

# The Bubonic Plague

## *Primary Source Document #1: The Report of the Paris Medical Faculty*

We, the Members of the College of Physicians of Paris, have, after mature consideration and consultation on the present mortality, collected the advice of our old masters in the art, and intend to make known the causes of this pestilence more clearly than could be done according to the rules and principles of astrology and natural science; we, therefore, declare as follows:-

It is known that in India and the vicinity of the Great Sea, the constellations which combated the rays of the sun, and the warmth of the heavenly fire, exerted their power especially against that sea, and struggled violently with its waters. (Hence vapors often originate which envelop the sun, and convert his light into darkness.) These vapors alternately rose and fell for twenty- eight days; but, at last, sun and fire acted so powerfully upon the sea that they attracted a great portion of it to themselves, and the waters of the ocean arose in the form of vapor; thereby the waters were in some parts so corrupted that the fish which they contained died. These corrupted waters, however, the heat of the sun could not consume, neither could other wholesome water, hail or snow and dew, originate therefrom. On the contrary, this vapor spread itself through the air in many places on the earth, and enveloped them in fog.

Such was the case all over Arabia, in a part of India, in Crete, in the plains and valleys of Macedonia, in Hungary, Albania, and Sicily. Should the same thing occur in Sardinia, not a man will be left alive, and the like will continue so long as the sun remains in the sign of Leo, on all the islands and adjoining countries to which this corrupted sea-wind extends, or has already extended, from India. If the inhabitants of those parts do not employ and adhere to the following or similar means and precepts, we announce to them inevitable death, except the grace of Christ preserve their lives.

We are of opinion that the constellations, with the aid of nature, strive by virtue of their Divine might, to protect and heal the human race; and to this end, in union with the rays of the sun, acting through the power of fire, endeavor to break through the mist. Accordingly, within the next ten days, and until the 17th of the ensuing month of July, this mist will be converted into a stinking deleterious rain, whereby the air will be much purified. Now, as soon as this rain shall announce itself by thunder or hail, every one of you should protect himself from the air; and, as well before as after the rain, kindle a large fire of vine-wood, green laurel, or other green wood; wormwood and chamomile should also be burnt in great quantity in the market- places, in other densely inhabited localities, and in the houses. Until the earth is again completely dry, and for three days afterwards, no one ought to go abroad in the fields. During this time the diet should be

simple, and people should be cautious in avoiding exposure in the cool of the evening, at night, and in the morning. Poultry and water-fowl, young pork, old beef, and fat meat in general, should not be eaten; but, on the contrary, meat of a proper age, of a warm and dry, but on no account of a heating and exciting nature. Broth should be taken, seasoned with ground pepper, ginger, and cloves, especially by those who are accustomed to live temperately, and are yet choice in their diet. Sleep in the day-time is detrimental; it should be taken at night until sunrise, or somewhat longer. At breakfast one should drink little; supper should be taken an hour before sunset, when more may be drunk than in the morning. Clear light wine, mixed with a fifth or six part of water, should be used as a beverage. Dried or fresh fruits, with wine, are not injurious, but highly so without it. Beet-root and other vegetables, whether eaten pickled or fresh, are hurtful; on the contrary, spicy pot-herbs, as sage or rosemary, are wholesome. Cold, moist, watery food in is general prejudicial. Going out at night, and even until three o'clock in the morning, is dangerous, on account of dew. Only small river fish should be used. Too much exercise is hurtful. The body should be kept warmer than usual, and thus protected from moisture and cold. Rain-water must not be employed in cooking, and every one should guard against exposure to wet weather. If it rain, a little fine treacle should be taken after dinner. Fat people should not sit in the sunshine. Good clear wine should be selected and drunk often, but in small quantities, by day. Olive oil as an article of food is fatal. Equally injurious are fasting and excessive abstemiousness, anxiety of mind, anger, and immoderate drinking. Young people, in autumn especially, must abstain from all these things if they do not wish to run a risk of dying of dysentery. In order to keep the body properly open, an enema, or some other simple means, should be employed when necessary. Bathing is injurious. Men must preserve chastity as they value their lives. Every one should impress this on his recollection, but especially those who reside on the coast, or upon an island into which the noxious wind has penetrated.

Source: Hecher, T. (1856). *Epidemics of the Middle Ages*. London: George Woodfall and Sons. Translated by Babington, B.G., p. 50-53.

# The Bubonic Plague

## *Primary Source Document #2: An Essay on the Report of Pestilence by Ibn Al-Wardi*

“God is my security in every adversity. My sufficiency is in God alone. Is not God sufficient protection for his servant? Oh God, pray for our master, Muhammad, and give him peace. Save us for his sake from the attacks of the plague and give us shelter.

The Plague frightened and killed. It began in the land of darkness. Oh, what a visitor! It has been current for fifteen years. China was not preserved from it nor could the strongest fortress hinder it. The plague afflicted the Indians in India. It weighed upon the Sind. It seized with its hand and ensnared even the land of the Uzbeks. How many backs did it break in what is Transoxiana? The plague increased and spread further. It attacked the Persians...and gnawed away at the Crimea. It pelted Rum with live coals and led the outrage to Cyprus and the islands. The plague destroyed mankind in Cairo. Its eye was cast upon Egypt, and behold, the people were wide awake. It stilled all movement in Alexandria. The plague did its work like a silkworm. It took from the tiraz factory its beauty and did to its workers what fate decreed.

