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Birth of a Serial Killer

'Then a boil developed on their thighs, or on their upper arms a boil ... This infected the whole body, so that the patient violently vomited blood. This vomiting of blood continued without intermission for three days, there being no means of curing it, and then the patient died.' So wrote Michael of Piazza, a Franciscan friar, describing the torment of the first victims of the Black Death.

In October 1347, all that the people of the time knew was that a deadly and hitherto unknown infectious disease had appeared from nowhere on the island of Sicily. They could have had no way of understanding the nature of their adversary.

The scale of the catastrophe was unprecedented. There was no cure and anyone who was infected died a truly awful death. This was the first manifestation of a plague that would blight Europe for the next 300 years and claim countless millions of victims – the worst serial killer of all time and the most tragic event in human history.

The first victims: their story

Contemporary accounts of the plague's first appearance speak to us across the centuries, conveying something of the utter terror and despair that afflicted whole populations. Michael of Piazza described how 12 Genoese galleys said to have come from the

Crimea entered the harbour of Messina in Sicily and the crews who carried such a virulent disease 'in their bones that anyone who only spoke to them was seized by a mortal illness and in no way could evade death. The infection spread to everyone who had any intercourse with the diseased. Those infected felt themselves penetrated by a pain throughout their whole bodies.'

It appears that the crews of the galleys were healthy and were not displaying any symptoms, and yet the inhabitants of Messina were rapidly struck down. When the authorities decided that the galleys were responsible for bringing this dreadful disease, they expelled them from the port, forcing them to put out to sea again. The crews, who were still perfectly healthy, must have been perplexed and indignant.

Onward they are said to have sailed to Genoa and, on arrival, a new outbreak of the pestilence began, the disease spreading rapidly almost as soon as the galleys had docked. Again, the reports suggest that the crews escaped the plague and yet:

> The infection appeared in Genoa in its most deadly form a day or two after the arrival of the ships, *although none of those on board were suffering from the plague* [our italics], for we know that there were no cases of plague on board the ships, although the very atmosphere or smell of the new arrival seemed sufficient to taint the air of Genoa and to carry death to every part of the city within a couple of days.

These reports have obviously been greatly embroidered and our conclusion was that the epidemic was already up and running by the time the galleys arrived at Messina. Since the crews were completely healthy after a voyage of at least a month as well as on the further voyage to Genoa, they cannot have been carrying the infection. Their arrival at the time when the people of Messina realized that they were experiencing an epidemic must have been merely coincidental. We decided that, most probably, unrecognized victims had been dying from the plague in Messina for some weeks before the galleys arrived.

In the throes of the ensuing epidemic, the citizens of Messina believed that the slightest contact with the sick guaranteed rapid infection. Michael of Piazza wrote:

> Soon men hated each other so much that, if a son was attacked by the disease, his father would not care for him. If, in spite of all, he dared to approach him, he was immediately infected, and could in no way escape death, but was bound to expire within three days. Nor was this the end of it: all those belonging to him or dwelling in the same house, even the cats and other domestic animals, followed him to the grave. As the number of deaths increased in Messina, many wished to confess their sins to the priests and to draw up their last will and testament. But ecclesiastics, lawyers and attorneys refused to enter the houses of the diseased. If one or the other had set foot in such a house to draw up a will, or for any other purpose, he was condemned to sudden death. Minor friars and Dominicans and members of other orders who heard the confessions of the dying were immediately overcome by death, so that some even remained in the rooms of the dying.
>
> Soon the corpses were lying forsaken in the houses. No ecclesiastic, no son, no father and no relation dared to enter, but they paid servants high wages to bury the dead. The houses of the deceased remained open, with all their valuables, with gold and jewels; anyone who decided to enter met with no impediment, for the plague raged with such vehemence that soon there was a shortage of servants and finally none were left at all.

This account may be exaggerated in places, but it does convey vividly the horror and terror that everyone felt when this new plague first struck. They were overwhelmed by the ferocity of this mysterious disease which was completely outside their experience. One thing is quite clear – and this is an important clue – they realized immediately that transmission was directly by person-to-person infection.

With hundreds dying and the merest contact with the sick apparently guaranteeing infection, the remaining Messinians panicked and fled. Nevertheless, although they thought they were perfectly healthy, unbeknown to them they were unwittingly carrying the plague with them.

