London Before and After the Plague

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London wasn’t always a clean, compelling city; actually it was fairly disgusting. When the plague came, people were prone to contract the illness with the roads and filthy homes too close together. The epidemic was practically inescapable in families. The disease seemed to impact every aspect of society, from religious practices to farming lifestyle, industry, law and order, economic and political stability¹. Authorities saw the plague epidemic as eye-opening and decided to enforce sanitary laws. The plague was a tragedy, but through recovery, London was able to better itself as a city.

**London Before the Plague**

Before the plague erupted in London, sickness already wandered the streets. With half a million humans and even more animals, manure and waste covered the streets in a thick, sickly, layer. It didn’t help that a selection of dealers would sell dead cattle that they found, instead of fresh meat.² This was only one of the many causes to scarcity of health in the city. People were dying frequently, and every week a ‘Bill of Mortality’ was posted to inform everyone of the death poll.³

Before the plague, this ‘Bill of Mortality’ showed common ailments that people died of during the Dark Ages. Fevers and other diseases were posted, along

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² Ibid  
with how many males and females were buried. But, when the plague came, the Bill of Mortality created a separate section for these deaths and burials. The death toll rose beyond any of the other mortality rates.\(^4\)

**The Plague**

During the 14th century, no one had necessarily understood what brought on the plague.

“AND for what concerns that Pestilence now under Enquiry, this we have as to its Origin, from the most irrefragable Authority, that it first came into this Island by Contagion, and was imported to us from Holland, in Packs of Merchandice; and if any one pleases to trace it further, he may be satisfied by common Fame, it came thither from Turkey in Bails of Cotton or Silk, which is a strange Preserver of the pestilential Steams.”

-Nath. Hodges, M.D. - *Loimologia* \(^5\) \(^6\) \(^7\)


Scientists and historians gathered to conclude that rats were heavily involved. Asian Ship Rats carried the bacterium, Yersinia Pestis, which fleas then ingested. Then, when fleas came into contact with people, they would vomit the rat blood, which beared the Yersinia Pestis, back into the person. Of course, it's unreasonable to say that rats were the sole reason for the fast spread of the plague, as it was apparent that people were infecting each other. It had come to the point where pubs were shut down to prevent the sick mingling with the healthy.

The Bubonic Plague was a highly contagious and fatal disease but was not the only form of the Black Death. In fact, there were three different stages of the plague during the summers of 1347-1352. The most common and gruesome form was the Bubonic Plague. Symptoms consisted of high fevers, delirious actions, feeling fatigued or lethargic, and within days black, walnut-sized blisters infected the armpits, neck, thighs, and groin before killing the patient. The symptoms usually lasted about three days and by the end of the fourth day, the patient was dead. Swollen lymph nodes were called “Buboes” giving the Bubonic Plague its name. The second form was the Pneumonic Plague, where the organism settles into the

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lungs. Over a four to five day period the lungs liquify, just to be coughed up and kill the carrier. The third form was Septicemic Plague, which infected the blood. Essentially, the patient would be bleeding to death. 12

“The bubonic plague lit the fire, the Pneumonic plague fanned the flame…” 13

With the heat of summer the plague thrived and because the illness was so contagious, if anyone in a family was caught with symptoms, the whole house was shut in. Even if the other members of the family didn’t have the plague, the risk of spreading the disease was too high. The doors were locked and painted with a red cross. 14 A sign meaning there was no hope for the family and nobody was to go in unless it was to gather the corpses.

Treating the Plague

Treating the illness was a different story; doctors fled once they realized how unstoppable the disease was, so as to not catch it themselves. Locals without any medical education, ended up tending to the people. Leeches were commonly used to bleed out the patient, because it was believed that ridding the tainted blood


would take care of the illness for good. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. Since doctors had fled the scene, people would turn to apothecaries, who, unlike doctors, weren’t afraid to go into sickly homes. They wore special outfits to keep from contracting the disease themselves. It consisted of heavily waxed leather garments, and beaked masks, stuffed with herbs to ward off any infection. A method recommended by the Royal College of Physicians\textsuperscript{15} was to burn the bubo. An onion was hollowed out, roasted in ashes, then filled with Treacle, soap, and scorpion oil or olive oil. The hallowed onion was then pressed against the bubo in hopes to burn it off.\textsuperscript{16} There weren't any specifically proven ways to treat the plague that actually helped the patient.\textsuperscript{17} Other times human excrement or human blood was rubbed onto the ‘tumor’ to relieve pain. It was also deemed that syphilis and pox gave immunity.\textsuperscript{18}Alas, they were all in vain, meeting no success. Treating the patient wasn't the only thing that needed to be dealt with.

**Impact of the Plague**


\textsuperscript{17} “Treatment of Plague.” *History | infectiousdiseases.edwardworthlibrary.ie/plague/treatment-of-plague/.*

Society was ultimately impacted by the epidemic, the churches had lost their authority and other aspects of culture was dismissed. The mass of people shut themselves behind locked doors shunning themselves from others.

