Lessons from Medieval Pandemics

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The burial of plague victims in Tournai – the sole contemporary image of the Black Death in Europe, 1350s

from Gilles li Muisit, Chronicon Maius, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS 13076-77, f. 24v
HIST 4210: The Black Death

“Officials have confirmed 218 cases, and although they’re centered on Wuhan, infections have been reported from Beijing in the north to Guangdong in the south. Three people have died, the most recent on Saturday, and eight people are in critical condition. Authorities do not know what the virus is, beyond saying that it is a type known as a coronavirus.”

(Washington Post, 1/20/2020)
Coronavirus and the Black Death: spread of misinformation and xenophobia shows we haven’t learned from our past

March 5, 2020 3:10am EST

Although some media outlets have begun referring to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus as a “modern plague”, the threat of COVID-19 remains negligible compared with historic outbreaks of plague. The latest World Health...
The plague is making headlines again.
Three lessons from medieval pandemics

- Our understanding of the past and its legacies for the present changes as we ask new questions and bring in evidence from different fields.

- Pandemics do not have clear start and finishing points

- Pandemics intensify changes in culture and society that are *already* occurring (*collapsology*).
Three Plague Pandemics:
*Yersinia Pestis*

- Justinianic Plague (mid-6th-9th centuries)
- Black Death (14th century)
- Modern Plague Pandemic (late 19th -mid 20th centuries)
Paleoclimatology: temperatures from proxy measures

Greenland ice core evidence from D.J. Easterbrook, Evidence-Based Climate Science (2nd ed. 2016)

- Roman Climate Optimum, c. 200 BCE-150 CE
- Roman Transitional, 150-450: Antonine Plague, Plague of Cyprian
- Late Antique Little Ice Age, 450-700: Justinianic Plague
- Medieval Climate Optimum, 700-1280s
- Little Ice Age, 1300-1750: Black Death
• 536—massive volcanic eruption, perhaps in Iceland
  • Dendrochronology and speleothems: minimal growth
  • Ice cores confirm particles (right, doi:10.1126/science.aaw0632)
  • "... during this year [536] a most dreadful portent took place. For the sun gave forth its light without brightness ... and it seemed exceedingly like the sun in eclipse, for the beams it shed were not clear." (Procopius)

• 541 plague in Egypt spreads around Mediterranean on ships

• 542 plague in Constantinople (capital Byzantine Empire)

• 6th century increased horde burials in Scandinavia and British Isles; Ragnarök as cultural memory of event?
“Collapsology” and the Justinianic Plague

- Ended the Roman Empire/Antiquity
- Enabled the Germanic Migrations/Barbarian Invasions
  - “Germs are far deadlier than Germans (Harper, The Fate of Rome, 2017, p. 18).”
- Enabled the establishment of Christianity (hospices)
- Origins of European society
Collapsology and the Black Death

- Completely changed “life as we know it” (cf. Siena’s cathedral, left)
- Destroyed the “feudal” “caste” system and ended serfdom
- Ushered in the Renaissance (secularism)
- Laid the groundwork for the Protestant Reformation
- Fostered the Great Divergence (rise of European nation states and capitalism/colonialism)
Mongols and the origins of the Black Death

**Traditional**
- **Biological Warfare in Kaffa**
  - Mongol siege
  - Genoese merchants

**New Research**
- Mid-13th c emergence of plague in central Asia (scroll, c. 1280 showing Kublai Khan hunting)
- Global impact
- Climate change: shift NA, 1300-1700
Internal Concerns and Climate

- 1290s growing recession
- 1315-1322 Agrarian Crisis
- 1315-1317 Great Famine
- 1330s famine throughout Mediterranean
- 1327-1453 Hundred Years War and other internal wars

- R: Apocalypse from a Biblia Pauperum, produced in Erfurt, c. 1315
Black Death in Europe

- Three plague “seasons:” 1348-49, 1349-50, 1350-51
- Second Wave: 1360-1363

- Mortality:
  - 1/3 in first wave
  - ½ by end of 14th century

- R: Chronicle pf Rochester Priory (BL Cotton MS Faustina B V), 1314-1350
Francesco Traini, *Triumph of Death*, Campo Santo, Pisa, post 1348?
Francesco Traini, Triumph of Death, Pisa, Campo Santo, post 1348-1330s
Flagellant confraternities in Belgium and Florence (left—Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*)
Burning of Jews accused of well poisoning, from Gilles li Muisit, f. 12v
Omne Bonum
BL Royal 6 E VI, c. 1375
("fake news")
The History of Pandemics & Impact on Society – A Series

Upcoming…

Session 2: Global Bioethics & the Pandemic in Dialogue
with Dr. Alexandre Martins on Wednesday, Nov. 11th from 12 – 1 p.m. CT

Session 3: COVID-19 and Economic Inequality in the U.S.
with Dr. Amber Wichowsky on Wednesday, Nov. 18th from 12 – 1 p.m. CT

Session 4: Social & Political Consequences of Global Disease –
What Could be the Long-Term Effects of COVID-19?
with Dr. Risa Brooks on Monday, Nov. 23rd from 12 – 1 p.m. CT

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