One group of refugees settled in the fields and vineyards of southern Sicily, but many fell down on the road and died. Others sought refuge in the neighbouring port of Catania, where they were tended in the hospital until death overcame them, but the Catanians rapidly realized their mistake – they should not have introduced this appalling infection into their town. The corpses were quickly pitched into trenches outside the walls and further immigration was strictly controlled.

Michael of Piazza relates that 'the population of Catania was so godless and fearful that no one among them would have intercourse with or speak to the fugitives, but each fled hastily on their approach'. Whether this was a sign of 'godlessness' or plain common sense, it was too late and the Black Death ravaged the town: 'The town of Catania lost all of its inhabitants, so that it ultimately sank into complete oblivion.' Michael of Piazza was probably exaggerating again, but the picture is unmistakable.

Fleeing in uncontrollable terror, the people from Messina spread the plague all over Sicily; the death toll was high in Syracuse and the port of Trapani was said to be completely depopulated.

What were the symptoms?

What was it like to contract the Black Death? Michael of Piazza's graphic description of the symptoms is not for those with weak stomachs:

> The 'burn blisters' appeared, and boils developed in different parts of the body: on the sexual organs, in others on the

> thighs, or on the arms, and in others on the neck. At first these were of the size of a hazelnut and the patient was seized by violent shivering fits, which soon rendered him so weak that he could no longer stand upright, but was forced to lie on his bed, consumed by a violent fever and overcome by great tribulation. Soon the boils grew to the size of a walnut, then to that of a hen's egg or a goose's egg, and they were exceedingly painful, and irritated the body, causing it to vomit blood by vitiating the juices. The blood rose from the affected lungs to the throat, producing a putrefying and ultimately decomposing effect on the whole body. The sickness lasted three days, and on the fourth, at the latest, the patient succumbed.

This account may be supplemented by the following description, given by the Florentine humanist Giovanni Boccaccio when the plague ravaged Florence:

> Unlike what had been seen in the east, where bleeding from the nose is the fatal prognostic, here there appeared tumours in the groin or under the armpits, some as big as a small apple, others as large as an egg; and afterwards purple spots in most parts of the body: in some cases large and but few in number, in others smaller and more numerous – both sorts were the usual messengers of death. Neither medical knowledge, nor the power of drugs, was of any effect to cure this illness ... nearly all died on the third day from the first appearance of the symptoms; some sooner, some later, without any fever or other accessory symptoms. What made this plague so virulent was that, by being transmitted from the sick to the hale, it spread daily ... Nor was it caught only by conversing with or coming near the sick, but even by touching their clothes.

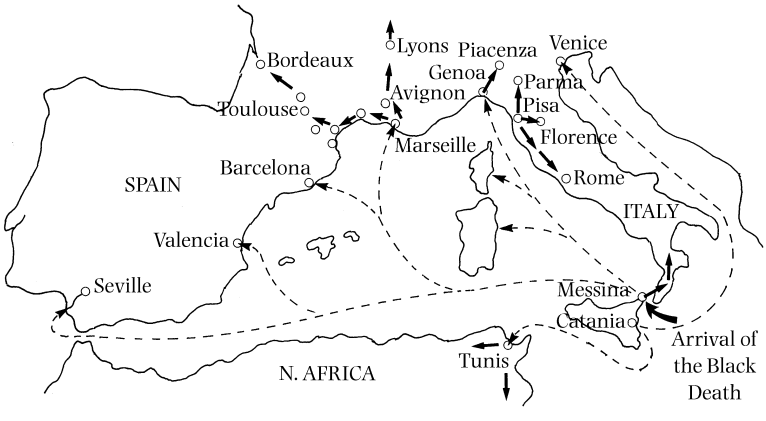
It was soon obvious that there was no cure: once the dreaded symptoms appeared, the agonizing end seemed to be inevitable. When 'God's tokens' – haemorrhagic spots caused by blood

seeping from damaged blood vessels beneath the skin – were found on the body, this was the death certificate and a prelude to four or five days of agony, frenzy and delirium. The victims' thirst was unquenchable and some of them ran naked through the streets, screaming, and plunged into water cisterns. Others went completely mad with the pain and even threw themselves out of windows. There was internal bleeding and, in the final days, the vital organs began to liquefy. Death was truly a merciful release.

The terror spreads throughout Italy

From its starting point, the plague was carried abroad in two ways: by ship, when it could jump over many miles and appear in a completely new port, and on foot, advancing slowly but surely over land.

