

Plague and Migrations

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European historiography has focused extensively on many aspects related to the plague, ranging from economic, medical, political and other fields of human activity; nevertheless, there is not a single volume dealing with plague migration. When discussing this topic, it is important to mention that plague migration has two aspects: the migration of people, animals and goods as enablers of the spread of plague, and migration as a direct result of the outbreak at a specific location; these are intrinsically linked and it is hard to discuss one without the other. Even though it may seem like the topic should have been extensively researched by now, there are several misconceptions that need addressing; after providing a short account on plague migration as the main culprit for the contagion itself, in the second half of the paper I would like to argue that the widely-accepted notion of people fleeing plague-stricken areas in massive numbers is, in most cases, a topos when it comes to the onset of the Black Death epidemic. This literary topos becomes factual only in later outbreaks of the Black Death, which I would like to support by engaging in two case studies and comparing the phenomenon of plague migrations in the fourteenth and in the seventeenth centuries.

Migrations and the spread of the plague

Even though at the time of the Black Death epidemic the ideas on transmission and contagion of diseases did not exist, people needed to provide an explanation as to how they spread so quickly. One came up with an elaborate theory on this phenomenon that had several different layers; from today's perspective this theory is clearly wrong, but it shows that human movement and contact were seen as facilitators of the spread of the disease.¹ Probably the most

¹ The idea of contagionism in at least somewhat modern notion only became popular with the work of Girolamo Fracastoro. The notion of atomism existed throughout the Middle Ages, but it never reached popularity before the Early Modern times. In the medieval mindset, the

famous legend of the spread of the disease coming from the pen of a contemporary of the epidemic is that of the Mongol siege of Kaffa in 1346, written by Gabriele de Mussi.² He wrote that upon laying siege on Kaffa on the Crimean peninsula, the Mongols were decimated by the plague and

The dying Tatars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realising that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in the siege. But they ordered corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside.³

This description was thought to have been an eyewitness account on the events in Kaffa for a long period of time, but later on it was discovered that de Mussi was in fact in his native Piacenza during the epidemic.⁴ What this shows is a literary account, an imagined narrative of the spread of plague, and for the author it was of crucial importance to relate contagion and human contact, which was often underlined with the notion of the miasmatic transfer of the plague.⁵

Even though it is not always mentioned in such an explicit way, the notion of human movement and movement of goods is so present in sources contemporary to the epidemic that it, in my opinion, reveals the intrinsic link of plague and its immediate association with migration. One of the more prominent examples of this is the occurrence of the topos of infected goods that, by travelling and switching hands, caused the disease to spread. This was mentioned in several sources even in the fourteenth century,⁶ but in later epidemics the sources often emphasize bales of fabric or other merchandise as containers of the 'pestilential vapors.' Another interesting topos is the one of *the other*, where by means of human contact it was deemed possible to transmit the

plague had two causes; a remote one, which was the astronomical influence, and the immediate one being the miasmatic vapours. Nevertheless, the underlying cause of both of them was God, who allowed the epidemic to happen in order to punish humans for their sins. John Aberth, *The Black Death, the Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin's: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). See also Joseph Patrick Byrne, *Daily Life during the Black Death* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006), 23. Also Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 159.

² The original manuscript of the account has been preserved and is kept in Poland. The references are made to the sourcebook of Horrox, 14-26.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ For the issue of de Mussi's account not being a first-hand experience see for example Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004). Also from the same author *The Black Death and Later Plague Epidemics in the Nordic Countries: Perspectives and Controversies* (Berlin: De Gruyter Open, 2016).

⁵ Miasma being imagined vapours of the polluted earth, in this case as the result of rotting bodies.

⁶ In one of the accounts it was described how two pigs caught the plague through contact with an item of clothing of a plague victim. Horrox, *The Black Death*, 28, 34

illness, which often came 'from the East, from the infidel' and later on shows even political implications. A descriptive example of this is the Great Plague of London, where the main causes of the disease were described to be "bailes of cotton or silk from Turkey or packs of merchandise from Holland," Turkey representing the largest Muslim Empire of the time, and Holland being currently at war with England.⁷

Mass emigration caused by the plague – merely a topos?

