

CHAPTER 3

THE BLACK DEATH: THE GREAT MORTALITY OF 1348-1350: A BRIEF HISTORY WITH DOCUMENTS ...

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Medical Responses

Although doctors enjoyed a considerable amount of prestige in medieval urban communities by the fourteenth century, they generally did not fare well at the hands of medieval chroniclers of the Black Death, who accused them of cowardice, impotence, and, above all, greed. Such complaints were not specifically related to the Black Death; rather, doctors were often the butt of satire and objects of scorn in the popular literature of the later Middle Ages. But the Black Death sharpened these complaints. One of the harshest critics was the Florentine chronicler Matteo Villani, who complained that “for this pestilential infirmity [of 1348], doctors from every part of the world had no good remedy or effective cure, neither through natural philosophy, medicine [physic], or the art of astrology. To gain money some went visiting and dispensing their remedies, but these only demonstrated through their patients’ death that their art was nonsense and false.”¹ In Avignon, however, Louis Sanctus charged doctors with refusing to visit the sick even for large

sums ([Document 7](#)). Other commentators, such as Boccaccio ([Document 6](#)), John VI Kantakouzenos ([Document 8](#)), and Agnolo di Tura ([Document 17](#)), simply argued that physicians and medicine were powerless in the face of plague, although Boccaccio qualified this with the observation that many quacks had lately entered the profession and that the disease was perhaps incurable or too new to be treated properly. Even the best known doctor of the day, Gui de Chauliac, physician to the pope and a respected surgeon, indicted his own profession during the Black Death ([Document 14](#)).

Like the priests whose behavior was criticized during the plague ([chapter 4](#)), however, many doctors gave their lives in service to the sick. Both Gentile da Foligno ([Document 11](#)) and Gui de Chauliac came down with the disease as they were making their rounds, in the former case with fatal results. It is also clear from the documents that doctors were in high demand during this crisis and that people naturally turned to them, as well as to their priests, for succor. Despite the inevitable failure of pre-antibiotic “cures,” doctors like Ibn Khātima ([Document 13](#)) expressed confidence that bloodletting worked, so some treatments must have coincided with natural recovery.

Doctors explained their failures as a consequence of the individual constitution's inability to admit of a cure (which, in any case, was limited to helping the body heal itself). Some medieval medical advice, such as avoiding baths (albeit more permissible in the Muslim world), bleeding patients until they lost consciousness (derived from Galen), and exotic theriacs, or medical compounds, may strike modern readers as completely inappropriate, if not downright harmful. Yet other recommendations, such as fleeing the site of infection, clearing refuse, fumigation, and quarantine were, even from a modern medical standpoint, eminently practical and beneficial. Even if they had no effect whatsoever, drinking wine or burning aromatic woods and herbs at the very least brought some pleasure to people in their last days.

Medical opinion concerning the Black Death was by no means monolithic. Even though the medical faculty at the University of Paris ([Document 9](#)) issued what seemed like a canonical pronouncement on the causes of the disease, which they attributed primarily to astrological influences, their explanation was not universally accepted. The Florentine chronicler Matteo Villani rejected the astrological explanation on the grounds that it was sufficient to say that the plague

was part of God's inscrutable plan for humankind.² A popular scientific writer, Konrad of Megenberg, who was a university-trained cleric but not a professional medical man, argued against both the astrological theory and the widespread notion that the plague was divine retribution for human sin. He preferred a more naturalistic explanation that the plague emanated from within the earth when earthquakes released noxious fumes. This theory was unique to the Black Death, perhaps because it happened to coincide with actual tremors in some parts of Europe.³ Whereas the medical faculty at Paris preferred to confine itself to traditional miasmatic or atmospheric infection, physicians from the rival medical school at Montpellier, like Alphonso de Córdoba ([Document 10](#)) and an anonymous colleague, instead championed theories of human-to-human contagion, revolving around, respectively, the contaminating vehicles of poison and sight.⁴ On the issue of how plague arose within the human body, there was also contention. In both his long and short *Consilia* (*Casebooks*) on the plague, Gentile da Foligno argued that once corrupt air entered the body it produced a "poisonous matter" near the heart and lungs. This theory was disputed, however, by a rival at the University of Naples,

Giovanni della Penna, who advanced a humoral theory that attributed the disease to overheated “choleric matter.”⁵ (Cholera, or yellow bile, was one of the four humors of the body, whose balance was deemed essential for human health. According to this theory, an excess of any one humor caused disease.)

A common impression is that physicians during the Black Death were ineffective because the advice they dispensed in their plague manuals had little to do with reality or the common man.⁶ But a close study of these tracts, like those excerpted here, suggests a different interpretation. Physicians attached to the universities were expected to assist their civic communities by responding to epidemic emergencies, and this was particularly true during the crisis of 1348–50. The long *Consilium* of Gentile da Foligno as well as the treatises of the faculty of medicine at the University of Paris and of Jacme d’Agramont ([Documents 9](#) and [12](#)) all state explicitly in their introductions that their works are intended for the wider community, in order to be of “common” or “public utility” and “service.”⁷ Agramont even wrote in his native language of Catalan and kept theoretical jargon to a minimum to reach a lay audience. Those communities that adopted quarantine and sanitation measures or set up temporary boards of

health in order to combat the Black Death—such as Pistoia and Venice in Italy—seem to have done so on the advice and with the guidance of physicians, as Foligno recommends in his short *Consilium* ([Document 11](#)). Even though doctors no longer played an advisory role when permanent plague controls were adopted in the fifteenth century, they were nevertheless called upon to diagnose patients for isolation (and perhaps treatment) in plague hospitals and wards.⁸ University doctors also modulated their prescriptions to suit the specific needs and circumstances of their patients. The medical faculty at Paris may have prescribed an “amber [smelling] apple” for the king and queen of France, but they also concerned themselves with more humble subjects, for example, advising “that commoners and agricultural laborers, who do not live refined lives, not neglect [to receive] a phlebotomy” either once or twice a day.⁹ The long *Consilium* of Gentile da Foligno is famous for providing a recipe containing “potable gold” for wealthy clients who could afford such expensive remedies,¹⁰ but his last short *Consilium* ([Document 11](#)) addresses the curative properties of garlic, which he recommended to “ordinary and rustic men, to whom a theriac is not available.” Jacme d’Agramont

Document 7

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LOUIS SANCTUS

Letter

April 27, 1348

Recueil des chroniques de Flandre, ed. Joseph-Jean de Smet, 4 vols. (Brussels, 1837–65), 3:5–16.

In the following extract from his letter of April 27, 1348, written from Avignon, Louis Sanctus appears to describe all three forms of the plague: bubonic, pneumonic, and even septicemic. Because Avignon was at the time the seat of the papacy, expert medical attention was available in the city and, by Sanctus's account, autopsies were conducted on plague victims. Sanctus seems to have had access to such expert medical testimony when writing his description of the symptoms of the disease, particularly of the pneumonic variety.