Sicily occupies a pivotal position in the Mediterranean, and Messina and Catania were important stop-over ports for sea trading. It was trade that spread the plague and from Sicily the



The arrival of the Black Death at Messina in Sicily and its subsequent spread across the Mediterranean by boat.

disease expanded to North Africa via Tunis, to the Balearic Islands and Cyprus, and to Corsica and Sardinia. If it had been confined to these areas, the epidemic would probably have fizzled out and perhaps even been forgotten by history. However, the plague then made some critical strikes almost simultaneously.

It arrived in the northern Italian port of Genoa in January 1348 (some three months after the galleys had docked in Messina). It also made the short jump across the strait to southern Italy.

In January 1348 the disease also arrived in Venice, probably having come by sea from Sicily. A contemporary estimate of the death toll was 100 000, though this is probably an overestimate. One Venetian wrote:

> A certain man bled me, and the blood spurted onto his face. On that same day he was taken ill, and the next day he died; and by the mercy of God I have escaped. I record this because, as by mere communication with the sick, the plague mortally infected the healthy ... so the healthy man studiously avoided the sick. Even priests and doctors fled from those who were ill, in fear, and all avoided the dead. In many places and houses when an inmate died, the rest quickly expired, one after another. And so great was the overwhelming number of the dead, that it was necessary to open new cemeteries everywhere.

Can we learn something here? Was the man who was being bled suffering from the pestilence and yet recovered?

A stranger (obviously a person who was already infected) is believed to have brought the disease to Padua and the resulting devastation was great: an astounding two-thirds of the population died. If one person in a household fell sick, the whole family quickly succumbed. Was this an important clue concerning the nature of the disease?

Pisa was struck, probably via the port of Leghorn, in March 1348. From here the plague spread northwards to Tuscany and southwards to Rome. Italy was truly overwhelmed.

Europe was now fighting a war with the plague and the struggle seemed hopeless; this disease was completely outside people's experience or understanding. The enemy was invisible and nobody knew when or where it would next appear. When it did strike, people could not defend themselves and many were overcome. The more they panicked and fled, the more the disease was spread. The plague held all the trump cards.

From Genoa it was carried to Piacenza, about 60 miles (100 kilometres) to the north-east, and Gabriele de Mussi, a resident of Piacenza who practised as a notary, wrote:

> But as an inhabitant I have been asked to write more of Piacenza, so that it may be known what happened there in the year 1348. Some Genoese who had fled from the plague raging in their city betook themselves higher. They rested at Bobbio, and there sold the merchandise that they had brought with them. The purchaser, together with all his family and many neighbours, were quickly stricken with the sickness and died. One of these, wishing to make his will, called a notary, his confessor, and the necessary witnesses. The next day all these were buried together. So greatly did the calamity increase that nearly all the inhabitants of Bobbio soon fell victim to the sickness, and only the dead remained in the town.

In the spring of 1348 another Genoese who was infected with the plague came to Piacenza. He sought out his friend Fulchino della Croce, who took him into his house. But he died almost immediately afterwards and Fulchino was also quickly carried off, together with his entire family and many of his neighbours.

Gabriele de Mussi clearly believed that this disease was directly infectious. He continued:

> The plague was rife throughout the city in a brief space of time. I do not know where to begin: everywhere there was weeping and mourning. So great was the mortality that men hardly dared to breathe. The dead were numberless,

> and those who remained alive gave themselves up as lost and prepared for the tomb.

His account brings home to us the terrible scale of the disaster:

> The cemeteries failing, it was necessary to dig trenches to bury the corpses. Whole families were frequently thrown together in the same pit. It was the same in the neighbouring towns and villages. One Oberto de Sasso, who had come from an infected place to the church of the Friars Minor to make his will, summonsed a notary, witnesses, and neighbours. All these, together with sixty others, died within a short space of time.

Florence, situated only some 40 miles (60 kilometres) from Pisa, was one of the greatest cities in Europe, a democratic centre of culture, art and learning, its treasures including the works of Dante and Giotto. It did not escape and was badly hit by the Black Death, in spite of all sensible precautions and supplications to God. Boccaccio wrote in the *Decameron* a very memorable account of Florence during this time:

> Some shut themselves away and eschewed all social contact and every kind of luxury; others drank, sang and revelled freely, believing this way of life to be the sovereign remedy for so great an evil.

