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Florence and the Black Death

Giovanni Boccaccio

In public imagination or scholarly literature, no city bears a greater relation to the Black Death than Florence, Italy. One reason rests on one man, the Florentine banker, who spent most of his life outside Florence, Giovanni Boccaccio, and his Hundred Stories, the *Decameron*, written around 1355 but reflecting merchant chatter and pastime gossip while Boccaccio was employed at Florence's premiere bank, the Bardi, at its Naples branch in the years just before 1348. The *Decameron* created a new literary genre that took hold immediately. Similar short stories or *novella* by Franco Sacchetti, Giovanni Sercambi, Giovanni Sermini, and later Agnolo Firenzuola spread through Tuscany but most famous of these was Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Boccaccio's *novelle* flipped the traditional moralistic tales called 'esempri' (moral examples) on their head. These had been written by churchmen to aid parish priests and friars in drafting their sermons, in contrast to the dangers of cardinal sins, Boccaccio's stories could even justify adultery as with his tale of Filippa da Prato in Day 2, Story 7, who defends herself in court and convinces the chief magistrate (the *podestà*) of her arguments for adultery.

For the Black Death per se the introduction to Day One of these stories became the most repeated pages of this collection. Here, he describes the powerlessness of Florence's health measures, the impotence of its physicians to find remedies, the anguish over the collapse of funerary and burial practices, and Boccaccio's eyewitness characterizations of human responses, which he divided into four psychological states. Unlike other contemporaries, not only for Florence but across Europe, he did not reduce these plague reactions to a simple dichotomy between a minority who suddenly became more pious and the rest condemned by chroniclers and theologians for devoting themselves to shameful gluttony, insatiable sex, and a disorderly life of pleasure. For Boccaccio, some assumed 'the abstemious mode', 'locking themselves in isolation', 'consuming modest quantities of delicate foods', and refusing to receive news of the dead or sick'. Others turned in the opposite direction, thinking that heavy drinking, going around singing, and gratifying all cravings was the better remedy. On the other hand they shared their wealth, treating themselves and their belongings 'with equal abandon'. 'For all their riotous living', however, 'they made sure to avoid any contact with the afflicted'. A third group adopted a middle course between the two. It was only with a fourth group, however, that Boccaccio found was utterly despicable. These 'callous' ones held that there was no better remedy than to run from the plague, 'sparing no thought for anyone but themselves': Wives abandoned husbands; brothers, sisters; uncles, nephews; but 'even worse', fathers and mothers ran from their own children. Boccaccio's horror over abandonment was hardly unusual in 1348. It is a topic to which we will return.

More influential and enduring were Boccaccio's eyewitness reports of the clinical and epidemiological features of the Black Death. Into the seventeenth century, physicians cited his evidence in their treatises on plague, and his descriptions have been repeated in historical accounts to the present: the swellings in the groin and armpits, some that were 'egg-shaped' and others 'the size of apples'; the spread of these buboes, called in Tuscan 'gavòccioli', 'at random all over the body'; the clustering of deaths in households; the story of the two pigs greedily tearing to bits a pauper's rags and suddenly dropping dead.

Sources and Demography

Our close association between Florence and the Black Death does not depend on Boccaccio alone, especially within scholarly communities. The sources for 1348 and immediately afterwards are incomparable elsewhere both with perspicacious narratives and archival and administrative records amenable to quantitative analysis. Although it is difficult to estimate the population of Florence before the Black Death as is universally the case with other

European cities, it possesses the extraordinary statistics reported by the merchant chronicler Giovanni Villani around 1338. These report the annual consumption of basic foodstuffs, wool production, the numbers of children attending grammar schools, and more. Further, Villani supplied an estimate of Florence's population for that year of 90,000, excluding foreigners, visitors, soldiers, and members of religious communities--priests, monks, friars, and nuns, marking it as one of the largest cities in Europe. He also noted the numbers baptized that year and the abled-bodied Florentine men, 15 to 70 years old, allowed to carry arms. Since Niccolò Rodolico's study of 1905, historians have pondered these statistics. Despite Enrico Fiumi questioning them in 1950, historians now agree that Villani's figures bear internal consistency, even if our estimates of Florence's pre-Black Death population continue to hover between 100,000 to 120,000 inhabitants.

