

### **Medical Faculty of the University of Paris, Consultation, October 6, 1348<sup>1</sup>**

*On October 6, 1348, the college of the faculty of medicine at the University of Paris issued a compendium of opinion on the Black Death, apparently in response to a request from the king of France, Philip VI. In addition to relying on their own knowledge and ancient authorities like Aristotle, the faculty consulted "very many knowledgeable men in modern astrology and medicine concerning the causes of the epidemic which has been abroad since 1345." Their pronouncement therefore contained what was considered the most up-to-date scientific information available at the time and quickly became authoritative, as evidenced by its repetition in other plague treatises.*

**Concerning the Universal and Distant Cause:** Therefore we say that the distant and first cause of this pestilence was and is a certain configuration in the heavens. In the year of our Lord 1345, at precisely one hour past noon on the twentieth day of the month of March,<sup>2</sup> there was a major conjunction [lining-up] of three higher planets in Aquarius. Indeed, this conjunction, together with other prior conjunctions and eclipses, being the present cause of the ruinous corruption of the air that is all around us, is a harbinger of mortality and famine and many other things besides...Moreover, that this is so is testified by the philosopher, Aristotle, in his book, *Concerning the Causes of the Properties of the Elements*.<sup>3</sup> ...And Albertus [Magnus] says in his book,

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<sup>1</sup> From John Aberth, *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA : Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 41-45. Also in H. Émile Rébouis, *Étude Historique et critique sur la Peste* (Paris: A. Picard, 1888), 76-92; and in Mary Horrox, trans and ed. *The Black Death* (New York: Manchester University Press, distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada by St. Martin's Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> The Paris masters most likely got this date from the *Prognosticatio* of Johannes de Muris, one of the astronomers summoned to the court of Pope Clement VI at Avignon in 1344-45.

<sup>3</sup> This work was not by Aristotle but was commonly attributed to him. Aristotle was considered the leading authority of the ancient world, and thus was invoked to support all kinds of positions.

*Concerning the Causes of the Properties of the Elements*<sup>4</sup> (treatise 2, chapter 1), that a conjunction of two planets, namely Mars and Jupiter, brings about a great pestilence in the air, and that this happens especially under a hot and humid sign [i.e., Aquarius], as was the case when the planets lined up [in 1345]. For at that time, Jupiter, being hot and wet, drew up evil vapors from the earth, but Mars, since it is immoderately hot and dry, then ignited the risen vapors, and therefore there were many lightning flashes, sparks, and pestiferous vapors and fires throughout the atmosphere...

**Concerning the Particular and Near Cause:** Although pestilential sicknesses can arise from a corruption of water and food, as happens in times of famine and poor productivity, nevertheless we are of the opinion that illnesses which proceed from a corruption of the air are more deadly, since this evil is more hurtful than food or drink in that its poison penetrates quickly to the heart and lungs. Moreover, we believe that the present epidemic or plague originated from air that was corrupt in its substance, and not only in its altered properties...For many vapors that had been corrupted at the time of the aforesaid conjunctions arose, by virtue of their [nature], from the earth and water, and in the air were spread and multiplied by frequent gusts of thick, wild, and southerly winds, which, on account of the foreign vapors they have brought and are still bringing with them, have corrupted the air in its substance. Thus, the corrupted air, when it is breathed in, necessarily penetrates to the heart and

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<sup>4</sup> Albertus Magnus wrote commentaries on all of Aristotle's known works, which explains the similarity in the titles by the two authors.

corrupts the substance of the spirit...this is the immediate cause of the current epidemic. What is more, these winds, which have become so prevalent around us, could by their force have brought or carried to us, or perhaps will do so in the future, evil, putrid and poisonous vapors from afar...And possibly this corruption could have or will come about through other causes, such as rottenness imprisoned in the inner parts of the earth that are released, or already in fact have been released, whenever there are earthquakes...