If one takes a look at the primary sources preserved from the fourteenth century, when the Black Death started and left the most severe impact on the medieval West, it becomes clear that the notion of escaping plague-stricken regions is omnipresent. It can be found in narrative sources from all over Europe, and due to that it came to be regarded as a fact, and has been accepted by historians of the plague worldwide.⁸ The narrative sources represent the basis for these conclusions and they reveal

- stories of people fleeing urban settlements in an attempt to avoid contagion, only to end up dying on the roads;
- stories of parents abandoning their sick children or vice versa;
- reports on cities being abandoned by their dwellers;
- and so on.

Since historians are aware of the issues that narrative sources pose for historical research, it is of crucial importance to use them only alongside other source types, and not only by themselves, which will add to their credibility. A good example of how to approach this issue in individual cities can be found in Shona Kelly Wray's study on the city of Bologna.⁹ She gathered the narrative descriptions of the people's flight from the city, and then, using a large preserved corpus of last wills, she refuted that paradigm. She claimed that it was actually the family that provided the basic support for its members during the epidemic, and that family members, and even more widely entire neighbourhoods, constituted of several parishes, suffered through the epidemic without leaving the community.

⁷ A. Lloyd Moote and Dorothy C Moote, *The Great Plague: the Story of London's most Deadly Year* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 55.

⁸ Renowned historians of the plague, to my knowledge, do not actively question this notion, but they rather engage in the historical discussions on the morality of flight. See for example John Aberth, *Plagues in World History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); see also Byrne, *Daily life during the Black Death*; even when migration is discussed, examples are usually used from later plague outbreaks. See also, regarding plague migrations being confirmed in Italy, Regina Schäfer, "Rural-Urban Migrations, Medieval Era," in *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. Immanuel Ness, vol. V (Chichester et al.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 2663.

⁹ Shona Kelly Wray, *Communities and Crisis: Bologna during the Black Death* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

Another example to be provided in this context is the one from the city of Dubrovnik, which in the Middle Ages followed many developmental patterns comparable to Italian communes due to their political, economic, and cultural interconnectedness. In the last wills produced at the height of the epidemic, in the year 1348, family members were used as witnesses, as *pitropi*¹⁰ or executors of wills, the main persons benefiting from the wills are mentioned, and there is no reference to anybody having left the community. In a study concerning the public health office in Dubrovnik in this period, the authors state that the Great Council of the city, its governing body, needed to issue several decrees insisting that "all Ragusans should return to the city before the following Wednesday" and use this Great Council order "to testify to the massive flight of the population from the city."¹¹ Nevertheless, upon evaluating this decree, which was enforced on 12 April 1348, it becomes clear that instead of referring to people who had fled the city, the law actually invited those currently absent to return to the city, which in my opinion should be read as an attempt at regulating people's movements, rather than as proof of massive emigration of the population due to the plague.¹² This call for return was aimed at all the citizens of Dubrovnik. Within the same Great Council decree, limitations were imposed on those planning to leave the city. Merchants were excluded from this part of the provision and trade is the only reason for which an individual is allowed to leave.¹³

In my opinion, the source material most likely does not refer to massive emigration; it would seem that, if that were the case, the invitation to return to the city would exclude merchants, since they were obviously kept in mind while bringing about this decree, which can be supported by the fact that they were singled out in the second part of the law. It is not my intention to completely refute the idea of a massive flight of population during the onset of the Black Death, because that would call for an inquiry into the source material from all over Europe,¹⁴ which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I believe that

¹⁰ They were also given some autonomy in decisions regarding how the money will be divided upon the testator's death, meaning the testator had no doubts about their continuous presence in the city.

¹¹ Zlata Blazina-Tomic and Vesna Blazina, *Expelling the Plague: The Health Office and the Implementation of Quarantine in Dubrovnik, 1377-1533* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 47.

¹² *Monumenta Ragusina: Libri Reformationum*, vol. 2, a. 1347-1352, 1356-1360; *Additamentum* a. 1301-1305, 1318, 1325-1336, *Monumenta Spectantia Historiam Slavorum Meridionalium* 13 (Zagreb: JAZU, 1882), 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ For example, as a part of my wider research I have been getting acquainted with the material from the Venetian commune, where in the secondary literature I did not come across information regarding mass emigration from the city upon the onset of the sickness, but I did find data on the government trying to prevent what looks like massive economic emigration in mid-1349. The logical next step would be looking into the legislative primary sources and comparing the data with what I present in this paper. See Mario

this notion has to be looked into from a more microhistorical viewpoint, and not taken for granted.