And it is said that the plague is of three types of infection. First, that men feel pain in their lungs, from which there comes a shortness of breath. He who has this malady, or is contaminated by it in any way whatsoever, can in no way escape, but will not live more than two days. Indeed, dissections were carried

out by doctors in many Italian cities, and also in Avignon by order and command of the pope, so that the origin of this plague might be known. And many dead bodies were cut up and opened, and it was found that all who die so suddenly have an infection of the lungs and spit up blood. And thus it follows that this plague is indeed most terrible and dangerous to all, namely that it is contagious, because whenever one infected person dies, all who see him during his illness, or visit him, or have dealings with him in any way, or carry him to his grave, straightaway follow him [to their deaths], without any remedy.

There is also another kind of plague, that at present exists alongside the aforesaid [pneumonic plague]: namely that certain apostemes [tumors] suddenly appear on both armpits, from which men die without delay. And there is even a third plague, likewise concurrent with the two mentioned above, but at present it runs its own course: namely that people of both sexes are stricken in the groin, from which they die suddenly. As the aforesaid plague spreads, it has come to pass that the doctor does not visit the sick for fear of this contagion, not even if the patient would give him everything he possessed in this life. Nor does the father visit his son, the mother her daughter,

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brother his brother, the son his father, the friend his friend, the acquaintance his acquaintance, nor anyone another who may be a blood relation, unless he wishes to suddenly die like him or follow him [to the grave] immediately. And thus an innumerable number of men have died who did their affectionate duty to their relations and who also were known for their piety and charity, but who perchance might have escaped had they not visited them at the time.

8

JOHN VI KANTAKOUZENOS

History

1367–1369

Christos S. Bartsocas, "Two Fourteenth Century Greek Descriptions of the 'Black Death,'" *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 21 (1966): 396. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

A member of the powerful Kantakouzenos family that owned large estates in Thrace, John VI became emperor of Byzantium in 1341 as the result of a coup in which he claimed to be acting as regent for the legitimate heir to the throne, John V Paleologus. But

in 1354, John V, who had attained his majority, forced John VI to abdicate and retire to a monastery. Kantakouzenos used his retirement to write a History of the Byzantine Empire, which he seems to have composed into its final form between 1367 and 1369. Although some scholars think that Kantakouzenos imitated the literary style of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides in this passage, his detailed observations on the plague appear to be genuine. The plague of Athens of 430–26 BCE (now thought to be typhus fever or smallpox) was a different disease from the Black Death. The emperor had the opportunity to observe this firsthand when his youngest son, Andronikos, succumbed on the third day after the plague struck Constantinople. John VI himself lived to 1383.

So incurable was the evil, that neither any regularity of life, nor any bodily strength could resist it. Strong and weak bodies were all similarly carried away, and those best cared for died in the same manner as the poor. No other disease of any kind presented itself that year. If someone had a previous illness he always succumbed to this disease and no physician's art was sufficient; neither did the disease take the same course in all persons, but the others, unable to resist, died the same

account of their interaction disasters are magnified threefold to the third power [i.e., nine times], and all this is to be found in [the writings of] ancient philosophers. And Albertus [Magnus] says in his book, *Concerning the Causes of the Properties of the Elements*[†] (treatise 2, [chapter 1](#)), that a conjunction of two planets, namely Mars and Jupiter, brings about a great pestilence in the air, and that this happens especially under a hot and humid sign [i.e., Aquarius], as was the case when the planets lined up [in 1345]. For at that time, Jupiter, being hot and wet, drew up evil vapors from the earth, but Mars, since it is immoderately hot and dry, then ignited the risen vapors, and therefore there were many lightning flashes, sparks, and pestiferous vapors and fires throughout the atmosphere. . . .

Concerning the Particular and Near Cause. Although pestilential sicknesses can arise from a corruption of water and food, as happens in times of famine and poor productivity, nevertheless we are of the opinion that illnesses which proceed from a corruption of the air are more deadly, since this evil is more hurtful than food or drink in that its poison penetrates quickly to the heart and lungs. Moreover, we believe that the present epidemic or plague originated from air that

was corrupt in its substance, and not only in its altered properties.[‡] For we wish it to be understood that air, which is pure and clear by nature, does not putrefy or become corrupt unless it is mixed up with something else, that is, with evil vapors. For many vapors that had been corrupted at the time of the aforesaid conjunctions arose, by virtue of their [nature], from the earth and water, and in the air were spread and multiplied by frequent gusts of thick, wild, and southerly winds, which, on account of the foreign vapors they have brought and are still bringing with them, have corrupted the air in its substance. Thus, the corrupted air, when it is breathed in, necessarily penetrates to the heart and corrupts the substance of the spirit that is in it and putrefies the surrounding moisture, so that the heat that is created goes forth and by its nature corrupts the principle of life, and this is the immediate cause of the current epidemic. What is more, these winds, which have become so prevalent around us, could by their force have brought or carried to us, or perhaps will do so in the future, evil, putrid and poisonous vapors from afar, as, for instance, from swamps, lakes, deep valleys, and, in addition, from dead, unburied or unburned bodies, all of which are deadly. And this could be a cause of the epidemic. And

possibly this corruption could have or will come about through other causes, such as rottenness imprisoned in the inner parts of the earth that are released, or already in fact have been released, whenever there are earthquakes. But all of these things which have done and are doing harm, by putrefying the air and water, could have come about through the configurations [of the planets], the aforesaid universal and distant cause.

Concerning Prognostications and Signs. Changes of the seasons are a great source of plagues. For the Ancients, and especially Hippocrates, are agreed that if any of the four seasons was disrupted so that the seasons did not observe their regularity, pestilence and deadly diseases would come to pass in that year. Therefore we speak from experience when we say that for some time now the seasons have not been regular. For the past winter was less cold than it ought to have been, with much rain, and the spring was windy and, at the tail end, rainy. But the summer was late, less hot than it usually is and extremely wet, very unpredictable from day to day and hour to hour, and the skies often cloudy but then clearing up, so that it seemed as if it was about to rain but it never did. Also, the autumn was very rainy and cloudy. Hence for us, this whole year, or most of that time, has been and still

is hot and wet, and for that reason the air is pestilential. For air that is hot and wet does not occur during the seasons of the year except in times of pestilence. . . .

Nevertheless, in the judgment of astrologers who base themselves on Ptolemy,^{*} these [plagues] are further reckoned to be likely and possible because there have been seen very many vapor trails and flare-ups, such as a comet and shooting stars. Also, the color of the heavens has customarily appeared yellowish and the sky turned red because of the frequently burnt vapors. In addition, there has been much lightning and frequent flashes, thunder and wind so violent and strong that it has stirred up much of the earth's dust, bringing it from southerly parts. These, especially the powerful earthquakes, quickly make things worse for everyone, leaving behind a legacy of yet more decay, and a multitude of fish, beasts, and other carcasses on the seashore, and also in many places trees covered with dust. And indeed, some confess to have seen a multitude of frogs and snakes, which come forth out of decomposition. All these things seem to come from a great rottenness of the air and land. Moreover, all of the above has been noted before by wise men of worthy memory who made their investigations on the

day, a few even within the hour. Those who could resist for two or three days had a very violent fever at first, the disease in such cases attacking the head; they suffered from speechlessness and insensibility to all happenings and then appeared as if sunken into a deep sleep. Then, if from time to time they came to themselves, they wanted to speak but the tongue was hard to move and they uttered inarticulate sounds because the nerves around the occiput [back of the head] were dead; and they died suddenly. In others, the evil attacked not the head, but the lung, and forthwith there was inflammation inside which produced very sharp pains in the chest.