On the other hand, a no small part of the cause of sicknesses is the condition of the patient's body...although everyone at one time or another incurs the danger of this corrupt air through their necessity to breathe, nevertheless not everyone is made sick by the corruption of the air, but many who are predisposed to it will become [sick]. Truly, those who become sick will not escape, except the very few. Moreover, the bodies that are more susceptible to receive the stamp of this plague are those bodies that are hot and wet, in which decay is more likely. Also [at risk] are: bodies that are full and obstructed with evil humors, in which waste matter is not consumed or expelled as is necessary; that live by a bad regimen, indulging in too much exercise, sex, and bathing; those who are weak and thin and very fearful. Also infants, women, and the young, and those whose bodies are fat and have a ruddy complexion or are choleric are to be on their guard more than others... What is more, we should not neglect to mention that an epidemic always proceeds from the divine will, in which case there is no other counsel except that one should humbly turn to God, even though this does not mean forsaking doctors. For the Most High created medicine here on earth, so that, while God alone heals the sick, He allows medicine as a symbol of his humanity. Blessed be the glorious and high God, who never denies His aid but makes plain to

those who fear Him a clear diagnosis for being cured.

### ***Ibn Ridwan, On the Prevention of Bodily Ills In Egypt***

*In practice, Muslims excelled over all other medieval peoples in the organization of hospitals and medical care. There were over two hundred clinics located in principal cities of Persia, Syria, Egypt, and Spain, and hospitals were forbidden to turn away patients who could not pay. Ibn Ridwan (998—1061) was a remarkable, self-educated physician from Cairo. Although Ibn Ridwan's treatise was written well before the major outbreak of plague in the fourteenth century, his opinions and remedies profoundly shaped Islamic medical conceptions of the Black Death.*<sup>5</sup>

Epidemic diseases have many causes that may be grouped into four kinds: a change in the quality of the air, a change in the quality of the water, a change in the quality of the food, and a change in the quality of psychic events...

It is desirable at this point that you learn what Hippocrates' and Galen recommended. As for Hippocrates, he said: "It is necessary to preserve the regimen in its usual manner, unless it is itself the cause of illness." If the normal regimen causes illness, he instructed that the accustomed amount of food and drink be diminished gradually and gently...He also instructed that efforts be made to alter the cause that produces the illness as far as possible, so that what reaches the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibn Ridwan, *Kitab Daf' madarr al-abdan bi-ard Misr [On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt]* in *Medieval Islamic Medicine: Ibn Ridwan's Treatise "ON the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt,"* trans. Michael Dols, ed. Adil S. Gamal, 112-114; 138-41. Taken from Thomas Sanders et al., "Encounters in World History, Vol. 1: Sources and Themes from the Global Past," (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 385-420.

body is completely opposite to the cause that initially altered the body.

Concerning the air, when it becomes hot, it is desirable for you to sit in the rooms that are far away from the glare of the sun, and vice versa... Water is improved by boiling; it should be boiled if it is spoiled or if much corruption is mixed with it. Then, it is purified by what opposes this corruption, and it should be protected from the putrid air. Its containers should be fumigated with mastic and...garlic should be dropped into the water because garlic is beneficial for the drinking of bad water.

We have said that when the air becomes excessively hot it can be improved by pouring out cold water, furnishing the rooms with roses, violets, myrtle, and Egyptian willow; drinking sweetened oxymel, nenuphar, Egyptian willow, prune, rose water, sour and sweet pomegranate juice, tamarind juice, and prune juice; and smelling cool oils, like the oils of roses, nenuphar, and violets. . . . In this situation, foods and other things having a hot temperament should be avoided...If you see that the body is full, evacuate it with gentle laxatives, as tamarind, *taranjubi'n*, and purging cassia. If one has need of bloodletting, you should bleed him immediately on the spot. . . Do your best, so that everything that is eaten and drunk is cold and constricting. Be cautious of physical exercise and bathing in such a condition...Work hard in preserving the temperament and opposing the cause of the disease to the utmost of your ability, if God Almighty wills.

