

THE BLACK DEATH

translated and edited by Rosemary Horrox

Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York

distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada by St. Martin's Press

IV: Scientific explanations

56. The report of the Paris medical faculty, October 1348

This is the most authoritative contemporary statement of the nature of the plague and therefore forms an appropriate introduction to this section. The full text consists of two parts: three chapters on the causes of the plague, and seven on remedies and regimen. Only the first part is printed here.

R. Hoeniger (ed), *Der Schwarze Tod*, Berlin, 1882, appendix III, pp. 152-6.

Seeing things which cannot be explained, even by the most gifted intellects, initially stirs the human mind to amazement; but after marvelling, the prudent soul next yields to its desire for understanding and, anxious for its own perfection, strives with all its might to discover the causes of the amazing events. For there is within the human mind an innate desire to seize on goodness and truth. As the Philosopher makes plain, all things seek for the good and want to understand.¹ To attain this end we have listened to the opinions of many modern experts on astrology and medicine about the causes of the epidemic which has prevailed since 1345. However, because their conclusions still leave room for considerable uncertainty, we, the masters of the faculty of medicine at Paris, inspired by the command of the most illustrious prince, our most serene lord, Philip, King of France, and by our desire to achieve something of public benefit, have decided to compile, with God's help, a brief compendium of the distant and immediate causes of the present universal epidemic (as far as these can be understood by the human intellect) and of wholesome remedies; drawing on the opinions of the most brilliant ancient philosophers and modern experts, astronomers as well as doctors of medicine. And if we cannot explain everything as we would wish, for a sure explanation and perfect understanding of these matters is not always to be had (as Pliny says in book II, chapter 39: 'some accidental causes of storms are still uncertain, or cannot be explained'), it is open to any diligent reader to make good the deficiency.

We shall divide the work into two parts, in the first of which we shall investigate the causes of this pestilence and whence they come, for

1 'The Philosopher' is Aristotle.

without knowledge of the causes no one can prescribe cures. In the second part we shall include methods of prevention and cure. There will be three chapters in the first part, for this epidemic arises from a double cause. One cause is distant and from above, and pertains to the heavens; the other is near and from below and pertains to the earth, and is dependent, causally and effectively, on the first cause. Therefore the first chapter will deal with the first cause, the second with the second cause, and the third with the prognostications and signs associated with both of them. There will be two treatises in the second part. The first will deal with medical means of prevention and cure and will be divided into four chapters: the first on the disposition of the air and its rectification; the second on exercise and baths; the third on food and drink; the fourth on sleeping and waking, emptiness and fullness of the stomach and on the emotions. The second treatise will have three chapters: the first on universal remedies; the second on specific remedies appropriate to different patients; the third on antidotes.

CHAPTER 1 OF THE FIRST PART: CONCERNING THE UNIVERSAL AND DISTANT CAUSE

We say that the distant and first cause of this pestilence was and is the configuration of the heavens. In 1345, at one hour after noon on 20 March, there was a major conjunction of three planets in Aquarius. This conjunction, along with other earlier conjunctions and eclipses, by causing a deadly corruption of the air around us, signifies mortality and famine – and also other things about which we will not speak here because they are not relevant. Aristotle testifies that this is the case in his book *Concerning the causes of the properties of the elements*,² in which he says that mortality of races and the depopulation of kingdoms occur at the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, for great events then arise, their nature depending on the trigon in which the conjunction occurs. And this is found in ancient philosophers, and Albertus Magnus in his book, *Concerning the causes of the properties of the elements* (treatise 2, chapter 1) says that the conjunction of Mars and Jupiter causes a great pestilence in the air, especially when they come together in a hot, wet sign, as was the case in 1345.³ For Jupiter, being wet and hot, draws up evil vapours from the earth and Mars, because it is immoderately

2 This work, although credited to Aristotle in the middle ages, was not by him. It was the subject of a commentary by Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great, d. 1280), which the medical faculty cites in the next sentence.

3 The houses of the zodiac are each associated with one of the elements, listed in 58. Aquarius is one of the air signs, and therefore hot and wet.

hot and dry, then ignites the vapours, and as a result there were lightnings, sparks, noxious vapours and fires throughout the air.

These effects were intensified because Mars – a malevolent planet, breeding anger and wars – was in the sign of Leo from 6 October 1347 until the end of May this year, along with the head of the dragon, and because all these things are hot they attracted many vapours; which is why the winter was not as cold as it should have been.⁴ And Mars was also retrograde and therefore attracted many vapours from the earth and the sea which, when mixed with the air, corrupted its substance.⁵ Mars was also looking upon Jupiter with a hostile aspect, that is to say quartile, and that caused an evil disposition or quality in the air, harmful and hateful to our nature.⁶ This state of affairs generated strong winds (for according to Albertus in the first book of his *Meteora*, Jupiter has the property of raising powerful winds, particularly from the south) which gave rise to excess heat and moisture on the earth; although in fact it was the dampness which was most marked in our part of the world. And this is enough about the distant or universal cause for the moment.

CHAPTER 2 OF THE FIRST PART: CONCERNING THE PARTICULAR AND NEAR CAUSE

Although major pestilential illnesses can be caused by the corruption of water or food, as happens at times of famine and infertility, yet we still regard illnesses proceeding from the corruption of the air as much more dangerous. This is because bad air is more noxious than food or drink in that it can penetrate quickly to the heart and lungs to do its damage. We believe that the present epidemic or plague has arisen

4 Leo is one of the fire signs – hot and dry – and therefore intensifies the hot/dry characteristics of Mars.

5 When observed from the earth against the background of the fixed stars, planets at times appear to loop backwards (to be retrograde) or to stand still. Mars makes a backward loop in some part of the sky once every 780 days.

6 As they move round the heavens, through the twelve houses of the zodiac, the planets' position relative to each other sometimes takes on particular significance, whether for good or bad. In these positions the planets are said to be looking at each other, and the positions are known as aspects. For instance, two planets in opposite houses of the zodiac (i.e. separated by 180° of the 360° circle) are said to be in opposition, and the aspect is malign. The other aspects are: trine (120° apart, benign), quartile (90° apart, malign) and sextile (60° apart, benign).

7 As the authors immediately make clear, they do not mean by this that the *nature* of the air changed, which would be impossible, but that it was corrupted by being mixed with bad vapours. John of Burgundy [62] makes the same point, but uses 'substance' in the opposite sense, to mean the unchanging, essential nature of an element, rather than (as here) its outward form.

from air corrupt in its substance, and not changed in its attributes.⁷ By which we wish it be understood that air, being pure and clear by nature, can only become putrid or corrupt by being mixed with something else, that is to say, with evil vapours. What happened was that the many vapours which had been corrupted at the time of the conjunction were drawn up from the earth and water, and were then mixed with the air and spread abroad by frequent gusts of wind in the wild southerly gales, and because of these alien vapours which they carried the winds corrupted the air in its substance, and are still doing so. And this corrupted air, when breathed in, necessarily penetrates to the heart and corrupts the substance of the spirit there and rots the surrounding moisture, and the heat thus caused destroys the life force, and this is the immediate cause of the present epidemic.⁸

And moreover these winds, which have become so common here, have carried among us (and may perhaps continue to do so in future) bad, rotten and poisonous vapours from elsewhere: from swamps, lakes and chasms, for instance, and also (which is even more dangerous) from unburied or unburnt corpses – which might well have been a cause of the epidemic. Another possible cause of corruption, which needs to be borne in mind, is the escape of the rotteness trapped in the centre of the earth as a result of earthquakes – something which has indeed recently occurred. But the conjunctions could have been the universal and distant cause of all these harmful things, by which air and water have been corrupted.

CHAPTER 3: CONCERNING PROGNOSTICATION AND SIGNS

Unseasonable weather is a particular cause of illness. For the ancients, notably Hippocrates, are agreed that if the four seasons run awry, and do not keep their proper course, then plagues and mortal passions are engendered that year. Experience tells us that for some time the seasons have not succeeded each other in the proper way. Last winter was not as cold as it should have been, with a great deal of rain; the spring windy and latterly wet. Summer was late, not as hot as it should have been, and extremely wet – the weather very changeable from day to day, and hour to hour; the air often troubled, and then still again, looking as if it was going to rain but then not doing so. Autumn too was very rainy and misty. It is because the whole year here – or most

8 'Spirit' in these medical tracts has a very precise meaning. It was a substance created by the heart from inhaled air, and was envisaged as an extremely thin, light vapour, which was carried through the body by the arteries. It was, in a literal and immediate sense, the life force, and without it the body would die.

of it – was warm and wet that the air is pestilential. For it is a sign of pestilence for the air to be warm and wet at unseasonable times.

