

THE BLACK DEATH

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I: The plague in continental Europe

1. The arrival of the plague

Gabriele de' Mussis was a lawyer of Piacenza who died in 1356. His *Historia de Morbo* is the main source for the arrival of the plague in Europe, although it is not true, as his first editor believed, that de' Mussis was actually a passenger on the ship which brought the plague to Genoa – he is now known to have remained in Piacenza throughout the epidemic. The factual details which de' Mussis provides have often been quoted, but this complete translation restores them to their moral framework: an extended meditation on the plague as an expression of divine anger.

A. W. Henschel, 'Document zur Geschichte des schwarzen Todes', in *Archiv für die gesamte Medicin* ed. Heinrich Haeser, II, Jena, 1841, pp. 45-57. I have checked Henschel's printed version against a microfilm of the manuscript (University of Wrocław Library, Ms R 262, fos 74-77v) and made a few emendations.

In the name of God, amen. Here begins an account of the disease or mortality which occurred in 1348, put together by Gabriele de' Mussis of Piacenza.

May this stand as a perpetual reminder to everyone, now living and yet to be born, how almighty God, king of heaven, lord of the living and of the dead, who holds all things in his hand, looked down from heaven and saw the entire human race wallowing in the mire of manifold wickedness, enmeshed in wrongdoing, pursuing numberless vices, drowning in a sea of depravity because of a limitless capacity for evil, bereft of all goodness, not fearing the judgements of God, and chasing after everything evil, regardless of how hateful and loathsome it was. Seeing such things he called out to the earth: 'What are you doing, held captive by gangs of worthless men, soiled with the filth of sinners? Are you totally helpless? What are you doing? Why do you not demand human blood in vengeance for this wrongdoing? Why do you tolerate my enemies and adversaries? When confronted by such wantonness you should have swallowed my opponents. Make yourself ready to exercise the vengeance which lies within your power.'

And the earth replied, 'I, established by your power, shall open and swallow up the countless criminals as soon as you give the word. When the enraged Judge gives the signal, with violent thunder from

heaven, and leads the elements, the planets, the stars and the orders of angels against the human race in an unspeakable judgement, enlisting all forms of life to wipe out the sinners at one savage stroke, I shall refuse the usual harvest, I shall not yield grain, wine and oil.'

God said, 'The exercise of justice belongs to me. I am the life of the living. I bear the keys of death. I bring retribution, giving each individual his due. My hands shaped the heavens. I formed light, created the world and adorned it. Oh you sinner, wretched and yet more wretched, why have you chosen to resist me and to scorn all my commands, laws and judgements? Where is the faith of baptism and the price of my redemption? When I fashioned my creation I never imagined that you would fall into these snares and come to this end. I had prepared heaven for you, not hell, and look where you have brought yourself. When you compelled me, who upheld the spheres, to descend into the womb of a virgin I endured hunger, thirst, toil, crucifixion and death – and your deeds, you ingrate, condemn me still to the cross. I ought to have punished you with eternal death, but pity conquered me. Behold, I have been merciful towards you, and you have barely acknowledged the salvation you have gained through me. You are unworthy of eternal bliss, showing yourself instead to be worthy of the torments of hell. Leave my earth, I abandon you to be torn into pieces by dragons. You shall go into the shadows, where there will be perpetual wailing and gnashing of teeth. Now disaster is at hand; your strength must have an end. The sight of the vanities and lecheries to which you have abandoned yourself has provoked me to fury. May evil spirits arise with the power to devour you. May you have no escape from this time forward.

'I pronounce these judgements: may your joys be turned to mourning, your prosperity be shaken by adversity, the course of your life be passed in never-ending terror. Behold the image of death. Behold I open the infernal floodgates. Let hunger strike down those it seizes; let peace be driven from the ends of the earth; let dissensions arise; let kingdoms be consumed in detestable war; let mercy perish throughout the world; let disasters, plagues, violence, robberies, strife and all kinds of wickedness arise. Next, at my command, let the planets poison the air and corrupt the whole earth; let there be universal grief and lamentation. Let the sharp arrows of sudden death have dominion throughout the world. Let no one be spared, either for their sex or their age; let the innocent perish with the guilty and no one escape.

'Because those I appointed to be shepherds of the world have behaved

towards their flocks like ravening wolves, and do not preach the word of God, but neglect all the Lord's business and have barely even urged repentance, I shall take a savage vengeance on them. I shall wipe them from the face of the earth. The enemy and adversary will seize their hidden treasure. They, along with all other wrongdoers, will bear the heavy burden of their offences. Their office – acquired through deceit – will not avail them, and because they feared men rather than God, and valued their grace more highly, they will be branded as hypocrites. Religion, turned out of doors, will grieve. The treacherous and maleficent fellowship of priests and clergy, imperilled by their own failings, will be destroyed. No one will be given rest, poisoned arrows will strike everyone, fevers will throw down the proud, and incurable disease will strike like lightning.'

After this warning had been given to mortals, disease was sent forth; the quivering spear of the Almighty was aimed everywhere and infected the whole human race with its pitiless wounds. Orion, that cruel star, and the tail of the dragon and the angel hurling vials of poison into the sea, and the appalling weather of Saturn were given leave to harm land and sea, men and trees; advancing from east to west with plague-bearing steps they poured out the poisoned vessels throughout the countries of the world, leaving fiery tokens on the sick.¹ And so the terrible violence of death, running through the world threatening ruin, devoured mortals by a sudden blow, as I shall describe below. Mourn, mourn, you peoples, and call upon the mercy of God.

In 1346, in the countries of the East, countless numbers of Tartars and Saracens were struck down by a mysterious illness which brought

1 This rather clumsy passage mixes apocalyptic and astrological imagery. The angel pouring out the vial of poison evokes the seven angels with the seven vials full of the wrath of God in Apocalypse 15-16. De' Mussis emphasises the identification with his comment that they were permitted to harm land and sea, men and trees – a reference to Apocalypse 7.2-3 where an angel ascending from the east forbids the four angels to harm the earth, the sea and the trees until the chosen of God have been sealed.

