



Ships, Fogs, and Traveling Pairs: Plague Legend Migration in Scandinavia

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Ships, Fogs, and Traveling Pairs *Plague Legend Migration in Scandinavia*

This article examines the various forms the plague assumes in the legend traditions of Scandinavia. Eight new legend types are proposed in an effort to expand the existing type-index to more adequately describe the legend corpus. Common to all traditions are legends concerning the aftermath of the plague. The legends of Norway and Sweden often present the plague as a wandering woman or as a pair of children with a rake and broom. These legends are nonexistent in the Danish corpus. Instead, the Danish legends often present the plague as a celestial phenomenon, primarily fog or mist. The forms the legends take are possibly linked to the areas of disease provenance. The legend migration may have followed the migration of the disease.

SCANDINAVIAN PLAGUE LEGENDS provide an ideal opportunity for the study of legend migration and variation. The differences between legends from country to country suggest not only different cultural biases, but also different areas of disease provenance. While, with the passage of time, legends have become sufficiently commingled to exclude any clear-cut relationship between types and areas, the concentration of specific types in particular areas suggests that some legends were more common to certain areas than others. More frequently found legends may be more indigenous to a specific area. As the plague migrated from country to country, so too did legends concerning its origins, appearance and aftermath. Each specific area throughout Scandinavia incorporated these legends into its extant legend tradition and modified them to account for local geographic and community features. Each area seems to have built its legends on the legends of countries with whom it had the greatest contact and already were infected by the plague. The legend migration, in short, seems to have followed the path of disease migration. The widely differing types of plague legends found in the various Scandinavian countries bear testimony to this assertion.

Reidar Christiansen mentions four types of plague legends—7080, Plague in the shape of an old hag passing from district to district with a rake and/or broom; 7085, Plague hag ferried across river; 7090, boy and girl survivors; 7095, discovery of deserted house or church (Christiansen 1938, 1977:214–

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215). These are certainly the most common types of plague legends. Nevertheless, a great many legends fall outside the bounds of these fairly limited types. Therefore, to this list should be added: 7080b, Plague as couple, young or old, with rake, shovel, broom and/or scythe; 7081, Plague as animal; 7082, Plague as fog, cloud, mist or flame; 7083, Plague arrives on foreign ship; 7086, Plague imprisoned or bound; 7087, tricking the plague; 7090b, old woman/man survivors; and 7091, buried alive to stop the plague.

Obviously, the “Black Death” of 1347–50 was the kind of thing legends are made of. The plague pandemic in Europe was the single most catastrophic ecological crisis in European history (Heillener 1967:IV, 5). A larger percentage of the population died during this short period than in either of the two world wars (Renouard 1948:459). Pestilence exists in tradition throughout the world as a major motif—one need look no farther than the Bible or the *Iliad* of Homer to find allusions to terrible pestilence.¹ However, the remarkable aspect of the “Black Death” was that it affected all of Europe, the Near East, and North Africa within a short time period, and it happened in the historical past.

The plague was caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*, transmitted to humans from the fleas *Xenopsylla cheopis* and *Pulex irritans* (Gottfried 1983:8–9). The plague was also spread through person-to-person contact. The disease came from the Far East and had two common forms, bubonic and pneumonic, as well as a rare third form, septicæmic (Gottfried 1983:8). It followed the major trade routes west, and reached the port of Caffa in Crimea in 1345.² From there it spread to the eastern ports of the Mediterranean sea, arriving in Constantinople in 1347. Constantinople provided an easy venue for a quicker and wider dispersal of the disease, as the flea was particularly attached to the rat, *Rattus rattus*, which often infested the large coastal towns and the merchant ships. The first port of call for the plague was the city of Messina (October 1347) and later Genova and Marseille. From Marseille it traveled west and north, reaching Paris in the spring of 1348 and Bordeaux in the fall of that same year. From Paris it moved steadily north through Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, Brussels, and finally Holland, where the morbidity was so high that land reclamation halted along the Zuider Zee (Blockmans 1980:833–863). The plague journeyed from western France into southeastern England, where it moved along the coast, reaching London in autumn 1348. From Genoa it moved north to Milan, a great trading hub. It traveled north and west through Switzerland and Austria and up into Germany through Basel, Frankfurt, Köln, and Bremen. Mortality figures for Bremen suggest that the city suffered a rate between 40 and 50% (Heillener 1967:IV, 7). Bremen was a major city of the Hanseatic league and provided routes to both the Netherlands and southern Jutland (Dollinger 1970).

Mortality during the plague was exceptionally high. Although one should approach the grossly exaggerated legend accounts with caution (some of them suggest rates as high as 90%), there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that

mortality was higher than 25% (Renouard 1948:459). Because of the peculiarities of the disease and its transmission, some communities were much harder hit than others. The words of Sée provide a good appraisal of demographic research for the plague: “Nous n’en savons rien, et nous n’en pouvons rien savoir” (Heillener 1967:IV, 1). If the great plague epidemic of 1710 can be taken as a poor substitute for the medieval pandemic, then the mortality of Copenhagen would have been approximately 33% (Heillener 1967:IV, 60). As a city, Copenhagen would have had a higher mortality than the countryside, due to the easy spread of the disease in close and unsanitary quarters. Still, it is reasonable to assume that mortality in Scandinavia during the plague pandemic was in the range of 25%. One out of every four people died within three years.

The path of the plague into Scandinavia is essentially unknown. While historians often cite evidence of an English ship drifting into Bergen carrying a dead, plague-infested crew, this evidence is nothing more than a popular legend.

I gamla tider har pesten vandret omkring i landet. När han först kom hit, så anlande han från England ofver Norge. Han hade lyckats komma ombord på ett skepp, som lastade hampa i en engelsk hamn. När skeppet kom till sjöss kröp pesten fram ur hamplasten och döyde besännangen. Skeppet dref i land vid Bergen i Norge. Folk packade sig omkring skeppet som hade drifvit in från hafvet. Men de hade ej lå da länge förr än den ena föll död ned efter den andra. Pesten härjade först i trakten omkring Bergen. [ULMA 9756]

In the old days the plague wandered around the country. When he first came here, he came from England via Norway. He had managed to get aboard a ship which was loading hemp in an English port. When the ship put to sea, the plague crept out of the cargo and the entire crew died. The ship drifted ashore in Bergen in Norway. People packed themselves around the ship which had drifted in from the sea. But they had not lain there long before the one fell down dead after the other. The plague ravaged the area around Bergen first.

Anyone who has ever sailed into Bergensfjord will realize the extreme unlikelihood of a desolate ship making its way to Bergen. Bergen is simply not the type of city where a ship strands. The trade routes passing to Bergen came from both England and Denmark (Figure 1). Rather than the dramatic drifting desolate ship, the plague probably arrived in Norway (and not necessarily Bergen) on a normal trading vessel, as it did for most of Europe. Or, a ship may have stranded along a more open stretch of the Norwegian coast, as another Swedish legend recounts.

Om farsotens början berättas här . . . samma episod som är av historien fastslagna, att det strandade ett skepp nånstans på norska kusten. [ULMA 8455]

It is told here about the arrival of the plague . . . the same episode which is given in history, that a ship stranded somewhere along the Norwegian coast.

The drifting ship motif also exists in Denmark and is centered in more believable areas. In Kristensen's collection (1980), there are five legends of this type

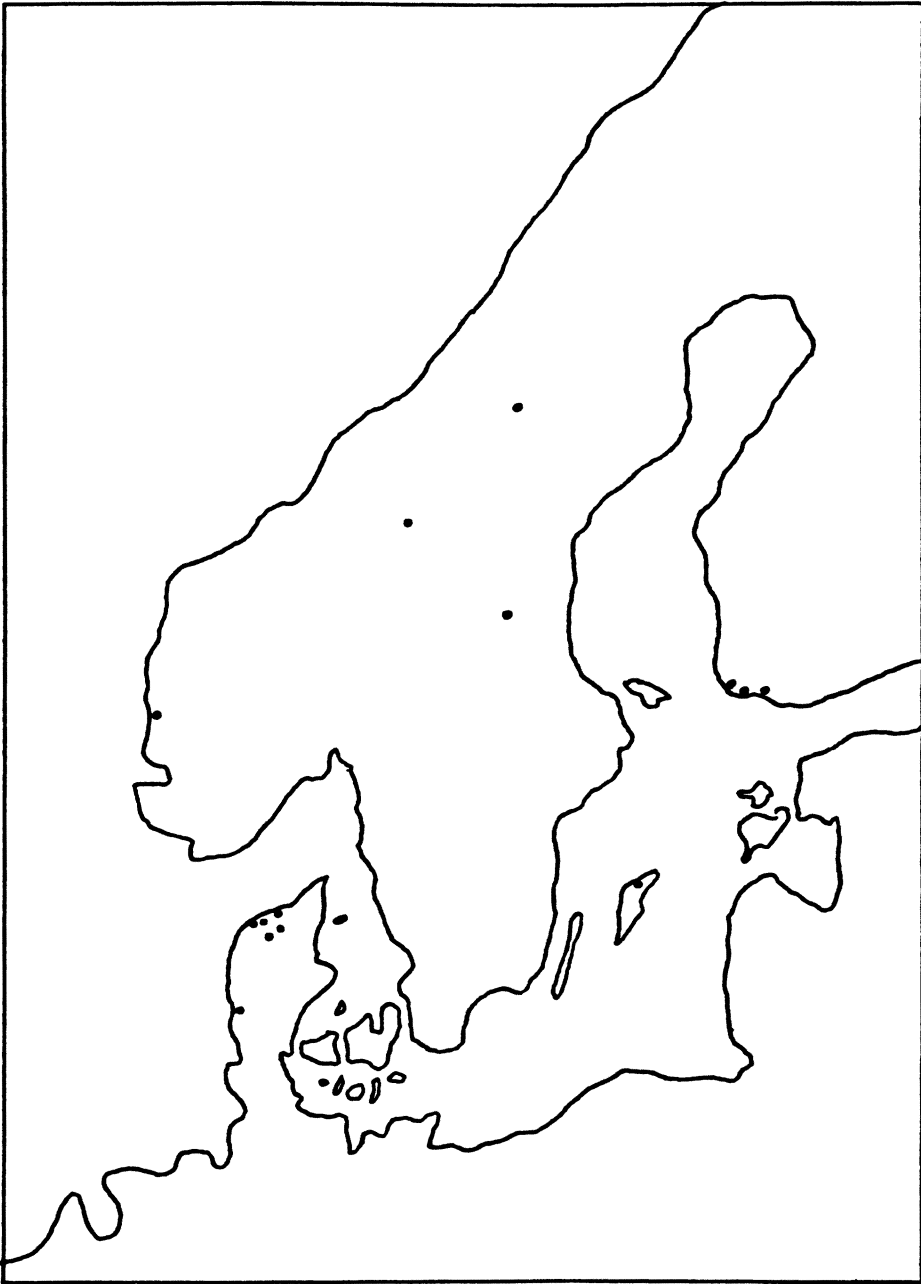


Figure 1. Distribution of ML7083 Legends in Continental Scandinavia.

