The Effects of The Black Death in England

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Magna Mortalitas

By

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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The Dance of Death (1493) by Michael Wolgemut, from the Nuremberg Chronicle of Hartmann Schedel. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This short volume is dedicated respectfully to the NHS workers who cared so skilfully, diligently, and compassionately for the people of England during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you to my wife Claire and our twins Chris and Ben, who supported me and put up with my obsessiveness and grumpiness during 2023. Thanks to my creative collaborator and co-conspirator, my eldest son Alex, for his encouragement and help. Thanks also to the librarians of the British Library, National Archives and Museum of Freemasonry for their patience and helpfulness.

Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Death
That in this contree al the people sleeth

—Geoffrey Chaucer

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: AGAINST THIS PESTILENCE

Fig. 1.1 The plague of Florence in 1348, as described in Boccaccio's Decameron. Etching by L. Sabatelli. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

> "Either because of the influence of heavenly bodies or because of God's just wrath as a punishment to mortals for our wicked deeds, the pestilence, originating some years earlier in the East, killed an infinite number of people as it spread relentlessly from one place to another until finally it had stretched its miserable length all over the West. And against this pestilence no human wisdom or foresight was of any avail; quantities of filth were removed from the city by officials charged with the task; the entry of any sick person into the city was prohibited; and many directives were issued concerning the maintenance of good health. Nor were the humble supplications rendered not once, but many times, by the pious to God, through public processions or by other means, in any way efficacious." (Boccaccio, trans. 1982, 87)

Thus spoke Giovanni Boccaccio in the introduction to his *The Decameron*, one of the great literary masterpieces of the Middle Ages, translated into English by Musa and Bondanella, and referencing one of the most catastrophic events of the medieval period. By 1348 AD, the pestilence he referred to had reached and was devastating Boccaccio's native city of Florence in Italy, Boccaccio's stepmother being one of its victims. His father was a senior bureaucrat with an influential role in both finance and trade. He had been recently appointed as the Minister of Supply, but he too died, presumably of the bubonic plague, a year later. At about the same time Boccaccio commenced work on his magnum opus, *The Decameron*. This piece of fiction centres around ten young, affluent, and healthy people who have, like so many others, fled from Florence because of the plague and barricaded themselves safely in a rural villa where they hoped to ride out the epidemic that was ravaging their homeland. To amuse themselves and to pass the time during their isolation, they agree to make up and tell each other stories. These stories are the heart of *The Decameron*. Geoffrey Chaucer was to use a similar device, using a group of people to tell each other stories during their pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas Becket, described in the *Canterbury Tales.*

But let us start at the beginning. It is commonly thought that this "pestilence" or specific outbreak of the bubonic plague originated in 1346 with a particularly contagious strain of the disease wreaking havoc in eastern Asia, possibly first arising in the Gobi Desert. The illness caused symptoms that were similar to the previous virulent bubonic and pneumonic plague outbreaks during the fourteenth century. It was widely believed in the regions affected that both diseases spread the bacilli through the breath of those who had become infected. This deadly new ailment made its way rapidly towards the west during the ensuing twelve months, and by October in 1347 it had infected numerous tribes of Turkish soldiers on the Crimean Peninsula who were laying siege to merchants from Genoa in the heavily defended trading port at Caffa. The Turks had grown frustrated by the surprising strength of the Genoese defence and instead of loading their trebuchets with large rocks to pound the walls of the fortified port, they put their catapults to an even more deadly use. Stacking the corpses of plague victims into the machines, they then hurled them into the port courtyards

instead, causing panic and disorder amongst the besieged. The horrified merchants loaded up their ships quickly and fled south via the Black Sea heading back to their homes in Italy. The Turks had achieved a macabre victory of sorts which was to prove tragically hollow, as their numbers had dwindled and were swiftly diminishing even further.

Eventually, one of the Genoese ships moored at Messina in Sicily. The ship's crew, however, were in a sorry state. Few of them were still alive and many of those were infected by the plague, a disease so contagious that the majority of the sailors carrying the disease were dead within days, if not hours. The port of Messina immediately fell into a blind panic as news of the contagion had already reached it. The port officials closed it instantly and turned the ship away. The craft departed and desperately attempted to seek refuge in other Mediterranean ports and consequently, the deadly disease spread quickly throughout the coastal area.