The head and tail of the dragon are the points in the heavens where the course of the moon crosses the ecliptic (the circle which defines the path along which the sun seems to travel) – the head of the dragon in the moon's northward journey, the tail when it is travelling south. They intensify (for good and ill respectively) the power of any planet situated in the same house of the zodiac. De' Mussis is not referring to a specific astrological conjunction here but is simply using the term, along with Saturn (the most harmful of the planets) and Orion (a constellation and not, as de' Mussis has it, a star) as examples of malevolent astrological forces. For more on medieval astrology see the introduction to Part Two.

sudden death. Within these countries broad regions, far-spreading provinces, magnificent kingdoms, cities, towns and settlements, ground down by illness and devoured by dreadful death, were soon stripped of their inhabitants. An eastern settlement under the rule of the Tartars called Tana, which lay to the north of Constantinople and was much frequented by Italian merchants, was totally abandoned after an incident there which led to its being besieged and attacked by hordes of Tartars who gathered in a short space of time. The Christian merchants, who had been driven out by force, were so terrified of the power of the Tartars that, to save themselves and their belongings, they fled in an armed ship to Caffa, a settlement in the same part of the world which had been founded long ago by the Genoese.²

Oh God! See how the heathen Tartar races, pouring together from all sides, suddenly invested the city of Caffa and besieged the trapped Christians there for almost three years. There, hemmed in by an immense army, they could hardly draw breath, although food could be shipped in, which offered them some hope. But behold, the whole army was affected by a disease which overran the Tartars and killed thousands upon thousands every day. It was as though arrows were raining down from heaven to strike and crush the Tartars' arrogance. All medical advice and attention was useless; the Tartars died as soon as the signs of disease appeared on their bodies: swellings in the armpit or groin caused by coagulating humours, followed by a putrid fever.

The dying Tartars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realising that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in the siege. But they ordered corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside. What seemed like mountains of dead were thrown into the city, and the Christians could not hide or flee or escape from them, although they dumped as many of the bodies as they could in the sea. And soon the rotting corpses tainted the air and poisoned the water supply, and the stench was so overwhelming that hardly one in several thousand was in a position to flee the remains of the Tartar army. Moreover one infected man could carry the poison to others, and infect people and places with the disease by look alone. No one knew, or could discover, a means of defence.

² Tana (now Azov), lay at the northern end of the Sea of Azov; it was abandoned in 1343 but subsequently recolonised. Caffa (now Feodosiya), on the Crimean peninsula, was one of the chief Black Sea ports.

Thus almost everyone who had been in the East, or in the regions to the south and north, fell victim to sudden death after contracting this pestilential disease, as if struck by a lethal arrow which raised a tumour on their bodies. The scale of the mortality and the form which it took persuaded those who lived, weeping and lamenting, through the bitter events of 1346 to 1348 – the Chinese, Indians, Persians, Medes, Kurds, Armenians, Cilicians, Georgians, Mesopotamians, Nubians, Ethiopians, Turks, Egyptians, Arabs, Saracens and Greeks (for almost all the East has been affected) – that the last judgement had come.

Now it is time that we passed from east to west, to discuss all the things which we ourselves have seen, or known, or consider likely on the basis of the evidence, and, by so doing, to show forth the terrifying judgements of God. Listen everybody, and it will set tears pouring from your eyes. For the Almighty has said: 'I shall wipe man, whom I created, off the face of the earth. Because he is flesh and blood, let him be turned to dust and ashes. My spirit shall not remain among man.'

– 'What are you thinking of, merciful God, thus to destroy your creation and the human race; to order and command its sudden annihilation in this way? What has become of your mercy; the faith of our fathers; the blessed virgin, who holds sinners in her lap; the precious blood of the martyrs; the worthy army of confessors and virgins; the whole host of paradise, who pray ceaselessly for sinners; the most precious death of Christ on the cross and our wonderful redemption? Kind God, I beg that your anger may cease, that you do not destroy sinners in this way, and, because you desire mercy rather than sacrifice, that you turn away all evil from the penitent, and do not allow the just to be condemned with the unjust.'

– 'I hear you, sinner, dropping words into my ears. I bid you weep.³ The time for mercy has passed. I, God, am called to vengeance. It is my pleasure to take revenge on sin and wickedness. I shall give my signs to the dying, let them take steps to provide for the health of their souls.'

As it happened, among those who escaped from Caffa by boat were a few sailors who had been infected with the poisonous disease. Some boats were bound for Genoa, others went to Venice and to other

³ This passage incorporates a slightly strained pun. The sinner is dropping [*instill-antem*] words into God's ear. God orders him instead to weep [*stille* – an error for *stilla*], an echo of Job 16.21: *ad Deum stillat oculus meus* – my eye pours out [tears] to God.

Christian areas. When the sailors reached these places and mixed with the people there, it was as if they had brought evil spirits with them: every city, every settlement, every place was poisoned by the contagious pestilence, and their inhabitants, both men and women, died suddenly. And when one person had contracted the illness, he poisoned his whole family even as he fell and died, so that those preparing to bury his body were seized by death in the same way. Thus death entered through the windows, and as cities and towns were depopulated their inhabitants mourned their dead neighbours.

– Speak, Genoa, of what you have done. Describe, Sicily and Isole Pelagie, the judgements of God.⁴ Recount, Venice, Tuscany and the whole of Italy, what you have done.

– We Genoese and Venetians bear the responsibility for revealing the judgements of God. Alas, once our ships had brought us to port we went to our homes. And because we had been delayed by tragic events, and because among us there were scarcely ten survivors from a thousand sailors, relations, kinsmen and neighbours flocked to us from all sides. But, to our anguish, we were carrying the darts of death. While they hugged and kissed us we were spreading poison from our lips even as we spoke.