Wherefore we may fear a future pestilence here, which is particularly from the root beneath,⁹ because it is subject to the evil impress of the heavens, especially since that conjunction was in a western sign. Therefore if next winter is very rainy and less cold than it ought to be, we should expect an epidemic round about late winter and spring – and if it occurs it will be long and dangerous, for usually unseasonable weather is of only brief duration, but when it lasts over many seasons, as has obviously been the case here, it stands to reason that its effects will be longer-lasting and more dangerous, unless ensuing seasons change their nature in the opposite way. Thus if the winter in the north turns out to be cold and dry, the plagues might be arrested.

We have not said that the future pestilence will be exceptionally dangerous, for we do not wish to give the impression that it will be as dangerous here as in southern or eastern regions. For the conjunctions and the other causes discussed above had a more immediate impact on those regions than on ours. However, in the judgement of astrologers (who follow Ptolemy on this) plagues are likely, although not inevitable, because so many exhalations and inflammations have been observed, such as a comet and shooting stars.¹⁰ Also the sky has looked yellow and the air reddish because of the burnt vapours. There has also been much lightning and flashes and frequent thunder, and winds of such violence and strength that they have carried dust storms from the south. These things, and in particular the powerful earthquakes, have done universal harm and left a trail of corruption. There have been masses of dead fish, animals and other things along the sea shore, and in many places trees covered in dust, and some people claim to have seen a multitude of frogs and reptiles generated from the corrupt matter; and all these things seem to have come from the great corruption of the air and earth. All these things have been noted before as signs of plague by numerous wise men who are still remembered with respect and who experienced them themselves.

No wonder, therefore, that we fear that we are in for an epidemic. But it should be noted that in saying this we do not intend to exclude the possibility of illnesses arising from the character of the present year –

9 By the 'root beneath' the authors mean terrestrial causes as distinct from celestial ones. Exactly the same phrase is used by the translator of Bengt Knutsson [59].

10 No comet was seen before the first plague epidemic and the authors are presumably referring to the mysterious 'star' which appeared over Paris in August 1348 [7].

for as the aphorism of Hippocrates has it: a year of many fogs and damps is a year of many illnesses. On the other hand, the susceptibility of the body of the patient is the most immediate cause in the breeding of illnesses, and therefore no cause is likely to have an effect unless the patient is susceptible to its effects. We must therefore emphasise that although, because everyone has to breathe, everyone will be at risk from the corrupted air, not everyone will be made ill by it but only those, who will no doubt be numerous, who have a susceptibility to it; and very few indeed of those who do succumb will escape.

The bodies most likely to take the stamp of this pestilence are those which are hot and moist, for they are the most susceptible to putrefaction. The following are also more at risk: bodies bunged up with evil humours, because the unconsumed waste matter is not being expelled as it should; those following a bad life style, with too much exercise, sex and bathing; the thin and weak, and persistent worriers; babies, women and young people; and corpulent people with a ruddy complexion. However those with dry bodies, purged of waste matter, who adopt a sensible and suitable regimen, will succumb to the pestilence more slowly.

We must not overlook the fact that any pestilence proceeds from the divine will, and our advice can therefore only be to return humbly to God. But this does not mean forsaking doctors. For the Most High created earthly medicine, and although God alone cures the sick, he does so through the medicine which in his generosity he provided. Blessed be the glorious and high God, who does not refuse his help, but has clearly set out a way of being cured for those who fear him. And this is enough of the third chapter, and of the whole first part.

57. Simon de Covino, *De Judicio Solis*

Simon de Covino of Liège wrote *On the Judgement of Sol at the Feasts of Saturn* in 1350. It is a long allegorical poem of 1132 hexameters describing the planetary conjunctions and their consequences in terms of the classical deities. Thus Saturn holds a feast in his house (the zodiac sign of Aquarius) to which the other gods (planets) are invited. Covino supplied a prose prologue to the poem, setting out the contents and 'translating' the allegory, and it is that which is printed here.

Master Simon de Covino, *De Judicio Solis* in *Conviviis Saturni*, ed E. Littre, *Bibliothèque de l'école des Chartes* II, 1840-1, pp. 206-208.

In case the material in this little book should seem too burdensome, I here explain it in four parts. In the first I describe, in the manner and

59. The dangers of corrupted air

This account is taken from the treatise of Bengt Knutsson, a mid-fifteenth century bishop of Västerås, near Stockholm. Knutsson took over wholesale one of the most popular plague tracts of the fourteenth century, that of John Jacobus (Jean Jacmé), written c.1364. Jacobus was a royal and papal physician and Chancellor of Montpellier, and the various autobiographical references later in the work refer to him, not to Knutsson.

This extract represents a little over half the treatise; the last two sections (on the comforts of the heart and blood-letting) have been omitted. The text is taken from a fifteenth-century English translation of Knutsson. I have modernised the spelling and made a few grammatical changes for the sake of clarity, but have not attempted a complete modern 'translation'.

A Little Book for the Pestilence, Manchester, 1911, a facsimile of a printed English translation of Knutsson in the John Rylands Library, Manchester.

Here begins a little book which treats and rehearses many good things necessary for the infirmity and great sickness called the Pestilence, the which often infects us, made by the most expert doctor in phisic the Bishop of Arusiens in the realm of Denmark.

At the reverence and worship of the blessed Trinity and of the glorious Virgin St Mary and for the conservation of the common weal, as well for them that be whole as for remedy of them that be sick, I the Bishop of Arusiens in the realm of Denmark, doctor of phisic, will write by the most expert and famous doctors, authorities in phisic, some things about the infirmity of pestilence which daily infects us and soon suffers us to depart out of this life.

First I will write the tokens of this infirmity.

Secondly the causes whereof it comes.

Thirdly the remedies for the same.

Fourthly comfort for the heart and the principal members of the body.

Fifthly when it shall be the season to let blood.

First as I said the tokens of this infirmity. Seven things ought to be noted here:

The first is when on a summer's day the weather often changes, so in the morning the weather appears rainy, afterwards it appears cloudy and finally windy from the south.

The second token is when in summer the days appear all dark and look

like rain, and yet it does not rain. And if many days continue thus, great pestilence is to be dreaded.

The third token is when there is a great multitude of flies upon the earth, then it is sign that the air is venomous and infected.

The fourth token is when stars often seem to fall, then it is a token that the air is infected with much venomous vapour.

The fifth token is when a blazing star is seen in the sky, then it should fortune that soon after there will be great manslaughter in battle.

The sixth token is when there is great lightning and thunder, namely out of the south.

The seventh token is when great winds blow out of the south for they be foul and unclean.

Therefore when these tokens appear great pestilence is to be dreaded, unless God of his mercy will remove it.

The pestilence comes of three things. Sometimes it comes from the root beneath, at other times from the root above, so that we may feel sensibly how the change of air appears to us, and sometimes it comes of both together: from the root above as well as from the root beneath – as when we see a siege or privy next to a chamber or any other particular thing which corrupts the air in substance and quality, which is a thing which may happen every day. And thereof comes the ague of pestilence. And many physicians are deceived about this, not suspecting this ague to be a pestilence. Sometimes it comes of dead carrion or the corruption of standing waters in ditches or sloughs or other corrupt places, and these things are sometimes universal and sometimes particular. By the root above is meant the heavenly bodies, by whom the spirit of life is corrupted in man or beast. In like wise, as Avicenna says in his fourth book, by the form of the air above the bodies beneath may be infected. For the inspissation above corrupts the air and so the spirits of man are corrupted.²¹ This infirmity comes also from the root above or beneath: when the inspissation above corrupts the air or when the putrefaction or rotten carrion of the vile places beneath cause an infirmity in man. And such an infirmity is sometimes an ague, sometimes an apostume or a swelling and that is in many things. Also the inspissated air is sometimes venomous and corrupt,

²¹ Inspissation is a thickening, specifically in this context the condensation of corrupt vapours to form thick, wet clouds.

hurting the heart so that nature is grieved in many ways, but so that he does not perceive his harm. For the urine appears fair and shows good digestion, yet nevertheless the patient is likely to die.²² Wherefore many physicians, seeing the urine of their patients, speak superficially and are deceived. Therefore it is necessary that every patient provide himself with a good and expert physician.

