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Cultural and Intellectual Responses to the Black Death

Brian David Yurochko

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CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL RESPONSES TO THE BLACK DEATH

A Thesis

Submitted to the McAnulty College and

Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

By

Brian D. Yurochko

December 2009

CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL RESPONSES TO THE BLACK DEATH

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ABSTRACT

CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL RESPONSES TO THE BLACK DEATH

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Thesis supervised by Jotham Parsons, Ph.D.

From the fall of the Roman Empire to the “Age of Translations,” Western Europe endeavored to rise above the so-called cultural and intellectual “Dark Ages.” That advancement was threatened with the arrival of the Black Death in 1347. Chapter one details the correlation between the spread of the plague and the location of the first universities. It also examines the expansion of the university system throughout the continent in the wake of the plague. The second chapter looks at the cultural, especially religious, explanations of and responses to the Black Death. It examines how medieval society used the religious tools at their disposal to combat the ‘evils’ of the plague.

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1981 article in *The American Historical Review*, historian Robert E. Lerner notes that, ranking disasters by both their physical and emotional damage, the Black Death rates second in world history, just slightly below World War II.¹ The author further writes that, while not stopping to quibble about ranking or asking “whether one can calibrate emotional stress so finely, we might agree that the Black Death was one of the worst disasters on record.”² The trauma of the fourteenth-century disaster had both immediate and protracted effects – particularly in light of the recurrent outbreaks of the plague throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Earlier historians of the Black Death tended to view the plague as another blow to the already fragile medieval psyche – concluding that the response of the populace to their condition was one of passivity, paralysis, or outright despair. This view paints an image of the medieval world already teetering on the brink of collapse; a society drifting towards its inevitable conclusion. According to this viewpoint, the Black Death merely becomes a symptom of a society already in a state of decay and mankind’s response to the plague reveals a worldview steeped in paralysis and despair. For instance, in a critical examination of the artwork of the period titled *Painting in Florence and Siena*

¹ Robert Lerner, "The Black Death and Western European Eschatological Mentalities," *The American Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (June 1981): 533.

² *Ibid.*

After the Black Death, art historian Millard Meiss states that, as a result of the trauma of the Black Death, artwork drifted into a “dark” period. The artists of the period, Meiss claims, depicted man as struggling to survive in a chaotic world.³ The artwork of the period, Meiss avers, reflects this period’s crisis.

Modern scholarship on the medieval period, however, questions this earlier interpretation. The ominous sense of impending doom portrayed by the earlier historians may not be the final analysis of the ramifications of the plague on the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century mind. In opposition to the older view, historians now tend to view the response to this period of intense crisis as one of determined survival. Rather than accepting the collapse of their civilization, medieval Europe resolutely set about recovering from the disaster.

While the immediate reaction to the Black Death may have been one of shock and despair, many historians now argue that – far from developing a sense of malaise – mankind aggressively set about to rebuild from the disaster. In the stead of paralysis and despair, European civilization began a process of defending, preserving and building on those things that had survived. To use a modern phrase, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century man engaged in a kind of “total war” against the pandemic – mustering all of its forces, physical, spiritual and intellectual, to the rescue of European civilization. Economically, socially and intellectually, European society struggled to rebuild its foundations. While the economic impact of the Black Death has been extensively examined, this thesis will explore the intellectual and sociological responses.

³ Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

In order to fully appreciate the intellectual response to the Black Death, however, an examination of the intellectual climate prior to the plague's onslaught is required. The first chapter of this thesis will examine the response to the outbreak of the plague throughout Europe in light of the academic endeavors that had been going on for the previous four centuries.

As the plague continued to ravage the continent from the mid-thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, European society also sought to preserve itself from its devastating effects. Rebuilding the intellectual structures of a society was one thing; inoculating the populace from a sense of fear was quite another. Without an understanding of the pathology of the disease, medieval society sought alternate ways of protecting itself from the plague. The second chapter of this thesis will examine medieval society's use of sacred imagery to protect itself from recurring outbreaks of the plague.

CHAPTER I

THE BLACK DEATH AND THE UNIVERSITIES

From the fall of the Roman Empire to the “Age of Translations” of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when scholars aggressively pursued a course of translating and incorporating the works of ancient Greece (along with their corresponding Arabic commentaries), Western Europe endeavored to rise above the so-called cultural and intellectual “Dark Ages.” The European leaders’ aggressive approach to intellectual advancement was radically challenged, however, by the Black Death of 1347 to 1351, for the plague not only devastated the population of the European continent but portended the loss of mankind’s most valuable resource, knowledge. The fear of the loss of scholars, perceived or actual, coupled with the loss of their concomitant knowledge, is evident in the charters establishing or expanding universities throughout Europe from the second half of the fourteenth century.

As the founding of these universities shows, institutions are not born in a cultural or political vacuum. They are established and administered by human agency and, as such, reflect the political and economic conditions of their societies. Founding and regulating universities became increasingly systematized throughout the Middle Ages as the established powers contended to bring them under their auspices. The founding – and perhaps more importantly – guidance and utilization of the universities served to underscore the tension already in existence between ecclesiastical and secular rulers at

the time. By both embodying and fostering political authority, university foundations of the period reflect the ongoing shift in political authority in favor of temporal rulers. The disorder ensuing from the arrival of the Black Death on the European continent accelerated this shift in political authority. This chapter examines the role of that epidemic, one of the most devastating in history, coupled with the political exigencies of temporal and spiritual authorities, in the formation of the universities throughout Europe from the late Middle Ages to the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth century.

Charters for the original universities in Europe date back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but serve only to confirm papal or imperial sanction, not promulgate the foundation of a university. In other words, while the charter of the University of Bologna officially dates to 1088, the city already had “a long tradition of law teaching.”⁴ David C. Lindberg, a distinguished scholar in the field of the history of science, explains that universities (the medieval terminology was *studia generalia*) did not arrive upon the European continent in an *ex nihilo* fashion. They were formed from the inchoate mass of cathedral schools and itinerant scholars.⁵ The word “university” derived from the Latin “universitas,” originally referred to a group of scholars or students, not an institution as it is defined today.⁶ Since the roots of early universities predate their charters, a brief

⁴ Jacques Verger, "Patterns: The University as Studium Generale," in *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. Hilde De Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 47-48.

⁵ David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B.C. to A.D. 1450* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 206-209.

⁶ The modern understanding of the word "ecclesia" or "church" arose in a similar manner to our contemporary understanding of the word "university." The original understanding of "ecclesia" denoted the assembly of worshipers, not the physical place of worship. As Christianity gained a secure foothold on the European continent and the religion, like the universities, became more institutionalized, "ecclesia" began to denote the physical space devoted to worship.

examination of the intellectual culture in which these institutions developed is needed to fully appreciate the impact of the Black Death on the universities in Europe.

The initial outcropping of universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries reflects a conscious appreciation of the necessity of recovering knowledge lost (or never fully absorbed) since the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. Professor of history and philosophy of science, Edward Grant, states that “twelfth-century scholars recognized an incalculable debt to their [ancient] predecessors,” and the period of translation of Greek and Arabic works “aroused the curiosity and desires of Western scholars while simultaneously reinforcing a sense of intellectual deprivation.”⁷ Grant notes that the prefaces of the translated works during this period reflect an acute awareness of this “intellectual deprivation.” The prefaces indicate that the translators “wanted to present the treasures of the East to the West and thus relieve the ‘poverty of the Latins’ (*Latinorum penoria*) in so many fields.”⁸ How did this intellectual “poverty” of the Latin West come about and why was the “Age of Translations” necessary in Western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries?

The historical root of the intellectual paucity of the Roman civilization lies in the character of the Roman Empire itself. Lindberg and Grant both illustrate the political, cultural and intellectual relationships between Greece and Rome. By the final centuries of the Empire, Rome had “controlled a vast empire in which two languages were dominant.” The Empire also had centuries of accumulated knowledge from Greek

⁷ Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22-23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

scholars.⁹ Lindberg points out that as the power of the empire increased, the elite leisure class “began to appreciate Greek achievements in literature, philosophy, politics and the arts.”¹⁰ It is important to note that it was the “leisured-class” that explored the Greek works of Plato, Aristotle and Galen. Unlike their Greek counterparts, the Roman elite tended to value science and natural philosophy on a limited and popularized basis.¹¹

With the pursuit of knowledge reduced to utilitarian or popularized forms, the Romans viewed Greek philosophy as people today rate hobbies: a form of recreation or a distraction from the rigors of everyday life. As a leisure-time pursuit, the Romans found no reason to go into great detail on subjects such as Plato’s cosmological system or Aristotle’s exploration of form and substance. Instead of large treatises on the Greek works the “scientific popularizers simplified and rendered palatable conclusions from the exact sciences and natural philosophy, which were then incorporated into handbooks or manuals.”¹² As such, only cursory levels of Greek philosophy and science were absorbed into the Roman Empire by the end of the second century A.D. The “*Pax Romana*” so necessary for the leisurely pursuit of knowledge and assimilation of Greek culture in the Roman world, however, began to fall apart in the late second century.

The peace and stability of the Roman Empire began to crumble in the chaos following the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 A.D. Rome’s relation to the Greek world

⁹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰ Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 134.

¹¹ Lindberg writes: "Science or natural philosophy, beyond the basics, was rarely valued except as an amusement." Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 137. Grant writes that "although the Romans were awed by Greek intellectual accomplishments, they had little interest in theoretical or abstract science." Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science*, 12

¹² Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science*, 11.

further eroded due to Diocletian's decision to establish the "Tetrarchy" in 293 and its consequent division of the Empire. The division became more than just a physical demarcation on the map; cultural and ideological differences developed as the Latin and Greek worlds drifted apart. Knowledge of the Greek language became increasingly rare, thus, since Greek was the "language of science," scholarly pursuit in science and philosophy in the Latin West gradually waned.¹³ The summaries produced for the leisure class remained as the vestiges of Greek knowledge for centuries to come. The mantle of scholarship fell to the only international institution remaining in the Latin West – the Church. Newly founded monastic orders in particular endeavored to preserve and build upon the knowledge of ancient Greece.

Lindberg shows that, under the aegis of the monasteries, the character of scholarship changed. Discussing the "universal monastic view" towards scholarship, he writes, "secular studies were to be pursued only insofar as they served sacred purposes."¹⁴ In this manner, the monastic orders followed the attitude originally espoused by Augustine (354 – 430). Lindberg reveals that "philosophy, in Augustine's influential view, was to be the handmaid of religion – not to be stamped out, but to be cultivated, disciplined, and put to use."¹⁵ In other words, scholarly pursuits were to be subordinated to theological concerns. This does not imply that scientific scholarship was eliminated in this period, but it did have to be justified. As the major patron of learning,

¹³ Ibid, 18.

¹⁴ Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 156.

¹⁵ The use of the word "handmaiden" is, no doubt, a deliberate one. It invokes the evangelist Luke's description of the Virgin Mary's response to the Annunciation. She responds: "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. May it be done according to your word." (Luke 1:38), Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 150.

the monasteries applied their knowledge of natural philosophy to the theological endeavors of the time.

With the resurgence of centralized government in Western Europe under the Carolingian rulers (starting in 800 A.D.), the cultural decline abated, albeit gradually. By the ninth century, an agricultural and commercial revolution was already underway, accelerated, in part, by the emergence of a more temperate climate beginning around the year 1000.¹⁶ At the dawn of the new millennium Western Europe was on the verge of “political, social and economic renewal.”¹⁷ Technological advances such as crop rotation, the adoption of the horse collar and the wheeled plow, and the development of a more efficient water wheel system, culminated in a major increase in the food supply. This increase fueled a population explosion throughout Europe until just before the arrival of the Black Death in 1346.¹⁸ While there is some speculation as to the actual rate of growth between the years 1000 and 1300, conservative estimates suggest a population growth of nearly 75 percent.¹⁹ Moreover, this period of rapid population expansion was marked by an increased percentage of those dwelling in the medieval cities, which reflected an ongoing urbanization that allowed for increased economic opportunities both at home and abroad and an attendant concentration of wealth in urban centers that was

¹⁶ Jean Gimpel reveals that "although the average temperature was perhaps no more than one or two degrees higher, this resulted in a quite different type of climate and goes a long way to explain the extent of the medieval agricultural revolution." Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* 1976; repr., New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003), 29 (page references are to the reprint edition).

¹⁷ Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 190-191.

¹⁸ The population began to decline around 1290 or 1300. David Hackett Fischer, *The Great Wave: Price Revolutions and the Rythm of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 20.

¹⁹ Lindberg posits that the population may have "doubled, tripled or even quadrupled" in the period between 1000 and 1200 ("*The Beginnings of Western Science*", p. 191) while Gimpel states that Europe witnessed a growth of 74 percent between 1000 and 1300 - from 42 million in 1000 to 73 million in 1300. (*The Medieval Machine*, p. 57)

critical to the development of civic institutions.²⁰ An increasingly urbanized population was instrumental to the development of the first universities.

Lindberg reveals that there is a correlation between urbanization and education. As urban populations grew in this period, schools, particularly those attached to local cathedrals, began to emerge “from the shadow of the monastery schools and become major educational forces.”²¹ The necessary components – cathedral schools, population growth and urbanization – for the “Age of Translations” had all fallen into place. The trickle of translations beginning in the tenth and eleventh centuries culminated in a veritable flood of knowledge by, and continuing throughout, the twelfth century. Scholars began to “rediscover” the works of the ancient Greeks (from Galen to Plato and, eventually, Aristotle) via increasing interaction with the Arab world – who had already undergone their own period of translating and commenting on the Greek works in the eighth and ninth centuries. It is in this period of additional economic resources, coupled with a “determined effort to recover the Latin classics,” that the nascent European education system underwent radical changes, culminating in the rise of an educational structure unique to the European continent – the university.²²

An examination of the original universities further underscores Lindberg’s statement regarding the connection between urbanization and education. Since the first universities grew out of pre-existing schools, it is often difficult to determine their

²⁰ Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 191.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Although the Latin West derived its science and natural philosophy from the Greeks and Arabs, the university was an independent invention that grew from conditions peculiar to the West in the twelfth century." Edward Grant, *The Foundation of Modern Science*, 34. See also Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 193.

“official” date of establishment, but is generally accepted that “genuine” universities had been established by the dawn of the thirteenth century. It is certain that by 1215 universities had been established in Bologna, Salerno, Paris, Montpellier and Oxford.²³ The University of Bologna, the first university chartered (its administrators date its foundation to 1088), owes its establishment to “the particularly precocious renewal of urban life in northern Italy.”²⁴ The revival between the ninth and thirteenth centuries was not uniformly accomplished throughout Europe and the early universities echo that imbalance. Those cities along the Mediterranean Sea rebounded from the economic depression of the Dark Ages before their northern European counterparts – transportation overseas being more efficient than the decaying roads of the Roman Empire.²⁵ Not surprisingly, it is in those regions benefiting most from the economic resurgence of the twelfth century that the first universities arise. Of those first universities established above, Oxford stands as the only one that was established in a town whose economic development was not conducive to a university foundation.²⁶

Throughout the thirteenth century, universities mirrored the continued progression of economic development. Universities were established in rapid fashion in growing

²³ Verger, "Patterns", 45.

²⁴ Verger, "Patterns", 48. To view the University of Bologna's history go to: University of Bologna, "La Nostra Storia [Our History]," <http://www.unibo.it/Portale/Ateneo/La+nostra+storia/default.htm>. (accessed April 23, 2007).

²⁵ "No doubt the difference between Italy north of the Tiber and the most retarded parts of Europe during the Commercial Revolution was as significant as that between England or the United States and India or China during the Industrial Revolution." Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 114-115.

²⁶ Verger describes Oxford as a "small market-town, which was not even the seat of a bishop." There are, however, other mitigating reasons for establishing a university at Oxford. Verger reveals that, while Oxford did not have an episcopal see per se, it "had long had several ecclesiastical establishments, which may have provided a point of departure." Jaques Verger, "Patterns", 52.

cities. In the first half of the thirteenth century, Padua, Naples, Toulouse and Orléans each founded universities. Additional foundations occurred in Lisbon, Rome and Avignon by the first years of the fourteenth century. While some of them were short lived, by the middle of the fourteenth century, over twenty universities had been established in Europe.²⁷

An examination of the locations of the first universities established (map 1) supports Verger's comment on the necessity of political and economic stability for the establishment of universities. The vast majority of the universities founded prior to the arrival of the Black Death are positioned in Mediterranean Europe. In this early university foundation phase, this area profited most from the trade routes with the Levant. It is hardly surprising, then, that these economically advantaged cities would be at the vanguard of university foundations. As noted above, not all of these universities would survive the Thirteenth Century. Those circled in red closed down prior to the onslaught of the plague. Map 2 shows those universities active at the time of the arrival of the Black Death on the European continent. It is clear that those areas that had the economic resources to found a university understood the advantages of founding such an institution. First, these institutions stood out as signs of a city's progress. Perhaps more importantly, starting a university made good business sense. In a symbiotic nature, they helped to train the much-needed bureaucrats for the newly developing economic empires developing throughout the continent. The locations that nurtured these nascent institutions, however, also made them vulnerable.

²⁷ For a complete listing of university establishments and closures up to the sixteenth century, see Verger, "Patterns", 62-64.

The Black Death, the most destructive epidemic in history, dramatically punctuated and challenged the rapid expansion of scholarship. In his *Historia de morbo*, Gabriele de Mussis, a lawyer in Piacenza, describes the outbreak of the disease on the European continent:

In 1346, in the countries of the East, countless numbers of Tartars and Saracens were struck down by a mysterious illness which brought sudden death. Within these countries broad regions, far-spreading provinces, magnificent kingdoms, cities, towns, and settlements, ground down by illness and devoured by dreadful death, were soon stripped of their inhabitants. An eastern settlement under the rulers of the Tartars called Tana, which lay to the north of Constantinople and was much frequented by Italian merchants, was totally abandoned after an incident there which led to its being besieged and attacked by hordes of Tartars who gathered in a short space of time. The Christian merchants, who had been driven out by force, were so terrified of the power of the Tartars that, to save themselves and their belongings, they fled in an armed ship to Caffa, a settlement in the same part of the world which had been founded long ago by the Genoese.²⁸

The Tartars then attempted to raise Caffa, but with their forces crippled by the plague, they quickly lost interest and, as a last measure, ordered the plague-infected corpses “to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside.”²⁹ Fleeing Caffa, infected sailors shortly thereafter reached the port cities of Europe. The Black Death arrived in Sicily by the second half of 1347.³⁰ In early 1348, the pestilence had spread from Sicily to Genoa, Venice, Marseilles and Barcelona.³¹ By the spring of 1348, the plague has reached central France. Already torn

²⁸ Gabriele de Mussis, "Historia de Morbo," in *The Black Death*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 14-15.

²⁹ Ibid, 17.

³⁰ Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 9.

³¹ Cohn's introduction to Herlihy's work provides a brief but concise illustration of the spread of the Black Death from the Byzantine Empire in 1347 to the Muscovite Duchy in 1352. Samuel K. Cohn, Jr, introduction to *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*, by David Herlihy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21.

asunder by famine and suffering the ravages of the first part of the Hundred Year's War the kingdom of France was hit particularly hard. An unknown Flemish cleric at the papal court in Avignon describes the devastating impact of the pestilence: "To be brief, at least half of the people in Avignon died; for there are now within the walls of the city more than 7,000 houses where no one lives because everyone in them has died, and in the suburbs one might imagine that there is not one survivor."³² At the same time, the Black Death moved throughout the Languedoc and Bordeaux regions.³³ Already visited by three of the four horsemen, France must have had a foreboding of the Apocalypse with the arrival of the plague. Contemporary images of the Black Death show the plague personified on a white horse carrying a bow – a clear reference to the Book of Revelation. Apocalyptic visions are reflected in the words of Carmelite Friar Jean de Venette: "in 1348 the people of France, and of virtually the whole world, were assailed by something more than war. For just as famine had befallen them... and then war... so now pestilence broke out in various parts of the world."³⁴

³² Rosemary Horrox, ed., "Recueil des Chroniques de Flandre," in *The Black Death*, trans. and ed. Horrox, Rosemary (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1994), 41.