(ML7083), and Thiele (1968) adds two more. Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate the legend type distribution. The legends concerning Copenhagen and Randers do not suggest a ship wreck, but rather the transport of plague by a trading vessel. In half of the legends, a religious figure, either a priest or bishop, is the first to die or the agent of initial infection. Religious figures are liminal and

Table 1. Plague Arrives on Ship—ML7083.

<i>Collection</i>	<i>Legend provenance</i>	<i>Location of ship</i>	<i>Provenance of ship</i>
Kristensen 1980:1678	Hassing	Dollerup/Sjørring	Antwerp
Kristensen 1980:1679	Kjelstrup	Sjørring	not given
Kristensen 1980:1680	Sjørring	Ty	England
Kristensen 1980:1681	Møllerup	Vesterhavet	“foreign”
Kristensen 1980:1682	Tapdrup	Randers	not given
Thiele 1968:II, 49	not given	Vendsyssel	England
Thiele 1968:II, 51	not given	Copenhagen	not given
ULMA 9756	Lappmark	Bergen	England
ULMA 8455	Bodsjö	Norway	England
Wessmann 1928:1447.A	Södrik	Södrik	Sweden
Wessmann 1928:1447.B	Linkulla	Hylta	not given
Wessmann 1928:1447.C	Kansjörr	Kansjörr	not given
Säve 1959:306	Garda	Austrböi	not given

often play a negative role in folk belief. Johnsson (1917:39) points out that Dollerup, Sjørring, Thy, and Vendsyssel are all areas open to the North Sea and the sites of frequent strandings. In fact, all of these coastal towns lie along frequently traveled Hanseatic trade routes, especially those routes originating in Lynn and Hull, England. In all of the legends, a foreign ship is beached or stranded offshore. The townspeople either plunder the ship, thereby bringing the plague to shore, or an infected person comes ashore. Excerpts from Danish legends read as follows:

Så flyver Vestboerne jo ned til det og skulde fange noget, som også de gjorde, for der var en stor ladning på skibet, men alle folkene var uddøde . . . det varede ikke svær længe, inden de allesammen blev syge. [Kristensen 1980:1681]

The Vestbos fly down to it to get something, and this they did, as there was a large cargo aboard the ship, but all the people were dead . . . it wasn't too long at all before they all became ill.

Af mandskabet var de fleste døde, men nogle kom dog levende i land, der iblandt en biskop fra England. [Kristensen 1980:1680]

Of the crew, most were dead, but some came to shore alive, among them a bishop from England.

The plague appears nearly simultaneously in Denmark and Norway in the fall of 1349 (Gottfried 1983:57; Johnsson 1917:41). In all likelihood, the plague came to both countries via boat from England. In Denmark, the plague also arrived from the south through the provinces of Schleswig-Holstein. While the Norwegian account of a stranded ship in Bergen seems ludicrous, the Danish accounts are certainly believable. The Norwegian legend should be considered a later variant of a Danish legend. The Swedish and the Finno-Swedish versions of this legend should also be considered as migrating from Denmark. A typical excerpt from a Finno-Swedish legend reads,

En gång kom ett skepp, där alla voro döda, och stannade någonstades vid kusten. Folk begav sig till skeppet och träffade där på liken, som alla varo svarta, och begrovo de döda samt togo lasten. Sålunda blev de nedsmittade, och strax därefter började folk dö i stora hopar. [Wessmann 1928:1447. A]

One time, a ship came on which all the people were dead, and it stranded somewhere along the coast. People went to the ship and found the bodies there, all of which were black, and they buried the dead and took the cargo. In this way, they were infected, and immediately thereafter people began dying in great numbers.

The legend accurately reflects the quick spread of the disease along the shipping routes. An amusing reborrowing of the legend may be found in the *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, which mentions that in 1618, a ship from Norway entered Dunbar harbor with “some infection of the pest on board.” (Shrewsbury 1970:313).

The plague spread slowly overland eastward across Denmark and reached its apex in 1350. Meanwhile, the plague moved from town to town in Norway, ravaging the population. Its spread was probably more haphazard in Norway than Denmark because of the reliance on multitudinous water routes rather than the firmly established overland routes in Denmark (Stokker 1986:331). As late as 1350, the plague had not reached Sweden, an attestation to the relatively slow spread of the plague over land. Magnus II, King of Sweden, declared in 1350, “God for the sins of man has struck the world with this great punishment of sudden death. By it most of the people in the land are dead. It is now ravaging in Norway and Holland, and approaching our kingdom of Sweden” (Gasquet 1908:78). By the end of 1350 the plague was doing quite well in all of Scandinavia and its trading partners. Iceland, behind the current continental trends as usual, was not infected by the plague until 1402 (Simpson 1972:162). However, when the plague reached Iceland, it raged, and mortality was exceptionally high. The plague probably came to Iceland through Norway, its main trading partner. Often mortality figures of over 40% are given for Iceland (Gottfried 1983:58).

Because of its migratory nature, the plague provides a perfect opportunity for the study of the dispersal of legends throughout Scandinavia and the adaptation of the legend traditions by each distinct folk group for its own uses. Legends concerning high mortality are found throughout Europe and Scandinavia. This is not surprising, as thoughts of the exceptionally high mortality must have been omnipresent. These legends commonly focus on the survival of an old woman (ML7090b) or a single man who finds a single woman and their ensuing marriage and fertility (ML7090). In Kristensen’s collection (1980), one finds 54 legends of this type (ML7090 and 7090b). Commonly, they take the form:

Da pesten gik over landet, var der ikke uden et par folk tilbage her i sognet og et par folk i Saltum. [Kristensen 1980:1713]

When the plague went over the country, there was nobody left except for a couple of people here in the parish and a couple in Saltum.

Efter pesten var kun ét menneske tilbage i *Valsgård* sogn, og det var en pige. Det var for resten den eneste levende norden fjorden. Så gik hun og råbte og fik at høre, at en karl råbte lige sådan sønden fjorden. De flyt så sammen og blev gifte. [Kristensen 1980:1748]

After the plague, there was only one person left in Valsgård parish, and that was a girl. She was the only living person on the northern side of the fjord. She went and cried out, and heard that a man yelled the same way from the southern side of the fjord. They moved in together and were married.

From Norway:

I Jørgensfjord uddøde alt folket med Undtagelesen af en Qvinde, Jorund, efter hvem Prestegjeldet siden skal have faaet sit Navn. [Faye 1948:129]

In Jørgensfjord all of the people died except for a woman, Jorund, after whom the parish supposedly is named.

I Gravens Prestegjeld levendes alene en Gut og en Pige, som giftede sig og satte Bo paa Nesheim. [Faye 1948:130]

In Gravens parish only a boy and a girl survived, who got married and settled at Nesheim.

From Sweden, common legends take the form,

I Kleva bodde två gamla töser. För att undgå Svarta döden byggde de sig en stuga i Parkedalen långt uppe i fjället. [1 April 1918:120]

In Kleva lived two old maids. To avoid the Black Death, they built a hut in Parkedalen, way up in the mountains.

Bara två levde kvar, och de bodde långt i sør. Det var "tös å pelt." De skulle gå upp på ett berg "å råpa å huja" (hojta). Då svarade den andra, och så fanns det ett ställe, som hette Rophult, och ett, som hette Svarhult. [1 April 1918:120]

Only two survived there, and they lived long to the south. It was a girl and a boy. They should go up on a mountain and yell and shout. Then one answered the other, and so there was a place called Rophult and another one called Svarhult.

The ML7090 legends often mention bell ringing and fire burning as a means for finding survivors. Johnsson believes that the accounts of bell ringing and fire burning to attract other survivors are based on historical fact (Johnsson 1917:46–47). However, given the above estimates of mortality, it seems unlikely that only one couple would survive in an entire district. More acceptable is the idea of a small group of survivors carrying out these practices not so much as to find other survivors, but rather to reestablish broken lines of communication. The bell ringing could also be related to the vast number of deaths—the church rang its bells at a burial. Or the bell ringing could be a reflex of the legends in which bells are rung to help lost people find their way back to the town (particularly common in Norway and Sweden). The fire burning could be related to the folk belief that fire and/or smoke could destroy

or prevent the plague. From Norway comes the legend of a couple who burn the plague children inside their house:

Då mann og kona høyrde det, så skyna dei kva gjester dei hadde fått. Og dei var så redde, at dei satte eld på husa. [Strompdal 1929:171]

When the man and his wife heard that, they realized what kind of guests they had. And they were so angry, that they lit the house on fire.

From Denmark comes a legend of a woman who is protected from the plague by smoking a pipe:

Hun havde kjørt alle de døde hen og havde kun et øg at kjøre dem med, men hun blev ikke syg, for det hun rögte af en kridpipe. [Kristensen 1980:1729]

She had driven all the dead [to the cemetery] and had only one jade to drive them with, but she did not get sick, because she smoked a chalk pipe.