These things before written are the causes of pestilence; but about these things two questions are asked. The first is why, within one town, one man dies and another does not. Where men are dead in one house, in another house no one dies. The other question is whether pestilence sores are contagious. To the first question I say that it may happen for two causes: that is to say because of the thing that does or the thing that suffers. An example of that thing that does: the influence of the bodies above affects that place or that place more than this place or this place. And one patient is more disposed to die than another. Therefore it is to be noted that bodies inclined to be hot have open pores, whereas infected bodies have the pores stopped with many humours. Where bodies have open pores, as in the case of men who abuse themselves with women or often have baths, or men who are hot with labour or great anger, they are the more disposed to this great sickness.

To the second question I say that pestilence sores are contagious because of infectious humours, and the reek or smoke of such sores is venomous and corrupts the air. And therefore one should flee such persons as are infected. In pestilence time nobody should stand in a great press of people because some man among them may be infected. Therefore wise physicians visiting sick folk stand far from the patient, holding their face towards the door or window, and so should the servants of sick folk stand. Also it is good for a patient to change his chamber every day and often to have the windows open against the north and east and to spar the windows against the south. For the south wind has two causes of putrefaction. The first is it that makes a man, whether whole or sick, feeble in his body. The second cause is as it is written in Aphorisms chapter 3, the south wind grieves the body and hurts the heart because it opens man's pores and enters into the heart. Wherefore it is good for a whole man in time of pestilence when the wind is in the south to stay within the house all day, and if it shall

22 Medieval physicians used their patient's urine as one of their main diagnostic tools. The assumption that illness was caused by corrupt humours meant that the body's excreta were the obvious source of information about the state of the humours inside the body.

be necessary for a man go out, yet let him abide in his house until the sun be up in the east and passing southward.

Here after follow the remedies for the pestilence.

Now it is to be known by what remedies a man may preserve himself from the pestilence. First see the writings of Jeremiah the prophet that a man ought to forsake evil things and do good deeds and meekly confess his sins, for it is the highest remedy in time of pestilence: penance and confession to be preferred to all other medicines. Nevertheless I promise you verily it is a good remedy to void and change the infected place. But some may not profitably change their places. Therefore as much as they can they should eschew every cause of putrefaction and stinking, and namely every fleshly lust with women is to be eschewed. Also the southern wind, which is naturally infective. Therefore spar the windows against the south in like wise as it is said before, until the first hour after the middle of the day then open the windows against the north. Of the same cause every foul stench is to be eschewed, of stable, stinking fields, ways or streets, and namely of stinking dead carrion and most of stinking waters where in many places water is kept two days or two nights. Or else there be gutters of water cast under the earth which cause great stink and corruption. And of this cause some die in that house where such things happen, and in another house die none as is said afore. Likewise in that place where worts and cabbages putrefy it makes a noisome savour and stinking. For in likewise as by the sweet odour of balsam the heart and the spirits have recreation, so of evil savours they be made feeble. Wherefore keep your house that an infected air enter not in, for an infected air most causes putrefaction in places and houses where folk sleep. Therefore let your house be clean and make clear fire of wood flaming. Let your house be made with fumigation of herbs, that is to say with leaves of bay tree, juniper, *uberiorgani* [unidentified] it is in the apothecary shops, wormwood, rue, mugwort and of the wood of aloes which is best but it is dear. Such a fume taken by the mouth and ears opens the inward parts of the body. Also all great repletion is to be eschewed because full bodies be easily infected as Avicenna says in the fourth canon: they that charge their bodies to repletion shorten their life.

Also common baths are to be eschewed, for a little crust corrupts all the body.²³ Therefore the people as much as is possible is to be

²³ A crust is a scab, and Knutsson is saying that just as a localised infection can spread to affect the whole body, so one man in a crowd can infect the rest. Public baths

eschewed, lest of infectious breath some man be infected. But when the multitude of people may not be eschewed, then use the remedies following. In the morning when you rise wash a little rue and one or two filbert nuts clean and eat them, and if that cannot be had then eat bread or toast sopped in vinegar, namely in troublous and cloudy weather. Also in the time of pestilence it is better to abide within the house for it is not wholesome to go into the city or town. Also let your house be sprinkled especially in summer with vinegar and roses and with the leaves of the vine. Also it is good to wash your hands oft times in the day with water and vinegar and wipe your face with your hands and smell to them. Also it is good always to savour sour things. In Montpellier I might not eschew the company of people for I went from house to house because of my poverty to cure sick folks, therefore bread or a sponge sopped in vinegar I took with me holding it in my mouth and nose because all sour things stop the way of humours and suffer no venomous things to enter into a man's body and so I escaped the pestilence, my fellows supposing that I should not live. These forsaied things I have proved by my self.

60. Earthquakes as the cause of plague

This is the final section of a treatise usually known, from its opening words, as *Is it from divine wrath that the mortality of these years proceeds*. It was probably produced in Germany in the generation after the 1348-49 outbreak. In the first part of the treatise, not printed here, the author considers various explanations of the plague, including the astrological one – which he rejects on the grounds that similar conjunctions occur frequently without being followed by plague, and that the configuration of the heavens should have an equal impact on all mankind, which the plague did not. He then turns to his preferred explanation: that the earthquakes of 1347 released poisonous fumes into the atmosphere.

Karl Sudhoff, 'Pestschriften aus den ersten 150 Jahren nach der Epidemie des 'schwarzen Todes' 1348: XI', *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* XI, 1918-19, pp. 47-51.

There is a fourth opinion, which I consider more likely than the others, which is that insofar as the mortality arose from natural causes its immediate cause was a corrupt and poisonous earthy exhalation, which

were notoriously used for sexual assignations and were regarded by contemporary moralists as no better than brothels. Knutsson's warning against them is probably based on the dangers of sexual intercourse as well as on the general risks posed by crowds.

to him, when the seas rise up high, is voiding his poison, sending it forth to be added to the poison in the air, and that air spreads gradually from place to place and enters men through the ears, eyes, nose, mouth, pores and the other orifices. Then if the man has a strong constitution, nature can expel the poison through ulcers, and if the ulcers putrify, are strangled and fully run their course the patient will be saved, as can be clearly seen. But if the poison should be stronger than his nature, so that his constitution cannot prevail against it, then the poison instantly lays siege to the heart, and the patient dies within a short time, without the relief which comes from the formation of ulcers.

To the third question I say that during the pestilence everyone over seven should be made to vomit daily from an empty stomach, and twice a week, or more often if necessary, he should lie well wrapped up in a warm bed and drink warm ale with ginger so that he sweats copiously, and he should never touch the sheets after that until they have been cleansed of the sweat, for if the person sweating had been in contact with the pestilence a healthy man could catch the plague from the sheets unless they have been well washed. And as soon as he feels an itch or prickling in his flesh he must use a goblet or cupping horn to let blood and draw down the blood from the heart, and this should be done two or three times at intervals of one or two days at most.³⁶ And if he should feel himself oppressed deep within the body, then he should let blood in the nearest veins, either in the arms or in the main veins of the feet. Likewise something which is extremely poisonous in itself may be of service in excluding the plague. And if a healthy adult does as I have described, they can save themselves whenever a great pestilence occurs.

64. Ordinances against the spread of plague, Pistoia, 1348

These are the fullest extant civic ordinances, and are particularly interesting in that they show the city rethinking and amending its strategy as the plague developed. The sections translated below are primarily concerned with preventing the spread of infection. A fourth set of ordinances, not printed here, addresses the problem of providing for the defence of the city given the much reduced population. The translation omits the preambles and the

36 Cupping involved placing heated cups, or special cupping horns, mouth downwards on the skin. As the air inside cooled and contracted the suction it created was thought to draw bad humours to the surface of the skin, where they could more easily be removed by bleeding or some other method.

concluding formalities of each set of ordinances, and also slightly abbreviates the text by reducing some of the formalities and repetitions. In particular note that references to Pistoia and other cities always include the *contado* (the adjoining countryside over which the town ruled) and district as well as the city itself; and that the penalties are to be levied on each offender for every breach of the ordinances.

A. Chiappelli (ed), 'Gli Ordinamenti Sanitari del Comune di Pistoia contro la Pestilenza del 1348', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, series 4, XX, 1887, pp. 8-22.