³³ Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1994), 9.

³⁴ Jean de Venette, "The Chronicle of Jean de Venette," in *The Black Death*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1994), 54-58.



Fig. 1 Triumph of Death, 15th Century Anonymous. Death depicted as archer shooting plague arrows. Art Source, NY.



Fig. 2 The Horseman of Death, Illuminated from the Tres Riches de Duc De Berry: Office of the Dead, 1416. Location: Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/ Art Source, NY.

By the summer of 1348, the disease had crossed the channel to England. While there is some disagreement as to the disease's first "port of call" in England (Bristol, Weymouth, and Southampton have all been suggested), there is no question that the plague reached pandemic proportions along the southern coast by the fall and winter of the same year. By November, the plague had reached London. Rosemary Horrox, a noted historian on the Black Death, cites the contemporary writings of Robert of Avesbury, a secular clerk based in London and employed in the court of the Archbishop of Canterbury:

The pestilence arrived in London at about the feast of All Saints [1 November] and daily deprived many of life. It grew so powerful that, between Candlemas [2 February 1349] and Easter [12 April], more than 200 corpses were buried almost every day in the new burial ground made next to Smithfield, and this was in addition to the bodies buried in other churchyards throughout the city. It ceased in London with the coming of the grace of the Holy Spirit, that is to say Pentecost [31

May], proceeding uninterrupted towards the north, where it also stopped about Michaelmas [29 September] 1349.³⁵

While plague ravaged northern England and the Scottish Highlands, it continued to spread throughout the continent - reaching southern Austria in January 1348 and spreading northeast throughout German and Teutonic lands in 1349 and 1350. By 1352, the disease had finally spread full-circle around Europe; reaching Kiev and the duchy of Muscovy. Additionally, like an earthquake, the plague struck Europe with “aftershocks,” sporadically reappearing throughout Europe as late as 1485.³⁶ The population loss as a result of the Black Death and its successive outbreaks varied throughout the continent. The medieval commentator’s propensity to exaggerate aside, it is conservatively agreed that the population levels dropped by at least one third. There is some evidence to suggest that the social elite, both secular and religious, fared better than their less advantaged counterparts.³⁷ Those less advantaged – including the “rank and file” clergy – suffered more from the tempest of the plague as their higher population loss (some historians estimate about 40 percent) bears witness. The city-dwellers and monastic orders fared the worst of any groups. In her seminal work on the fourteenth century, noted historian Barbara Tuchman reveals that “cities, as centers of transportation, were more likely to be

³⁵ Robert of Avesbury, "Robertus de Avesbury de Gestis Mirabilibus Regis Edwardi Tertii," in *The Black Death*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1994), 64.

³⁶ Jerah Johnson and William Percy, *The Age of Recovery: The Fifteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 6-8.

³⁷ Examining the data from English statistics, Cantor shows that the wealthy witnessed a 25 percent reduction in their numbers while the mortality rate for the peasants and low-ranking clergy was in the low 40's and in some places as high as 50 percent. It must be remembered, though, that unlike its continental counterparts, England had slight advanced warning of the impending epidemic - allowing those with ample resources to flee to safer ground (as did Henry VIII during mid-sixteenth century outbreaks). As a result, the population data of the rich in England may be skewed in favor of the wealthy. Norman Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World it Made* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 21.

affected than villages, although once a village was infected, its death rate was equally high.”³⁸ The plague raged from the largest cities in Europe (Venice, Genoa, Florence and Paris) to the trading cities of the newly formed Hanseatic League, “killing anywhere from one third to two thirds of their inhabitants.”³⁹

In the wake of the plague, the necessity of recovering the intellectual climate created from the eleventh century onward became acutely apparent. After the initial shock of the pestilence to the body of Europe had worn off, the potential loss of knowledge alarmed the mind. Like Sisyphus and his boulder, the “intellectual deprivation” that the twelfth and thirteenth-century scholars had so feverishly labored to eradicate now seemingly threatened a swift return. The scholars’ labor seemed to be in vain. Anna Montgomery Campell, an early twentieth-century scholar, claimed that “it is only in the generation following the Black Death that testimony comes from all sides of the decline of the universities, the failure of men of learning [in the sense of depleted numbers, not inadequacy], and the threatened extinction of knowledge.”⁴⁰

Charters from newly formed or expanded universities reflect the impact of the Black Death in the role of university expansion throughout the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Between 1355 and 1369, the early period of recovery from the Black Death in French and Burgundian territories as well as on the Italian peninsula, Charles

³⁸ Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), 95.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁰ Anna Montgomery Campbell, *The Black Death and Men of Higher Learning* repr., New York: AMS Press, Inc, 1966), 162 (page references are to the reprint edition).

IV, Holy Roman Emperor (r. 1316-1378), promulgated five university charters.⁴¹

Campbell stated that the “prefaces of the imperial diplomas [charters] are much alike” in that each reflected the impact of the Black Death on the emperor’s decision to establish these universities to combat the potential loss of knowledge in the ensuing disorder caused by the plague.⁴² She provided extracts from charters for the University of Sienna (1357) and Pavia (1361) for comparison. In the patent of the University of Pavia, the emperor wrote:

Most famous Knowledge, the mistress of the human race, imitator of celestial virtue, whose sublime members have now been dragged down to the pit throughout the world’s climes by the odious madness of pestilence, has dared to cry out to us with such trembling, not that she has with her divine attendants [lit., household gods] been expelled from her rich domiciles, that she might be worthy to be aided by the protection of the imperial highness, if now by provision of the emperor, whose office it is to sustain the purity of growth and protectively encircle that which like watered seeds is again fertile.⁴³

⁴¹ The universities founded were: Perugia (1355), Sienna (1357), Pavia (1361), Orange (1365) and Lucca (1369). Campbell, 149.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ From the 1361 charter of the University of Pavia: "Rectrix humani generis, virtutum celestium imitatrix [or mutatrix], praeclara scientia, cuius elata membra odiosa pestilentie rabies per mundi climata impia voragine iam assumpsit, tanto gemitu ad nos clamare [or clamore] confiditur, iam suis laribus a penosis habitaculis viduata, ut sibi dignemur [or dignemini] imperialis celsitudinis presidio subvenire, si quando provisione cesarea, cuius et crescentem mundum sustentare edenuo fecunda quidem [or quadam] aspergine germinis redimiri."

The charter founding the University of Sienna in 1357 reads similarly: In surveying the devastation of the Black Death in northern Italy, Charles IV wrote:

“Preciosa scientia, quam pestilentis pridem mortalitatis rabies perampla orbis calmata suffocavit, ipso sui silentio ad nos clamat, tratae lapsum Imperialis ei dextram potentiae porrigamus... stadium quod ibidem hacenus viguisse, sed his temporibus permissu Dei, aequaliter obscuratum esse dignoscitur, in lucem decernimus erigere redivivam.”

“Precious knowledge, which the mad rage of pestilential death has of late suffocated throughout the world’s wide climes, is, by her very silence, calling upon us to raise her up by the Imperial power of our outstretched hand... the studies which hitherto have flourished, but which, by God’s permission have in these days been allowed to be just as much obscured, We have resolved to raise up, into the light.”, Campbell, 150. My sincere thanks to Jotham Parsons, Ph.D. for his much-needed aid in translating the above.

The emperor was not the only benefactor of the university system. Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Clare and granddaughter of Edward I of England, left bequests in her will of 1355 on behalf of University Hall in Cambridge. The building's name was changed to Clare Hall in accordance with additional statutes added in 1359 to her bequest. Campbell's work shows that, in similar manner to the emperor's charters, the prologue to de Burgh's 1359 statutes acknowledged both the perceived threat of the loss of knowledge and the founder's faith in the university in reversing the loss. It noted:

Knowledge of letters... is best obtained in a university which then sends forth trained men for the service of God and the state. This kind of knowledge is beginning lamentably to fail, in consequence of a great number of men having been taken away by the fangs of pestilence.⁴⁴

In an article in *Speculum* in 1980, Professor of Classics William J. Courtenay challenged Campbell's assessment of the decline of potential scholars in the decades immediately following 1348. He examined the biographical registers of Oxford and Cambridge for mortality rates of scholars in English higher education in the wake of the Black Death. Culling attendance data from the Oxford registry from 1300-1499, Courtenay's work reveals the following breakdown of attendance:

Academic Cycle	Attendance	Percentage +/-
1300-1319	1,112	-
1320-1339	1,192	+7.2%
1340-1359	1,086	-8.9%
1360-1379	1,100	+1.3%

⁴⁴ Campbell paraphrases the source document from Documents Relating to the University and Colleges of Cambridge, London, 1852, Vol. 2., pp. 366-368; Campbell, 152-153.

1380-1399	1,547	+40.6%
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⁴⁵

Courtenay concludes that the decline of students in the period ending in 1359 is not proportional to the overall population loss of twenty to forty percent in England and, thus, refutes Campbell's assessment that the mortality rate of scholars triggered the expansion of universities in the latter half of the fourteenth century. But, from another perspective, Courtenay's data, in fact, proves Campbell's thesis. Courtenay writes that "we are, for the decade of 1350-1360, looking not at the survival rate but at a replacement rate."⁴⁶ If, indeed, the data for that decade indicate that students were being added to Oxford's rolls to replace those lost by the plague – and the numbers still did not add up to the level of students before it – Campbell's position rings true. Attenuated by the recruitment of replacement students, a drop of only nine percent is hardly relative to the general population. In other words, the data from Oxford reveal a university struggling to overcome the loss of scholarship due to the plague.

Courtenay's statistics for Oxford in the latter half of the century are of equal import (or even more so) to those immediately following the Black Death. Oxford witnessed a rapid increase in attendance within the last twenty years of the fourteenth century. Campbell's work shows that this increase is also reflected in the French universities in the same period.⁴⁷ These data indicate that attempts at recovering the intellectual climate

⁴⁵ Courtenay provides the attendance data for the University of Oxford in the fourteenth century in textual form. For simplicity, I have compiled to above table. William J. Courtenay, "The Effect of the Black Death on English Higher Education," *Speculum* (Fall 1980): 704-705.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 704.

⁴⁷ Campbell, 165.

after the Black Death were both immediate and protracted in nature. Like many other disasters, natural or manmade, the wound inflicted on the body of Europe took several generations to heal. The repercussions of the Black Death lasted through the fifteenth century, operating in tandem with the political exigencies of the time.

Charles IV's document, cited earlier (see page 21), promulgating the re-establishment of the University of Pavia in 1361 is a fitting example of the medieval authorities' attitudes towards founding universities. He associates his role in establishing the university with that of a gardener tending his fields, writing that it is his responsibility "to sustain the purity of growth and protectively encircle that which like watered seeds is again fertile." The role of a gardener is an apt one; original university charters often used the word "plant" to found a university. The conditions for planting must be right; a stable political and economic environment must be achieved prior to establishing an institution dedicated to "sustain the purity of growth." To carry the gardening analogy further, like an unexpected frost, the Black Death stunted the universities' growth, necessitating a reseeded of the soil. Seeds take time to germinate and grow, however, and the harvest comes months later. In a similar manner, the university system in Europe took generations to rebound from the ill effects of the plague and the planting of universities throughout the fifteenth century demonstrates the ongoing attempt to recover.

In the larger picture, the progression of the Black Death in Europe follows a pattern similar to the university foundations and expansions. Plotting the spread of the disease on a six-month cycle (as historians tend to do since the disease remained relatively dormant throughout the winter season) over a fifty-year frequency of university foundations and closing reveals a startling relationship.

The areas of Europe hit by the first two waves of the plague (from June 1347 to June 1348) encompass the vast majority of the universities that had already been founded (map 3).⁴⁸ Of the twenty-five universities already established at the time, only Oxford, Cambridge and the universities on the Iberian Peninsula (that is, six of the twenty-five) were spared from the first year of the plague's outbreak.

The third six-month cycle (30 June to 31 December) shows the plague striking the Iberian Peninsula and the southern section of England (maps 4 and 5). With Europe approaching its colder months and the disease being more or less water-borne, the spread was minimal in this period, except perhaps in parts of Eastern Europe (roughly modern Slovenia, Croatia and the Southern part of Hungary). Coupled with the next university foundation cycle (during and twenty-five years after the Black Death: 1347 to 1376), the impact of the Black Death on the universities that were struck during the first phase of the plague becomes clear. Those institutions with longer histories and greater stability (the "Big Six": Bologna, Salerno, Paris, Oxford, Montpellier and Cambridge) managed to weather the storm of pestilence. In fact, as noted above, some of these universities actually expanded shortly after the Black Death.

More telling of the Black Death's path of destruction, however, is the fate of those *studia generalia* founded in the early fourteenth century; of the nine universities founded from 1300 to 1347, five had false starts or closed completely.⁴⁹ In addition to the failure

⁴⁸ The first six month cycle hit the island of Sicily. From there, it struck the Italian peninsula. For simplicity's sake, I have combined the first two cycles into one.

⁴⁹ Rome's Studium Generale: Started in 1303 closed at the end of the fourteenth century and was re-established in 1431; Treviso: Started in 1318 and closed by 1400; Grenoble: Started in 1339 and failed by the middle of the fourteenth century; Verona: Started by 1337 and disappeared in the fifteenth century; Pisa: started in 1343 and disappeared around 1360 – re-established early in the fifteenth century. See those colored grey on map 4.

of the schools founded in the fifty years before the plague's outbreak, those founded during or twenty-five years after the plague (1347-1376) suffered a similar fate. Of the eleven universities founded in that period, five foundered.⁵⁰ Those that survived (the University of Prague, for instance) struggled to remain in existence throughout the fourteenth century - limping along until the population stabilized. Geographically speaking, those universities in transition – either established or closed – in this period show a relationship to the third cycle of the Black Death. The Italian peninsula and the southern region of France, the first areas hit by the plague, began to show signs of resurgence while the four universities founded in Eastern Europe existed on the boundary lines demarcating the third phase of the Black Death with the universities of Vienna and Pecs practically on the border itself.

The fourth phase of the geographic progression of the Black Death (1 January to 30 June 1349) also shows a connection to the fate of the universities established between 1377 and 1426 (maps 6 and 7). The summer months of 1349 witnessed the spread of the Black Death throughout the lands of modern-day Germany and the lower part of Eastern Europe, as well as striking at the heart of England. The stability much-needed for universities to survive seemed to be returning. Whereas five of the nine universities founded between 1347 and 1376 failed, of the fifteen universities founded between 1377 and 1426 all but two survived⁵¹ The locations of the above mentioned universities

⁵⁰ Florence founded in 1349 transferred to Pisa and closed in 1472; Huesca established in 1354 disappeared in the first half of the fifteenth century and was re-established in 1464; Arrezo attempted a new foundation in 1355 only to disappear around 1373; Cracow founded in 1364 and failed by 1370; Pecs established in 1361 and failed around 1376.

⁵¹ Huesca failed in 1464; Grenoble failed in the fourteenth century; Treviso: founded in 1318 failed by 1407; Pavia transferred to Piacenza in 1398; Pecs – newly founded in 1367 failed around 1376. The university at Cracow and Rome's Studium are the only two universities that, founded between the years 1377 ad 1426, failed.

founded in this period are telling. While some foundations can be found on the Italian peninsula (Parma, Turin, Pisa and Ferrara) and in French Lands (Aix-en-Provence), university establishments begin to crop up in Northern Europe, particularly Germany.⁵² Between 1377 and 1426, charters for six universities were promulgated in German lands.⁵³ In addition to the German lands, St. Andrew's established a university in 1411 and the University of Cracow was re-founded in 1397.

In the second half of 1349, phase 5 of the Black Death, the plague again traveled north; reaching Scotland in the British Isles and wreaking havoc on northern Germany and Denmark (map 8). Pushing on to the universities established between the years 1426 and 1475, we see that, in similar fashion to the resurgence of universities on the Italian peninsula fifty years prior (that is, between 1347 and 1376), the majority of universities in this period were founded in German, French and Spanish lands – traveling in the wake of the Black Death. The delayed development of the universities in the French territories is easily explained: the devastating impact of the Black Death, coupled with famine and war with England, retarded French academic endeavors in the fourteenth century. In 1350, the Black Death reached the shores of Northern Germany, progressed into the Scandinavian Peninsula and stretched along the Baltic coast of Poland. Again, the next cycle in university foundations (1476-1525) mirrors the spread of the plague. Of the

⁵² The universities founded in northern Europe in this period are: Cologne, Heideburg, Wurtzburg, Erfurt, Leipzig, and Rostock.

⁵³ Erfurt (1379), Heidelberg (1385), Cologne (1388), Wurtzburg (1402), Leipzig (1409), and Rostock (1419)

eleven universities founded in this period, five are located in the northern half of Europe.⁵⁴

Of equal importance to the location of the universities, the relative stability of those universities founded between 1400 and 1525 reflects the economic recovery in Europe following the outbreak of the plague. Unlike the relative volatility of universities founded shortly before, during, or twenty-five to fifty years after the Black Death, those established throughout the fifteenth century, with very few exceptions, remained in existence.⁵⁵ These data suggest that the economic and political stability needed to foster scholarly pursuit had begun to return to southern Europe by the end of the fourteenth century. Furthermore, this stable environment spread to the northern lands by the second half of the fifteenth century.

The convergence of the Black Death and the foundations of universities throughout Europe suggests a common connection. The first universities in the twelfth century reflect the relationship of economic and political security to university stability. This relationship between scholarship and economic and political stability has ancient roots: the ancient Greek scholars thrived after the Greco-Persian and Peloponnesian wars of the fifth century B.C., and Baghdad's "House of Wisdom" was founded during the height of the Golden Age of Islam. The European universities followed this trend. The first universities appeared on the Italian peninsula because the people of that land spearheaded the international commerce needed to provide the economic recovery after the Barbarian

⁵⁴ Copenhagen (1475-6); Mainz (1476); Tubingen (1476) Uppsala (1477); and Frankfurt-on-Oder (1498, opened in 1506).

⁵⁵ 10 of the 24 universities (over 40 percent) founded between 1300 and 1399 failed or had a false start whereas only 2 of the 38 universities (5.26 percent) of those founded between 1400 and 1525 suffered a similar fate.

Invasions. In his work detailing the economic recovery of Europe from 950 to 1350, Robert S. Lopez reveals that the revitalization was unevenly diffused throughout Europe, with northern Italy at the vanguard of this growth.⁵⁶ *A posteriori* evidence of the economic differences between southern and northern continental Europe between the tenth and fourteenth centuries exists. For example, Italy had developed double entry bookkeeping at roughly the same time that the Hanseatic League came into existence.⁵⁷

But with international commerce comes risk, and the Black Death presented the “double-edged sword” of that commerce. As it was at the helm of the economic revival, it is no surprise that the Genoese outpost of Caffa first brought the plague to Europe. From there, the plague spread rapidly from port to port and less rapidly across the land routes: the roads of the Roman Empire now in a state of decay. The northern territories, already suffering from slower economic development, faced a harder time recovering from the outbreak of the Black Death; the economic and political revival after the plague was just as unevenly distributed in Europe as the initial commercial boom of the tenth and eleventh centuries. As in the previous phase, southern Europe, in particular the emerging Italian city-states, was at the forefront of the recovery in the century after the outbreak of the plague.⁵⁸ With the uneven distribution of recovery, it is hardly surprising

⁵⁶ Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages*, 114-115.

