WHAT DID FLEEING TO THE COUNTRYSIDE SAY ABOUT PEOPLE'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE BLACK PLAGUE?

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Introduction

Characterized as the deadliest pandemic in human history, The Black Death is held accountable for the death of over 75 million people across the globe. Although the beginning of the plague cannot be defined by an exact year, the Black death occurred during the second pandemic. Intricate trading networks observed as the nations they connected became victims of the deadliness of the plague. Peeking in Europe, the Black Death was easily spread in overcrowded cities flooded with those desperate for work. Terrible living conditions meant many Europeans lived in communion with infectious rats and fleas that carried the complex airborne disease. The magnitude of the horrors became exponentially clear to those living during this time period, in any part of the various interconnected trading systems.

The arrival of the Black Plague caused several types of responses amongst the society of Eurasia, one of which is fleeing cities and migrating to rural areas or the countryside. Through the writings of people who lived during the time of the Black Plague, it is evident that the majority of people in infected countries fled to the countryside in hopes to be protected from disease. For instance, Giovanni Boccaccio was an Italian writer who lived in Florence in 1348, the early years of plague. In his novella, *The Decameron*, he wrote about his experience with plague and about how people living in Florence fled the city. In his novella, he states, "Some

again … affirmed that there was no medicine for the disease superior or equal in efficacy to flight; following which prescription a multitude of men and women … migrated to the country parts … that it was now time for all to flee from it … " (Boccaccio, preface). As the frequency of deaths increased, many people in Eurasia began to believe that there was no cure to plague and that the only way to escape this catastrophe was to flee. Many people of Florence migrated to the countryside and writers of the time such as Boccaccio believed that was the smartest response to plague. Additionally, many fled to the countryside seeking jobs (Cee World History, 1). The plague not only took away family and friends, but the workforce as well. With lords and nobles still in need of their lands worked but their workers gone, it was an opportunity for the unemployed to step in. Furthermore, it has been documented that people fleeing affected life in the countryside as a whole. In many cases villages were completely abandoned during the black death. For example, places like Ambion, Tilgarsely, and Tusmore were left deserted due fleeing after the deaths of serfs. Hearing of these deaths of these serfs created anxiety within the community and multiple people had left fleeing from this village thereby saving themselves in the process. Tusmore was 20 miles away from the city of Oxford that in the middle ages was considered a large town in the middle ages. The fleeing of Tusmore depicts the fear and anxiety of large towns that caused many people to leave. Overall, fleeing to the countryside is a response that explains much about people's thoughts on plague and how plague was deciphered. Through analysis of society and culture, religion, medicine, economics and geography, the understanding of plague during the time period of the Black Plague can be explained.

Sociocultural (Samantha Gonzalez)

With millions of people dead due to the Black Death, it seemed to the peasants and the nobility

living through this time that there was no end in sight. There was fear in becoming the next victim in death of the plague. However, most of the common folks did think there was a cause. However, most of the common folk did think there was a cause. The people moving had to know reasonings why the country was safer, many of which were guided by societal and cultural norms.

The labeling of cities being marked as death, in particular, was one of the prominent causes that was pushed by society. London was associated with death, the close corridors, and the lack of sanitation in general lead to far more cases in these urban areas than a rural environment. Losing, "roughly 15% of its population. While 68,596 deaths were recorded in the city, the true number was probably over 100,000" (The National Archives, 2011), it is very well known that London was hit the worst in England. What furthered this narrative is that it was mainly the poor peasants who were forced to stay in the cities due to a worker shortage many of them growing ill as well. Since the majority of the people in the cities were peasants who if were thought to be sick were put in pesthouses it surrounding cities was the stereotype of a deathwish. All in all, it can be determined that "the plague affected life in the countryside as the vast majority of Britain's population lived in the countryside" (Ibeji, 2011), the societal view against living in cities also urged moving inland.

Other than the poor, there were many groups of people that medieval society believed was to blame for the plague. Religious tensions lead people to blame the Jewish community, while panic itself leads people to fear foreigners in general. This wide group of people was minorities, beggars, lepers, and travelers and these groups have all experienced discrimination. A notable example of this very prejudice occurring is when, "Armed with a conviction that the

West faced an epidemic of devastating proportions [in the late nineteenth century], leprologists needed ammunition to support a campaign for segregation and thus constructed a medieval leper to serve their purpose" (Cohn, 42). Centuries after medieval times people still aimed to say that lepers needed to be separated from other ordinary people. In fact, even during medieval times people still sought out to banish lepers from cities. This is illustrated because," Bristol in 1331, attempted to remove lepers from their city walls, 'voicing fears about infection'" (Cohn, 42). The word "attempted" speaks volumes into why a person may want to move into a rural setting; it can be predicted that despite discrimination authorities were still unsuccessful in removing these groups of people. For additional context, when the black plague hit medieval Europe London had approximately 100,000 people. A rather large number that many people living during this time can see as a threat because in an urban center one cannot simply just believe these groups of people they blamed are not living among them. Paranoia in medieval culture could have aided the fear of why many people frantically left, the thought of a Jew or Leper accidentally being among them, in their eyes, could increase their chances of death.