Citizen avoided citizen, few showing any fellow feeling for another, people held themselves aloof and never met their kinsfolk, and 'what is more and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers abandoned their own children, untended, to their fate, as if they were strangers'.

> No woman, however dainty, fair or well-born, shrank, when stricken by the disease, from the ministrations of a man, no matter whether he were young or not, nor did she scruple to expose every part of her body to him, with no more shame than if he had been a woman, submitting of necessity to that which her malady required.

> Many died by day or by night in the public streets; the departure of many others, who died at home, was hardly observed by their neighbours until the stench of their putrefying bodies carried the tidings; and what with their corpses and the corpses of others who died on every hand the whole place was a sepulchre.

It was the common practice of most of the neighbours, who were moved more by fear of contamination by the putrefying bodies than by charity towards the deceased, to drag the corpses out of the houses and to lay them in front of the doors; afterwards biers were brought up or, lacking them, planks on which the dead were laid.

Corpse carriers, known as *becchini*, performed their offices for hire and hurriedly carried the biers to the burial places. They dug huge trenches 'in which they laid the corpses as they arrived, hundreds at a time, piling them up in the same way that merchandise is stowed in the hold of a ship, tier upon tier, each covered with a little earth, until the trench would hold no more'.

The *becchini* were not nice people; apparently they were brutalized monsters who also had a more sinister role, which added to the general misery. They would force their way into the houses of people who were still alive and drag them away to join the ranks of the dead unless the men gave over money for their safety and the women paid with their virtue.

It has been estimated that between 45 000 and 65 000 people died in Florence, probably roughly in line with a general 50 per cent mortality in the towns and cities of Italy. Again, the story was the same. In the plague at Siena, Agnolo di Tura (who buried five of his children) described how father abandoned child and so they died, one after another. No one could be found to bury the huge heaps of the dead in the great pits; they were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them out and ate their bodies. A gruesome picture.

The Petrarch endured the plague in Parma and he describes it in his letters. The inhabitants attempted to quarantine themselves

by forbidding any contact with cities that were already stricken and the plague did not arrive there until June 1348. But when it did, it was the usual grim tale; about 40 000 people are estimated to have died in six months.

The epidemic raged in Italy for about a year before it began to peter out. The Petrarch wrote mournfully to his brother, the only survivor out of 35 people in a monastery at Monrieux:

> Sorrow is on all sides; fear is everywhere. I wish, my brother, that I had never been born, or at least had died before these times. How will posterity believe that there has been a time when well-nigh the whole globe has remained without inhabitants? ...
>
> When has any such thing ever been heard or seen; in what annals has it ever been read that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead to be buried, and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole earth?
>
> Will posterity ever believe these things when we, who see them, can scarcely credit them? We would think we were dreaming if we did not, with our own eyes, when we walk abroad, see the city in mourning with funerals, and on returning home, find it empty, and thus know that what we lament is real.

We may have discovered an important clue here. The Petrarch's brother was the only person to escape in a closed monastic community and yet he must have been in close proximity to his fellows. How did he avoid infection? Is this an indication that some people in Europe showed a form of resistance to this terrible disease?

The invasion of France

When the plague arrived in France in late 1347 or early 1348, the estimate of 57 000 people dying in Marseille and its hinterland is

probably inflated, but the tale of terror and mortality there is just what we have come to expect. Simon de Covino, a doctor from Paris, set down his recollections in 1350. They make grim reading:

> Faces became pale, and the doom which threatened the people was marked upon their foreheads. It was only necessary to look in the faces of men and women to read there the blow that was about to fall; a marked pallor announced the approach of the enemy and, before the fatal day, the sentence of death was written unmistakably on the face of the victim. No climate appeared to have any effect upon this strange disease. It appeared to be stopped neither by heat nor cold. High and healthy situations were as much subject to it as low and damp ones. It spread during the cold of winter as rapidly as in the heat of the summer.

We can learn some important points about the nature of the disease from this valuable account. Covino also noted that the plague appeared to be so contagious that a single breath of an infected person, or an item of their clothing, was sufficient to transmit it.

The plague spread westwards, from Marseille to Montpellier, Narbonne, Perpignan and Carcassone, which it reached by May 1348. From there it travelled to Toulouse and Montaubon, arriving at the port of Bordeaux on the Atlantic coast between June and August 1348. Its average rate of spread was between 1 and 5 miles (2 and 8 kilometres) a day, which suggests that it was mainly carried by infected people travelling on foot rather than on horseback.