⁵⁷ Lopez and Raymond provide a vast amount of primary documents regarding the evolution of accounting procedures in the Middle Ages. Robert S. Lopez and Irving W. Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 359-377.

⁵⁸ “The Italian city-state entered a long period of slow recovery, stable growth and dynamic equilibrium in economic and demographic movements (circa 1405-80)... Italy was more advanced in these tendencies than other parts of Europe. North of the Alps, disorder and instability persisted for another generation or longer.” Fischer, *The Great Wave*, 50-51.

that the initial revivification of the universities in the period of the Black Death centered on those areas of Europe that had recovered more quickly.

The diplomatic language of official charters aside, the founding of universities - both prior to and after the Black Death- was not always or solely altruistic in nature. While the early universities may have originated in an organic, the official formation of a *studium generale* increasingly fell under the aegis of “an authority of a universal nature.”⁵⁹ This meant that students and teachers alike “were placed under the immediate safeguard of the supreme authority, be it papal or imperial.” Jacques Verger, current vice-president of the International Commission for the History of Universities, reveals the original reasons for placing a “universal authority” in control of the universities emerging in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. A centralizing power that encompassed Europe was needed in order to transcend local politics and to ensure universal validity.⁶⁰ In an era when most nation-states were, at best, in embryonic form, the papacy and empire were the only institutions capable of establishing an education system throughout Europe. In time, along with the temporal and spiritual institutions, the universities became the third cog in an international mechanism that supported and developed Western civilization.

Verger also explains that an authority of international scope was needed to ensure the academic integrity of scholars. The *licentiate docendi*, the license granted to scholars having attained certain levels of study by universities, entitled the holder to teach throughout Christendom.⁶¹ The concomitant benefit of allowing scholars relative

⁵⁹ Verger, “Patterns,” 35.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 35-36.

⁶¹ Ibid., 36.

freedom in travel and teaching allowed knowledge to spread throughout the continent in a rapid manner and provided trained administrators for the burgeoning medieval cities. For the license to have ubiquitous validity (*ubique docendi*), a universal authority was needed. Imperial or papal sanction of a university soon became mandatory and it would not be long until *studia generalia* could not be formed without official promulgation or confirmation, be it a papal Bull or imperial decree.⁶²

In the power politics of medieval Europe, pope, emperor, and prince vied for control of both land and knowledge. As both instantiations and shapers of authority, university foundations played a critical role in the process of determining the locus of control in medieval Europe.⁶³ To a certain extent, medieval universities can be viewed as chess pieces on an elaborate European board – a game played among the various religious and secular rulers.⁶⁴ Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century history bears witness to an ongoing shift of power from religious to temporal authority; and the founding of universities, in addition to their use as political tools, reflects this change.

From the fall of the Roman Empire to the twelfth century, educational efforts on the European continent fell under the hegemony of the church, the political powerhouse

⁶² Marthellen R. van Scoyoc, "Origin and Development of the University," *Peabody Journal of Education* 39, no. 6 (May 1962): 322.

⁶³ "The university became the means of embodying the existing authority, whether ecclesiastical or secular, in knowledge." Phyllis Riddle, "Political Authority and University Formation in Europe, 1200-1800," *Sociological Perspectives* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 48.

⁶⁴ In describing the implementation of the private law schools of Bologna from 1075 onwards by secular or religious authorities, Verger writes that the schools were "the main theatre for the great political confrontations between papacy and the empire." Verger, "Patterns," 48.

throughout the thirteenth century;⁶⁵ the episcopate was interested in utilizing the education system as a tool to create ecclesiastical bureaucrats.⁶⁶ With the growing influence of the Holy Roman Empire overlapping the rise of papal authority, however, contentions for political supremacy throughout Europe resulted in clashes between spiritual and temporal leaders. While the secular and religious figures occasionally battled each other from the fifth century onward, the two authorities remained marginally cooperative for almost five hundred years. The Investiture Controversy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries marks a critical turning point in the cooperative nature of these polities.

The right to appoint and confirm ecclesiastical offices proved a major point of contention between the Holy Roman Emperors and the popes of the eleventh century. The issue reached its climax starting with the ascendancy of Henry IV (r. 1065-1106) to the imperial throne.⁶⁷ Royal and papal authority clashed as Henry attempted to “use episcopal nominations to turn dioceses into reliable pillars of the imperial government.”⁶⁸ As relations between the two rulers further deteriorated, Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073-85) issued the Bull *Dictatus Papae* in 1075, which asserted papal authority over secular rulers. Henry reacted by renouncing his obedience to papal authority at Worms in January 1076, incurring excommunication from the pope. Reconciliation between the

⁶⁵ “The power of the papacy reached its high point during the early thirteenth century with the pontificate of Innocent III, after which it declined, largely because secular rulers became so wealthy and powerful that they could no longer be controlled by Rome.” Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science*, 8.

⁶⁶ Paulo Nardi, "Relations with Authority," in *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. Hilde De Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 81.

⁶⁷ Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarchy from the Ninth to Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 106-127.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 109.

authorities finally occurred with the peace settlement and Henry's acceptance of papal authority in Worms in 1122. It is in this political climate that the first universities were founded. It is relevant that the Universities of Bologna and Paris specialized in law and theology – William of Champeaux, bishop of Chalons-sur-Marne and a theologian in Paris, played an instrumental role in the negotiation processes.⁶⁹ Soon after the concordat, the balance of power began to shift in favor of secular authorities. Henry's successor Frederick II (r. 1194 – 1250) exacted his revenge in 1224; founding the University of Naples in 1224 “to compete with that of Bologna and train the jurists whom he required.”⁷⁰ Thus, the empire confronted the papacy by engaging in a thirteenth-century intellectual arms race.

Perhaps the best example of the use of universities as both political and spiritual weapons prior to the Black Death is the establishment of the University of Toulouse in the Languedoc region of modern France. The early history of the Languedoc “is marked by the progressive loss of cohesion” and “the minor nobility retained more political control and independence of action than was the case in northern France.”⁷¹ The lack of central authority gave rise to a neo-Manichean heresy whose proponents were known as the Cathars.⁷² Repeated attempts were made by the church to return the region to the orthodox fold in the affair, employing the saintly Bernard of Clairvaux to educate and re-

⁶⁹ Ibid., 170.

⁷⁰ Verger, “Patterns,” 54.

⁷¹ Michael Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1997), 1,15.

⁷² For a brief description of the Cathar beliefs and the spread of Catharism in the Languedoc region, see Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade*, 61-75.

indoctrinate the populace in 1145. Historian Michael Costen reveals the role of theological studies in combating heresy:

Throughout the struggle with the Cathars the church was immeasurably aided by the enormous progress made in the century by the academic study of theology... the doctrines of the Church were defined and refined in such a way that the differences between orthodox faithful and the heretics were clear to the hierarchy.⁷³

Clear to the church hierarchy, perhaps, but the same clarity can not be attributed to the Cathars. When these repeated attempts to reconvert the region failed, the Church resorted to the sword, issuing a crusade lasting from 1209-1229. The Cathars were defeated and the Treaty of Paris of 1229 obligated Raimon VII, Count of Toulouse to “found a university... by supporting Masters in Theology, Law and Grammar for ten years.”⁷⁴ Taking advantage of temporary dissolution of the University of Paris between 1229 and 1231 over disputes with local authorities, an official at Toulouse invited the Parisian theologians to transfer. He and other officials at Toulouse invited scholars to the newly created university

So that where once swords cleaved paths for you, you shall fight with a sharp tongue; where war waged carnage, you shall militate with peaceful doctrine; where the forest of heretical depravity scattered thorns, the cedar of catholic faith shall be reared by you to the stars.... You soldiers of philosophy may be able to fight the more safely with the art of Mercury, the weapons of Phoebus, the lance of Minerva.⁷⁵

⁷³ Costen, 101-102.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 190-191.

⁷⁵ Lynn Thorndike, "Invitation to Toulouse, 1229," in *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 32-33.

Invoking Biblical references, the letter described Toulouse as “the second land of promise flowing with milk and honey” and decreed that students and professors would receive a plenary indulgence for transferring.⁷⁶

The creation of the University of Toulouse demonstrates the Church’s pretensions to hegemony in the thirteenth century. By the fourteenth century, however, the Church’s political monopoly began to come to an end as religious and secular authorities continued to clash. The Great Western Schism (1378 – 1419) further compounded the institutional chaos caused by the Black Death. The disorder resulted in the erosion and fragmentation of the papacy’s political authority. Pope Gregory XI traveled to Rome with intentions to return the papacy there. With the papal administration in transit from Avignon to Rome, he died unexpectedly on 27 March 1378. His death effectively divided the College of Cardinals into two camps, Italian and French. The College in Rome, under pressure by the citizens to elect a Roman pope, elected Urban VI. Irascible in nature and “imbued with the theory of [absolute] papal power,” Urban soon came into conflict with his electors.⁷⁷ Claiming that Urban was elected under duress, the College formally challenged his election and, in turn, elected one of their own to replace him. Cardinal Robert of Geneva accepted their election and took the name Clement VII. Urban, however, refused to step down. From 1380 to 1409, two distinct papal courts existed: one in Rome, and the other in Avignon. The Council of Pisa, called in 1409 to rectify the situation, invalidated both Urban and Clement; electing a third pope, Alexander V, to the

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Robert N. Swanson, *Universities, Academics and the Great Western Schism* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 5-7.

See of Peter. Neither Urban nor Clement resigned and from 1409 to 1415, the Church was split into three factions. The schism finally came to a conclusion with the Council of Constance (1414 – 1419) and the submission of the Avignonese pope to Roman authority in 1423. Robert Swanson, professor of medieval history, explains that the universities played a critical role in the ongoing disputation involved in resolving the schism. In addition to disputation, Swanson notes, universities gained “increasing importance as instruments for shaping and directing ‘public opinion.’”⁷⁸

The Great Western Schism posed a unique question for the universities, the institutions that had just recovered from the plague now faced further challenges. In the midst of this spiritual and administrative chaos already active universities had to choose which papal authority demanded their loyalty. Along with secular rulers, universities divided into factions based on loyalty to specific popes. Additionally, the pontiffs established universities in this period for the specific purpose of fostering allegiance. The following chart provides a breakdown of the universities established in this period and the pope promulgating the charter:

Rome	Avignon	Pisa
Urban IV (r. 1378 – 1389)	Orvieto (1378)	
	Heidelberg (1385)	
	<i>Kulm</i> (1386)	
	<i>Lucca</i> (1387)	
	Cologne (1388)	
Boniface IX	<i>Ferrara</i> (1391)	
	Clement VII	
	Perpignan (1379)	
	(r.1378 – 1395)	
	<i>Erfurt</i> (1379)	

⁷⁸ Ibid., 16.

(r. 1389 – 1405)				
	Erfurt (1392)			
	Buda (1395)	Benedict XIII (r. 1395 – 1418)		
	<i>Fermo</i> (1398)			
	Cracow (1400)			
	Wurtzburg (1402)			
Innocent VII (r. 1405 -1407)	<i>Rome</i> (1406)		<i>Turin</i> (1405)	
Gregory XII (r. 1407 – 1415)				Alexander V (r.1409 – 1410)
				Aix-in-Provence (1409)
				John XXIII (r. 1410 – 1415)
				Leipzig (1409)
				Buda (1410)
		St. Andrews (1413)		Turin (1412)
		<i>Calataydd</i> (1415)		

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The Great Western Schism witnessed the further erosion of universal papal authority alongside the further development of the universities. Moreover, Swanson shows, the period was further marred by the virtual dissolution of imperial authority. With the death of Charles IV in 1378 and the ascension of his son Wenceslas, the empire, “the most obvious alternative jurisdiction,” could not replace the authority of the Church.⁸⁰ Local rulers stepped into the power vacuum provided by this diminution of centralized authority.

⁷⁹ Swanson provides the foundation dates and papal authority responsible for the promulgation. To illustrate the line of succession of each pontifical see, I’ve arranged the data into the chart above. Those universities in italics failed. Note that this is the period of rapid turnover in founding and closing universities; ten of the twenty-two established universities failed in this period. Swanson, *Universities, Academics and the Great Schism*, 216-217.

⁸⁰ Swanson, *Universities*, 2.

Simultaneous with this shift in authority, northern Europe began the process of recovering from the Black Death in the fifteenth century. The imbalanced recovery from the plague between northern and southern Europe came to an end. As evidence of the northern acceleration of recovery in this period, noted historian David Hackett Fischer cites that “rates of interest fell by 50 percent in France and the Low Countries in the century from 1370 to 1470. Italian rates also came down, though not so much as northern Europe.”⁸¹ By the middle of the fifteenth century, economic and political conditions had improved in France. The conclusion of the Hundred Year’s War in 1453 provided relative security to French lands.

In this climate of economic stability coupled with weakened centralized authority, “one is witness to the birth of the modern nation state and to the awakening of national sentiments.”⁸² It is against the backdrop of healthier centuries and emerging nation-states that universities in the northern regions of Europe were established. Verger notes that “the most dynamic foundations of the fifteenth century were undoubtedly in the northern half of the kingdom of France (Poitiers, Bourges, Caen), in Louvain, in Cracow and in Germany.”⁸³ Under increasingly nationalistic control, the universities gradually began a process of moving away from their centralized nature, particularly in the discipline of theology.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Fischer, *The Great Wave*, 55

⁸² Verger, “Patterns”, 57.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸⁴ Verger writes that “increasing local and national pressures for the establishment of autochthonous theology faculties.” Verger, “Patterns”, 60.

This change in authority also signaled a change in the universities' character. In effect, with the rise of nationalization in Europe, national universities were formed. Paolo Nardi, professor of the history of Italian law, suggests that while these newly founded universities "seemed to follow the traditional model and ideals, they had a distinctly regional slant."⁸⁵ This "distinctly regional slant" is a decided break from the international intention of the original universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The break occurred because of the stresses of plague and political issues surrounding the papacy and empire. As society became increasingly nationalized and secularized, so too did the universities.

The Black Death left behind a wake of social, economic and political crises. The political turmoil of the age forever changed the development of intellectual culture. The collapse of Pan-European authority in the final quarter of the fourteenth century sounded the clarion call of nation-states. Further explaining the "handmaiden" attitude towards scholarship, Lindberg writes "for much of its history, the question has not be *whether* science [and by extension, all scholarship] will function as a handmaiden, but *which* mistress it will serve."⁸⁶ In other words, scholarly endeavors have always been under a guiding influence, be it religious or secular. The events of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the beginnings of the transfer of authority from a universal religious polity to regional secular rulers. Wrested from religious control, the universities – and the intellectual climate in general – slowly began a process of secularization. With the universal church slowly loosing its grip on scholarly pursuits, the interrelated nature of

⁸⁵ Nardi, 103.

⁸⁶ Lindberg's emphasis. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 151.

theology and natural philosophy began to become obscured – divorcing each other to the point of separate disciplines.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a period of accelerated change in European history. The Black Death abruptly invaded a society laboring valiantly to improve the intellectual climate that had long been in a state of stagnation. The economic and social upheaval that ensued took generations to overcome. More importantly, the backward slide in intellectual pursuits threatened the extinction of Western civilization. If the Black Death demonstrated the potential downfall of society's attempts to advance, then the response to it illustrated a determined response by mankind to understand, survive and even thrive. Like the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes, Europe began the slow and arduous task of rebuilding.

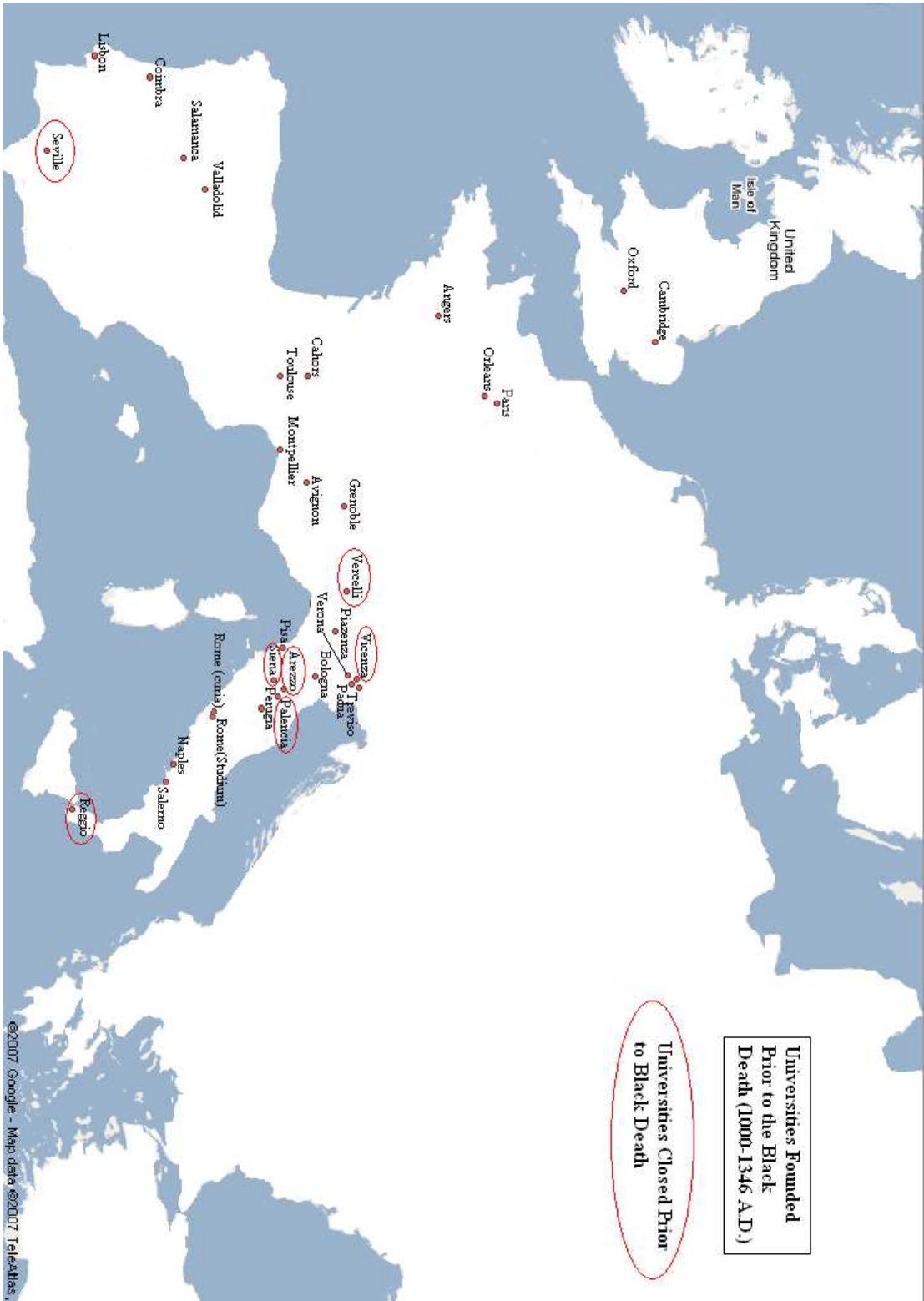
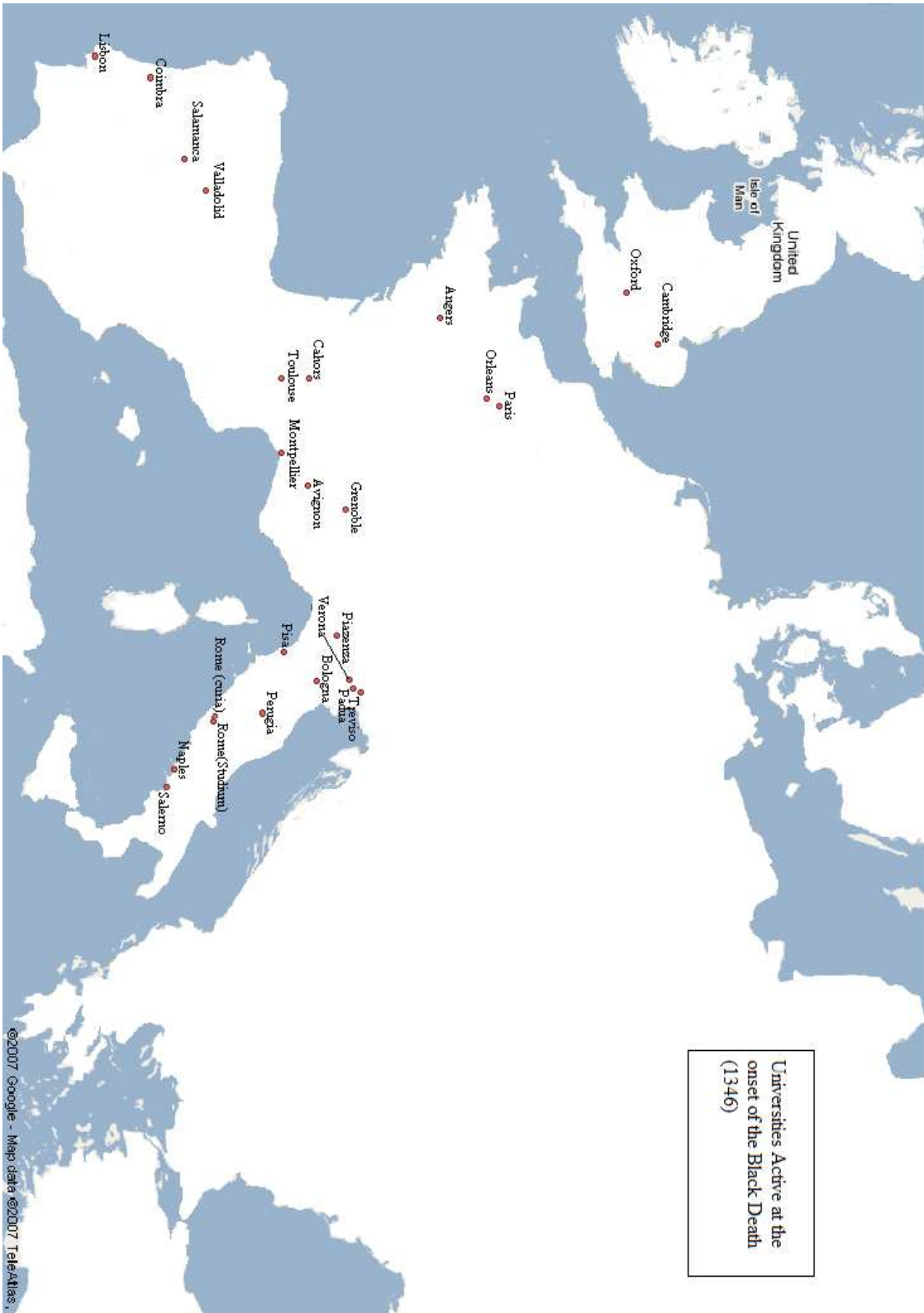


