

Giovanni Boccaccio on the Plague in Florence (1348)

The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio lived through the plague as it ravaged the city of Florence in 1348. The experience inspired him to write The Decameron, a story of seven men and three women who escape the disease by fleeing to a villa outside the city. In his introduction to the fictional portion of his book, Boccaccio gives a graphic description of the effects of the epidemic on his city.

The Signs of Impending Death

"The symptoms were not the same as in the East, where a gush of blood from the nose was the plain sign of inevitable death; but it began both in men and women with certain swellings in the groin or under the armpit. They grew to the size of a small apple or an egg, more or less, and were vulgarly called tumors. In a short space of time these tumors spread from the two parts named all over the body. Soon after this the symptoms changed and black or purple spots appeared on the arms or thighs or any other part of the body, sometimes a few large ones, sometimes many little ones. These spots were a certain sign of death, just as the original tumour had been and still remained.

No doctor's advice, no medicine could overcome or alleviate this disease, An enormous number of ignorant men and women set up as doctors in addition to those who were trained. Either the disease was such that no treatment was possible or the doctors were so ignorant that they did not know what caused it, and consequently could not administer the proper remedy. In any case very few recovered; most people died within about three days of the appearance of the tumours described above, most of them without any fever or other symptoms.

The violence of this disease was such that the sick communicated it to the healthy who came near them, just as a fire catches anything dry or oily near it. And it even went further. To speak to or go near the sick brought infection and a common death to the living; and moreover, to touch the clothes or anything else the sick had touched or worn gave the disease to the person touching. "

Varying Reactions to Disaster

"...Such fear and fanciful notions took possession of the living that almost all of them adopted the same cruel policy, which was entirely to avoid the sick and everything belonging to them. By so doing, each one thought he would secure his own safety.

Some thought that moderate living and the avoidance of all superfluity would preserve them from the epidemic. They formed small communities, living entirely separate from everybody else. They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick, eating the finest food and drinking the best wine very temperately, avoiding all excess, allowing no news or discussion of death and sickness, and passing the time in music and suchlike pleasures. Others thought just the opposite. They thought the sure cure for the plague was to drink and be merry, to go about singing and amusing themselves, satisfying every appetite they could, laughing and jesting at what happened. They put their words into practice, spent day and night going from tavern to tavern, drinking immoderately, or went into other people's houses, doing only those things which pleased them. This they could easily do because everyone felt doomed and had abandoned his property, so that most houses became common property and any stranger who went in made use of them as if he had owned them. And with all this bestial behavior, they avoided the sick as much as possible.

In this suffering and misery of our city, the authority of human and divine laws almost disappeared, for, like other men, the ministers and the executors of the laws were all dead or sick or shut up with their families, so that no duties were carried out. Every man was therefore able to do as he pleased.

Many others adopted a course of life midway between the two just described. They did not restrict their victuals so much as the former, nor allow themselves to be drunken and dissolute like the latter, but satisfied their appetites moderately. They did not shut themselves up, but went about, carrying flowers or scented herbs or perfumes in their hands, in the belief that it was an excellent thing to comfort the brain with such odors; for the whole air was infected with the smell of dead bodies, of sick persons and medicines.

Others again held a still more cruel opinion, which they thought would keep them safe. They said that the only medicine against the plague-stricken was to go right away from them. Men and women, convinced of this and caring about nothing but themselves, abandoned their own city, their own houses, their dwellings, their relatives, their property, and went abroad or at least to the country round Florence, as if God's wrath in punishing men's wickedness with this plague would not follow them but strike only those who remained within the walls of the city, or as if they thought nobody in the city would remain alive and that its last hour had come."

The Breakdown of Social Order

"One citizen avoided another, hardly any neighbour troubled about others, relatives never or hardly ever visited each other. Moreover, such terror was struck into the hearts of men and women by this calamity, that brother abandoned brother, and the uncle his nephew, and the sister her brother, and very often the wife her husband. What is even worse and nearly incredible is that fathers and mothers refused to see and tend their children, as if they had not been theirs.

Thus, a multitude of sick men and women were left without any care, except from the charity of friends (but these were few), or the greed, of servants, though not many of these could be had even for high wages, Moreover, most of them were coarse-minded men and women, who did little more than bring the sick what they asked for or watch over them when they were dying. And very often these servants lost their lives and their earnings. Since the sick were thus abandoned by neighbours, relatives and friends, while servants were scarce, a habit sprang up which had never been heard of before. Beautiful and noble women, when they fell sick, did not scruple to take a young or old man-servant, whoever he might be, and with no sort of shame, expose every part of their bodies to these men as if they had been women, for they were compelled by the necessity of their sickness to do so. This, perhaps, was a cause of looser morals in those women who survived."

