**Primary Sources – The Black Death**

**Doc. 1:Jean de Venette*’s On the Progress of the Black Death***

In A.D. 1348, the people of Florence and of almost the whole world were struck by a blow other than war. For in addition to the famine . . . and to the wars . . . pestilence and its attendant tribulations appeared again in various parts of the world. In the month of August, 1348, after Vespers when the sun was beginning to set, a big and very bright star appeared above Paris, toward the west. It did not seem, as stars usually do, to be very high above our hemisphere but rather very near. As the sun set and night came on, this star did not seem to me or to many other friars who were watching it to move from one place. At length, when night had come, this big star, to the amazement of all of us who were watching, broke into many different rays and, as it shed these rays over Paris toward the east, totally disappeared and was completely annihilated. Whether it was a comet or not, whether it was composed of airy exhalations and was finally resolved into vapor, I leave to the decision of astronomers. It is, however, possible that it was a presage of the amazing pestilence to come, which, in fact, followed very shortly in Paris an throughout France and elsewhere, as I shall tell. All this year and the next, the mortality of men and women, of the young even more than of the old, in Paris and in the kingdom of France, and also, it is said, in other parts of the world, was so great that it was almost impossible to bury the dead. People lay ill little more than two or three days and died suddenly, as it were in full health. He who was well one day was dead the next and being carried to his grave. Swellings appeared suddenly in the armpit or in the groin -- in many cases both -- and they were infallible signs of death. This sickness or pestilence was called an epidemic by the doctors. Nothing like the great numbers who died in the years 1348 and 1349 has been heard of or seen of in times past. This plague and disease came fromymaginatione or association and contagion, for if a well man visited the sick he only rarely evaded the risk of death. Wherefore in many towns timid priests withdrew, leaving the exercise of their ministry to such of the religious as were more daring. In many places not two out of twenty remained alive. So high was the mortality at the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris that for a long time, more than five hundred dead were carried daily with great devotion in carts to the cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris for burial. A very great number of the saintly sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu who, not fearing to die, nursed the sick in all sweetness and humility, with no thought of honor, a number too often renewed by death, rest in peace with Christ, as we may piously believe.

This plague, it is said, began among the unbelievers, came to Italy, and then crossing the Alps reached Avignon, where it attacked several cardinals and took from them their whole household. Then it spread, unforeseen, to France, through Gascony and Spain, little by little, from town to town, from village to village, from house to house, and finally from person to person. It even crossed over to Germany, though it was not so bad there as with us. During the epidemic, God of His accustomed goodness deigned to grant this grace, that however suddenly men died, almost all awaited death joyfully. Nor was there anyone who died without confessing his sins and receiving the holy viaticum. . . .

Some said that this pestilence was caused by infection of the air and waters, since there was at this time no famine nor lack of food supplies, but on the contrary great abundance. As a result of this theory of infected water and air as the source of the plague the Jews were suddenly and violently charged with infecting wells and water and corrupting the air. The whole world rose up against them cruelly on this account. In Germany and other parts of the world where Jews lived, they were massacred and slaughtered by Christians, and many thousands were burned everywhere, indiscriminately. The unshaken, if fatuous, constantly of the men and their wives was remarkable. For mothers hurled their children first into the fire that they might not be baptized and then leaped in after them to burn with their husbands and children. It is said that many bad Christians were found who in like manner put poison into wells. But in truth, such poisonings, granted that they actually were perpetrated, could not have caused so great a plague nor have infected so many people. There were other causes; for example, the will of God and the corrupt humors and evil inherent in air and earth. Perhaps the poisonings, if they actually took place in some localities, reinforced these causes. The plague lasted in France for the greater part of the years 1348 and 1349 and then ceased. Many country villages and many houses in good towns remained empty and deserted. Many houses, including some splendid dwellings, very soon fell into ruins. Even in Paris several houses were thus ruined, though fewer here than elsewhere.

After this cessation of the epidemic, pestilence, or plague, the men and women who survived married each other. There was no sterility among the women, but on the contrary fertility beyond the ordinary. Pregnant women were seen on every side. . . . But woe is me! the world was not changed for the better but for the worse by this renewal of population. For men were more avaricious and grasping than before, even though they had far greater possessions. They were more covetous and disturbed each other more frequently with suits, brawls, disputes, and pleas. Nor by the mortality resulting from this terrible plague inflicted by God was peace between kings and lords established. On the contrary, the enemies of the king of France and of the Church or stronger and wickeder than before and stirred up wars on sea and on land. Greater evils than before [swarmed] everywhere in the world. And this fact was very remarkable. Although there was an abundance of all goods, yet everything was twice as dear, whether it were utensils, victuals, or merchandise, hired helpers or peasants and serfs, except for some hereditary domains which remained abundantly stocked with everything. Charity began to cool, and iniquity with ignorance and stand to abound, for a few could be found in the good towns and castles who knew how or were willing to instruct children in the rudiments of grammar.

