

With a lack of modern scientific and medical knowledge at the time of the Black Death, most people, in response to what most contemporary chroniclers described as a never before seen pestilence, turned to what they did know: religion and superstitions. Between these two beliefs, they were able to give reason to what was occurring around them. The use of religion and superstitions provided them with many explanations of where the Black Death came from and why. It also provided opportunities to escape the plague.

The need to find reason in events that are far beyond human understanding can be seen throughout time. The Ancient Greeks had their gods, to whom they attributed the natural disasters or diseases that occurred around them. Many of these gods were seen as swords that could cut both ways, bringing both life and death. Apollo comes first to the mind as being a God of Medicine but also a God of Disease. One of his sobriquets is Apollo the Far-Darter.¹ However, he is not just a simple archer; his arrows are of disease that are irresistible, unseen, and strike down the luckless.² These invisible arrows will be returned to later in the Middle Ages only without the connection to the Apollo. In the beginning of the *Iliad*, Apollo is directly

¹ Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2001), 154.

² Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2001), 155

linked with plague, becoming the 'Lord of Mice'.³ The arrows are sent out as retribution after the transgression of the Greek General Agamemnon, who had refused to return a girl whose father had ransomed for her return. Once again this theme of retribution and of transgression will be returned to during the medieval Black Death. Looking at this ancient template, it can be seen that it is within human nature to try to explain the inexplicable with what was common knowledge at the time; this can be seen within other ancient civilizations through to modern times. Before I discuss the beliefs and thoughts regarding the causes of the Black Death, I will first explain the many signs that were witnessed. Many of these omens led contemporaries to believe that they were being warned that pestilence was imminent.

Before the Black Death's arrival, numerous signs appeared and were recorded by various chroniclers. These portents of doom varied in manner, though many must have been frightening to the people of the era. There are mentions of a talking newborn, who was "said to have addressed its mother by her name, and to have related that it had seen the Holy Virgin Mary beseeching her son that he would not destroy the world; there after the child spake

³ Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2001), 155-56

never a word till the rightful time had come."⁴ Throughout Europe, there were rumors of "stinking mists, rains of snakes and frogs, storms and floods, earthquakes, and famines and locusts."⁵ In 1347 and 1348, there were strong earthquakes.⁶ Other such omens came from the earth, including black vapours, which were rising from the ground.⁷ Fresh bread was said to turn "moldy and mildewed" readily.⁸

Images of death were also seen and recorded by several chroniclers. Some of images pertaining to humans mentioned that there were several abortive pregnancies or monstrous births. Birds died after drinking the morning dew. In the air, chroniclers recorded funerals that were seen passing through the clouds. An uncanny sign included black riders, who mysteriously appeared before vanishing with plague following in their wake.⁹

The animal world played an important role in many of signs recorded. Within this category of omens, the animals are presented as acting strangely or dying with little cause. There are signs of unusual insects, strange worms,

⁴ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 57.

⁵ *Id.* at 59.

⁶ *Id.* at 60.

⁷ *Id.* at 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Id.* at 63.

and big-bellied toads.¹⁰ 'Snakes, bats, and badgers forsook their hiding places in their burrows or caves, and instead showed up in fields.'¹¹ Dogs suddenly went mad, while 'ravens turned their attention to the hospitals, where they chose to fly in pairs around them.'¹²

In the era of the Black Death, astronomy and astrology were used as methods to predict future events. This practice dated back to ancient times. Prior to the plague's outbreak in 1348, there was a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars under the fourteenth degree of Aquarius on March 20, 1345 at 1 PM.¹³ This conjunction was seen as being particularly ominous. Over the palace of the Pope at Avignon on December 20, 1348, it was reported that a column of fire was visible,¹⁴ and at Vienna in 1568 'in the sun and moonlight a beautiful rainbow and fiery beam were seen hovering above the church of St. Stephanie.'¹⁵ Comets especially were seen as being menacing. Medieval people seeing comets above them must have instantly drawn similarities to the Gospel of Luke 21:25, which states: 'And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and

¹⁰ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 62.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Id. at 54.

¹⁴ Id. at 56.

¹⁵ Id. at 57.

in the stars.’¹⁶ Comets were seen as God’s divine punishment as they seemed to descend from the heavens.¹⁷ They were stated to be God’s ‘chastisement rods.’¹⁸ In appearance, it is easy to see how contemporaries would find this comparison. Only a few medieval minds openly speculated that comets were not used by God to show his wrath. One of these few were Jacques Bernoulli, who believed ‘the crown of the comet could not be a sign of divine anger, because it is eternal nature...’¹⁹ It was not until Halley’s observations and calculations²⁰ regarding the return of comets that the connotation of comets being sent as signs from God lessened.

These signs of great disaster, which seemed so much greater than them, it only seems right that the medieval mindset would connect these occurrences with God and the supernatural. Like the Arrows of Apollo in ancient Greek texts, medieval plates show the baby Jesus sending his own arrows of disease.²¹ And like the ancient Greeks, it was believed that mankind had brought this destruction upon

¹⁶ Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁷ Sara Schechner, *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 69.