Moreover, Florence is blessed with a second series of statistics compiled almost immediately after the plague in 1352 and 1355. It was a rare tax survey for Florence (the city as opposed to its countryside, that counted and taxed directly the urban population). Now only just over 10,000 households remained. By estimating the number of household members from later tax records and especially from the city's new tax system of 1427, David Herlihy and Christian Klapisch-Zuber estimated that Florence possessed a population of around 25,000 circa 1352. By this figure, the Black Death would have decimated 75 percent of the urban population, far greater than the usual figures between 30 and 50 percent for other European cities based either on chronicles' remarks or more recent guess-work without any quantitative reckoning. However, this decline does not account for the mass migration from the countryside that ensued immediately after the Black Death to tap charitable services and obtain better paying jobs within the city. Yet with a mysterious plague in 1340, which Giovanni Villani estimated to have killed 15,000 and a famine in 1346, the city's population on the eve of the Black Death was probably less than 100,000 and certainly less than 120,000. Nonetheless, the Black Death's devastation was worse than the general global estimates of European plague deaths and should mute previous scepticism that the Black Death could not have decimated cities by a third or more.

Florence produced further records that go beyond questions of population. These have allowed historians to delve into the epidemiological mysteries of the Black Death and its trends with recurring bouts of plague in 1363, 1374-5, 1383, 1390 (in parts of its countryside) and 1400. First, one of Florence's largest religious communities; the Dominican friary of Santa Maria Novella possesses a 'necrology' of all its brothers before and after the Black Death with short biographies. Unlike any other records during the Black Death, it supplied the causes of death, thereby demarcating those who died of plague. From this record the monthly toll or seasonality of the plague in 1348 and during subsequent bouts of the disease can be charted. Less precisely and problematically, the same can also be calculated from the vast numbers of last wills and testaments that survive in Florence's monastic and notarial archives. Moreover, these records allow trends in plague mortality rates to be charted across the late Middle Ages and into the early modern period. Thirdly, in the 1390s Florence was the first major city in Europe to produce a secular, citywide burial register, and it was in place for the plague of 1400. For reasons, presently unknown, plague mortalities that year suddenly rose after declining for four successive returns of the epidemic. In neighbouring Prato, then a dependency of Florence, plague deaths almost rebounded to its Black Death rates with just under 50 percent of the population felled. With Florence's burial records, which identified victims by parish, age, and occasionally occupation, historians for the first time can chart the plague's topographical progress across the city and determine its socio-economic profile. In addition, the extent of clustering of plague deaths within households and the age structure of plague mortality can be estimated. From these analyses, changes in the plague can be detected: by 1400, it had become concentrated in Florence's peripheral parishes and among its young and the poor.

Furthermore, the Black Death spurred Florentines to become more attentive to counting their numbers at regular intervals that culminated with the extraordinary tax record, the Catasto in 1427. These records also served as censuses, recording the names and ages of all family members, even in those households that possessed no taxable wealth. But the

trend began with the Black Death itself. Through the network of parishes, Florence's archbishop conducted a head count of all who had died during the plague. Unfortunately, this record no longer survives. The chronicler Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, however, reported from it that 96,000 had perished in 1348. Historians have brushed aside Stefani's figure (along with Boccaccio's of 100,000). However, they have not considered that the archbishop's figure was not for the city alone but for its diocese (Santa Maria del Fiore), which encompassed a broad suburban belt, including market towns such as Sesto, which even after the Black Death comprised over 1,000 souls. More significant for understanding the plague were increasingly more detailed tax surveys with extended demographic details. As early as an *estimo* in 1365 of Florence's countryside (*contado*), officials were required to list those who had immigrated into or departed from their parishes since the previous tax survey.

At the same moment, officials for the first time had to record the names and ages of all household members, allowing Florentine historians to construct age pyramids of Florence's subject cities and its countryside and to address sociological and economic questions concerning household size and composition. Moreover, this material has also contributed to cultural and religious history. Through charting changes in first-names with Giovanni, Francesco, and Domenico on the rise at the expense of good-luck names such as Bonaventura or Dietisalvi, historians have seen the Black Death's impact in an unexpected direction: Christian learning and devotion intensified in the early Renaissance, especially through Florence's small towns and villages.