The Black Death also spread northwards from Marseille and arrived at Avignon in March 1348, where it struck with particular ferocity. The recorded numbers of deaths, although surely exaggerated, are staggering: 1800 in the first three days and a total of 150 000 in the city and surrounding countryside. Many people fled from the city, but Pope Clement VI remained in

seclusion nearby, surrounding himself with large fires that were supposed to purify the air.

One anonymous canon wrote a letter to his friends giving a full account of the plague at Avignon. He began by giving a valuable description of the characteristic course of the disease and of the investigations ordered by the Pope:

> The disease can appear in three different ways. Firstly, men suffer in their lungs and breathing, and these victims, even if they are slightly attacked, cannot by any means escape, nor live beyond two days. Examinations have been made by doctors in many cities of Italy, and also in Avignon, by order of the Pope, in order to discover the origin of this disease. Many dead bodies have been opened and dissected, and it is found that all who had died suddenly in this way have had their lungs infected and have spat blood. The contagious nature of the disease is indeed the most terrible of all the terrors, for when anyone who is infected dies, all who see him in his sickness, or who visit him, or do any business with him, or even carry him to the grave, quickly follow him thither, and there is no known means of protection.
>
> There is another form of the sickness, which is running its course concurrently with the first; that is, certain swellings appear under both arms, and people also quickly die by these. A third form of the disease – like the two former – is that from which people of both sexes suffer from swellings in the groin. This, likewise, is quickly fatal.

The canon, like everyone else, assumed that this illness was directly infectious and he reiterates the writings of others:

> The epidemic has already grown to such proportions that, from fear of contagion, a doctor will not visit a sick man, even if the invalid would gladly give him everything he possessed; neither does a father visit his son, nor a mother her daughter, nor, in fact, does anyone go to another, no

> matter how closely he may be related to him, unless he is prepared to die with him, or quickly to follow him.

Evidently, complete avoidance of even near relatives was a standard practice and no one questioned the idea that the disease was directly infectious. The canon continued:

> One-half, or more than a half, of the people at Avignon are already dead. There are now more than 7,000 houses shut up within the walls of the city; there is no one living in these, and all the inhabitants have departed; the suburbs are almost empty. A field near Our Lady of Miracles has been bought by the Pope and consecrated as a cemetery, and 11,000 corpses have been buried in this. This number does not include those interred in the cemetery of the hospital of St Anthony, nor in cemeteries belonging to the religious bodies, nor in the many others that exist in Avignon. I must not be silent about the neighbouring parts, for all the gates at Marseille, with the exception of two small ones, are now closed, because four-fifths of the inhabitants are dead.

Clearly, the mortality was as high in France as it was in Italy.

> I can give the same account of all the cities and towns in Provence. Already the sickness has crossed the Rhône, and ravaged many cities and villages as far as Toulouse, and it steadily increases in violence as it proceeds. There is such a fear of death that people do not dare to speak even with anyone whose relative has died, because it is frequently remarked that in a family where one dies nearly all the relations follow him, and this is a common belief among the people. The sick are now not served by their kindred, except as dogs would be; food is put near the bed for them to eat and drink, and then the healthy fly and leave the house. When a man dies, some rough countrymen, called *gavoti*, come to the house, and after receiving a sufficiently large reward, carry the corpse to the grave. Neither relatives nor friends go to the sick; the priests do not even hear their confessions

> nor give them the sacraments; but everyone who is still healthy looks after himself. It happens daily that some rich man dying is borne to the grave by these ruffians without lights, and without anyone to follow him, except these hired mourners. When a corpse is carried through the streets everyone goes into their houses. Nor do these said wretched *gavoti*, strong as they are, escape; since most of them become infected by this contagion after a time and die.

It seems that people sought scapegoats for the plague, because the canon says:

> Some wretched men have been caught with a certain type of dust, and, whether justly or unjustly only God knows, they are accused of having poisoned the water, and men in fear do not drink the water from wells; for this crime many have been burnt and, daily, continue to be burnt.

Rough justice indeed for the innocent. He concludes with some commonsense advice:

> I write this to you, my friends, that you may know the dangers in which we live. And if you desire to protect yourselves, the best advice is to eat and drink temperately, to avoid cold, not to commit excess of any kind, and above all, to converse little with others, at this time especially, except with the few whose breath is sweet. But it is best to remain at home until this epidemic has passed.