ML7090ab legends primarily address the effect of plague on fertility. In many cases, the surviving figure is a liminal one, devoid of any fertility function in the community, “I pestens tid var alle folk døde ud her så nær som to gamle kjællinger” [During the plague, all the people died in this area except two old women] (Kristensen 1980:1732). Heillener mentions the impact of the plague on fertility and the decline in the number of births during and immediately after the plague (1967:3–20). It is noteworthy that pregnant women were at a great risk of dying or aborting due to the increased stress on the immune system exerted by the disease (Heillener 1967:11). The population of Scandinavia took well over a century to recover from the ravages of the plague, and Norway’s population did not recover until well into the 17th century. Plague especially targeted the liminal groups found in the first type of these legends (ML7090b), namely the young, the old, the infirm, and women. In these legends, the district is reduced to a barren state, symbolized either by the postmenopausal women or the prepubescent children. In either case, these survivors cannot reproduce. The second type of legend (ML7090a) seems to build on legends similar to the Old Testament account of Noah and the Great Flood. Noah and his wife, along with his sons and their wives, are expected to repopulate the world. These legends underscore both the need for and the difficulty of increasing the depleted populace. During the search for the mate, the young man/woman often has to rely on the church bells to locate the other, a symbolic appeal to God.

In an agrarian society, manpower was essential to the success of the economy. The inability to reproduce, or difficulty in reproducing suggested by the search for the mate, was tantamount to economic ruin. Agrarian work is labor intensive. In Scandinavia, farms were dependent on large families and young unwed men (*ungkarl*). The continuation of the farm required the sons to marry and raise large families. However, the age of marriage could not be too young,

or it would encroach on the important *ungkarl* labor pool. The high mortality among young children and women severely damaged the process. One of the results was a lower average age of marriage (occasionally reflected in these legends), which further hurt the farming system. The continued depletion of the Scandinavian populations bears witness to the breakdown in this system. Disease was much more detrimental to this system than poor harvests and famines. In a discussion on the effects of disease versus poor harvest on mortality in a Scandinavian agrarian society (Finland), Jutikalla and Kauppinen offer convincing proof that poor harvests were not a major factor in raising the death rate. Their findings show that all years in which the death rate was substantially higher than normal came during years of epidemic and not famine (1971:273–286).

Another group of plague legends concerns live burial of people to stop the plague. This subject was treated in depth by Hauge (1965) and also mentioned by Tillhagen (1967:215–230). The legend type seems to be linked to a larger cycle of legends that concern preventative measures to halt the advance of the plague. The use of fire and smoke as prophylaxis against the plague was discussed above. Tillhagen argues convincingly that live burial probably did exist as a means to fend off the plague (1967:217). The belief was that the plague spirit would be unable to escape from the victim before he or she was completely buried, at which point the plague would be entombed in the ground. The loss of one or two peripheral figures would be worth the inhumanity if it meant an end to plague. The people buried are, in all accounts, either women or children. In one legend, the children buried are orphans:

Under den stora pesten dog många människor här i socknen. Pesten stoppades i en by som heter Gravamåla. Det tillgick så, att man grävde ner ett par levande barn i jorden. Vilken dessa barn voro visste ingen. Deras föräldrar hade dött i pestan, och de vandrade från gård til gård och tiggde mat. [Tillhagen 1967:223]

During the great plague, many people died here in the parish. The plague was stopped in a town called Gravamåla. It happened because they buried a pair of live children in the ground. Nobody knew whose children these were. Their parents had died from the plague, and they wandered from farm to farm and begged for food.

From Posen comes the account of a girl buried alive:

Als der Grab fertig war, befahle er dem Mädchen hineinzusteigen, damit er sehe, ob es auch tief genug sei. Das Mädchen tat, wie ihm befohlen; sobald es aber in dem Grabe war, ließ sich der Schulze den Spaten reichen und verschüttete das im Grabe befindliche Mädchen mit der aufgeschütteten Erde. . . . Vom nächsten Tage ab erkrankte keine Person mehr im Dorf, die Pest war gewichen. [Knoop 1893:XL, 7]

When the grave was finished, they told the girl to get into it to see if it was deep enough. The girl did as they asked; however, when she got into the grave, they reached for the spade and buried the girl alive in the grave with the heaped up dirt. . . . From the next day on, no people in the town got sick, and the plague had disappeared.

This is remarkably similar to the Danish version:

I den østlig ende af kirkegården på Fur i Limfjorden må der ikke begraves nogen, for da den sorte død rasede der på øen, måtte man begrave et levende barn her, for at smitten skulle standse. [Thiele 1968:II, 53]

In the eastern end of the cemetery on Fur in the Limfjord one may not bury anyone because when the plague raged on the island, they had to bury a living child there to stop the disease.

The thought of trapping the plague in a hole or locking it up is found throughout Scandinavia and Europe. From Rügen comes the account:

Ein Mann sah einmal die Pest, "wie einen knäuel blauen Dunst" hinein in ein Loch im Pfosten eines Thorwegs fliegen. Sogleich nahm er einen Pflock und schlug ihn in die Höhlung. Als er nun nach Jahren wieder an den Pfosten herantrat, sagte er: "Ich sperrte dort einmal einen Böser hinein, ich möchte doch wissen, ob er noch darinnen ist," und zog den Pflock aus dem Loche. Da fuhr die Pest heraus, ihm gerade in den Mund, so daß er auf der Stelle tot zur Erde stürzte. [Jahn 1886:#47]

A man saw the plague once as a "small, bluish mist" fly into a hole in a doorjamb. So he took a plug and put it into the hole. Years later, he got near the doorjamb again, and he said, "I trapped a devil in there once, and I would like to know if it is still in there," and he took the plug out of the hole. Then the plague flew out, right into the man's mouth, so that he died right there on the spot.

This is similar to a Norwegian legend:

I gamle dage gik Pesten eller Rokkå omkring i Solør og bragte vekselvis riven og limen. . . . Manden fulgte henne da til en låve og todde henne et navarshul i væggen. "Jeg har hørt du skal årke gjøre dig så liden du vil; men kan du smyge ind her?" sa han. Jo, Rokkå skrumpet sig ihop, så hun blev liden som en mus og krøb ind i hullet . . . og da tog manden en plugg op av lommen og slog i hullet. Siden læste han en sentense ud av svartebogen, og da sad Rokkå så fast, at hun hverken kunde bryde eller bore sig ud, og der sidder hun den dag idag. [Kvideland 19]

In the old days, the plague or Rokkå went around in Solør and brought either a rake or a broom. . . . A man followed her to a barn and drilled an augerhole in the wall for her. "I've heard that you can make yourself as small as you will; but can you creep in here?" he said. Yes, Rokkå shrunk herself together, so she became as small as a mouse and crept into the hole . . . and then the man took a plug out of his pocket and banged it into the hole. Then he read a sentence out of the black book, and then Rokkå was stuck so tightly in the hole that she could neither break out nor tunnel out, and she sits there still today.

Another belief concerning the plague was that it was unable to cross barriers, especially water or ditches. From Tempelburg in Pommern comes the account of the plague leaving a man's shoulder because he jumps into the water:

Ein Arbeiter ging auf dem Fußsteig am Ufer der Oder, als über die Wiese hin die Pest wie ein langer, schmaler Nebelstreif auf ihn zugeflogen kam und sich ihm auf die Schultern legte. Zu

seiner Angst wusste er sich keinen besseren Rat, als in das Wasser zu springen. Und das half auch, die Pest scheute vor dem kalten Bade zurück und verliess den Mann. [Jahn 1886:#48]

A worker went on the footpath along the shore of the Oder, while over the meadow the plague came flying as a long, narrow streak of mist and laid itself on his shoulder. In his fear, he could think of nothing better to do than to jump in the water. And that helped too, because the plague jumped back from the cold bath and left the man.

In popular belief, the plague was unable to cross water. The ML7085 legends use this inability as their basic premise. Other natural barriers existed as well. Swedish legends often mention walls erected to prevent the spread of plague.

I slutet på 1700 tallet härjade en svår pest i Gamlakarleby. De döda begrav man i Katarina kyrkogård, kring vilka uppfördes en stenmur förr at hindra pesten att sprida sig. [Wessman 1928:1474c]

In the end of the 1700s a terrible plague raged in Gamlakerby. They buried the dead in Katrina cemetery, around which a stone wall was erected to hinder the spread of the plague.

This mirrors the east European legends of ploughing a furrow to prevent the spread of plague. An interesting connection exists between these ploughing legends and the Scandinavian buried alive legends. The people forced to pull the plough are often the same class of people who are buried alive. The end result in both cases is death of the victim, but salvation from plague for the community. Barriers in Norway occasionally share the motif of killing a living person to halt the plague:

Då denne gysjelige farsotti kom herjende upp etter dalen . . . drap ein sakeslauss ung mann med kniv og la liket tvers over vegen i soknedelet millom Gol og Ål. Over liket av denne skuldlause mannen kunne farsotti ikkje koma . . . [Kvideland 20]

When that gruesome epidemic came harrying up the valley . . . an innocent young man was killed with a knife and they lay the body across the road in the part of the parish between Gol and Ål. The epidemic could not come over the body of the innocent man.

Another legend relates the use of consecrated earth as a barrier to the plague's advance:

Sotti rasa over heile bygdi. . . . Paa Rauland klara heile huslyden seg. Mannen hadda henta mold fraa kyrkjegarden og stöydd rundt stogo si. [Kvideland 15]

The plague raged over the entire village . . . In Rauland the entire household survived. The man had brought dirt from the cemetery and spread it around his house path.

The legend is reminiscent of the Danish legends in which a priest is successful in halting the spread of the plague.