Sputum suffused with blood was brought up and disgusting and stinking breath from within. The throat and tongue, parched from the heat, were black and congested with blood. It made no difference if they drank much or little. Sleeplessness and weakness were established forever.

Abscesses formed on the upper and lower arms, in a few also in the maxillae [jaw], and in others on other parts of the body. In some they were large and in others small. Black blisters appeared. Some people broke out with black spots all over their bodies; in some they were few and very manifest; in others they

were obscure and dense. Everyone died the same death from these symptoms. In some people all the symptoms appeared, in others more or fewer of them, and in no small number even one of these was sufficient to provoke death. Those few who were able to escape from among the many who died were no longer possessed by the same evil, but were safe. The disease did not attack twice in order to kill them.

Great abscesses were formed on the legs or the arms, from which, when cut, a large quantity of foul-smelling pus flowed and the disease was differentiated as that which discharged much annoying matter. Even many who were seized by all the symptoms unexpectedly recovered. There was no help from anywhere; if someone brought to another a remedy useful to himself, this became poison to the other patient. Some, by treating others, became infected with the disease. . . . Most terrible was the discouragement. Whenever people felt sick there was no hope left for recovery, but by turning to despair, adding to their prostration and severely aggravating their sickness, they died at once. No words could express the nature of the disease.

*This refers to the medieval medical idea, derived from the ancier Greek physician Hippocrates, that the body was composed of four humors—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile—that must be kept in balance if the body is to stay healthy.

Document 9

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MEDICAL FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PARIS

Consultation

October 6, 1348

H. Émile Rébouis, *Étude historique et critique sur la Peste* (Paris: A. Picard, 1888), 76–92.

On October 6, 1348, the college of the faculty of medicine at the University of Paris issued a compendium of opinion on the Black Death, apparently in response to a request from the king of France, Philip VI. In addition to relying on their own knowledge and ancient authorities like Aristotle, the faculty consulted “very many knowledgeable men in modern astrology and medicine concerning the causes of the epidemic which has been abroad since 1345.” Their pronouncement therefore contained what was considered the most up-to-date scientific information available at the time and quickly became authoritative, as evidenced by its repetition in other plague treatises. The first part of the faculty’s treatise addresses the “causes of this pestilence” and is divided into three chapters: one on a “distant” cause “which is up above and in the heavens,” a second on a “near”

cause “which is lower and on earth,” and the third on “prognostications and signs, which are connected to both [above causes].” The second part, devoted to preventions and cures, is omitted because it covers much the same ground as [Documents 12](#) and [13](#).

Concerning the Universal and Distant Cause. Therefore we say that the distant and first cause of this pestilence was and is a certain configuration in the heavens. In the year of our Lord 1345, at precisely one hour past noon on the twentieth day of the month of March,* there was a major conjunction [lining up] of three higher planets in Aquarius. Indeed, this conjunction, together with other prior conjunctions and eclipses, being the present cause of the ruinous corruption of the air that is all around us, is a harbinger of mortality and famine and many other things besides, which we will not touch on here because it does not pertain to our subject. Moreover, that this is so is testified by the philosopher, Aristotle, in his book, *Concerning the Causes of the Properties of the Elements*.* Around the middle [of the work] he says that mortalities of men and depopulation of kingdoms happen whenever there is a conjunction of two planets, namely Saturn and Jupiter, so that on

account of their interaction disasters are magnified threefold to the third power [i.e., nine times], and all this is to be found in [the writings of] ancient philosophers. And Albertus [Magnus] says in his book, *Concerning the Causes of the Properties of the Elements*[†] (treatise 2, [chapter 1](#)), that a conjunction of two planets, namely Mars and Jupiter, brings about a great pestilence in the air, and that this happens especially under a hot and humid sign [i.e., Aquarius], as was the case when the planets lined up [in 1345]. For at that time, Jupiter, being hot and wet, drew up evil vapors from the earth, but Mars, since it is immoderately hot and dry, then ignited the risen vapors, and therefore there were many lightning flashes, sparks, and pestiferous vapors and fires throughout the atmosphere. . . .

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basis of sure experience. . . .

On the other hand, a no small part of the cause of sicknesses is the condition of the patient's body, in that no cause is apt to take effect unless the patient shows a predilection toward it. And it must be particularly emphasized that, although everyone at one time or another incurs the danger of this corrupt air through their necessity to breathe, nevertheless not everyone is made sick by the corruption of the air, but many who are predisposed to it will become [sick]. Truly, those who become sick will not escape, except the very few. Moreover, the bodies that are more susceptible to receive the stamp of this plague are those bodies that are hot and wet, in which decay is more likely. Also [at risk] are: bodies that are full and obstructed with evil humors, in which waste matter is not consumed or expelled as is necessary; that live by a bad regimen, indulging in too much exercise, sex, and bathing; those who are weak and thin and very fearful. Also infants, women, and the young, and those whose bodies are fat and have a ruddy complexion or are choleric are to be on their guard more than others. But those who have bodies that are dry and free of impurities, who govern [their bodies] well and in accordance with a suitable regimen, are more resistant

to the pestilence. What is more, we should not neglect to mention that an epidemic always proceeds from the divine will, in which case there is no other counsel except that one should humbly turn to God, even though this does not mean forsaking doctors. For the Most High created medicine here on earth, so that, while God alone heals the sick, He allows medicine as a symbol of his humanity. Blessed be the glorious and high God, who never denies His aid but makes plain to those who fear Him a clear diagnosis for being cured.

10

ALFONSO DE CÓRDOBA

Letter and Regimen concerning the Pestilence

ca. 1348

Karl Sudhoff, "Pestschriften aus den ersten 150 Jahren nach der Epidemie des 'schwarzen Todes' 1348," *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin*, 3 (1909–10): 224–25.

Little is known about Córdoba. Although he obviously came from Spain, an inscription at the end of his treatise, Epistola et Regimen de Pestilentia (Letter and Regimen concerning the Pestilence), states that it was

written at Montpellier in France. No date is given, although it is believed to be either 1348 or 1349. The University of Montpellier was one of the leading medical schools in Europe at the time, and it is clear that Córdoba was connected to it from the way he describes himself at the beginning of his work. Córdoba probably composed his treatise in response to the pronouncement on the plague by the University of Paris in 1348. Rather than positing an astrological or natural cause, like the Paris masters, Córdoba focuses on an artificial or a human one.

I, Alfonso of Córdoba, master of the liberal and medical arts, have examined with much study the cause and nature of the pestilences which have arisen and begun in the present year of our Lord 1348. The first pestilence was a natural one and its cause was an eclipse of the moon occurring immediately before in the sign of Leo [i.e., July 23–August 22], accompanied by a powerful conjunction of the unlucky planets. The second was caused by a very strong earthquake which many can recall, and that pestilence was naturally located in regions of Italy and in parts overseas, in the corner of the triangle opposite the house of Europe [i.e., an indefinite region to the East]. But that plague ought to have ceased, and so it has ceased, which it did

quickly within the space of a year, and otherwise the strength and vigor of the constellation [of the planets] was not in accordance with how it afterwards spread. And yet today the pestilence is spread throughout all the regions of Christendom.