Fig. 3 Universities Founded/Closed Prior to Black Death.



Universities Active at the onset of the Black Death (1346)

Fig. 4 Universities Active at Arrival of Black Death (1346).

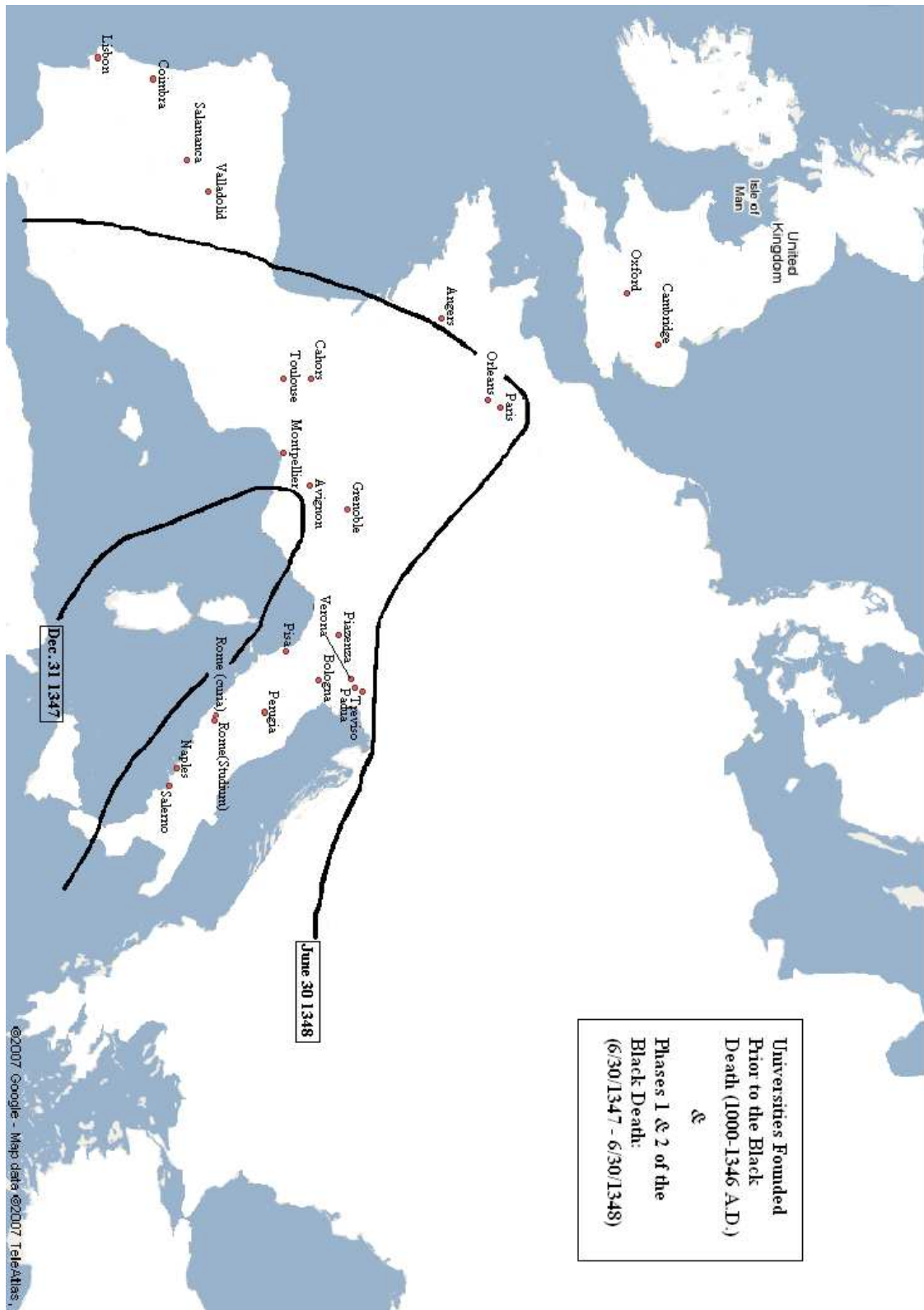


Fig. 5 Active Universities and the First Phases of the Black Death (June 1347 - June 1348).

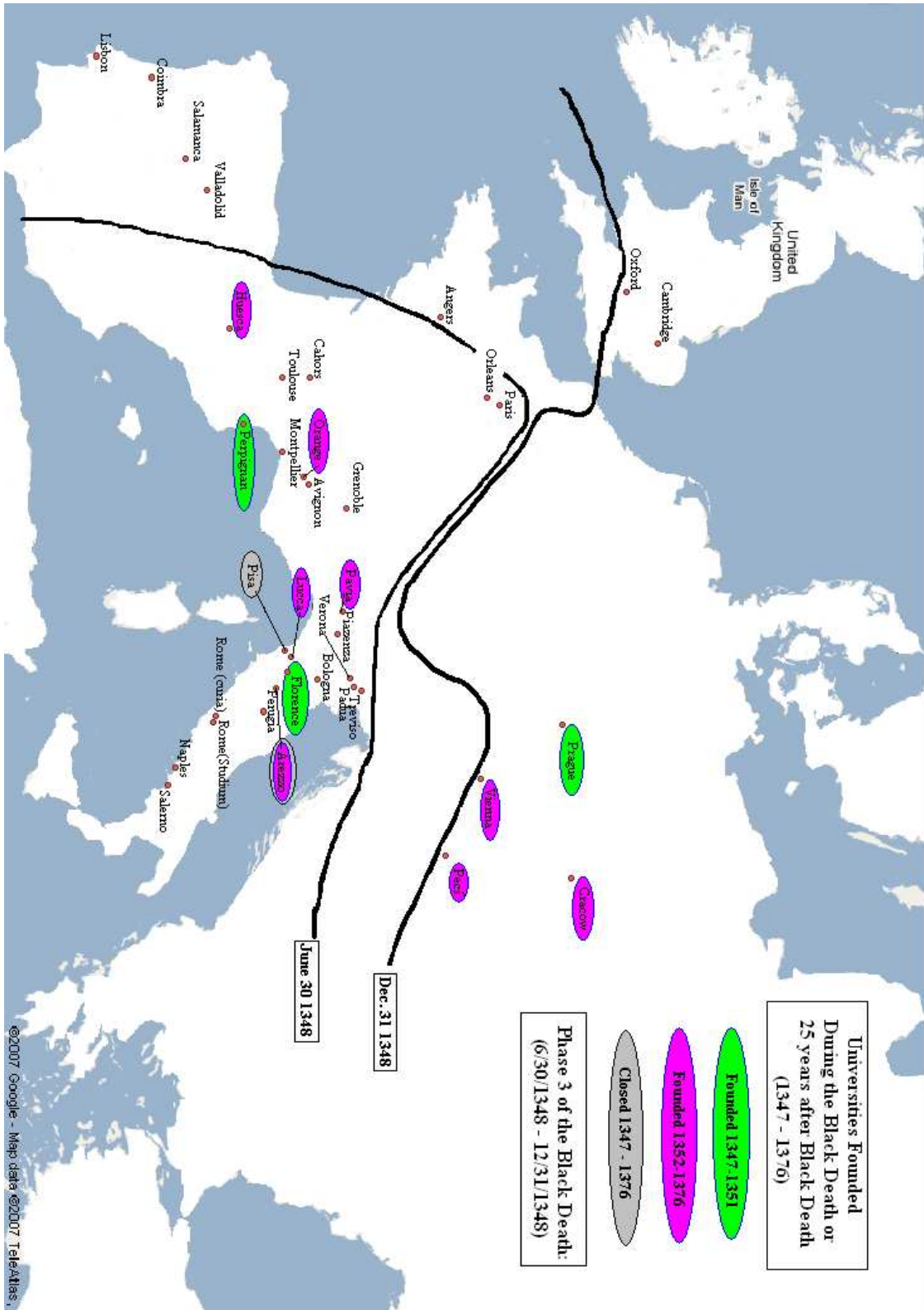


Fig. 6 Universities Founded/Closed 25 Years after the Black Death/ Phase 3 of Black Death (July through December 1348).

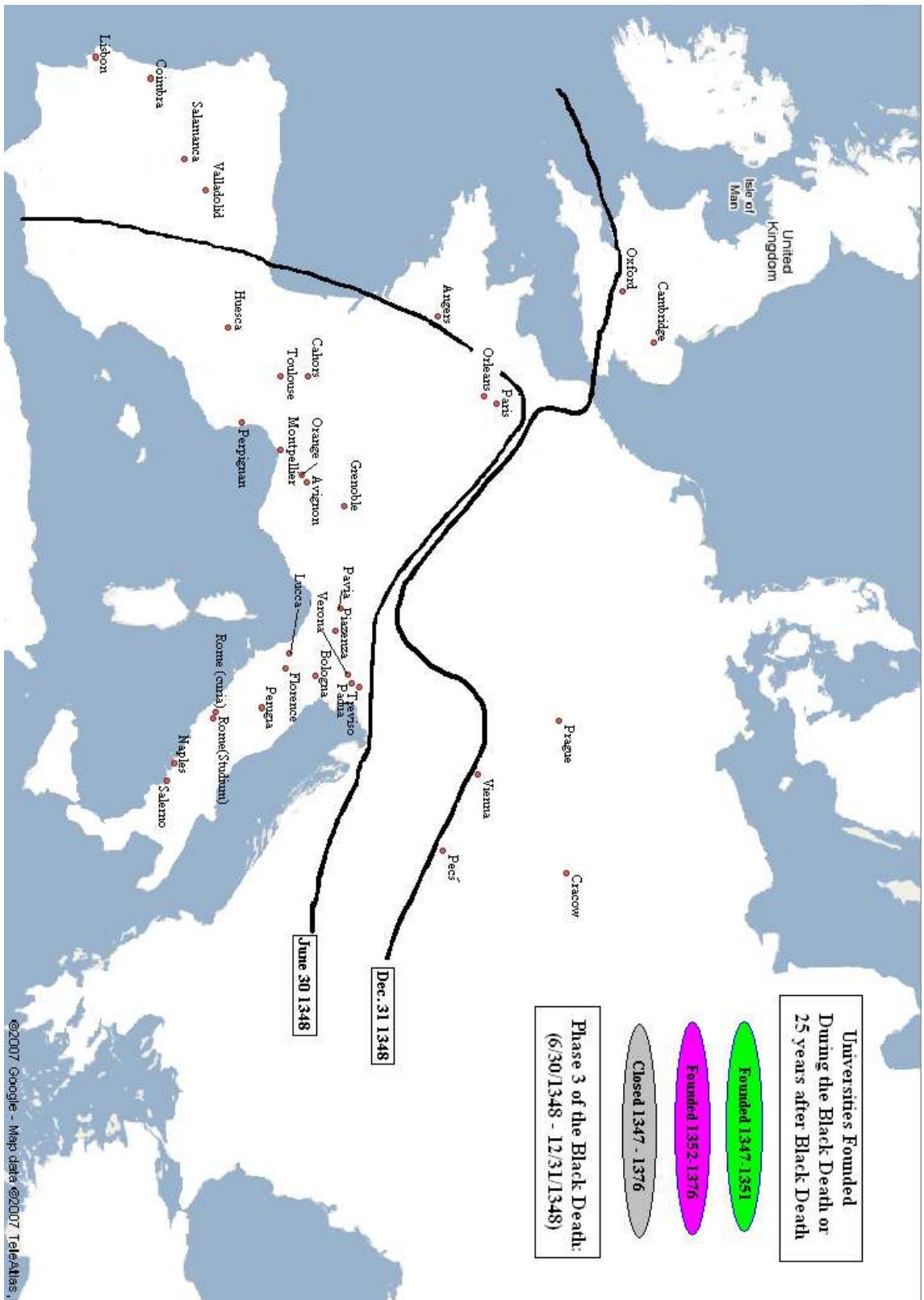


Fig. 7 Active Universities 25 Years after Black Death (1347 - 1376).

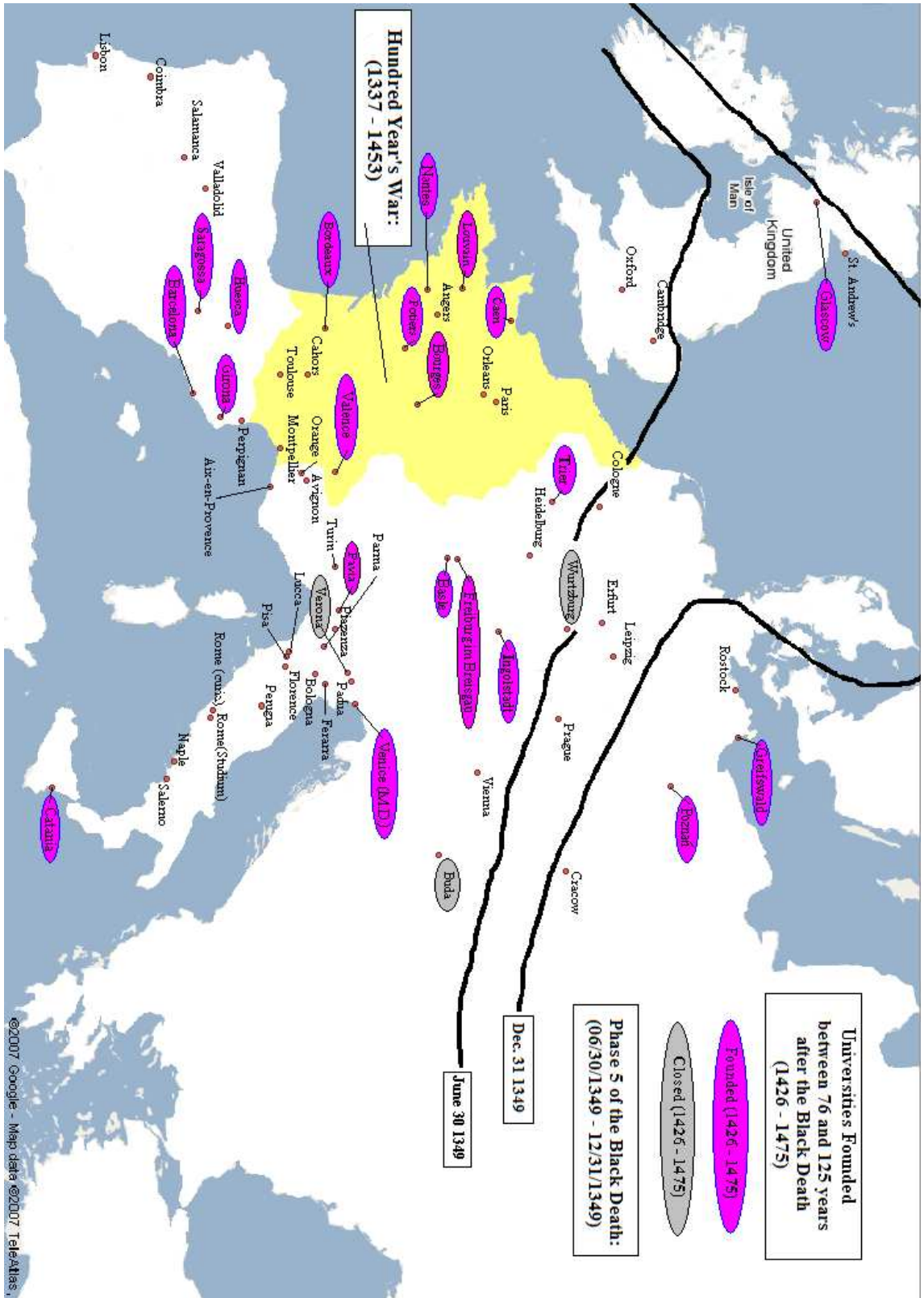


Fig. 10 Universities Founded/Closed 76-125 Years after Black Death/ Phase 5 of Black Death (July through December 1349).

CHAPTER II

THE BLACK DEATH, ART AND RELIGION

While modern science is in general agreement of the sources and cause of the Black Death, contemporary documents reveal that humanity struggled to make sense of why this tragedy occurred. Astrological or cosmological reasons were sometimes explored, but divine retribution for mankind's profligate ways seemed to be the most palpable answer. Rosemary Horrox indicates that "all contemporary commentators were agreed that the plague was an act of God, sent to punish mankind for its sinfulness and frighten it into repentance and future good behavior."⁸⁷ Prior to describing the origin of the plague, Piacenzan lawyer Gabriele dé Mussis describes the reasons that the Black Death was sent to Europe. He writes that:

The entire human race was wallowing in the mire of manifold wickedness, enmeshed in wrongdoing, pursuing numberless vices, drowning in a sea of depravity because of a limitless capacity for evil, bereft of goodness, not fearing the judgments of God, and chasing after everything evil, regardless of how hateful and loathsome it was.⁸⁸

Sin in all forms – disobedience in children, vanity in dress (there are numerous descriptions of "men dressing like women" and "women dressing like men;") a change in

⁸⁷ Horrox, 95.