Mass Burials

"The plight of the lower and most of the middle classes was even more pitiful to behold. Most of them remained in their houses, either through poverty or in hopes of safety, and fell sick by thousands. Since they received no care and attention, almost all of them died. Many ended their lives in the streets both at night and during the day; and many others who died in their houses were only known to be dead because the neighbours smelled their decaying bodies. Dead bodies filled every corner. Most of them were treated in the same manner by the survivors, who were more

concerned to get rid of their rotting bodies than moved by charity towards the dead. With the aid of porters, if they could get them, they carried the bodies out of the houses and laid them at the door; where every morning quantities of the dead might be seen. They then were laid on biers or, as these were often lacking, on tables.

Such was the multitude of corpses brought to the churches every day and almost every hour that there was not enough consecrated ground to give them burial, especially since they wanted to bury each person in the family grave, according to the old custom. Although the cemeteries were full they were forced to dig huge trenches, where they buried the bodies by hundreds. Here they stowed them away like bales in the hold of a ship and covered them with a little earth, until the whole trench was full."

References:

Boccaccio, Giovanni, *The Decameron* vol. I (translated by Richard Aldington illustrated by Jean de Bosschere) (1930); Gottfried, Robert, *The Black Death* (1983).

The Black Death - A Description of the Plague in Messina

Described by Michael Platiensis (1357)

At the beginning of October, in the year of the incarnation of the Son of God 1347, twelve Genoese galleys . . . entered the harbor of Messina. In their bones they bore so virulent a disease that anyone who only spoke to them was seized by a mortal illness and in no manner could evade death. The infection spread to everyone who had any contact with the diseased. Those infected felt themselves penetrated by a pain throughout their whole bodies and, so to say, undermined. Then there developed on the thighs or upper arms a boil about the size of a lentil which the people called "burn boil". This infected the whole body, and penetrated it so that the patient violently vomited blood. This vomiting of blood continued without intermission for three days, there being no means of healing it, and then the patient expired.

Not only all those who had speech with them died, but also those who had touched or used any of their things. When the inhabitants of Messina discovered that this sudden death emanated from the Genoese ships they hurriedly ordered them out of the harbor and town. But the evil remained and caused a fearful outbreak of death. Soon men hated each other so much that if a son was attacked by the disease his father would not tend him. If, in spite of all, he dared to approach him, he was immediately infected and was bound to die within three days. Nor was this all; all those dwelling in the same house with him, even the cats and other domestic animals, followed him in death. As the number of deaths increased in Messina many desired to confess their sins to the priests and to draw up their last will and testament. But ecclesiastics, lawyers and notaries refused to enter the houses of the diseased.

Soon the corpses were lying forsaken in the houses. No ecclesiastic, no son, no father and no relation dared to enter, but they hired servants with high wages to bury the dead. The houses of the deceased remained open with all their valuables, gold and jewels. . . . When the catastrophe had reached its climax the Messinians resolved to emigrate. One portion of them settled in the vineyards and fields, but a larger portion sought refuge in the town of Catania. The disease clung to the fugitives and accompanied them everywhere where they turned in search of help. Many of the fleeing fell down by the roadside and dragged themselves into the fields and bushes to expire. Those who reached Catania breathed their last in the hospitals there. The terrified citizens would not permit the burying of fugitives from Messina within the town, and so they were all thrown into deep trenches outside the walls.

Thus the people of Messina dispersed over the whole island of Sicily and with them the disease, so that innumerable people died. The town of Catania lost all its inhabitants, and ultimately sank into complete oblivion. Here not only the "burn blisters" appeared, but there developed gland boils on the groin, the thighs, the arms, or on the neck. At first these were of the size of a hazel nut, and developed accompanied by violent shivering fits, which soon rendered those attacked so weak that they could not stand up, but were forced to lie in their beds consumed by violent fever. 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 the sufferer to vomit blood. The sickness lasted three days, and on the fourth, at the latest, the patient succumbed. As soon as anyone in Catania was seized with a headache and shivering, he knew that he was bound to pass away within the specified time. . . . When the plague had attained its height in Catania, the patriarch endowed all ecclesiastics, even the youngest, with all priestly powers for the absolution of sin which he himself possessed as bishop and patriarch. But the pestilence raged from October 1347 to April 1348. The patriarch himself was one of the last to be carried off. He died fulfilling his duty. At the same time, Duke Giovanni, who had carefully avoided every infected house and every patient, died.

This account is quoted in Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death*, trans. C.H. Clarke (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1926), pp. 18-20.

Another Description

From Agnolo di Tura, of Siena:

"The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing. . . . It seemed that almost everyone became stupefied seeing the pain. It is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. The victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in the groin, and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. None could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. In many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. I, Agnolo di Tura . . . buried my five children with my own hands. . . . And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world."