The foreign often play the role of the unexpected or the otherworldly in legends. It is not surprising, then, that plague legends exist in all of the Scandinavian countries in which the plague takes the form of a foreign animal

(ML7081). Legends of this type are found throughout Europe. Usually, the animal embodying the plague is a normal farm animal. The use of it as a plague personification underscores the breakdown of community fertility during the plague—the function of the animal is no longer to bring food, but death. Thiele includes the following legend in his collection:

Her var en flok unge mennesker samlet i en lade, hvor de fornøjede sig hele natten med spil og dans. Da kom der pludselig et ildhjul ind i laden, og da man så nærmere til, var det en buk på tre ben, der hoppede omkring, og de kaldte den Hel. Men den næste morgen var en del af gæsterne syge og herfra bredte sygdommen sig videre over hele landet, og da denne død også lod sig se i skikkelse af en hvid hest, kunne man følge dens vej fra den ene by til den anden. [Thiele 1968:II, 50]

Here a group of young people were gathered in a barn, where they enjoyed themselves the whole night with game and dance. Suddenly, a fire wheel came into the barn, and when one looked closer at it, it was a three-legged goat which hopped around, and they called it Hel. But the next morning, a number of the guests were ill and from here the disease spread over the entire country, and as this death also let itself be seen in the shape of a white horse, one could follow its path from one town to another.

The narrative exhibits the plague in two animal forms and emphasizes the folk awareness of the migratory nature of the disease. The white horse is unusual enough to draw attention and act as a plague personification. White horses are often used in Swedish legend in conjunction with the *näck*. Horses played a central role on the Scandinavian farm as a means for transportation—the vital link between communities. The three-legged goat is also an unusual version of a common farm animal. Goats are often related to the devil in Scandinavian legend tradition. The use of the goat thus exhibits two sides. First, it is an inversion of the normal fertility function of the farm animal. Second, it implies a connection to the devil. The connection is underscored by the reference to the goat as *Hel*. The plague often takes the appearance of a farm animal. Indirect allusion to the plague as animal often occurs, such as, “sorte død begyndte at grassere i Norge” [the black plague began to graze in Norway] (Faye 1948:127). However, the plague is not limited to farm animal form. Arill’s collection contains the following account:

När svarta döden (digerdöden) gick, så var orsacken, att ett underligt djur gick genom landet. Det var ingen människa, som hade sett det förr. Var det djuret ängick fram, där svartnade människorna och föll ner och dog. [Arill 1918:126]

When the black death (plague) went, the reason was because a strange animal went through the country. Nobody had ever seen it before. Wherever the animal went by, the people turned black and fell down dead.

The plague is also often brought by a foreigner to the community. Rather than acting as a personification of the plague, these foreigners are the cause of infection. Often, they are men. Men were the main traders and travelers in

Scandinavia, and thus the main sources of contagion. The plague carrier is usually a merchant. Occasionally, a nationality is attached to the wanderer. In Sweden, the foreigner is a Finn; conversely, in Finland, the foreigner is a Swede. (Table 2 illustrates the distribution and form of these legends.)

Legends also exist in Scandinavia concerning plague portents. Most of the plague portents are either women or small children. Legends of this type are found throughout Europe. An account from Germany tells of a woman in white who says the plague will arrive to punish people for dancing the polka too much. This hearkens back to Thiele’s account of the three-legged goat and the young people dancing in the barn (1968:II, 50). Plague portents often mention that the plague would arrive as a form of punishment for people’s moral transgressions. A Danish legend recounts the discovery of a baby in a haystack, who tells of the impending arrival of the disease:

En morgen kort efter solopgang på den fjerde søndag efter trinitatis hendte det, at en kvinde, der skulle ud for at mælke, tydeligt hørte en stemme synge salmen, “Nu bede vi den Helligånd,” og da hun så sig om, fandt hun midt i kornet et dejligt barn, der var klædt i hvid skjorte, og barnet sagde til hende, at hun ikke skulle frygte for sit liv, men for menneskes onskabs skyld skulle der først falde sygdom og død over øen. . . . Derefter indfandt den sorte Død sig. [Thiele 1968:II, 53]

One morning, a little after sunrise on the fourth Sunday after Trinity, it happened that a woman, who was going out to milk, clearly heard a voice singing the hymn, “Now we pray to the Holy Spirit,” and when she looked around, she found a wonderful child in the middle of the grain clad in a white shirt, and the child said to her that she should not fear for her life, but because of man’s evilness, disease and death would fall over the island. . . . Soon after the Black Death came.

Once again, fertility symbols abound in a nonfertile situation.

Lindow (1973) summarizes the different personifications of the plague in Scandinavian legends and offers some interesting insights into the mechanisms at work in the legend composition. Tillhagen (1967) also cites examples of

Table 2. Continental Scandinavia—Plague Brought by Foreigner.

<i>Collection</i>	<i>Legend provenance</i>	<i>Foreigner</i>
Kristensen 1980:1638	Hassing	Bishop from Antwerp
Kristensen 1980:1680	Sjörring	Bishop from England
Kristensen 1980:1693	Løgum	enemy troops
Kristensen 1980:1767	Ringe	four men
Thiele 1968:49	Ulstrup	wandering man
Faye 1948:134	Sælbo	Finn
Wessman 1928:1477	Kärpä	Swede
Säve 1959:304	not given	child
Säve 1959:306	Austrbüi	seaman
Kvideland 19	not given	Finn

plague personifications, focusing primarily on Sweden. Both of these studies place primary emphasis on legends of the type ML7080, 7080b, and 7085. They mention the legends ML7081, although neither discusses these legends in detail. Legends of the type ML7082 are essentially ignored.³ Remarkably, inverse emphasis on legend types can be found in Johnsson (1917). The reason for this is the geographic area focus of the articles in question. While Lindow and Tillhagen concern themselves primarily with Sweden and Norway, Johnsson limits his discussion exclusively to Denmark. The emphasis on different legend types due to geographic area reveals an interesting fact—while the plague is almost always anthropomorphized in Sweden and Norway, it nearly exclusively appears as a cloud or fog in Denmark.

The arrival of plague in Denmark is linked predominantly to fogs, mists, and clouds. Kristensen’s collection includes six legends that mention fog or clouds specifically and four legends in which language indicative of this form is used. Words such as *drivende* (drifting) imply the presence of a cloud or fog, even if the specific item is not mentioned. Legends of this type are also found along the western coast of Norway, specifically near Bergen and Kristiansand. Table 3 and Figure 2 summarize the distribution of the legend type. The appearance of the plague as a fog or cloud is popular throughout Europe, but it seems to be particularly common in Austria and Germany. In Austrian legend, the plague often appears in the form of the *Pest Jungfrau*, who flew over the land, enveloped in a blue flame (Crawfurd 1968:125). Here, two elements are present—an anthropomorphic figure and a cloudlike embodiment. The fact that the plague is a virgin, a woman who does not bear children, underscores

Table 3. Plague as Fog, Mist or Cloud—ML7082a.

Collection	Legend provenance	Allusion	Form
Kristensen 1980:1678	Hassing	specific	fog
Kristensen 1980:1683	Rødning	specific	cloud
Kristensen 1980:1683	Ulvborg	specific	black cloud
Kristensen 1980:1686	Vrendrup	specific	shadow
Kristensen 1980:1687	Sjellerup	specific	blue sheet
Kristensen 1980:1712	not given	specific	mist
Kristensen 1980:1761	Gudrum	specific	dark fog
Kristensen 1980:1681	Mollerup	implicit	“drev ind over landet”
Kristensen 1980:1684	Roding	implicit	(see 1685)
Kristensen 1980:1685	Nautrup	implicit	“kom drivende”
Kristensen 1980:1743	Nygård	implicit	“gået over landet”
Kvideland 1	Aaseral	specific	fog
Kvideland 2	Sætedal	specific	fog
Kvideland 3	Balestrand	specific	cloud
Bergstrand 1949:180	Rolfstorp	specific	flying rod
Bergstrand 1949:181	Idala	specific	red cloth