And there is another cause besides the natural one, and for this reason and out of compassion for the [Christian] faithful who chiefly suffer from it, I have written down this letter and regimen, along with its medicines, so that pious and good people may not be subjected to so many dangers and may know how to prevent the great dangers and evils that especially threaten Christians in this pestilence. Before all else, one must be on one's guard against all food and drink which can be infected and poisoned, especially against non-flowing water, because this can most easily be infected. Experience teaches us that this pestilence does not proceed from some constellation [of the planets] nor as a consequence of any natural infection of the elements, but it proceeds out of a deep-seated malice through the most subtle artifice that can be invented by a profoundly wicked mind.* This is why the wise counsel of doctors does not profit or help those in the grip of this most cruel and pernicious disease. Wherefore the best remedy is this: to flee the

plague, because the plague does not follow the fugitive, or to take precautions, inasmuch as possible, against infection of all of life's necessities. . . . [Córdoba proceeds to give some recipes for theriacs and electuaries.] The use of such an electuary may preserve one from the venom and poison.

And the use of pestilential pills is of great value, and may preserve one from infected air, because air can be infected by artifice, as when a certain formula is prepared in a glass amphora [flask]. And when that formula is well fermented, he who wishes to do that evil [i.e., poison others] waits until there comes a strong and steady wind from some part of the world. Then he must go against the wind and place his amphora next to some stones opposite the city or town that he wishes to infect. And after giving this area a wide berth, walking away against the wind so that the vapor does not infect him, he should forcefully throw the amphora against the stones, and once the amphora is broken, the vapor spreads and disperses in the air and anyone who comes into contact with that vapor will die as if from pestilential air, and quickly. [Córdoba then gives some more recipes for pestilential pills and recommends fumigating the air with coal fires perfumed by one of the pills.]

Chapter 5

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5

Religious Mentalities

For some European Christians, like Gabriele de Mussis ([Document 23](#)), the extraordinary mortality of the Black Death was proof of the righteous judgment of God visited upon a sinful humanity—the clergy, chief among them—which inevitably invited intimations of a coming apocalypse or reign of the Antichrist. But even Mussis, who does not doubt that God’s vengeance is just, seems so overwhelmed by the plague that he begins to despair of God’s mercy. As we have seen, others, like Petrarch ([Document 15](#)), could not understand why humankind deserved such awful punishment and began to question whether God even played a role in their lives. Overall, however, the predominant response seems to have been to seek solace and hope in the prayers and processions led by bishops and the clergy. Christians directed religious appeals to God and to saints especially known for their mercy or power against the plague, such as the Virgin Mary, St. Sebastian, St. Anthony, and St. Roch. Many also resorted to local saint cults, such as the Virgin

Agatha of Catania in Sicily ([Document 24](#)), or the newly established shrine of St. Thomas Cantilupe in Hereford, England.¹

A number of documents criticize the priesthood for failing to administer to the needs of parishioners during the Black Death, including hearing confession and giving last rites. Both Michele da Piazza and Jean de Venette contrasted the “cowardly” behavior of priests with the behavior of friars. In some places friars also tended to the needs of the parish and allegedly stayed behind with the sick even though this cost them their lives. One must remember, though, that both these critics were themselves friars. But perhaps the harshest critics of the priesthood were its superiors. In a famous decree issued on January 10, 1349, Bishop Ralph Shrewsbury of Bath and Wells in England granted an unprecedented indulgence to the parishioners of his diocese to confess to a layman, even a woman, on the grounds that “many, we hear, are dying without the sacrament of penance” in parishes decimated by the plague because “priests cannot be found to take on the cares of these places, neither out of devotional zeal nor for payment, or to visit the sick and administer the Church sacraments to them, perhaps because they are infected or have a fear

of being infected.”² The archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Islip, castigated the clergy of his province for abandoning their parishes, blaming such behavior not on fear of contagion, but on the clerics’ greed. Priests wanted higher salaries and, particularly, to serve private chapels, or chantries, where a wealthy patron paid to have priests say private masses ([Document 25](#)). Islip’s desire to regulate the excessive salaries of priests echoes the labor legislation passed by secular governments to rein in an ascendant peasantry (see [chapter 4](#)). Islip’s successors found that this problem did not diminish with time; the continuing presence of plague made priests’ labor just as valuable as the peasants’.

However, one can attempt to exonerate churchmen who faced the onslaught of the Black Death. Mortality of priests serving the parishes of England was high, both in absolute terms and relative to the death rates of other members of society. Approximately 45 percent of the priests in ten dioceses throughout England died during the height of the pestilence in 1349, with mortality in some dioceses, such as Norwich, Exeter, and Winchester, nearing 50 percent.³ In the diocese of Barcelona in Spain, mortality of the priesthood was even higher, reaching 60 percent in the year between

May 1348 and April 1349.⁴ This compares favorably with the average mortality of the English peasantry, which, based on surviving manorial and tax records, ranged from 40 to 70 percent.⁵ Obviously, priests as well as friars were performing parochial duties and consequently putting their lives at risk during the Black Death. One must also consider that priests who survived the plague expected much lower incomes in offerings and tithes from a flock ravaged by the Black Death and thus of necessity they sought supplemental funds from private masses ([Document 26](#)).⁶

Medieval chroniclers asserted that there was a falling off of spiritual fervor among the laity in the wake of the Black Death. But Bishops John Trillek of Hereford and John Grandisson of Exeter complained of scurrilous plays and obscene gesticulations that were distracting the people’s devotion even in years preceding the arrival of plague in 1349.⁷ Because some might view these complaints as stereotypical denunciations of one generation by another, wills have formed the basis for a more rigorous and systematic study of the religious mentality of the laity in the post-plague generation. Medieval wills survive in numerous city archives, and some actually seem to have been drawn up as the testators were dying of the plague in

1348–50 ([Document 27](#)). Although medieval wills may not be representative of the entire population, scholars have now analyzed a large number of them across a broad temporal and geographical range. The wills that survive from both before and after the Black Death in central Italy and Flanders, for example, seem to point to a new “cult of remembrance” that grew up in the wake of the plague and to the fear of oblivion that the catastrophe may have engendered. Commissions for portraiture of the patron may have anticipated the individualism that characterized the Renaissance.⁸

There were fundamental differences in the way Islam and Christianity responded to the Black Death. Sunni Islam did not so readily draw upon apocalyptic traditions as Christians did when faced with the plague, and Muslims displayed no scapegoating tendencies against the Jews, as was true of European Christians during the Black Death ([chapter 6](#)). Muslims, scholars claim, had not developed a theology of original sin that saddled them with a heavy burden of guilt as plague victims, but instead viewed the disease as a natural disaster that God allowed with no reference to human culpability or punishment.⁹ Above all, Muslims rejected the concept of contagion, because this posited a cause of the disease outside the direct

agency of God. Even the leader of Christendom, Pope Clement VI, bowed to the principle of contagion by fleeing from his plague-stricken seat at Avignon. Parallel stories told by Gilles li Muisis and Ibn Battūta illustrate the contrast well: The Christian chronicler relates how some pilgrims “left in great haste” once they learned in the morning that their host and his whole family were dead; Battūta and his companion, on the other hand, stay to pray over and bury a *faqir*, or Muslim holy man, who died in their company during the night.¹⁰ Whereas Muslims continued to indulge in communal prayers, processions, and funerals even at the height of the plague ([Document 28](#)), several Christian communities prohibited these gatherings in order to avoid the effects of contagion.