### **Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron***

*Boccaccio (1313—1375) was an aspiring Florentine writer when the plague struck his native city in the spring of 1348. In The Decameron, ten affluent young people from Florence seek refuge from the disease at a country*

*estate, where they entertain themselves by each telling a story on a different day.*<sup>6</sup>

In the year 1348 after the fruitful incarnation of the Son of God, that most beautiful of Italian cities, noble Florence, was attacked by deadly plague. It started in the East either through the influence of the heavenly bodies or because God's just anger with our wicked deeds sent it as a punishment to mortal men; and in a few years killed an innumerable quantity of people. Ceaselessly passing from place to place, it extended its miserable length over the West. Against this plague all human wisdom and foresight were vain. Orders had been given to cleanse the city of filth, the entry of any sick person was forbidden, much advice was given for keeping healthy; at the same time humble supplications were made to God by pious persons in processions and otherwise. And yet, in the beginning of the spring of the year mentioned, its horrible results began to appear, and in a miraculous manner....

No doctor's advice, no medicine could overcome or alleviate this disease. An enormous number of ignorant men and women set up as doctors in addition to those who were trained. Either the disease was such that no treatment was possible or the doctors were so ignorant that they did not know what caused it, and consequently could not administer the proper remedy. In any case very few recovered; most people died within about three days of the appearance of the tumors described above, most of them without any fever or other symptoms.

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Richard Aldington (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co, 1930), 1—6. Taken from Thomas Sanders et al., "Encounters in World History, Vol. 1: Sources and Themes from the Global Past," (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 385-420.

The violence of this disease was such that the sick communicated it to the healthy who came near them, just as a fire catches anything dry or oily near it. And it even went further. To speak to or go near the sick brought infection and a common death to the living; and moreover, to touch the clothes or anything else the sick had touched or worn gave the disease to the person touching.

What I am about to tell now is a marvelous thing to hear; and ill and others had not seen it with our own eyes I would not dare to write it, however much I was willing to believe and whatever the good faith of the person from whom I heard it. So violent was the malignancy of this plague that it was communicated, not only from one man to another, but from the garments of a sick or dead man to animals of another species, which caught the disease in that way and very quickly died of it. One day among other occasions I saw with my own eyes (as I said just now) the rags left lying in the street of a poor man who had died of the plague; two pigs came along and, as their habit is, turned the clothes over with their snouts and then munched at them, with the result that they both fell dead almost at once on the rags, as if they had been poisoned...

Some thought that moderate living and the avoidance of all superfluity would preserve them from the epidemic. They formed small communities, living entirely separate from everybody else. They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick, eating the finest food and drinking the best wine very moderately, avoiding all excess, allowing no news or discussion of death and sickness, and passing the time in music and suchlike pleasures. Others thought just the opposite. They thought the sure cure for the plague was to drink and be merry, to go about singing and amusing themselves, satisfying every appetite they could, laughing and jesting at what happened.

They put their words into practice, spent day and night going from tavern to tavern, drinking immoderately, or went into other people's houses, doing only those things which pleased them. This they could easily do because everyone felt doomed and had abandoned his property, so that most houses became common property and any stranger who went in made use of them as if he had owned them. And with all this bestial behavior, they avoided the sick as much as possible.

In this suffering and misery of our city, the authority of human and divine laws almost disappeared, for, like other men, the ministers and the executors of the laws were all dead or sick or shut up with their families, so that no duties were carried out. Every man was therefore able to do as he pleased.

Many others adopted a course of life midway between the two just described. They did not restrict their victuals so much as the former, nor allow themselves to be drunken and dissolute like the latter, but satisfied their appetites moderately. They did not shut themselves up, but went about, carrying flowers or scented herbs or perfumes in their hands, in the belief that it was an excellent thing to comfort the brain with such odors; for the whole air was infected with the smell of dead bodies, of sicknesses and medicines.

Others again held a still more cruel opinion, which they thought would keep them safe. They said that the only medicine against the plague-stricken was to go right away from them. Men and women, convinced of this and caring about nothing but themselves, abandoned their own city, their own houses, their dwellings, their

relatives, their property, and went abroad or at least to the country around Florence, as if God's wrath in punishing men's wickedness with this plague would not follow them but strike only those who remained within the walls of the city or as if they thought nobody in the city would remain alive and that its last hour had come. Not everyone who adopted any of these various actions died., nor did all escape. Some when they were still healthy had set the example of avoiding the sick, and, falling ill themselves, died untended...

In this way many people died who might have been saved if they had been looked after. Owing to the lack of attendants for the sick and the violence of the plague, such a multitude of people in the city died day and night that it was stupefying to hear of, let alone to see. From sheer necessity, then, several ancient customs were quite altered among the survivors.