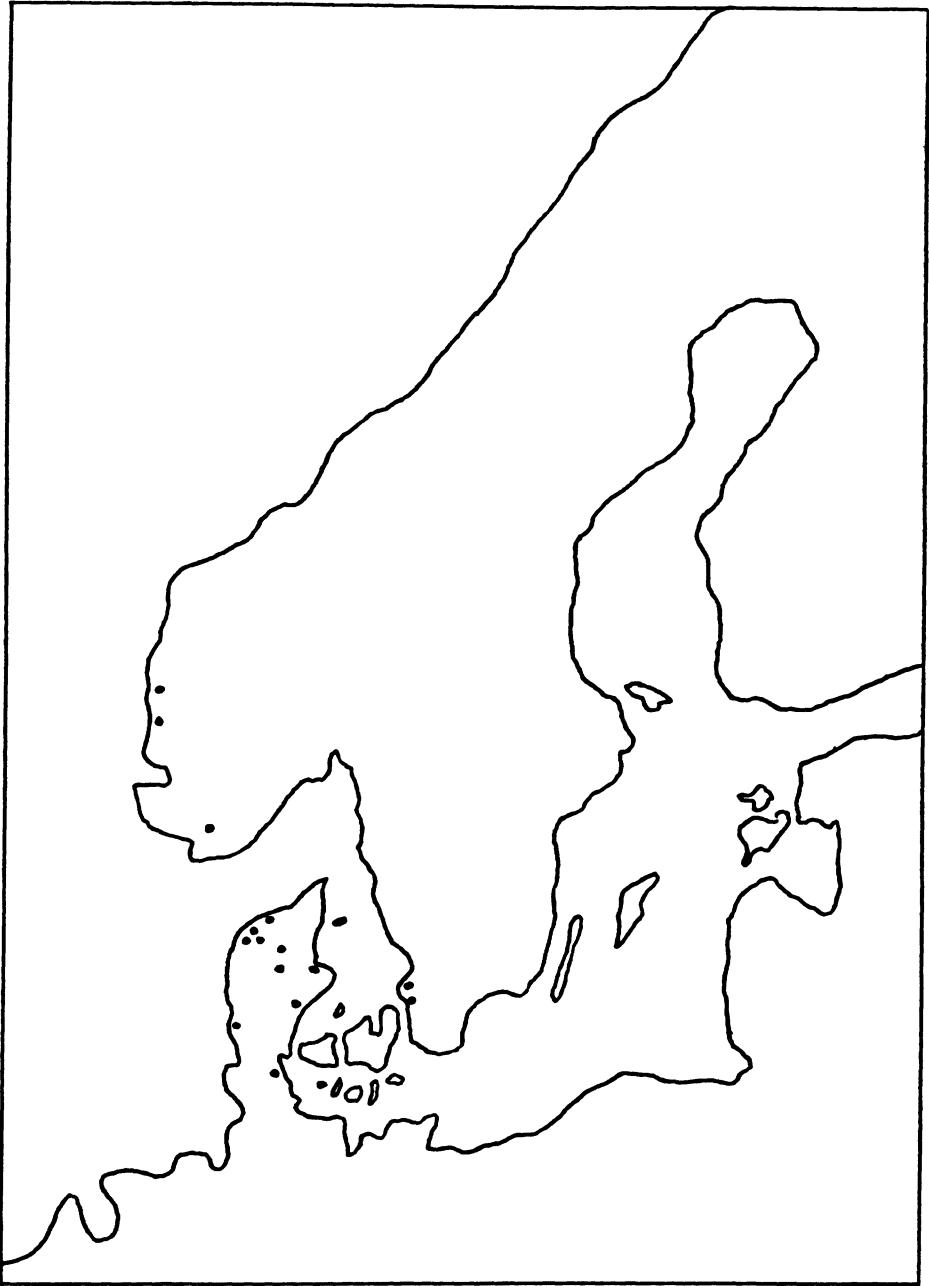


Figure 2. Distribution of ML7082 Legends in Continental Scandinavia.

the negative fertility value of the plague. Pestilence had been attributed to a blue flame for hundreds of years prior to the Black Death. An account from Rheims in A.D. 937 describes the pestilence as a blue flame in the sky (*Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* 1927:VI, 1502). As the plague migrated north and west, the two aspects of the plague received varying emphasis. By

the time the legends reached northern Germany, emphasis had shifted completely to the blue flame/cloud aspect. From Rügen comes the account of the plague as “ein knäuel blauer Dunst” [a bundled blue vapor] (Jahn 1886:#47). In Tempelburg, the plague takes the form of “ein langer, schmaler Nebelstreif” [a long, narrow streak of mist] (Jahn 1886:#48). In Thüringen, the plague is described as “ein kleiner blauer Dunst” [a small blue vapor] (Sommer 1846:#63). Moving further north to the provinces of Schleswig-Holstein, the plague takes on the following appearances:

As in olen linden in uns Lant de Swarte Doet vael Minschen ümt Leben bröch unn ok in unse Regent vāle unn gansse dörper vetstarwen dāen, do seeg man eenmael enen swarten Nāwel retit Norosten baem in de Luft op Grammdorp tokam'n. [Müllenhof 1845:#329]

During the Black Death, many people died and in our regency entire households and whole villages died out, and once one saw a black mist come through the air from the northeast to Grammdorp.

Anno 1345 regnete es Feuer vom himmel über das Meer gleich wie Schneewolken; das war so hissig und verzehrend, alle Leute, die den Rauch sahen, lebten nur einen halben Tag, die Leute aber, die berührt waren auf dem Meer, wo die hinkamen, da starb alles Volk und alle, die sie sahen. [Müllenhof 1845:#580]

In 1345, fire rained from the sky over the sea as well as snow clouds; it was so fierce and frightening that all of the people who saw the smoke lived no longer than half a day; however, those people who were touched by the water when they came near it died as did all whom they saw.

There is no trace of an anthropomorphic representation of the plague in these legends.

In many of the Danish ML7082 legends, a priest or other religious figure helps to save the parish from the plague:

Folk var ved at gå ud af kirken, og så fik præsten øje på, at pesten kom drivende. Så siger han, at de skulde gå ad kirken igjen. Så blev de fri. [Kristensen 1980:1685]

People were about to leave the church, and then the priest saw that the plague came drifting. Then he says that they should go back into the church again. In this way, they were spared.

The plague arriving as a fog correlates well with the legends ML4000, soul of sleeping person wanders on its own. In these legends, the soul is often symbolized by a fog. It is not surprising, then, that a religious figure plays an important role in the ML7082 legends. The priest was in charge of the spiritual well-being of the community. He had to drive away evil spirits and prevent the encroachment of the other world on this world. Furthermore, priests were often seen as being in command of magical powers due to their extensive education and their foreign roots. The bishop in Kristensen (1980:1678) is a higher version of the priest, perhaps used to emphasize the extreme nature of the plague. In several of the legends, returning to the church and praying after first sighting the plague cloud is effective in preventing the spread of the disease.

Johnsson tries to explain the predominance of fogs and clouds in the Danish plague legends, arguing that natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions could cause the appearance of bizarre celestial phenomena:

En mulighed for forklaring har man i, at Skydannelser af sær og fremmed Natur ingenlunde er ukendte, selv ikke for vor Tid. De skyldes ofte fjærne vulkanske Udbrud. . . . De farvede skyer skyldtes her, at Asken . . . foranledigede en Fortætning af Vanddampene. [Johnsson 1917:43]

One possibility for explanation of strange and foreign celestial phenomena is that they are not unknown, not even in our own time. Often, they are caused by distant volcanic eruptions. . . . The colored clouds are due to the ash . . . which brings about a concentration of the atmospheric moisture.

Throughout Europe, common belief held that the plague was caused by natural disasters, including volcanic eruption or undersea earthquakes. Gottfried points out the belief that fissures under the sea caused the escape of some gas that made its way in over the European continent, thereby causing the plague (1983:111). Needless to say, there is no evidence that the time surrounding the Black Death exhibited substantially higher numbers of geological disasters. Johnsson admits this himself:

For at antage, at de omtalte Himmelsyn skulde have deres Aarsag i noget lignende, er der den Hindring, at man ingen historiske Efterretninger ejer om noget vulkansk Udbrud kort før den sorte Døds Optræden. [Johnsson 1917:44]

There is one obstacle to accepting that the discussed celestial phenomena are caused by something of that nature [volcanic eruptions], and that is that there are no historic accounts of any volcanic eruptions shortly before the outbreak of the Black Death.

All the accounts of celestial phenomena are highly localized and not symptomatic of phenomena accompanying geological disasters.

During the legends' northward migration, the symbol of the flame developed into a small, localized cloud or fog, whose appearance was definite and recognizable. In some legends the blue color is preserved:

Da pesten kom, mældte den sig ved, at der fløj ligesom et blåt forklæde gennem luften. [Kris-tensen 1980:1687]

When the plague came, something just like a blue sheet flew through the air.

A legend in Thiele's collection preserves the aspect of fire (ML7082b):

Da kom pludeselig et ildhjul ind i laden . . . den næste morgen var en del af gæsterne syge, og herfra bredte sygdommen sig videre over hele landet. [Thiele 1968:II, 50]

Suddenly a fire wheel came into the barn . . . the next morning, a number of the guests were ill, and from here the disease spread over the entire country.

The vast majority of the Danish legends rely on the cloud motif. Only a minority employs the flame motif.

ML7082 legends are not restricted to continental Europe. In a Scottish legend, the plague maintains both an anthropomorphic form and a cloud form. It appears as a dark cloud, but later takes definite shape as a man. The man is chased from the room of a sick woman and disappears down a hole, never to be seen again (Briggs 1971:II, 569–572). In another Scottish legend, the plague appears as a blue fog, again reminiscent of Danish tradition (Briggs 1971:II, 377). The areas of plague infection for Denmark, north Germany, and the British Isles have legends in their tradition of the same type as those predominant in the Danish tradition. The legends from the British Isles, however, maintain the anthropomorphic form for the plague.

The Norwegian legends that deal with the appearance of the plague are predominantly of the types ML7080a, 7080b, and 7085. Only very few type 7082 legends have been collected. Legend type ML7085 presupposes an anthropomorphic form. Christiansen correctly notes that in a large number of cases the plague appears as an old hag. Lindow adds that this hag is not a witch, but rather a completely independent folk character (1973:87). The other common form for the plague to take is that of two small children (ML7080b). Tillhagen suggests that the children entered tradition through historical fact. He asserts that, after the plague, a large number of orphans must have passed from farm to farm begging food (1967:217). They would also have acted as agents of infection. Returning to the relation between plague, its victims, and fertility, another plausible explanation emerges. All legends of type ML7080ab make use of nonfertile community members as representations of the plague. The intimate connection between fertility and economic success was shown above. It would therefore appear that the plague, because of its dire demographic consequences, could only be represented by nonfertile members of the community—women past their childbearing years, small children, or, in one instance (ULMA 9756), virgins. Finally, mortality was highest among the old, the young, and women. This aspect of the plague is incorporated into the legends—those who most frequently died were the best form for a symbolic representation of the disease.

The negative fertility aspect of the plague figure is heightened by her use of common household tools for determining the number of victims. In Christiansen's collection, one finds the following:

Der gikk pesten fra gård til gård i skikkelse av et bitte lite kvinnfolk. Hun bar alltid med sig en liten kost, og der hvor hun gikk inn og feiet for døren, der døde alle folkene i huset; men på de gårdene der noen skulde live, slo hun like mange slag på døren med kosterkaftet, som der skulde dø folk i huset. [Christiansen 1938:36]

There the plague went from farm to farm in the shape of a little tiny woman. She always carried with her a little broom, and there where she went in and swept in front of the door, all the people in the house died; but at those farms where some people should survive, she hit the door with the broomhandle as many times as the number of people who would die in the house.