The scientific or educated groups of people during the black death had their own reasons why they saw the countryside as a tempting escape. Many scientists reasoned that the reasoning for the black death was as simple as impure air. In fact, "for most physicians, the "substance" of the element "air" was altered such that it could draw up pestilential vapors from polluted waters and places…..that ''every plague begins in one region'' and was conveyed from place to place in a variety of ways" (Carmichael, 22). This common belief in society was that polluted waters could create this air that spread the plague also ties into the reason why so many nobles left the rural area. Cities were notorious for their contaminated water because of pollution and lack of

public sanitation in these cities. Additionally ,decomposing bodies could also spread the contaminants of bubonic plague (Mark, 2020). Since the countryside has a lower population and mortality it would seem tempting to simply flee to an area where there would be less dead people so they have a slight chance of transferring the disease to them and their families. The people who were traveling to the country were mainly literate nobility who would be able to recognize this theory and pack their bags in the process.

There were multiple reasonings to why numerous groups of people decided to venture to the countryside. Whether it was societal panic, their own prejudice, or scientific reasonings. These people were aware of what was going on in their society to have many different mindsets develop into moving away from cities.

Role of Religion (Kiran Ahmad)

Before the Black Death arrived in Europe, the majority of society looked up to religious institutions for guidance in all aspects of life. However, as the people's understanding of the Black Plague changed, most of the common folk began to refrain from assistance and advice from religious institutions. The majority of the society of Western Europe during the time of the Black Death was Roman Catholic. During the medieval times, the church was the highest authority in Europe. The common folk relied on the Pope for information to explain all types of mishaps. According to McLaurine H. Zentner, "The Church played a significant role during the Middle Ages because religion was an important aspect of daily life for European Christians" (Page iii). The Black Plague traveled rapidly despite the slowness of communication and transportation. Due to this rapid spread, people were searching for causations. They looked up to

the Catholic church for an explanation. When the plague arrived in Europe, the most common belief amongst the people was that the plague came from elsewhere. For most of the time period, it was believed that the plague originated from Asia. However, in 1348, religion began to start explaining the origins of the plague. For example, "In 1348 there appeared in Europe a devastating plague … that year the rumor was current that these deaths were due to an international conspiracy of Jewry to poison Christendom" (Jewish History Sourcebook, 1). The Catholic church began telling its followers that Jewish people were to blame for the plague. At first, much of the common folk believed this rumor. The Catholic society of Western Europe was assured by the church that they were not going to be harmed by the plague because they were not Jewish. However, as the number of deaths increased, people's trust in the church began to wane and consequently, the reputation of the church fell apart. In *The Black Death*, Ziegler writes, "During and immediately after the plague the usual rules governing the ordination of priests were virtually abandoned" (Ziegler, 212). Ultimately, as knowledge about the true origins of the plague spread amongst the common folk, many abandoned the clergy and fled to the countryside in hopes of being protected from plague.

When the plague first arrived in societies such as that of the Ottoman Empire, many people believed that the reason why the plague happened was due to religion. According to the work by Elis Gjevori, "Generally speaking in the first centuries of Ottoman history, the plague was understood to be a divine decree, a portent of the apocalypse, and a result of social and moral transgression" (Page 1). Many Ottomans believed that the plague was a punishment from God and that only sinners would be affected and killed by the plague. It was thought that as long as a person had good morals, plague could not harm them. However, as time progressed, this

theory changed. For instance, many began concluding that plague "came to be seen as a disease resulting from natural causes (e.g., unhealthy cities), and something that can be controlled by the state" (Gjevori, 1). The understanding of plague changed amongst the society of the Ottoman Empire. As more knowledge about the origin of the catastrophe was acquired, people's original theories changed.

In essence, religious beliefs waned during the Black Death. During the beginning of the plague, Eurassian societies and empires struggled to explain the causation of plague. People's trust in the Catholic church deteriorated due to the belief that God would not punish humans so harshly. As the amount of deaths due to plague increased, many people began fleeing to the countryside for protection and doubting the clergy. Overall, people's understanding of the plague and religion changed over time.