The custom had been (as we still see it today), that women relatives and neighbors should gather at the house of the deceased, and there lament with the family. At the same time the men would gather at the door with the male neighbors and other citizens. Then came the clergy, few or many according to the dead person's rank; the coffin was placed on the shoulders of his friends, and carried with funeral pomp of lighted candles and dirges to the church which the deceased had chosen before dying. But as the fury of the plague increased, this custom wholly or nearly disappeared, and new customs arose. Thus, people died, not only without having a number of women near them but without a single witness. Very few indeed were honored with the piteous laments and bitter tears of their relatives, who, on the contrary, spent their time in mirth, feasting and jesting. Even the women abandoned womanly pity and adopted this custom for their own safety. Few were they whose bodies were accompanied to church by more than ten or a dozen neighbors. Nor were

these grave and honorable citizens but grave-diggers from the lowest of the people who got themselves called sextons, and performed the task for money. They took up the bier and hurried it off, not to the church chosen by the deceased but to the church nearest, preceded by four or six of the clergy with few candles and often none at all. With the aid of the grave-diggers, the clergy huddled the bodies away in any grave they could find, without giving themselves the trouble of a long or solemn burial service.

The plight of the lower and most of the middle classes was even more pitiful to behold. Most of them remained in their houses, either through poverty or in hopes of safety, and fell sick by thousands. Since they received no care and attention, almost all of them died. Many ended their lives in the streets both at night and during the day; and many others who died in their houses were only known to be dead because the neighbors smelled their decaying bodies. Dead bodies filled every corner. Most of them were treated in the same manner by the survivors, who were more concerned to get rid of their rotting bodies than moved by charity towards the dead. With the aid of porters, if they could get them, they carried the bodies out of the houses and laid them at the doors, where every morning quantities of the dead might be seen. They then were laid on biers, or, as these were often lacking, on tables. . .Nor were these dead honored by tears and lighted candles and mourners, for things had reached such a pass that people cared no more for dead men than we care for dead goats. Thus it plainly appeared that what the wise had not learned to endure with patience through the few calamities of ordinary life,

became a matter of indifference even to most ignorant people through the greatness of this misfortune.

Such was the multitude of corpses brought to the churches every day and at every hour that there was not enough consecrated ground to give them burial, especially since they wanted to bury each person in the family grave, according to the old custom. Although the cemeteries were full they were forced to dig huge trenches, where they buried the bodies by hundreds. Here they stowed them away like bales in the hold of a ship and covered them with a little earth, until the whole trench was full.

Not to pry any further into all the details of the miseries which afflicted our city, I shall add that the surrounding country was spared nothing of what befell Florence. The villages on a smaller scale were like the city; in the fields and isolated farms the poor wretched peasants and their families were without doctors and any assistance, and perished in the highways, in their fields and houses, night and day, more like beasts than men. Just as the townsmen became dissolute and indifferent to their work and property so the peasants, when they saw that death was upon them, entirely neglected the future fruits of their past labors both from the earth and from cattle, and thought only of enjoying what they had. Thus it happened that cows, asses, sheep, goats, pigs, fowls and even dogs, those faithful companions of man, left the farms and wandered at their will through the fields, where the wheat crops stood abandoned, unreaped and ungarnered.

**William Edendon, *Vox in Rama [A Voice in Rama]***

*William Edendon, Bishop of Winchester, sent copies of this letter to abbots, priors, chaplains, and vicars in his diocese in 1348, when the plague was just beginning to spread into England. Although the bishop claims that no*

*one can truly know the will of God, he nonetheless offers his own interpretation, as well as his instructions for appropriate therapy.*<sup>7</sup>

A voice has been heard in Rama<sup>8</sup> and much lamentation and mourning has echoed through various parts of the world. Nations, bereft of their children, alas, in the abyss of unprecedented pestilence, refused to be comforted. For, what is terrible to hear, cities, towns, castles and villages, which until now rejoiced in their illustrious residents (their wisdom in counsel, their splendid riches, their great strength, the beauty of their womenfolk), which rang with the abundance of joy to which crowds of people poured from far and wide for succour, pleasure and comfort, have now been suddenly and woefully stripped of their inhabitants by this most savage pestilence, more cruel than a two-edged sword. As a result no one dares to enter these places, but instead flees far from them, as if from the caves of wild animals, so that all joy within them ceases, all sweetness is dammed up and the sound of mirth silenced, and they become instead places of horror and desolate wastelands. Broad, fruitful acres lie entirely abandoned now that their farmers have been carried off, and might as well be barren.