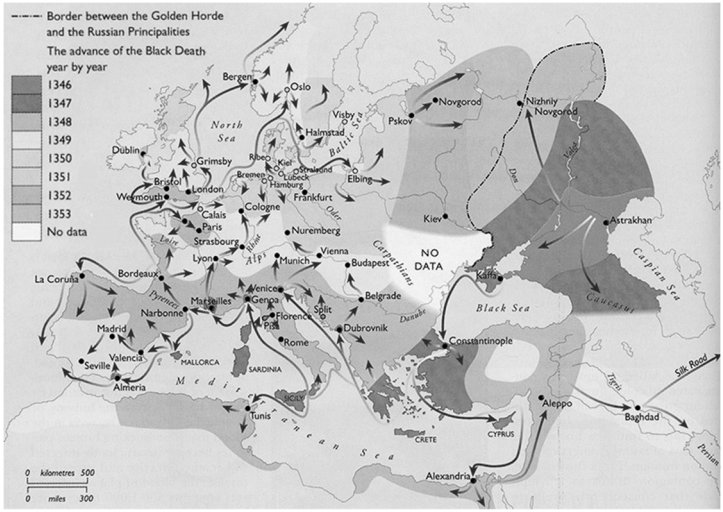

Fig. 1.2 Atlas zur Weltgeschichte (Atlas of World History)

Many scholars agree that the bubonic plague pathogen had originated in East Asia and then spread westwards from there (Wiechmann et al, 2012). The unusual epidemic strength of the plague might have evolved in the Middle East, where the black rat and the oriental rat flea, Xenopsylla

cheopis, may well have thrived, generating the necessary conditions for the mutation and transmission of the disease amongst the human populations. To qualify as being an epidemic infection spreading throughout human communities, the disease would need to have been established firmly amongst rat colonies within a human environment, with fleas that would also feed off and therefore transmit the disease to humans. Evidently, conditions in the Middle East were conducive to permitting such a change within the patterns of the spread of the disease.

It was around this time that the plague was given several different names. In England it was most commonly called *Magna Mortalitas*, *Huge Mortalyte* or *The Great Death.* The term *The Black Death* was not used by historians until several hundred years later. In France it was referred to as *Tres Grand Mortalite.* Muslim communities had a vivid and more haunting range of expressions for the pandemic including *The Plague of the Kindred* and *The Year of Annihilation*. Theories about its cause ran wild across the region, most of them wildly inaccurate, if not completely false. It was popularly thought to be a divine punishment, whilst others of an astrological persuasion pointed to unusual planetary alignments as being its cause. Some believed that it was a diabolical curse. One idea on which many agreed was that the plague was signalling the beginning of the Apocalypse, and that the end of the world was nigh. In an early example of antisemitism, people whispered that the disease had been introduced by the Jews to kill every Christian in the world. The hatred and bigotry spread, and in several countries many Jews were murdered by hysterical crowds intent on finding a scapegoat. By 1349, the living expected only death. It seemed as though the Last Judgement had come and the rapidly shrinking population found themselves in a world with little hope, and many felt that they had been abandoned by God. Across the world, in excess of twenty million people died, and those who survived awaited the End of Days or the appearance of the Antichrist.

Of course, the real reason for the plague was microbiological. The pestilence was a bacteria-based disease, although some modern scholars argue that it was viral. However, most agree that the micro-organism responsible was the Yersinia pestis. Many researchers believe that this deadly micro-organism was carried through the blood of black rats and the

fleas that fed off them. Originally there was no spread of the disease between fleas and humans, but as the rats died, the fleas easily transferred to human hosts. The disease had quickly found a way to spread even more effectively.

