

Marcin SOBÓŃ, Jagiellonian University, Poland

## THE BLACK DEATH – A WARNING FROM THE PAST

„We look, when death bursts into us like  
black smoke, a bug which devours young,  
a wandering ghost insensible to a nice  
face”

Ieunan Gethin (1351)

„The Black Death”, which rolled over Europe from 1347 to 1350, was the greatest human disaster the world has ever seen from the sixth up to the end of the nineteenth century. This horrible disease, spreading out with unusual speediness, was an effect of the very primitive hygienic habits of Middle Age society. Bacilli of the plague were transferred by black rats, by their fleas to be exact. From a medical point of view, the bacillus *Pasteurella Pestis* caused the most common form of the plague. The visible effects of the infection were huge blisters, rising just under the groin of a sick person. Additionally, on a skin of such a person, very often, black spots appeared, caused by inner bleeding. The agony usually persisted usually for a few days [Davies, 1998, 241].

The infection appeared in Middle Asia and was transferred with terrible speed towards Europe. In 1346 the plague appeared in Kaffa on the Crimean Peninsula. The Tatars besieged this town. They used a „bacteriological weapon” – the bodies of dead comrades, infected by the plague, which were thrown beyond the walls of the city and thus transferred this infection among its inhabitants. The defenders of Kaffa ran away to Sicily. At the beginning of 1348 the plague had spread over almost the whole Italy. By 1350, the plague had entered Scotland, Denmark and Sweden and finally Russia, through the hanzeatic towns. As historians estimate, the number of victims of the plague was about 35% of the population of medieval Europe. In England 1.4–2 million people died, in France – 8 million, and about 30 million in Europe.

What was the reason for that great epidemic then? Can we explain it based on the conditions of everyday life of medieval society? What were these conditions like? Let us have a look at this topic from an historical perspective.

The fourteenth century was a period of the rising of a new model for a city. European cities became centres of trade and intellectual life. This had a great influence on the development of towns and municipal life, extending the meaning of these terms, making the position of cities more critical to the political scene of the medieval world. But concerning this, we have to remember the conditions of life in a medieval town. Let us start with a physical description of such a town.

One or two lines of municipal walls surrounded Middle Age cities, therefore there was a lack of free space to build more and more. Additionally, except for Italian cities where there were pavements of old Roman origin, almost no European towns had paved roads. Inhabitants of these cities did not care about tidiness and order, therefore the streets looked like a dump. In the dry season, they were covered with dust and impurities, which were thrown out of houses. In the wet season, the streets became a marsh, which people and animals used to sink into. Sometimes, to make walking and travelling easier, citizens put big stones on the roads, and they jumped from one to another walking down the street. In this way, they could reach their destination without soiling their clothes. Later, in some cities, their authorities started to put big blocks of wood on the bottom of the streets (germ. Brücke) or constructed pavements (fr. trottoir) [Manteuffel, 1974, 178].

Originally private houses were built of wood. The lack of free space to build within the city walls was a reason why places were overcrowded. An average townsman had to build several storey houses. Sometimes the upper levels overhung the street, making it even narrower.

Such a house was rather modest. It consisted of two parts: the forepart and the outhouse divided by a courtyard. A shop or a workshop usually occupied the first level. Under this level there was a cellar. Next to the main room there was a corridor, and in bigger houses, even a gate connecting the backyard to the street. The second storey of the house was occupied by the living room of the owner of the house. Next to this, there were bedrooms (usually without any windows) and a kitchen. The windows had no panes, instead there were membranes or only shutters protected the windows. In the fourteenth century in the houses of richer townsmen a few panes appeared, and they were framed with lead.

The level of hygienic consciousness in Middle Age cities was not too high. It depended on the social position of a townsman, his personal features, habits and many other things, like education and social origins. One very

important problem of everyday life of the burghers was waste management. In such communities there were great problems with removing trash, waste and excrement. In the countryside and in the city, there were holes for excrement, very close to people's accommodation and wells. This caused great danger of contamination of water. Very often wooden boards surrounded those excrement holes. But this was not an ideal means of protection. In stone castles there were special toilets placed in high towers, very often overhanging a river or ditch [Tyszkiewicz, 1977, 186].

Waste management was organised only in the richest and biggest cities. The worst situation in those areas was just outside the city walls, in the suburbs. The municipal authorities usually issued a lot of decrees to keep order in the town. Some of them were concerned with fire-prevention. In some cities breeding of cattle, herd and poultry was prohibited. City councils tried to make the situation better, to improve social and hygienic conditions, partly by appointing one special place to collect waste. Sometimes there were special city guards, who were engaged in tidying up municipal squares and streets. So called *circulatores* used to go around the city, especially at night and remove all large sized waste, e.g. carrion, decaying meat or other refuse. When reading the city council decrees, we can find paragraphs that prohibited throwing out waste into the streets, market squares and other public places. They were especially concerned with throwing manure into rivers and leaving excrement on roads. Sometimes even pigs, running along the streets without a pig-herder, were a huge problem for city councils [Drabina, 1991, 83].

As can be seen, the material and hygienic conditions of life in a Middle Age city were not satisfying, even for less fastidious person. Now, let us have a look at personal hygiene of medieval people.

Ways of washing the body were different in particular countries. It also depended on personal habits and convictions. In some monasteries the law of the order prohibited washing the bodies of monks at all. In cities, people tried rather to stifle the smell of sweat by various perfumes, scents and aromatic herbs.

Actually they washed their hands and faces everyday, but with a very little portion of a water. Usually, there was no sewage system, and people had to bring water from a city well before they used it to wash themselves. Sometimes some of them washed themselves at the market square, at the city well and other public places. While washing inside the house, they used a copper basin, pouring water from a jug.

Physical purity was also an object of city council decrees. In some towns, its inhabitants had to go to a city vapour-bath two or three times a month. Only very ill people were exempt. Some guilds had such a habit too and its members regularly went to a vapour-bath together, even with

their master, who was obliged to pay. The vapour-bath building was placed on the bank of a river or the water was conducted to the building through canalisation. The building was divided into a section for men and one for women and a cloakroom [Maleczyński, 1961, 354].

In bigger vapour-baths there were also special rooms for recreation, talking to friends, playing games, eating and taking healing treatments. There were two main ways of taking a bath: the standard one and steam baths. A special service helped in washing backs, combing hair etc. After taking a bath everyone could flog himself with a rod and take some rest in a special recreation area.

In a vapour-bath a client additionally could be shaved, have his hair cut, teeth pulled out, but not for free, of course.

Although it looked better than in the countryside, even in cities the situation was bad. An almost total lack of any waste management was a reason for periodical epidemics and attacks of the plague. Most people remember only about that one plague – which rolled over Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century, but we have to realise that it was not the only attack of this horrible disease. It came back from time to time.

Today we are convinced that we can fight such diseases as the plague, which are caused by a lack of hygiene, especially in the circle of modern western civilisation. We have found so many solutions to problems of everyday life, but we do not know if they are sufficient and safe, especially over a longer period of time. The main difficulty is still the same – a question of the “substrate” of the modern, technological way of living – hills made of trash, waste and other impurities. Seven hundred years ago it was the main cause of an epidemic of the greatest and most fatal sickness in the modern times in the history of Europe.

But let us consider whether we have an equally serious danger in the shape of the rising production of waste. This historical example is to make us aware of the consequences of unbalanced consumption filling our planet with rubbish, which follows. In medieval Europe the effect was the following, an attack of a new non-material enemy, which was possible to defeat only by extreme effort of the whole society. But what will the result be next time?

## Literature

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