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<sup>7</sup> William Edendon, *Vox in Rama [A Voice in Rama]*, 24 October 1348. Found in *The Black Death*, trans. and ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester University Press 1994), 115-17. Taken from Thomas Sanders et al., "Encounters in World History, Vol. 1: Sources and Themes from the Global Past," (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 385-420.

<sup>8</sup> This is a reference to Matthew 2:18, which describes the massacre of male Jewish infants ordered by King Herod after he learned that a new "King of the Jews" (Jesus) had been born. "A voice was heard in Rama, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more." The passage echoes a prophecy in Jeremiah 31:15.

We report with anguish the serious news which has come to our ears, that this cruel plague has now begun a similarly savage attack on the coastal areas of England. We are struck by terror lest (may God avert it) this brutal disease should rage in any part of our city or diocese.

Although God often strikes us, to test our patience and justly punish our sins, it is not within the power of man to understand the divine plan. But it is to be feared that the most likely explanation is that human sensuality—that fire which blazed up as a result of Adam’s sin and which from adolescence onwards is an incitement to wrong doing—has now plumbed greater depths of evil, producing a multitude of sins which have provoked the divine anger, by a just judgement, to this revenge. But because God is benign and merciful, long-suffering, and above malice, it may be that this affliction, which we richly deserve, can be averted if we turn to him humbly and with our whole hearts, and we therefore earnestly urge you to devotion. We beg you in God’s name, and firmly command you by the obedience which you owe us, that you present yourselves before God through contrition and the proper confession of your sins, followed by the making of due satisfaction through the performance of penance, and that every Wednesday and Sunday, assembled in the choir of your monastery, you humbly and devoutly recite the 7 penitential psalms and the 15 psalms of degrees on your knees,<sup>9</sup>

We also order that every Friday you should go solemnly in procession through the marketplace at Winchester, singing these psalms and the great litany instituted by the fathers of the church for use against the pestilence and performing other exercises of devotion, together with the clergy and people of

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<sup>9</sup> The Penitential Psalms are numbers 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142. The Psalms of Degrees are numbers 119—133.

the city, whom we wish to be summoned to attend. They are to accompany the procession with bowed heads and bare feet, fasting, with a pious heart and lamenting their sins (all idle chatter entirely set aside), and as they go they are to say devoutly, as many times as possible, the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary. They are to remain in earnest prayer until the end of the mass which we wish you to celebrate in your church at the end of each procession, trusting that if they persevere in their devotions with faith, rectitude and firm trust in the omnipotence and mercy of the Savior they will soon receive a remedy and timely help from heaven.

*[The letter ends with the grant of an indulgence of forty days to those taking part in the procession and mass and praying there for a successful expedition for the king, the safety of his family and subjects and all Christians, the peace of the Church, England and Christendom, and for the end of the plague, and thirty days indulgence to those making similar prayers elsewhere.]*

### **Jean de Venette, *Chronicle*, late 1300s<sup>10</sup>**

*Jean de Venette was a fourteenth-century French Carmelite friar who lived through the events described in his Chronicle.*

In A.D. 1348, the people of France and of almost the whole world were struck by a blow other than war. For in addition to the famine which I described in the beginning and to the wars which I

