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Living with the Plague: Life through the Lens of Material Culture and Artifacts
HIST 2004-Historical Methods with Dr. Daniel Thorp
Material culture and archaeological findings have the ability to provide further understanding of social changes during a time when one of the most devastating diseases in history ravaged much of Europe. While records of the bubonic plague exist throughout time, such as the plague of Justinian in the sixth century Byzantine Empire and the nineteenth century outbreak in China, the disease was most influential in society between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century. The plague was never more catastrophic than during this period, for it left entire towns devoid of residents and killed a significant number of the European population. Between 1348 and 1352 alone, one third of Europe’s population was wiped out as a result of this deadly disease. This five year span is considered the worst of the bubonic plague outbreaks due to the particularly heavy losses of lives, and it is referred to as the Black Death. The infamous Black Death began when rodents carrying fleas infected with *Yersinia pestis* boarded Genoese galleys. The infected fleas then spread into port towns and into other urban and rural areas on the backs of their hosts. When the rodents died from infection, the fleas simply found another host and the plague spread widely as a result. The bubonic plague spread among individuals through rat bites and contact with bodily fluids. The bubonic plague can turn into pneumonic plague by infecting the lungs, which spreads the plague quickly through coughing. The disease continued to emerge in towns and cities in Europe for centuries afterwards and caused havoc in society by altering funeral rites, relationships between the church and people, and social behavior to name a few. The profound loss of life in such a short time and the horrors of contagion greatly altered the society living through the plague. Fortunately, many material objects and artifacts remain today to help show what the world was like for the victims of the disease. Whether a museum
provides the artifacts and material object, or whether they have been recently excavated by archaeologists, artifacts and material objects provide insight into the social life of Europeans and how the bubonic plague affected their daily lives. Material objects, artifacts, and archaeological remains reflect social changes in Western Europe from 1348 to 1700 that occurred as a result of plague outbreaks.

Many scholars and individuals have researched the history of the Black Death and subsequent episodes of the plague. However, many of these publications solely utilize written documents from the period. Historians are fortunate enough to have written accounts of this time in order to help us better understand one of the deadliest diseases in history. However, it is necessary to look at a broad range of sources and materials so as to understand as much as possible about this history. Written sources are extremely useful, but they can also provide a limited scope into the period a document was written. There were far more illiterate individuals than literate in the medieval and early modern period. Therefore, many written accounts do not provide a larger understanding of the world and the individuals of different classes, and they tend to particularly exclude the poor. In order for historians to grow in their profession and make further contributions to unlocking the past, they must look beyond the primary and secondary material in order to understand the greater story of culture and society in history. As a result, this research focuses on material culture and artifacts that illustrate the social changes and differences that occurred as a result of the bubonic plague outbreaks in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern period.
One of the most profound effects among the society during the years of the bubonic plague in Europe, was the constant presence of death. A bell dating from 1660 to 1669, now located in the Museum of London, represents the practices deemed necessary to deal with the plague and its victims.\(^1\) This bell (Figure 1) was likely one of many that rung throughout cities and villages to signal that it was time to collect the dead.\(^2\) A man walked the streets, which reeked of decaying bodies, ringing the bell to let family and friends know that it was time for their loved ones to be placed upon a wooden cart along with other bodies to be buried.\(^3\) This

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2. “Bell.”
3. Ibid.
practice of collecting the dead was not normal in society before the plague, for people often received some sort of funeral. However, propriety was cast aside during the plague outbreaks as bodies were placed out on the streets for collection. This bell existed around the time period of the Great Plague of 1665 in London. The article, “The Great Plague in London,” goes into detail of how the numbers of deaths rose up to the thousands and to the tens of thousands. The city was decimated by the bubonic plague in 1665. Bells were in constant use due to such a large death toll. In “English Life and Law in the Time of the Black Death,” attorney Mark Senn noted that “The mortality [Black Death] was so great in London that there was a funeral every two and one-half minutes.” Those individuals living through the Black Death had the unfortunate experience of hearing the bell and witnessing bodies consistently being carried through the streets. In the town of Richmond, “the death toll was so huge that the churchyard was inadequate and many of the dead had to be buried in emergency grounds in the Castle Yard and in Clark’s Green.” The death toll in Europe during the plague meant that people were invariably exposed to death. The sound of bells, echoing through the street, was a constant reminder of death and the disease in society.