[2 May, 1348]

1. So that the sickness which is now threatening the region around Pistoia shall be prevented from taking hold of the citizens of Pistoia, no citizen or resident of Pistoia, wherever they are from or of what condition, status or standing they may be, shall dare or presume to go to Pisa or Lucca; and no one shall come to Pistoia from those places; penalty 500 pence. And no one from Pistoia shall receive or give hospitality to people who have come from those places; same penalty. And the guards who keep the gates of the city of Pistoia shall not permit anyone travelling to the city from Pisa or Lucca to enter; penalty 10 pence from each of the guards responsible for the gate through which such an entry has been made. But citizens of Pistoia now living within the city may go to Pisa and Lucca, and return again, if they first obtain permission from the common council – who will vote on the merits of the case presented to them. The licence is to be drawn up by the notary of the *anziani* and gonfalonier of the city.³⁷ And this ordinance is to be upheld and observed from the day of its ratification until 1 October, or longer if the council sees fit.

2. No one, whether from Pistoia or elsewhere, shall dare or presume to bring or fetch to Pistoia, whether in person or by an agent, any old linen or woollen cloths, for male or female clothing or for bedspreads; penalty 200 pence, and the cloth to be burnt in the public piazza of Pistoia by the official who discovered it.³⁸ However it shall be lawful

³⁷ The official rulers of Italian cities were the commune (a word which does not have its modern egalitarian connotations). They appointed a *podestà*, often a nobleman from outside the region, as their salaried chief executive. By the fourteenth century this arrangement was mirrored in many cities by the more broadly based *popolo*, represented by a governing council of *anziani* (elders). The *capitano del popolo* corresponded, in background and role, to the *podestà* of the commune.

³⁸ Later outbreaks of plague in Italian cities were often associated with the movement of cloth, and this requirement suggests that the connection may already have been noted. Contemporaries – who were not aware of the role played by fleas in the transmission of the disease – explained the connection as due to the trapping of corrupt air within the folds of fabric.

for citizens of Pistoia travelling within Pistoia and its territories to take linen and woollen cloths with them for their own use or wear, provided that they are in a pack or fardle weighing 30 lb or less. And this ordinance to be upheld and observed from the day of its ratification until 1 January. And if such cloth has already been brought into Pistoia, the bringer must take it away within three days of the ordinance's ratification; same penalty.

3. The bodies of the dead shall not be removed from the place of death until they have been enclosed in a wooden box, and the lid of planks nailed down³⁹ so that no stench can escape, and covered with no more than one pall, coverlet or cloth; penalty 50 pence to be paid by the heirs of the deceased or, if there are no heirs, by the nearest kinsmen in the male line. The goods of the deceased are to stand as surety for the payment of the penalty. Also the bodies are to be carried to burial in the same box; same penalty. So that the civic officials can keep a check on this, the rectors of the chapels in Pistoia must notify the *podestà* and *capitano* when a corpse is brought into their chapel, giving the dead man's name and the contrada in which he was living when he died; same penalty. As soon as he has been notified, the *podestà* or *capitano* must send an official to the place, to find out whether this chapter of the ordinances is being observed, along with the other regulations governing funerals, and to punish those found guilty. And if the *podestà* or *capitano* is remiss in carrying out these orders he must be punished by those who appointed him; same penalty. But these regulations should not apply to the poor and destitute of the city, who are dealt with under another civic ordinance.

4. To avoid the foul stench which comes from dead bodies each grave shall be dug two and a half armslength deep, as this is reckoned in Pistoia;⁴⁰ penalty 10 pence from anyone digging or ordering the digging of a grave which infringes the statute.

5. No one, of whatever condition, status or standing, shall dare or presume to bring a corpse into the city, whether confined or not; penalty 25 pence. And the guards at the gates shall not allow such bodies to be brought into the city; same penalty, to be paid by every guard responsible for the gate through which the body was brought.

39 The bodies of ordinary people were generally buried in shrouds, although they might be carried to church in a coffin. This ordinance probably implies that they were to be buried in a coffin, as people certainly had to be in Tournai [6].

40 A *braccio* in Pistoia measured between two and two and a half feet.

6. Any person attending a funeral shall not accompany the corpse or its kinsmen further than the door of the church where the burial is to take place, or go back to the house where the deceased lived, or to any other house on that occasion; penalty 10 pence. Nor is he to go the week's mind of the deceased; same penalty.⁴¹

7. When someone dies, no one shall dare or presume to give or send any gift to the house of the deceased, or to any other place on that occasion, either before or after the funeral, or to visit the house, or eat there on that occasion; penalty 25 pence. This shall not apply to the sons and daughters of the deceased, his blood brothers and sisters and their children, or to his grandchildren. The *podestà* and *capitano*, when notified by the rector as in chapter 3, must send an official to enquire whether anything has been done to the contrary and to punish those responsible.

8. To avoid waste and unnecessary expense, no one shall dare or presume to wear new clothes during the mourning period or for the next eight days; penalty 25 pence. This shall not apply to the wife of the deceased, who may if she wishes wear a new garment of any fabric without penalty.

9. No crier, summoner or drummer of Pistoia shall dare or presume to invite or summon any citizen of Pistoia, whether publicly or privately, to come to a funeral or visit the corpse; nor shall anyone send the same summoner, trumpeter, crier or drummer; penalty 10 pence from each crier, trumpeter, summoner or drummer, and from the people by whom they have been employed.

10. So that the sound of bells does not trouble or frighten the sick, the keepers of the campanile of the cathedral church of Pistoia shall not allow any of the bells to be rung during funerals, and no one else shall dare or presume to ring any of the bells on such occasions; penalty 10 pence, to be paid by the keepers who allowed the bells to be rung and by the heirs of the dead man, or his kinsmen should he have no heirs. When a parishioner is buried in his parish church, or a member of a fraternity within the fraternity church, the church bells may be rung, but only on one occasion and not excessively; same penalty.

11. No one shall presume or dare to summon a gathering of people to escort a widow from the house of her dead husband, but only from the

⁴¹ This last sentence refers to a ban on attendance at the commemorative mass one week after a death.

church to his burial place. But it shall be lawful for the widow's kinsmen to send up to four women to escort the widow from her husband's house at other times. No one shall dare to attend such a gathering; penalty 25 pence, paid by those invited and by those who issued the invitation.

12. No one shall dare or presume to raise a lament or crying for anyone who has died outside Pistoia, or summon a gathering of people other than the kinsfolk and spouse of the deceased, or have bells rung, or use criers or any other means to invite people throughout the city to such a gathering; penalty 25 pence from each person involved.

However it is to be understood that none of this applies to the burial of knights, doctors of law, judges, and doctors of physic, whose bodies can be honoured by their heirs at their burial in any way they please.

13. So that the living are not made ill by rotten and corrupt food, no butcher or retailer of meat shall dare or presume to hang up meat, or keep and sell meat hung up in their storehouse or over their counter; penalty 10d.⁴² And that the rulers of the craft of butchery must investigate these matters on every day when slaughtering occurs, and immediately denounce any offenders to the lords, *podestà* or *capitano*, or to one of their officials; same penalty from the rulers of the craft if they fail to carry out these things in person or by deputy. The *podestà* and *capitano* must each send someone to look into these matters, and punish those found guilty, along with the rulers of the craft if they have failed to denounce them. The word of any official who finds an infringement of the regulations shall be taken as sufficient evidence.

14. Butchers and retailers of meat shall not stable horses or allow any mud or dung in the shop or other place where they sell meat, or in or near their storehouse, or on the roadway outside; nor shall they slaughter animals in a stable, or keep flayed carcasses in a stable or in any other place where there is dung; penalty 10 pence. An official of the *podestà* or *capitano* is to enquire closely into such matters, and his word is to be taken on any infringement of these ordinances.

15. No butcher or retailer of meat shall dare or presume to keep on the counter where he sells meat, meat from more than one ox, calf, or cow

⁴² The word I have translated as 'to hang up' is *gonfiare* which, in modern Italian, means to swell or blow up. This might suggest that butchers were being forbidden to sell carcasses already distended by the gases generated by corruption, but the phrasing seems to suggest that it is the display of carcasses which is being banned. Perhaps both implications are present: that to minimise the risk of corruption *whole* carcasses are not to be displayed, but only joints of meat.

at once, although he can keep the meat of an ox or cow alongside that of a calf; penalty 10 pence. The rulers of the craft must investigate the matter on every day on which animals are slaughtered, and denounce any offenders to the *podestà* or *capitano* of the city; same penalty.