Jean de Venette on the Progress of the Black Death in France

In A.D. 1348, the people of Florence and of almost the whole world were struck by a blow other than war. For in addition to the famine . . . and to the wars . . . pestilence and its attendant tribulations appeared again in various parts of the world. In the month of August, 1348, after Vespers when the sun was beginning to set, a big and very bright star appeared above Paris, toward the west. It did not seem, as stars usually do, to be very high above our hemisphere but rather very near. As the sun set and night came on, this star did not seem to me or to many other friars who were watching it to move from one place. At length, when night had come, this big star, to the amazement of all of us who were watching, broke into many different rays and, as it shed these rays over Paris toward the east, totally disappeared and was completely annihilated. Whether it was a comet or not, whether it was composed of airy exhalations and was finally resolved into vapor, I leave to the decision of astronomers. It is, however, possible that it was a presage of the amazing pestilence to come, which, in fact, followed very shortly in Paris and throughout France and elsewhere, as I shall tell. All this year and the next, the mortality of men and women, of the young even more than of the old, in Paris and in the kingdom of France, and also, it is said, in other parts of the world, was so great that it was almost impossible to bury the dead. People lay ill little more than two or three days and died suddenly, as if they were in full health. He who was well one day was dead the next and being carried to his grave. Swellings appeared suddenly in the armpit or in the groin -- in many cases both -- and they were infallible signs of death. This sickness or pestilence was called an epidemic by the doctors. Nothing like the great numbers who died in the years 1348 and 1349 has been heard of or seen of in times past. This plague and disease came from *ymaginatione* or association and contagion, for if a well man visited the sick he only rarely evaded the risk of death. Wherefore in many towns timid priests withdrew, leaving the exercise of their ministry to such of the religious as were more daring. In many places not two out of twenty remained alive. So high was the mortality at the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris that for a long time, more than five hundred dead were carried daily with great devotion in carts to the cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris for burial. A very great number of the saintly sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu who, not fearing to die, nursed the sick in all sweetness and humility, with no thought of honor, a number too often renewed by death, rest in peace with Christ, as we may piously believe.

This plague, it is said, began among the unbelievers, came to Italy, and then crossing the Alps reached Avignon, where it attacked several cardinals and took from them their whole household. Then it spread, unforeseen, to France, through Gascony and Spain, little by little, from town to town, from village to village, from house to house, and finally from person to person. It even crossed over to Germany, though it was not so bad there as with us. During the epidemic, God of His accustomed goodness deigned to grant this grace, that however suddenly men died, almost all awaited death joyfully. Nor was there anyone who died without confessing his sins and receiving the holy viaticum. . . .

Some said that this pestilence was caused by infection of the air and waters, since there was at this time no famine nor lack of food supplies, but on the contrary great abundance. As a result of this theory of infected water and air as the source of the plague the Jews were suddenly and violently charged with infecting wells and water and corrupting the air. The whole world rose up against them cruelly on this account. In Germany and other parts of the world where Jews lived, they were massacred and slaughtered by Christians, and many thousands were burned everywhere, indiscriminately. The unshaken, if fatuous, constancy of the men and their wives was remarkable. For mothers hurled their children first into the fire that they might not be baptized and then leaped in after them to burn with their husbands and children. It is said that many bad Christians were found who in like manner put poison into wells. But in truth, such poisonings, granted that they actually were perpetrated, could not have caused so great a plague nor have infected so many people. There were other causes; for example, the will of God and the corrupt humors and evil inherent in air and earth. Perhaps the poisonings, if they actually took place in some localities, reinforced these causes. The plague lasted in France for the greater part of the years 1348 and 1349 and then ceased. Many country villages and many houses in good towns remained empty and deserted. Many houses, including some splendid dwellings, very soon fell into ruins. Even in Paris several houses were thus ruined, though fewer here than elsewhere.

After this cessation of the epidemic, pestilence, or plague, the men and women who survived married each other. There was no sterility among the women, but on the contrary fertility beyond the ordinary. Pregnant women were seen on every side. . . . But woe is me! the world was not changed for the better but for the worse by this renewal of population. For men were more avaricious and grasping than before, even though they had far greater possessions. They were more covetous and disturbed each other more frequently with suits, brawls, disputes, and pleas. Nor by the mortality resulting from this terrible plague inflicted by God was peace between kings and lords established. On the contrary, the enemies of the king of France and of the Church or stronger and wickeder than before and stirred up wars on sea and on land. Greater evils than before [swarmed] everywhere in the world. And this fact was very remarkable. Although there was an abundance of all goods, yet everything was twice as dear, whether it were utensils, victuals, or merchandise, hired helpers or peasants and serfs, except for some hereditary domains which remained abundantly stocked with everything. Charity began to cool, and iniquity with ignorance and stand to abound, for a few could be found in the good towns and castles who knew how or were willing to instruct children in the rudiments of grammar.

[Source: Richard A. Newhall, ed., Jean Birdsall, trans., *The Chronicle of Jean de Venette* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), pp. 48-51.]

Boccaccio: The Decameron – Introduction to the Black Plague

The onset of the Black Death, was described by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375).