When they returned to their own folk, these people speedily poisoned the whole family, and within three days the afflicted family would succumb to the dart of death. Mass funerals had to be held and there was not enough room to bury the growing numbers of dead. Priests and doctors, upon whom most of the care of the sick devolved, had their hands full in visiting the sick and, alas, by the time they left they too had been infected and followed the dead immediately to the grave. Oh fathers! Oh mothers! Oh children and wives! For a long time prosperity preserved you from harm, but one grave now covers you and the unfortunate alike. You who enjoyed the world and upon whom pleasure and prosperity smiled, who mingled joys with follies, the same tomb receives you and you are handed over as food for worms. Oh hard death, impious death, bitter death, cruel death, who divides parents, divorces spouses, parts children, separates brothers and sisters. We bewail our wretched plight. The past has devoured us, the present is gnawing our entrails, the future threatens yet greater

⁴ Isole Pelagie: strictly, the islands lying between Sicily and Tunis but the phrase literally means Islands of the Sea and de' Mussis may be referring to all the Mediterranean islands.

dangers. What we laboured to amass with feverish activity, we have lost in one hour.

Where are the fine clothes of gilded youth? Where is nobility and the courage of fighters, where the mature wisdom of elders and the regal throng of great ladies, where the piles of treasure and precious stones? Alas! All have been destroyed; thrust aside by death. To whom shall we turn, who can help us? To flee is impossible, to hide futile. Cities, fortresses, fields, woods, highways and rivers are ringed by thieves – which is to say by evil spirits, the executioners of the supreme Judge, preparing endless punishments for us all.

We can unfold a terrifying event which happened when an army was camped near Genoa. Four of the soldiers left the force in search of plunder and made their way to Rivarolo on the coast, where the disease had killed all the inhabitants. Finding the houses shut up, and no one about, they broke into one of the houses and stole a fleece which they found on a bed. They then rejoined the army and on the following night the four of them bedded down under the fleece. When morning comes it finds them dead. As a result everyone panicked, and thereafter nobody would use the goods and clothes of the dead, or even handle them, but rejected them outright.

Scarcely one in seven of the Genoese survived. In Venice, where an inquiry was held into the mortality, it was found that more than 70% of the people had died, and that within a short period 20 out of 24 excellent physicians had died. The rest of Italy, Sicily and Apulia and the neighbouring regions maintain that they have been virtually emptied of inhabitants. The people of Florence, Pisa and Lucca, finding themselves bereft of their fellow residents, emphasise their losses. The Roman Curia at Avignon, the provinces on both sides of the Rhône, Spain, France, and the Empire cry up their griefs and disasters – all of which makes it extraordinarily difficult for me to give an accurate picture.

By contrast, what befell the Saracens can be established from trustworthy accounts. In the city of Babylon alone (the heart of the Sultan's power), 480,000 of his subjects are said to have been carried off by disease in less than three months in 1348 – and this is known from the Sultan's register which records the names of the dead, because he receives a gold bezant for each person buried. I am silent about Damascus and his other cities, where the number of dead was infinite. In the other countries of the East, which are so vast that it takes three years to ride across them and which have a population of 10,000 for

every one inhabitant of the west, it is credibly reported that countless people have died.

Everyone has a responsibility to keep some record of the disease and the deaths, and because I am myself from Piacenza I have been urged to write more about what happened there in 1348. Some Genoese, whom the disease had forced to flee, crossed the Alps in search of a safe place to live and so came to Lombardy. Some had merchandise with them and sold it while they were staying in Bobbio, whereupon the purchaser, their host, and his whole household, together with several neighbours, were infected and died suddenly of the disease. One man there, wanting to make his will, died along with the notary, the priest who heard his confession, and the people summoned to witness the will, and they were all buried together on the following day. The scale of the disaster was such that virtually all the inhabitants were subsequently struck down by sudden death and only a tiny handful remained alive.

Another of the Genoese, who was already suffering from the illness, managed to reach Piacenza. Finding himself unwell, he sought out his close friend Fulco della Croce, who gave him shelter. He immediately took to his bed and died, and then straightaway Fulco, with his whole household and many of the neighbours, died too. And that, briefly, is how this disease (spreading rapidly throughout the world) arrived in Piacenza. I don't know where to begin. Cries and laments arise on all sides. Day after day one sees the Cross and the Host⁵ being carried about the city, and countless dead being buried. The ensuing mortality was so great that people could scarcely snatch breath. The living made preparations for their burial, and because there was not enough room for individual graves, pits had to be dug in colonnades and piazzas, where nobody had ever been buried before. It often happened that man and wife, father and son, mother and daughter, and soon the whole household and many neighbours, were buried together in one place. The same thing happened in Castell' Arquato and Viguzzolo and in the other towns, villages, cities and settlements, and last of all in the Val Tidone, where they had hitherto escaped the plague.

Very many people died. One Oberto de Sasso, who had come from the infected neighbourhood around the church of the Franciscans, wished to make his will and accordingly summoned a notary and his neighbours as witnesses, all of whom, more than sixty of them, died

⁵ The consecrated Eucharistic wafer. The reference is to priests taking the last sacrament to the dying.

soon after. At this time the Dominican friar Syfredo de Bardis, a man of prudence and great learning who had visited the Holy Sepulchre, also died, along with 23 brothers of the same house. There also died within a short time the Franciscan friar Bertolino Coxadocha of Piacenza, renowned for his learning and many virtues, along with 24 brothers of the same house, nine of them on one day; seven of the Augustinians; the Carmelite friar Francesco Todischi with six of his brethren; four of the order of Mary; more than sixty prelates and parish priests from the city and district of Piacenza; many nobles; countless young people; numberless women, particularly those who were pregnant. It is too distressing to recite any more, or to lay bare the wounds inflicted by so great a disaster.

Let all creation tremble with fear before the judgement of God. Let human frailty submit to its creator. May a greater grief be kindled in all hearts, and tears well up in all eyes as future ages hear what happened in this disaster. When one person lay sick in a house no one would come near. Even dear friends would hide themselves away, weeping. The physician would not visit. The priest, panic-stricken, administered the sacraments with fear and trembling.