⁸⁸ Gabriele dé Mussis, "Historia de Morbo," in *The Black Death*, trans. and ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1994), 14.

style no doubt, but one in time of stress that was not welcome), corruption among the clergy, disapproval of tournaments – were cited as the reasons for God’s wrath.⁸⁹

Theologians discussed how the arrival of the disease fit into God’s plans – a God who played an active role in the unfolding of history. Robert Lerner contends that the Black Death aided in underscoring and supporting the already-present medieval eschatological mentality. The historian is naturally cautious – indicating that not every person in the period thought that the world was on the verge of coming to an end. Lerner writes “what I do mean to argue is that the onslaught of disaster [the Black Death] lead many to wonder how it fit into God’s plan, and the ways in which they did are of considerable interest to the cultural historian.”⁹⁰ Much like the universities, eschatological beliefs existed prior to the arrival of the Black Death. Lerner points out that eschatological belief gradually became more accepted throughout the medieval period:

Whereas the early medieval authorities abhorred chiliasm and only allowed the idea of a final time on earth because Scripture seemed to offer no alternative, ... thoroughly orthodox twelfth-century commentators ... welcomed the idea of a final time after Antichrist and made it serve variously for the “refreshment of the saints,” the conversion of the heathen and the Jews, and the reformation and purification of the Church. In [twelfth-century German theologian] Gerhoch of Reichersberg’s view, the time after Antichrist would be one of “great joy for the people of God.”⁹¹

Lerner further notes that these ‘end-time’ mentalities gradually became the norm by the thirteenth century and from 1200 until the end of the Middle Ages “the idea of a

⁸⁹ Horrox provides extensive primary sources on the explanations for the Black Death. Heinrich von Herford, a Westphalian Dominican decrys the corruption of the clergy; Henry Knighton cites divine disapproval of tournaments; an anonymous monk in Westminster abbey joins a chorus of critics; writing about “indecent clothing,” saying that “the sin of pride manifested in this way must surely bring down misfortune in the future.” Horrox, *The Black Death*, 111-156.

⁹⁰ Lerner, 534.

⁹¹ Ibid., 540.

wondrous time on earth after Antichrist became a virtually unquestioned assumption of Western eschatological theology.”⁹² By the time that the Black Death arrived in European soil, the medieval mindset was firmly entrenched with eschatological beliefs.

A tract, *Liber secretorum eventuum* (Book of Secret Events), completed in November 1349 by a Franciscan visionary, John of Rupecissa, offers a revisionary prophetic outlook. Rupecissa claims that the general famine and mortality of 1347, coupled with the “innumerable multiplying of corpses [cadaverorum]” in 1348, were elements of the chastisements that would precede Antichrist’s arrival.⁹³ Lerner writes that the prophecies of the time, while each conceived independently, “all foresaw contemporary storms being succeeded by time of peace and Christian triumph.”⁹⁴

It is important to note that the understanding of the end of the world as the medieval theologian knew it portended a “wondrous time” and that, while the reign of the Antichrist was certainly not joyfully anticipated, it marked the fulfillment of Scripture. The end of the world anticipated the “Second Coming” of Christ and the reign of the kingdom of Heaven on earth. Lerner further explains that “with theologians agreeing that there would be good times on earth after Antichrist, anyone in the mid-fourteenth century who assumed that Antichrist’s open reign would be preceded by heralding disasters could easily incorporate the Black Death into a chiliastic script.”⁹⁵ These ongoing and

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Lerner cites Rupescissa's Latin: "Quarto intellexi multas clades futuras erunt in ianuis et envenire validas tempestates. Primo famem generalem simul cum mortalitate in orbe que facta est anno Domini MCCCXLVII per secundum universum. Secundo multiplicacionem innumerabilium cadaverorum anno Christi MCCCXLVIII ubique terrarum multifarie [multifamine] dispersorum." Lerner, "Western European Eschatological Mentalities," 541.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 551.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 541.

upcoming tribulations could easily be interpreted, if not joyfully welcomed, as signs of Scriptural fulfillment.

While adhering to the formulae of Sacred Scripture, the period's eschatological pattern of thought tended to forget that these trials and tribulations were, in fact, just that – periods of intense suffering. Eschatology, jumping forward to the anticipated end, easily leads prophets to forget that there were trials to be overcome. Additionally, visionaries and theologians can influence but may not, in general, reflect the sentiment of the masses. This sense of joy over the approaching of the end-times runs in tandem with a countertrend of thought; profound and imminent fear of trials and retribution by an angry God.

In periods of intense trial, it is not always easy to see the value of suffering. Moreover with repeated instances of the plague, the idea that mankind could appreciate God's divine plan could easily be questioned. The expression of fear created by the Black Death is best described by one of the period's most prolific and influential writers, Petrarch. The intensity of the suffering and isolation caused by the initial occurrence of the Black Death had a profound impact on the author's work, according to Renee Neu Watkins, who writes:

What he expresses in his lamentations, especially in Fam., VIII, 7, is pessimism, much cloaked in the words of the ancients. Survival amidst so much death is hell – death would be a mercy. *Undique dolor, terror undique* [Surrounded by misery, surrounded by terror]. Can the plague really be sent by a just God? There is no justice in punishing this particular generation in such an unprecedented way. '*Cum omnibus peccavimus, flagellamur soli*' [We alone were scourged with/for all of mankind's sins]. He clings to faith without pretending to

understand to morality of providence. He believes that catastrophe is God's way of punishing sinners and 'reminding' is people to mend their ways.⁹⁶

It is human nature to worry and lament during such periods of tribulation. Petrarch's mourning the loss of his friends and bewailing the "scourge" that had befallen his generation on behalf of all mankind's sins is a natural and immediate reaction to the events that occurred. The initial emotional impact of the Black Death can be drawn two ways – that is, Petrarch's sense of loss is recorded alongside the prophetic "joy" that the end of the world was at hand. This dramatic tension between affliction and assurance that peace was to follow it play out in the iconography of the period.

While trauma – any trauma – may elicit an immediate reaction that verges on despair, the protracted response to it is often radically different from the initial one. It is difficult to maintain a constant level of panic and despair. These initial emotions eventually give way to more rational analyses and attempts to remedy the situation or to prevent it from happening again. A modern comparison can be drawn along the same vein as the Black Death. The initial reaction to the Second World War – fear and despair over a world torn apart by warfare – gave way to a period of rapid development. As a direct result of mankind resisting this feeling of paralysis, the 1950's and 1960's witnessed the advent of the "Baby Boomer" generation and unprecedented economic growth, particularly in the United States. It also witnessed the creation of institutions designed to protect mankind from repeating such a tragedy. Institutions such as N.A.T.O. and the United Nations were formed in the wake of the Second World War in an effort to find more viable solutions to conflict. In the wake of war, mankind labored to establish a sense of

⁹⁶ Renee Neu Watkins, "Petrarch and the Black Death: From Fear to Monuments," *Chicago Journals* (1972): 202.

“normalcy” again. As in the aftermath of the Second World War, the centuries following the plague outbreaks reveal a society actively and aggressively working to rebound from catastrophe.

The ongoing recurrences of the plague shifted the European attitude towards the pestilence from one of immediate fear and pessimism to one of preservation and protection. It is these recurrent waves of the plague, in particular, that shaped the mentality of Europe away from despair and towards survival. The will to survive the calamity caused by the Black Death is reflected in the artwork from the mid-fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Through the use of sacred imagery (and in some cases architecture), the medieval world began the process of rebounding from the sociological trauma caused by the Black Death. The artwork of the period reflects the ongoing invocation of heavenly protection. This chapter will explore the period’s use of sacred images and architecture in securing celestial aid to abate God’s wrath.

The widely-held belief that the Black Death was an instrument of God’s will is portrayed in the artwork of the period. The retributive element of God’s divine plan, however, generally runs in conjunction with the belief that His wrath can, somehow, be abated. That is to say, the “Divine Retribution” component of the Black Death runs concurrently with imagery designed to evoke celestial protection from the plague. A sense of the role of sacred imagery to inoculate mankind from the plague is evident and plays a strong role in the artwork of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. This idea of combating God’s wrath with celestial protection will be explored in more detail in this chapter.

At this point, it is necessary to comment on the role of images – particularly sacred images – in the lives of the medieval populace. Beyond recording facts (i.e. that the plague hit ‘this’ or ‘that’ town and caused suffering), the artwork played an active role in defending and protecting the populace. In a recent edition of *Jansen’s History of Art*, editor Penelope Davies comments on the role of sacred art:

Although modern audiences expect to find and react to works of art hanging in museums, art historians have demonstrated that art served different purposes in late Medieval Europe. Few in the West today believe that a work of art can influence events or change lives. But in fourteenth-century Europe, people thought about images in much more active terms. Art could be a path to the sacred or a helper in times of trouble.⁹⁷

In other words, in the medieval period, these pieces of sacred art didn’t simply “hang in a museum,” but played an active role in society. These works functioned as a vital link to the supernatural world. They had a particular didactic function by educating the populace about the major tenants of Christian theology. Moreover, they allowed man to, in the words of Shakespeare, ‘shed its mortal coil,’ to transcend the ordinary (or in the case of the plague, extraordinary) troubles facing them.

As gateways or portals to the sacred, these images provided the populace with assured connection to celestial protection. On the expected efficacy of sacred images in protecting the populace from pestilence, art historian from the University of Sydney Louise Marshall writes that

The images functioned to secure protection from the plague by soliciting the intervention of some powerful heavenly protector. ... Those who lived during the

⁹⁷ Penelope J. Davies, ed., *Jansen’s History of Art: The Western Tradition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2006), 454.

pandemic were not neurotic and helpless, but were taking positive – and in their eyes effective – steps to regain control over their environment.⁹⁸

In other words, for the medieval mind, implementing sacred images to combat the “evil” of the plague made rational sense. Regardless of modern science’s criticisms of art’s efficacy in abating the plague, for the medieval mind, these images were seen as a valid and important weapon in combating the perceived evil that had befallen them.

Regardless of their actual ability to abate the plague (in modern terms), these images were understood to be effective measures in combating the disorder and destruction that had struck fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe. In describing the use of sacred art as a legitimate means of defense in the medieval period, Dr. Marshall remarks that these sacred images were used as a means of “protective/defensive behaviour, but [they were] acted out within ideas/beliefs current at time.” Rather than mankind 'grasping at straws' to save themselves, these images were seen as highly effective tools in man's defensive arsenal.⁹⁹

Moreover, we must also keep in mind the Church’s conception of the “Communion of Saints” and its role in the iconography of the period. These heavenly beings actively interacted with mankind. More than mere spectators, those in heaven played a role as intercessors on mankind’s behalf. Since, after death, these holy figures still existed as members of the Universal Church (they constituted the *Ecclesia Triumphans*, or the “Church Triumphant”) they could still be in active communion and

⁹⁸ Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 488.

⁹⁹ This message comes from my email correspondence with Dr. Marshall. Many thanks to Dr. Marshall for her time and insights. Ph.D., Louise Marshall, Imagery and the Black Death, e-mail message to Brian Yurochko, March 26, 2009.

communication with those of the *Ecclesia Militans*, the “Church Militant” - the faithful still on earth.¹⁰⁰ Because of their earthly experiences, particular saints and images could be invoked for particular reasons. Their experiences on earth provided them with a specific sympathy for mankind’s current tribulations. As such, certain “Plague Saints” and images evolved over the course of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. In this period, saints like Sebastian, Roch, and the Virgin Mary take on the role of intercessor for mankind regarding the abatement of the plague.

I do not wish to imply that these images had any totemic or talismanic function or that the objects had any efficacy in and of themselves. As devotional pieces, these objects were meant to inspire the population in the face of the pandemic. As sacred art, these pieces reflect and reposit the history and theology of the church. Therefore, the artwork played a substantial role in the transmission of the faith. Sacred art embodies and echoes its contemporary convictions in theology. The Church’s understanding of the “Communion of Saints” is underscored through the plague iconography of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. In other words, the use of plague intercessors throughout this period reflects the church’s belief that those faithful in heaven still had the capacity to influence and interact with the believers undergoing trauma.

While current scholarship on the cultural effects of the Black Death run counter to Meiss’ original thesis that the artwork of the period entered a “darkening mood” as a result of the plague, there is general acceptance of his commentary on the symbolic nature of the arrow in the period’s artwork. Meiss writes: “In Italian and northern art of

¹⁰⁰ In Catholic, medieval theology, there also exists an *Ecclesia Expectans* - the “Church Expectant.” These are those souls still in Purgatory (that is, expectant of their celestial destination). The Churches Triumphant and Militant could, through prayers and petitions to the Almighty, assist those undergoing penance; speeding their transition to heaven.

the fifteenth century the conception of an aroused God punishing mankind by pestilence often assumed the form of Christ hurling arrows at the world, like the thunderbolt of Jove.”¹⁰¹ There are repeated images whereby the “Horseman of the Apocalypse” rides upon a horse shooting arrows at the stunned populace (see Fig. 1, page 12 and Fig. 3, below). Echoing Meiss’s statement, Marshall writes that the “use of the arrow as a metaphor for sudden death and disease inflicted upon humanity by celestial powers is common to many cultures and religions, from early Indian myth to the Graeco-Roman world.”¹⁰² Swift and unexpected, the arrow, much like a pandemic disease, strikes its target unawares.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, steeped in Scriptural references, actively used the “arrow metaphor” as a means of understanding the calamity of epidemic disease or unexpected destruction. While the arrow metaphors within the Scriptures can be used to illustrate God’s wrath, they also indicate that God will protect his people from harm – so long as the people kept the sacred covenant intact. In both scripture and tradition, we witness both a merciful and a wrathful God. David’s Psalms reflect both the “protective” nature of God towards his chosen people and the “retributive” element of God’s wrath for those who stray from his commands. The protective element of the arrow metaphor can be found in Psalm 91:

He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler,
And from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his pinions,
And under his wings shall you take refuge:

¹⁰¹ Meiss, 77.

¹⁰² Louise Marshall, “Waiting on the Will of the Lord”: The imagery of the plague” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 1989), 66.

His truth is a shield and a buckler.
You shall not fear the terror of the night
Nor the arrow that flies by day...

In this instance, David writes that God will protect his people from outside harm. On the other hand, in Psalm 38, David writes about “God’s arrows” being used as a means of inflicting punishment:

O Jehovah, rebuke me not in your wrath;
Neither chasten me in your hot displeasure.
For your arrows stick fast in me,
And your hand presses me sore.



Fig. 11 Frescos on outside of Oratorium, “Dei Disciplini” in Clusone near Bergamo, Italy, 1487. Location: Oratorio dei Disciplini, Clusone (Bergamo), Italy. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 12 Allegory of the Plague, 15th Century, Anonymous. A Biccherna Book Cover, Sienna, Italy, 1437. Inv. K9224 Location: Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Photo Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

A God who protected His promised people could also chastise them on account of their transgressions. God's role could also be quite active, as witnessed in the psalm above. As such, mankind needed intercessors that could abate God's wrath. For plague iconography, Saint Sebastian emerged as the primary intercessor throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods.

Most of what is known of Saint Sebastian is handed down to us through legend, but there is some documentary evidence of the appearance of his cult in Rome in the fourth century. Marshall indicates that St. Sebastian "is first mentioned in the list of martyrs' anniversaries preserved in the Roman chronograph, or calendrical collection, of 354."¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Marshall, Dissertation, 53.

Sebastian was a member of the Praetorian Guard under the emperor Diocletian (284-311). According to the *Passio San Sebastiani*, written in the mid-fifth century and attributed (perhaps erroneously) to Saint Ambrose, Sebastian was born in Milan. He was promoted to the personal guards under Emperors Maximilian and Diocletian for his faithful service. Secretly a Christian, Sebastian began to use his position to visit and comfort those Christians who had been imprisoned – urging them to hold steadfast in their faith. Two brothers, Marcus and Marcellinus, moved by Sebastian’s words refused to deny their faith and were martyred. Additionally, through his healing powers, Sebastian began attracting a wide number of converts – including the entire family of the prefect of Rome, Chromatius.

All of those who Sebastian converted were brought to trial and subsequently martyred. Sebastian himself was finally arrested and accused before Emperors Maximilian and Diocletian. Refusing to abandon his faith, Sebastian was taken to a field and shot with arrows by archers from Mauretania.¹⁰⁴ The *Passio* describes Sebastian’s torment as “he was pierced with arrows like a hedgehog.”

Left for dead, he was found by Christians who secretly came to claim his body for burial. Upon discovering that he was still alive, they took Sebastian to Irene, widow of the martyr St. Castulus, who healed him.¹⁰⁵ Once fully healed, Sebastian returned to the imperial court, to the shock of all in attendance, deliberately seeking out the Emperors to accuse them of their crimes against Christianity. Diocletian commanded Sebastian to be

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter Two of Marshall's dissertation for further details regarding St. Sebastian's history. Matthew Bunson, Bunson, Margaret, and Steven Bunson, *Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Saints* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1998), 559.

¹⁰⁵ According to the Encyclopedia of Saints, Castulus was also a Roman military officer serving in the palace of Diocletian. Arrested, Castulus was tortured and smothered in a pit. See Encyclopedia, 155.

clubbed to death and his body thrown in Rome's sewer system, the Cloaca Maxima, so that his body could not be recovered and, hence, venerated. Sebastian, however, appeared to another Christian convert, Lucina, in a dream to tell her where his body was. Lucina and her companions recovered Sebastian's body the next night and buried him along the via Appia. By the mid-fourth century, Sebastian's feast was part of the Roman Church's liturgical calendar. It would take many centuries, however, for Sebastian's cult to spread beyond Rome itself.

Early documentation regarding the establishment of Sebastian as a "plague saint" are rare and the origin of his charism is still puzzling to scholars.¹⁰⁶ Like many saints, the cult of Saint Sebastian was originally limited to the local region in which the saint lived or performed miracles. In Sebastian's case, his original cult was localized to the regions around Rome. Moreover, there is nothing to connect him personally to the plague. Sebastian's healing miracles were not plague related, but rather, *in imitatio Christi*, these miracles were done to win converts to Christianity.¹⁰⁷

Marshall attributes the development of his cult in the latter half of the fourth century in Northern Italy to St. Ambrose, bishop in Sebastian's home city of Milan. In this early phase of his cult, however, Sebastian was not invoked to combat the plague. Marshall points out that during the plague outbreak of the late-sixth century, Gregory the Great (r. 590-604) did not invoke the powers of Sebastian (or of any other saint), but rather, called the populace to conversion and repentance.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, she indicates that at this period,

¹⁰⁶ Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 489-491.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Marshall, Dissertation 56-57.

local saints were invoked to avert the plague. She writes, “bishops and Christian communities were turning to the saints to combat recurring outbreaks of plague. In each case, however, the resources mobilized were those of a local saint.”¹⁰⁹ This supplication to ‘local’ saints in this early medieval period, moreover, reflects the fragmented political climate in Europe at the time; a fractured society reverted to its local roots to see itself through times of crisis. As Europe began to recover, the improved infrastructure allowed for a greater dissemination of ideas and beliefs. As the period progressed, Sebastian’s role became more and more universal. By the end of the eighth century, the saint began to take on the role of a ‘plague saint.’

