

The Black Death Experience and Its Origins

Javier Perez

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The Black Death did not only ravage Europe during the time it was alive but also the countries that it passed through. Not only did the plague that was the cause for the Black Death kill many, but it left a psychological pain towards the survivors. The Black Death is a story that is told through many testaments which was written by the inflicted or the family members of the inflicted. It is only the survivors that got to experience the true aftermath of the Black Death. It is primarily thought to have originated by fleas that were infected with the plague, rats being the carriers of said fleas, with grains and cloth offering a refuge for the fleas inside merchant ships.

The Black Death first began its journey from Central Asia. Many historians believe that this was due to a natural disaster that happened at the time. Whether it was an earthquake, or a serious drought is up for debate. It was mainly brought in from rats that were accustomed to the warm climate in Central Asia, “The most recent research, however, points to the remote steppes, or arid grasslands, of central Asia as the source of the disastrous pandemic.”¹ From there on it is also debatable as to how the fleas were able to make their way onto the human population, “Assuming that central Asia was indeed the cradle of the pandemic that devastated medieval Europe, just when and how the plague leapt from the local rodent population and their flea parasites to the region’s human population remains a mystery.”² Coming back to the event that prompted the rats to begin to flee towards the human population, it is speculated that the event must have destroyed the rodent's food supplies. This natural disaster caused the rodents to flee

¹ Slavicek, Louise Chipley. 2008. *The Black Death*. Great Historic Disasters. New York, 37.

² Slavicek, *The Black Death*, 38.

their habitat into central Asia. From here the pandemic began to move towards China through the Silk Road. The plague then moved towards India by merchant vessels. The fleas that latched onto these merchant vessels didn't do so by latching themselves onto humans. They usually were attracted to the warm and humid parts of the vessels, "Able to survive for six weeks without a host, the tiny parasites are thought to have traveled hundreds of miles in cloth, grain, and other trade items commonly carried on medieval ships and overland caravans."³ This comes to show that if it wasn't for the commodity of the trade items at the time or for the fact that the merchant vessels themselves were carrying these items, the disease spreading would have been non-existent or existed briefly in a local region. Even if the grain itself wasn't on the ship, most of the ships had carried grain at one point, "Since grain is part of the rat's staple diet, its fleas have probably developed an ability to survive by hibernating in grain even where only tiny residues are to be found, for example in a ship's hold."⁴

Since grain was a hot commodity, one can see how the fleas managed to ravage most of the continent, "By all accounts, the Black Death spread from France in the summer of 1348 to the port of Weymouth on the southern coast of England, from whence it travelled very rapidly to other ports in both directions along the coast."⁵ The grain played a big role, but famine was also a culprit in aiding the spread of the plague, "Many scholars view famine as a possible factor in the emergence of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century."⁶ Prior to the plague hitting

³ Ibid., 40.

⁴ Lenz, Kristina, and Nils Hybel. "The Black Death: Its Origin and Routes of Dissemination." *Scandinavian journal of history* 41, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 54–70.

⁵ Lenz, Kristina, and Nils Hybel. "The Black Death: Its Origin and Routes of Dissemination." 58.

⁶ DeWitte, Sharon, and Philip Slavin. "Between Famine and Death: England on the Eve of the Black Death--Evidence from Paleoepidemiology and Manorial Accounts." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 38.

Europe, they were experiencing overpopulation. This in turn caused famine which was also aided by an ice age that was going on at the time which ruined their agriculture. Not only was famine a big issue prior to the plague but a war had also broken out. One of these wars was called the Hundred Years war which ended up with immense casualties in France. All in all, this played a big role prior to the plague hitting Europe:

Still, many historians believe that the intermittent famines, severe weather, and violent conflicts that beset the continent during the first half of the 1300s took a toll on inhabitants' overall health, making them more likely to contract—and die from— infectious diseases such as the plague.⁷

As the plague moved its way Westward it ended up in a city called Sarai. Three years prior to the plague arriving the Mongols(who belonged to Sarai) began a siege on the port-city named Kaffa. The Mongols played a vital role in the disease spreading due to their biological warfare against the city of Kaffa. They built catapults and catapulted the infected corpses into the city. The Genoese who lived in Kaffa fled through their trading ships which managed to spread the plague even further. From there, 12 ships managed to make it as far as Messina, Sicily where the plague spread even further. The people of Messina were terrified and traveled as far away as possible from the plague-ridden city. At this point they were also hosts so they spread the plague even further into Italy. From here the plague spread towards major ports. It spread to Spain and France, and in 1348 it had reached Europe. In 1349 it had reached Northern parts of Europe such as Denmark and Sweden. From there it went to Russia reaching it in the year 1352.

⁷ Slavicek, Louise Chipley. 2008. *The Black Death*. Great Historic Disasters. New York: Facts on File, Inc. 22.

Prior to the plague spreading outside of Italy, there was a town called Bologna. Bologna was a town where a lot of testaments and wills were written during the spread of the plague. During the time the plague ravaged Bologna, Italy there were wills that were made, most of them being from women, “Thus, wills have their problems in representation—they include no poor, few religious, and no identifiable students—but they do record the wishes of a large part of the general population.”⁸ These wills were an important role for historians, mainly due to the personal accounts of the Black Death. The Memoriali & Provvisori are notarial evidence that include testaments during the plague, “Like a net, the notarial record captured the actions and decisions of a broad section of the populace.”⁹ Bologna was a city that had a growth spurt in the late 13th century & early 14th century but stagnated prior to the plague entering, “[. . .] but in 1348 plague entered a society that was stagnant or had only recently entered decline, not one wasted by 50 to 75 years of deep decline.”¹⁰ In this case, Bologna was somewhat different compared to Europe who had experienced famine & a “Little Ice Age” prior to the Black Death.