Listen to the tearful voices of the sick: 'Have pity, have pity, my friends. At least say something, now that the hand of God has touched me.'

'Oh father, why have you abandoned me? Do you forget that I am your child?'

'Mother, where have you gone? Why are you now so cruel to me when only yesterday you were so kind? You fed me at your breast and carried me within your womb for nine months.'

'My children, whom I brought up with toil and sweat, why have you run away?'

Man and wife reached out to each other, 'Alas, once we slept happily together but now are separated and wretched.'

And when the sick were in the throes of death, they still called out piteously to their family and neighbours, 'Come here. I'm thirsty, bring me a drink of water. I'm still alive. Don't be frightened. Perhaps I won't die. Please hold me tight, hug my wasted body. You ought to be holding me in your arms.'

At this, as everyone else kept their distance, somebody might take pity and leave a candle burning by the bed head as he fled. And when the

victim had breathed his last, it was often the mother who shrouded her son and placed him in the coffin, or the husband who did the same for his wife, for everybody else refused to touch the dead body. No prayer, trumpet or bell summoned friends and neighbours to the funeral, nor was mass performed. Degraded and poverty-stricken wretches were paid to carry the great and noble to burial, for the social equals of the dead person dared not attend the funeral for fear of being struck down themselves. Men were borne to burial by day and night, since needs must, and with only a short service. In many cases the houses of the dead had to be shut up, for no one dared enter them or touch the belongings of the dead. No one knew what to do. Everyone, one by one, fell in turn to death's dart.

What a tragic and wretched sight! Who would not shed sympathetic tears? Who would not be shaken by the disastrous plague and the terrors of death? But our hearts have grown hard now that we have no future to look forward to. Alas. Our inheritance has been diverted to strangers, our homes to outsiders. It is only the survivors who can enjoy the relief of tears.

I am overwhelmed, I can't go on. Everywhere one turns there is death and bitterness to be described. The hand of the Almighty strikes repeatedly, to greater and greater effect. The terrible judgement gains in power as time goes by.

— What shall we do? Kind Jesus, receive the souls of the dead, avert your gaze from our sins and blot out all our iniquities.

We know that whatever we suffer is the just reward of our sins. Now, therefore, when the Lord is enraged, embrace acts of penance, so that you do not stray from the right path and perish. Let the proud be humbled. Let misers, who withheld alms from the poor, blush for shame. Let the envious become zealous in almsgiving. Let lechers put aside their filthy habits and distinguish themselves in honest living. Let the raging and wrathful restrain themselves from violence. Let gluttons temper their appetites by fasting. Let the slaves of sloth arise and dress themselves in good works. Let adolescents and youths abandon their present delight in following fashion. Let there be good faith and equity among judges, and respect for the law among merchants. Let pettifogging lawyers study and grow wise before they put pen to paper. Let members of religious orders abandon hypocrisy. Let the dignity of prelates be put to better use. Let all of you hurry to set your feet on the way of salvation. And let the overweening vanity

of great ladies, which so easily turns into voluptuousness, be bridled. It was against their arrogance that Isaiah inveighed: 'Because the daughters of Sion are haughty, and have walked with stretched out necks and wanton glances of their eyes, and made a noise as they walked with their feet, and moved in a set pace: the Lord will make bald the crown of the head of the daughters of Sion: and the Lord will discover their hair. In that day, the Lord will take away the ornaments of shoes, and little moons: and chains, and necklaces, and bracelets, and bonnets and bodkins, and ornaments of the legs, and tablets, and sweet balls, and earrings: and rings, and jewels hanging on the forehead: and changes of apparel, and short cloaks, and fine linen, and crispering pins: and looking glasses, and lawns and headbands, and fine veils. And instead of a sweet smell, there shall be a stench: and instead of a girdle, a cord. And instead of curled hair, baldness: and instead of a stomacher, haircloth. Thy fairest men also shall fall by the sword: and thy valiant ones in battle. And her gates shall lament and mourn: and she shall sit desolate on the ground' [Isaiah 3.16-26]. This was directed against the pride of ladies and young people.

For the rest, so that the conditions, causes and symptoms of this pestilential disease should be made plain to all, I have decided to set them out in writing. Those of both sexes who were in health, and in no fear of death, were struck by four savage blows to the flesh. First, out of the blue, a kind of chilly stiffness troubled their bodies. They felt a tingling sensation, as if they were being pricked by the points of arrows. The next stage was a fearsome attack which took the form of an extremely hard, solid boil. In some people this developed under the armpit and in others in the groin between the scrotum and the body. As it grew more solid, its burning heat caused the patients to fall into an acute and putrid fever, with severe headaches. As it intensified its extreme bitterness could have various effects. In some cases it gave rise to an intolerable stench. In others it brought vomiting of blood, or swellings near the place from which the corrupt humour arose: on the back, across the chest, near the thigh. Some people lay as if in a drunken stupor and could not be roused. Behold the swellings, the warning signs sent by the Lord.⁶ All these people were in danger of dying. Some died on the very day the illness took possession of them,

6 Another pun: *bull*a is a swelling, but it is also the word for the papal seal, and hence for a papal document (or bull). De' Mussis is playing on the idea of the swelling characteristic of the plague being God's seal, notifying the victim of his imminent fate.

others on the next day, others – the majority – between the third and fifth day. There was no known remedy for the vomiting of blood. Those who fell into a coma, or suffered a swelling or the stink of corruption very rarely escaped. But from the fever it was sometimes possible to make a recovery.

