

The Plague: MEDIEVAL SCOURGE

In 1346, the rumor was strong in every port of Europe; a plague of unprecedented ferocity was sweeping through the east. But, the wealthy ship owners of Italy were not about to let rumor interfere with business.

It was in one of the Italian trading ports in Russia that a brawl broke out between Christian merchants and local Muslims. This brawl soon escalated into a war. The local Muslim lord laid siege to the city, but during the siege, the plague broke out among his troops. Unable to continue fighting, the Muslim lord catapulted the dead bodies from the plague into the city. The plague erupted in the city.

The Italians left, after loading their trade goods into their ships. In their cargo lurked the beginnings of the greatest epidemic to strike Europe.

The Plague in Europe

Although Sicily took the immediate brunt of the disease's ravages, within a year, it had spread to Florence in northern Italy. People were not prepared for this calamity. Giovanni Boccaccio in the *Decameron* observed, "Nor for all their number were the deaths honored by either tears or lights or crowds of mourners, rather it came to this that a dead man was then of no more account than a dead goat would be today."

In Florence, everyone grew so frightened of the bodies stacked up in the streets that some men took jobs to fetch and carry out the dead to mass graves. They passed through the streets daily calling for the residents to bring out their dead. They became an abandoned and brutal group, often forcing their way into houses and threatening to carry off live people if they were not paid off.



Nursery rhyme "Ring Around the Rosy" derives from plague time, when flowers were used to mask stench.

The Plague Spreads

By spring of 1348, the plague was poised to strike Paris, from there it moved swiftly north. A year later, it arrived at the eastern ports of England from the Netherlands traders. By 1350, it had spread north into the Scandinavian countries. No place was spared and social order was on the verge of collapse.

How could an infection travel that fast? The answer is it had a lot of help from the black rat (*Rattus rattus*). It carries tiny fleas, about the size of the letter o. As this flea bites a sick rat, it sucks in the plague bacteria. When the flea bites another animal or human, it injects the bacteria into the new victim.

Effects of the Disease

When a human is bit, soon they will be complaining of headaches and shaking chills. Soon there will be a white coating on the tongue, rapid pulse, slurred speech, confusion, and fatigue. A round blackish pustule, called a rose, forms at the point of the bite. By the third day, the lymph nodes begin to swell. The swelling will be tender, and perhaps, as large as an egg. The heart begins to flutter rapidly as it tries to pump blood through swollen tissues. Hemorrhaging occurs, causing purplish blotches on the skin. The victim's nervous system begins to collapse, causing horrible pain and bizarre movements, which were called "the dance of death". By the fifth day, terror overtakes the sufferer, and as the skin turns ashen, the victim dies.

Nobody would know until several centuries later, but there were three different forms of the plague. The one described was bubonic plague. The second was pneumonic plague, which occurred when the plague was transmitted in the air and people breathed the bacteria. The third form of the plague was septicemic, and is not entirely understood today. The plague bacillus would enter the bloodstream and death occurred within a day.

The smell of the plague victims was so bad that people were almost unable to go near them or anything they had touched.

Theories of Cause

At one time or another, people believed that the plague was caused by lepers, dogs, cats, gravediggers, gypsies, any stranger from a foreign land, drunks, and Jews. Other theories were pleasant odors caused the disease, foul odors caused the disease, raining of frogs and toads, lust for old women, earthquakes releasing bad odors, conjunction of the planets Saturn, Mars, and Jupiter causing a bad atmosphere, warm baths, exercise and deep breathing, and the wrath of God on human sins, and lying on the left side at night!

Cures

Doctors were helpless. They had no idea what caused the disease and they usually died when they treated their patients. Some adopted a full length leather coat, with a face covering that had a long beak in which to put flowers to combat the plague odors. Goggles, a hat and gloves completed the outfit.

Strangely, this strange outfit that some of the doctors wore kept them alive. How did it help?

Questions

Who brought the plague to Europe?

How were the dead disposed of?

How long did the plague take to spread through Europe?

What animal spreads the disease?

What does this animal carry that infects other animals?



Other “cures” included the placement of crosses on front doors, bathing in urine daily, sitting in latrines to let the foul odor combat the plague, carrying garlands of flowers around the neck to ward off plague odors, people called penitents called on god to stop the punishment by whipping and beating themselves to atone for human sins, fleeing the country, eating rhubarb, eating figs, washing bodies with vinegar, and one medical school said to eat lettuce while another said to avoid it!

By the end of 1350, the plague subsided. The reason is not known, even today. There were a few other outbreaks, but nothing on the scale of 1347-50. One-third of Europe’s population died. There was a great shortage of workers so wages for the workers rose greatly. The Catholic Church began to be questioned. New, young doctors replaced the old dead doctors. The price of food fell because there were not as many people to buy it.

What are the effects of the plague?

What are the other types of the plague?

1.

2.

What do you think was done to the animals and people that were thought to cause the plague?

*How would a person combat harmful odors?
Pleasant odors –*

Foul odors –

How could the wrath of God be stopped?

Which of the “cures” worked? Why?

What was the effect of the plague on feudalism? Why?

How did the plague affect the Church? Why?

The legacy of the plague is still with us today with us today in the children’s game Ring Around the Rosy.

In Ring Around the Rosy, what does each line have to do with the plague?

*Ring around the Rosy,
a pocket full of posies,
ashes, ashes,
we all fall down.*