Although this is the most widely accepted explanation for the origins of the bubonic plague, the eminent writer, S.K. Cohn states that The Black Death had its origins in "any disease other than the rat-based bubonic plague" (Cohn, 2002, 9). He posits that there are no reports of dying rats in contemporary reports of the pandemic and the decades that follow. He also argues that a unique characteristic of Yersinia pestis is that humans cannot develop enduring resistance if they survive the infection. Cohn points out that the unnamed disease resulted in a lower mortality in subsequent waves. After the third wave, it mainly affected infants born after the previous wave, probably because surviving adults had developed a higher level of immunity. In contrast, the bubonic plague is usually steadily virulent with each outbreak, indiscriminately affecting all age groups. However, Shipman (2014) counters with the fact that the disease attacked in three forms, which made its classification difficult until more recently. The three forms have now been definitively traced back to the bacterium Yersinia pestis by researchers who separated genetic material from the skeletal remains and dental pulp of victims buried in plague cemeteries and then matched them to the genotype of modern samples of the bacterium. Although the bubonic plague was carried initially by black rats and the infected fleas they bore, it also eventually spread between humans in a respiratory form, as well as between humans who came into direct physical contact with carriers of the disease. Haensch et al (2010) confirm this in their research. They also identified DNA and protein signatures specific for Yersinia pestis in human remains from mass graves across Europe that were linked archaeologically with The Black Death and its successive reappearances. They provide evidence that Yersinia pestis was the cause of The Black Death and subsequent epidemics during the following four hundred years. Their discoveries indicate that the bubonic plague visited Europe several times in the succeeding decades and centuries, each following a separate path. These groups of organisms share a common ancestor, and all its descendants are ancestral to the modern instances of the Yersinia pestis variances known as

Orientalis and Medievalis. These compelling research findings results help to explain the aetiology of The Black Death and provide a prototype for a comprehensive modelling of the routes of infection followed by the disease.

These scientific theories were, of course unknown to the people of the mid-fourteenth century. They were caught in the midst of a terrible and terrifying calamity and felt helpless in the path of its relentless spread. In a letter from October 1347, Michele di Piazze describes how on the Italian boats:

> "The sailors brought in their bones a disease so violent that whoever spoke a word to them was infected and could in no way save himself from death... Those to whom the disease was transmitted by infection of the breath were stricken with pains all over the body and felt a terrible lassitude. There then appeared, on a thigh or an arm, a pustule like a lentil. From this the infection penetrated the body and violent bloody vomiting began. It lasted for a period of three days and there was no way of preventing its ending in death." (Piazzem, 1349, 11)

As can be seen from contemporary accounts, the bubonic plague presented similar symptoms in those who contracted the disease. Apple-sized swellings, known as buboes appeared at the flea bite sites. This is the source from which the bubonic plague derives its name. They usually manifested in the victim's groin, armpits, or side of the neck and were attached to lymph nodes. The buboes were extremely painful and were at first sight red in appearance, later turning a deep purple or black. As the disease worsened, these buboes grew larger and more painful, often bursting. This is reported as being unbearably painful, often driving victims to a state of madness. However, the doctors administering to the afflicted insisted that the bursting was a positive indicator, probably because it showed that the victim was still able to fight off the infection. Of course, they were usually not, and by the time the buboes reached the stage of bursting approximately half of the sufferers were in their final death throes. The black buboes eventually gave the disease the name of *The Black Death* although as already noted, that name was not actually used until much later. During medieval times in England the phrase *The Great Death* was by far the more common and apposite term used, as the victims died quickly and on a large scale, usually within a week of infection.

The bubonic plague had two equally sinister and deadly cousins. The pneumonic plague was contracted by an infection being inhaled, causing vomiting of blood. The disease was airborne, those infected by the pneumonic plague spreading the infection by coughing or sneezing. The method of transmission was similar to that of COVID-19, or indeed the common cold. The septicaemic plague was contracted by the bacteria entering the body through the person's circulatory system. Being bloodborne it quickly caused death, often within a day.

All three plagues spread and killed with alarming rapidity. It is no wonder that the superstitious folk of the medieval world attributed these diseases to supernatural forces. The speed of the spread of the plagues caused the author Boccaccio to sorrowfully state that those who died of the plague "ate lunch with their friends, and dinner with their ancestors in paradise." (Boccaccio, trans. 1982, 91)

Relentlessly spreading throughout Europe, Magna Mortalitas eventually reached the shores of England. It had already been a dismal year for the population. It had rained relentlessly during the summer of 1348 and the farmlands were sodden. The harvests were ruined as they lay rotting in the fields and there were few provisions left from the previous year. With the crops so badly affected, landowners and peasants alike had braced themselves for the food shortages that were sure to come. On top of this, a terrible disease was creeping towards England’s shores.

Although there is not complete agreement on the exact time and location of the arrival of the Great Death in England, most commentators think it likely that it first arrived at the town of Melcombe (Weymouth) in Dorset. Some contemporary reports mention Bristol as an alternative point, although it is certain that it arrived first on the south coast. It is also agreed that the arrival of the disease was either in the early or middle months of summer. It is furthermore well-documented that by August the Channel Islands were also firmly in the grip of the infection. From this point, the disease’s spread throughout England was rapid and deadly.