I have, however, known a case where, although there was a stench arising from the patient, the use of the best theriac expelled the poison and prevented it proving fatal.⁷ If the tumid humour revealed itself in numbness, but not by any external growths, it was a sign of death, because then the poison, passing into the veins of the heart, smothered the patient. But if swellings appeared externally, on the upper or lower body, the patient might be rescued. He could be cured by immediately letting blood from the appropriate part of his body: from his arm if the upper part of the body was affected; from the tendon of the foot if it was the lower part which was affected. When this was followed up with medicinal means, using mallow or a plaster of marsh mallow to ripen the boil and draw the humours from the seat of the illness, and then cutting out the boil, the patients received the blessing of health. But if the bitter fever persisted it stole the life of its victims. It can be asserted, on the clear evidence of experience, that the illness was more dangerous during an eclipse, because then its effect was enhanced, and it was at such times that people died in the greatest numbers.

In the East, in Cathay, which is the greatest country in the world, horrible and terrifying signs appeared. Serpents and toads fell in a thick rain, entered dwellings and devoured numberless people, injecting them with poison and gnawing them with their teeth. In the South, in the Indies, earthquakes cast down whole towns and cities were consumed by fire from heaven. The hot fumes of the fire burnt up infinite numbers of people, and in some places it rained blood, and stones fell from the sky.

Truly, then was a time of bitterness and grief, which served to turn men to the Lord. I shall recount what happened. A warning was given by a certain holy person, who received it in a vision, that in cities, towns and other settlements, everyone, male and female alike, should gather in their parish church on three consecutive days and, each with a lighted candle in their hand, hear with great devotion the mass of the

7 Theriac was an ointment, made from snake flesh and other ingredients, which was believed to draw poison from the body. De' Mussis' discussion of the medical treatment of plague is rather obscure and I have drawn on contemporary medical treatises in making sense of it.

Blessed Anastasia, which is normally performed at dawn on Christmas day, and they should humbly beg for mercy, so that they might be delivered from the disease through the merits of the holy mass. Other people sought deliverance through the mediation of a blessed martyr; and others humbly turned to other saints, so that they might escape the abomination of disease. For among the aforesaid martyrs, some, as stories relate, are said to have died from repeated blows, and it was therefore the general opinion that they would be able to protect people against the arrows of death. Finally, in 1350, the most holy Pope Clement ordained a general indulgence, to be valid for a year, which remitted penance and guilt to all who were truly penitent and confessed. And as a result a numberless multitude of people made the pilgrimage to Rome, to visit with great reverence and devotion the basilicas of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul and St John.

Oh, most dearly beloved, let us therefore not be like vipers, growing ever more wicked, but let us rather hold up our hands to heaven to beg for mercy on us all, for who but God shall have mercy on us?⁸ With this, I make an end. May the heavenly physician heal our wounds – our spiritual rather than our bodily wounds. To whom be the blessing and the praise and the glory for ever and ever, Amen.

2. The plague in Florence

The introduction to the *Decameron* of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) is the most famous literary treatment of the Black Death. As Boccaccio himself emphasises, however, the description is based on his own experiences in Florence and the picture he gives can be paralleled in chronicle accounts of the period.

This translation by G. H. McWilliam is taken from the Penguin Classics edition of the *Decameron*, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 50–58.

I say, then, that the sum of thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had elapsed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God, when the noble city of Florence, which for its great beauty excels all others in Italy, was visited by the deadly pestilence. Some say that it descended upon the human race through the influence of the heavenly bodies, others that it was a punishment signifying God's righteous anger at our iniquitous way of life. But whatever its cause, it had originated

⁸ Vipers were thought the most villainous of creatures, and proverbially ungrateful – hence the expression (which derives from Aesop's *Fables*) to nourish a viper in one's bosom.

some years earlier in the East, where it had claimed countless lives before it unhappily spread westward, growing in strength as it swept relentlessly on from one place to the next.

In the face of its onrush, all the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing. Large quantities of refuse were cleared out of the city by officials specially appointed for the purpose, all sick persons were forbidden entry, and numerous instructions were issued for safeguarding the people's health, but all to no avail. Nor were the countless petitions humbly directed to God by the pious, whether by means of formal processions or in any other guise, any less ineffectual. For in the early spring of the year we have mentioned, the plague began, in a terrifying and extraordinary manner, to make its disastrous effects apparent. It did not take the form it had assumed in the East, where if anyone bled from the nose it was an obvious portent of certain death. On the contrary, its earliest symptom, in men and women alike, was the appearance of certain swellings in the groin or the armpit, some of which were egg-shaped whilst others were roughly the size of the common apple. Sometimes the swellings were large, sometimes not so large, and they were referred to by the populace as *gavòcciolì*. From the two areas already mentioned, this deadly *gavòcciolo* would begin to spread, and within a short time it would appear at random all over the body. Later on, the symptoms of the disease changed, and many people began to find dark blotches and bruises on their arms, thighs, and other parts of the body, sometimes large and few in number, at other times tiny and closely spaced. These, to anyone unfortunate enough to contract them, were just as infallible a sign that he would die as the *gavòcciolo* had been earlier, and as indeed it still was.

Against these maladies, it seemed that all the advice of physicians and all the power of medicine were profitless and unavailing. Perhaps the nature of the illness was such that it allowed no remedy; or perhaps those people who were treating the illness (whose numbers had increased enormously because the ranks of the qualified were invaded by people, both men and women, who had never received any training in medicine), being ignorant of its causes, were not prescribing the appropriate cure. At all events, few of those who caught it ever recovered, and in most cases death occurred within three days from the appearance of the symptoms we have described, some people dying more rapidly than others, the majority without any fever or other complications.

But what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever

those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to be placed within its reach. Nor was this the full extent of its evil, for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had any dealings with the sick, making them ill or visiting an equally horrible death upon them, but it also seemed to transfer the sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by its victims.

It is a remarkable story that I have to relate. And were it not for the fact that I am one of many people who saw it with their own eyes, I would scarcely dare to believe it, let alone commit it to paper, even though I had heard it from a person whose word I could trust. The plague I have been describing was of so contagious a nature that very often it visibly did more than simply pass from one person to another. In other words, whenever an animal other than a human being touched anything belonging to a person who had been stricken or exterminated by the disease, it not only caught the sickness, but died from it almost at once. To all of this, as I have just said, my own eyes bore witness on more than one occasion. One day, for instance, the rags of a pauper who had died from the disease were thrown into the street, where they attracted the attention of two pigs. In their wonted fashion, the pigs first of all gave the rags a thorough mauling with their snouts after which they took them between their teeth and shook them against their cheeks. And within a short time they began to writhe as though they had been poisoned, then they both dropped dead to the ground, spreadeagled upon the rags that had brought about their undoing.