Individuals heard bells ring constantly as people lugged around carts filled up with corpses, to be buried. According to the Museum of London, one man during the Great Plague of

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4 “Bell.”
1665 said that “Death stares us continually in the face; in every coffin which is daily and hourly carried along the street. The bells never cease to remind us of our mortality.”

Society was constantly reminded of how close to death each and every individual was. The danger of death in society caused individuals to keep others at arm’s length. Cases occurred where people “[died] and no one [could] be found who would want to bury them, not even for money or in the name of friendship.”

Bells served as a reminder to society that death was all around. As a result, people removed themselves from others in fear of contracting the plague. In some places, such as Siena during the Black Death, not even the church bells rang anymore. Therefore, bells rung by those who loaded the carts may have been the only bells heard in some areas. These communities likely associated bells only with death, and the bells represent how people were forced to acknowledge the plague and death that had enveloped society.

When one considers how the inhabitants of cities and towns were continually surrounded by death, one cannot expect society to have been unaffected. Giovanni Boccaccio described some of the social effects of the bubonic plague when it hit Florence in the introduction to his Decameron. Boccaccio explained alienation in society during the plague for some “refrained from speaking to outsiders, refused to receive news of the dead or the sick, and entertained themselves with music and whatever other amusements they were able to devise.”

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8 “Bell.”
was so rampant and so feared that people shut out the world around them as a survival mechanism and a way to cope with the constant death. A town chronicler, Agnolo di Tura, took note of the social effects of the plague on Siena, Italy. Tura described the plague as so heavily feared that “fathers abandon their sons, wives their husbands, and one brother the other” due to the belief that the plague could be spread through bad breath and odor.\(^\text{12}\) The strength of the bubonic plague was so great that it could make family members abandon those closest to them for the sake of survival.

![Crudely Executed Cross of Lead](http://collectionsonline.nmsi.ac.uk/detail.php?t=objects&type=all&f=&s=cross+of+lead+1348-1349&record=0)

During the outbreaks of the bubonic plague, burial and death became a part of everyday life and social practices in burying the dead were altered as a result. Figure 2 is a lead cross that

\(^{12}\) Tura, “Sienese Chronicle,” 80.
was very crudely made around 1348-1349, when the Black Death was rampant in Europe.\textsuperscript{13} The crude cut and design of the cross suggests heavy losses of the population. There was simply not enough time to prepare an elaborate cross amidst the need to bury all of the victims.

The burial practices and methods employed during outbreaks of the bubonic plague certainly reveal social change. In his introduction to \textit{The Decameron}, Boccaccio described how a priest would be on his way to a burial, only to find that he has attracted three or four more biers behind him, “so that whereas the priests had thought they had only one burial to attend to, they in fact had six or seven, and sometimes more.”\textsuperscript{14} Thus, burial rites meant for one person suddenly turned into rites meant for a large group of people so as to get the infected corpses into the ground as quickly as possible. Therefore, it is understandable why crosses, such as Figure 2, were created with such hastiness. Giovanni Boccaccio detailed the unfortunate mass burials of large numbers of people who did not receive a typical funeral. He stated that even if one person was supposed to have his or her own plot of ground, as tradition demanded, the number of bodies was so great that trenches, seen in Figure 3, were dug within the church.\textsuperscript{15} The bodies then “were placed in their hundreds, stowed tier upon tier like ships’ cargo, each layer of corpses being covered over with a thin layer of soil till the trench was filled to the top. . . .”\textsuperscript{16} The lead cross represents change in how society buried their dead, for tradition fell by the wayside so that bodies could be buried more quickly.