I say, then, that the years of the beatific incarnation of the Son of God had reached the tale of one thousand three hundred and forty eight, when in the illustrious city of Florence, the fairest of all the cities of Italy, there made its appearance that deadly pestilence, which, whether disseminated by the influence of the celestial bodies, or sent upon us mortals by God in His just wrath by way of retribution for our iniquities, had had its origin some years before in the East, whence, after destroying an innumerable multitude of living beings, it had propagated itself without respite from place to place, and so calamitously, had spread into the West.

In Florence, despite all that human wisdom and forethought could devise to avert it, as the cleansing of the city from many impurities by officials appointed for the purpose, the refusal of entrance to all sick folk, and the adoption of many precautions for the preservation of health; despite also humble supplications addressed to God, and often repeated both in public procession and otherwise by the devout; towards the beginning of the spring of the said year the doleful effects of the pestilence began to be horribly apparent by symptoms that shewed as if miraculous.

Not such were they as in the East, where an issue of blood from the nose was a manifest sign of inevitable death; but in men a women alike it first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumors in the groin or the armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg, some more, some less, which the common folk called *gavoccioli*. From the two said parts of the body this deadly *gavocciolo* soon began to propagate and spread itself in all directions indifferently; after which the form of the malady began to change, black spots or livid making their appearance in many cases on the arm or the thigh or elsewhere, now few and large, then minute and numerous. And as the *gavocciolo* had been and still were an infallible token of approaching death, such also were these spots on whomsoever they shewed themselves. Which maladies seemed set entirely at naught both the art of the physician and the virtue of physic; indeed, whether it was that the disorder was of a nature to defy such treatment, or that the physicians were at fault - besides the qualified there was now a multitude both of men and of women who practiced without having received the slightest tincture of medical science - and, being in ignorance of its source, failed to apply the proper remedies; in either case, not merely were those that covered few, but almost all within three days from the appearance of the said symptoms, sooner or later, died, and in most cases without any fever or other attendant malady.

Moreover, the virulence of the pest was the greater by reason the intercourse was apt to convey it from the sick to the whole, just as fire devours things dry or greasy when they are brought close to it, the evil went yet further, for not merely by speech or association with the sick was the malady communicated to the healthy with consequent peril of common death; but any that touched the clothes the sick or aught else that had been touched, or used by these seemed thereby to contract the disease.

So marvelous sounds that which I have now to relate, that, had not many, and I among them, observed it with their own eyes, I had hardly dared to credit it, much less to set it down in writing, though I had had it from the lips of a credible witness.

I say, then, that such was the energy of the contagion of the said pestilence, that it was not merely propagated from man to man, but, what is much more startling, it was frequently observed, that things which had belonged to one sick or dead of the disease, if touched by some other living creature, not of the human species, were the occasion, not merely of sickening, but of an almost instantaneous death. Whereof my own eyes (as I said a little before) had cognisance, one day among others, by the following experience. The rags of a poor man who had died of the disease being strewn about the open street, two hogs came thither, and after, as is their wont, no little trifling with their snouts, took the rags between their teeth and tossed them to and fro about their chaps; whereupon, almost immediately, they gave a few turns, and fell down dead, as if by poison, upon the rags which in an evil hour they had disturbed.

In which circumstances, not to speak of many others of a similar or even graver complexion, divers apprehensions and imaginations were engendered in the minds of such as were left alive, inclining almost all of them to the same harsh resolution, to wit, to shun and abhor all contact with the sick and all that belonged to them, thinking thereby to make each his own health secure. Among whom there were those who thought that to live temperately and avoid all excess would count for much as a preservative against seizures of this kind. Wherefore they banded together, and dissociating themselves from all others, formed communities in houses where there were no sick, and lived a separate and secluded life, which they regulated with the utmost care, avoiding every kind of luxury, but eating and drinking moderately of the most delicate viands and the finest wines, holding converse with none but one another, lest tidings of sickness or death should reach them, and diverting their minds with music and such other delights as they could devise. Others, the bias of whose minds was in the opposite direction, maintained, that to drink freely, frequent places of public resort, and take their pleasure with song and revel, sparing to satisfy no appetite, and to laugh and mock at no event, was the sovereign remedy for so great an evil: and that which they affirmed they also put in practice, so far as they were able, resorting day and night, now to this tavern, now to that, drinking with an entire disregard of rule or measure, and by preference making the houses of others, as it were, their inns, if they but saw in them aught that was particularly to their taste or liking; which they, were readily able to do, because the owners, seeing death imminent, had become as reckless of their property as of their lives; so that most of the houses were open to all comers, and no distinction was observed between the stranger who presented himself and the rightful lord. Thus, adhering ever to their inhuman determination to shun the sick, as far as possible, they ordered their life. In this extremity of our city's suffering and tribulation the venerable authority of laws, human and divine, was abased and all but totally dissolved for lack of those who should have administered and enforced them, most of whom, like the rest of the citizens, were either dead or sick or so hard bested for servants that they were unable to execute any office; whereby every man was free to do what was right in his own eyes.