The plague raged on at Avignon through the long summer of 1348 and continued until winter. Bodies littered the streets and the burial grounds were full, so that Pope Clement VI was forced to consecrate the River Rhône and the corpses were thrown into it. The resulting putrefaction, decomposition and pollution can scarcely be imagined. Worse was to come. Many of the sick, considered certain to die, were buried alive.

Meanwhile, the plague had continued its reign of terror and had advanced northwards, arriving in Lyons early in the summer

and in Paris soon afterwards. The chronicle of Guillamme de Nangis describes the epidemic of Paris:

> There was so great a mortality of people of both sexes, and of the young rather than the old, that they could hardly be buried. Further, they were ill for scarcely more than two or three days, and some often died suddenly, so that a man today in good health, was tomorrow carried as a corpse to the grave ... And the multitude of people who died in the years 1348 and 1349 was so great that nothing like it was ever heard, read of, or witnessed in past ages. And this same death and sickness often sprang from the imagination, or from the society and contagion of another, because a healthy man visiting one sick rarely escaped death. So that in many towns, small and great, priests retired through fear, leaving the administration of the sacraments to religious men who were bolder. Briefly, in many places, two did not remain alive out of every twenty [i.e. a staggering 90 per cent death rate]. So great was the mortality in the Hôtel-Dieu of Paris that for a long time more than fifty corpses were carried away in carts to be buried each day ... It lasted in France the greater part of 1348 and 1349, and afterwards houses in many towns, country places and cities remained empty and without inhabitants.

This chronicle reinforces the view that the scale of the disaster was unprecedented; nobody had ever seen anything like it before. Death quickly followed the appearance of the symptoms.

The Abbot of St Martin's at Tournay wrote of the ghost towns that were left after an epidemic had burnt itself out:

> It is impossible to credit the mortality throughout the whole country. Travellers, merchants, pilgrims and others who have passed through it describe how they have found cattle wandering without herdsmen in fields, town and land laid waste, houses empty, and few people to be found anywhere. So much so that in many towns, cities and villages, where

> before there had been 20,000 people, scarcely 2,000 remain; and in many cities and country places, where there had been 1,500 people, hardly 100 are left. And in many different lands, fields are lying uncultivated.

He continued by saying that later ages would hardly be able to believe the horror of it.

The Black Death moved north-west from Paris to the coast, which it reached in August 1348. The winter again slowed the violence of the infection (was there a clue here?), but it returned to full and deadly virulence. At Rouen, an eye-witness calculated that 100 000 died – which, again, may be an overestimate – and the Duke of Normandy donated land for a new graveyard.

At La Graverie, 4 miles (6 kilometres) from Vire, 'the bodies of the dead decayed in putrefaction on the pallets where they had breathed their last'. A black flag flew above the church as it did in all the worst-affected villages of Normandy.

Spain succumbs

Meanwhile, trading vessels had ensured the spread of the disease throughout the Mediterranean. The mortality in the ports was so great that the bodies were thrown directly into the sea. The plague struck Cyprus with devastating ferocity. Confronted with this calamity, the Cypriots assembled all the Muslim slaves and prisoners and devoted one entire afternoon until sundown to massacring them, because of their fear that the Muslims would gain control of the island when so many Christians were dying and fleeing in panic.

The Black Death caused Pedro IV of Aragon considerable alarm when it reached Majorca in April 1348. He instructed the Government of the island to take steps to stop the further spread of the disease, but its leaders were powerless and the death toll was put at an incredible 15 000 in a single month. Eighty per

cent of the island's population are said to have died and soon the Government was protesting that people were so weakened by the disease that they could no longer protect themselves from attacks by pirates and by the Bey of Tunis. Instead, however, the Governor of Majorca was instructed in June 1349 to send troops to the neighbouring island of Minorca, where the devastation was even worse, to assist in its defence against an enemy attack.

