Invisible Armadas

After famine, humanity's second great enemy was plagues and infectious diseases. Bustling cities linked by a ceaseless stream of merchants, officials and pilgrims were both the bedrock of human civilisation and an ideal breeding ground for pathogens. People consequently lived their lives in ancient Athens or medieval Florence knowing that they might fall ill and die next week, or that an epidemic might suddenly erupt and destroy their entire family in one swoop.

The most famous such outbreak, the so-called Black Death, began in the 1330s, somewhere in east or central Asia, when the flea-dwelling bacterium Yersinia pestis started infecting humans bitten by the fleas. From there, riding on an army of rats and fleas, the plague quickly spread all over Asia, Europe and North Africa, taking less than twenty years to reach the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Between 75 million and 200 million people died – more than a quarter of the population of Eurasia. In England, four out of ten people died, and the population dropped from a pre-plague high of 3.7 million people to a postplague low of 2.2 million. The city of Florence lost 50,000 of its 100,000 inhabitants.6

Medieval people personified the Black Death as a horrific demonic force beyond human control or comprehension.

The Triumph of Death, c.1562, Bruegel, Pieter the Elder © The Art Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

The authorities were completely helpless in the face of the calamity. Except for organising mass prayers and processions, they had no idea how to stop the spread of the epidemic – let alone cure it.