16. In May, June, July and August butchers and retailers of meat shall slaughter meat on the days on which meat can be eaten, including Sundays and feast days, and sell it on the same day to those wishing to buy; the animals to be vetted by the civic officials appointed for the purpose.⁴³

17. No butcher or retailer shall dare or presume to kill any ox, cow or calf without first obtaining permission from officials of the *podestà* or *capitano*. As soon as the official's approval has been requested he shall go and see the animal, to decide whether it is healthy or not. When permission has been given the butcher himself must slaughter the animal properly in the official's presence; penalty 10 pence.

18. No butcher or any other retailer of meat shall kill any two- or three-year old boar or sow between 1 March and 1 December; penalty 25 pence.

19. Butchers or retailers shall flay every two- or three-year old boar or sow killed between 1 December and 1 March before putting it on sale. If they wish to salt it down, that is permissible, but it must be flayed first; penalty 25 pence.

20. [Provisions for the election of officials to set the retail price of meat.]

21. For the better preservation of health, there should be a ban on all kinds of poultry, calves, foodstuffs and on all kinds of fat being taken out of Pistoia by anybody; penalty 100 pence and the confiscation of the things being carried contrary to the ban. And whoever can capture such carriers and the things carried, and take them to the gaol of the commune of Pistoia shall have half of the fine and of the value of the goods, after the fine has been paid and the goods sold to the highest bidder.

22. To avoid harm to men by stink and corruption, there shall in future be no tanning of skins within the city walls of Pistoia; penalty 25 pence.

23. [Provisions for enforcement including the proviso that anyone can

⁴³ In other words, the importance of ensuring a supply of fresh meat meant that slaughtering could take place on days when it was usually banned.

denounce an offender before the *podestà* or *capitano*, and receive a quarter of the fine if the accusation is upheld; the word of one man worthy of belief is to be sufficient evidence of guilt, or the statements of four men testifying to the common belief.]

[Revisions of 23 May]

Chapter 1 to be entirely revoked.

Chapter 19 to continue: After the pigs have been shaved or singed the butcher or retailer must flay them before taking them to his home or storeroom; once flayed it is permissible for him to take the carcasses into his storeroom or house, but otherwise not; penalty as specified in chapter 19.

Chapter 21 to be entirely revoked and replaced with: There should be a ban on all kinds of poultry, goats and sheep, and no one shall take them or cause them to be taken out of the contada of Pistoia; penalty 5 pence, to be put to the common use by the *podestà* or *capitano*. And anyone who is able to capture someone doing the contrary, and deliver them to the gaol of the commune of Pistoia shall have half the penalty.

Chapter 22 to be amended by the addition of: That skinners and tanners shall be allowed to tan skins as at present in their tanneries from the day on which these ordinances are ratified until 15 June. Moreover tanneries shall be permitted within the walls of the city, but only in the following places: in the houses along the road which goes from the house of the canons of Pistoia at the chapel of Santa Maria del Nuova to the gate of San Pietro, and in that contrado, and on the land outside the gate. And in those places they may peg out skins and do everything else necessary to tanning, as they wish. And this may also be done below the Castell Traiecti up to the Carmelite friary and in the houses, gardens and grounds round about. And if anyone does the contrary, let him be punished or fined as in the said chapter.

It is also provided and ordained that:

24. So that no corruption or stench should harm people's bodies, within the city the rendering down of dripping or suet should be done in houses at least 25 arms length from their neighbours and nowhere else; penalty 25 pence.

25. That the tanning of gut, to make strings, shall only be done outside the city; penalty 25 pence.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Animal entrails were tanned and twisted ('spun') to form various types of cord, including the strings for musical instruments and tennis rackets. The generic term

[26-28 Three chapters regulating the meat trade in the city and region.]

29. The *podestà* and *capitano* shall make enquiry into all the matters contained here, and also act on accusations and denunciations made by anyone else before them, and punish and fine offenders as set out above.

[Revisions of 4 June]

30. At the burial of anyone no bell is to be rung at all, but people are to be summoned and their prayers invited only by word of mouth; penalty 25 pence from the heirs or next of kin of the deceased.

31. When the corpse has been carried to the church, everyone who accompanied it there ought to withdraw, and when the next of kin leave no one ought to accompany them except their spouses and the neighbours, and also the dead man's next of kin on his mother's side. These people may go to the house of the dead man, or wherever the body is, but may not enter the building. 'Neighbours' are to be understood as people who lived within 50 arms length of the dead man during his lifetime; penalty 25 pence.

32. The *anziani* and gonfalonier shall choose at least sixteen men from each quarter of the city, and repeat the process as often as seems necessary to maintain the number. These men are to take corpses from houses or dwellings and carry them to church and to burial, and no one else shall dare to enter a house or other place in which a person has died or carry the body to burial; penalty 25 pence. And anybody who asks someone else to remove or carry a corpse shall incur the same penalty. Those who carry the corpse shall have 16 pence between them for their labour, the money to be paid from public funds; and the chamberlains of the commune of Pistoia shall make the payment within two days of the burial; penalty 25 pence. A written receipt from one of the brethren of the place where the burial occurred, or from a priest or one of the keepers of the fabric of the church where the burial took place, or from the rector of the hospital if the burial was at a hospital, is to be taken as sufficient proof that the portering was carried out. And it shall be sufficient for the receipt to say: I, N, have written this. The men chosen and appointed to act as porters must go

for the product was catgut, although cats were not, in fact, the source of most of the gut used. As this regulation implies, the process was thought more noxious than the tanning of skins, which could still be carried out within the city walls during the plague.

when anybody asks them, and if they refuse they are to be punished with a fine of 10 pence. An oath on the sacrament by the person who made the request is to be taken as sufficient proof of their refusal.

However, the *disciplinati*⁴⁵ of a particular society in the city, who wear the garments of *disciplinati*, shall be allowed to remove and carry the bodies of the dead if this is done without charge, for the good of their souls; for certain good men, in search of salvation, have made themselves porters of the bodies of the poor and destitute, and they shall be allowed to enter houses and other places and take the bodies to burial whenever they wish.

33. Since wax for honouring the corpses of the dead cannot be found on sale, candles are not to be given, but instead it shall be permissible for anyone to give between 6 and 12 pence, at most, as he sees fit to each priest and friar who attends a funeral, in lieu of the candles and money which they were accustomed to give. But canons of the great church of Pistoia, prebendaries, priors, wardens and provosts of churches and of the orders of friars of Pistoia may be given twice that amount; penalty 25 pence.

34. The keepers of the fabric of each church in the city shall keep a supply of wax torches to be carried at the burial and to be held, alight, while the corpse is buried. And no other torches or wax lights should be held or carried at a burial; penalty 25 pence. And after the burial the torches shall be taken back and restored to the keepers, and they shall be reimbursed at the going rate for the wax used, with an additional 5 pence for the good of the dead person's soul.

35. For the support of the church where burial takes place, and of the rector of the church where the dead man was a parishioner, when the burial is in a friary church the friars should be given between 16 and 20 pence in lieu of candles; and the same should be given to the rector of the church where the dead man was a parishioner. And if he is buried in his parish church, the rector should be given the same amount, and so should the keepers of the fabric. However, it shall be left to the discretion of the friars, rectors and keepers of the fabric to take less from the poor and destitute, depending on the status of the deceased.

36. [The *podestà* and *capitano* and their officials should enquire into these matters weekly and punish those doing the contrary; penalty 50 pence. Anyone can bring an accusation before them.]

⁴⁵ *Disciplinati* were members of a penitential fraternity; in this case, those who had taken on the role of burying the dead.

These ordinances are to be observed until 1 September, or until 1 November at the discretion of the *anziani* and gonfalonier. Saving that anything in them which is contrary to the liberty of the church shall be null and void, and of no effect.

65. Plague regulations of Bernabò Visconti, lord of Milan, 1374

Chronicon Regiense, ed. L. A. Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* XVIII, Milan, 1731, col.82.

Wishing, as far as we can, to preserve our subjects from contagious illness, we have made certain decrees which we send to you enclosed in this, and which we wish to be observed in Reggio and to be enrolled in the volume of our statutes. Milan, 17 January 1374.

To the noble man, the *podestà* of Reggio. We wish that each person who displays a swelling or tumour shall immediately leave the city, castle or town where he is and take to the open country, living either in huts or in the woods, until he either dies or recovers.

Item, those in attendance upon someone who died shall wait ten days before returning to human society.

Item, parish priests shall examine the sick to see what the illness is, and shall immediately notify the designated searchers under pain of being burnt alive.

Item, all the goods, both movable and immovable, shall be put to the use of the lord's treasury.