Medieval Christians had little understanding of the religious views of Muslims toward the plague. Muslims regarded plague as a mercy and martyrdom that held forth the promise of paradise to believers, equivalent to what one might obtain through *jihad*, or holy war. Even as well informed a chronicler as Matteo Villani of Florence displays his ignorance of Islamic culture when he declares: “It commenced with the infidels [Muslims] this cruel inhumanity, that mothers and fathers abandoned their children, and children their

fathers and mothers, one brother the other and other relatives, a thing cruel and astonishing, and something very foreign to human nature, detestable to faithful Christians, who yet soon followed the barbaric nations in practicing this same cruelty.”¹¹ Given Islamic taboos against flight from a plague region, the exact opposite was more likely to have been true.

Nevertheless, religious proscriptions against contagion do not seem to have interfered with the practice of medicine in the Muslim world, which was authorized by the Koran, and there seems to have been some debate within the Muslim religio-legal community, or *ulama*, concerning Islamic teachings on plague.¹² One brave soul, Ibn al-Khatīb ([Document 30](#)), openly subscribed to the idea of contagion on the basis of practical observation, even when his friend and colleague, Ibn Khatīma, took the more prudent approach of doing so only tacitly ([Document 13](#)). Khatīb was eventually lynched by a mob, however, for his defiance of such long-held *fatwas*, or religious teachings — proof that Muslims could be just as intolerant as Christians. Disputes between advocates of religion and science also occurred in the Christian community, particularly concerning the causes of the Black Death, as the German writer, Konrad of

Megenberg, testifies.¹³

Finally, Ibn al-Wardī argues that Muslims, like Christians, viewed plague as God’s punishment for their sins and sought to eliminate it through prayer, even though this view conflicted with the idea that it was a mercy and martyrdom ([Document 29](#)). For both religions, of course, God was the ultimate author of the plague; there were Christians as well as Muslims who felt that this terrible calamity was a blessing in disguise that worked for the salvation of true believers. Gabriele de Mussis and Ibn Kathīr tell almost identical stories of how prophecies uttered by holy men could spur renewed religious fervor among a populace threatened with plague ([Documents 23](#) and [28](#)). As always, animosity and lack of understanding between followers of the two religions hides what they have in common.

NOTES

¹*Registrum Johannis de Trillek, Episcopi Herefordensis, AD 1344–1361*, ed. J. H. Parry (London: Canterbury and York Society, 1912), 147–48.

²David Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, 4 vols. (London: Sumptibus R. Gosling, 1737), 2:745–46.

³John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting*

Document 17

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17

AGNOLO DI TURA

Sieneſe Chronicle

1348–1351

Agnolo di Tura del Grasso, *Cronaca senese*, ed. Alessandro Lisini and Fabio Iacometti, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 15/6 (1931–37), 555–56. Translated from the Italian by Aubrey Threlkeld.

Siena, a town south of Florence in Tuscany, was struck by the Black Death in April or May 1348. The town's chronicler, Agnolo di Tura, describes the devastating effect that the disease had upon his fellow citizens, including his own family. Tura may have worked for the city's financial magistracy and therefore may have had access to official records. However, one should not take his mortality figures at face value, as best estimates indicate that the city's population shortly before the plague was a little over 52,000, which is precisely the number Tura cites as dying from the Black Death. Di Tura's contribution to his city's history ends in 1351.

The mortality, which was a thing horrible and cruel, began in Siena in the month of May [1348]. I do not know from where came this cruelty or these pitiless

ways, which were painful to see and stupefied everyone. There are not words to describe how horrible these events have been and, in fact, whoever can say that they have not lived in utterly horrid conditions can truly consider themselves lucky. The infected die almost immediately. They swell beneath the armpits and in the groin, and fall over while talking. Fathers abandon their sons, wives their husbands, and one brother the other. In the end, everyone escapes and abandons anyone who might be infected. Moreover, it appears that this plague can be communicated through bad breath and even by just seeing one of the infected. In these ways, they die and no one can be found who would want to bury them, not even for money or in the name of friendship. Those who get infected in their own house, they remove them the best way they can and they bury them without the supervision of a priest. No one controls anything and they do not even ring the church bells anymore. Throughout Siena, giant pits are being excavated for the multitudes of the dead and the hundreds that die every night. The bodies are thrown into these mass graves and are covered bit by bit. When those ditches are full, new ditches are dug. So many have died that new pits have to be made every day.

And I, Agnolo di Tura, called the Fat, have buried five of my sons with my own hands. Yet still I do not steal from those who were poorly buried like the dogs that eat them and litter them about the city. There is no one who weeps for any of the dead, for instead everyone awaits their own impending death. So many have died that everyone believes it is the end of the world. Medicine and other cures do not work. In fact, the more medicine people are given the quicker they die. The leaders of the city have elected three citizens that have been given 1,000 florins for the expense of taking care of the homeless and for burying them. These conditions have been so horrible that I do not reflect as often as I used to about the situation. I have thought so much about these events that I cannot tell the stories any longer. This is how the people lived until September [1348], and it would be too much for me to write the whole story. One would find that in this period of time more people died than in twenty years or more. In Siena alone, 36,000 people have died. If you count the elderly and others, the number could be 52,000 in total. In all of the boroughs, the number could be as high as 30,000 more. So it can be seen that in total the death toll may be as high as 80,000. There are only about 10,000 people left in the

city and those that live on are hopeless and in utter despair. They leave their homes and other things. Gold, silver, and copper lay scattered about. In the countryside, even more died, so many that farms and agricultural lands are left without people to work them. I cannot write about the cruelties that existed in the countryside: that wolves and other wild beasts eat the improperly buried and other horrors that are too difficult for anyone who would read this account. . . .

The city of Siena appeared uninhabited because almost no one was found there. The pestilence remained and everyone who survived celebrated his or her fate. Of the monks, priests, nuns, women, and others from the secular community, they didn't worry about their expenses or games. Everyone appeared to be rich because they had survived and regained value in life. Now, no one knows how to put their life back in order.

18

JEAN DE VENETTE

Chronicle

ca. 1359–1360

Document 20

20

CITY COUNCIL OF SIENA

Ordinance

May 1349

William M. Bowsky, "The Impact of the Black Death upon Sienese Government and Society," *Speculum*, 39 (1964): 26, n. 145.

Italian city-states were among the first to enact labor legislation in the wake of the Black Death, some as early as 1348. They typically took a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, attempting to restrict laborers' mobility and curb their demands for higher wages; on the other, trying to attract immigrant labor with the promise of attractive conditions. Siena's labor law is included here; the city-states of Venice, Orvieto, and Pisa, as well as Ragusa (modern-day Dubrovnik), across the Adriatic, enacted similar legislation. It is unclear how successful these laws were: Two other labor measures enacted by Siena, dated September 5, 1348, and October 7, 1350, were not renewed. The following ordinance would have been deliberated and voted on by the commune's city council, which was composed of 300 permanent and 150 rotating members. The ordinance is dated May 1349.