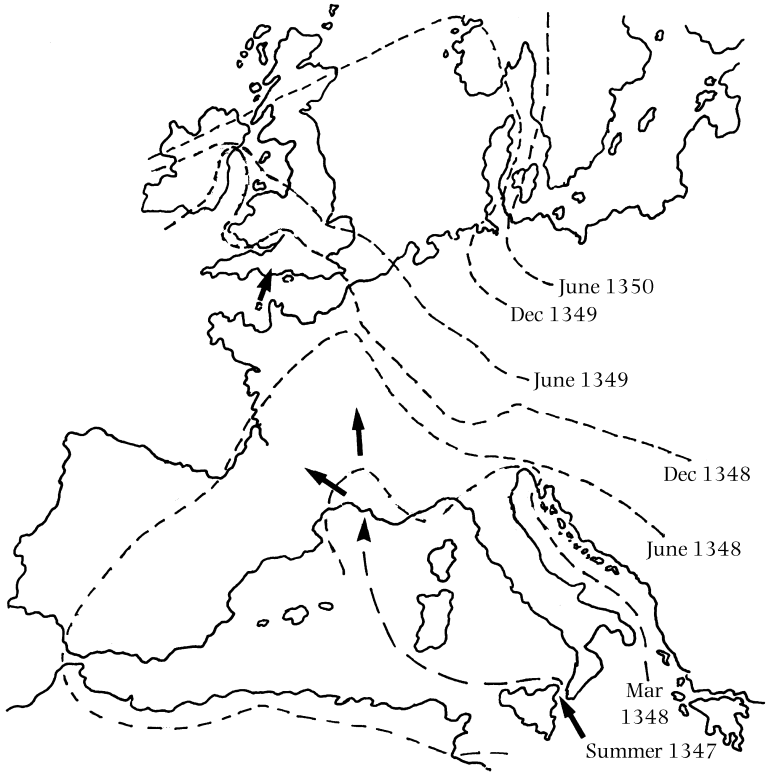
The plague invaded the Iberian peninsula through the Mediterranean ports of Barcelona and Valencia, where it arrived in May 1348. At first, through the autumn and winter, the epidemic spread only slowly, killing about 70 people a day. The disease spread southwards to the Arabs who were attacking Alfonso XI of Castile, causing consternation, and Philip Ziegler records in his book *The Black Death* that many of them were so desperate that they considered adopting Christianity as a form of preventive medicine. However, the disease was soon raging among the troops of Castile and 'When they learned that the pestilence had now reached Christian men their good intentions died and they returned to their vomit'.

The Castilian army survived intact at Gibraltar and then was struck by the plague in March 1350. The army officers suggested that King Alfonso leave his troops and seek safety in isolation, but he refused to desert his post and so died during the epidemic. He was the only ruling monarch to perish during the Black Death, although King Pedro lost his wife, youngest daughter and niece.

Law and order eventually broke down in Spain. Bands of armed brigands strayed over the countryside and an ordinance was published ordering severe punishment for anyone found looting the houses of plague victims.

Three deadly years

The Black Death moved relentlessly northwards through Europe like a giant wave. It took about eight months for an epidemic



The wave-like spread of the Black Death northwards across Europe, 1347–50.

to clear each town after the initial strike and it never moved backwards. Its progress was most rapid in the early stages, from December 1347 to June 1348, during which time it spread through Italy and much of France, Spain and the Balkans. Crossing the Alps and Pyrenees, it continued its movement northwards, eventually reaching Sweden, Norway and the Baltic by December 1350.

Curiously, a few places escaped the disease completely and these included Milan, Liège, Nuremberg, a small area east of Calais, a very large area north of Vienna and a small area at the

north-west end of the Pyrenees (although the disease was present over the rest of the mountain range).

There was panic throughout Europe as the plague advanced on a broad front, engulfing everything in its path. Nobody knew of any way to avoid it except to flee. To run away ahead of it must have seemed an obvious defensive strategy, but it brought little reward and most probably exacerbated the advance of the pandemic. Tragically, if everyone had stayed put the plague might have been confined to Italy and southern France and might have been eliminated.

It was then the turn of the Low Countries to suffer and, true to form, the Black Death caused its customary horror and devastation. Gilles Li Muisis wrote:

> It is almost impossible to credit the mortality throughout the whole country. Travellers, merchants, pilgrims and others who have passed through it declare that they have found cattle wandering without herdsmen in the fields, towns and waste-lands; that they have seen barns and wine-cellars standing wide open, houses empty and few people to be found anywhere ... And in many different areas, both lands and fields are lying uncultivated.

The Black Death reached Tournai in present-day Belgium in the summer of 1349 and the Bishop was one of the first to die. Then came a lull before the epidemic started raging.