¹⁸ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 57.

¹⁹ Id. at 58.

²⁰ Sara Schechner, *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 158.

²¹ Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 252.

themselves because of their sins. The belief of a sin as a cause grew in popularity among contemporaries. They used the notion in different manners to prevent or relieve their families and communities of the Black Death.

The Church latched on to this idea of divine punishment, believing that was 'because the ways of humanity were inhuman, and we men did not love our neighbours, but that all our doings turned towards luxuriant living.'²² The church brought forth images of the pale horse of the Apocalypse, which remained a popular image in the mind of the medieval populace, making its way into wood cuttings such as Albrecht Dürer's 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' of 1498.²³ Parables also became popular methods to explain the cause of plague. One such parable regarded innkeeper who wanted to get rid of an unruly guest by creating foul odors. The morale of the parable was 'Thus God behaves in Nature when he wishes to punish sinful men; he makes a pungent smell- that is, the poisoned air.' The parable then continues to list what God uses to make the foul stench, such as 'poisonous stars, the baneful aspects

²² Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 114.

²³ Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

and planets.'²⁴ Spanish clergy blamed the opera for the outbreak of plague in 1563, while the English pointed their finger at theater.²⁵ After the reformation, Catholics and Protestants switched the blame between each other for arising God's wrath.

God was not the only cause presented by the religious and superstitious. The devil was soon mentioned as a culprit, drawing a parallel to the story of Job in the bible. Martin Luther favored this explanation of the plague, comparing Satan to a dog, which is under God's control: 'til God on account of our sins releases him from his chain so that he may run up and down and bite whomsoever he may encounter.'²⁶ But just like in the Job story it is suggested that in the end after the punishment had been fulfilled, Satan will be returned to his 'chained' position.

Ironically, rather than turning away from the devil and sinful ways, some people sought him out and worshipped him. A group called the Luciferians was established during the fourteenth century; their main belief was that God had

²⁴ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 114-115.

²⁵ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 115.

²⁶ Ibid.

usurped heaven, and that one day 'the unjust government of God would be replaced by the rule of Lucifer.'²⁷

More superstitious views turned to sorcery and witchcraft as the true causes. In Normandy, it is said that sorcerers advised their patients to spread their plague.²⁸ Rumors in Poland at the time of an outbreak in 1572 stated that plague had come because a sorceress had been buried in the church at Lemberg; the corpse was immediately exhumed. The corpse appeared to the villagers as being a very demonic image with the corpse having eaten a piece of its burial dress. The villagers severed her head and then reburied her elsewhere. Upon her reburial, the plague immediately disappeared from the town.²⁹ Stories similar to this one were told throughout Europe, and it was thought beheading the corpses of witches and sorcerers would decrease the impact of the plague on the community.³⁰

People looked toward easy scapegoats to place the blame on for their tribulations, even though many of these scapegoats were just as affected by the plague as their persecutors. The gravediggers³¹ were one group of people, who were blamed for purposely spreading plague, along with

²⁷ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 162-163

²⁸ Id. at 171.

²⁹ Id. at 116.

³⁰ Id. at 179.

³¹ Id. at 178.

general social outcasts, such as lepers³² and overall troublemakers, who likened spreading the plague to a sportsman "shooting birds" and said there was "no human pleasure" that could equal it.³³ Centuries of anti-Semitism came to the front during the Black Death as Jews took a large amount of blame for spreading the Black Death by poisoning the wells. One contemporary Franciscan monk wrote: 'Others [say] that the Jews planned to wipe out all the Christians with poison and had poisoned wells and springs everywhere.' As stated by the chronicler, many of these confessions were obtained through torture.³⁴ This theory was widespread throughout the medieval world with Jews being expelled or burned in horrific scenes.³⁵ Their fate was similar to the fate that anyone else, who was accused of poisoning wells or using of other means to spread the plague, received.

Even during the Black Death more signs presented themselves further confirming and enhancing the fearsome nature of the plague. Some of these signs included freshly baked bread bleeding, droplets of blood on the walls, and crosses appearing on people seeming to mark those who would

³² Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969).

³³ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 175-179.

³⁴ Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 1994), 207.

³⁵ *Id.* at 207-209.

later become victims of the Black Death. Evil spirits, goblins, phantom gravediggers, hearses, and thunder also became popular signs.³⁶ To show that animals were very in tune with the natural world in regards to the plague reports begin to arise in regards to wolves. The reports tell of wolves, who would visit plague villages, but upon smelling the air would turn and return to the forest.³⁷ All these signs must have further increased the apprehension the people were already feeling and spurred them into finding means to protect, prevent, or cure themselves of this new disease.

With all the signs that presented themselves before the Black Death and ideas of what caused them, many individuals took steps to prevent the spread of the plague not only on a communal level but also on an individual level. Prevention became more prominent method of combating the plague because of the high mortality rate of those who contracted it. As has already been mentioned above, many communities dug up the graves of suspected sorcerers or witches to behead them, hoping to prevent or stop plague from effecting their cities and villages.

³⁶ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 64-65.

³⁷ Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969).

