greater security of society. But by the late twelfth century, the climate was changing: Europe was growing colder and wetter. The 1290s were an extremely rainy decade; seedlings died and fertile topsoil was washed away. The growing population soon outstripped food production capabilities, and in certain regions of Europe between 10 and 25 percent of the inhabitants died. Thus the Black Death arrived close on the heels of famine.*

*Many were in no condition to resist such a virulent disease. To the people who lived in the mid-fourteenth century, the Black Death was an incomprehensible agent of destruction. No one was safe, neither peasant nor aristocrat, priest nor king. In such a spiritual age, many believed that God was rendering His judgment upon humanity, or that a great cosmic struggle between the forces of Good and Evil was taking place, with the Devil emerging victorious. It was evident to all that Europe was in the throes of change by forces that could not be understood, moving toward a future that could not be guaranteed.*

in Sienese territory were abandoned as is seen; for in the countryside . . . many more people died, many lands and villages were abandoned, and no one remained there. I will not write of the cruelty that there was in the countryside, of the wolves and wild beasts that ate the poorly buried corpses, and of other cruelties that would be too painful to those who read of them. . . .

The city of Siena seemed almost uninhabited for almost no one was found in the city. And then, when the pestilence abated, all who survived gave themselves over to pleasures: monks, priests, nuns, and lay men and women all enjoyed themselves, and none worried about spending and gambling. And everyone thought himself rich because he had escaped and regained the world, and no one knew how to allow himself to do nothing. . . .

At this time in Siena the great and noble project of enlarging the cathedral of Siena that had been begun a few years earlier was abandoned. . . .

After the pestilence the Sienese appointed two judges and three non-Sienese notaries whose task it was to handle the wills that had been made at that time. And so they searched them out and found them. . . .

1349. After the great pestilence of the past year each person lived according to his own caprice, and everyone tended to seek pleasure in eating and drinking, hunting, catching birds and gaming. And all money had fallen into the hands of nouveaux riches.

## "A Most Terrible Plague"

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

*Giovanni Boccaccio is best known as a humanist of the Italian Renaissance. The following excerpt is from his most famous work, The Decameron. Written during the plague years between 1348 and 1353, it is a collection of stories told intimately between friends while they passed the time away from Florence in the solitude and safety of the country. It begins with a detailed description of the pestilence. Over two-thirds of the population of Florence died of the plague.*

In the year then of our Lord 1348, there happened at Florence, the finest city in all Italy, a most terrible plague; which, whether owing to the influence of the planets, or that it was sent from God as a just punishment for our sins, had broken out some years before in the Levant, and after passing from place to place, and making incredible havoc all the way, had now reached the west. There, in spite of all the means that art and human foresight could suggest, such as keeping the city clear from filth, the exclusion of all suspected persons, and the publication of copious instructions for the preservation of



The "Danse Macabre" was a common art motif in the fourteenth century. Death seemed to mock the living and the "grim reaper" took his toll indiscriminately. (Woodcut by Mich. Wohlgemuth, 1493. Corbis)

health; and notwithstanding manifold supplications offered to God in processions and otherwise, it began to show itself in the spring of the aforesaid year, in a sad and wonderful manner. Unlike what had been seen in the east, where bleeding from the nose is the fatal prognostic, here there appeared certain tumours in the groin or under the armpits, some as big as a small apple, others as an egg; and afterwards purple spots in most parts of the body; in some cases large and but few in number, in others smaller and more numerous—both sorts the usual messengers of death. To the cure of this malady, neither medical knowledge nor the power of drugs was of any effect; whether because the disease was in its own nature mortal, or that the physicians (the number of whom, taking quacks and women pretenders into the account, was grown very great) could form no just idea of the cause, nor consequently devise a true method of cure; whichever was the reason, few escaped; but nearly all died the third day from the first appearance of the symptoms, some sooner, some later, without any fever or accessory symptoms. What gave the more virulence to this plague, was that, by being communicated from the sick to the healthy, it spread daily, like fire when it comes in

contact with large masses of combustibles. Nor was it caught only by conversing with, or coming near the sick, but even by touching their clothes, or anything that they had before touched. . . .

These facts, and others of the like sort, occasioned various fears and devices amongst those who survived, all tending to the same uncharitable and cruel end; which was, to avoid the sick, and every thing that had been near them, expecting by that means to save themselves. And some holding it best to live temperately, and to avoid excesses of all kinds, made parties, and shut themselves up from the rest of the world; eating and drinking moderately of the best, and diverting themselves with music, and such other entertainments as they might have within doors; never listening to anything from without, to make them uneasy. Others maintained free living to be a better preservative, and would baulk no passion or appetite they wished to gratify, drinking and revelling incessantly from tavern to tavern, or in private houses (which were frequently found deserted by the owners, and therefore common to every one), yet strenuously avoiding, with all this brutal indulgence, to come near the infected. And such, at that time, was the public distress, that the laws, human and divine, were no more regarded; for the officers, to put them in force, being either dead, sick, or in want of persons to assist them, every one did just as he pleased. A third sort of people chose a method between these two: not confining themselves to rules of diet like the former, and yet avoiding the intemperance of the latter; but eating and drinking what their appetites required, they walked everywhere with [frangrances and nose-coverings], for the whole atmosphere seemed to them tainted with the stench of dead bodies, arising partly from the distemper itself, and partly from the fermenting of the medicines within them. Others with less humanity, but . . . with more security from danger, decided that the only remedy for the pestilence was to avoid it: persuaded, therefore, of this, and taking care for themselves only, men and women in great numbers left the city, their houses, relations, and effects, and fled into the country; as if the wrath of God had been restrained to visit those only within the walls of the city. . . .