Although the sources that I have consulted question mass emigration upon the onset of the 1348 plague, the same material suggests immigration into the city after the end of the epidemic. Due to the decimation of the city's population by the disease, the government decided to issue a call to people who wanted to settle there, offering tax reliefs.¹⁵ Thus, although existing literature often mentions migration *from* urban centres upon the onset of the epidemic, the only primary-source evidence that I consulted suggests instead migrations *into* urban communities upon the ending of the epidemic.

There is clearly still a possibility that historians are missing some information on the notion of plague migration. Some doubt must always remain, due to the lack of sources that represent a window into the mentalities of the people who lived through the epidemic, as well as due to the general administrative chaos created by the high mortality rates. In any case, it seems that one should not generalize and that the notion of overall mass flight from settlements due to the fourteenth-century plague is debatable at best. Later, a paradigm shift with respect to plague migration can be recognized. People started fleeing from urban settlements into the countryside attempting to avoid contagion. This can, in particular, be seen for the Great Plague of London, with a much better source situation offering a variety of information.

An example of the paradigm shift – The Great Plague of London

The Great Plague of London¹⁶ was the last major outbreak of the Black Death in England; the first victim fell around Christmas 1664, but due to extreme cold that took place that winter, the first significant increase in mortality rates occurred in the spring of 1665. One of the primary reasons this hike in morbidity occurred only in the spring can be attributed to the renewed movement of people; more favourable weather meant greater freedom of movement and facilitated human contact. London of that time had around 500,000 permanent residents, many of whom occupied the poorer stratum of society, which also facilitated the spread of the disease.¹⁷ Due to the poor hygiene of the impoverished, as well as the greater occurrence of human contact among these groups of people, this outbreak of the disease is also sometimes

Brunetti, "Venezia durante la peste del 1348," *L'Ateneo Veneto* 22 (1909), 1, 289-311; 2, 5-42.

¹⁵ For Dubrovnik, see Blazina-Tomic and Blazina, *Expelling the Plague*, 47.

¹⁶ A good overview of the social and political circumstances in the period before the onset of the epidemic, with prominence given also to the issues of capital cities and migration can be found in Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Moote, *The Great Plague*, 11.

called the Plague of the Poor. The overall death toll likely amounted to 100,000 people.¹⁸ Apart from the aforementioned causes, one additional factor contributed to the spread of the plague among the poor: migration. The Great Plague of London came to be renowned for the people's flight from the city, which is the exact reason why I chose this outbreak as a comparative tool for the issue of migration. High incidence of migration can also be confirmed with the preserved primary sources, most notably the diary entries of two famous Londoners, Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn.

Samuel Pepys (1633-1703)¹⁹ was a prominent member of the Parliament of England who achieved unprecedented advancement up the social ladder of seventeenth-century London. His most famous legacy is the diary he wrote during two devastating occurrences in the city's history – the Great Plague and the Great Fire, which happened in the year 1666. This source remains quite credible and is used in research on the daily life of London in this period due to Pepys's descriptions of both his personal affairs and general aspects of daily life in the city.²⁰ The second such source used for research on the Great Plague of London is the diary of John Evelyn (1620-1706),²¹ an author and promoter of ecological advancement and a personal friend of Pepys. Although his description of the epidemic is less thorough than Pepys's, he remains important for another aspect of the plague and its transmission – namely the matter of hygiene.²² Although he was interested in botany even before, when faced with the epidemic he started arguing for cleanliness in the city, and for moving the unclean industries and graveyards away from the city and replacing them with trees. This will have been aimed at lowering the incidence of diseases, but the government did not support his attempts.²³

With regards to plague migration itself in this period, it mainly involved the higher levels of society—wealthy business owners, entrepreneurs, and members of the nobility. The king himself relocated to Oxford, but the mayor of the city decided to remain in town.²⁴ Even though the king himself fled from the

¹⁸ Even though the usual estimates place the number at the range between 70 000 – 100 000 people, it is generally acknowledged in historiography that the cause of death was not always assessed correctly, but also that the city administration could not keep track of all the dead among the poor; for these reasons historians lean towards the higher number. Ibid. Even Samuel Pepys (see below) mentions this problem in his diary, see Samuel Pepys, *Memoirs*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), 25.