**Doc . 2: Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* (Introduction)**

Thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had passed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God, when there came into the noble city of Florence, the most beautiful of all Italian cities, a deadly pestilence, which, either because of the operations of the heavenly bodies, or because of the just wrath of God mandating punishment for our iniquitous ways, several years earlier had originated in the Orient, where it destroyed countless lives, scarcely resting in one place before it moved to the next, and turning westward its strength grew monstrously. No human wisdom or foresight had any value: enormous amounts of refuse and manure were removed from the city by appointed officials, the sick were barred from entering the city, and many instructions were given to preserve health; just as useless were the humble supplications to God given not one time but many times in appointed processions, and all the other ways devout people called on God; despite all this, at the beginning of the spring of that year, that horrible plague began with its dolorous effects in a most awe-inspiring manner, as I will tell you. And it did not behave as it did in the Orient, where if blood began to rush out the nose it was a manifest sign of inevitable death; but rather it began with swellings in the groin and armpit, in both men and women, some of which were as big as apples and some of which were shaped like eggs, some were small and others were large; the common people called these swellings gavoccioli. From these two parts of the body, the fatal gavaccioli would begin to spread and within a short while would appear over the entire body in various spots; the disease at this point began to take on the qualities of a deadly sickness, and the body would be covered with dark and livid spots, which would appear in great numbers on the arms, the thighs, and other parts of the body; some were large and widely spaced while some were small and bunched together. And just like the gavaciolli earlier, these were certain indications of coming death.

To cure these infirmities neither the advice of physicians nor the power of medicine appeared to have any value or profit; perhaps either the nature of the disease did not allow for any cure or the ignorance of the physicians (whose numbers, because men and women without any training in medicine invaded the profession, increased vastly) did not know how to cure it; as a consequence, very few were ever cured; all died three days after the appearance of the first outward signs, some lasted a little bit longer, some died a little bit more quickly, and some without fever or other symptoms. But what gave this pestilence particularly severe force was that whenever the diseased mixed with healthy people, like a fire through dry grass or oil it would rush upon the healthy. And this wasn't the worst of the evil: for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or mixed with the sick, but also touching bread or any other object which had been handled or worn by the sick would transport the sickness from the victim to the one touching the object. It is a wondrous tale that I have to tell: if I were not one of many people who saw it with their own eyes, I would scarcely have dared to believe it, let alone to write it down, even if I had heard it from a completely trustworthy person. I say that the pestilence I have been describing was so contagious, that not only did it visibly pass from one person to another, but also, whenever an animal other than a human being touched anything belonging to a person who had died from the disease, I say not only did it become contaminated by the sickness, but also died literally within the instant. Of all these things, as I have said before, my own eyes had experience many times: once, the rags of a poor man who had just died from the disease were thrown into the public street and were noticed by two pigs, who, following their custom, pressed their snouts into the rags, and afterwards picked them up with their teeth, and shook them against their cheeks: and within a short time, they both began to convulse, and they both, the two of them, fell dead on the ground next to the evil rags….

…And beyond all the particulars we suffered in the city, I will tell you not only about the ill times passing through the city, but also mention that the countryside was not spared these circumstances. For here, in the fortified towns, similar things occurred but on a lesser scale than in the city, through the small villages and through the camps of the miserable and poor laborers and their families, without any care from physicians or help from servants, and in the highways and the fields and their houses, day and night at whatever hour, not like humans but more like animals they died; and because of this, they came to neglect their customs, as did the people in the city, and had no concern for their belongings. Beyond all this, they began to behave as if every day were the day of their certain death, and they did no work to provide for their future needs by caring for their fields or their animals, but rather consumed everything they owned. Because of this, it happened that oxen, asses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, and dogs, the most faithful human companions, were driven from the houses, and in the fields, where the crops had been abandoned, not even reaped let alone gathered, they would wander about at their pleasure; and many, as if they possessed human reason, after they had pastured all day long, would return satiated to their houses without any guidance from any shepherd…

…Oh, how many grand palaces, how many beautiful homes, how many noble dwellings, filled with families, with lords and ladies, became completely emptied even of children! Oh, how many famous families, how many vast estates, how many renowned fortunes remained without any rightful successors! How many noble men, how many beautiful ladies, how many light-hearted youth, who were such that Galen, Hippocrates, or Asclepius would declare them the healthiest of all humans, had breakfast in the morning with their relatives, companions, or friends, and had dinner that evening in another world with their ancestors! As I think over these miseries, sorrow grows inside me . .