Not a few there were who belonged to neither of the two said parties, but kept a middle course between them, neither laying the same restraint upon their diet as the former, nor allowing themselves the same license in drinking and other dissipations as the latter, but living with a degree of freedom sufficient to satisfy their appetite and not as recluses. They therefore walked abroad, carrying in the hands flowers or fragrant herbs or divers sorts of spices, which they frequently raised to their noses, deeming it an excellent thing thus to comfort the brain with such

perfumes, because the air seemed be everywhere laden and reeking with the stench emitted by the dead and the dying, and the odours of drugs.

Some again, the most sound, perhaps, in judgment, as they were also the most harsh in temper, of all, affirmed that there was no medicine for the disease superior or equal in efficacy to flight; following which prescription a multitude of men and women, negligent of all but themselves, deserted their city, their houses, their estates, their kinsfolk, their goods, and went into voluntary exile, or migrated to the country parts, as if God in visiting men with this pestilence in requital of their iniquities would not pursue them with His wrath wherever they might be, but intended the destruction of such alone as remained within the circuit of the walls of the city; or deeming perchance, that it was now time for all to flee from it, and that its last hour was come.

Of the adherents of these divers opinions not all died, neither did all escape; but rather there were, of each sort and in every place many that sickened, and by those who retained their health were treated after the example which they themselves, while whole, had set, being everywhere left to languish in almost total neglect. Tedious were it to recount, how citizen avoided citizen, how among neighbors was scarce found any that shewed fellow-feeling for another, how kinsfolk held aloof, and never met, or but rarely; enough that this sore affliction entered so deep into the minds of men a women, that in the horror thereof brother was forsaken by brother nephew by uncle, brother by sister, and oftentimes husband by wife: nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children, untended, unvisited, to their fate, as if they had been strangers. Wherefore the sick of both sexes, whose number could not be estimated, were left without resource but in the charity of friends (and few such there were), or the interest of servants, who were hardly to be had at high rates and on unseemly terms, and being, moreover, one and all, men and women of gross understanding, and for the most part unused to such offices, concerned themselves no further than to supply the immediate and expressed wants of the sick, and to watch them die; in which service they themselves not seldom perished with their gains. In consequence of which dearth of servants and dereliction of the sick by neighbors, kinsfolk and friends, it came to pass-a thing, perhaps, never before heard of-that no woman, however dainty, fair or well-born she might be, shrank, when stricken with the disease, from the ministrations of a man, no matter whether he were young or no, or scrupled to expose to him every part of her body, with no more shame than if he had been a woman, submitting of necessity to that which her malady required; wherefrom, perchance, there resulted in after time some loss of modesty in such as recovered. Besides which many succumbed, who with proper attendance, would, perhaps, have escaped death; so that, what with the virulence of the plague and the lack of due attendance of the sick, the multitude of the deaths, that daily and nightly took place in the city, was such that those who heard the tale-not to say witnessed the fact-were struck dumb with amazement. Whereby, practices contrary to the former habits of the citizens could hardly fail to grow up among the survivors.

It had been, as to-day it still is, the custom for the women that were neighbors and of kin to the deceased to gather in his house with the women that were most closely connected with him, to wail with them in common, while on the other hand his male kinsfolk and neighbors, with not a few of the other citizens, and a due proportion of the clergy according to his quality, assembled without, in front of the house, to receive the corpse; and so the dead man was borne on the shoulders of his peers, with funeral pomp of taper and dirge, to the church selected by him before

his death. Which rites, as the pestilence waxed in fury, were either in whole or in great part disused, and gave way to others of a novel order. For not only did no crowd of women surround the bed of the dying, but many passed from this life unregarded, and few indeed were they to whom were accorded the lamentations and bitter tears of sorrowing relations; nay, for the most part, their place was taken by the laugh, the jest, the festal gathering; observances which the women, domestic piety in large measure set aside, had adopted with very great advantage to their health. Few also there were whose bodies were attended to the church by more than ten or twelve of their neighbors, and those not the honorable and respected citizens; but a sort of corpse-carriers drawn from the baser ranks, who called themselves *becchini* and performed such offices for hire, would shoulder the bier, and with hurried steps carry it, not to the church of the dead man's choice, but to that which was nearest at hand, with four or six priests in front and a candle or two, or, perhaps, none; nor did the priests distress themselves with too long and solemn an office, but with the aid of the *becchini* hastily consigned the corpse to the first tomb which they found untenanted. The condition of the lower, and, perhaps, in great measure of the middle ranks, of the people shewed even worse and more deplorable; for, deluded by hope or constrained by poverty, they stayed in their quarters, in their houses where they sickened by thousands a day, and, being without service or help of any kind, were, so to speak, irredeemably devoted to the death which overtook them. Many died daily or nightly in the public streets; of many others, who died at home, the departure was hardly observed by their neighbors, 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 neighbors, moved no less by fear of contamination by the putrefying bodies than by charity towards the deceased, to drag the corpses out of the houses with their own hands, aided, perhaps, by a porter, if a porter was to be had, and to lay them in front of the doors, where any one who made the round might have seen, especially in the morning, more of them than he could count; afterwards they would have biers brought up or in default, planks, whereon they laid them. Nor was it once twice only that one and the same bier carried two or three corpses at once; but quite a considerable number of such cases occurred, one bier sufficing for husband and wife, two or three brothers, father and son, and so forth. And times without number it happened, that as two priests, bearing the cross, were on their way to perform the last office for some one, three or four biers were brought up by the porters in rear of them, so that, whereas the priests supposed that they had but one corpse to bury, they discovered that there were six or eight, or sometimes more. Nor, for all their number, were their obsequies honored by either tears or lights or crowds of mourners rather, it was come to this, that a dead man was then of no more account than a dead goat would be to-day.