Psychologically, the plague changed a lot of people that had to witness their loved ones dying, “[. . .] But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.”¹¹ This change didn’t come outright but because they were exhausted from caring for them, “And those who were attending them were in a state of constant exhaustion and had a most difficult time of

⁸ Wray, Shona Kelly. 2009. *Communities and Crisis: Bologna During the Black Death*. The Medieval Mediterranean. Leiden: Brill. 32.

⁹ Wray, *Communities and Crisis: Bologna During the Black Death*. 55.

¹⁰ Ibid., 97.

¹¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (London, 1972, repr.

it throughout.”¹² It is also noted that the plague didn’t cause all social constructs to collapse, although you had family members abandoning the sick, “Gene Brucker reviewed wills, diaries, and letters of Florentines during the epidemic and also concluded that society remained stable.”¹³ Although society remained stable, the plague caused trade to halt in May of 1348, where testaments made a big entry point, but trade increased after August, “The wills appear to confirm May as the date of plague’s entry [. . .]”¹⁴ There were a lot of testaments and wills during this time but some of the town's inhabitants remained invisible. People such as the poor, clergy and students did not appear as testators. Crime during the black plague also surged, “The majority of crimes involved in these contracts are personal injuries (usually involving one aggressor and one victim), while murder is the second most common crime.”¹⁵ Not only did crime surge, but certain groups of people were also targeted as the cause for the plague, “In Germany and other parts of the world where Jews lived, they were massacred and slaughtered by Christians, and many thousands were burned everywhere, indiscriminately.”¹⁶ During the plague outbreak, government bodies also began to respond, although they failed and chaos prevailed, “[. . .] initially explained that the Florentine government took steps to remove garbage and prevent infection, but then claimed chaos and anarchy prevailed, stating that no law, either of man or God, held during the

¹² Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 7 Vols., trans. H. B. Dewing, Loeb Library of the Greek and Roman Classics, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), Vol. I, pp. 451-473.

¹³ Wray, Shona Kelly. 2009. *Communities and Crisis: Bologna During the Black Death*. The Medieval Mediterranean. Leiden: Brill. 107.

¹⁴ Wray, *Communities and Crisis: Bologna During the Black Death*. 110.

¹⁵ Ibid., 119.

¹⁶ Richard A. Newhall, ed., Jean Birdsall, trans., *The Chronicle of Jean de Venette* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), pp. 48-51.

epidemic.”¹⁷ Although you could say chaos prevailed, this didn’t prevent medical practitioners from helping. In the notaries, there is evidence that medical practitioners did help during the plague in Bologna, “There is, in fact, evidence of the presence of several medical practitioners attending the afflicted in the wills of the Memoriali.”¹⁸ The result of medical practitioners helping out was that the people now had built trust into them, “A certain sign of trust and confidence in her doctor during the crisis is displayed by the widow of a professor who named a doctor (medicus) as her executor on 27 July.”¹⁹

When the plague reached Northern Europe, such as Sweden for example, not only did the plague affect the people but there was also oppression by the elite thereafter, “Increased oppression and plundering by the landowning elite resulted in peasant resistance and revolts, and much of the late fourteenth century was characterized by social unrest and conflicts.”²⁰ These revolts by the peasants were successful and resulted in lower rents and higher wages. This comes to show that for the above reasons, much of the living conditions after the plague were better. Things got better after the plague even though there was a shortage of skilled labor, “Construction of houses required skilled workers; as with other projects requiring skilled labor, building projects probably suffered after the Black Death from workers who were insufficiently skilled.”²¹ Although the Black Death had passed, there were also several outbreaks of the plague

¹⁷ Wray, Shona Kelly. 2009. *Communities and Crisis: Bologna During the Black Death*. The Medieval Mediterranean. Leiden: Brill. 107.

¹⁸ Ibid., 171.

¹⁹ Ibid., 176.

²⁰ Lageras, Per. 2015. *Environment, Society and the Black Death: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Late-Medieval Crisis in Sweden*. Oxford: Oxbow Books. 104.

²¹ Palmer, Robert C. 1993. *English Law in the Age of the Black Death, 1348-1381: A Transformation of Governance and Law*. Studies in Legal History. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 181.

thereafter, “Plague returned with slightly reduced intensity to almost every part of western Europe throughout the next three centuries.”²² During the plague several mass pits were dug up that were called plague pits. Although one would assume that most of the deceased were to be laid upon these pits, this conclusion is wrong, “In spite of the high mortality, people were still buried in coffins, and funeral processions lead by priests were held whenever possible.”²³

Fleas being the main carriers of the plague which were carried by rats and then merchant vessels that traveled all over the continent unbeknownst to the merchants. The Black Death was a catastrophic event that comes to show how easy it is for a plague to spread. The experience that the people had on ground zero was damaging to them due to the immense loss that they endured. Society didn’t crumble and some parts of the continent even flourished thereafter. The events that led prior to the Black Death set the stone for the amount of damage that would be inflicted.

²² Gottlieb, Beatrice. 1993. *The Family in the Western World From the Black Death to the Industrial Age*. New York: Oxford University Press. 130.

²³ Lageras, Per. 2015. *Environment, Society and the Black Death: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Late-Medieval Crisis in Sweden*. Oxford: Oxbow Books. 107.