Item, the goods of anyone who carries the epidemic from another place shall likewise be put to the use of the lord's treasury, and no restitution shall be made.

Item, under pain of forfeiture and death no one shall enter service from attending upon the sick, except as above.

Let all our subjects be informed of these matters.

66. London butchery regulations, 1371

This attempt to ban the dumping of entrails and blood within the city of London is justified in terms of the diseases which arise from corrupt air, and was presumably a deliberate attempt to play upon public anxieties about the plague. It was not, however, a serious attempt to prevent the spread of disease – and two major city shambles were almost immediately exempted from its

V: Human agency

68. Well-poisoning

A brief contemporary account by a Franciscan friar from Franconia, Herman Gigas. His chronicle ends in 1349.

J. G. Meuschen (ed), *Hermanni Gygantis, ordinis fratrum minorum, Flores Temporum seu Chronicon Universale ab Orbe condito ad annum Christi MCCCXLIX*, Leiden, 1750, pp. 138-9.

In 1347 there was such a great pestilence and mortality throughout almost the whole world that in the opinion of well-informed men scarcely a tenth of mankind survived. The victims did not linger long, but died on the second or third day. The plague raged so fiercely that many cities and towns were entirely emptied of people. In the cities of Bologna, Venice, Montpellier, Avignon, Marseilles and Toulouse alike, a thousand people died in one day, and it still rages in France, Normandy, England and Ireland. Some say that it was brought about by the corruption of the air; others that the Jews planned to wipe out all the Christians with poison and had poisoned wells and springs everywhere. And many Jews confessed as much under torture: that they had bred spiders and toads in pots and pans, and had obtained poison from overseas; and that not every Jew knew about this wickedness, only the more powerful ones, so that it would not be betrayed. As evidence of this heinous crime, men say that bags full of poison were found in many wells and springs, and as a result, in cities, towns and villages throughout Germany, and in fields and woods too, almost all the wells and springs have been blocked up or built over, so that no one can drink from them or use the water for cooking, and men have to use rain or river water instead. God, the lord of vengeance, has not suffered the malice of the Jews to go unpunished. Throughout Germany, in all but a few places, they were burnt. For fear of that punishment many accepted baptism and their lives were spared. This action was taken against the Jews in 1349, and it still continues unabated, for in a number of regions many people, noble and humble alike, have laid plans against them and their defenders which they will never abandon until the whole Jewish race has been destroyed.

69. The persecution of the Jews

The author of this account, Heinrich Truchess (or *dapifer*) von Diessenhoven, was a canon of Constance who had been a chaplain of Pope John XXII (d.1334).

J. F. Boehmer (ed), *Fontes Rerum Germanicarum*, 4 vols, Stuttgart, 1843-68, IV pp. 68-71.

The persecution of the Jews began in November 1348, and the first outbreak in Germany was at Sölden, where all the Jews were burnt on the strength of a rumour that they had poisoned wells and rivers, as was afterwards confirmed by their own confessions and also by the confessions of Christians whom they had corrupted and who had been induced by the Jews to carry out the deed. And some of the Jews who were newly baptised said the same. Some of these remained in the faith but some others relapsed, and when these were placed upon the wheel¹ they confessed that they had themselves sprinkled poison or poisoned rivers. And thus no doubt remained of their deceitfulness which had now been revealed.

Within the revolution of one year, that is from All Saints [1 November] 1348 until Michaelmas [29 September] 1349 all the Jews between Cologne and Austria were burnt and killed for this crime, young men and maidens and the old along with the rest. And blessed be God who confounded the ungodly who were plotting the extinction of his church, not realising that it is founded on a sure rock and who, in trying to overturn it, crushed themselves to death and were damned for ever.

But now let us follow the killings individually. First Jews were killed or burnt in Sölden in November, then in Zofingen they were seized and some put on the wheel, then in Stuttgart they were all burnt. The same thing happened during November in Landsberg, a town in the diocese of Augsburg and in Bueron, Memmingen and Burgau in the same diocese. During December they were burnt and killed on the feast of St Nicholas [6 December] in Lindau, on 8 December in Reutlingen, on 13 December in Haigerloch, and on 20 December in Horw they were burnt in a pit. And when the wood and straw had been consumed, some Jews, both young and old, still remained half alive. The stronger of them snatched up cudgels and stones and dashed out the brains of those trying to creep out of the fire, and thus compelled

¹ Breaking on the wheel was a form of torture.

those who wanted to escape the fire to descend to hell. And the curse seemed to be fulfilled: 'his blood be upon us and upon our children'.²

On 27 December the Jews in Esslingen were burnt in their houses and in the synagogue. In *Nagelten* they were burnt. In the abovesaid town of Zofingen the city councillors, who were hunting for poison, found some in the house of a Jew called Trostli, and by experiment were satisfied that it was poison. As a result, two Jewish men and one woman were put on the wheel, but others were saved at the command of Duke Albrecht of Austria, who ordered that they should be protected. But this made little difference, for in the course of the next year those he had under his protection were killed, and as many again in the diocese of Constance. But first those burnt in 1349 will be described in order.

Once started, the burning of the Jews went on increasing. When people discovered that the stories of poisoning were undoubtedly true they rose as one against the Jews. First, on 2 January 1349 the citizens of Ravensburg burnt the Jews in the castle, to which they had fled in search of protection from King Charles, whose servants were imprisoned by the citizens after the burning. On 4 January the people of Constance shut up the Jews in two of their own houses, and then burnt 330 of them in the fields at sunset on 3 March. Some processed to the flames dancing, others singing and the rest weeping. They were burnt shut up in a house which had been specially built for the purpose. On 12 January in Buchen and on 17 January in Basel they were all burnt apart from their babies, who were taken from them by the citizens and baptised. They were burnt on 21 January in Messkirch and Waldkirch, on 25 January in Speyer, and on 30 January in Ulm, on 11 February in Überlingen, on 14 February in the city of Strassburg (where it took six days to burn them because of the numbers involved), on 16 February in Mengen, on 19th of the month in Sulgen, on 21st in Schaffhausen and Zurich, on 23rd in St Gallen and on 3 March in Constance, as described above, except for some who were kept back to be burnt on the third day after the Nativity of the Virgin [11 September].

They were killed and burnt in the town of Baden on 18 March, and those in the castle below, who had been brought there from Rheinfelden for protection, were killed and then burnt. And on 30 May

² Matthew 27.24: the people's response to Pilate's statement, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just man [Christ]. Look you to it'.

they were similarly wiped out in Radolfzell. In Mainz and Cologne they were burnt on 23 August. On 18 September 330 Jews were burnt in the castle at Kyburg, where they had gathered from Winterthur and Diessenhoven and the other towns of their protector the Duke of Austria. But the imperial citizens did not want to go on supporting them any longer, and so they wrote to Duke Albrecht of Austria, who was protecting his Jewish subjects in the counties of Pfirt, Alsace and Kyburg, and told him that either he had them burnt by his own judges or they would burn them themselves. So the Duke ordered them to be burnt by his own judges, and they were finally burnt on 18 September.

And thus, within one year, as I said, all the Jews between Cologne and Austria were burnt – and in Austria they await the same fate, for they are accursed of God. And I could believe that the end of the Hebrews had come, if the time prophesied by Elias and Enoch were now complete; but since it is not complete, it is necessary that some be reserved so that what has been written may be fulfilled: that the hearts of the sons shall be turned to their fathers, and of the fathers to the sons.³ But in what parts of the world they may be reserved I do not know, although I think it more likely that the seed of Abraham will be reserved in lands across the sea than in these people. So let me make an end of the Jews here.⁴

70. Measures taken against the Jews in Lausanne

This and the following two texts are taken from material in the Strassburg archives. The city (in common with other towns, see also 72 and 74) wrote round to neighbouring cities enquiring whether they had evidence that

3 A reference to Malachias 4.5-6: 'Behold I will send you Elias the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers: lest I come and strike the earth with anathema'.

This text was taken to mean that after the coming of Antichrist the prophets Enoch and Elias would reconvert the apostates as a preliminary to the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgement. At the same time they would convert the Jews to Christianity. Heinrich's point is that because the second coming is not yet imminent, contemporary Jews could not be entirely wiped out or converted, because some had to survive to be converted by Enoch and Elias in the Last Days.

4 The sentence is ambiguous and, given the anti-semitism of the author, probably deliberately so. Its surface meaning is that he has come to the end of the two chapters devoted to the Jews and is now about to turn to other matters. But it could also be taken to mean that he hopes to see the extermination of the Jews in Europe, as there are likely to be enough elsewhere to meet the prophetic conditions laid down for Christ's second coming (see note 3 above).