Oh Alexandria; this plague is like a lion which extends its arm to you. Have patience with the fate of the plague, which leaves of seventy men only seven.

Then, the plague turned to Upper Egypt. It also sent forth its storm to Barqah. The plague attacked Gaza, and it shook Asqalan severely. The plague oppressed Acre. The surge came to Jerusalem and paid the zakat [with the souls of men]. It overtook those people who fled to the al-Aqsa mosque, which stands beside the Dome of the Rock. If the door of mercy had not been opened, the end of the world would have occurred in a moment. It, then, hastened its pace and attacked the entire maritime plain. The plague strapped Sidon and descended unexpectedly upon Beirut, cunningly. Next, it directed the shooting of its arrows to Damascus. There the plague sat like a king on a throne and swayed with power, killing daily 1000 or more and decimating the population. It destroyed mankind with its pustules. May God the Most High spare Damascus to pursue its own path and extinguish the plague's fires so they do not come close to her fragrant orchards.

Oh God, restore Damascus and protect her from insult. Its morale has been so lowered that people in the city sell themselves for a grain.

Oh God, it is acting by your command. Lift this from us. It happens where you wish; keep the plague from us. Who will defend us against the horror other than you the almighty?

How many places has the plague entered? It swore not to leave the houses without its inhabitants. It searched them with a lamp. The pestilence caused the people of Aleppo

the same disturbance. It sent out its snake and crept along. It was named the “Plague of the Ansab.” It was the sixth plague to strike in Islam. To me it is the death of which our prophet warned, on him be the best prayers and peace.

Aleppo – may God protect us from this disaster – is the land of toil.  
The plague became a serpent, and evil thing which kills her people with its spit.

Oh, if you could see the nobles of Aleppo studying their inscrutable books of medicine. They multiply its remedies by eating dried and sour foods. The buboes which disturb men’s healthy lives are smeared with Armenian clay. Each man treated his humors and made life more comfortable. They perfumed their homes with ambergris and camphor, cyperus [sic] and sandal. They wore ruby rings and put onions, vinegar and sardines together with the daily meal. They ate less broth and fruit but ate the citron and similar things.

If you see many biers and their carriers and hear in every quarter of Aleppo the announcements of death and cries, you run from them and refuse to stay with them. In Aleppo the profits of the undertakers have greatly increased. Oh God, do not profit them. Those who sweat from carrying the coffins enjoy this plague-time. Oh God, do not let them sweat and enjoy this. They are happy and play. When they are called by a customer, they do not even go immediately...

We ask God’s forgiveness for our souls’ bad inclination; the plague is surely part of His punishment. We take refuge from His wrath in His pleasure and from His chastisement in His restoring. They said: the air’s corruption kills. I said: the love of corruption kills. How many sins and how many offenses does the crier call our attention to.

Among the things which exasperated the Muslims and brought suffering is that our enemy, the damned people of Sis, are pleased by our trial. They act as if they are safe from the plague – that there is a treaty so that it will not approach them or that they have triumphed over it. Our Lord does not create us as an enticement for those who disbelieve.

This plague is for the Muslims a martyrdom and a reward, and for the disbelievers a punishment and a rebuke. When the Muslim endures misfortune, then patience is his worship. It has been established by the Prophet that the plague-stricken are martyrs. And this secret should be pleasing to the true believer. If someone says it causes infection and destruction, say: God creates and recreates. If the liar disputes the matter of infection and tries to find an explanation, I say that the Prophet said: who infected the first? If we acknowledge the plague’s devastation of the people, it is the will of the chosen Doer. So it happened again and again.

I take refuge in God from the yoke of the plague. Its high explosion has burst into all countries and was an examiner of astonishing things. Its sudden attacks perplex the people. The plague chases the screaming without pity and does not accept a treasure for ransom. Its engine is far reaching. The plague enters into the house and swears it will not leave except with all of its inhabitants. “I have an order from the *qadi* to arrest all those in

the house.” Among the benefits of this order is the removal of one’s hopes and the improvement of his earthly works. It awakens men from their indifference for the provisioning of their final journey.

One man begs another to take care of his children, one says goodbye to his neighbors.

A third perfects his works, and another prepares his shroud.

A fifth is reconciled with his enemies, and another treats his friends with kindness.

One is very generous; another makes friends with those who have betrayed him.

Another man puts aside his property; one frees his servants.

One man changes his character while another mends his ways.

For this plague has captured all people and is about to send its ultimate destruction.

There is no protection today from it other than his mercy, praise be to God.

Nothing prevented us from running away from the plague except our devotion to the noble tradition. Come then, seek the aid of God Almighty for raising the plague, for he is the best helper. Oh God, we call you to raise from us the petulance and plague. We do not take refuge in its removal other than with you. We do not depend on our good health against the plague but on you. We seek your protection, Oh Lord of creation, from the blows of the stick. We ask for your mercy which is wider than our sins even as they are the number of the sands and the pebbles. We plead with you, by the most honored of the advocates, Muhammad, the Prophet of mercy, that you take away from us this distress. Protect us from evil and the torture and preserve us. For you are our sole support; what a perfect trustee!”

Ibn al-Wardi, “An Essay on the Report of the Pestilence,” in *Near eastern numismatics, iconography, epigraphy, and history: Studies in honor of George C. Miles*, ed. Dickran Kouymjian, translated by Michael Dols (American University of Beirut, 1974) 447-454.