From Boccaccio, The Decameron, . M. Rigg, trans. (London: David Campbell, 1921), Vol. 1, pp. 5-11

Gabriele de' Mussi on the Plague at Kaffa and Sicily in 1348

"Tell, O Sicily, and ye, the many islands of the sea, the judgements of God. Confess, O Genoa, what thou hast done, since we of Genoa and Venice are compelled to make God's chastisement manifest. Alas! our ships enter the port, but of a thousand sailors hardly ten are spared. We reach our homes; our kindred and our neighbours come from all parts to visit us. Woe to us for we cast at them the darts of death! Whilst we spoke to them, whilst they embraced us and kissed us, we scattered the poison from our lips. Going back to their homes, they in turn soon infected their whole families, who in three days succumbed, and were buried in one common grave. Priests and doctors visiting the sick returned from their duties ill, and soon were numbered with the dead. O death! cruel, bitter, impious death! which thus breaks the bonds of affection and divides father and mother, brother and sister, son and wife. Lamenting our misery, we feared to fly, yet we dared not remain."

(M.R., ed: D.S.) Adapted from: George Deaux, *The Black Death 1347*. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969. Chapter IV, pp. 75ff.

Petrarch on the Plague

Petrarch endured the Black Death in Parma, and responded to it quite unlike Boccaccio. The genuine anguish of Petrarch's letter is as apparent as is the horror of Boccaccio's account:

My brother! My brother! My brother! A new beginning to a letter, though used by Marcus Tullius [Cicero] fourteen hundred years ago. Alas! my beloved brother, what shall I say? How shall I begin? Whither shall I turn? On all sides is sorrow; everywhere is fear. I would, 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 without the lightnings of heaven or the fires of earth, without wars or other visible slaughter, not this or that part of the earth, but well-nigh the whole globe, has remained without inhabitants. When has any such thing been even 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 and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole earth?... Oh happy people of the future, who have not known these miseries and perchance will class our testimony with the fables. We have, indeed, deserved these [punishments] and even greater; but our forefathers also have deserved them, and may our posterity not also merit the same...

(M.R., ed: D.S.) Adapted from: George Deaux, *The Black Death 1347*. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969. Chapter IV, pp. 92-94.

Florentine Chronicle of Marchionne di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti (1327-1385) Concerning the Plague

Rubric 634a

Concerning a deadly outbreak of disease which happened in the city of Florence, where many people died.

In the year of our lord 1348 there occurred in the city and contado of Florence a great pestilence, and such was its fury and violence that in whatever household it took hold, whosoever took care of the sick, all the carers died of the same illness, and almost nobody survived beyond the fourth day, neither doctors nor medicine proving of any avail, and there appeared to be no remedy, either because those illnesses were not yet recognised, or because doctors had never previously had cause to study them properly. Such was the fear that nobody knew what to do: when it caught hold in a household, it often happened that not a single person escaped death. And it wasn't just men and women: even sentient animals such as dogs and cats, hens, oxen, donkeys and sheep, died from that same disease and with those symptoms, and almost none who displayed those symptoms, or very few indeed, effected a recovery. Those symptoms were as follows: either between the thigh and the body, in the groin region, or under the armpit, there appeared a lump, and a sudden fever, and when the victim spat, he spat blood mixed with saliva, and none of those who spat blood survived. Such was the terror this caused that seeing it take hold in a household, as soon as it started, nobody remained: everybody abandoned the dwelling in fear, and fled to another; some fled into the city and others into the countryside. No doctors were to be found, because they were dying like everybody else; those who could be found wanted exorbitant fees cash-in-hand before entering the house, and having entered, they took the patient's pulse with their heads turned away, and assayed the urine samples from afar, with aromatic herbs held to their noses. Sons abandoned fathers, husbands wives, wives husbands, one brother the other, one sister the other. The city was reduced to bearing the dead to burial; many died who at their passing had neither confession nor last sacraments, and many died unseen, and many died of hunger, for when somebody took ill to his bed, the other occupants in panic told him: 'I'm going for the doctor'; and quietly locked the door from the outside and didn't come back. The victim, abandoned by both people and nourishment, yet kept constant company by fever, wasted away. Many were those who begged their families not to abandon them; when evening came, the relatives said to the patient: 'So that you don't have to wake up the people looking after you at night, asking for things, because this is going on day and night, you yourself can reach for cakes and wine or water, here they are on the shelf above your bed, you can get the stuff when you want'. And when the patient fell asleep, they went away and did not return. If, through good fortune the victim had been strengthened by that food, the next morning alive and still strong enough to get to the window, he would have to wait half an hour before anybody came past, if this was not a busy thoroughfare, and even when the odd person passed by, and the patient had enough voice to be heard a little, if he shouted, sometimes he would be answered and sometimes not, and even if he were to be answered, there was no help to be had. For not only none or very few wished to enter a house where there were any sick people, but they didn't even want to have contact with