¹⁹ See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Pepys>, last accessed on 26 April 2017.

²⁰ Due to several mentions of his extramarital love affairs and similar events his diary became more famous than Evelyn's, whose writings lack such 'juicy' details.

²¹ See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Evelyn>, last accessed on 26 April 2017.

²² For this paper I consulted *The diary of John Evelyn*, vol. II, ed. William Bray (Washington and London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901).

²³ Moote, *The Great Plague*, 48.

²⁴ John Scott, *Narratives of Two Families Exposed to the Great Plague of London* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1832), 274.

epidemic, his first reaction to the skyrocketing mortality rates was to quarantine entire families within their households.²⁵ In the meantime, the wealthier population started taking necessary steps for emigration as early as April;²⁶ in this context, business owners started asking for advanced payments for their work. Some estimates claim that more than 200,000 people – 40 percent of the population – fled London during the summer months of 1665.²⁷ Samuel Pepys confirms this problem, providing us with a first-hand account of the city's situation: 'I find all the town almost going out of town, the coaches and wagons being all full of people going into the country.'²⁸

* * *

In this short contribution, I have aimed at providing an insight into the question of plague and migration, offering the hypothesis that the idea of flight from plague-stricken regions in the fourteenth century cannot be generalized and could just have been a literary topos, while it became a fact in later outbreaks. The later epidemics, like the Great Plague of London, are well supported with a variety of source material and are less of a challenge for research in this respect. The fourteenth-century outbreak of the Black Death, and smaller outbreaks that followed prove to be less easy for conducting research, although the recent questioning of the idea of flight from the plague in this period seems to be plausible. The debate can only be solved by a thorough analysis of individual cities, and by combining different types of sources, narrative, judicial and notarial ones.

Though I have questioned the generalized notion of flight during the Black Death, the fact remains that there was a later trend towards migration. I believe that it is crucial to deduct when and how this change happened, by looking more thoroughly into the epidemics that followed the 1348 one, since it seems possible that this change came about already in the second half of the fourteenth century. By comparing these outbreaks through time, one will get more insight into the issue of plague migration, its development and change. Only in this way one will then be able to concentrate on and discuss reasons for such changes of migration practice.

²⁵ Since entire families were confined to their homes in case only one member got infected, this usually meant infecting the entire household. Because of that, as well as the fact that many wealthier families were excluded from such a treatment through bribery, the population soon revolted.

²⁶ The epidemic peaked in the summer.

²⁷ Moote, *The Great Plague*, 79-89.

²⁸ Pepys, *Memoirs*, 281.

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Vorwort

Der vorliegende Band von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* widmet sich Themenbereichen, die im weiteren Sinne für die Alltagsgeschichte des Mittelalters von wichtiger Bedeutung sind. Matthias Johannes Bauer setzt sich in seiner Studie mit der Frage des Inhaltes, der Entstehung und des Kontextes einer Rechts handschrift auseinander. Zwei weitere Beiträge beschäftigen sich mit Problemen mittelalterlicher Migration, zum Einen in Bezug auf den Zeitraum der Pestepidemien, zum Anderen hinsichtlich der unerwarteten Übernahme eines Bildmotives aus der Legende des Heiligen Kaisers Heinrich II. in Gotland. Josip Banić untersucht schließlich die Entwicklung der Rolle des rechtlichen Raumes in der Markgrafschaft Istrien nach der Übernahme des aquilejensischen Territoriums durch Venedig. Die drei letztgenannten Beiträge wurden verfasst von PhD-Studenten am Department of Medieval Studies der Central European University (Budapest) und zeigen die bedeutende Forschungstätigkeit, welche an der im Moment in ihrer Existenz bedrohten Universität geleistet wird.

Mit diesem Band und einem im Herbst erscheinenden Sonderband beende ich meine Tätigkeit als Herausgeber von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*. Ich bedanke mich sehr herzlich für Ihr Interesse an der alltagsgeschichtlichen Forschung zum Mittelalter und für Ihre Treue zu unserer Gesellschaft.

Gerhard Jaritz