These things, and many others of a similar or even worse nature, caused various fears and fantasies to take root in the minds of those who were still alive and well. And almost without exception, they took a single and very inhuman precaution, namely to avoid or run away from the sick and their belongings, by which means they all thought that their own health would be preserved.

Some people were of the opinion that a sober and abstemious mode of living considerably reduced the risk of infection. They therefore formed themselves into groups and lived in isolation from everyone else. Having withdrawn to a comfortable abode where there were no sick persons, they locked themselves in and settled down to a peaceable existence, consuming modest quantities of delicate foods and precious wines and avoiding all excesses. They refrained from speaking to outsiders, refused to receive news of the dead or sick, and

entertained themselves with music and whatever other amusements they were able to devise.

Others took the opposite view, and maintained that an infallible way of warding off this appalling evil was to drink heavily, enjoy life to the full, go round singing and merrymaking, gratify all of one's cravings whenever the opportunity offered, and shrug the whole thing off as one enormous joke. Moreover, they practised what they preached to the best of their ability, for they would visit one tavern after another, drinking all day and night to immoderate excess; or alternatively (and this was their more frequent custom), they would do their drinking in various private houses, but only in the ones where the conversation was restricted to subjects that were pleasant or entertaining. Such places were easy to find, for people behaved as though their days were numbered, and treated their belongings and their own persons with equal abandon. Hence most houses had become common property, and any passing stranger could make himself at home as naturally as though he were the rightful owner. But for all their riotous manner of living, these people always took good care to avoid any contact with the sick.

In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city. For like everybody else, those ministers and executors of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties. Hence everyone was free to behave as he pleased.

There were many other people who steered a middle course between the two already mentioned, neither restricting their diet to the same degree as the first group, nor indulging so freely as the second in drinking and other forms of wantonness, but simply doing no more than satisfy their appetite. Instead of incarcerating themselves, these people moved about freely, holding in their hands a posy of flowers, or fragrant herbs, or one of a wide range of spices, which they applied at frequent intervals to their nostrils, thinking it an excellent idea to fortify the brain with smells of that particular sort; for the stench of dead bodies, sickness, and medicines seemed to fill and pollute the whole of the atmosphere.

Some people, pursuing what was possibly the safer alternative, callously maintained that there was no better or more efficacious remedy against a plague than to run away from it. Swayed by this argument, and sparing no thought for anyone but themselves, large

numbers of men and women abandoned their city, their homes, their relatives, their estates and their belongings, and headed for the countryside, either in Florentine territory or, better still, abroad. It was as though they imagined that the wrath of God would not unleash this plague against men for their iniquities irrespective of where they happened to be, but would only be aroused against those who found themselves within the city walls; or possibly they assumed that the whole of the population would be exterminated and that the city's last hour had come.

Of the people who held these various opinions, not all of them died. Nor, however, did they all survive. On the contrary, many of each different persuasion fell ill here, there, and everywhere, and having themselves, when they were fit and well, set an example to those who were as yet unaffected, they languished away with virtually no one to nurse them. It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbours and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.

Hence the countless numbers of people who fell ill, both male and female, were entirely dependent upon either the charity of friends (who were few and far between) or the greed of servants, who remained in short supply despite the attraction of high wages out of all proportion to the services they performed. Furthermore, these latter were men and women of coarse intellect and the majority were unused to such duties, and they did little more than hand things to the invalid when asked to do so and watch over him when he was dying. And in performing this kind of service, they frequently lost their lives as well as their earnings.

As a result of this wholesale desertion of the sick by neighbours, relatives and friends, and in view of the scarcity of servants, there grew up a practice almost never previously heard of, whereby when a woman fell ill, no matter how gracious or beautiful or gently bred she might be, she raised no objection to being attended by a male servant, whether he was young or not. Nor did she have any scruples about showing him every part of her body as freely as she would have

displayed it to a woman, provided that the nature of her infirmity required her to do so; and this explains why those women who recovered were possibly less chaste in the period that followed.

Moreover a great many people died who would perhaps have survived had they received some assistance. And hence, what with the lack of appropriate means for tending the sick, and the virulence of the plague, the number of deaths reported in the city whether by day or night was so enormous that it astonished all who heard tell of it, to say nothing of the people who actually witnessed the carnage. And it was perhaps inevitable that among the citizens who survived there arose certain customs that were quite contrary to established tradition.

It had once been customary, as it is again nowadays, for the women relatives and neighbours of a dead man to assemble in his house in order to mourn in the company of the women who had been closest to him; moreover his kinsfolk would forgather in front of his house along with his neighbours and various other citizens, and there would be a contingent of priests, whose numbers varied according to the quality of the deceased; his body would be taken thence to the church in which he had wanted to be buried, being borne on the shoulders of his peers amidst the funeral pomp of candles and dirges. But as the ferocity of the plague began to mount, this practice all but disappeared entirely and was replaced by different customs. For not only did people die without having many women about them, but a great number departed this life without anyone at all to witness their going. Few indeed were those to whom the lamentations and bitter tears of their relatives were accorded; on the contrary, more often than not bereavement was the signal for laughter and witticisms and general jollification – the art of which the women, having for the most part suppressed their feminine concern for the salvation of the souls of the dead, had learned to perfection. Moreover it was rare for the bodies of the dead to be accompanied by more than ten or twelve neighbours to church, nor were they borne on the shoulders of worthy and honest citizens, but by a kind of gravedigging fraternity, newly come into being and drawn from the lower orders of society. These people assumed the title of sexton, and demanded a fat fee for their services, which consisted in taking up the coffin and hauling it swiftly away, not to the church specified by the dead man in his will, but usually to the nearest at hand. They would be preceded by a group of four or six clerics, who between them carried one or two candles at most, and sometimes none at all. Nor did the priests go to the trouble of pronouncing solemn and

lengthy funeral rites, but, with the aid of these so-called sextons, they hastily lowered the body into the nearest empty grave they could find.