**Doc. 3: Ordinance of Laborers 1349**

The king to the sheriff of Kent, greeting. Because a great part of the people, and especially of workmen and servants, late died of the pestilence, many seeing the necessity of masters, and great scarcity of servants, will not serve unless they may receive excessive wages, and some rather willing to beg in idleness, than by labor to get their living; we, considering the grievous incommodities, which of the lack especially of ploughmen and such laborers may hereafter come, have upon deliberation and treaty with the prelates and the nobles, and learned men assisting us, of their mutual counsel ordained:

That every man and woman of our realm of England, of what condition he be, free or bond, able in body, and within the age of threescore years, not living in merchandise, nor exercising any craft, nor having of his own whereof he may live, nor proper land, about whose tillage he may himself occupy, and not serving any other, if he in convenient service, his estate considered, be required to serve, he shall be bounden to serve him which so shall him require; and take only the wages, livery, meed, or salary, which were accustomed to be given in the places where he oweth to serve, the twentieth year of our reign of England, or five or six other commone years next before. Provided always, that the lords be preferred before other in their bondmen or their land tenants, so in their service to be retained; so that nevertheless the said lords shall retain no more than be necessary for them; and if any such man or woman, being so required to serve, will not the same do, that proved by two true men before the sheriff or the constables of the town where the same shall happen to be done, he shall anon be taken by them or any of them, and committed to the next gaol, there to remain under strait keeping, till he find surety to serve in the form aforesaid.

## Doc. 4: Jean Froissart on the Jacquerie (1358)

Not long after the King of Navarre had been set free, there were very strange and terrible happenings in several parts of the kingdom of France. They occurred in the region of Beauvais, in Brie and on the Marne, in Valois, in Laonnais, in the fief of Coucy and round Soissons. They began when some of the men from the country towns came together in the Beauvais region. They had no leaders and at first they numbered scarcely a hundred. One of them got up and said that the nobility of France, knights and squires, were disgracing and betraying the realm, and that it would be a good thing if they were all destroyed. At this they all shouted: "He's right! He's right! Same on any man who saves the gentry from being wiped out!" They banded together at went off, without further deliberation and unarmed except for pikes and knives, to the house of a knight who lived near by. They broke in and killed the knight, with his lady and his children, big and small, and set fire to the house. Next they went to another castle and did much worse; for, having seized the knight and bound him securely to a post, several of them violated his wife and daughter before his eyes. Then they killed the wife, who was pregnant, and the daughter and all the other children, and finally put the knight to death with great cruelty and burned and razed the castle….

**Doc. 5:** [**Henry Knighton**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Knighton)**’s Account of the Black Death (England)**

…In the following autumn a reaper was not to be had for a lower wage than 8d, with his meals; a mower for not less than 10d, with meals. Wherefore many crops wasted in the fields for lack of harvesters. But in the year of the pestilence, as has been said above, there was so great an abundance of every type of grain that almost no one cared for it.

The Scots, hearing of the dreadful plague among the English, suspected that it had come about through the vengeance of God, an, according to the common report, they were accustomed to swear "be the foul deth of Engelond." Believing that the wrath of God had befallen the English, they assembled in Selkirk forest with the intention of invading the kingdom, when the fierce mortality overtook them, and in a short time about 5,000 perished. As the rest, the strong and the feeble, were preparing to return to their own country, they were followed and attacked by the English, who slew countless numbers of them.

Master Thomas of Bradwardine was consecrated by the Pope Archbishop of Canterbury, and when he returned to England he came to London, but within two days was dead…Meanwhile the King sent proclamations into all the counties that reapers and other laborers should not take more than they had been accustomed to take, under the penalty appointed by statute. But the laborers were so lifted up and obstinate that they would not listen to the King's command, but if anyone wished to have them he had to give them what they wanted, and either lose his fruit and crops, or satisfy the lofty and covetous wishes of the workmen. And when it was known to the King that they had not observed his command, and had given greater wages to the laborers, he levied heavy fines upon abbots, priors, knights, greater and lesser, and other great folk and small folk of the realm, of some 100s, of some 40s, of some 20s, from each according to what he could give. And afterwards the king had many laborers arrested, and sent them to prison; many withdrew themselves and went into the forests and woods; and those who were taken were heavily fined. Their ringleaders were made to swear that they would not take daily wages beyond the ancient custom, and then were freed from prison. And in like manner was done with the other craftsmen in the boroughs and villages…After the aforesaid pestilence, many building, great and small, fell into ruins in every city, borough, and village for lack of inhabitants, likewise many villages and hamlets became desolate, not a house being left in them, all having died who dwelt there; and it was probable that many such villages would never be inhabited.

**Primary Source Analysis – The Black Death Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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