Unsurprisingly, the cities initially suffered the most. With relatively large populations crammed together with inadequate sanitation and hygiene, the

spread was catastrophic. By the middle of the autumn, the plague had reached London. It is estimated that over forty percent of the city's population of seventy thousand inhabitants died as a direct result of the plague. During the ensuing couple of years, between thirty and forty percent of the population of the entire country had succumbed to its deadly effects. It is estimated that the mid-fourteenth century population of England was six million people. It is therefore a grim fact that deaths during this time approached two million.

To the medieval mind, spiritual matters were of equal or even greater significance than matters pertaining to physical health. For those who knew they were dying, there was no bigger fear than passing on without having first confessed their sins or having received the final sacrament. In an uncharacteristic act of clemency Pope Clement VI agreed to the full remission of sins for all of those who had died because of the plague. There simply were not enough priests to carry out the last rites. People dying of the plague were permitted to confess their sins to a layperson, even if that person was female. For the Church at that time, this was a radical relaxation of its rules. Unsurprisingly, those environments where people lived in close proximity to each other such as convents or monasteries experienced even higher death rates. Priests who were fully occupied with hearing the confessions and granting absolution to those who were infected themselves were highly prone to falling victim to the disease. In less than a year, sixty percent of their population in England had been wiped out.

Panic was also rife in the rural communities. Farm workers abandoned the fields. Livestock was untended, and the meagre crops that remained were left to spoil. Contemporary commentator and monk Henry of Knighton exclaimed that "many villages and hamlets have now become quite desolate. No one is left in the houses, for the people are dead that once inhabited them." (Knighton, 1995, 5)

In Britain, the devastation that was wreaked by the plague was not confined to England. In the north the Scots were also afflicted, although initially the Border Scots interpreted the encroaching disease in England as a sign of the retribution of God on their sinful enemies. They gathered their forces together and prepared to strike their neighbours. A significant army was

mobilized at Stirling ready to invade England in its moment of weakness. However, as the Scots prepared for their incursion, the plague hit them as well, causing havoc. In the face of the remaining English troops, the Scots retreated north, spreading the plague further into the highlands.

The population of both countries, and indeed the whole of the infected world, was in despair. How could they have offended God so grievously to deserve such a cruel punishment? In an attempt to appease the vengeance of the Almighty, public acts of penitence were made with increasingly devastating consequences. Pious processions, in Europe sometimes involving self-flagellation, were commonly seen, with these mass gatherings being initially officially sanctioned by the Pope. Sadly, the collective acts of repentance only served to further intensify the spread of the plague.

Two years later, at the latter end of 1350, cases of the plague had lessened significantly. This subsidence however was only at the pandemic scale. Isolated outbreaks still occurred in England for the next four hundred years. Further significant plague epidemics followed in 1361, 1369, 1379 and 1389, and continued to manifest until well into the 15th century. The Great Fire of London in 1666 signalled the beginning of the end of major outbreaks and by the close of that century, plague epidemics in England were starting to become relics of the past. However, at the end of the first plague outbreak in 1350 further significant effects from the plague were still having an impact on society. The workforce had been decimated, with insufficient labourers to help the farms recover. There were simply not enough people left to plant, tend and harvest the crops. In accordance with mid to late medieval economic practice, wages and consequently prices rose significantly. A law entitled *The Ordinances of Labourers* was introduced in 1349 in an attempt to suppress wages to a pre-pandemic wage level (see Appendix B). However, the growing free market of the medieval economy meant that with the chronic shortage of workers, wages continued to grow. Desperate landowners attempted to entice labourers with added bonuses in the form of increased subsistence benefits. This meant that for the first time, the quality of life and the standard of living improved for farm workers.

In conjunction with this radical change in the way in which the labour market worked, the economy itself started to change significantly as social

circumstances continued to develop. Farming land was often converted to pasture, which required less maintenance. As a consequence, the farming of meat increased, resulting in a change in the eating habits of the poorer classes along with positive subsequent changes to nutrition and a prolonged life expectancy. Along with this, manufacturing based on wool and cotton also increased. However, as the population at the time had been reduced, landowners could not command the same land rental and in many cases, labourers were able to lease their land.