Evolution of Medical Understanding (Anna Carvajal)

The Middle Ages are often characterized as "dark" due to being a time with few scientific and cultural advancements in Europe. It consisted of the perfect ingredients for the easy spread of the Black Plague, better known as the Black Death. The dangerous congestions of people, lack of proper hygienic methods for waste removal, showering, and storage, along with living among rodents and fleas led to the deadliest pandemic outbreak in human history. With 75-200 million deaths worldwide, it is rightly named the Black death; the plague quickly spread across Eurasia and North Africa from approximately 1346-1353. With substantially fewer technological advancements and medical knowledge compared to the 21st century, it is interesting to observe what was known about the plague and what measures were taken for its containment. Most

importantly, the better handling and precautions seen when observing the countryside during this time.

In order to understand the extremity of the Black Death and the knowledge the population had at the time, it is important to note what it truly was. There are three primary types of plague: Bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. The Black Death was an epidemic of Bubonic Plague, meaning it came from the bacteria "Yersinia Pestis" and was very easily transmittable. Originating in China, the large and constant trading networks allowed it to spread globally and reach disastrous extremes. Conditions were so horrendous that a renaissance poet wrote "O happy posterity, who will not experience such abysmal woe and will look upon our testimony as a fable." (Benedictow 1) Anyone in any nation could observe the horrific conditions, entire populations were disappearing after coming in contact with the plague, making it clear to anyone that this was a tragedy of great proportion.

First person accounts about the precautions taken by governments and its people display a great deal of understanding the deadliness of the situation. For example, "First. So that no contaminated matter which presently persists in the areas surrounding the city of Pistoia can enter into the bodies of the citizens of Pistoia... no one can or ought to come from either of them or their districts ... to the said city of Pistoia or its district or county on penalty of £ 50." (Buonacorsi 1) It is important to note that certain governments prohibited the movement in and out of a city, and they even applied fines to those who dare trespass. Furthermore "They provided and ordered that the bodies of the dead… be placed in a wooden casket covered by a lid secured with nails." (Buonacorsi 1) The same protocol applied to those who died at the hands of the plague can be observed today, dead bodies are handled with caution because of the

possibility of further contamination. Lastly, "the said city concerning the preserving, strengthening and protecting the health of humans from various and diverse pestilences which otherwise can befall the human body." (Buonacorsi 1) Evidently, there was a basic understanding of what had to be done to contain the spread of the black death and what measures had to be put into place.

The greatest indication of how much was known about the black plague, is the simple fact that the spread was contained until it no longer posed a great threat. One of the ways that the Black Death came to an end was through the implementation of quarantines. Not only would the sick be quarantined, but those who could would move to the countryside. The countryside allowed for greater space between people and lowered the chance of possible infection. A "The Weekly Newsletter" Article stated: "The uninfected would typically remain in their homes and only leave when it was necessary, while those who could afford to do so would leave the more densely populated areas and live in greater isolation." (Page 2) The importance of self isolation, distancing, and improving on personal hygiene are all steps that were taken during the Black Plague that allowed it to become contained, and are precautions still taken today.

Moving into the countryside was not a mere coincidence, it was a well thought out precaution that greatly diminished the already extreme amount of deaths due to the Black Plague. The population understood that severing contact with others was necessary, and improving living conditions was needed in order to contain the Plague. It is impressive to observe the protocols that are taken in the 21st century. and the connection they hold to similar occurrences in the past.

Economic Consequences (Devonie Rhoden)

The Black Plague was undeniably a time filled with confusion and fear. Along with the many social, cultural and medical changes brought about, people moving to the countryside caused the economics of the time to shift as well. There was an uptick in fines which was used to discourage people from purchasing unnecessary goods and made it more expensive for those to provide a proper send-off for their loved ones.   In addition, there was a wealth disparity with those who moved and stayed in the cities, those who were poorer often stayed behind while the wealthy were a part of the class that moved away, and stocked up on essential goods separately.