The plague hag can also be accompanied by an old man, often carrying a shovel:

Da han (pesten) gick fram med sin spade, der blev dock nagon enda menniska skonad; men der hon gick fram med sin qvast, blev ej mors barn lefvande lemnadt. [Säve 1959:#308]

When he (the plague) went forth with his shovel, some people were spared; but where she went forth with her broom, not even a mother's child was left alive.

The household tools the plague uses are those associated with the woman's and man's respective normal household roles. However, the function of the tools has been inverted and, rather than maintaining the living quarters or bringing sustenance, the tools bring death. When the plague arrives as a child couple, the same tools are used:

Vid Ungbåtels i Stånga inkom först Pesten i såsom en flicka med qvast (der gjorde döden rent hus) och en gosse med spade (der han kom, lemnades någon enda menniska kvar lefvande.) [Säve 1959:#309]

At Ungbåtels in Stånga, the plague first came as a girl with a broom (there death cleaned house) and a boy with a shovel (where he came, some people remained alive).

The future roles of the children are inverted: children are usually associated with new life, but here they are associated with death. Rather than stepping into future roles of contributors to the community, they assume the roles of detractors from the community.

I could find no analogues to these legends (ML7080ab) in Denmark or any other European country. The closest image is that of the Grim Reaper, who travels with his scythe, harvesting people. As with the ML7080ab legends, a tool associated with life sustenance is used for life destruction. However, accounts of a Grim Reaper do not seem common in Scandinavian tradition. One Norwegian legend makes use of the Grim Reaper figure with scythe: "Dei saag pesten som ein mann med ein stor ljaa ridande yver vatn, berg og dalar. . . . Der han reid fyre, fylgde pesten etter og gjorde sitt verk" [They saw the plague as a man with a large scythe riding over the water, mountains and valleys. . . . There where he rode by, the plague followed after and did its work] (Kvideland 5). Predominantly, the north Scandinavian legends use an anthropomorphic plague figure as a starting point. The accounts of single or pair survivors act as a building block, supplying the motif of infertility. The idea of a foreign element bringing the plague is also incorporated into these legends as well as the wandering nature of the disease. Finally, the negative use of household and farm tools is added to emphasize the impact on communal fertility. The popularity of these legends bespeaks their efficiency in communicating all of the important aspects of the disease—arbitrary number of deaths, impact on fertility, migratory nature of the disease, and its foreign provenance. (Table 4 and Figure 3 show the wide dispersal of this type through Norway and Sweden.)

Legends of the type ML7085 build directly on legends of the type ML7080ab. Once again, the anthropomorphic representation of the plague is an old woman. However, men also play this role. The ferryman who grants

Table 4. Plague as Old Hag, Old Man, Old Pair or Child Pair—ML7080ab.

<i>Collection</i>	<i>Legend provenance</i>	<i>Type</i>
ULMA 5622	Sollerön	7080b
ULMA 13133	N. Finnskoga	7080b
ULMA 68:4:18	Resele	7080a
ULMA 68:4:28	Resele	7080a (man)
ULMA 7639	Dal	7080a (man)
ULMA 7639	Dal	7080b
ULMA 2782:2	Salerön	7080b
ULMA 8694	Mora	7080b
ULMA 14490	Tråvad	7080a (boy)
ULMA 4697	Värmland	7080b
ULMA 12721:18	Häls	7080b
ULMA 12721:18	Vollsjö	7080a
ULMA 303:708	Vänge	7080a (girl)
ULMA 1976	Mora	7080a
ULMA 1992	Mora	7080a
ULMA 425	Gillberga	7080a
ULMA 23019:93	Fågelås	7080a
ULMA 23961	Vårvik	7080b
ULMA 11288	Mora	7080b
ULMA 8155	Ö. Ullerud	7080b
ULMA 7886	Vingåker	7080b
ULMA 11431	Gagnef	7080a (man)
ULMA 18504	Älgå	7080b
ULMA 18504	Älgå	7080a (man)
ULMA 18504	Älgå	7080b
ULMA 12855	Boda	7080a
ULMA 9756	Åsele	7080b
ULMA 9756	Åsele	7080b (two virgins)
ULMA 16115	Tävelsås	7080b
Strompdal 1929:IV.8	Helgeland	7080a (man)
Strompdal 1929:IV.9	Helgeland	7080b
Faye 1948:127	Gjerrestad	7080b
Faye 1948:137	Øiestad	7080a
Christiansen 1938:36	Vinje	7080a
Säve 1959:304	Quie	7080b
Säve 1959:304	Båta, Fårö	7080b
Säve 1959:305	not given	7080b
Säve 1959:306	not given	7080b
Säve 1959:306b	not given	7080a, and 7080b
Säve 1959:307	not given	7080a
Säve 1959:308	Fårö	7080b
Säve 1959:309	Stånga	7080b
Kvideland 4	Österdalen	7080a

Table 4. Continued.

<i>Collection</i>	<i>Legend provenance</i>	<i>Type</i>
Kvideland 5	Nordfjord	7080b
Kvideland 6	not given	7080a (man)
Kvideland 16	Högsfjord	7080a
Kvideland 19	Solör	7080a
NFS Krogh 6.31	Søndre Høland	7080a
NFS Krogh 21.4	Søndre Høland	7080a
NFS Elin 3.7	Grimsby	7080a
NFS Elin 3.51	Øymarki	7080b
NFS Hoff 3.7	Eidsberg	7080a
NFS Klonberg 2.2	Tinn	7080a
NFS Klonberg 2.2	Tinn	7080a
NFS Klonberg 2.2	Tinn	7080b
NFS Klonberg 2.3	Tinn	7080b
NFS Moe 54.38	Moland	7080a
NFS Østberg 1.38	Hedmark	7080a
NFS Ragnvald 10.51	Saltdal	7080a
NFS Delgobe 3.5	Kragmopa	7080a (man)

passage to the plague is the first to die from the disease. Often, he is granted a quick and easy death, an obvious consolation to the otherwise painful death of the plague. As with the ML7080ab type legends, this legend is not found in Denmark. The closest analogue in Denmark to these legends is the plague being brought by a foreigner or person returning from afar. Both cases involve a journey over water,⁴ but none of these variants includes the essential interchange between the traveler and ferryman.⁵ A common example of an ML7085 legend may be found in Faye's collection:

Paa sin vandring gennem landet kom Pesta ogsaa til Gjerrestad. Hun var imidlertid da ei som ellers sedvanlig iført et rødt Skjørt, men havde en blaa Stak paa. Manden paa Sandaker, som roede hende over Gjerrestad vandet til Eskeland, blev ræd, da han mærkede hvem han havde i Baaden, og bønfaaldt om at maate beholde livet i Færgeløn. Pesta tog da frem en stor Bog, slog op i den og svarede derpaa: "Livet dit kan jeg ikke spare, men en let Død skal du faae." Aldrig saa snart var Manden kommen hjem, førend han blev døsigt. Han lagde sig derfor paa Pallen og død var han. [Faye 1948:127]

During her wanderings through the country, Pesta also came to Gjerrestad. She was, as usual, wearing a red shirt, but she also had on a blue jacket. The man on Sandaker, who rowed her across Gjerrestad water to Eskeland, got mad when he realized who he had in the boat, and begged that he be allowed to keep his life as ferry fare. Pesta took out a large book, looked up something in it, and answered, "I cannot save your life, but you shall have an easy death." As soon as the man got home, he became tired. He lay down on the chimney shelf and he was dead.

The use of a large black book is reminiscent of legends concerning the use of the Black Book (ML3020). The black book is related to priests and witches.

In an illiterate society, the ability to read, or “slå opp” as Pesta does, connoted a great deal of mystical power. The terrifying aspect of these unknown books is further emphasized in Pesta’s inability to grant clemency—the name of the victim is already written, and his fate is sealed.