With the number of people dying each day, the epidemic was now figuring out where to bury those bodies. Pits were made so multiple burials could be made at once, compactly. Not only that but holding funerals was important to Londoners. The church was impacted with the funerals and burials each day, they couldn’t keep up. The church was also affected when the priests were frequently in contact with the plague, caring for locals. Many members were lost and with religious beliefs, believing that this was the hand of God and people needed to atone for their sins, the authority of the church weakened. A collective amount of people concluded that minority groups were the cause and religious cults rose against the church’s jurisdiction. Cults hunted them down and murdered these innocent people, saying that their sins caused the pestilence. One group, the Jewish race, was blamed harshly moreover in 1349, 200 Jews were burned alive.

Others decided to drink and be merry in the situation ‘for tomorrow we may die’. They did this because they knew death was unavoidable in urban cities.


21 Ibid
Funerals were important to Londoners and the church couldn’t always keep up. The members of the church were in frequent contact with the ailment and soon those members were taken by the plague.\(^{22}\)

Farming in Europe had changed forever during the plague. With hundreds of deaths a week, there was a labor shortage and the grain farms fell. The remaining workers pressed for a raise and the farming economy turned to raising livestock, such as sheep and cattle, because they were much less labor intensive. With that, the overall price of stock dropped to an all time low.\(^{23}\) Along with the population of London.

In the urban area, the plague was virtually unavoidable. With housing so crammed together and the famine of the cities rising. People knew that death was coming and decided to spend their last days the way that they wanted. Whether it was atoning for their sins or drinking till sunrise.\(^{24}\)

The figure of death was commonly found in the Arts. Featured in paintings, drawings, and a large theme in medieval literature\(^ {25}\). With the plague came the introduction to the *Danse Macabre*, the *Dance of Death*, an idea where skeletons escort humans to their grave in a lively dance. This was presented in a lot of art during the Black Death to represent the mortality rate that was continually rising.\(^ {26}\)

\(^{22}\) Ibid
\(^{23}\) Ibid
\(^{24}\) Ibid
\(^{25}\) Ibid
Stopping the Epidemic

No one could see an end to this monstrous disaster. With a lower population, the filth in the city reduced. Authorities decided to enforce laws in order to keep London clean. Keeping the city clean would hopefully rid its famine. Leaders also thought it best to rid the street population of cats and dogs. They held a massacre and destroyed over 40,000 dogs and twice as many cats. Hiring proper servants tripled after the plague with higher pay, to which they kept London overall cleaner.

London After the Plague

Winter cold killed off the bacillus and after houses were clean of plague for 40 days, a white cross was painted over the red. It took 200 years for London to repopulate. With that and immigration, London grew to be a largely populated


28 Ibid


Grain farming started up again and people weren’t stuck in a position of starving. More and more laws were made to prevent ailments from growing, like, no one is allowed to sell meat that they ‘skinned by candlelight’. Meaning that you weren’t granted to sell your meat unless you skinned and sold it in the open markets.  

**London’s Triumph**

London, susceptible to pestilence and a filthy city faced the Black Death with blood and tears. London today is considered one of the greatest cities in the world. The tragedy being the mass destruction that the plague caused. Millions of people died, nations were completely wiped out, and religious standpoints fell. Yet, through the worst of it, London pulled through with an eye-opening view. London became one of the greatest cities on earth. A place where people could to look for work, a prosperous city with large trading ports and harbours. To infer, Black Death shaped what is the great city of London today.

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Annotated Bibliography
MLA8

**PRIMARY SOURCES**


I classified this source as primary due to the quotes and because the film itself is grounded around Samuel Pepys daily journaling and Henry Dorsett's documenting of 'every penny perish spent'. This documentary focused on a very specific alley area of London. I gained plenty of information and insight on a lifestyle during the plague.


Nathaniel Hodgens helped medical historians understand what happened during the recurrence of Black Death. He had journaled his theories and studies which he performed on patients. RCP London kept these documents in hoped to educate others and grasp onto a piece of history.


Nathaniel Hodges published a project journal named ‘Loimologia’ in 1672. He explained his theories and studies performed on patients. He has many other works, but this work clearly states the contagion of the plague along with its origin.
SECONDARY SOURCES


Shiya Ribowsky, a forensic medical investigator, discusses the tragedy of the 14th century. He talks about how the Yersinia Pestis spread, the contagion of the plague.


A brief history of the ‘Danse Macabre’, is exactly as it sounds. This was mainly used to fact check any misconceptions in the several documentaries I watched.


The ‘Bill of Mortality’ was a way for every citizen to understand the situation of the death toll. The numbers and specifics of illness taking people. It tried to help everyone prevent any upcoming high death toll illnesses.


The plague impacted London (along with every other place it hit), and this educational film gives visual aid to the tragedy of it.


This was probably my most used source, Dan Snow who narrated and walked through the documentary film did live demonstrations of everyday life in Medieval London. This BBC series goes through the filthy cities of the world whether its historical or not.


A documentary film about the ‘return of the Black Death’, this film really gave a good description between the impacts of bubonic plague and the pneumonic plague.

I've always known about the bubonic plague and how it kills you, but I never thought about the treatments doctors must have tried during the medieval times. This gave me information on what doctors like Nath. Hodgens, M.D. wrote in his studies.


Symptoms of the bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic plagues. The visual aid of what the stages of plague did to the body.