Item, because laborers of the land and those who have been accustomed to work the land or orchards on the farms of the citizens and *districtuales* [inhabitants] of Siena extort and receive great sums and salaries for the daily labor that they do every day, they have totally destroyed and abandoned the farms and estates of the aforesaid citizens and *districtuales*, which is not without great danger to the aforesaid holders of the farms. The aforesaid wise men [of the city council] provide and ordain that everyone, of whatever condition he may be, who labors and is accustomed to labor with his own hands be bound and ought to pay six gold *florins** every year to the commune of Siena

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on behalf of the lord, unless the said laborer or cultivator works or cultivates with his own hands and labor eight *staios*[‡] or works eight *staios* of vineyards or orchards in good faith without fraud according to the customs of a good laborer, which at the very least he is bound to render to the said lord. And that everyone who works for hire or wages with oxen or cows or other kinds of plough-teams be bound and ought to pay twelve gold *florins* every year to the commune of Siena on behalf of and in the name of the lord, always with the exception and proviso that the aforesaid laborers with their beasts work, cultivate, and sow twenty *staios* of land, which at the very least they are bound to render to the said lord. And that . . . the *bargello* [exactor] of the commune of Siena be bound and ought to diligently investigate the aforesaid laborers at least every two months, and those whom he finds to have acted against the present provision of laborers . . . should be fined by the said *bargello* in [the amount of] ten Sienese *lira*.[‡] And nevertheless he [the *bargello*] is bound to pay the said lord. It is declared that laborers should be understood as comprising those who are fifteen years of age and above, up to the age of seventy. And the aforesaid wise men [of the city council] have decreed and ordained

that if, after the approval of the present ordinances, any persons from anywhere else than the city and *contado* [district] of Siena wish to come to work at the rate of half or more of the said quantity of land, as is stated above [i.e., four *staios* by hand, ten *staios* with beasts], are not bound to contribute anything [i.e., taxes or services] in that community in which they work or live, and they are to hold and ought to hold this said immunity for five years' time after the approval of the present ordinances.

21

THE CÓRTESES OF CASTILE

Ordinance

1351

Córtes de los antiguos reinos de León y de Castilla, 5 vols. (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1861–1903), 2:75–77.

In Spain, the córtes of Castile, a form of government like the English parliament, was convened under the auspices of the crown and comprised prelates, noblemen, country squires, and town merchants or councillors throughout the realm. Scholars dispute the exact role of representative assemblies in Spain's

*medieval political history: At certain times, for example, during the 1350s and 1360s in the kingdom of Aragon and during the 1380s and 1390s in Castile, the *córtes* demonstrated impressive consultative, legislative, and financial powers on a par with those of England. But at other times, the *córtes* met infrequently and was fragmented among regional assemblies along the model of France. The following selection describes labor legislation enacted in response to the Black Death by the *córtes* convoked by King Pedro I “the Cruel” of Castile (1334–1369) at Valladolid in 1351. The *córtes* of Aragon passed similar decrees in 1350 (subsequently revoked in 1352). The ordinances of Castile were tailored to each part of the kingdom, suggesting that the plague’s impact varied considerably by region. Only the first four ordinances, common to all regions of the kingdom, are included here.*

There have been rumors and complaints made to me [Pedro I of Castile] that some persons of my land and of my realms suffer very great losses because they cannot work their estates to produce bread and wine and other things that maintain men. And this has come about, on the one hand because many men and women wander about idle and do not want to work,

and on the other because those who do work demand such great prices and salaries and wages, that those who have estates cannot comply, and for this reason, these estates have become deserted and lack laborers. And also there have been rumors and complaints made to me that those laborers who work and perform other trades [that produce things] for the maintenance of men which they cannot go without, sell things from their trades at their will and for much greater prices than they are worth; and from this situation ensue and arise very great damages to all those who have to buy those things that they need. And I, seeing that this has been to my disservice and great damage and loss in all of my land and seeking and desiring the common welfare of those who live in my realms, deem it good to command that an ordinance be made in each of the regions of my realms concerning these matters, in the manner given here.

First, I deem it good and I command that no man nor woman who is fit and able to work wander about idle through my dominions, neither asking [for things] nor begging, but that all work hard and live by the labor of their hands, except those men and women who become so sick and injured or are of such great age that they cannot do anything and boys and girls of

twelve years of age [or younger].

Also, I deem it good and I command that all the laboring men and women and persons who can and ought to earn a living, as is said above, continue to perform the same work on the estates and serve for the salaries and wages at the prices contained below, and the same applies to those who are idle.

Also, I deem it good and I command that all the carpenters and builders and plasterers and servants and workmen and workwomen and day laborers and other workers who are accustomed to hire out their labor go to the public square of each place where they live and have been accustomed to be hired at daybreak of every day, [bringing] with them their implements and their food in a manner such that they can go out of the town or place to perform their labor where they were hired at sunrise, and that they work the whole day. And they are to quit their work at such a time that they return to the town or place where they were hired at sunset. And those who work in the town or place where they were hired are to work from the said time of sunrise, and they are to quit working at sunset.

Also, I deem it good and I command that all the laborers continue to work and employ themselves in the professions that they know and are accustomed to, and that they sell the things that they make in their trades and professions for the prices that are contained and given below. And they are to perform the work of their professions well and faithfully.

Chapter 7

THE BLACK DEATH: THE GREAT MORTALITY OF 1348-1350: A BRIEF HISTORY WITH DOCUMENTS ...

7

The Artistic Response

There are many ways to measure the artistic impact of the Black Death. One approach is to examine the art produced by the generation immediately following the plague of 1348 to 1350, even if its themes make no literal reference to disease or death.¹ The limitations of this approach stem from the difficulties in dating medieval works precisely—and thus establishing the Black Death as a definitive break in a genre — and by the subjective nature of interpretation.² In one view, the Black Death brought the Renaissance spirit of innovation to a grinding halt through the deaths of its leading artists, which inaugurated a more conservative and rigid school.³ But in another view, the plague was a positive force, either by reinforcing faith through a refocused depiction of traditional plague saints, or by providing a major impetus to the Renaissance theme of individualism, represented by the fact that so many patrons felt impelled to commission portraits to be remembered in the face of mass death ([Document 27](#)).⁴

The approach of this chapter is to study art and literature whose themes are intimately connected with, and highly revealing of, late medieval attitudes toward death. We focus on artistic and poetic depictions of a desiccated and decaying corpse, a type of representation known as the “macabre,” or *memento mori* (remembrance of death). Of all artistic representations, this genre, although in its origins predating the Black Death, is most closely associated with the plague.

THE DANCE OF DEATH

It is quite possible that a dance associated with the figure of Death first arose in conjunction with the Black Death of 1348. The *Great Chronicle of France* ([Document 41](#)) testifies to a dance performed in that year to ward off the plague. Other chronicles report that in 1374 a dancing mania seized hundreds of people in German and Flemish towns. The people periodically interrupted their dance to fall to the ground and allow onlookers to trample on them in the belief that this would cure them of their “extreme oppression,” although it is nowhere stated that this was the disease.⁵ These people may have been exhibiting or masking through dance one of the

neurological symptoms of the bubonic plague, called chorea or St. Vitus's Dance, which produces involuntary muscle contractions.