\textsuperscript{14} Boccaccio, “Introduction to \textit{The Decameron},” 79.
\textsuperscript{15} Boccaccio, “Introduction to \textit{The Decameron},” 79.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 79.
The traditions and burial practices were neglected as too many people were succumbing to the ferocious disease for mores to continue as they had before. Before the plague outbreaks, one custom allowed women to mourn a man in the company of visitors and priests.\textsuperscript{17} Afterwards, his body was taken to church for burial, and he was carried on “on the shoulders of his peers amidst the funeral pomp of candles and dirges.”\textsuperscript{18} With the arrival of the bubonic plague, the mourning women seemed to disappear, and many died without witnesses, leaving only neighbors to discover dead bodies days later after the stench of decay became strong enough.\textsuperscript{19} The cross depicted in Figure 2 illustrates how traditions changed when the bubonic plague hit Europe. The lead cross shows that there may have been a tradition of burying the dead with a cross or some sort of religious object before 1348. The burial practices and methods employed by society changed significantly as a result of the bubonic plague, as bodies were left for others to find later, corpses were buried in layers rather than single plots due to lack of room, and those who were buried with lead crosses received only a crudely cut cross.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 78.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 79.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 78.
As the bubonic plague spread rapidly throughout Western Europe, people were fully aware of the horrors of sickness around them. Thus, it was only natural that some methods, such as quarantine, were utilized by society to stop the spread of the disease. Around 2004, workers accidentally uncovered a mass grave of over 1,500 bubonic plague victims on Lazzaretto Vecchio in the Venetian Lagoon (Figure 3).20 According to Luisa Gambaro, an anthropologist at the University of Padua, "When plague struck the town, everybody sick or showing any suspect symptom were restricted on the island until they recovered or died."21 The remains at the archaeological site illustrate how the bubonic plague did not discriminate and those of all classes were subject to the disease. One of Gambaro’s conclusions from the remains at the site is that "Nobles or lower class didn't make any difference. . . All the sick were forced to stay on

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21 Valsecchi, “Mass Plague Graves Found.”
Lazzaretto Vecchio, and if they died, they were buried together.” The importance of class appears to have temporarily diminished with the outbreak of the plague. When the plague struck in Venice, the town did not send only the poor and lower classes to be quarantined on Lazzaretto Vecchio. The mass pit in Figure 3 shows that when many people died, the upper class was not given higher privileges over another when they were buried. The mass grave in Figure 3 illustrates how the plague infected such a large number of people in such a short time that the plague took precedence over social status.

The bubonic plague shook society to the core as fear prompted people to abandon religious traditions of burying others in consecrated ground in order protect themselves from the spread of the disease. In 2013, Crossrail engineers were working in a shaft where they discovered twenty-five skeletons in the shaft under Charterhouse Square, London, as Figure 4

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22 Valsecchi, “Mass Plague Graves Found.”
23 Ibid.
Researchers believe numerous other graves surround the area, a few of which have already been found. Radio carbon dating has allowed for researchers to determine that the area was used as a burial ground for “at least two distinct periods-the earliest within the Black Death in 1348-50, followed by a later outbreak in the 1430’s.” This archaeological site reveals the hastiness with which Londoners tried to bury their dead. Meanwhile in Italy, during the Black Death, a man in Siena named Agnolo di Tura grievously stated, “I cannot write about the cruelties in the countryside: that wolves and other wild beasts eat the improperly buried and other horrors that are too difficult for anyone who would read this account. . . .” The site in London and the account from Siena show how society abandoned propriety for the sake of people’s safety. The fact that researchers have determined that some bodies in Figure 4 were dumped in the same area during different outbreaks of the plague shows that society did not have the time to find different burial spots for the corpses. Instead, people buried the infected dead improperly in mass graves, even if they were already occupied. When Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, in 1599, he revealed the importance of a proper burial in society during this time period. Laertes’ outrage at Ophelia’s burial in a grave that was already occupied and without all of the rites administered reveals the importance of tradition in European burials. The skeletons at Charterhouse Square illustrate how the bubonic plague stripped tradition and courtesy from society when people buried their dead so as to relieve themselves of the infected corpses.