The latter part of the eighth century marks the first record of invoking Sebastian against the plague in Pavia, the Langobard capital city. Paul the Deacon (c. 720 –c. 797) writes in his *History of the Langobards* that

It was said to a certain man by revelation that the pestilence itself would not cease before an altar of St. Sebastian the martyr was placed in the church of the blessed Peter which is called “Ad Vincula.” And it was done, and after the remains of St. Sebastian the martyr had been carried from the city of Rome, presently the altar was set up in the aforesaid church and the pestilence itself ceased.¹¹⁰

The evidence is clear that by the end of the eighth century, Sebastian’s cult as a plague saint began to spread beyond the localized Roman area. Sheila Barker remarks that by the close of the eighth century, Sebastian’s cult and plague association had spread to various parts of Europe; spreading to the Byzantine, Lombard and Frankish kingdoms.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 58.

¹¹⁰ Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, trans. William Dudley Foulke (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1907), 255.

¹¹¹ Sheila Barker, *Piety and Plague: From Byzantium to the Baroque*, ed. Franco Mormando, Worcester, Thomas, *The Making of a Plague Saint: Saint Sebastian’s Imagery and Cult Before the Counter-Reformation* (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2007), 90.

While Sebastian's origins as a plague saint are shrouded in mystery, Barker also suggests a political explanation for the transfer of part of his relics (his arm, to be precise) to Pavia. She writes,

In 680, the same year that the plague struck both Rome and ... Pavia, Pope Agatho sealed an important alliance with the Langobards and established a Catholic hierarchy in the Langobard territories. The transfer of some of Sebastian's relics from Rome to Pavia's church of San Pietro in Vincoli – a church consecrated to the most important of Roman saints and visited by pilgrims taking the Via Francigena route to Rome – symbolically reinforced the bond between two worldly hierarchies. Sebastian was ideally suited for this mediating role, since he had territorial associations both with Lombardy, where he spent his youth, and Rome, where he died.¹¹²

Whether done for political expediency or religious piety, the transfer of Sebastian's arm relic to Pavia was cited as the reason for the abatement of the plague; confirming "miraculous powers of the saint and his relics."¹¹³ At this time, Sebastian's role as a plague saint became established in some small scale on the Italian peninsula. Marshall explains that by the middle of the eighth century, Sebastian's "new cult was sufficiently well established to spread from Rome to Pavia."¹¹⁴

Since Sebastian's cult originated like many other cults, its origins were relatively localized. As noted above, Sebastian's cult originates in the place of his (double) martyrdom: Rome. The first image of Sebastian dates to the late fifth century. In the crypt of Saint Cecilia –a subsection of the catacomb of Saint Callixtus - within the Trastevere region of Rome, one of the first images of Saint Sebastian can be found (fig.

¹¹² Ibid, 92.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ "What is certain is that by the end of the eighth century, in Paul's [Paul the Deacon's] own day, Sebastian had been venerated in Pavia as a plague saint for some time." Marshall, Dissertation 62-64.

13). Flanked by Saints Quirinus and Policamus, Sebastian appears in traditional ancient Roman garb – tunic and pallium. The painting dates roughly to circa 500 A.D.¹¹⁵

While art historian M. Laura Marchiori writes, “whether [in this image] the saint is depicted with a beard or moustache is unclear,” it is certain that – in comparison to Quirinus and Policamus – Sebastian appears to be of middle age.¹¹⁶ This and other early depictions run counter to many of the later, plague-related works wherein Sebastian is portrayed as a vibrant, youthful figure. Moreover, there is no reference to Sebastian’s martyrdom in the image; rather, he appears as one of the early Roman faithful watching over those buried there. The image is “post-martyrdom” – that is, as opposed to later works depicting Sebastian in the moment of his martyrdom, these earlier images focus on his heavenly reward. One is not reminded here of his sacrifice or suffering, but of the final, celestial outcome.

¹¹⁵ “Noting that the saints were depicted without halos and without the designation ‘Sanctus,’ [art historian Giovanni Battista] de Rossi chose to date the painting to the fifth century, with the knowledge that there had been an intervention in the contiguous chapel by Pope Sixtus III (432-440). The paintings have recently been restored, the details of which restoration were reported by Fabrizio Bisconti, who proposed a new date of ca. 500 based on his analysis of the painting style and chapel’s context.” Maria Laura Marchiori, “Art and Reform in Tenth-Century Rome - The Paintings of S. Maria in Pallara” (PhD diss., Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada., 2007), 157.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.



Fig. 13 Saints Policamus, Sebastian and Quirinus in the catacomb of St. Callixtus (crypt of St. Cecilia), Rome, Italy, circa 500 A.D. Photo credit: M. Laura Marchiori, Ph.D. (taken from her dissertation).

This image style is repeated in a mosaic of Sebastian found in Rome's San Pietro in Vincoli, dated to seventh century (fig. 14).¹¹⁷ Here, a bearded, grey-haired Sebastian stands in flowered meadow with his martyr's crown held between his hands. His name is written in gold characters to either side: SCS SEBA/STIANUS.¹¹⁸ Marshall posits that this mosaic icon "represents a distinctive break with earlier Roman depictions of the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 64. The dating is based mostly on stylistic criteria. Marshall writes that "most art historians have agreed upon a late-seventh century date" for the mosaic.

¹¹⁸ Marshall, Dissertation 63.

saint, in that Sebastian is shown alone, the sole focus of the beholder's attention."¹¹⁹ Iconography was "intimately tied to the growth of the cult of saints, making the holy figure directly accessible to the worshippers," and, as such, this mosaic of Sebastian "suggests a new development in the cult of the Roman martyr."¹²⁰ While perhaps not immediately or directly plague related, the icon solely depicting Sebastian certainly marks a change in the development of his cult in seventh-century Roman lands.

Marshall also suggests that the choice of location for this mosaic is hardly arbitrary and cites two instances whereby the location may have played a role in developing Sebastian as a plague saint.¹²¹ With the "parallel dedications" of the Roman and Pavian churches (both named San Pietro in Vincoli) after the transfer of Sebastian's arm bone to Pavia in 680 – and Pavia's subsequent abatement of the plague – Sebastian's role as a plague intercessor had been established. Marshall further avers that Sebastian's healing charisma may have been purposefully linked to the chains of Saint Peter. She

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Marshall, Dissertation, 63. Here, the author is referencing Ernst Kitzinger's 1955 work, "Byzantine Art in the period between Justinian and Iconoclasm.," in *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West: Selected Studies*, ed. W.B. Kleinbauer, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976) 157-232.

¹²¹ Ibid.



Fig. 14 Seventh century mosaic of Saint Sebastian in San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome. Image source: http://www.glisritti.it/gallery2/main.php?g2_view=slideshow.Slideshow&g2_itemId=22572.

writes that “devotion to Peter’s chains for the curative and prophylactic qualities of filings obtained from them may also have been a determining factor.”¹²² As such, the location of the mosaic may very well have been purposeful. Linking the curative element of Saint Peter’s chains to Sebastian’s role as a plague saint may have been a deliberate and conscious act.

As the centuries progressed, Sebastian’s healing charism gained momentum, paving the way for his cult to become linked to plague abatement. Since his reputation as

¹²² Ibid, 64.

an intercessor for the plague was not established until well after his martyrdom it is not surprising that earlier images of Sebastian do not reflect this intercessory role. As the iconography progressed, however, it becomes clear that Sebastian's cult took on a plague-abating dynamic. This later artwork reflects the ongoing confidence in Sebastian's role in protecting mankind from disease.

By the mid-thirteenth century, the saint's plague-thwarting role had been firmly established. In his *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend), dated to the 1260's, Dominican preacher and later Archbishop of Genoa Jacobus de Voragine recapitulates the earlier Pavian story related to Saint Sebastian. Resonating with earlier connections to Sebastian's plague-abating powers, the hagiographical work closes its discussion on Sebastian with an intercessory prayer, written by Saint Ambrose:

Then let us pray to this holy martyr Saint Sebastian that he pray unto our Lord that we may be delivered from all pestilence and from sudden death, and so depart advisedly hence, that we may come to everlasting joy and glory in heaven.¹²³

Barker points out that the origin and evolution of Sebastian as a plague intercessor is still rather vague, however. While Sebastian may have been (and most certainly was, if the Pavian legend rings true) celebrated as a "plague saint" prior to the thirteenth century, the author indicates that there is no evidence prior to the *Legenda Aurea* to substantiate Sebastian's role as a plague intercessor. "From 1330, however, there are signs that his formerly protean powers had been funneled into specific functions, including this one."¹²⁴

It is readily obvious how Sebastian's first martyrdom – being shot with arrows – can be linked to the cessation of the plague. Again, given the ongoing symbolism of the

¹²³ Jacobus de Voragine, "The Golden Legend: The Life of Saint Sebastian," *Catholic-forum.com*, catholic-forum.com/saints/golden155.htm. (accessed June 23, 2009).

¹²⁴ Barker, 97.

plague striking as an arrow, the connection to Sebastian is easy to make. Borrowing from art critic Leo Steinberg's words, Marshall writes that "Sebastian [serves] as the "lightning rod," who draws the divinely-launched arrows of the plague away from humanity, "grounding" them harmlessly in his own body."¹²⁵ Perhaps the most striking example of this motif is Florentine Giovanni del Biondo's *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian and Scenes from His Life* (fig. 15). Painted as an altarpiece for the city's Duomo in the 1370's, Giovanni del Biondo's work is more than likely connected to the plague outbreak of 1374.¹²⁶

In this Florentine work, we witness the beginnings of the transformation of Sebastian's plague iconography. Unlike the earlier artwork depicting Sebastian, Biondo's altarpiece takes on a narrative form – the two folds of the work detail the highlights of Sebastian's life while the center of the triptych depicts the saint at the moment of his first martyrdom.¹²⁷ With over thirty arrows shot through his body, the artist provides a visual depiction that resonates with the *Passio*'s description of the saint's death; that Sebastian "was pierced with arrows like a hedgehog." We get a sense of Sebastian's suffering in Biondo's work; the vision of being pierced with over thirty arrows hardly conveys a feeling of comfort to the viewer. This sense of suffering, of course, contrasts heavily with the earlier works where Sebastian is depicted post-martyrdom. The shift to a

¹²⁵ Ibid, 66-67.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 91.

¹²⁷ According to Marshall, the use of the narrative altarpiece was typically reserved to depict the lives of Christ and the Virgin. The addition of Sebastian to this style adds a certain amount of gravitas to his cult and, therefore, his plague-abating charism. The scholar writes that, due to his Stigmatization, Saint Francis may be the only other additional saint granted this type of visual narration in the period. She draws the conclusion that both saints "could be hailed as *alter Christus* by virtue of their wounds, in assimilation of Christ's Passion." (p. 92)

suffering saint, perhaps, reflects fourteenth-century's need to find a heavenly advocate in the midst of mankind's suffering caused by recurring outbreaks of the plague.

Sebastian is no longer a localized, Roman saint enjoying his heavenly rewards, but plays an active role in the theological struggle with the "evil" of the plague in fourteenth-century Florence. He has become an intercessor, a celestial weapon, in combating the ravages of the disease.



Fig. 15 Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian and Scenes from His Life, Giovanni del Biondo, Florence, 1370.

While Sebastian is portrayed as a “suffering saint,” the viewer need not be dismayed by Sebastian’s martyrdom – there are clear elements of hope and promise of celestial rewards within the altarpiece. First, at the top, Christ gives his benediction to the narrative; sanctifying Sebastian’s act. Moreover, Sebastian’s martyrdom is confirmed through the use of the angel at the saint’s side. Providing the saint with his laurel crown of martyrdom, Sebastian and the angel lock eyes as if to further underscore the celestial mission.

Benozzo Gozzoli’s two Sebastian paintings in 1464-65 confirm the period’s belief in the saint’s role as an intercessor (figs. 16 and 17). Painted in San Gimignano as a result of an outbreak of the plague, the artist provides a visual intercessory prayer on behalf of the city.¹²⁸ In the course of just over ninety years between Biondo’s work and Gozzoli’s we witness a dramatic shift in the iconography regarding Sebastian. Gozzoli’s *Martyrdom*, portrays a serene Sebastian at the point of his martyrdom. More importantly, Gozzoli’s work reveals a growing trend to portray the event as “other-worldly.” While Biondo’s painting depicts an angel presenting the martyr’s crown and portrays Christ in a posture of blessing, the entire top half of Gozzoli’s work is devoted to the celestial element of the narration. The pattern is even more even more dramatically repeated in the artist’s *Intercession*. Here, we witness Sebastian post-martyrdom. At the top, God the Father, the source of all punishment, is about to hurl down a plague arrow on the town. The citizens of San Gimignano gather around a prayerful Sebastian as two angels hold his cape in a gesture of envelopment and protection. The plague arrows break

¹²⁸ *Web Gallery of Art*, "St Sebastian Intercessor," <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/gozzoli/5various/4interce.html>. (accessed September 3, 2009).

harmlessly off of the cape. Sebastian is standing on a pedestal carved with the inscription, “Sancte Sebastiane Intercede pro devoto populo tuo” (Saint Sebastian, intercede for your devoted people). In Gozzoli’s works, the iconography of Sebastian as an intercessor is nearly complete

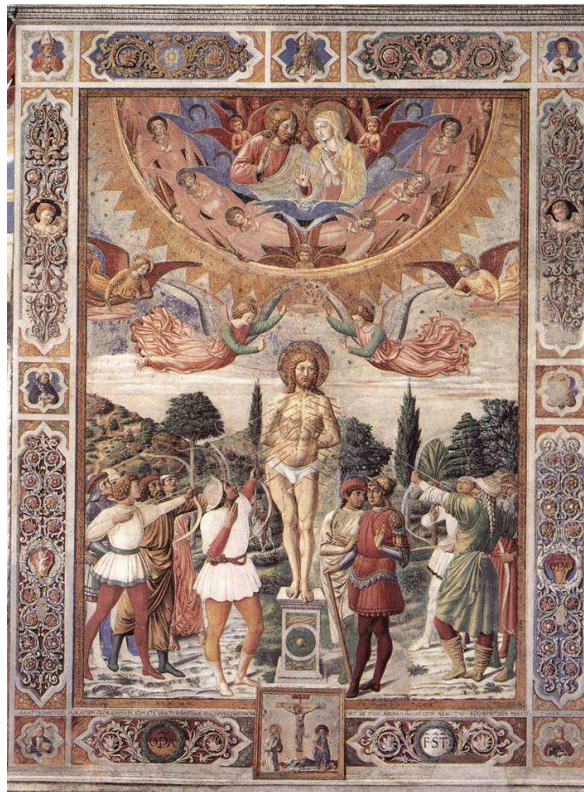


Fig. 16 Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, Benozzo Gozzoli, San Gimignano, 1464-65.

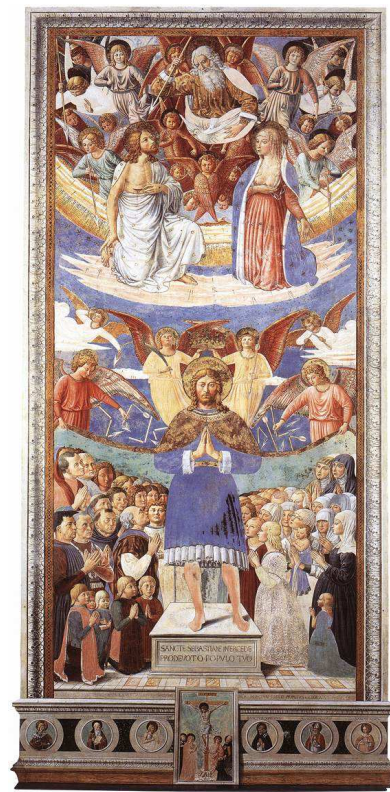


Fig. 17 Intercession of Saint Sebastian, Benozzo Gozzoli, San Gimignano, 1464-65.

The Quattrocento proved to be a transitional period for Sebastian iconography in two ways. In contrast to Biondo’s 1370 work, Pietro Perugino’s (1450’s) and Matteo di Giovanni’s (c. 1480) paintings (figs. 18 and 19) reveal striking differences in iconography regarding the same topic. No doubt, the shift in style between Biondo’s work and these illustrate the dramatic shift in artistry from the Trecento to the Quattrocento, but they also demonstrate a change in Sebastian’s iconography. As time

progressed, the sense of the saint's suffering faded into the background. While there is still evidence of his arrow martyrdom in the later works, the pieces focus on the other-worldly nature of Sebastian's courage and sanctity.

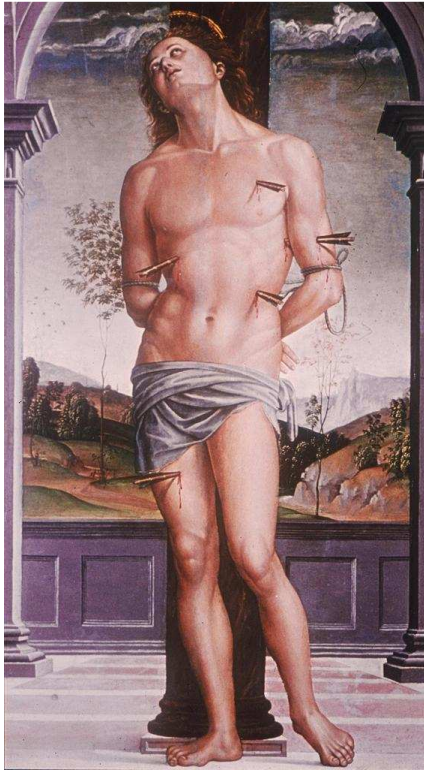


Fig. 18 Saint Sebastian, Pietro Perugino, 1450s.



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Fig. 19 Saint Sebastian, Matteo di Giovanni, c 1480.

In the case of both of these works and many others later on, the archers have been removed from the picture. By removing the remaining elements of the narrative, the artist shifts the perspective towards Sebastian's celestial mission. In Perugino's case, Sebastian looks up to the skies as if to receive God's benediction for his martyrdom. Note also that the background is serene and pastoral, hardly underscoring the sense of suffering that Sebastian must have experienced. This concept is echoed in Gozoli's works whereby the heavenly aspect of the image constitutes over half of the artwork.

Removing the archers or making the image a mostly-celestial event ultimately results in an “other-worldly” perspective to Sebastian’s martyrdom.

While Perugino’s work depicts Sebastian at the point of his martyrdom, Matteo di Giovanni’s work harkens back to a post-martyrdom theme. No longer tied to a post or tree, Sebastian engages the viewer personally. The two cherubs present him with one of his crowns of martyrdom while Sebastian himself holds the second in his right hand; serenely engaging the audience. With Sebastian no longer suffering, Giovanni’s piece reminds the audience that the pains of the plague are transitory and that greater glory awaits mankind. Sebastian is no longer of this earthly world, of the *Ecclesia Expectans*. In Giovanni’s work, he has clearly become a member of the *Ecclesia Triumphans* capable of advocating on behalf of mankind.

Perhaps the most striking change in the iconography of Saint Sebastian is the fact that he is, more often than not, portrayed as a youth. This lies in direct contrast to the earlier, non plague-related, icons of the sixth- and seventh centuries. Moreover, the new, “youthful” Sebastian is probably not historically accurate. While there is a chance that he was recruited into the Guard as a teenager, ancient military historian Boris Rankov explains that, by the second century A. D., transfer to the Guard from other branches of the Roman military was the norm.¹²⁹ It is far more likely that, if the *Passio* is correct, Sebastian served in the military in some other capacity prior to joining the Praetorian Guard – adding to his age significantly. Joining the Guards, moreover, was a long-standing commitment. Rankov explains that “from 5 B. C. onwards, Praetorians signed

¹²⁹ Boris Rankov, *The Praetorian Guard* (Oxford, England: Osprey Publishing, 1994), 8.

up for 16 years' service."¹³⁰ There is no indication as to when, in the sixteen year commitment, Sebastian converted to Christianity and, subsequently, was martyred. More likely than not, Sebastian was significantly older than these later images portray.¹³¹ Why, then, the change towards a youthful, vibrant Sebastian?