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<sup>10</sup> From Marvin Perry, Joseph Peden, Theodore von Laue, ed. *Sources of the Western Tradition* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 265-267; taken from Jean Fillon de Venette, *The Chronicle of Jean de Venette*, Jean Birdsall, trans., Richard A. Newhall, ed. (New York: Columbia University

described in the course of this narrative, pestilence and its attendant tribulations appeared again in various parts of the world. ...All this year and the next, the mortality of men and women, of the young even more than of the old, in Paris and in the kingdom of France, and also, it is said, in other parts of the world, was so great that it was almost impossible to bury the dead. People lay ill little more than two or three days and died suddenly, as it were in full health. He who was well one day was dead the next and being carried to his grave. Swellings appeared suddenly in the armpit or in the groin—in many cases both—and they were infallible signs of death. This sickness or pestilence was called an epidemic by the doctors. Nothing like the great numbers who died in the years 1348 and 1349 has been heard of or seen or read of in times past. This plague and disease came from *ymaginatione* or association and contagion, for if a well man visited the sick he only rarely evaded the risk of death. Wherefore in many towns timid priests withdrew, leaving the exercise of their ministry to such of the religious as were more daring. In many places not two out of twenty remained alive. So high was the mortality at the Hotel-Dieu [an early hospital] in Paris that for a long time, more than five hundred dead were carried daily with great devotion in carts to the cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris for burial. A very great number of the saintly sisters of the Hotel-Dieu who, not fearing to die, nursed the sick in all sweetness and humility, with no thought of honor, a number too often renewed by death, rest in peace with Christ, as we may piously believe.

This plague, it is said, began among the unbelievers [Muslims], came to Italy, and then crossing the Alps reached Avignon [site of the papacy in that period], where it attacked several cardinals and took from them their whole

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Press, c1953).

household. Then it spread, unforeseen, to France, through Gascony [in the south of France] and Spain, little by little, from town to town, from village to village, from house to house, and finally from person to person. It even crossed over to Germany, though it was not so bad there as with us. During the epidemic, God of His accustomed goodness deigned to grant this grace, that however suddenly men died, almost all awaited death joyfully. Nor was there anyone who died without confessing his sins and receiving the holy *viaticum*<sup>11</sup>...

Some said that this pestilence was caused by infection of the air and waters, since there was at this time no famine nor lack of food supplies, but on the contrary great abundance. As a result of this theory of infected water and air as the source of the plague the Jews were suddenly and violently charged with infecting wells and water and corrupting the air. The whole world rose up against them cruelly on this account. In Germany and other parts of the world where Jews lived, they were massacred and slaughtered by Christians, and many thousands were burned everywhere, indiscriminately. The unshaken, if fatuous,<sup>12</sup> constancy of the [Jewish] men and their wives was remarkable. For mothers hurled their children first into the fire that they might not be baptized and then leaped in after them to burn with their husbands and children.

It is said that many bad Christians were found who in a like manner put poison into wells. But in truth, such poisonings, granted that they actually were perpetrated, could not have caused so great a

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<sup>11</sup> the Eucharistic bread given to the sick or dying

<sup>12</sup> 'fatuous' means 'stupid.' It is one of Jean de Venette's favorite words.

plague nor have infected so many people. There were other causes; for example, the will of God and the corrupt humors and evil inherent in air and earth. Perhaps the poisonings, if they actually took place in some localities, reinforced these causes. The plague lasted in France for the greater part of the years 1348 and 1349 and then ceased. Many country villages and many houses in good towns remained empty and deserted. Many houses, including some splendid dwellings, very soon fell into ruins. Even in Paris several houses were thus ruined, though fewer here than elsewhere.

After the cessation of the epidemic, pestilence, or plague, the men and women who survived married each other. There was no sterility among the women, but on the contrary fertility beyond the ordinary. Pregnant women were seen on every side...But woe is me! the world was not changed for the better but for the worse by this renewal of population. For men were more avaricious and grasping than before, even though they had far greater possessions. They were more covetous and disturbed each other more frequently with suits, brawls, disputes, and pleas. Nor by the mortality resulting from this terrible plague inflicted by God was peace between kings and lords established. On the contrary, the enemies of the king of France and of the Church were stronger and wickeder than before and stirred up wars on sea and on land. Greater evils than before [swarmed] everywhere in the world. And this fact was very remarkable. Although there was an abundance of all goods, yet everything was twice as expensive, whether it were utensils, victuals, or merchandise, hired helpers or peasants and serfs, except for some hereditary domains which remained abundantly stocked with everything. Charity began to cool, and iniquity with ignorance and sin to abound, for few could be found in the good towns and castles who knew how or were willing

to instruct children in the rudiments of grammar...