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25 Morgan, “Black Death skeletons.”

26 Ibid.

Society’s misconceptions and beliefs regarding the plague influenced people’s interactions with others and how they approached the epidemic as well. Figure 5 shows a replica, located in the Science Museum of London, of a fumigating torch that is representative of fumigating torches dating from 1601 to 1700.\textsuperscript{28} Herbs with a sweet scent were burned in the torch in order to prevent the plague from infecting the carrier. The disease was thought to be spread by foul smelling odors, as “the buboes caused by the disease and the breath of the dying both smelt disgusting.”\textsuperscript{29} One of the best sources available for how society viewed the plague is Jacme D’Agramont’s treatise on “Regimen of Protection against Epidemics,” which dates to 1348. D’Agramont was a physician and professor of medicine in Spain.\textsuperscript{30} His treatise

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{29} “Copy of a fumigating torch carried for protection against bubonic plague, 1601-1700.”
\end{itemize}
demonstrates society’s beliefs in bad odor as the cause of disease.\textsuperscript{31} He advised people to use firewood made of rosemary, myrtle, cypress, or the like.\textsuperscript{32} The notion of bad air even caused some people to stop bathing. Jacme D’Agramont advised people to avoid the apparently dangerous activity “because the bath opens the pores of the body and through these pores corrupt air enters and has a powerful influence upon our body and on our humors.”\textsuperscript{33} Society’s belief that the air was causing the spread of the bubonic plague caused individuals to change their daily habits, such as the increased use of fumigating torches, the type of wood and herbs that were burned, and how they bathed.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{31} D’Agramont, “Regimen of Protection against Epidemics,” 51.
\bibitem{32} Ibid.
\bibitem{33} D’Agramont, “Regimen of Protection against Epidemics,” 54.
\end{thebibliography}
The widespread belief that the plague was spread through foul odor caused many doctors to take precautions. In the seventeenth century, the first doctor to Louis XIII of France, Charles de Lorme, wrote about the design of the masks and clothing that plague doctors wore to protect themselves against the disease. Credited with the invention of the plague doctor apparel, Lorme wrote:

“The nose [is] half a foot long, shaped like a beak, filled with perfume with only two holes, one on each side near the nostrils, but that can suffice to breathe and carry along
with the air one breathes the impression of the [herbs] enclosed further along in the beak.

. . . with spectacles over the eyes”

An engraving, *Plague Doctor in Rome*, by Paul Furst (Figure 6), was created in 1656. This image connects well with de Lorme’s description of a plague doctor’s apparel. In the outbreaks during the seventeenth century, a beak-like doctor tending to victims was likely quite a sight. Such procedures illustrate how society’s fear of the plague caused people to alter their habits, such as doctors protecting themselves against patients with masks and long coats. The bubonic plague caused many in individuals to alter their every-day life practices as they attempted to fight the plague.


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As the plague spread, so did the fear of the caretakers. Figure 7 is an undated cautery with a long handle that was have been used to cauterize the large buboes that formed on the body as a result of the bubonic plague. Doctors utilized this long-handled cautery in order to protect themselves from the victims, as it was believed that the plague was spread through bad air. Therefore, the long handle was meant to provide some degree of safety for doctors. This cautery reveals how methods developed that allowed doctors and people to care for the victims without touching them. Considering the distance that people and doctors were putting between themselves and the infected, it is understandable that there was tension between nurses and victims. Susan Scott and C.J. Duncan cite Daniel Defoe, who wrote the novel *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Defoe stated that “hired nurses, who attended infected people, [used] them barbarously, starving them, smothering them, or by other wicked means hastening their end.” Apparently, they went as far as breaking in to the patient’s dwelling to murder them and toss them out to the carts, “so they [went] scarce cold to the grave.” The rapid spread and onset of the bubonic plague in society in Western Europe gave rise to questionable tactics in medical care. The cautery and the plague doctors’ apparel reveal that people were willing to help the victims, but fear of infection prompted people to take drastic measures to protect themselves. The fear of the plague drastically affected the relationship between caretakers and victims.