For the first time peasants had greater choice in how they lived their lives and a greater range of potential employment options. Wages also continued to grow. Rather than being isolated in one geographical area, workers became mobile and were able to seek employment over a greater area. Consequently, those communities that were not able to economically compete suffered, and some market towns vanished despite the increased prosperity that the late fourteenth century brought.

In the midst of this social and economic change, the churches suffered significantly. A high proportion of the priests of England had died during the plague, and the spiritual and social gap left was having a detrimental effect on the Church’s power and influence. It attempted to fill this deficit with many illiterate and hastily recruited novices. This accelerated the weakening of the Church’s control and influence and eventually was one factor that led to the eventual religious revolution that became the English Reformation. Many of those who had survived the plague were also cynical about the Church's role and its inability to reconcile the worship of God under the Roman Church with the terrible sufferings they had to endure.

Fairly predictably, the economic benefits of post-pandemic England did not persist. The systemic feudal structure of English society had been temporarily weakened but had not been overthrown, and by the middle of the following century the quality of life for most of the labouring classes had again declined. This is not to diminish the positive economic impact in the years immediately following the Great Death. Throughout the entire hierarchical structure, there had been enormous social upheaval. English society would never be the same again.

Magna Mortalitas: The Great Death in England gives a brief overview of the effects of The Black Death on the politics, culture, religious and social structures, and the economies of England using both original extant commentaries and more recent scholarship. Commentary is used from contemporary monks such as Henry Knighton, Canon of St Mary's, Leicester, Geoffrey le Baker, clerk of Osney Abbey, Oxford and Robert de Avesbury, monk of Malmesbury, amongst others. This book is intended as a compact piece documenting some aspects of the extent of the impact of the 1348 plague on the way in which the country would develop into the late Middle Ages and beyond.

CHAPTER 2

ENGLAND:
THE END OF THE WORLD

The pestilence arrived in England with astonishing speed and magnitude, having first spread through Cyprus, Sicily, the Holy Land, France, the Italian states, and elsewhere. Andrew Ullford, a veteran soldier of Crecy, was with an English royal party that had sailed from Portsmouth and had landed at Bordeaux. The central member of the party was King Edward III's daughter Joan who had been betrothed to King Alfonso XI for strategic alliance purposes. The plague had not yet reached England at that time, and when the party landed at Bordeaux the mayor of the town warned them about the plague and begged them to stay away. However, the betrothal festivities included a lavish and elaborate tournament. The English were not to be deterred and paid no attention to this warning, attending the tournament with assumed impunity although without, as it turned out, immunity. Ullford, who was staying at the Chateau de l'Ombrier, contracted the illness however, and succumbed to it on 20th August 1347. It is recorded that he is the first known instance of an English person becoming infected with the illness. His demise was singularly horrendous and documented in vivid detail. In common with the final hours of most victims he gave off a sickening smell, evident in his saliva, breath, sweat and excrement. At the end he eventually became delirious, shrieking terribly before collapsing and dying. Inevitably, other members of the party went the same way, with Princess Joan also contracting the plague. She died on the 2nd of September. The king was distraught by the news of her death and when the plague eventually reached English shores, he reacted immediately and firmly in an attempt to control the outbreak of the disease in England. He postponed the parliament of the ensuing year until Easter. Government bureaucrats abandoned their city offices and escaped to their rural seats. Many local sheriffs refused to perform their duties and sat tight. England was effectively in lockdown and the population waited for the king to act further (see

Appendix A). In a letter to Alfonso XI of Castile, Edward III expressed his sorrow at his daughter's passing and wrote of "…destructive Death who seizes young and old alike, sparing no-one, and reducing rich and poor to the same level" (Senn, 2003, 31).

The king's response was pragmatic as well as emotional. He realised that poor standards of public health and hygiene had exacerbated the spread of the pandemic. He resisted pressure for the creation of a plague pit for the burying of plague victims in East Smithfield, thinking this was too close to the Tower of London and neighbouring inhabited regions. He commanded that pits were dug further away, but as they were quickly filled, the largest one eventually was constructed in Smithfield. In 1349 Edward III wrote to the Mayor of London instructing him to have the thoroughfares completely cleaned, as they were "foul with human faeces, and the air of the city poisioned (sic) to the great danger of men passing, especially in this time of infectious disease" (Senn, 2003, 41). Uncertainty was everywhere. The death of Princess Joan had created a diplomatic crisis in the conferring of a dowry that included sovereignty over agreed areas. The dynastic union with Castile was prevented and never achieved, despite later invasions of Spain by both the Black Prince and John of Gaunt. The new Archbishop of Canterbury had just been enthroned when he succumbed to the disease and the mortality rate in Oxford caused classes to be paused for a considerable period. There was an unexpected but significant impact on human capital as well as on manual labour.