The first artistic production of the dance is open to some debate. A German scholar claims that the Dominican convent of Würzburg was the first to produce a poem on the Dance of Death in 1350, but others believe that the French poet Jean le Fèvre wrote the first one in 1376.⁶ By the end of the fourteenth century, the dance was being performed as a kind of morality play in parish churches, and later as secular entertainment.⁷

The first known painting of the Dance of Death is the fresco that once adorned the southern cloister of the cemetery of Les Innocents in Paris, which was painted by 1425.⁸ Accompanied by a text, the images depicted thirty-one partners—from pope and emperor to infant and hermit—dancing a reel with death. During the 1430s—when the English occupied the French capital and plague and famine occurred on both sides of the Channel—the English poet John Lydgate made a loose transcription and translation of the poem ([Document 42](#)), to which he added, at least according to one version of his poem, six other characters, including several females. By 1440,

pictures to accompany Lydgate's version of the poem were painted on the north cloister of Pardon Churchyard at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Neither the frescoes at St. Paul's nor those at Les Innocents have survived.

The Dance of Death lends itself artistically to the experience of the Black Death for a number of reasons. As the great leveler, Death comes for all regardless of their position in the social hierarchy, just as plague made no distinctions in its onslaught on Europe's population.⁹ In some versions of the dance, Death is a chess player ([Document 43](#)), which seems to express the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of the plague's geographical behavior. The chronicler Heinrich of Herford noticed this behavior, comparing the plague's movements to "a game of chess."¹⁰ In addition, a dancing Death, though frightening, is more approachable and familiar than the awesome figure of the Fourth Rider of the Apocalypse (depicted on the cover of this volume). Here, at least, a mortal can communicate with Death, before being taken away. An elaboration on this theme is the late medieval English morality play *Everyman* (ca. 1485), in which Death appears at the beginning of the play to claim Everyman and lead him to his "reckoning." A long

dialogue then ensues in which Death remains unmoved by Everyman's pleas for a delay of execution, until finally Death allows Everyman a brief respite to prepare his soul for the afterlife. As in Lydgate's poem of the Dance of Death, the afterlife in *Everyman* is described as a "pilgrimage" and Death comes regardless of rank or riches, setting nought "by pope, emperor, king, duke, nor princes."¹¹ But there is a revealing commentary at the end of the play in a monologue by Doctor, who points to the coming resurrection at the Last Judgment, when "we may live body and soul together."¹² The implied message that even a body rent by plague boils and other deformities will be fully restored at the end of time, finds a parallel in the translator's introduction at the beginning of Lydgate's poem ([Document 42](#)).

The Dance of Death and other art forms representing death or mortality often have been invoked to symbolize the "waning" of late medieval society and culture which had become "obsessed" with death. Scholars either dismiss late medieval *memento mori* art as "the too much accentuated and too vivid representation of Death hideous and threatening,"¹³ or characterize the art and literature of the period as "pervaded by a profound pessimism and sometimes a

renunciation of life."¹⁴ There is, however, an alternative interpretation of *memento mori*, one that sees it as a positive, even uplifting, response to the morbid atmosphere created by the Black Death. This interpretation is closely related to medieval beliefs concerning the apocalypse, the final destruction of the world and the salvation of the righteous as prophesied in the book of Revelation in the New Testament.¹⁵ Yes, medieval minds imagined the end of the world as a time of great suffering, terror, and death. But at the same time, the end of the world also holds out the promise of rebirth, renewal, and resurrection. Although it does not deny the terrible evils that plague could bring in its wake, this outlook could provide great comfort and reassurance in the face of mass death.

NOTES

¹Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951).

²H. W. Van Os, "The Black Death and Sienese Painting: A Problem of Interpretation," *Art History*, 4 (1981): 237–49; Joseph Polzer, "Aspects of the Fourteenth-Century Iconography of Death and the Plague," in *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth-Century Plague*, ed. Daniel

Document 29

29

ABŪ HAFS ʿUMAR IBN AL-WARDĪ

Essay on the Report of the Pestilence

ca. 1348

Michael W. Dols, "Ibn al-Wardī's *Risālah al-naba' ʿan al-waba'*, A Translation of a Major Source for the History of the Black Death in the Middle East" in *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*, ed. Dickran K. Kouymjian (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1974), 454–55.

In this selection, Ibn al-Wardī of Aleppo, Syria, provides a classic account of the Muslim religious view of the plague, largely derived from the Koran and the hadith, or traditions ascribed to the prophet Muhammad. As in the previous selection of his (Document 2), al-Wardī inserts poetic verses as a memory aid.

This plague is for the Muslims a martyrdom and a reward, and for the disbelievers a punishment and a rebuke. When the Muslim endures misfortune, then patience is his worship. It has been established by our Prophet, God bless him and give him peace, that the plague-stricken are martyrs. This noble tradition is true and assures martyrdom. And this secret should be pleasing to the true believer. If someone says it causes

infection and destruction, say: God creates and recreates. If the liar disputes the matter of infection and tries to find an explanation, I say that the Prophet, on him be peace, said: who infected the first? If we acknowledge the plague's devastation of the people, it is the will of the Chosen Doer. So it happened again and again.

I take refuge in God from the yoke of the plague. Its high explosion has burst into all countries and was an examiner of astonishing things. Its sudden attacks perplex the people. The plague chases the screaming without pity and does not accept a treasure for ransom. Its engine is far-reaching. The plague enters into the house and swears it will not leave except with all of its inhabitants: "I have an order from the *qadi* [religious judge] to arrest all those in the house." Among the benefits of this order is the removal of one's hopes and the improvement of his earthly works. It awakens men from their indifference for the provisioning of their final journey.

One man begs another to take care of his children, and one says goodbye to his neighbors.

A third perfects his works, and another prepares his shroud.

A fifth is reconciled with his enemies, and another treats his friends with kindness.

One is very generous; another makes friends with those who have betrayed him.

Another man puts aside his property; one frees his servants.*-

One man changes his character while another mends his ways.

For this plague has captured all people and is about to send its ultimate destruction.

There is no protection today from it other than His mercy, praise be to God.

Nothing prevented us from running away from the plague except our devotion to noble tradition. Come then, seek the aid of God Almighty for raising the plague, for He is the best helper. Oh God, we call You better than anyone did before. We call You to raise from us the pestilence and plague. We do not take refuge in its removal other than with You. We do not depend on our good health against the plague but on You. We seek Your protection, oh Lord of creation, from the blows of this stick. We ask for Your mercy which is wider than our sins even as they are the number of the sands and pebbles. We plead with You, by the most honored of the advocates, Muhammad,

the Prophet of mercy, that You take away from us this distress. Protect us from the evil and the torture and preserve us. For You are our sole support; what a perfect trustee!

30

LISĀN AL-DĪN IBN AL-KHATĪB

A Very Useful Inquiry into the Horrible Sickness

1349–1352

M. J. Müller, "Ibnul-khatīb's Bericht über die Pest," *Sitzungsberichte der Königl. Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 2 (1863): 2–12. Translated from the Arabic with assistance from Walid Saleh.