I pass over the little regard that citizens and relations showed to each other; for their terror was such, that a brother even fled from his brother, a wife from her husband, and, what is more uncommon, a parent from his own child. Hence numbers that fell sick could have no help but what the charity of friends, who were very few, or the avarice of servants supplied; and even these were scarce and at extravagant wages, and so little used to the business that they were fit only to reach what was called for, and observe when their employer died; and this desire of getting money often cost them their lives. . . .

It fared no better with the adjacent country, for . . . you might see the poor distressed labourers, with their families, without either the aid of physicians, or help of servants, languishing on the highways, in the fields, and in their own houses, and dying rather like cattle than human creatures. The consequence was that, growing dissolute in their manners like the citizens, and careless of

everything, as supposing every day to be their last, their thoughts were not so much employed how to improve, as how to use their substance for their present support.

What can I say more, if I return to the city, unless that such was the cruelty of Heaven, and perhaps of men, that between March and July following, according to authentic reckonings, upwards of a hundred thousand souls perished in the city only; whereas, before that calamity, it was not supposed to have contained so many inhabitants. What magnificent dwellings, what noble palaces were then depopulated to the last inhabitant! What families became extinct! What riches and vast possessions were left, and no known heir to inherit them! What numbers of both sexes, in the prime and vigour of youth . . . breakfasted in the morning with their living friends, and supped at night with their departed friends in the other world!

## **Effects of the Plague**

*Human populations are resilient enough to recover from an isolated epidemic, but pandemic plague gave impetus to the great permanent changes in the Late Middle Ages.*

*Historians can document some of the changes explicitly; other changes were more ephemeral and are subject to varying opinion. The depopulation of the cities, where the plague hit hardest, caused a crisis in trade and economic exchange. Production of goods was often curtailed with the death of skilled artisans, and those who replaced them offered work of inferior quality. The medieval church grew wealthier from the accumulation of property of those who willed it as a last token of faith before they died. But the church also had difficulty explaining the pestilence and was hard-pressed to defend against the argument that God was taking vengeance for the sins of humanity. The papacy itself was battered by criticism and charges of corruption that were proved daily during its residence in Avignon from 1303 to 1377. What the church gained in wealth, it lost in prestige. The plague also affected the political relationship between church and state that had been under dispute since the eleventh century. The question of whether the secular or spiritual realm had greater authority on earth had already been answered by the mid-fourteenth century, since popes no longer challenged the military might of kings. But this status was confirmed by the results of the Black Death. The traditional containers of monarchical power were the nobility and the clergy. Both groups depended on the strength that numbers and unity gave them in their struggles with the king. The plague reduced their numbers, thus allowing kings to secure their realms more easily.*

*Perhaps the greatest changes, however, were in the fabric of society. On a personal level, the plague destroyed patterns of life that contributed to social stability. Familial ties were shattered as people refused to care for their relatives out of fear of contracting the disease themselves. Whole families were destroyed; we can truly*

*speak of "lost generations." Survivors were often left in psychological and moral crisis.*

## The Situation in Rochester (1349)

DENE OF ROCHESTER

*The clergy struggled to maintain its authority and credibility during the plague. In the following selections, note the desperation the clergy felt in not being able to handle the crisis.*

In this pestilence scarce one-third of the population remained alive. Then, also, there was so great scarcity and rarity of priests that parish churches remained altogether unserved, and beneficed parsons had turned aside from the care of their benefices for fear of death, not knowing where they might dwell. . . . Many chaplains and hired parish priests would not serve without excessive pay. The Bishop of Rochester (by a mandate of June 27, 1349, to the Archdeacon of Rochester), commanded these to serve at the same salaries, under pain of suspension and interdict. Moreover, many beneficed clergy, seeing that the number of their parishioners had been so diminished by the plague that they could not live upon such oblations as were left, deserted their benefices.

## The Fate of Dutiful Friars (1361)

FRIAR MICHAEL OF PIAZZA

So did the plague increase at Messina [Sicily] that many sought to confess their sins to the priests and make their last testament, and the priests and judges and notaries refused to go to their houses; and if any of them did enter the sick men's houses for testamentary or other business, sudden death came unavoidably upon them. But the friars, who were willing (Franciscans and Dominicans and of other Orders) to enter the houses of the sick, and who confessed them of their sins, and who gave them penance according to the will [of God to satisfy] divine justice, were so infected with this deadly plague that scarce any of them remained in their cells. What shall I say more? The corpses lay abandoned in their own houses; no priest or son or father or kinsman dared to enter, but they gave rich fees to hirelings to bear the corpses to burial. . . .

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