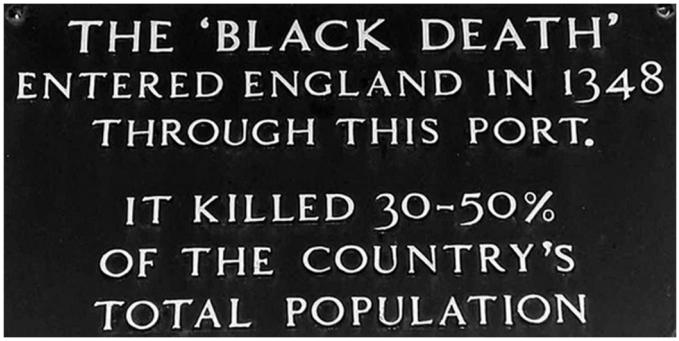

Fig. 2.1 Plaque in Weymouth, England, noting the entrance of plague into the country.

Despite fervent hopes to the contrary, it had only been a matter of time before the sickness reached England's southern shores. It had eventually arrived by ship either at Melcombe Regis (Weymouth) or at Southampton. The precise date when it reached Dorsetshire is uncertain. The earliest day suggested is made by the monk of Malmesbury in his *Eulogium Historiarum*, who nominates June as its arrival time. The latest date is documented by Knighton, the sub-contemporary canon of Leicester, who vaguely mentions its arrival in the autumn of 1348. Given these possibilities, and the fact that its arrival in England apparently was not known by the bishop of Bath and Wells in the middle of August, it appears probable that The Black Death had spread further into the West of England by the middle and certainly before the end of August. Some plausible accounts indicate that there were two ships that docked at Melcombe Regis at the beginning of June 1348. One moored there briefly before sailing on to Bristol, but during its stay the crews of both ships disembarked. It was discovered that several sailors from Gascony had become ill during the Channel crossing and had to be helped ashore. They were covered in dark blotches and had developed ulcers in the groin and in the armpits. No-one was quite sure what to make of this, as the sailors had appeared perfectly healthy several weeks before. But they all died within days of each other, and other crew members began to cough up blood. They too died quickly and the disease spread rapidly until most of the crew had eventually succumbed. The local inhabitants kept their distance initially, but inevitably the disease spread also to them and on Monday, 23rd June in 1348, at Midsummer Eve, the first English people on English soil are reported as dying from the illness. The Black Death in England had begun.

Having established itself in Dorset, it then spread quickly to the counties of Wiltshire, Hampshire and Surrey. Bishop Edington of Winchester wrote to his diocese warning about the spread of the disease, but this was to no avail. The proportion of clergy dying in Winchester reached fifty percent, at the time making this the highest number for any diocese in England. The bishop had instructed his reeve to collect rent, sell livestock at the town market and to make every attempt to quickly maximise income for the diocese. The account sheet shows how the local economic conditions deteriorated and how costs increased quickly, and eventually plague-related deaths caused

tenant land to be abandoned because of the plague (defectus per pestilentium). Initially, news spread faster than the disease itself. Archbishop Zouche of York heard that a terrible pestilence was approaching through the local traders and prayed to God for deliverance from the plague, imploring that:

> "…the kind the merciful Almighty God, should turn his anger and remove the pestilence and drive away the infection from the people whom he redeemed with his precious blood" (Gummer, 2009, 35)

His prayers were in vain, however. Some of the statistics from nineteenth century texts on The Black Death give a graphic if somewhat hyperbolic description of the devastation wrought by the disease. Hecker describes:

> "Thus did the plague spread over England with unexampled rapidity, after it had first broken out in the county of Dorset, whence it advanced through the counties of Devon and Somerset, to Bristol, and thence reached Gloucester, Oxford and London. Probably few places escaped, perhaps not any; for the annuals of contemporaries report that throughout the land only a tenth part of the inhabitants remained alive." (Hecker, 1888, 21)

In turn, it is reported that The Black Death spread from England to Scandinavia:

> "From England the contagion was carried by a ship to Bergen, the capital of Norway, where the plague then broke out in its most frightful form, with vomiting of blood; and throughout the whole country, spared not more than a third of the inhabitants. The sailors found no refuge in their ships; and vessels were often seen driving about on the ocean and drifting on shore, whose crews had perished to the last man" (Caius and Hecker, 1844, 19).