As for the common people and a large proportion of the bourgeoisie, they presented a much more pathetic spectacle, for the majority of them were constrained, either by their poverty or the hope of survival, to remain in their houses. Being confined to their own parts of the city, they fell ill daily in their thousands, and since they had no one to assist them or attend to their needs, they inevitably perished almost without exception. Many dropped dead in the open streets, both by day and by night, whilst a great many others, though dying in their own houses, drew their neighbours' attention to the fact more by the smell of their rotting corpses than by any other means. And what with these, and the others who were dying all over the city, bodies were here, there and everywhere.

Whenever people died, their neighbours nearly always followed a single, set routine, prompted as much by their fear of being contaminated by the decaying corpse as by any charitable feelings they may have entertained towards the deceased. Either on their own, or with the assistance of bearers whenever these were to be had, they extracted the bodies of the dead from their houses and left them lying outside their front doors, where anybody going about the streets, especially in the early morning, could have observed countless numbers of them. Funeral biers would then be sent for, upon which the dead were taken away, though there were some who, for lack of biers, were carried off on plain boards. It was by no means rare for more than one of these biers to be seen with two or three bodies upon it at a time; on the contrary, many were seen to contain a husband and wife, two or three brothers and sisters, a father and son, or some other pair of close relatives. And times without number it happened that two priests would be on their way to bury someone, holding a cross before them, only to find that bearers carrying three or four additional biers would fall in behind them; so that whereas the priests had thought that they had only one burial to attend to, they in fact had six or seven, and sometimes more. Even in these circumstances, however, there were no tears or candles or mourners to honour the dead; in fact, no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown towards dead goats. For it was quite apparent that the one thing which, in normal times, no wise man had ever learned to accept with patient resignation (even though it struck so seldom and unobtrusively), had now been brought home to the feeble-minded as well, but

the scale of the calamity caused them to regard it with indifference.

Such was the multitude of corpses (of which further consignments were arriving every day and almost by the hour at each of the churches), that there was not sufficient consecrated ground for them to be buried in, especially if each was to have its own plot in accordance with long-established custom. So when all the graves were full, huge trenches were excavated in the churchyards, into which new arrivals were placed in their hundreds, stowed tier upon tier like ships' cargo, each layer of corpses being covered over with a thin layer of soil till the trench was filled to the top.

But rather than describe in elaborate detail the calamities we experienced in the city at that time, I must mention that, whilst an ill wind was blowing through Florence itself, the surrounding region was no less badly affected. In the fortified towns, conditions were similar to those in the city itself on a minor scale; but in the scattered hamlets and the countryside proper, the poor unfortunate peasants and their families had no physicians or servants whatever to assist them, and collapsed by the wayside, in their fields, and in their cottages at all hours of the day and night, dying more like animals than human beings. Like the townspeople, they too grew apathetic in their ways, disregarded their affairs, and neglected their possessions. Moreover, they all behaved as though each day was to be their last, and far from making provision for the future by tilling their lands, tending their flocks, and adding to their previous labours, they tried in every way they could think of to squander the assets already in their possession. Thus it came about that oxen, asses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, and even dogs (for all their deep fidelity to man) were driven away and allowed to roam freely through the fields, where the crops lay abandoned and had not even been reaped, let alone gathered in. And after a whole day's feasting, many of these animals, as though possessing the power of reason, would return gluttoned in the evening to their own quarters, without any shepherd to guide them.

But let us leave the countryside and return to the city. What more remains to be said, except that the cruelty of heaven (and possibly, in some measure, also that of man) was so immense and so devastating that between March and July of the year in question, what with the fury of the pestilence and the fact that so many of the sick were inadequately cared for or abandoned in their hour of need because the healthy were too terrified to approach them, it is reliably thought that over a hundred thousand human lives were extinguished within the

walls of the city of Florence? Yet before this lethal catastrophe fell upon the city, it is doubtful whether anyone would have guessed it contained so many inhabitants.

3. The plague in Padua

Cortusii Patavini Duo, sive Gulielmi et Abrijeti Cortusiorum, *Historia de Novitatibus Paduae et Lombardiae ab anno MCCLVI usque ad MCCCCLXIV*, in L. A. Muratori (ed), *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores XII*, Milan, 1728, cols 926-7.

Almighty God, who does not desire the death of a sinner, but that he may be converted and live, first threatens and secondly strikes to reform the human race, not to destroy it.⁹ Wishing to assail the human race with enormous and unprecedented blows, his terrifying judgement began firstly in the furthest part of the world, in the countries of the East. After he had struck at the Tartars, Turks and all the other unbelievers, there was on 25 January 1348, at the 23rd hour, a great earthquake to terrify the Christians, which lasted for half an hour. After which the unprecedented plague crossed the sea and so came to the Veneto, Lombardy, the March, Tuscany, Germany, France and spread through virtually the whole world. It was carried by some infected people who had travelled from the East and who, by sight alone, or by touch, or by breathing on them, killed everyone. The infection was incurable; it could not be avoided. The wife fled the embrace of a dear husband, the father that of a son, and the brother that of a brother. Even the houses or clothes of the victims could kill. Those burying, carrying, seeing or touching the infected often died suddenly themselves. Just as one infected sheep infects the whole flock, so one death within a household was always followed by the death of all the rest, right down to the dogs. The bodies even of noblemen lay unburied. Many, at a price, were buried by poor wretches, without priests or candles. Indeed in Venice, where 100,000 died, boats were hired at great expense to carry bodies to the islands and the city was virtually deserted.