those who issued healthy from a sick person's house, saying: 'He's jinxed, don't speak to him', saying: 'He's got it because there's the "gavocciolo" [bubo] in his house'; and 'gavocciolo' was the name they gave to these swellings. Many died without being seen, remaining on their beds till they stank. And the neighbours, if any were left, having smelled the stench, did a whip round and sent him for burial. Houses remained open, nobody dared to touch anything, for it seemed that things remained poisoned, and whoever had anything to do with them caught the disease.

At every church, or at most of them, pits were dug, down to the water-table, as wide and deep as the parish was populous; and therein, whosoever was not very rich, having died during the night, would be shouldered by those whose duty it was, and would either be thrown into this pit, or they would pay big money for somebody else to do it for them. The next morning there would be very many in the pit. Earth would be taken and thrown down on them; and then others would come on top of them, and then earth on top again, in layers, with very little earth, like garnishing lasagne with cheese.

The gravediggers who carried out these functions were so handsomely paid that many became rich and many died, some already rich and others having earned little, despite the high fees. The female and male sick-bay attendants demanded from one to three florins a day, plus sumptuous expenses. The foodstuffs suitable for the sick, cakes and sugar, reached outrageous prices. A pound of sugar was sold at between three and eight florins, and the same went for other confectionery. Chickens and other poultry were unbelievably expensive, and eggs were between 12 and 24 denari each: you were lucky to find three in a day, even searching through the whole city. Wax was unbelievable: a pound of wax rose to more than a florin, nevertheless an age-old arrogance of the Florentines was curbed, in that an order was given not to parade more than two large candles. The churches only had one bier apiece, as was the custom, and this was insufficient. Pharmacists and grave-diggers had obtained biers, hangings and laying-out pillows at great price. The shroud-cloth apparel which used to cost, for a woman, in terms of petticoat, outer garment, cloak and veils, three florins, rose in price to thirty florins, and would have risen to one hundred florins, except that they stopped using shroud-cloth, and whoever was rich was dressed with plain cloth, and those who weren't rich were sewn up in a sheet. The benches placed for the dead cost a ludicrous amount, and there weren't enough of them even if there had been a hundred times more. The priests couldn't get enough of ringing the bells: so an order was passed, what with the panic caused by the bells ringing and the sale of benches and the curbing of spending, that nobody should be allowed the death-knell, nor should benches be placed, nor should there be a public announcement by the crier, because the sick could hear them, and the healthy took fright as well as the sick. The priests and friars thronged to the rich, and were paid such great sums that they all enriched themselves. And so an ordinance was passed that only one rule (of religious houses) and the local church could be had, and from that rule a maximum of six friars. All harmful fruit, such as unripe plums, unripe almonds, fresh beans, figs and all other inessential unhealthy fruit, was forbidden from entering the city. Many processions and relics and the painting of Santa Maria Impruneta were paraded around the city, to cries of 'Mercy', and with prayers, coming to a halt at the rostrum of the Priori. There peace was made settling

great disputes and questions of woundings and killings. Such was the panic this plague provoked that people met for meals as a brigata to cheer themselves up; one person would offer a dinner to ten friends, and the next evening it would be the turn of one of the others to offer the dinner, and sometimes they thought they were going to dine with him, and he had no dinner ready, because he was ill, and sometimes the dinner had been prepared for ten and two or three less turned up. Some fled to the country, and some to provincial towns, to get a change of air; where there was no plague they brought it, and where it already existed they added to it. No industry was busy in Florence; all the workshops were locked up, all the inns were closed, only chemists and churches were open. Wherever you went, you could find almost nobody; many rich good men were borne from their house to church in their coffin with just four undertakers and a lowly cleric carrying the cross, and even then they demanded a florin apiece. Those who especially profited from the plague were the chemists, the doctors, the poulterers, the undertakers, and the women who sold mallow, nettles, mercury plant and other poultice herbs for drawing abscesses. And those who made the most were these herb sellers. Woollen merchants and retailers when they came across cloth could sell it for whatever price they asked. Once the plague had finished, anybody who could get hold of whatsoever kind of cloth, or found the raw materials to make it, became rich; but many ended up moth-eaten, spoilt and useless for the looms, and thread and raw wool lost in the city and the contado. This plague began in March as has been said, and finished in September 1348. And people began to return to their homes and belongings. And such was the number of houses full of goods that had no owner, that it was amazing. Then the heirs to this wealth began to turn up. And someone who had previously had nothing suddenly found himself rich, and couldn't believe it was all his, and even felt himself it wasn't quite right. And both men and women began to show off with clothes and horses.

