

Boccaccio on the Plague

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The following is taken from Giovanni Boccaccio, the Decameron, Introduction. Boccaccio lived through the plague and wrote this description shortly thereafter, but he borrowed liberally from an earlier writer who was describing a completely different plague.

I say, then, that in the year 1348 after the **Son of God's fruitful incarnation** (*birth of Jesus*), into the distinguished city of Florence, that most beautiful of Italian cities, there entered a deadly **pestilence** (disease). Whether one believes that it came through the influence of the **heavenly bodies** (nature) or that God, justly angered by our **iniquities** (sins), sent it for our correction, in any case it had begun several years earlier in the east and killed an **innumerable** (countless) mass of people, spreading steadily from place to place and growing as it moved west.

No human wisdom or provision was of any help. Huge amounts of filth were removed from the city by officials charged with that task; sick people were forbidden to enter the city; advice was given on how to stay healthy; **devout** (religious) persons made humble **supplication** (prayers) to God not once but many times, ... but in the spring of that year the sad effects of the plague nonetheless began to appear in an almost miraculous manner. It was not as it had been in the east, where **nosebleeds** had signaled that death was inevitable. Here the sickness began in **both men and women with swelling in the groin and armpits**. The lumps varied in size, some reaching the **size of an ordinary apple and others that of an egg, and the people commonly called them gavoccioli**. Having begun in these two parts of the body, the gavoccioli soon began to appear at random all over the body. ... with **black or livid (bruised) spots appearing on the arms, the thighs, everywhere**. Sometimes they were large and well spaced, other times small and numerous. These were a certain sign of **impending** (soon to arrive) death, but so was the swelling.

Q1 When did the plague begin in the city of Florence Italy? Where did it begin? **1348, the East (ASIA)**

Q2 What are some of the symptoms that the plague caused? **see in blue**

#3 No doctor's advice, no medicine seemed to be of any help. Either the disease was incurable or the doctors simply didn't know how to cure it. Many tried, though. The number of doctors became huge as a multitude of people, male and female, with no medical training whatsoever took their place alongside those who were properly educated. But no one knew the cause of the *pestilence (disease)* and thus no one could do much about curing it, so not only were few people healed but most of them died by the third day ... Most of them died without any fever or other symptoms.

This pestilence was so powerful that it **spread from the ill to the healthy like fire ... #4 It was so bad that it could be communicated not only through speaking or associating with the sick, but even by touching their clothing or anything else they had touched.** ... Such experiences gave birth to a variety of fears, ... among the living, and the cruel strategy they pursued was to avoid, even flee the sick and their belongings. They thought that by doing so they could stay healthy themselves.

Q3 What medical treatments helped with the plague?

Q4 How does the author believe the disease spread?

... Others were of the opposite opinion. **#5 They believed that drinking a good deal, enjoying themselves, going about singing and having fun, satisfying all their appetites as much as they could, laughing and joking was sure medicine for any illness.** ... they spent day and night moving from one tavern to the next, drinking ... engaging only in those activities that gave them pleasure. ... people had abandoned their

possessions ... and most of the houses had become common property with complete strangers making use of whatever homes they arrived at as if they owned them. ...

As our city sunk into this *affliction (illness)* and misery the **reverend authority of the law, both divine and human**, sunk with it and practically disappeared, **#6 for those who were supposed to be its ministers and executors (leaders) were, like other people, either dead, sick or so taken up with the needs of their own families that they could not perform their offices**. That left everyone else free to make his or her own arrangements.

... instead of shutting themselves in, they went about carrying flowers, fragrant herbs or various spices which they often held to their noses, assuming that the best thing for the brain was to comfort it with such odors, since the air was filled with the stench of dead bodies and illness and medicine.

Q5 How did people live their lives as the plague spread?

Q6 Why were the priests and political leaders unable to get people to obey the laws?