Like today, there were still people during the Black Plague who attempted to avoid said pestilence by moving away, and trying not to come into contact with too many people. "Of course business ground to a halt. Commerce between peoples and regions virtually ceased, save for those bold and foolhardy enough to take the risks and suffer the consequences." (Findlen, 2020) This was most definitely spurred on by the fact that people left their loved ones, often infected, to avoid becoming ill themselves, and because they avoided interacting with others. The government understood that and put forth specific ordinances so that individuals would not spread the plague even more. Specifically, rules that the executive council of Pistoia put out was meant to limit social contact, and try to put space between anything or anyone that was considered infected. " So that stench and putrefaction shall not be harmful to men, henceforth tanning of hides can not and must not be done within the walls of the city of Pistoia on penalty of £ 25". The rule states that if you alter the protein's of the skin and make it less susceptible to decay, you will be charged 25 pounds. This was a punishment because it was thought you could get the Plague by its putrid stench, so by avoiding tanning of hides, you wouldn't be keeping the skin or the body for a long time. "They have provided and ordered that when anyone has died no

person should dare or presume to present or to send any gift before or after burial to the former

dwelling place of such a dead person or any other place on the said occasion or to attend or to go

to a meal in that house or place on the said occasion on penalty of £ 25". (The Institute, 1994)

This rule would restrict the movement of items and goods, in addition to having people avoid

going to an infected space.

During the aftermath of the Black Death, there was a sharp decline of population. While

there were less workers, the resources available for agriculture weren't affected by a large

amount. While it became harder to find people to complete tasks like, plow fields, harvest crops,

and other goods and services, the people remaining took up those jobs, and in turn wanted higher

wages. A response to this situation would be the Statute of Laborers Law, which said that a

worker could not receive or request a higher wage than what was given before the plague.

Essentially every healthy unemployed person under 60 years old must work for anyone who

wanted to hire him. Workers who violated the ordinance were fined, or sent to prison. Workers

wanted better conditions in turn for the effort they were putting in. Instead, the Statute of

Laborers Law made it seem like they were being unreasonable by saying, "seeing the straights of

the masters and the scarcity of servants, are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive

wages, and others, rather than through labour to gain their living, prefer to beg in idleness".

(Avalon Project)

People didn't have the best understanding of the plague considering they repeatedly

prioritized the stench associated with bubos, and had many limitations based off of this

information. Their attempt to distance themselves socially by limiting what can be done at a

funeral, and by moving away from the cities show that they had the appropriate idea in mind.

Geographical (Edinelly Peguero-Rosario)

The Black Plague was the deadliest pandemic recorded to date. It took the lives of approximately 75-200 million people in Eurasia, peaking in Europe from 1347-1351. Medical knowledge stagnated in the Middle Ages and did not develop until the 17th/18th centuries. With little knowledge came little understanding and with people dying left and right mankind needed answers. Speculations arose as to where this pandemic came from and why it was occurring in the first place.

People during this era did have a general understanding of the origins of this plague. It was understood this curse had made its way from Central Asia and took a harrowing journey through Mongolian trade routes. It reached China and India by 1346 and infected the Black Sea port of Kaffa by 1347. The plague arrived in Europe in October 1347, when 12 ships from the Black Sea docked at the Sicilian port of Messina. People gathered on the docks were met with a horrifying surprise: Most sailors aboard the ships were dead, and those still alive were gravely ill and covered in black boils that oozed blood and puss (History, 1). Sicily wanted to banish trading ships from Kaffa off their ports, but it was far too late. The Black Plague had already taken root on its new target. It was believed Mongols had infected the city of Kaffa by shooting infected corpses over the wall with catapults. While this was proven to be no more than a legend it shows people's understanding of the region the Black Plague originated from. While it was limited, people during this era did have an understanding of the origins of the plague.

People during this era also knew the benefits of quarantining. "When the Black Death… swept across Europe it killed over ⅓ of the population. This level of destruction is almost impossible to imagine today… One of the things that helped the bacteria to thrive was the

conditions that the cities encouraged. *Yersinia* infected fleas, which travel on rates and huge

populations of rats could be found in every major city in Europe...Animals and humans in close

proximity creates a breeding ground for zoonotic diseases, which can be highly deadly when

they switch species (Gould, 1)." Conditions in cities were atrocious which helped them become a

breeding ground for the plague. Most people lived in cities that were believed to hold more

opportunities for jobs.

Because everyone had the same idea on cities being a "gold mine" of possibilities, cities

became very crowded, with "everyone on top of one another." "In large cities you get lots of

people all packed close together. This encourages not just bacteria but particularly large and

virulent epidemics which spread through the crowded conditions with frightening ease(Gould

1)." Human contact is something done without thought of action or consequences that may come.

Major cities included ones like Genoa, Italy, a major trading site. "Speak Genoa, what have you

done.." Overcrowding leads to increased human contact and that to a rapid spread of disease.