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37 “Long handled cautery, Europe, undated.”
38 Scott and Duncan, *Return of the Black Death*, 126-127.
40 Scott and Duncan, *Return of the Black Death*, 127.
As the bubonic plague devastated communities, towns, and cities, certain religious practices were also affected. Figure 8 is a replica of a sixteenth century European sacrament dispenser in the Science Museum, London. This sacrament dispenser represents dispensers that were used among church officials to give Holy Communion, but to also keep people at a distance.\(^{41}\) It is about a meter in length and has two prongs in the end resembling a fork.\(^{42}\) One prong has a slit at the end for holding the communion wafer, and five small holes are located on the other prong from which people can receive wine.\(^{43}\) The sacrament dispenser is an example of how many in the church kept people at arm’s length, sometimes literally. Hamo Hethe, the Bishop of Rochester, noted that in some of the benefices around the country, “the priests are still absent and have been for a long time, on account of the fact that by now it is well known that

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\(^{42}\) “Copy of a European sacrament dispenser (1500s).”

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
their incomes have been diminished by the mortality of the parishioners in these places.\textsuperscript{44} Another account from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Islip, notes the lack of attention to the victims and parishes, for the priests “wholly abandon these to devote themselves to celebrating anniversary masses and other private services,” as this allowed them to receive a higher salary at private chapels than in a parish.\textsuperscript{45} It appears some priests were so fearful of the disease that a sacrament dispenser, such as that in Figure 8, did not provide enough distance for them to feel comfortable around those who were infected or possibly infected. This dispenser shows how the relationship between priests and members was becoming more detached due to the plague.

The number of priests and church officials to minister to the victims and the survivors was small. Priests were constantly replaced, and over time the level of literacy and the knowledge of the Bible likely decreased due to the rapid turnover of priests. The lack of knowledgeable priests may have led to a decline in the understanding of the Bible. Religion and religious practices were greatly influenced by the pandemic of the bubonic plague. The sacrament dispenser is a physical representation of the separation between the plague victims, survivors, and the church. While the church tried to maintain some sense of normalcy through traditional church practices such as the Holy Communion, the fear of the plague and infection drove a wedge between church officials and their congregation.


While many churches and parishes struggled to provide support to the communities, the bubonic plague caused some in society to undertake extreme acts of faith. Figure 9 is of a penitent’s belt in the Science Museum of London that dates from 1401 to 1700. The belt was worn around the thigh, and the pain that it inflicted was supposed to be a form of penance, for many Christians believed that the bubonic plague was a consequence of man’s sins.\textsuperscript{46} Those who were most commonly associated with a penitent’s belt were the flagellants.\textsuperscript{47} According to a Dominican friar named Heinrich, they were called flagellants because the whips, or \textit{flagella}, were used for penance. Flagellants came into the cities, towns, and villages in a procession,


\textsuperscript{47}“Penitent’s belt, Europe, 1401-1700.”
heading to a church. Once they arrived at a church, they stripped the upper half of their bodies to prepare themselves for a harsh routine. The penitent’s belt in Figure 9 is one of many objects that were used by the flagellants to inflict pain upon themselves. Heinrich described the horror and difficulty of watching such a scene as individuals willingly allowed themselves to be whipped.\footnote{Heinrich, “Book of Memorable Matters,” (1349-1355), in \textit{The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350}, ed. John Aberth (Bedford: St. Martin’s, 2005), 124.}