A Muslim scholar and physician, Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khatīb hailed from Loja, a town near Granada, the capital city of an important and tenacious Moorish kingdom in southern Spain. A friend of Ibn Khatīma, Ibn al-Khatīb wrote his own medical account of the plague, entitled Muqniʿat as-sā'il ʿan al-marad al-hā'il (A Very Useful Inquiry into the Horrible Sickness). Since he incorporated Ibn Battūta's famous description of the plague in Southeast Asia, al-Khatīb likely wrote his treatise during his friend's visit to

Granada between 1349 and 1352. In this selection, al-Khatīb explains why he rejects the Islamic religious proscription against plague contagion, which was well documented by physicians. His outspokenness against a long-established hadith, or religious tradition, backed up by the Shari'a, or Muslim law, was perhaps triggered by the fact that his friend, Khātima, felt compelled to bow to Islamic precept despite empirical observation on the same subject in his own treatise ([Document 13](#)). Al-Khatīb's brave defense of contagion may have contributed to his forced exile from Granada in 1371, when proceedings began for his trial for heresy on the basis of his writings. Before the trial could begin, however, a mob broke into his prison at Fez and lynched him in 1374.

If it were asked, how do we submit to the theory of contagion, when already the divine law has refuted the notion of contagion, we will answer: The existence of contagion has been proved by experience, deduction, the senses, observation, and by unanimous reports, and these aforementioned categories are the demonstrations of proof. And it is not a secret to whoever has looked into this matter or has come to be aware of it that those who come into contact with [plague] patients mostly die, while those who do not

come into contact survive. Moreover, disease occurs in a household or neighborhood because of the mere presence of a contagious dress or utensil; even a [contaminated] earring has been known to kill whoever wears it and his whole household. And when it happens in a city, it starts in one house and then affects the visitors of the house, then the neighbors, the relatives, and other visitors until it spreads throughout the city. And coastal cities are free of the disease until it comes from the sea through a visitor from another city that has the disease, and thus the appearance of the disease in the safe city coincides with the arrival of this man from the contagious city. And the safety of those who have gone into isolation is demonstrated by the example of the ascetic, Ibn Abū Madyan, who lived in the city of Salé [unidentified]. He believed in contagion, and so he hoarded food and bricked up the door on his family (and his family was large!), and the city was obliterated by the plague and not one soul [except Madyan] was left in that whole town. And reports were unanimous that isolated places that have no roads to them and are not frequented by people have escaped unscathed from the plague. And let me tell you of the miraculous survival in our time of the Muslim prisoners who were spared

in the prison of the city of Seville, and they were in the thousands. They were not struck by the bubonic plague, yet it almost obliterated the city. And it has been confirmed that nomads and tent dwellers in Africa and other nomadic places have escaped unscathed because their air is not enclosed and it is improbable that it can be corrupted.

And amidst the horrible afflictions that the plague has imposed upon the people, God has afflicted the people with some learned religious scholars who issue *fatwas*^{*} [against fleeing the plague], so that the quills with which the scholars wrote these *fatwas* were like swords upon which the Muslims died. . . . Although the intent of the divine law is innocent of harm, when a prophetic statement is contradicted by the senses and observation, it is incumbent upon us to interpret it in a way so that the *hadith* fits reality, even if we claim to subscribe to the literal meaning of the *hadith* and, lest we forget, to the fundamentals of the *Shari'a* [Islamic law] that everybody knows about. And the truth of this matter is that it should be interpreted in accordance with those who affirm the theory of contagion. Moreover, there are in the divine law many indications that support the theory of contagion, such as the statement of Muhammad: “A disease should not visit a

healthy man,” or the statement that: “One escapes the fate of God to meet the fate of God.” But this is not the place to go on at length concerning this matter, because the discussion about whether the divine law agrees or disagrees with the contagion theory is not the business of the medical art, but is incidental to it. And in conclusion, to ignore the proofs for plague contagion is an indecency and an affront to God and holds cheap the lives of Muslims. And some of the learned holy men have retracted their *fatwas* for fear of helping people to their deaths.

May God keep us from committing error in word and deed!

^{*}A reference to Joel 1:10.

[†]This passage mixes apocalyptic and astrological imagery. Mussis is especially evocative here of chapters 15 and 16 from the book of Revelation, which begin: “And I saw another sign in heaven, great and wonderful: seven angels having the seven last plagues. For in them is filled up the wrath of God. . . . And I heard a great voice out of the temple, saying to the seven angels: ‘Go, and pour out the seven vials of the wrath of God upon the earth.’ ”

^{*}This was the “jubilee” that had been called by the pope once before, in 1300, inviting people to make a pilgrimage to Rome.

^{*}This is a rather hypocritical passage, considering that Agatha’s body often changed hands. Agatha was a third-century Christian martyr from Catania or Palermo, and her relics were removed to Constantinople during the ninth century when Sicily was conquered by the Muslims. In

1126, Gislebert and Goselin stole them and took them back to Catania.

*The exact term used here is *exilia* or, literally, “exiled.” Use of this word suggests that priests have abandoned their parishes out of financial necessity, rather than fear of the plague.

*Designating that the metal came from Tours, France.

†*bennarius*: The amount of land ploughed in one boon-work.

‡That is, if the land should be disputed by another relative, so that Libionus cannot inherit it.

*This is Renciaro Jannis, Libertus’s nephew and executor, mentioned above.

*Al-Bukhārī was a famous collector of Islamic traditions who lived in the ninth century. The work being read from is undoubtedly al-Bukhārī’s *Sahih*, a collection of more than 7,000 traditions on a variety of subjects, including the creation, heaven and hell, and the Prophet Muhammad. According to al-Maqrīzī, the reading took place at the Omayyad Mosque and lasted three days and nights.

†*mihrab*: An arched niche used for prayer, which pointed in the direction of Mecca.

‡More details of this story are given by al-Maqrīzī, according to whom the holy man came “from the mountains of Asia Minor” and first communicated his vision to the great *qadi*, or judge, of Damascus. His instructions were to “read 3,360 times the flood of Noah and ask God to end this plague that afflicts you.” Al-Maqrīzī reports that the Damascenes carried out the holy man’s instructions “in a perfect spirit of humility and with an intense repentance of their past sins”; they also allegedly sacrificed a “great number” of sheep and cattle, whose meat was distributed to the poor. After this went on for a week, al-Maqrīzī claims, the plague began to “diminish daily” before disappearing from Damascus entirely. This conflicts with Kathīr’s testimony.

§One of the five pillars of Islam, fasting during the sacred month of Ramadan is prescribed by the Koran and usually takes place in November.

|| This seems to be a quotation from Koran 22:27: “And proclaim the

Pilgrimage among men: They will come to thee on foot and [mounted] on every kind of camel, lean on account of journeys through deep and distant mountain highways.” The twenty-second *sura*, or chapter, is on pilgrimage, so this is Kathīr’s way of saying that the Damascenes embarked on a plague procession.

*Slavery was common in the Muslim world.

**fatwa*: A ruling or an opinion based on Islamic law handed down by a qualified legal scholar.