A single stranger carried the infection to Padua, to such effect that perhaps a third of the people died within the region as a whole. In the

⁹ The reference, which will recur repeatedly in these texts, is to Ezekiel 33.11: 'Say to them: As I live, saith the Lord God, I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked may turn from his way and live'.

Thou glorious star this world to illumine,
 Thy name to praise I have no sufficiency,
 On us sinners thy mercy let down shine,
 Of infect airs oppress all their utterance
 Us to infect, that they have no puissance;
 From their battle be thou our chief defence,
 That their malice to us do no grievance
 Of infecting or stroke of pestilence.

Thou resplendent star, of stars most sovereign,
 Grant me these three, most excellent princess:
 The first is this, I pray thee not disdain,
 To have length of life not mixed with sickness;
 Of wordly goods grant me also largesse,
 Without strife, to God's reverence;
 The third is that my soul, without distress,
 May come to the bliss where dreaded is no pestilence.

40. A prayer made to St Sebastian against the mortality which flourished in 1349

This popular verse invocation of St Sebastian appears in late-medieval *Horae* or Primers, but this text has been taken from the chronicle of Gilles li Muisis, and the heading above is li Muisis' own.

J-J. de Smet (ed), *Recueil des Chroniques des Flandre* II, Brussels, 1841, pp. 385-6.

O St Sebastian, guard and defend me, morning and evening, every minute of every hour, while I am still of sound mind; and, Martyr, diminish the strength of that vile illness called an epidemic which is threatening me. Protect and keep me and all my friends from this plague. We put our trust in God and St Mary, and in you, O holy Martyr. You, citizen of Milan,⁸ could, through God's power, halt this pestilence if you chose. For it is known to many that you have that merit: to Zoe, whom you miraculously healed and restored to health, and to Nicostratus her husband. You comforted martyrs in their time of trial, and promised them the eternal life which is the reward of martyrs.⁹ O martyr Sebastian! Be with us always, and by your merits

8 St Sebastian himself was born in Narbonne, but his parents came from Milan.

9 According to his *Life* the saint encouraged the martyrs Marcus and Marcellian when they were wavering in their resolution.

keep us safe and sound and protected from plague. Commend us to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary, so that when we die we may have our reward: to behold God in the company of martyrs.

41. The sins of the times

The title by which this anonymous poem is usually known, 'On the Pestilence', was supplied by its editor, Thomas Wright; the original (Cambridge University Library MS Ee.vi.29 fo.31) is untitled. There is no evidence to suggest which of the fourteenth-century plagues the author has in mind in stanza 1.

Thomas Wright (ed), *Political Poems and Songs* I, Rolls Series, 1859, pp. 279–81.

See how England mourns, drenched in tears. The people, stained by sin, quake with grief. Plague is killing men and beasts. Why? Because vices rule unchallenged here.

Alas! The whole world is now given over to spite. Where can a kind heart be found among the people? No one thinks on the crucified Christ, and therefore the people perish as a token of vengeance.

Peace and patience are thoroughly plundered; love and justice are not at home. Men cuddle up to errors and vices; children die for the sins of their fathers.

The sloth of the shepherds leaves the flocks straying. The trusting are tricked by the cunning of traders; fraud and avarice go hand in hand like sisters; the poor suffer through the depravity of the rich.

Nourished by simony, Simon Magus flourishes.¹⁰ The balance is crooked, truth has departed; the flock of Christ is scattered, the wolf rages; and plague is poured out, engulfing the lambs.

Rulers are moved by favour not wisdom; power thrusts the unworthy into jobs; the mercy of kings is governed by favourites; patrons are swayed by love and lucre.

The brave warriors of Christ have now retreated; the satellites of

¹⁰ Simon Magus was a sorcerer of Samaria converted to Christianity by the Apostle Philip. He then offered money to be given the power (enjoyed by the Apostles themselves) of transmitting the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, and was rebuked by Peter for thinking that the gifts of God could be purchased for cash [Acts 8]. He therefore gave his name to simony, the sin of buying spiritual office. He also became the medieval stereotype of the fraudulent magician, a side of his career amplified by the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: V. I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in early medieval Europe*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 338–44.

Satan have overturned the temple. They have lost the wounded and sickly sheep. Cuckoos intrude into the monastic nest.

Noble fathers once put the plague to flight and the firm in faith healed the sick. Their holy life shone as a bright example and by their praiseworthy deeds they showed themselves soldiers of Christ.

Such men dressed in rough garments, but few do so these days; instead they wear soft fabrics. They were distinguished by moral excellence, but the youth of today are learned only in squalid rites.

Alas! rectors and vicars have changed their ways, they're hirelings now, not true shepherds, and their works are motivated by the desire for money. Such workers deserve to come to grief.

Such men prefer furs to hair shirts; they stuff their bellies with dainties and then abandon themselves to limitless depravity. Buttressed by riches, they live contrary to right.

While chapels are lavishly rebuilt the Church – the Bride of Christ – is stripped naked. Untended, the vine is blighted by sin, and usurers dig it up like rooting pigs.

The priests of God are unchaste; their deeds not matching their name. They should be teaching and administering the sacraments, but they behave in ways inappropriate to their order.

Their names should be written with blood in heaven, but are to be read instead in the records of this world. Old sins should be purged with fire, but theirs weigh them down and now rule them.

Alas! Love and charity have grown cold in kingdoms. It is spite and harshness which blaze up in the people. Truth and faith are lukewarm in laymen and clerics alike. Nobility and renown are asleep in this realm.

Women are no longer bound by the restraints of their sex; the subtlety of merchants shifts into fraud; the guile of brothers turns the world topsy turvy. Man, if truth now reigns in you, rejoice.

42. The failings of the clergy

Heinrich von Herford, in Westphalia, was a Dominican, who died in the friary at Minden on 9 October 1370, although his chronicle ends considerably earlier, in 1355. His attack on the greed and ambition of the clergy, printed here, leads immediately into a list of natural and man-made calamities, beginning with the earthquake of January 1348. For his detailed account of the flagellants see below, 52.