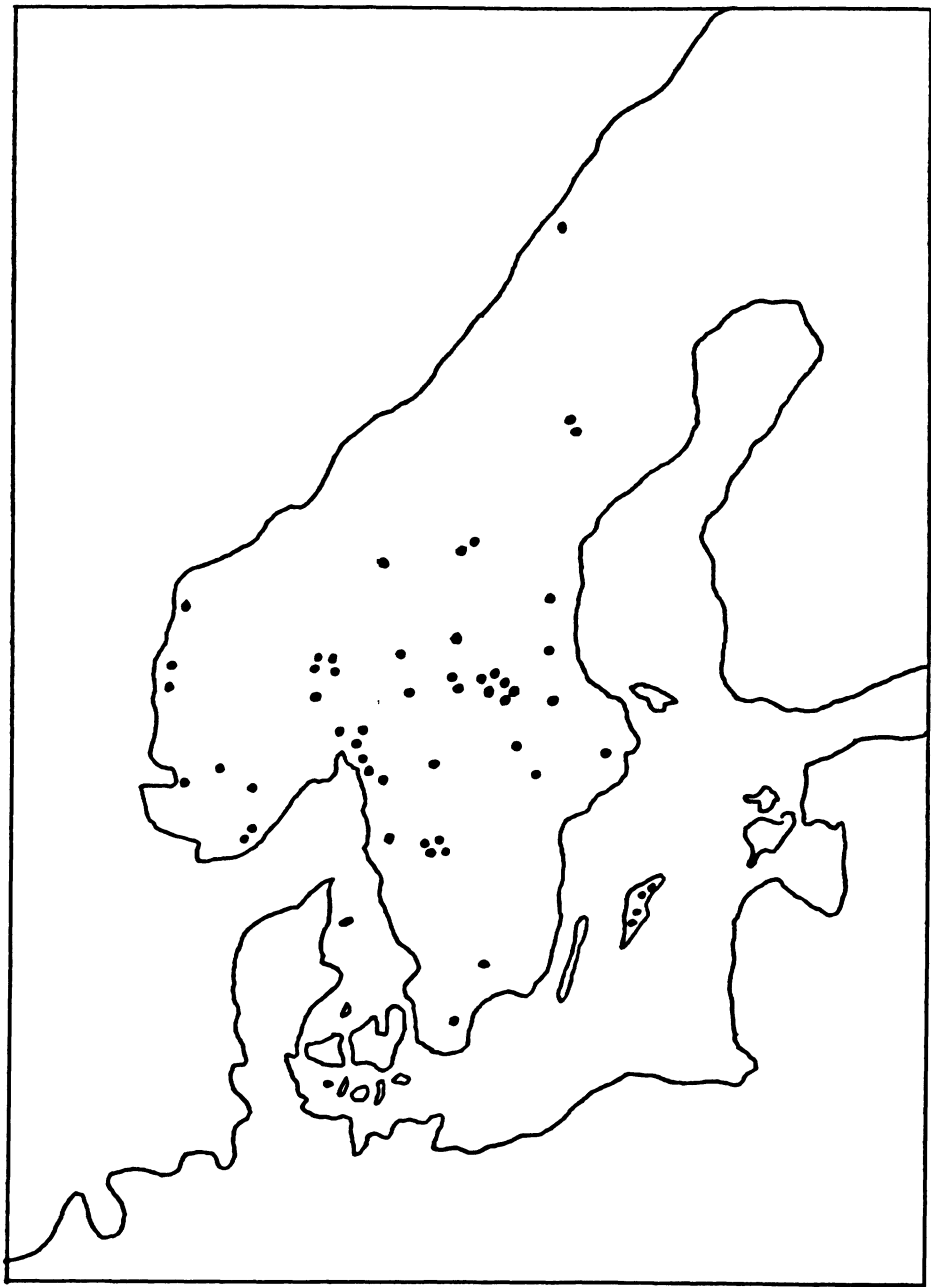


Figure 3. Distribution of ML7080ab Legends in Continental Scandinavia.

Frequently, legend type ML7085 is combined with the legends of type ML7080ab. For example:

Då svartedauden gjekk, kamm eingong ein mann til sin gard i Øvre Vefsn, sume segjer det var Laksfors, og vilde ha skyss over elva. . . . Framandkaren som han skyssa, han fø ifrå gard til gard, og det segjast at han ha' ei riva og ein soplime med. [Strompdal 1929:IV, 8]

During the Black Death, a man came once to his farm in Øvre Vefsn—some say that it was Laksfors—and wanted to be rowed over the stream. . . . The foreign man [he] rowed across, traveled from farm to farm, and it is said that he had a rake and a broom with him.

In another interesting account, the plague appears as two small children who wish to be *carried* over a stream. In return, they grant their carrier immunity from the disease (Strompdahl 1929:IV, 9). The distribution and form of this legend type may be seen in Table 5 and Figure 4. An important feature of the legends (except Säv 1959:311) is that the plague is brought over water, primarily by ship—a reflection of both the belief that water was a natural plague barrier and the actual path of plague transmission.⁶ In all cases, the plague figure is a foreigner to the area. The other important aspect in these legends is the exchange between the plague and the probable victim. The person always begs

Table 5. Plague Ferried across Water—ML7085.

Collection	Legend provenance	Plague figure	Fate of ferryman
ULMA 68:4:18	Resele	unspecified	not given
ULMA 2121:1	Ström	man	spared
ULMA 20384	Långåsen	man	death
ULMA 23961	Värvik	unspecified	not given
Strompdal 1929:IV.8	Helgeland	man	easy death
Strompdal 1929:IV.9	Helgeland	boy and girl	spared
Faye 1948:127	Gjerrestad	woman	easy death
Christiansen 1938:36–37	Vinje	little woman	easy death
Säv 1959:308	Fårö	man	easy death
Säv 1959:311	Isum	man	spared
Kvideland 8	Fyresdal	man	easy death
Kvideland 9	Holvig	Pesta	easy death
Kvideland 11	Rogaland	woman	spared
Moe LIII, 5–6	Vegårskei	woman	easy death
Moe LIV, 37	Fyresdal	woman	easy death
Bondevik, I, 5	Sogndal	man	easy death
Bugge IV, 136	Fyresdal	man	easy death
Kl. V, 39	Røken	woman	easy death
Kl. VII, 20	not given	man	easy death
NFS Elin 3.34	Grimsby	Pesta	spared
NFS 54.37	Årnes	woman	easy death
NFS Østberg 1.39	Hedmark	Pesta	spared (tricks plague)

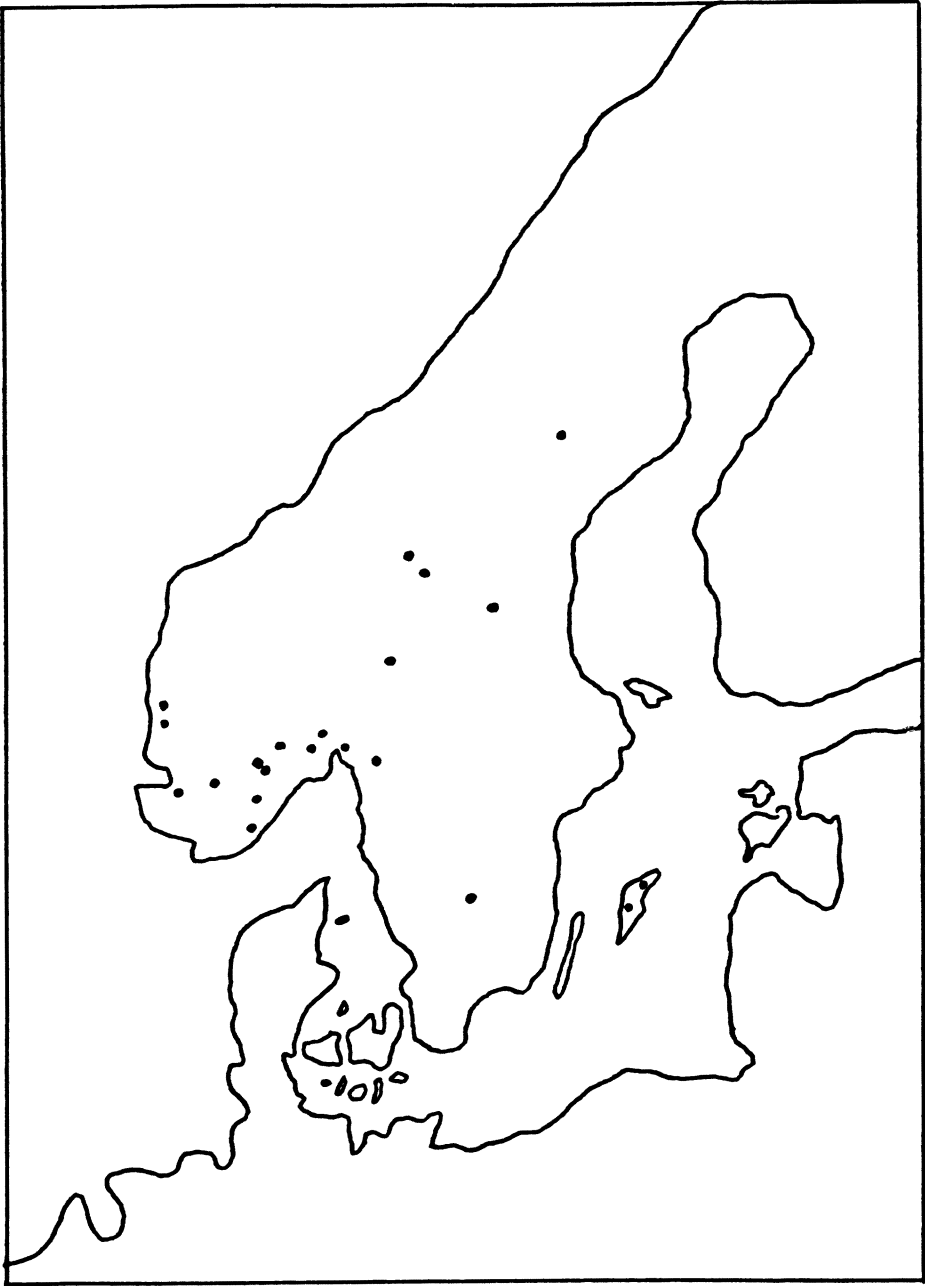


Figure 4. Distribution of ML7085 Legends in Continental Scandinavia.

for clemency, but rarely is it granted. Instead, the person is allowed an easy death.

When the plague finally reached Iceland in 1402, a well-established legend tradition existed in continental Scandinavia. As the Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes earlier, the Icelanders were in a position to pick and choose legends

that suited their needs best from the area of disease provenance. The result is that legends of all types appear in the Icelandic tradition. Iceland was infected through Denmark and Norway, its two main trading partners. Thus, Iceland was exposed to two distinct legend traditions simultaneously. The Icelanders adapted legends from both traditions to fit their landscape and extant legend tradition, but the roots of the Icelandic tradition can easily be traced to continental Scandinavia.

The plague comes from a foreign land in many of the Icelandic plague legends. Surprisingly, no stranded ship legends have been collected in Iceland. Perhaps the fact that Iceland is an island forced a tacit belief that the disease arrived by ship, for *everything* arrived in Iceland by ship. Attributions of the plague to the arrival of a foreigner exist. In one legend, the plague is sent to Iceland by two Finns, a reflex to a similar Swedish legend:

Það er kunnugt að svartidauði við á lönd áður en hann kom til Íslands. Yfir þessu fylltust Finnendingar öfund og sendu tvo fjölkynngismenn til Íslands, karl ok kerlingu. [Árnason 1956:IV, 137]

It is known that the Black Death raged through countries before he came to Iceland. Two Finns felt envy about this and sent two people skilled in the black arts to Iceland, an old man and an old woman.