In the year 1349, while the plague was still active and spreading from town to town, men in Germany, Flanders, Hainaut [east of Flanders], and Lorraine uprose and began a new sect on their own authority. Stripped to the waist, they gathered in large groups and bands and marched in procession through the crossroads and squares of cities and good towns. There they formed circles and beat upon their backs with weighted scourges, rejoicing as they did so in loud voices and singing hymns suitable to their rite and newly composed for it. Thus for thirty-three days they marched through many towns doing their penance and affording a great spectacle to the wondering people. They flogged their shoulders and arms with scourges tipped with iron points so zealously as to draw blood. But they did not come to Paris nor to any part of France, for they were forbidden to do so by the king of France, who did not want them. He acted on the advice of the masters of theology of the University of Paris, who said that this new sect had been formed contrary to the will of God, to the rites of Holy Mother Church, and to the salvation of all their souls. That indeed this was and is true appeared shortly. For Pope Clement VI was fully informed concerning this fatuous new rite by the masters of Paris through emissaries reverently sent to him and, on the grounds that it had been damnably formed, contrary to law, he forbade the Flagellants under threat of anathema [excommunication] to practice in the future the public penance which they had so presumptuously undertaken. His prohibition was just, for the Flagellants, supported by certain fatuous priests and monks, were

enunciating doctrines and opinions which were beyond measure evil, erroneous, and fallacious. For example, they said that their blood thus drawn by the scourge and poured out was mingled with the blood of Christ. Their many errors showed how little they knew of the Catholic faith. Wherefore, as they had begun fatuously of themselves and not of God, so in a short time they were reduced to nothing. On being warned, they desisted and humbly received absolution and penance at the hands of their prelates as the pope's representatives. Many honorable women and devout matrons, it must be added, had done this penance with scourges, marching and singing through towns and churches like the men, but after a little like the others they desisted.

### **Ahmad al-Maqrizi, *Guide to the Knowledge of Dynasties and Kings***

*Ahmad al-Maqrizi (1364—1442) was a biographer and historian of the Islamic Empire. In addition to his commentaries on politics and economic conditions, Ahmad al-Maqrizi made note of the devastating impact of the plague in Cairo.*<sup>13</sup>

News reached Cairo from Syria that the plague in Damascus had been less deadly than in Tripoli, Hama, and Aleppo. From [October 1348] death raged with intensity. 1200 people died daily and, as a result, people stopped requesting permits from the administration to bury the dead and many cadavers were abandoned in gardens and on the roads.

In New and Old Cairo, the plague struck women and children at first then market people, and the numbers of the dead augmented. The [ravages of the] plague intensified in [November] in Cairo and became extremely grave during *Ramadan*, which coincided with the arrival of winter...The plague continued to spread so considerably that it became impossible to count how many died

In [January 1349] new symptoms developed and people began spitting up blood. One sick person came down with internal fever. followed by an unrestrained need to vomit, then spat blood and died. Those around him in his house fell ill, one after the other and in one

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmad ibn 'Ali al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-suluk li-ma'rifat duwal al-muluk [The Guide to the Knowledge of Dynasties and Kings]* 4 vols, ed. M. Mustafa Ziada, Vol. 2, Part 3 (Cairo: Association of Authorship, Translation and Publishing Press, 1958), 775-86, in *The Middle East and Islamic Reader*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman and Stuart Scharr, (Grove Press, 2003), 52-53. Taken from Thomas Sanders et al., "Encounters in World History, Vol. 1: Sources and Themes from the Global Past," (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 385-420.

or two nights they all perished. Everyone lived with the overwhelming preoccupation that death was near. People prepared themselves for death by distributing alms to the poor, reconciled with one another, and multiplied their acts of devotion.

None had time to consult doctors or drink medicinal syrups or take other medications, so rapidly did they die. By [January 7<sup>th</sup>] bodies had piled up in the streets and markets; [town leaders] appointed burial brigades, and some pious people remained permanently at places of prayer in New and Old Cairo to recite funeral orations over the dead. The situation worsened beyond limits, and no solution appeared possible. Almost the entire royal guard disappeared and the barracks in the sultan's citadel contained no more soldiers...

People began searching for people to act as the *Qur'an* readers at funerals, and many individuals quit their trades to recite prayers at the head of burial processions.

