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The Black Plague – Part II

Lead: In the summer of 1348, the Black Plague swept through populous Florence, Italy, killing over one half the population.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: The Black Plague or Black Death was actually two major bacterial epidemics. The Bubonic Plague, the most common, was spread by fleas from person to person and involved “buboes,” (Latin for swollen lymph glands) which could swell to the size of eggs, giving the infected a

grotesque appearance. The Pneumonic Plague (involving the lungs) was less common, occurring in about one in four plague cases, and was spread by respiratory droplets from an infected person. Because the victims of the plague often turned a purplish color due to broken blood vessels (causing bruises) or respiratory failure, which changed the color of the complexion, the term “Black Death” or “Black Plague” was used to describe the epidemics. After an abrupt onset of symptoms, which included chills, fever, nausea, exhaustion, and swollen lymph nodes in the upper thigh, armpit, and neck,

death usually resulted in about four days.

One of the hardest hit of all cities in Europe was populous Florence, Italy, the center of commerce and art. It is estimated that at least one half to two thirds of its population succumbed to the plague, perhaps as many as 90,000 people. The effects of the plague on Florence were multi-faceted and repercussions were felt for years. Florence was the home to three of the major chroniclers of the plague – Matteo Villani, Marchionne Stefani, and the most well-known, Giovanni Boccaccio. These writers provided invaluable

descriptions of the plague and its effects on Florentine society. Because of a large population loss, business and commerce collapsed, families were no longer intact, and themes of homelessness, grief, abandonment, and death permeated art and religion. On the other hand, the Plague stimulated new ideas about man's free will and the role of God. The idea of humanism was forwarded by Boccaccio, a movement that revived the ancient writing of the Greeks and Romans and played a major role in the Renaissance. The plague also stimulated the idea in the science community that a contagion was not

an evil passed from a contaminated person to a healthy one but perhaps a disease transmitted by contaminated air, an idea, although incorrect, but quite revolutionary for its time.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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