Pope Urban VIII himself, called for 'public prayers and a jubilee,'³⁸ though this prevention was aimed more at preventing widespread pandemonium rather than actually stopping the spread of the plague. By the early sixteenth century, pamphlets that housed astrological predictions became widespread amongst the people, which in general led many people to 'awake, repent, and reform.'³⁹ People sought help from the divine, going on pilgrimages to visit holy place or relics. In Bavaria, people went by night with torches and candles to the Peninsula of the 'Three Ladies.'⁴⁰ The citizens of Messina begged the Patriarch Archbishop of Cantania for the holy relics of St Agatha to be brought to them.⁴¹

Ancient pagan rituals were reborn. In the year 1522, a bull, tamed by witchcraft, was brought to Rome and sacrificed in order to appease hostile demons. Lower Lusatia had its own ritual as well revolving around maidens, who would create a furrow around the village, and a widow, who would wield the rod. The belief was that the

³⁸ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 57.

³⁹ Sara Schechner, *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 47.

⁴⁰ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 50.

⁴¹ Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), 41.

furrow would prevent evil spirits from entering the village.⁴²

Many people believed certain feelings could either bring the plague or prevent one from receiving it. Those who put forth this theory recommended that one should not think of death, but focus on pleasing, agreeable, and delicious things. This thought was especially promoted by Italian physicians, who recommended visiting gardens and beautiful landscapes.⁴³ Jobus Lincelius suggested that emotions such as hatred, jealousy, anger, sadness, horror and fear should be avoided and replaced with praising God, good tales, and music.⁴⁴

The medieval populace also returned to the Greek tradition of amulets and precious stones, which were used to prevent the spread of the Black Death. These amulets were recommended by quacks, old women, and even physicians. For precious stones, emeralds and hyacinth (a reddish-orange mineral) were highly praised. Cardanus claimed that after placing an emerald in his mouth, the death of his son became less painful.⁴⁵ Spells were also written and placed on one's person throughout the Black Death. Interesting

⁴² Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 51-52.

⁴³ *Id.* at 90

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 91.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 98.

enough during this time the mysterious 'Abracadabra'
triangle appeared as shown below:

ABRACADABRA
ABRACADABR
ABRACADAB
ABRACADA
ABRACAD
ABRACA
ABRAC
ABRA
ABR
AB
A⁴⁶

Among some more superstitious preventatives called for placing spiders and birds in houses so that they could circulate the air (as was the case with birds) or absorb poison in the air (the spiders).⁴⁷ Oxen, cows, and horses were run through villages with the purpose of circulating the air and that their breath held healing properties.⁴⁸ Certain smells were thought to prevent the poisonous air from entering one's body. Incense, juniper shrubs and berries, laurel leaves, lemon and orange leaves, and oak leaves are just some of several smells thought to ward off the plague.⁴⁹

Cures for the plague were not a plentiful as were manners of which to prevent it. Many of these suggested

⁴⁶ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 99.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 95.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 92.

cures killed more people than they saved as one can assume when the use of mercury and arsenic was implied. There were several potions that were applied with numerous variants in ingredients. Red wine, in which new steel had been cooled, was recommended to those who had contracted the plague. Another wine related cure called for red coral to be placed within the liquid.⁵⁰ Dried toads were applied to the boils. The practitioners of this method believed that the toad would draw out the poison that was no doubt affecting the body of the victim.⁵¹

Some people turned to a more sinister being to receive their cures. In Switzerland, people confessed that they went to the devil in order to receive plague antidotes, some admitting to taking also the plague agent. The reason for this turn was that many believed that Satan knew everything about poisonous things and thus would know the cure to these things as well.⁵²

It is interesting to note that during the Black Death, people began to personify Death and the plague itself in a larger number than can be seen in earlier time period. For personification of the plague itself, the most well-known story is that of the Jung Pestfrau, who traveled spreading

⁵⁰ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 98.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 105.

⁵² *Id.* at 174.

plague with her hands. She is known also for wearing a red scarf. The villagers would close their windows to her, though eventually, for necessities such as food, they would open their doors and windows to her and become infected. One noble sacrificed himself in order to save the village by cutting off her hand and stealing her scarf.⁵³ One of the personifications of death occurs in 1682 near Spandau, in which death is seen crawling over the garden gate of an old woman. She awakes and gives him hospitality. He in return gives his name before telling her that she should not be alarmed 'if he should create a stir in the neighbourhood.'⁵⁴ Stories such as these give life to that which can not be seen. And by giving these intangible ideas human traits reduced the fear that they inspired.

Chroniclers left behind these several sources. The sheer amount of preventative methods, remedies, and reasons clearly shows that the people of the era were very much afraid of this new menace. Their fear is evident in the large variety. If one cure did not work they would quickly move on to the next. This provided them with hope that was not easily destroyed since there were other methods available to them. By finding omens, probable causes, ways

⁵³ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 52-53.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 53.

to prevent the spread, cures, and giving it a human face, the fear that surrounded the Black Death lessened. As the medical field was at that time relatively undeveloped, it is easy to see that they would instead turn to religion and superstition, with which they were familiar with, to confront the fear of the unknown.