Jews were poisoning wells, and what steps they were taking against the perpetrators. The city received eleven replies in all. The formal courtesies at the beginning and end of the letters have been omitted here.

Urkunden und Akten der Stadt Strassburg: Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg, V, Strassburg 1896, pp. 164–5.

Rodolphe d'Oron, knight, lord of *Artales*, bailiff of Lausanne, and Michel de Vevey, esquire, *sautier* of Lausanne⁵ on behalf of the citizens of Lausanne, to Conrad von Winterthur, the bürgermeister of Strassburg, and the city councillors. Lausanne, the Saturday after St Martin in winter [15 Nov, 1348].

We have received your gracious letters with pleasure, and have accordingly sent you in writing under our seals the confessions made by a Jew called Bona Dies. He was condemned to be set on the wheel, where he survived for four days and nights. While he could still speak he held unvaryingly to his first story. And we have informed you that in the lordship of the Count of Savoy many Jews, and Christians as well, have confessed to the same appalling crime. Accordingly they were condemned to punishment by burning and impalement.⁶ The confessions they made have been communicated to our friends the officials and councillors of Bern and Fribourg at their request.

71. Examination of the Jews captured in Savoy

The confessions extracted by torture from a group of Jews living in the county of Savoy were evidently widely circulated as evidence of an international conspiracy. Unidentified place names have been printed in italics.

Strassburg Urkundenbuch, pp. 167–74.

The Castellan of Chillon, deputy of the bailiff of Chablis there, to the officials, councillors and citizens of Strassburg.

I understand that you want to know about the confessions of the Jews and the proofs brought against them. I am writing to tell you that the people of Bern have a copy of the inquisition and confession of the Jews dwelling in their neighbourhood who were involved in putting poison into the wells there and in several other places, and that that copy

⁵ Lausanne was largely under the control of its bishop. The bailiff headed the civic hierarchy; the *sautier* was a judicial official. In the published list of officers the name of the *sautier* is given as Michod de Vennes: M. Reymond, *Les Dignitaires de L'Église Notre-Dame de Lausanne jusqu'en 1536*, Lausanne, 1912, p. 130.

⁶ The word used is *scitote*, which is perhaps related to the Italian *stichata*, a palisade.

contains a detailed account of the truth of the matter. Many Jews have been tried after being put to the question or, in some cases, making confession without it, and have been condemned to be burnt. Some Christians, to whom Jews gave poison for use against Christians, have also been put on the wheel and tortured. For the burning of Jews and the torturing of Christians has gone on in numerous places within the county of Savoy. May God keep you.

The confession made on the 15 September 1348, in the castle of Chillon, by the Jews of Villeneuve imprisoned there on the charge of poisoning the wells, springs and other places; and putting poison into food in order to destroy and wipe out the entire Christian religion.

I. Balavigny, a Jewish surgeon who lived at Thonon, was arrested at Chillon after being found in the neighbourhood. He was briefly put to the question and, when it was over, he confessed, after a long interval,⁷ that, about ten weeks earlier, the Rabbi Jacob (who had come from Toledo and had been living at Chambéry since Easter) sent him, by a Jewish boy, some poison (about the size of an egg) in the form of a powder, enclosed in a leather bag, accompanied by a letter, commanding him on pain of excommunication and by the obedience he owed to the Jewish law, to put the poison into the larger public wells of the town – the ones most commonly used – in order to poison the people using them; and not to tell anybody at all. The letter also said that rabbis had given orders for the same thing to be done in various other places.

He confessed that one evening he secretly put the poisonous powder under a stone in a spring on the shore at Thonon. He further confesses that the boy showed him many identical letters addressed to numerous other Jews, specifically some addressed to Mossoiet, Banditon and Samolet of Villeneuve; to Musseo, Abraham and Aquetus of Montreux, Jews residing at La Tour de Vevey; to Beneton and his son at St Maurice; and to Vivian, Jacob, Aquetus and Sonetus, Jews at Évian les Bains. Several letters of a like nature were sent to Hebrea and Musset, Jews at Monthey. The boy told him that he had taken many others to various places, a long way away, but he (Balavigny) does not know to whom they were addressed. He further confessed that after he had put

⁷ To be put to the question is the standard circumlocution for torture. Because confessions made while torture was actually being applied were – for obvious reasons – suspect, the clerk (with only one exception) stresses that the confession was made after the torture session had finished. The period of torture is variously defined as brief or moderate.

the poison in the spring at Thonon, he expressly forbade his wife and children to use the spring, but without telling them why. In the presence of many credible witnesses he confessed by the Jewish law and by the five books of Moses that everything he had said was true.

On the next day, Balavigny, voluntarily and without torture, maintained the truth of his confession, repeating it word for word in the presence of many credible witnesses and further confessing, of his own accord, that one day, on his way back from La Tour de Vevey, he had put into a spring below Montreux, namely the spring *de la Conereyde*, a quantity of poison about the size of a nut, wrapped in a rag, which he had been given by Aquetus of Montreux, who lives in La Tour. He told Manssionnus the Jew, who lives at Villeneuve, and Delosatz, son of Musselotus, what he had done and warned them not to drink from the spring. He describes the poison as red and black in colour.

On 19 September Balavigny confessed, without being put to the question, that three weeks after Pentecost⁸ Mussus the Jew of Villeneuve told him that he had put poison in the public drinking fountain of his own town, namely in the custom-house there, and that afterwards he did not drink its water, but only drank from the lake. He also confessed that Mussus told him that he had likewise placed poison in the public drinking fountain at Chillon, namely in the custom-house under some stones. The spring was then investigated and some poison found. Some of it was given to a Jew, who died, thereby proving that it was poison. He said further that rabbis had instructed him and other Jews not to drink water for nine days after poison had been put in it, and he said that as soon as he had put poison in the spring he immediately warned other Jews.

He confesses further that a good two months earlier he had been at Évian and, while talking the matter over with a Jew called Jacob, had asked him, among other things, whether he had had a letter and poison like the others; to which Jacob replied that he had. Afterwards he asked him whether he had obeyed the instructions, to which Jacob replied that he had not placed the poison himself but had given it to Savetus the Jew who had put it into the spring *de Morer* at Évian. He urged on Balavigny the wisdom of dealing with the instructions in the same way.

He confesses that Aquetus of Montreux told him that he had put poison into the spring above La Tour which he uses regularly when he is staying there. He confesses that Samolet told him that he had put

⁸ Pentecost, or Whitsun, fell on 8 June in 1348.

the poison which he had received into a spring, but refused to tell him which.

Balavigny, speaking as a surgeon, says further that if anyone suffering the effects of the poison comes into contact with someone else, especially while sweating, the other person will be infected; and that the infection can be transmitted by breath as well. He believes this to be the case because he has heard many experienced physicians say so, and is certain that the other Jews cannot acquit themselves of the charge, for they knew perfectly well what they were doing and are guilty.

Balavigny was taken across the lake from Chillon to Clarens, to identify the spring in which he had confessed putting the poison. Upon arrival he was taken to the spot and as soon as he saw the spring he said, 'This is the spring where I put the poison'. The spring was examined in his presence and the linen rag or cloth in which the poison had been wrapped was found in the channel going from the spring by Henri Gérard, a notary public, in the presence of many people, and shown to the Jew. He confirmed that it was the linen cloth or rag in which the poison had been enclosed when he put it in the spring; adding that the poison was of two colours, black and red. The linen cloth or rag was taken away and is in safe keeping.

Balavigny confesses everything recorded here, adding that he believes that the poison is derived from the basilisk, for he has heard it said that the poison would not be efficacious otherwise and is convinced that that is the case.

II. Banditon, a Jew of Villeneuve, was likewise briefly put to the question on 15 September and, when it was over, he confessed, after a long interval, that he had put a quantity of poison, about the size of a large nut, which had been given to him by Musseus, a Jew of La Tour de Vevey, into the spring of Carutet, to poison people.

The next day, Banditon, voluntarily and without being put to the question, confirmed that what he had confessed was true, confessing also that Rabbi Jacob, who had come from Toledo at Easter and was living at Chambéry, sent him, at *Pillieux*, by a Jewish boy, some poison about the size of a large nut, together with a letter which told him to put the poison into springs on pain of excommunication. He had put the poison, which was in a leather bag, into the spring of *Cerclitus de Roch*. He further confesses that he saw many other letters addressed to Jews, which the boy was carrying, and that he saw him deliver one

letter to Samolet the Jew of Villeneuve outside the upper gate. He says also that Massoletus the Jew told him that he had put poison in the spring near the bridge at Vevey, namely on the side towards Évian.