> Everyday the bodies of the dead were borne to the churches, now five, now ten, now fifteen, and in the parish of St Brice sometimes twenty or thirty. In all parish churches the curates, parish clerks and sextons, to get their fees, rang morning, evening and night the passing bells, and by this the whole population of the city, men and women alike, began to be filled with fear.

The Town Council acted firmly to restore public confidence: bells were not to be rung at funerals, no mourning was to be worn and there were to be no gatherings in the houses of the dead. New

graveyards were opened outside the city walls and all the dead, irrespective of their standing in the city, were buried there.

Thus the plague continued remorselessly northwards through Germany, bringing tragic loss of life on the same scale as before and often causing a breakdown in law and order and in civic responsibilities. The terrible toll of deaths included 2000 people in 72 days in Frankfurt-am-Main; over 50 per cent of the inhabitants of Hamburg; 6000 in Mainz and 11 000 in Munster. Some 12 000 perished in Erfurt and nearly 7000 in Bremen, perhaps 70 per cent of the population. Furthermore, it is said that 200 000 small country towns in Germany were cleared of all their inhabitants. The terror and horror of those faced with certain death are unimaginable.

The *Neuberg Chronicle* recorded in November 1348:

> Since this deadly pestilence raged everywhere, cities which hitherto had been populous became desolate. Their inhabitants were swept off in such numbers that those who were left closed their gates, and strenuously watched that no one should steal the property of those departed ... The pestilence came to Carinthia, and then took possession of Styria so completely that people there, rendered desperate, walked about as if mad.

The frighteningly infectious nature of the plague is again confirmed:

> Pestilential odours proceeded from so many sick, infecting those visiting and serving them, and it happened frequently that when one person in a house died, all, one after the other, were carried off ... As a consequence of this overwhelming visitation cattle were left to wander in the fields without guardians, for no one thought of the future; and wolves came down from the mountains to attack them. Property, both movable and immovable, that sick people leave in their will, is carefully avoided by all, as if it were certainly infected.

The Black Death struck Vienna in spring 1349 and every day during the long summer it was said 500–600 victims died. Nearly 1000 people died in one dreadful day. Probably about half the population perished in all.

The corpses were buried, as usual, outside the city in huge pits, each of which contained 6000 bodies. Because of the odour and horror inspired by the dead bodies, burials in the church cemeteries were not allowed; as soon as life was extinct, the corpses were carried outside the city to a common burial place called 'God's acre'. There the deep and broad pits were quickly filled to the top with the dead.

The lands of the Vikings

Tradition has it that the plague was carried to Norway in the summer of 1349 on a boat from London, but it is more likely that it made the short jump across the strait from Copenhagen. The disease then spread quickly 'over all Norway' and is reported to have reached Archangel, a port on the White Sea in north-west Russia just south of the Arctic Circle. Incredibly, two-thirds of the population of Norway are said to have died; many villages were completely depopulated and disappeared.

Philip Ziegler tells in *The Black Death* the old story that when the pestilence reached Bergen several of the leading families fled to Tusededal (Jostedal) in the mountains and there they started to build a town where they hoped they would be safe. It was not to be; probably one of their number was already infected. An epidemic broke out and the entire community died with the exception of one girl. She was discovered years later still living in the area, but running wild and shunning human company. However, she eventually returned to society and married happily. All the land that had been appropriated by the community became her property and her family were among the large landowners in the neighbourhood for several centuries.

When we uncovered this story, we were puzzled by the question of why this girl had escaped infection. She must have been in close contact with her family and the other members of the community as they died one by one and probably had to bury some of them. We had seen this before and wondered if it was another example of a person who was resistant to the disease.

The plague probably arrived in Sweden in 1350 by crossing from Denmark, and also by a voyage across the Baltic from the port of Gdansk, where an epidemic was raging. King Magnus II of Sweden announced that God had struck the world with a great punishment of sudden death and that most people to the west of his country were dead: 'It is now ravaging Norway and Holland and is approaching our Kingdom of Sweden'. He commanded his people to abstain on Fridays from food except bread and water, to walk to their churches with bare feet and to process around the cemeteries carrying holy relics to appease the divine anger. Again, it was no use. When the epidemic reached the capital, the streets were once more soon littered with the bodies of the dead and Hacon and Knut, the king's brothers, were among the victims.

The Black Death had moved across continental Europe in less than three terrible years. Unfortunately for these hapless men and women, this was to be its home and favourite hunting ground for the next three centuries. Nevertheless, there were still more territories for it to conquer.