

Black Death and Medieval Public Health

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(This module is permanently hosted [here](#))

The present module introduces advanced undergraduates to the events known as the Black Death (1347-1352) and situates them in the broader culture of medieval public health or premodern prophylactics. It is divided into two teaching units of equal length and interchangeable order: premodern public health theory, policy and practice can operate as an introductory context for the various impacts of plague, while an exploration of Black Death can also be a starting point for discussing prophylactic medicine and urban hygiene more broadly. Together they question whether the second plague pandemic triggered any and all preventative interventions, and illustrate Galenic medicine's overall influence on prophylactic measures at the population level both before and after its onset.

The module focuses on Europe, often taking available English-language readers as its reference point. But it is easy to adapt either class to different geographical contexts (including Asia and the Middle East) through the use of parallel documents, translated or not, in or out of print, as the instructor's and class' needs may be. We have provided links to secondary sources in open access, but set up liquid readers [here](#) for the primary and [here](#) for secondary sources. Comments and suggestions (also for parallel texts) are welcome!

a. Suggested Structures:

Version 1

Medieval concepts of health and disease
Urban public health hazards and preventative efforts

Plague: preludes, origin and spread
Contemporary explanations and responses
Impacts: short-, medium-, and long-term

Version 2

Plague: preludes, origin and spread
Impacts: short-, medium-, and long-term

Medieval concepts of health and disease
Contemporary explanations and responses
Urban public health hazards and preventative efforts

b. Discussion Topics:

Medieval concepts of health and disease (humoral theory, miasma)

Health hazards and their prevention in the urban context (food scarcity, produce quality, waste disposal, public order, decorum and morality, labor safety; the responsibility of urban officials, guilds, the church, confraternities, etc.)

Preludes to the Black Death:

- Overpopulation, high rents, low wages

- Famine and harvest failures

Origin and spread of the plague

Nature of the plague (modern analysis of types of plague and possibilities for transmission)

Contemporary explanations

Contemporary responses, individual and collective

Impacts:

- Demographic decline and recurrent visitations

- Socio-economic

- Politics

- Religion

- Culture

c. Readings:

1. Primary

Urban public health measures:

“Air pollution in Southwark, 1307,” and “Regulations for London’s Streets, 1297,” in *Medieval Towns: A Reader*, ed. Maryanne Kowaleski (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 350-51

“Parliamentary statute of 1388,” in *The Black Death*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 205-206

Narrative accounts:

“The plague in Florence,” and “The plague in Padua,” in *The Black Death*, ed. Horrox, 26-34 and 34-35

Scientific and religious accounts of the plague:

“Intercessionary Processions (2),” and “The report of the Paris medical faculty, October 1348,” in *The Black Death*, ed. Horrox, 112-13 and 158-63

Urban hygienic measures:

“Ordinances against the spread of plague, Pistoia, 1348,” and “Plague Regulations of Bernabò Visconti, lord of Milan, 1374,” in *The Black Death*, ed. Horrox, 194-203

“*Nettezza urbana*,” in *The Towns of Italy in the later Middle Ages*, ed. and trans. Trevor Dean (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 50-54

“An accusation of practicing medicine without a license, 1334,” in Luis García-Ballester, Michael R. McVaugh, and Agustín Rubio-Vela *Medical Licensing and Learning in*

Fourteenth-Century Valencia (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1989), Appendix 2, Document 2, 61-66.ⁱ

Demographic consequences:

“A shortage of priests to hear confession,” and “The statute of laborers, 1351,” in *The Black Death*, ed. Horrox, 271-73 and 312-16

2. Secondary

Plague and demography:

Sharon N. DeWitte and Maryanne Kowaleski, “[Black Death Bodies](#),” *Fragments* 6 (2017), 1-37

Concepts of health and disease:

Carole Rawcliffe, “The Concept of Health in Late Medieval Society,” *Interazioni fra economia e ambiente biologico nell'Europa preindustriale, secc. XIII-XVIII* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2010), 317-34

Janna Coomans and G. Geltner, “On the Street and in the Bath-House: Medieval Galenism in Action?” [Añuario de Estudios Medievales](#) 43 (2013), 53-82

Urban preventative programs:

Carole Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (London: Boydell, 2013), chs. 2-3

G. Geltner, “[Public Health](#),” in *A Companion to Medieval Bologna*, ed. Sarah Rubin Blanshei (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 103-28

Further readings:

An updated bibliography of premodern public health is maintained on the Premodern Healthscaping website: <https://hcommons.org/groups/premodern-public-health/> (see under files).

ⁱ Also available in Luis García-Ballester, *Medicine in a Multicultural Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2001).