III. The said Mamson, a Jew of Villeneuve, when he was put to the question on 15 September, confessed nothing about these matters, maintaining his total ignorance. But on the next day he voluntarily, of his own volition and without being put to the question at all, confessed in the presence of many people that one day in the fortnight after Pentecost he travelled from Monthey in the company of a Jew called Provenzal, and as they went along Provenzal said to him, 'You're going to put the poison which I'll give you into that spring, or it'll be the worse for you'. And this was the spring of *Chabloz Cruyez* between Vevey and Muraz. So Mamson took a quantity of poison, about the size of a nut, and put it in the well. He believes that all the Jews round about Évian held a meeting before Pentecost to discuss the poisoning. He says that Balavigny told him one day that he had poisoned the spring *de la Conereyde* below Montreux. He says moreover that none of the Jews can acquit themselves of the charges, because they were all in it together and are guilty. When Mamson was brought before the commissioners on 3 October he changed none of his testimony, except that he had not put the poison into the spring.

Before their execution, all these Jews confessed by the Jewish law that all these things were true, insisting that no Jew above the age of seven could acquit himself of the charges, because they all knew everything that was going on.

IV. On 8 October Belieta, the wife of Aquetus the Jew was briefly put to the question, and when it was over she confessed that around midsummer last the said Provenzal, who had been arrested and then released at Vevey, although she does not know on what grounds, gave her some poison (about the size of a large nut, and tied up in a linen rag or cloth) in front of the house where he was living. She was to put the poison into springs to poison the people using them, and she handed it on to Mamson and his wife for them to do it.

On 18 October Belieta was put to the question, and when it was over she confessed that Provenzal had given her some poison, about as much as a large nut, to put in springs so that people using the water would fall sick and die. And she took the poison and did as she was told. Asked whether any Jew knew about the poisoning she says that Geney the Jewess and Jocet of La Tour knew about it very well.

V. Aquetus son of Belieta the Jewess was put to the question to a moderate extent, and when it was over accused Aquetus the son of Banditon, who lived in Villeneuve; saying that he overheard through a window of his house Aquetus saying to his father Banditon that a Jew called Provenzal, whom he didn't know, had, twelve weeks previously, given him some poison in a paper cornet and told him to put the poison in some well-used spring; and he heard his father answer that he should put the poison in the first spring he could find, and afterwards he heard Aquetus tell his father that he had sprinkled the poison into the spring of *Cerclitus de Roch*.

When the accused Aquetus was brought before the two commissioners, he denied the accusations to Aquetus' face. Aquetus the accuser replied that that was what he had heard and he wasn't making it up. And immediately he confessed that everything set out here was true, and that he had sprinkled poison in the spring, so that the people using it would die; and that he had revealed the matter to his father. Asked whether his father and the other Jews in Villeneuve know about the poisoning, he says that he is sure they do, because the leading members of the Jewish community always discuss matters among themselves outside the upper gate of Villeneuve, and the humbler Jews do the same. And he confessed these things without being put to the question, adding that the poison was green and black. And he confessed that this was true by the Jewish law and the five books of Moses; adding that, by his soul, the Jews richly deserved to die, and that indeed he had no wish to escape death, for he too richly deserved to die.

On Friday 10 October 1348 in the castle at Châtel an investigation was held on the authority of the court of the illustrious prince, our lord Amadée, Count of Savoy, into the accusations noised abroad by public fame and clamour against the Jews of both sexes imprisoned there. They were shown to be guilty of trying to kill Christians by poisoning springs, wells and other things used by them, and were accordingly punished. Their confession was made in the presence of many credible witnesses.

I. Agimetus, a Jew, who had been staying at Geneva and was imprisoned in the castle there, was put briefly to the question and then afterwards, after a long interval, he was put to the question again, this time to a moderate extent, whereupon he confessed in the presence of many credible witnesses the things unfolded below. Firstly that in last Lent the trading house of Claus de Rances sent him to Venice to buy silk and other things. When this came to the ears of Rubi Peyret, the

rabbi at Chambéry, Rabbi Peyret sent for Agimetus, and when he had come into his presence said to him: 'It has come to our knowledge that you will be going to Venice to buy merchandise. Here's a sachet of poison, folded up in a bag of thin leather. Put a little in the wells, cisterns and springs at Venice, and at the other places on your route, to poison the people using the water.'

Agimetus took the sachet full of poison and took it with him to Venice, and when he arrived he scattered some of the poison into a well or cistern of fresh water near the house of the said Germans to poison the people using it, affirming that that was the best source of fresh water in the town. He affirms also that Rubi Peyret promised him, Agimetus, that he could name his own reward for the deed. Moreover he confesses voluntarily that he left as soon as he had done it, to avoid being arrested by the burgesses and others, and that he went to Calabria and Apulia and threw poison into numerous wells there, and that he put poison into the spring in the piazza of Barletta, into the public spring at Toulouse and into springs along the coast. Asked whether anyone died in the places where he put poison, he says that he does not know, because he always took himself off in a great hurry. Asked whether any Jews in those places were guilty, he says he does not know. And he confessed the truth of all these things on the five books of Moses and a Jewish roll, and that he had lied about none of the things that had happened to him.

II. Jocetus the Jew, an inhabitant of Châtel, put briefly to the question, after a long interval confessed, in the presence of many credible witnesses, that a good fourteen weeks ago Rubi Peyret, the rabbi at Chambéry, met him near his house and handed him a quantity of poison about as big as a fist in a piece of net, and he could see through the little holes that it held powder and that the powder was black. And he transferred the powder to a large paper cornet and put some into a spring in the middle of the road from Vevey to Châtel, which was used by everybody passing that way, and left the rest under a clod of grass and earth near a tower. And Rubi Peyret gave Jocetus five gold shillings for doing it. He confesses moreover that Rubi Peyret gave him two bags, each the size of an egg, with two letters which he was to deliver to two Jews living in La Tour de Vevey, Aquetus and Abraham, to poison people with; telling them to put the poison into springs. The two Jews received the bags from him in their houses at La Tour and said that they were prepared to carry out the instructions in their letters.

III. Iconetus, a Jew who once lived at Bas but now at Châtel and was arrested there, was put to the question to a moderate degree, and when it was over confessed after a long interval that two years ago Abuget, one of the richest and most powerful Jews in Bas, gave him some poison (which was white, and about the size of two fists) outside his house, saying to him, 'Go to Brussels and Hainault and put this poison in the best springs in that area, to poison the people using them'; and he gave him two florins for doing it, and said that he should put the poison secretly and stealthily into the springs and tell nobody. When Iconetus had taken the poison he left, and travelled to the places specified. And when he had reached Brussels he left two lots of poison in springs in the town of Tinimont and at the top of the town, placing it stealthily under a large stone at about noon, and then he retreated hastily and, leaving the town, headed for Hainault and there stealthily left another bag in a beautiful spring near the market town of Mons in Hainault, leaving it as before under a large stone to poison the people using the water, and again leaving immediately to go begging for bread elsewhere. Asked whether he knows what the poison was made of, he says he does not, and confesses that all these things are true, on the five books of Moses.

IV. Aquetus Rubi, a Jew born in *Warembon* but now living in Châtel, was put briefly to the question and afterwards confessed that a year ago he was at Le Pont-de-Beauvoison and had lost all his money at dice and was planning to leave for the region around Geneva when Salamin the Jew, an inhabitant of Le Pont-de-Beauvoison, came to him and said, 'You've lost all your money and you've got nothing. Go to those parts, but take this poison with you and put it into springs and wells in the big and middling towns, and I'll give you six shillings in Savoy money'. Aquetus took the poison, about as much as two fingers, in a piece of leather, together with the six shillings, and one day put the bag full of poison under a big stone in a spring at *Perioso* near the drinking fountain at the *Maison du Chat*, to poison people using water from the spring. Asked if he had put poison anywhere else he said not. He also said he did it for a laugh, but now he was sorry for what he had done. Asked whether any of the Jews in La Tour, Évian, Villeneuve and Châtel knew anything about the poisonings he said that he did not know, and that everything he had confessed was true, on the Jewish law.

VI. Aquetus son of Jocetus the Jew, living at Châtel, was put to the question to a moderate extent on 11 October and when it was over