Despite the horror of the act, some did join the flagellants. Heinrich claimed that some “women took off and wandered through the land and whipped themselves” and that children joined the flagellants’ cause.\footnote{Fritsche Closener, “Chronicle,” (1360-1362), in \textit{The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350}, ed. John Aberth (Bedford: St. Martin’s, 2005), 131.} As the numbers of flagellants increased, so did their practice of whipping, wearing barbed belts for the thigh, and other practices. People began to see the flagellants as a burden and refused to allow them to enter their homes.\footnote{Closener, “Chronicle,” 131.}

Figure 9 shows how the bubonic plague triggered extreme acts of faith among certain groups in society, especially the flagellants. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, the bubonic plague was seen by society as the wrath of God for the sins of mankind. Therefore, objects such as the penitent’s belt allowed some people to inflict an extreme form of penance on themselves in repentance for their sins.

With the periodic outbreaks of the bubonic plague, many people turned toward faith and religious works to help repent for their sins, though in ways that were less extreme than the methods employed by the flagellants. The late medieval and Renaissance period saw a “boom in chapel building commissioned with monumental graves, fresco cycles, and perpetual light
Before the Black Death, mainly the wealthy built chapels to help atone for their sins and gain a spot in heaven, or at least purgatory. For example, the Scrovegni family in Padua built a lavish chapel in the 1303-1305 painted by one of the best, Giotto, and they paid for much of it to be painted in ultramarine, which was more expensive than gold. However, Samuel Cohn Jr. has noted that “by the late fourteenth century . . . shopkeepers and even artisans could aspire to construct such objects (even if on a more modest scale) to memorialize their bones and assist the future journey of their souls.” During outbreaks of the plague, people associated the disease with their sin and saw fit to leave money for religious works to help their souls in afterlife. The bubonic plague affected how people approached their legacies as individuals began to leave what money they had to churches and chapels due to the desire to ease the burden of their sins and appease God so that they would go to heaven.

53 Cohn, “Renaissance attachment to things,” 989.
The bubonic plague in Western Europe during the fourteenth to the seventeenth century greatly affected society and its faith, especially how people viewed saints. Figure 10 is a badge that dates to the 15th century. St. Christopher is shown carrying the Christ child on his right shoulder. Christ is holding his right hand out in blessing, while his left hand holds the orb of sovereignty. St. Christopher was considered such a powerful saint that “people believed that those who looked on his image would not die that day, which made him a very popular saint.” Society seems to have looked increasingly to saints during the centuries when the bubonic plague was rampant throughout Europe. Avraham Ronen notes that “One of the consequences of the

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55 “St Christopher with Christ Child.”
56 Ibid.
Black Death . . . was the new cult of the ‘intercessory saints’, who were invoked for protection against the plague.”  

According to Ronen, this “cult” of saints reached its height about 100 years following the worst of the bubonic plague outbreaks, the Black Death. Consequently, this “St. Christopher with Christ Child,” badge was created around this time. Historian Joseph Byrne has pointed out that “Christ is the perfect advocate before the Father, but “if the Judge is Christ then the saints must be the ones to hear prayers, and this was the common idea in the centuries following the Black Death.” The spread of the plague and the notion that it was divinely ordered caused society to turn to saints such as St. Christopher for safety.

From 1348 to 1700, the bubonic plague greatly affected social life and fostered change in European society as material culture, artifacts, and archaeological remains reflect. When the fleas bearing Yersinia pestis hopped onto the backs of the rodents on the Genoese galley, European life was drastically altered for centuries. The quick passing of loved ones, the constant presence of death, and the fear of infection transformed the day-to-day life of society. Bells, human remains, penitent belts, and fifteenth-century paintings, along with other historical objects, help tell the story of the lives of the plague victims and how society suffered from the deadly bubonic plague.

58 Ronen, “Gozzoli’s St. Sebastian Altarpiece in San Gimignano,” 77.
59 Joseph Patrick Byrne, The Black Death (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), 93.
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