Blame

Let us return to the narrative sources. In histories and the popular imagination of the Black Death, its blaming and murdering of Jews and in places other minorities such as Catalans in Sicily is almost as memorable as the colossal numbers who died from the disease. However, these tragic events were confined mainly to German-speaking regions that crossed into some parts of Spain and France between 1348 and 1351. In Florence, along with mainland Italy, the narrative sources give no evidence of mass slaughter or even individual assaults on Jews or other minorities. Yet across Italy and Europe there were others who were blamed, if not for producing the plague itself, then for making matter worse during and soon afterwards. The butts of this blame were labourers and the poor, who historians rarely picture as the targets of the Black Death's blame. However, chroniclers castigated these ones for selfishly taking advantage of the sudden scarcity of labour to satisfy their gluttony and wasteful pleasures. Florence's contemporary chronicler Matteo Villani, who took over his brother's history of Florence after he had died from the plague in 1348, was as biting in condemnation of these social groups as any commentator north of the Alps:

And the common people (*popolo minuto*), both men and women, by reason of the abundance and superfluity that they found, would no longer work at their accustomed trades; they wanted the dearest and most delicate foods for their sustenance...while children and common women clad themselves in all the fair and costly garments of the illustrious ladies who had died...And the price of labour and the products of every trade and craft rose in disorderly fashion.

Another Florentine chronicler, Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, who began his chronicle in the 1380s but had lived through the Black Death as a child also decried the post-Black Death high prices and wages but focused his rage on those who treated the ill and the dead. Like Boccaccio, he began his railing with the astronomical costs charged by grave-diggers, claiming that many of them grew rich because of it but that many also died. He then turned to those who nursed the afflicted, accusing them of demanding 'whatever they wished', sending their salaries to skyrocket between 1 and 3 florins a day. Finally, he poured scorn on priests and friars, who 'now hung about only with the rich' to soak them for as much money as they could.

Abandonment

Like Boccaccio, contemporary Florentines were most disgusted by the abandonment of loved ones. This outrage, however, was not peculiar to Florence; it filled chronicles across Western and Eastern Europe in 1348. Yet modern historians have paid little mind to these passages or have branded them as literary *topoi*, copied from one chronicler to another. First, it is difficult to imagine how chroniclers across Europe in strikingly different intellectual communities from isolated country monks to merchants in Florence or chivalric writers at princely courts could have suddenly copied one another in the space of a few plague-ridden months. Moreover, even in Florence, no copying is manifest. Instead, these entries find interesting variations. Boccaccio, for instance, is the only one to talk about uncles abandoning nephews. Moreover, he does not mention the abandonment of vital responsibilities by the clergy, notaries, or the medical profession.

By contrast, Matteo Villani is alone in giving a partial explanation for this terrible behaviour: ‘

Early on men, women, and children saw that the disease could strike simply by touch, even by sight and could be recognized by the tell-tale traits of the swelling (enfiatura). As a consequence, many were abandoned...

Yet he branded ‘such inhumane cruelty’ as initiated by ‘the infidel’. The Florentine poet Antonio Pucci saw it as worse, alleging that ‘Not even Saracens, Jews, or traitors deserve such treatment.’ Unlike Boccaccio and Villani, Pucci’s condemnation focused on ‘doctors, priests, and friars’, and instead of simple reportage, he directed his scorn directly to them:

And for God’s sake, you doctors, priests, and friars, you might try acting
with some piety towards those who plead for help!
You might act for the wellbeing of your souls instead of just seeking profit!

A younger Florentine chronicler, Stefani, put the two forms of abandonment together, asserting first that ‘doctors could not be found.’ Like others, they had mostly fled to the countryside and those who remained, ‘demanded extortionate fees’. In narrating fathers abandoning their children; husbands, their wives’, etc., Stefani, unlike others, ended his condemnation with a little sketch:

Those occupying the same household, would promise, ‘I am going for the doctor’ . . .
[they] then locked the front door [without leaving food, water, or medicine] not to be
seen again.

Finally, Matteo Villani was the only Florentine and only one of two commentators in Europe who saw a change of heart during the brief period of the Black Death. He was also the only one to explain it: ‘once Florentines saw that some could be cured, they began helping others in a variety of ways, including nursing the plague stricken.’ He then argued that this change helped to end the plague.

Conclusion

This sketch of the most cited city in descriptions of the Black Death shows similarities and differences with other places in Europe. In addition to the uniqueness of Giovanni Boccaccio and his pioneering literary form, the Florentine sources are more voluminous and amenable to quantitative analysis for 1348 than any other city. Unlike German-speaking regions, however, no blame for spreading the disease or mass murder of Jews or other minorities arose. On the other hand, as with most other places across the continent, Florentines blamed the labouring classes for driving up prices and wages and indulging in

gluttony and other excessive pleasures. Finally, again with others across Europe, the Florentines saw the most horrifying behaviour in response to the Black Death as one that present-day historians have either ignored or dismissed—abandonment of the sick by the clergy, doctors, and nurses, and worse still, abandonment of one's own kin and even young children. As in many other respects, these Black Death responses were not its enduring legacy with hundreds of plagues that would recur into the nineteenth century.

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