Italian medievalist and writer, Umberto Eco writes on the use of beauty to reveal a subject's connection to the holy. He writes that "beauty was the disposition of form in reaction to its internal character. In this way, beauty was given a new foundation, for the true, the good, and the beautiful were convertible. They differed only *ratione* – conceptually, logically."¹³² In other words, "the beautiful" and "the good," to the medieval artist, were interfused and interrelated. Additionally, "the beautiful" reflected a harmonious universe. While writing about the Scholastic period, Eco's commentaries on beauty and universal harmony also apply to the later artistic periods:

The climate of the time was one of integrated values. Its sensibility breathed the spirit of the Greek *kalokathia*, the good and beautiful combined, albeit a spirit modified by Christianity. ... If it could be shown that beauty was a constant property of being a whole, then the beauty of the universe would be founded on a metaphysical certainty, not a mere poetic sentiment.¹³³

Eco's words go a great way in explaining the evolution of Sebastian into a beautiful youth. Since beauty was inextricably linked to the holy, portraying Sebastian in this

¹³⁰ While 16 years of service is long-term by today's standard, Rankov writes that joining the Guard actually reduced the amount of time a man committed to active service. The Urban Cohorts demanded 20 years and the Legions 25. Ibid.

¹³¹ Ordinary recruits to the Praetorian Guard were aged between 15 and 32. With his prior service, it is likely that Sebastian was in his mid-twenties by the time he entered. Adding a possible 16 years for his service in the Guard itself, making him somewhere between 25 and 41 when he was executed. Therefore, while it is possible that Sebastian was a youth when he was martyred, the odds are that he was middle-aged. This, of course, would make the earlier iconography of the saint more true to his actual age.

¹³² Umberto Eco and Hugh Bredin, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989),24.

¹³³ Ibid, 20.

manner allowed for a greater efficacy, a greater holiness, than the historical narrative would have provided. In other words, while the images may reflect a moment in time – Sebastian’s arrow martyrdom – they make no pretensions at recording history. Rather, they serve a different function altogether. Later images, in particular, reflect Eco’s words on beauty and harmony. One need only to look at Gozzoli’s *Intercession* to get a feel for the sense of the balancing of cosmic forces. Distanced from historical reality, this work gives the sense that God’s wrath, the source of the plague, can be abated; that, somehow through Sebastian’s intercession, an angry God can be soothed.

Perhaps the most important element to keep in mind regarding the images of Saint Sebastian, in particular the later versions, is that these works were not generally conceived as historical narratives, but devotional pieces. As devotional pieces, they became more abstracted from the historical narrative. By portraying Sebastian as a beautiful youth, the artist was no longer displaying a historical reality, but a “moral and psychological reality.”¹³⁴ The later iconography of Sebastian reminds the viewer that the suffering he endured has a transcendent element. The audience is reminded that the suffering of this world, much like Sebastian’s suffering, is transitory.

Insofar as plague iconography is concerned, the images of Sebastian operated on two different levels, one earthly and the other divine. As quasi-sacred objects themselves, they were viewed as being endowed with a quality that allowed mankind to evoke the prayers of a powerful intercessor against the rampages of disease. As stated earlier, these images were no mere museum pieces; they were a living part of the cosmology that was intimately tied to mankind’s salvation or damnation. They were seen

¹³⁴ Ibid., 5.

as effective weapons in the medieval arsenal against the plague. On the other hand, these images were not mere “hanging intercessory prayers” – that is, objects solely intended to invoke the prayers of an intercessor. As pieces of art, these sacred images were also designed to be viewed by an audience, to invoke an emotional response in the viewer. As devotional pieces, these images also served as a reminder to the audience that, much like the subject itself, mankind is called to suffer in this earthly life. In these images, Sebastian serves as a reminder that these sufferings are temporary; that greater rewards await a faithful community.

This “dual operation” of Sebastian’s iconography vividly mirrors the period’s attitude towards the plague. The images portray the need for a heavenly intercessor and reflect the sense of fear noted at the beginning of this chapter. But they also functioned as devotional pieces and were intended to be a source of inspiration to their audiences. Viewed from an eschatological perspective, they reminded the viewer that mankind’s earthly sufferings were to be endured as transitory trials; that greater glories awaited.

SAINT ROCH AS A PLAGUE SAINT

While Sebastian's plague-abating charism gained influence in the Italian peninsula, he was not the only intercessor to gain popularity as a "plague saint." As mentioned earlier, regions and cities generally took recourse to their patron saint – each area or city adopting one as the centuries progressed. Moreover, Trecento and Quattrocento artwork bares witness to the development of two other universal cults regarding the plague. Images depicting Saint Roch and the Virgin Mary – as the *Madonna della Misericordia* (the Mother of Mercy) – also abound throughout the Italian peninsula and beyond. Unlike Sebastian's rather hazy origins as a plague saint, the hagiography surrounding Roch has a clear connection to the plague – his healing miracles surround the plague and the saint himself was a survivor of the disease.

The main sources of information regarding the history (and hagiography) of Saint Roch comes from the anonymously written *Acta breviora* from 1483 and the first published version (1470) of the *Legenda aurea*.¹³⁵ Born in Montpellier (his father was apparently governor of the city) around the close of the thirteenth century, Roch lost both of his parents when about twenty years old. Handing over the reins of government to his uncle and distributing his family's treasure, he set out for Rome in the guise of a

¹³⁵ Since the first writing of the *Legenda* dates back to the 1260's, Roch's chapter is a relatively new addition. As we shall see, Roch's addition to the 1470 version of the Golden Legend reflects the saint's increasing popularity in the second half of the fifteenth-century.

mendicant pilgrim.¹³⁶ At Acquapendente (in Northern Italy), he experienced his first encounter with the plague and performed his first healing miracle. While at Rome, he cured a cardinal suffering from the disease. Grateful, the cardinal introduced him to the pope, who immediately recognized the Roch's piety – granting him a plenary indulgence.¹³⁷

On his return trip (he spent three years in Rome curing the sick in the city), Roch cured plague victims in Rimini, Novara and Piacenza. In Piacenza, Roch, forewarned by an angel in a dream, contracted the disease. Roch left the city for the neighboring forests so that no others would be infected.¹³⁸ Throughout his sufferings, he never complained. Instead, he praised God that he was granted the gift of affliction that he might better understand the sufferings that Christ endured on the cross. The *Legenda* explains that a hunting dog in the service of a local nobleman, Gotard, began to steal bread from his master's table in order to bring sustenance to Roch while he was in seclusion in the forest. Becoming curious, Gotard followed his dog out into the forest and found Roch, becoming the saint's first disciple.¹³⁹

In reward for his steadfast prayers and stoic endurance of his sufferings, Roch himself miraculously survived the plague. He returned to his homeland where, mistaken

¹³⁶ Some believe that Roch may have become a third class member of the Franciscan order upon the death of his parents. This, naturally, would explain the change in clothes. More importantly, it would also explain his pilgrimage to Italy. Marshall's dissertation provides a comprehensive history of Roch's life. The saint's story is widely available online.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 169.

¹³⁸ The *Legenda Aurea* is a variance with this statement. According to it, the townsfolk drove Roch out of the city once he had contracted the disease. The *Legenda Aurea* reads: "then the citizens incontinent put out S. Roche from the city and suburbs, lest by him the city might be the more infected." Either through his own volition or the will of the citizens of Piacenza, Roch decidedly left the city.

¹³⁹ Marshall, dissertation, 169.

for a spy, he was thrown in prison. A model prisoner, Roch “patiently went into prison and suffered it gladly.”¹⁴⁰ Having endured prison for five years, Roch was again visited by an angel who informed Roch that his sufferings were to end – that he was to die and that “his soul should be brought into the fellowship of his [God’s] saints.” On his deathbed, Roch supplicated God that “all good Christian men which reverently prayed in the name of Jesu to the blessed Rocke might be delivered surely from the stroke of pestilence.” Having finished his prayer, the saint died.

According to the Golden Legend, an angel then appeared and left a tablet – divinely written with letters of gold – indicating the prisoner’s true identity and revealing that whosoever “callesh meekly to S. Rocke he shall not be hurt with any hurt of pestilence.” The *Legenda aurea* finishes the story: soon after his death (and with his identity revealed) the citizens of Montpellier appealed to the pope to canonize their native son in recognition of his Godly works. Upon hearing the miraculous deeds of Roch, the pope had him canonized. The chapter on Roch concludes with an admonition to the reader to appeal to the saint for intercession against the plague:

Then let us reverently with devotion pray unto this glorious saint S. Rocke, that by his intercession and prayer we may be delivered from the hard death of pestilence and epidemic, and that we may so live in this life and be penitent for our sins, that after this short life we may come unto everlasting life in heaven.

Given that both the *Legenda* and the *Acta* are hagiographical works, the historicity of them often come into question. Neither provides a specific time table of events regarding Roch’s life – nor were they intended to. Marshall reminds us that “the *Acta Breviora* was intended to celebrate and promote the cult of St. Roch, not to document his

¹⁴⁰ *Legenda Aurea*

life.”¹⁴¹ In their essence, the historical accuracy of these works is less important than their devotional impact. Much like the depictions of Sebastian’s martyrdom, Roch’s devotion and stoic endurance of suffering stand as a vivid reminder to Christian society to face its trials with bravery and determination – confident and secure in their final, heavenly reward.

The spread of Roch’s cult as a plague saint mirrors that of Sebastian’s though the latter’s cult took on that role about a century before the former. The first extant documentation of Roch’s cult traces to the 1460’s in the Veneto region of Northern Italy. Like Sebastian, Roch’s cult slowly spread by word of mouth (and copies of the *Acta*) through various regions of Italy. Marshall writes that, as evidence of his “growing popularity in the region around Venice,” Roch “appears alongside other saints in two altarpieces from the Vivarini workshop, dated 1464 and 1465.”¹⁴² And, the growing interest in Roch is reflected in the “1467 decision of the long established Paduan confraternity of St. Lucy to officially rename itself as that of St. Roch and Lucy.”¹⁴³

Much like Sebastian’s cult, Roch’s popularity as a plague saint expanded rapidly in the recurrent outbreaks of the plague in the fifteenth century. Waves of the plague in 1477 and 1479 certainly played a part in the diffusion of Roch’s cult throughout the Northern regions of the Italian peninsula – where many of his healing miracles took place. Confraternities dedicated to the saint were formed in the Veneto, Umbria and

¹⁴¹ Marshall, dissertation, 170.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 171.

Tuscany regions in these years.¹⁴⁴ This brief period witnesses an influx of commissions for paintings including Saint Roch in addition to the saint's name being inserted into the Venetian edition of the Roman missal.¹⁴⁵ Roch's popularity certainly grew with the saint's intercession against the plague during the Council of Constance in 1414 and, thenceforward, his charism as a plague saint was secured.¹⁴⁶

Roch also appears alongside Saint Romanus in a 1478 painting intended to protect the citizens of the Umbrian city of Deruta (near Perugia) from the onslaught of the plague. In tandem with the city's patron saint, Roch adds his "expertise" in plague-abatement to the celestial petition.¹⁴⁷ In essence the city has adopted a second patron in Roch – relying on his experience to provide a more potent petition to God.

The saint appears again on a 1480 canvas *gonfalone* (a processional banner used for either ecclesiastical or civic purposes) in the Umbrian town of Foligno in the Servite church of San Giacomo. As with other instances of painting commissions, this one followed a plague epidemic in the area. The painting is believed to be by a local artist, Pier Antonio Mezzastris. Here we see Roch taking a clear intercessory role on behalf of the worshipping townspeople. The calm, assuring gaze of Christ resonates –complete with a Resurrection banner, reminding the viewer of the heavenly aspiration of every faithful

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 172.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. Marshall writes that three paintings invoking the aid of Roch were commissioned in Northern Italy between 1478 and 1481.

¹⁴⁶ Modern scholarship has contended the historical accuracy of the plague and the Council of Constance. For our purposes here, this is of little consequence. Historical accuracy and hagiography do not always see eye to eye. That this "miracle" was attributed to Roch is the crux of the story. Ibid, 174.

¹⁴⁷ "By his presence, Roch functions to support Romanus' appeal, supplementing the passionately personal relationship of the city and the patron saint with his more specialized 'expertise.'" Ibid, 175.

Christian - Roch's ability to provide ample intercessory protection to the populace.¹⁴⁸

The commissioners of the town further underscored the significance of the banner (and hence, Roch's prophylactic abilities regarding the plague) on 25 June 1481, when it was carried in a city-wide procession. This procession was to be completed every year in remembrance of Roch's intercession on behalf of Foligno. With the collaboration of the

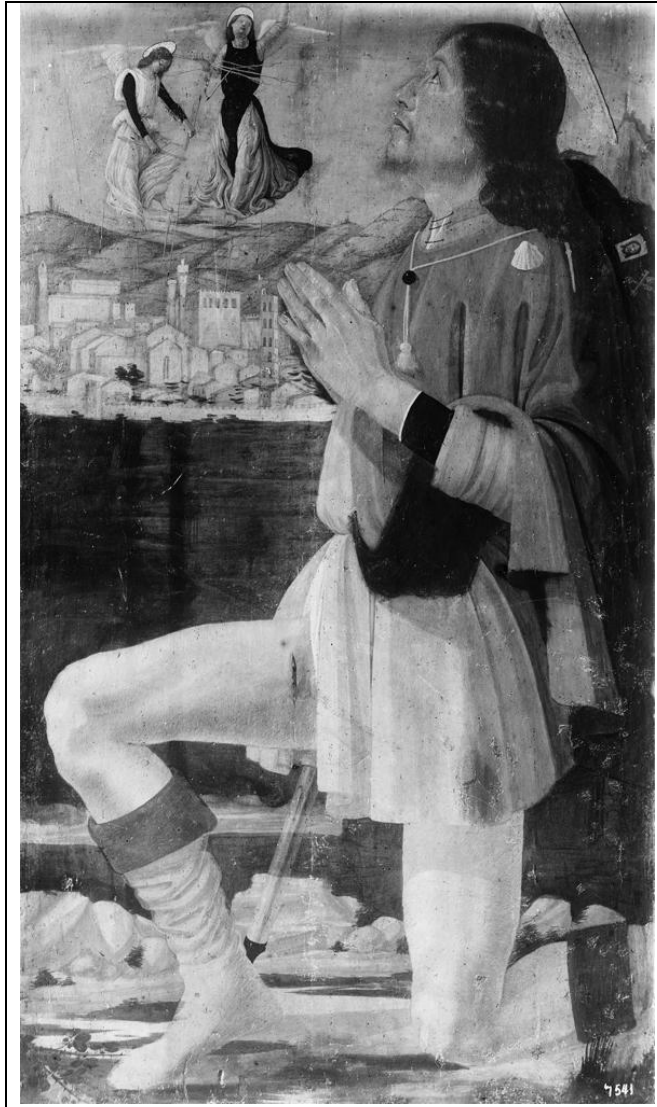


Fig. 20 St. Roch interceding with Christ to stop the plague, Bartolomeo della Gatta, 1478.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 187-186.

civic authorities of the town with the confraternity we witness Foligno's version of a "total war" against the waves of epidemic.¹⁴⁹

Given Roch's intimate connection to the plague, it is hardly surprising that artists used his image to invoke celestial protection against it. His healing miracles and his own survival of the plague "endowed" Roch with a special connection to those who suffered from the disease. More than a mere device to the audience (so that the saint can be



Fig. 21 Sts. Roch and Lucy, Lorenzo Costa, 1480/81.

¹⁴⁹ The Foligno gonfalone must have proved particularly effective. It spawned at least two later copies within the region in the late fifteenth century. Ibid.

identified in images), Roch confidently reveals the pustule on his thigh as a reminder to mankind of his sympathy with their plight. On this head Marshall writes that, “for Renaissance men and women, the sight of Roch, living and healthy, exposing his bleeding bubo, must have been an emotionally charged image of promised salvation. Here was one who had triumphed in his own flesh over the disease which constantly threatened them.”¹⁵⁰ These images also mirror those of Sebastian cited earlier in the chapter. Images of Roch remind the viewer that it is, indeed, possible to survive the plague – that, like his own example, living in piety and patiently enduring the trials and tribulations of this world results, ultimately, in a heavenly reward.

Almost every depiction of Roch reveals a post-suffering saint. Much like the later images of Sebastian, who even at the point of his martyrdom does not appear to suffer at all, Roch’s sufferings (while poignantly described in the *Legenda aurea*) are not portrayed. The images of Roch from 1478 to 1481 parallel those of Sebastian from the same period (see Pietro Perugino’s (1478) and Matteo di Giovanni’s (c. 1480) paintings, page 68). Mirroring Sebastian’s later images, Roch’s hagiography and images remind the viewer that their earthly tribulations are like fire that purifies gold.

In this light, the plague becomes a means of chastisement, a needed penance for a sinful mankind. As such, these images illustrate that disease is to be stoically and patiently

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.



Fig. 22 Saints Romanus and Roch intervene on behalf of Deruta, 1478.



Fig. 23 Saint Roch intercedes on behalf of Folino, 1480.

endured, with confidence that greater things await.¹⁵¹ Like Sebastian, Roch's patient suffering mirror's that of Christ (who, suffered the ultimate penance by enduring his crucifixion as a means of expiating mankind's sins) and reminds the viewer of every Christian's duty to accept suffering since it brought the individual closer to understanding the sufferings of their Savior. The parallels among Roch, Sebastian and Christ continue – each, in their turn, take their devotees' suffering (and in Christ's case, sins) into their physical bodies. These saints are not mere bystanders who sympathetically watch as mankind suffers but, rather, as suffering saints themselves, they are endowed with a

¹⁵¹ In his pious acceptance of affliction as a trial sent by God, Roch was explicitly presented by [fifteenth-century hagiographer] Diedo as an example to be imitated. The lesson was clear: only if one accepted the disease as a justly ordained trial, and placed one's trust entirely in God, as did Roch, was there any hope of recovery. Ibid, 178.

particular efficacy, becoming active and effective petitioners to abate mankind's suffering.

As with the images of Sebastian, the time for the Roch's suffering has passed. Mankind, too, although suffering now, can look forward to a brighter eternity *specifically because* of that suffering. Both saints remind the viewer of the transitory nature of death. It is not the end, but rather, the beginning of a new and profoundly deeper relationship with God. In their own ways, both Sebastian and Roch reflect the eschatological beliefs espoused by the theologians of the period. In these images, we have a visual representation of John of Rupecissa's 1438 tract, *Liber secretorum eventuum*, where the author reminds the reader that the "innumerable multiplying of corpses" would be "succeeded by time of peace and Christian triumph."¹⁵² Symbolically, Roch and Sebastian represent the post-apocalyptic second half of Rupecissa's vision.

¹⁵² Ibid, 551.