With the source of The Black Death probably being the East, its spread was made possible by the trade routes and the exploration of the wider world by the expansion of commerce across international frontiers.

This growth of transnational trade had greatly expanded the horizons of individual countries in Europe and the Middle East. By the mid fourteenth century traders and merchants in medieval Europe had become increasingly mobile and sophisticated. However, the bubonic plague was a most unwelcome import from abroad. In its victims it manifested flu-like

symptoms, which included a fever. Vomiting followed, and buboes grew in the neck, armpits and groin. Internal hemorrhaging was not far behind. It soon became common knowledge that this disease ended inevitably, unavoidably, and tragically in death. There were no known cures at the time. Initially physicians vaguely suggested that the illness was caused by a poisonous substance generated by the heart and lungs but in time they stayed well away from the sufferers. Social isolation was the final condition of the dying. Physicians and priests alike would not visit the victims. No-one was expected to live, and it seemed to the faithful that whole communities had been abandoned by God. From across the European continent in the town of Sienna, the tax collector and chronicler Agnolo di Tura lamented that he had "buried my five children with my own hands. And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world" (Kelly, 2005, 79).

When considering the extent of the devastation wreaked by The Black Death it is worth examining the distribution of towns across England at the time. The *Liber Loci Benedicti* was completed in 1346 and is a collection of documents compiled by Whalley, a Cistercian monk. He notes that there were in England at the time fifty thousand churches and just over the same number of townships. Higden's *Polychronicon* puts the number at approximately the same. The Supplement to the *Avesbury Chronicle* gives a similar number. There were plenty of communities for the disease to take hold and spread. Towns and cities provided a perfect breeding ground for the bacterium.

CHAPTER 3

CITIES AND TOWNS: AWAITING DEATH AMONG THE DEAD

As with York and other English cities, the population of London heard about the encroaching plague long before it reached them. Rumours as well as outbreaks of the disease proliferated, spread by visiting merchants and sailors, and although it was known that the king's daughter had died from the disease during the outbreak in Bordeaux, English people initially carried on as normal with their lives. However, once word had reached the capital that the plague had landed on English soil, complacency started to shift. On 28th September, the prior of Christchurch in Canterbury wrote to the clergy demanding prayers, under instructions from the king. However, these prayers certainly were offered up too late for any positive divine intervention. Geoffrey le Baker from Oxfordshire wrote that the first cases of the plague were being seen in London at Michaelmas, which fell on the following day, 29th September. The London guilds quickly became aware of this, Michaelmas representing culturally and economically important city processions, and celebrations for the feast day. These festivities inevitably took the form of social interaction, business transactions, meals, and carousing, often involving merchants and traders at the quaysides and in the inns and taverns. The celebratory events took London from being in a plague-free state to one of high mortality in less than a month. The Black Death ripped through the populace at an alarming rate. Panic ensued as crowds fought their way across London Bridge to escape the pestilence, inadvertently taking it with them and spreading it further.

By the end of the period of Magna Mortalitas, between twenty-five and fifty percent of London's population had died. This estimate is neither better nor worse than other European cities. In a chilling sense it was the norm across the whole of Europe.

Fig. 3.1 Miniature by Pierart dou Tielt illustrating the Tractatus quartus by Gilles li Muisit (Tournai, c. 1353). The people of Tournai bury victims of The Black Death. ms. 13076 - 13077 fol. 24v. (Creative Commons licence)

The detail, however, reveals the true overwhelming scale of the pandemic (Naphy and Spicer, 2000). In 1348, between February and April, thirty-four plague victims were buried on average every day of the week in London. Between June and December of the same year, that number had risen to two hundred and ninety deaths per day. Crowded living conditions, combined with a highly contagious disease, poor sanitation, and a lack of medical knowledge left tens of thousands of people dead. Lambert, in his history and survey of London describes a proclamation of the time, which graphically portrays the unhygienic conditions of the age, and he complains about how:

> "Abominable and most filthy stinks…sickness and many other evils have happened to such as have abode in the city… and great dangers to fall out for the time to come" (Triggs, 1985, 19).