Rubric 635a

The quantity of people who died during the plague outbreak of the year of our lord 1348.

The bishop and the signoria in Florence having ordered a careful count of how many were dying of plague in the city of Florence, and seeing finally at the beginning of October that nobody was dying of that pestilence any more, it was discovered that putting together men and women, children and adults, from March to October, ninety-six thousand had died.

Stefani, Marchione di Coppo. Cronaca fiorentina. Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, Vol. 30. , ed. Niccolo Rodolico. Citta di Castello: 1903-13.

Gabriele de' Mussi on the Plague in 1348

First in importance, as well as in order of time, comes the testimony of De' Mussi, the substance of which is here given. It so happened that when the ships left Kaffa—some bound for Genoa, some for Venice, and some to other parts of the Christian world—a few of the sailors were already infected by the fatal disease. One sick man was enough to infect the whole household, and the corpse as it was carried to the grave brought death to its bearers.

" Tell, O Sicily, and ye, the many islands of the sea, the judgments of God. Confess, O Genoa, what thou hast done, since we of Genoa and Venice are compelled to make God's chastisement manifest. Alas! our ships enter the port, but of a thousand sailors hardly ten are spared. We reach our homes; our kindred and our neighbors come from all parts to visit us. Woe to us, for we cast at them the darts of death! Whilst we spoke to them, whilst they embraced us and kissed us, we scattered the poison from our lips. Going back to their homes, they in turn soon infected their whole families, who in three days succumbed, and were buried in one common grave. Priests and doctors visiting the sick returned from their duties ill, and soon were numbered with the dead. O, death! cruel, bitter, impious death! which thus breaks the bonds of affection and divides father and mother, brother and sister, son and wife. Lamenting our misery, we feared to fly, yet we dared not remain."

The terror increased when it was found that even the effects and clothes of the dead were capable of communicating the disease. This was seen in the case of four soldiers at a place near Genoa. Returning to their camp they carried back with them a woollen bed-covering they had found in a house at Rivarolo, on the sea-coast, where the sickness had swept away the entire population. The night following the four slept under the coverlet, and in the morning all were found to be dead. At Genoa the plague spared hardly a seventh part of the population. At Venice it is said that more than seventy died out of every hundred, and out of four- and-twenty excellent doctors twenty were soon carried off by the sickness.

" But as an inhabitant I am asked to write more of Piacenza so that it may be known what happened there in the year 1348. Some Genoese who fled from the plague raging in their city betook themselves hither. They rested at Bobbio, and there sold the merchandise they had brought with them. The purchaser and their host, 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 a prey to the sickness, and there remained in the town only the dead.

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

throughout the city. I know not where to begin: everywhere there was weeping and mourning. So great was the mortality that men hardly dared to breathe. The dead were without number, and those who still lived gave themselves up as lost, and prepared for the tomb.

" The cemeteries failing, it was necessary to dig trenches to receive the bodies of the dead. It frequently happened that a husband and wife, a father and son, a mother and daughter—nay, whole families—were cast together in the same pit.

"It was the same in the neighbouring towns and villages. One Oberto di Sasso, who had come one day from an infected place to the church of the Friars Minor to make his will, called thither a notary, witnesses, and neighbours. All these, together with others, to the number of more than sixty, died within a short space of time. Also the religious man, Friar Sifredo de' Bardi, of the convent and order of Preachers, a man of prudence and great learning, who had visited our Lord's sepulchre, died with twenty-three other members of his order and convent. Also the learned and virtuous Friar Bertolin Coxadocha, of Piacenza, of the order of Minorites, with four-and-twenty members of his community, was carried off. So too of the convent of Augustinian Hermits— seven; of the Carmelites—seven; of the Servites of Mary—four, and more than sixty dignitaries and rectors of churches in the city and district of Piacenza died. Of nobles, too, many; of young people a vast number."

De Mussi then proceeds to give examples of the scenes daily passing before his eyes in the plague- stricken cities of northern Italy. The sick man lay languishing alone in his house and no one came near him. Those most dear to him, regardless of the ties of kindred or affection, withdrew themselves to a distance; the doctor did not come to him, and even the priest with fear and trembling administered the Sacraments of the Church. Men and women, racked with the consuming fever, pleaded—but in vain—for a draught of water, and uselessly raved for someone to watch at their bedside. The father or the wife would not touch the corpse of child or husband to prepare it for the grave, or follow it thither. No prayer was said, nor solemn office sung, nor bell tolled for the funeral of even the noblest citizen.