People, beginning to pick up on the fact that if their neighbor had the plague, they most likely did

as well, began to move. Especially those living on the coasts, which were major trading sites

causing overcrowding, began to migrate more inland. The Black Death hit towns and cities

disproportionately hard. Larger cities were the worst off, as population densities and close living

quarters made disease transmission easier. In general, the areas not near seaports had less of a

problem. The countryside being more secluded, people were able to distance themselves from

others. A place where they could be alone and secluded and not worry about others passing the

disease along.

Medical knowledge was scarce during this period, and even those that had a general

understanding of it couldn't fully grasp it. However, even with limited comprehension of the disease and what it meant, people during this time had a general understanding of its origins. People also understood plague was spreading rapidly in overpopulated ports so they began to move to the countryside or places where there were less people to protect themselves, thus starting the pattern of quarantine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, people fled to the countryside as their understanding of the Black Plague changed due to more information about the origin of the plague. Analysis of society and culture, religion, medicine, economics and geography explains the shift in understanding and the reasons for fleeing to rural areas. Society allowed people to develop certain beliefs during the black plague. During medieval times, societal norms marked urban cities as basically a death wish, people were aware of the death toll in london. Additionally, since cities had an influx of people from different regions and religions, which people saw as a threat. Outsiders were seen as the cause of the plague so people would see the countryside as a safe escape from these people. Scholars have also explained the cause of the plague with impure air from polluted cities or decomposing bodies. Furthermore, prior to the arrival of plague, the Roman Catholic church held the highest power in Western Europe. When the plague arrived, the clergy explained that plague was caused by Jews and was also a punishment from above and that people of good morals were not going to be harmed. However as the frequency of deaths increased, people began doubting the church. They fled to rural areas which explains that they did not understand the origin of plague as a punishment by God, but as a scientific origin. Although the migration to the countryside could be viewed as a mere coincidence, it was the best remedy for lowering the rate

of infection and the speed of the spread. The space provided by the countryside meant the

implementation of quarantines, self-isolation, and far less contact than in cities. Furthermore, the

migration to the countryside made way for improvements in the congested cities and the

nonfunctioning hygienic methods already in place. Moving to the countryside was medically the

best option available to the population at the time. New rules and limitations put in place to

control movement, as well as the function of business had an enormous impact on the economy

during the Black Death. Economically, the increase in fines for seemingly normal activities, as

well as the risk of associating themselves with ill individuals forced people to seek more space

which could be found in the countryside. Due to the decreasing population, those workers who

did survive had more resources available to themselves which let them produce more, in turn

they demanded higher wages. As a response to statues put in place against higher wages, lords

made extra alternative payments, or simply paid their workers more. People during the Black

Plague had a general understanding of its origins. It was understood this pandemic made its way

from Central Asia and took a harrowing journey through Mongolian trade routes. Sicily wanted

to banish trading ships from Kaffa off their ports, but it was far too late. Legends arose to make

sense of this situation such as Mongols infecting the city of Kaffa by shooting infected corpses

over the wall with catapults. While proven to be false, it shows civilian's understanding of the

region the Black Plague originated from. People during this era also knew the benefits of

quarantining. Most people lived in cities that were believed to hold more opportunities for jobs.

Large cities with large populations became breeding grounds for bacteria such as *Yersinia pestis*

taking form in one of three forms as the Bubonic Plague. People, picking up on the fact that this

plague spread like wildfire, began to move. Especially those living on the coasts, which were

major trading sites causing overcrowding, began to migrate more inland. Ultimately, fleeing to

rural areas explains the understanding of people during the time period of the Black Plague.

       Analysis of the correlation between fleeing and people's understanding is significant as it

explains many events that occurred during the time period of the Black Plague and can relate to

COVID-19. The discrimination against travelers and Jewish people escalated with violence

because they were deemed to be the cause. This again occurred centuries later with COVID-19

when society placed the blame of the virus on East-Asian Americans. Then this followed with

heavy discrimination against this group of people, again with sometimes violence. The societal

norms during a pandemic plays drastic roles in how people react in a response. Economically

speaking, researching the impacts the Black Death had on allows people of the future to

hopefully learn and make advancements to the systems we have in place now. There have been

so many complicated financial situations created because of COVID-19, and if one were placed

in similar circumstances they would have been magnified significantly. If people were to go

through the same ordeal people of the past were to go through, it is valuable to have information

that prevents history from repeating itself. This information was made even more important

considering COVID-19 has made situations comparable to the Black Death, whether it be

wanting the extension of a weekly check from the government, or workers asking their lords for

a higher wage. In essence, the research concerning what fleeing to rural areas has to say about

what people understood about the Black Plague relates to COVID-19 and explains some events

that occurred during the time period.

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