THE VIRGIN MARY – THE MADONNA DELLA MISERICORDIA

From the Council of Ephesus to the Protestant Reformation, the role of the Virgin Mary in the Christian church has been hotly debated. As the mother of Christ, she has been afforded a special position in the hierarchy of heaven. Demonstrative of this deferential status, she has been given titles such as *Stella Maris* and *Regina Coeli* (Star of the Sea and Queen of Heaven, respectively). Mary, because of her singular role as mother of God (or *theotokos*) came to be viewed as the ultimate intercessor with her Son on mankind's behalf. Sacred images involving Mary have, not surprisingly, followed suit with her special status. One popular image type of Mary throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods was the *Madonna della misericordia*, the Mother of Mercy – where the Virgin wraps her mantle in a gesture of protection around a crowd of faithful gathered at her feet.¹⁵³ As with the literal use of a cloak for protection from the elements, the iconographical symbolism of the article of clothing has long been interpreted as a form of protection, of security. On the symbolic nature of enveloping someone with a cloak, Marshall writes: “The theme of the *Madonna della Misericordia* resonated with long-established gestural symbolism, from the legal and ritual act of covering someone with one's cloak as a sign of protection and adoption, to the many popular prayers in which the faithful beseech the Virgin's intercession and place themselves under her protection.”¹⁵⁴

While the origins of this type of iconography are somewhat cloudy, recent scholarship demonstrates that it developed during the late thirteenth century – particularly

¹⁵³ Marshall, dissertation, 209.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

under the influence of the Dominican and Franciscan orders. Barbara Wollesen-Wisch reports that “innumerable Italian Marian confraternities... used the Madonna of Mercy image as their chief symbol in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries” and that the image “remained throughout the following centuries in its traditional forms and locations – as altarpieces and *gonfaloni*, above the entrances to oratories, houses, hospitals and orphanages run by the confraternities and on confraternity documents such as the title page of statue books.”¹⁵⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly, as the ultimate assurance of celestial protection, this iconographical image gained popularity in periods of intense trials or tribulations. The Trecento and Quattrocento periods witnessed an expanded propagation of the *Madonna della Misericordia* iconography.

The Dominican order proved to be particularly influential in advancing the use of Mary as a source of security and protection; a defense against a wrathful deity, bent on punishing humanity for its profligate ways. Marshall writes, “amongst the Dominicans, the theme of Mary’s mediation occurs repeatedly in visions which testify to the Order’s celestially-instigated mission to bring humanity to repentance.”¹⁵⁶ The Order helped spread the vision of Christ as the “Just Judge” who was poised to bring His much deserved wrath to sinful man. As part of Dominic’s vision, it is the Virgin Mary who tempers her Son’s anger – soothing Christ as a mother does an upset child. As with Saint Sebastian, the “plague as arrow” symbolism merged with the images of Mary where she afforded the faithful her all enveloping protection.¹⁵⁷ According to the vision, it is

¹⁵⁵ Barbara Wollensen-Wish, “The Madonna of Mercy,” *The Art Bulletin*, 68, (1986): 674-676.

¹⁵⁶ Marshall, dissertation, 214.

through Mary's intercession, that Christ – poised to strike the world with three arrows – is placated. In gratitude for Christ holding back his punishment, Mary presents Dominic and Francis as “new prophets” sent to guide man back to the path of righteousness.

Successive waves of epidemic lead to a variation in the iconography of the Madonna della Misericordia. In the midst of suffering, it is easy to see how mankind could believe that they were (at the very least metaphorically) facing the Last Judgment as written in the Book of Revelation. In a world torn apart by disease, mankind sought assured refuge under the protection of the “Mother of Mercy.” The plague, interpreted as God's vengeful scorn, underscored the need for mankind's repentance. In these instances of the *Madonna della Misericordia* motif, an angry God -- usually Christ as the Just Judge, though God the Father occasionally appears. A visual representation of Dominic's



Fig. 24 Misericordia, Sienna, early 14th Century.



Fig. 25 Misericordia, Loggia de Bigallo, Florence, 14th Century.



Fig. 26 Misericordia, Relief above a doorway at San Toma Church, Venice, c. 1350s.

vision, the deity appears holding the arrows of his wrath. Angels, brandishing half-drawn swords or firing arrows, are often depicted as faithfully executing Christ's justice. Mary, confident in her ability to temper her Son's wrath, shrouds faithful under her cloak – shielding them from torment. The arrows bounce harmlessly off of the cloak, assuring mankind of the efficacy of her intervention.

One of the earliest extant versions of this plague rendition of the *Madonna della Misericordia* is Barnaba da Modena's Genoese masterpiece. Painted in the 1370's after an outbreak of the plague (in 1372), the image provides a clear indication of the assured safety that those devoted to the Madonna will receive. While pieces have been cut from its original form (the upper two corners and, presumably an entire section at the top are missing) the viewer still gets a sense of God's wrath. Angels appear over Mary's shoulders, bows at the ready to dispense God's justice. Wimpled nuns, tonsured monks, a bishop, and the Genoese faithful gather at her feet in search of protection – some

clinging to her vestments. Mary, serenely engaging the viewer, seems to ensure that those who seek her protection will be granted it. Salvation is not for all, though. On the fringes of the painting, there are clear demonstrations of the sufferings to be expected to those who do not appeal to the Madonna for aid. Like the Triumph of Death paintings (see pages 12 and 54), the viewer witnesses the misery that awaits those who fail to invoke her intercession.

The protective element surrounding the plague version of the *Madonna della Misericordia* became even further developed in the Quattrocento period. Striking representations of this period come from Benedetto Bonfigli's Perugian masterpiece from 1464 and Giovanni Bocatti's 1470's painting. In both, we witness a punitive Christ unleashing his anger on the mankind below. As symbols of his divine wrath, he carries plague arrows in both paintings. An oversized Mary calmly envelops the faithful in her cloak. As in the Barnaba da Modena's earlier work, those under Mary's cloak cover a broad spectrum of medieval society. The plague arrows – clearly visible in Bocatti's work, but also present in Bonfigli's – cannot penetrate her all-encompassing protection.

In Bonfigli's work, painted in the church of San Francesco al Prato, the Madonna is flanked by saints of all ages and Orders. Sebastian kneels at the right side of the painting while Lawrence, his Roman contemporary, peers over Mary's right shoulder. Franciscans, Dominicans and Cistercians are each represented by Francis (his stigmata are clearly visible), Peter of Verona (Peter Martyr, the instrument of his martyrdom still buried in his head), and Bernard of Clairvaux, respectively. In both scale and action, Bonfigli's work reveals a vivid picture of Mary's position in the hierarchy of the Church.

The saints, though privileged to be God's chosen in heaven, are somewhat smaller in perspective than the Virgin. The faithful, in their turn, are scaled



Fig. 27 Madonna della Misericordia, Barnaba da Modena, Genoa, 1370s.

slightly smaller than the saints. By virtue of their scale, the hierarchy is reinforced.

The angle of vision for each of the subjects in Bonfigli's work is also quite revealing. Christ and his angels are poised to strike –swords and arrows at the ready.

They gaze fixedly at Perugia below and seem oblivious of the penitents and saints who dominate the middle



Fig. 28 Misericordia, Benedetto Bonfigli, Perugia, San Francesco al Prato, 1464.



Fig. 29 Misericordia, Giovanni Boccati, 1470.

Section of the work. Both the faithful and the communion of saints gaze at the Virgin in an expression of desperate entreaty. They invoke the mother of God to intercede on behalf of mankind. Both Sebastian and Bernard rest their hands on one of the faithful in



Fig. 30 Misericordia (detail) Benedetto Bonfigli, Perugia, 1464.

a gesture of presentation to the Virgin. Mary, in her turn, engages the audience directly. Her placid gaze soothes the viewer in this period of turmoil. She inspires confidence in the viewer that her supplication to Christ will, indeed, temper the destruction caused by the plague. The result of invoking her intercession appears at the bottom of the work. Through the Virgin's intercession, an angel drives a winged, skeletal demon (bow and arrows in his hands and a quiver slung over his shoulder) out of Perugia. On the left (within the city), the faithful kneel – expressing thanks for the Virgin's aid.

VOTIVE CHURCHES

Sacred images were not the only way of eliciting the aid of the celestial. In an article in *Slavic Review*, Russel Zguta writes that it was common in Eastern Europe to construct votive churches in a single day as a means of combating the spread of the plague. Zguta writes “the early Russian chronicles record nineteen one-day votive churches built between 1390 and 1552, all as a response to the pestilence then raging.”¹⁵⁸ Significantly, ten of these churches (*obydennyi khrami*) were constructed in Novgorod or Pskov – cities that were actively engaged in trade with Western Europe at the time of the Black Death. That it was these two cities that experienced waves of the epidemic more often than any of their Eastern European counterparts underscores the spread of the disease along established trade routes.

While none of these *obydennyi khrami* still exist, documentation regarding the building of the 1654 church in Vologda still remains. Zguta describes the event:

A call went out immediately for all devout inhabitants of the town and its suburbs to assemble. On October 18, 1654, Archbishop Markell of Vologda and Perm solemnly blessed the large cadre of eager and hopeful workers. At precisely 1 A.M., the foundation for the church was laid. Some took charge of the ground plans; others supervised the hauling of the wood which was being brought in from every direction. Still others made torches out of birch bark and with these ringed the construction site, providing light during the early morning hours.... By nightfall of the same day the work was completed, albeit the interior walls were left rough and unhewn. Icons were borrowed from several nearby churches for the formal consecration and the celebration of the inaugural Divine Liturgy by the archbishop on the following day.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Russell Zguta, "The One-Day Votive Church: A Religious Response to the Black Death in Early Russia," *Slavic Review* 40 (Autumn 1981): 423.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 427.

Zguta indicates that these votive churches were a popular response to the plague in the Slavic lands because there was no recognizable patron saint of pestilence.¹⁶⁰ The author details that, in the face of the impending epidemic, cities called upon their metropolitan in order to lead a “Holy Procession” around the city in an effort to seal the city off from the ‘evils’ associated with the disease.¹⁶¹ Having exhausted all other resources and lacking a Saint Sebastian or Roch in their arsenal against the plague, the the Slavic people turned to building a small (the church in Ekterinskoe measured 101 square feet, for example), rough-hewn church as a means of invoking heavenly aid to stop the plague. Eastern Europe, however, was not the only region to build these one-day votive churches in response to outbreaks.

About fifteen miles from the Adriatic Coast, in the Marche region of Italy, the city of Macerata boasts of a one-day votive church built in response to an outbreak of the plague in 1446/47. The story behind the construction of the church mirrors that of the one in Vologda:

In 1446-47, the plague reached Macerata, disseminating terror and death in the desolate city. With all other remedies useless, in order to check the disease that continued to ravage [lit. infuriate], the Communal Council, unanimously, voted [lit. deliberated] to construct a votive chaplet, in a single day, around the fresco representing the Madonna della Misericordia, that was on the wall of the garden of the bishop in the Piazza del Duomo. On 15 August, the first stone was laid and the sixteenth, all of the citizens [of Macerata] – young and old, men and women, poor and rich, lay and religious – came to raise the church. From that day, the plague [lit. death] diminished until it stopped completely and the chapel was crowded every day with the faithful who rushed to thank the Virgin.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 424.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 425.

¹⁶² *Comune Di Macerata*, July 28, 2006, "Storia Madonna Misericordia," http://www.comune.macerata.it/download/storia_madonna_misericordia.pdf. (accessed November 12, 2009).

Unlike its Eastern European counterparts, the Maceratese church still exists. In 1734 an official commissioned the young architect, Luigi Vanvitelli, to build a church surrounding the original structure. The painting still exists as a centerpiece of *Il Santuario della Madonna della Misericordia* in the Piazza Strambi. In the painting we witness one of the most thorough iconographical images designed to deliver the citizens of Macerata from the misery of the plague. The familiar plague-saints are coupled with the town's patrons – Saints John Hospitaller (on the extreme left, with the red and white striped cane) and Andrew are present to implore the Virgin for her intercession. To the right, Sebastian engages the audience and Roch exposes the bubo on his thigh while gazing at Mary in a look of entreaty. As in the illustrations above, Mary stands serene, confident in her powers as intercessor. Her gaze engages those Maceratese citizens who gather at her feet while her outstretched arm and cape envelope them in the familiar gesture of protection.¹⁶³ Elements regarding the building of the votive churches in Macerata and Volgodia parallel each other. In both, the entire community was mobilized into action. Regardless of status or position, the building of these churches was a communal affair and everyone was assigned a role in the process of building. That the community gathered to build these churches implies that both civic and religious authorities combined in an effort to cease the ravages caused by the outbreak. On the communal aspect of these votive churches, Zguta writes “although the one-day votive church was clearly a religious response to plague, the initiative for its construction,

¹⁶³ The use of the Misericordia in Macerata was not limited to the Quattrocento. In 1846 another painting of the Madonna was put on the city hall in the main square of town (the Piazza Libertà) to preserve the people from an outbreak of cholera. My thanks to Anna Pisani from the Communications Office from the Comune di Macerata for her information and the use of the Misericordia image.



Fig. 31 Misericordia with Sebastian, Roch, John Hospitalier and Andrew, Macerata, Early Quattrocento.

more often than not, came from a secular rather than ecclesiastical quarter.”¹⁶⁴ As in the city-wide “Holy Processions,” the creation of these votive churches represents an entire community gathering to demonstrate their faith to a wrathful God.

As communal projects, these votive churches gave the general populace a specific role in the process of preserving their town from the ravages of epidemic. Perhaps

¹⁶⁴ Zguta, 426.

equally important to providing the populace a specific role in the process, building a votive church also gave them something to do, to alleviate the stress from the population as they braced to encounter the plague. Stressing that the community was “mobilized into swift action to avert panic and ultimate despair,” these churches, “afforded psychological release from pent-up fears and frustrations.”¹⁶⁵ Constructing these votive churches also prevented panic from gripping the population by “challenging the able-bodied to exert their energies in a constructive and perhaps even spiritually rewarding function.”¹⁶⁶ In other words, giving the people a constructive task helped to alleviate a sense of helplessness that surely would have developed as the plague spread from city to city.

While the psychological effect of doing something constructive in the midst of an outbreak is certainly important, constructing these votive churches, in the eyes of those involved in their construction, did more than provide a psychological release. Much like the efficacy of the sacred images, these one-day churches were believed to be endowed with a special and specific spiritual function. They, too, were seen as a viable means of defending the faithful from the ‘evil’ that had befallen them. Here, the narrative surrounding the Vologda votive church sheds some light. The archbishop blesses the workers as they prepare to start the construction of the church. Tasked with a holy mission, the faithful worked non-stop until their sacred duty was completed. Zguta explains that continuous work by “blessed hands” prevented the object created from being exposed to any potential evils. He writes that “the belief in an object that is the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 429.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

product of continuous, uninterrupted labor cannot be contaminated by evil beings, who are ipso facto prevented from approaching it.” Started as a holy project, the continuous labor of the craftsmen prevented anything evil from infiltrating the work. Free of any taint, these votive churches stood as holy citadels against the impending spread of the ‘evils’ associated with the plague. With the plague interpreted as Divine Judgment on a wayward mankind, these churches stood as the community’s attempt to demonstrate to God their religious piety.

As with the iconography of Sebastian, Roch and the Madonna della Misericordia, these churches were not just exercises to relieve the “psychological stress” or panic caused by the spread of epidemic. These churches were seen as an effective tool in bringing godliness back to what appeared to be a godless situation. This attitude, in part, explains why the churches were built in a non-stop, frenetic fashion. Blessed workers gathered to complete a holy mission, building pockets of sacred space in a land that seemed torn apart by evil.

While the initial onslaught of the Black Death may have been interpreted as confirmation of the eschatological beliefs that were already prevalent, the successive waves of disease over the centuries changed mankind’s attitude towards it. Additionally, the theologian’s view towards the end of the world was disconnected from the misery of those who tangibly experienced the plague. The recurring outbreaks lead many to seek ways to protect themselves from the death and destruction that the disease brought. Whether through icons or votive churches, these sacred objects were seen as effective ways of combating the ‘evil’ associated with the plague.

An analysis of the icons reveals the medieval attitude towards epidemic. In the iconography, we see both an example of patient Christian suffering and assured protection against the disease. Usually portrayed at the moment of his arrow martyrdom, Sebastian often gazes skyward. His martyrdom is understood as part of a celestial mission. Through Sebastian, the viewer is reminded that the trials of this world are not permanent, that a heavenly award awaits those who remain steadfast in their faith. Roch, having suffered and survived the plague, reminded the viewer that survival was, indeed, possible. Because of his experience, the saint also made a powerful intercessor on behalf of a society suffering from epidemic. As the mother of Christ, Mary – as the *Madonna della Misericordia* – seemed to the medieval world as the most potent means of abating her Son’s wrath. Her sense of compassion – in opposition to her Son’s vengeful wrath – shines through in her iconography. Calmly and confidently, she wraps the faithful in a cloak of protection while her Son passes his “Final Judgment” on a profligate world. In the iconography of each of these saints, the viewer is assured of heavenly intercession. In tandem with this sense of protection, the audience is also reminded of the proper Christian response to trials and tribulations. We, like those saints whom we invoke, are called to endure the sufferings of this world – to remain unwavering in the midst of storms.

The votive churches stand as medieval society’s attempt to create spiritual barricades against the evils that were associated with the plague. Built in one day by blessed workers, these chaplets were believed to be untainted by any potentially harmful elements. The result of a day’s effort was a sanctified environment that reminded the approaching evil that the building’s constructors were God’s chosen. As spiritual objects

in the physical world, these churches, like the icons, bridged the earthly and the divine.
In their own form, these churches became an intercession on behalf of the faithful.

CONCLUSION

The Black Death, coupled with the recurring waves of the disease, challenged Europe to the core. Faced with a drastic loss in population, the immediate reaction to the epidemic certainly must have been one of fear and despair. Petrarch bemoaned the loss of his friends and theologians and philosophers sought to find a reason why this tragedy occurred. The later reactions, however, stand as testament to mankind's desire to survive in the midst of tribulation.

Once the Black Death ceased in 1351-52, medieval society began to repair the damage that ensued. The initial onslaught of the plague, in particular, portended the reversal of the burgeoning intellectual climate that had developed since the eleventh century. Faced with the potential loss of accumulated knowledge, universities redoubled their efforts to maintain the momentum. While many of the universities that were founded right before the plague broke upon the continent faltered, those that were long-established survived. Indeed, in some cases, those that survived expanded to accommodate the society's need to continue its intellectual exploration. In the case of Cambridge, while attendance dropped immediately after the Black Death, records show that it radically picked up in the second half of the fourteenth century – jumping by over forty percent between 1359 and 1399.

By the fourteenth century, those areas first hit by the Black Death had founded more universities in an effort to move on, intellectually at least, from the devastation.

Following the pattern of the spread of the disease, universities, first planted in Italy and France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, were planted in those regions once again. Between 1355 and 1368, the Holy Roman Emperor promulgated five university charters in French and Burgundian territories alone. Northern and Eastern Europe followed suit with its Southern counterpart – establishing universities as a response to the plague. In the span of forty years, at least six universities were established north of the Alps. As the period progressed, universities were planted in Eastern Europe. Between the cessation of the Black Death and the close of the fifteenth century, over fifteen universities were established in Northern or Eastern Europe. Europe, certainly, was poised for another intellectual Golden Age.

As the intellectual climate slowly improved in the centuries following the Black Death, the populace – suffering from recurring waves of the disease – sought ways of avoiding the pain and death associated with the epidemic. While the eschatological beliefs were never fully placed aside (still to this day, eschatology has its devotees), it gradually gave way to a societal belief that there must be a way to stop the plague. Without the aid of modern medicine, the plague was interpreted as God’s scorn on a wayward society. With the assumption that the plague had divine origins, the medieval people naturally elicited celestial protection. The period witnesses an influx of “plague saints” whose were specifically invoked to abate God’s wrath and end the suffering of the faithful. Sebastian, Roch and the *Madonna della Misericordia* – each because of their unique experiences or relationship with the Almighty – became saints renowned for their ability to assist Christian society in abating the fury of God.

If the Black Death exposed the weaknesses of the medieval world, that period's reaction to it demonstrated its determined resolve to survive, rebuild and even thrive. On both intellectual and spiritual planes, mankind waged a "total war" against the ravages of the disease.

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