Ten years later, thirty percent of the land within the City of London's walls was still uninhabited. The scene would have seemed truly apocalyptic to those who had survived so far. The City of London, however did not break down completely under this unimaginable strain. The Court of Husting resumed its duties the year after the outbreak. The Mayor of London, Sir John Lovekyn, a fishmonger, and his alderman worked hard to ensure that as far as practicable, the business of the City was maintained in spite of the

pestilence. The City of London hung on grimly. Property deeds, hearings, and appointments continued, albeit in a reduced form, to ensure that the commercial wheels of the City continued to turn to some extent. But in the midst of this, sickness, death, filth, and panic ran rife. The painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymous Bosch has a third panel apparently depicting hell. This painting harks back to The Black Death of 1348 as well as to the Hundred Years' War between England and France. Unlike the military war, however, the war with the pestilence was overwhelmingly one-sided. In this case the enemy was invisible, relentless, and deadly. Cities, towns, and villages were cruelly ravaged and sometimes did not fully recover for many decades. Wallingford, once known for its fourteen churches was so depopulated that it almost vanished (Hedges, 1881).

The Irish Francisan friar, John Clyn exclaimed in anguish;

> "I, seeing these many evils, and the whole world lying, as it were in the grasp of the wicked one- myself awaiting death among the dead" (Clyn, 2007, 77)

These sentiments would have been the same in England. However, as with any catastrophe there were those who took advantage of the suffering and ill-fortune of others. Thieves and other criminals flocked to the cities, especially to London as the social order, if not crumbling, began to change dramatically (Knighton, 1995). Death, panic, disorder, and an overwhelming sense of chaos started to permeate the city. With cemeteries rapidly filling, mass pits were used to dispose of the corpses, denying the dead a Christian burial. The Pardon Plague Pit in the City of London was commanded by Edward III to be dug. One of the largest of its time, it ran between St John's Street and Goswell Road to the north of Old Street. It was also used for felons and the poor and was still in use centuries later.

Eventually, as there was no consecrated ground left available for proper Christian burials, thirteen acres were obtained at Smithfield for specific use as burial land. However, the area in East Smithfield was created in anticipation of plague deaths, not in response to actual demands at the time. Located to the north-east of the Tower of London, it was established by a clerk to Edward the Black Prince named John Corey. This had the complete support of the City of London in the early part of 1349. Based on the density

of grave cuts, it is estimated that nearly two and a half thousand bodies were buried in the cemetery (Pfizenmaier, 2016). In 2010, DeWitte investigated whether or not the epidemic had impacted on all ages groups similarly or if there was some discrimination of the age groups affected. Analyses were undertaken using a sample of over three hundred different human remains exhumed from the Smithfield cemetery. The fact that the cemetery only contains the remains of those people who died in the 1348-49 outbreak makes the findings highly reliable. The age patterns from Smithfield were compared to a sample of over two hundred individuals who perished from non-plague causes. Their ages were calculated using transition analysis, and age-specific mortality was calculated using a hazards model. The results indicated that the risk of dying during the pandemic increased with the individuals' ages, and thus confirmed that increased age was correlated with the higher risk of dying during The Black Death (DeWitte, 2010).

Hemer et al compared the excavation of the burial pit at Thornton Abbey, Linconshire with the abbey's medieval hospital and also used data from the mass plague graves at Smithfield in London. They discovered significant differences in the post-mortem manner in which the plague dead in rural areas were treated from the way in which the dead in urban areas were often treated (Hemer et al, 2021). The Crossrail underground railway network extension uncovered twenty-five largely intact skeletons buried in Central London in 2013 (Dick et al, 2015). Shallow geophysical surveys of Charterhouse Square showed many hundreds more. These burials were unexpectedly separated and were not in mass burial pits. Burials were also at different times and in varying directions. However, radiocarbon dating, and analysis of tooth DNA confirmed that these were Black Death victims. Green (2015) points out that The Black Death genome from London is an exceptionally fortunate although macabre discovery. It is a unique fossil in which is captured that strain of the Yersinia pestis bacterium as it was seven hundred years ago, before it terminated in the humans it killed in fourteenth century London.

The urban landscape of England at the time is reasonably well documented (Britnell, 1994). Approximately fifteen towns, including London, were probably each populated by at least ten thousand inhabitants at the start of the fourteenth century, and approximately five per cent of the population in