A group of people devoted themselves to applying a coat of clay to the inner sides of the graves. Others volunteered to wash corpses, and still others to carry them. Such volunteers received substantial wages. For example, a *Qur'an* reader earned 10 *dirhams*: the moment he finished with one funeral, he ran off to another. A body carrier demanded six *dirhams* in advance, and still it was hard to find any. A gravedigger wanted 50 *dirhams* per grave. But most of them died before they had a chance to spend their earnings.

Family celebrations and marriages no longer took place...No one had held any festivities during the entire duration of the epidemic, and no voice was heard singing...The call to prayer was suspended at many locations, and even at the most important ones, there remained only a single *muezzin* [caller to prayer].

Most of the mosques and lodges were closed; it was also a known fact that during this epidemic no infant survived more than one or two days after his birth, and his mother usually quickly followed him to the grave.

At [the end of February], all of Upper Egypt was afflicted with the plague. According to information that arrived...from...other regions, lions, wolves, rabbits, camels, wild asses and boars, and other savage beasts, dropped dead, and were found with scabs on their bodies.

The same thing happened throughout Egypt. When harvest time arrived, many farmers had already perished and no field hands remained to gather crops. Soldiers and their young slaves or pages headed for the fields. They tried to recruit workers by promising them half of the proceeds, but they could not find anyone to help them gather the harvest. They threshed the grain with their horses [hoofs], and winnowed the grain themselves, but, unable to carry all the grain back, they had to abandon much of it. Most craft workshops closed, since artisans devoted themselves to disposing of the dead, while others, not less numerous, auctioned off property and textiles [which the dead left behind]. Even though the prices of fabric and other such commodities sold for a fifth of their original value, they remained unsold.

### **Ibn Battuta, *Voyages* (1355)**

*Ibn Battuta (1304—1369) traversed the Islamic world in the fourteenth century and recorded his observations around 1355. While visiting Damascus in July 1348, Ibn Battuta witnessed the ravages of the plague and noted popular reactions to the epidemic.*<sup>14</sup>

One of the celebrated sanctuaries at Damascus is the Mosque of the Footprints (*al-Aqdam*), which lies two miles south of the city. alongside the main highway which leads to the Hijaz, Jerusalem, and Egypt. It is a large mosque, very blessed, richly endowed, and very highly venerated by the Damascenes, The footprints from which it derives its name are certain footprints impressed upon a rock there. which are said to be the mark of Moses' foot. In this mosque there is a small chamber containing a stone with the following inscription: "A certain pious man saw in his sleep the Chosen One [Muhammed], who said to him 'Here is the grave of my brother Moses.'" "

I saw a remarkable instance of the veneration in which the Damascenes hold this mosque during the great pestilence on my return journey through Damascus, in the latter part of July 1348. The viceroy Arghun Shah ordered a crier to proclaim through Damascus that all the people should fast for three days and that no one should cook anything eatable in the market during the daytime. For most of the people there eat no food but what has been prepared in the market. So the people fasted for three successive days, the last of which was a Thursday, then they assembled in the Great Mosque, *amirs*, *sharifs*, *qadis*, theologians, and all the other classes of the people, until the place was filled to overflowing, and there they spent the Thursday night in prayers and litanies. After the dawn prayer next morning they all went out together on

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<sup>14</sup> Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, trans. H.A.R. Gibb (London: G. Routledge, 1929), 68-69. Taken from Thomas Sanders et al., "Encounters in World History, Vol. 1: Sources and Themes from the Global Past," (New York: McGraw

foot, holding *Qurans* in their hands, and the amirs barefooted. The procession was joined by the entire population of the town, men and women, small and large; the Jews came with their Book of the Law and the Christians with their Gospel, all of them with their women and children. The whole concourse, weeping and supplicating and seeking the favor of God through His Books and His Prophets, made their way to the Mosque of the Footprints, and there they remained in supplication and invocation until near midday. They then returned to the city and held the Friday service, and God lightened their affliction; for the number of deaths in a single day at Damascus did not attain two thousand, while in Cairo and Old Cairo it reached the figure of twenty-four thousand a day.

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Hill, 2006), 385-420.