Some were of a crueller opinion, though perhaps a safer one. They said there was no better medicine against the plague than to **escape from it**. Moved by this argument and caring from nothing except themselves, a large number of **#7 men and women abandoned their city, houses, families and possessions in order to go elsewhere ...**

... And, **having given an example of abandonment to others while they were healthy, when they themselves fell sick they were in turn left abandoned by all**. And we will pass over the fact that one citizen avoided another, no neighbor took care of another, and family members rarely if ever visited one another, in fact they stayed far apart. This *tribulation (great trouble/suffering)* struck such fear in the hearts of men and women that **one brother abandoned another, uncles abandoned nephews, sisters abandoned brothers, often wives abandoned their husbands, and (a greater thing and barely believable) fathers and mothers abandoned their children**, as if they were not even theirs.

The countless number of people who fell sick could look for help only to the charity of friends (and there were few of them) or to the *avarice (greed)* of servants, who received huge salaries without being required to do much and yet were still hard to find. They tended to be men or women with little intelligence or training who were good for little else except bringing the sick person whatever they requested or watching over them as they died. They often lost their own lives and profits in the process.

Q7 How did neighbors and family members treat each other as the plague spread?

The poor and even the middling classes faced an even grimmer prospect. Most of them stayed in their own homes and neighborhoods, either because they hoped they would be safe there or because they could afford to do no other. They fell sick by the thousands every day, and having neither servants nor anyone else to care for them they almost always died. Many of them died in the street either during the day or by night, while those who died in their homes were noticed by their neighbors only when the smell of their decomposing bodies brought them to public attention.

There were dead bodies all over, and all were treated in pretty much the same manner by their neighbors ... They would **#8 drag the dead bodies out of their homes** (either themselves or with the aid of porters, when they could get them) and **left them in front of their doors**. In the morning great numbers of them could be seen by any passerby. At that time they were **laid out and carried away ...** Sometimes it carried two or three at a time, and there were occasions when a husband and wife, two or three brothers, or a father and son were carried off together. ... so that the priests, who thought they were on their way to bury one person, eventually found that they had six, eight or even more.

Nor were these dead honored with tears, lights or companions. Things sunk to the level that people were disposed of much as we would now dispose of a dead goat. ... The amount of holy ground available for burials

was insufficient for the huge quantity of corpses arriving at the church every day and even every hour, ... so when all individual places in a churchyard was taken **they dug huge trenches and put people in them by the hundreds like merchandise in the hold of a ship, then covered them over with a little dirt, until the ditch was filled to the top.**

Q8 What happened to the corpses which died from the plague? What were burials like? How did society treat the deceased?

But I shall spare you a detailed description of the miseries visited upon us and simply mention that the ill winds blowing through our city did not spare the surrounding countryside. There, to say nothing of the towns (which were like smaller versions of the city), **#9 throughout the villages and fields the poor, miserable peasants and their families**, who lacked the care of doctors or the aid of servants, **died more like beasts than humans**, day and night, on the roads and in their fields, And thus like the city-dwellers they became loose in their behavior and stopped taking care of their possessions and occupations, and all of them, once they began to anticipate their deaths, **stopped caring about what they might do in the future with their beasts and lands and simply concentrated on consuming what they had.** Thus their cattle, donkeys, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens and even their dogs, man's best friends, were driven off into **the fields where the wheat stood abandoned, not merely unharvested but not even cut.** These animals were allowed to roam where they pleased, and many, like rational beings, returned home each night after eating well during the day, without being encouraged to do so by a shepherd.

Q9 What was life like on the manors for the serfs?

Enough about the countryside. Returning to the city, what more can be said except that the cruelty of heaven (and perhaps in part of humankind as well) was such that between March and July, thanks to the force of the plague and the **fear that led the healthy to abandon the sick, more than one hundred thousand people died within the walls of Florence.** Before the deaths began, who would have imagined the city even held so many people? Oh, how many great *palazzo* (*palaces*), how many lovely houses, **how many noble dwellings once full of families, of lords and ladies, were emptied down to the lowest servant?** How many valiant men, lovely ladies and handsome youths whom even Galen, Hippocrates and Aesculapius would have judged to be in perfect health, dined with their family, companions and friends in the morning and then in the evening with their ancestors in the other world?

Q10 What was the city of Florence like after the plague arrived?