The Icelanders relate the arrival of plague in the land with magic and magicians. Wizards often play the same role that priests play in the continental Scandinavian legends, namely the deterrent of the plague's advance, as in the following legend:

Þegar svartidauði geisaði á Íslandi komst hann aldregi á Vestfjörðu því tólf galdramenn vestra tóku sig saman og mögnuðu allir sendingu á móti honum. En svartidauði lagði yfir landið eins og gufa sem náði upp í miðjar hlíðar og út á mið fiskimið, réðu fyrir gufunni karl er fór með hlíðum og kerling er fór með löndum fram. . . . Þegar gufan og manndauðinn tók að færast vestur eftir höfðu galdramennirnir sendingu tilbúna; var hún graðungur mikill fleginn ofan að knjám og dró hann húðina eftir sér; hitti hann karl og kerlingu undir klettum í fjöru við Gilsfjörð þar sem leiðir þeirra urðu að liggja saman; sáu skyggnir menn aðgang þeirra ok lauk svo að uxinn kom þeim inn undir húðina, lagði þau undir og kramdi þau sundur. [Árnason 1956:I, 347–348]

When the Black Death raged in Iceland, he never came to the west fjords because twelve wizards got together and put all their power in a sending against him. And the Black Death lay over the land as a fog which reached up into the mountains and midway out into the fishing banks. The fog was steered by a man who traveled in the cliffs and a woman who strode along the shore. . . . When the fog and the death toll began to travel west, the wizards had the sending prepared; it was a large bull flayed down to the knees and dragged its hide behind it; it met the old man and the old woman under the cliffs at the shore near Gilsfjord, there where their paths were destined to cross; men with second sight saw their meeting and it happened that the ox caught them under the hide and lay them under and crushed them to pieces.

Nearly all of the Scandinavian plague legend types may be found in this legend. The appearance of the plague as a fog was particularly suited to the Ice-

landic legend tradition, as its magical counterpart, the sending, also commonly took the form of a vapor:

Þegar svartidauði geisaði yfir Ísland tóku átján galdramenn sig saman og gjörðu félag með sér . . . enda leið þá ekki á löngu áður hún sá gufu móræuða koma inn í bæinn. . . . Sendingin . . . bregzt . . . í flugulíki og ætlast nú að komast undir hendina á stúlkunni upp í rúmið til mannsins. En þá lendir hún í sauðarlegg sem stúlkan hélt á og fór inn í hann, en stúlkan setti tappa í gatið. [Árnason 1956:I, 321–323]⁷

When the Black Death raged over Iceland, eighteen wizards got together and swore a pact . . . and it was not long before she saw a reddish vapor come into the farm house. . . . The sending changed into the shape of a fly and tried to get under the arms of the girl and up into the man's room. But it lands on a marrow bone that the girl held up and it goes inside a hole, and the girl sets a plug in the hole.

Interestingly, the plague vapor appears in conjunction with an anthropomorphic form. While the distinction between plague as vapor and plague as person(s) was clearly defined in continental Scandinavia, the two types have been commingled in this Icelandic legend. The two traditions of Denmark and Norway/Sweden have been rejoined in the Icelandic.

The plague also appears as a mist without anthropomorphic accompaniment. The fog or vapor is foreign in nature, and always of uncommon appearance:

Þriðja árið kemur þorsteinn enn í kaupstað og segir þá kaupmaður að nú sé klæð komið svo gott sem fáist, kemur með klæðsstranga ok rullar sundur á borðinu, en innan úr klæðisstranganum rýkur blá gufa . . . [Árnason 1956:IV, 138]

The third year, Thorstein came to the market place and the merchant said that now he would see the best cloth one can get and comes with a cloth bolt and rolls it out on the table, and out from the bolt of cloth comes a blue smoke . . .

Þegar svartidauði kom í Ólafsfjörð voru þar smalar tveir sem hétu Teitur og Sigga. Það var einn morgun snemma að þau voru að smala uppi í fjöllum. Sýndist þeim þá okenniligt þoku leggja inn allan Ólafsfjörð og réðu það af að halda ekki ofan til byggða fyrri en þokunni létti af. [Árnason 1956:IV, 138–139]

When the Black Death came to Olafsfjord, there were two shepherds named Teitur and Sigga. It was early one morning, while they were milking up in the mountains. It seemed to them that an unknown fog settled in over all of Olafsfjord and they decided that they would not go to the village until the fog had lifted.

Það er sagt að Helga á Grund í Eyjafirði hafi alltaf haldizt við á fjöllum uppi meðan svartidauði gekk yfir Eyjafjörð og hafi henni þá alltaf synzt þoka yfir allri byggðinni. [Árnason 1956:IV, 139]

It is said that Helga from Grund in Eyjafirth stayed up in the mountains while the Black Death went over Eyjafirth and it had seemed to her that a fog lay over the entire village.

The legends all seem reminiscent of the Danish legends of the same type.

The plague also appears in animal form in Iceland. The inversion of a common farm animal's function (i.e., to destroy rather than sustain life) is the basis for these legends. One legend presents the plague as a grey cow:

Þegar svartidauði var búinn að geisa um Norðurland og kominn vestur að Hrutafjarðará var hann í gráu nautslíki og ætlaði vestur yfir og vóð út í ána . . . [Arnason 1956:IV, 138]

The Black Death was prepared to rage through the Northland country and when he came west to Hrutafirth, he was in the shape of a grey cow and wanted to go west over the river, and waded out into the river . . .

The cow is prevented from crossing the river by a red cow. Thus, the belief that plague was unable to cross water appears in Icelandic tradition as well.

A type of legend that seems particular to Iceland is tricking the plague. This type should be labeled ML7087. A Swedish legend recounts how the plague was tricked into staying in the mountains overnight, resulting in the disease deciding not to journey up into the mountains any longer⁸ but it does not rely on the one-line trickery associated with the Icelandic legends. Like the legends of type ML7085, these legends rely on an anthropomorphic plague figure and play on the desire to get immunity from the disease. Unlike the ML7085 legends, the Icelandic legends are always successful in finding immunity:

Þegar svartidauði gekk var það um dagsetursbil að bóndi leit út í glugga ok varð þess var að eitthvað tveinnt reið fyrir ofan ok heyrir að sagt er: "Skal hér heim?"—"Nei, hér er gras í túninu sem við megom ekki koma nærri." Á þenna bæ kom svartidauði ekki. [Arnason 1956:IV, 139]

When the Black Death raged, there was a farmer who, at nightfall, looked out the window and saw that something double rode overhead and heard that one said: "Shall I visit here?"—"No, here is the grass in the meadow which we may not get near." The Black Death did not come to that farm.

This legend also accounts for the random striking pattern of the plague, which allowed for some farms to remain unscathed and others to be completely depopulated.

The Icelanders made use of the other Scandinavian traditions as a basis for their legends, but they adapted them to their own particular worldview. The position of the priest was superseded by that of the magician or wizard. The power of sendings, essentially unknown in continental Scandinavia, was called upon to halt the dreaded disease. The presence of fertility symbols, men and women, bulls and cows, was used as a means for emphasizing the negative impact of the disease on the farming communities. The normal function of the figures is inverted—where they would normally bring life, they bring death. This parallels the use of these figures in the rest of Scandinavia.

Conclusion

Denmark and Norway were infected nearly simultaneously with the plague, and therefore could not look to each other for legends. Instead, they relied on the legends of their closest trade partners who had already been in-

fected. For Denmark, this was north Germany and the British Isles. For Norway, this was only the British Isles. Accordingly, the legend tradition of Denmark and Norway reflects particular aspects of the legends of those countries. Legends did not migrate quickly from Denmark to Norway, because the plague had to spread overland in Denmark to the main ports on Sjælland. By the time the plague reached Copenhagen, it had already been raging for several months in Norway. At that point, the form of the plague in Norwegian legend had probably been firmly established. Norway was the country of disease provenance for Sweden and, as hypothesized, both countries exhibit markedly similar legend traditions. Later commingling with traditions undoubtedly occurred, and certain legend types filled a need in all three countries, as in the case of the legends ML7083, accounting for the wide distribution of such legends. Iceland was not in need of a plague tradition until one hundred years later. Its tradition, as I noted above, exhibits aspects of both the Danish and the Norwegian/Swedish traditions, both major trading partners.

The fog legends took hold in Denmark perhaps due to their suitability to the landscape. One can see from one community to another because the horizon is relatively open. A drifting localized fog easily could be seen and imagined drifting over the Danish fields. Once these legends had taken hold, however, the plague did not appear in any other form. Plague legends in Denmark always present the plague in its underlying legend form—a visible air mass. Once this form had been established for the plague, it became difficult for other forms to be accepted. Variation affects the form on a superficial, rather than fundamental, level. This precludes, except to a highly peripheral degree, the inclusion of legends in a tradition that depends on a fundamental change in the nature of the representation, such as from fog to anthropomorphic form.

The anthropomorphic form was better suited to the Norwegian landscape. Fog legends appear primarily along the western coasts of Norway and Sweden.⁹ As the disease migrated inland, the unsuitability of a wandering fog to the rugged landscape precipitated a predominant emphasis on anthropomorphic representations of the plague. The plague would arrive from nowhere in the shape of an old woman, an old pair, or a couple of children—in all cases, an infertile group. The great reliance on water transportation and the belief that plague could not cross water were conflated into the ML7085 legends. If the fog legends had been accepted into the Norwegian tradition, one would expect to find a much wider distribution of the legends throughout Norway and Sweden. The fact that they are extant only in areas of immediate contact with Denmark supports my assertion that the plague could only assume one underlying form in the tradition.

Plague legends throughout Europe recognize the disease as an arbitrary, unknown, and unstoppable force. In Scandinavia, prayers to God, appeals to magicians, and live burials were the only possible means of halting the disease. In other Scandinavian legends, doing an otherworldly being a favor often won

their help, or at least their mercy. The Norwegian/Swedish legends about the ferryman underscore the brutality of this particular “otherworlder.” Even when the plague appears as an animal, it is often in an unusual form. The plague legends play on the question of fertility. When the plague is an anthropomorphic figure, that figure is never fertile—it is either too young or too old to produce children. Scandinavia was not alone in aligning the plague with a nonfertile representation. The Austrian *Pest Jungfrau* is just one example. While the plague appears as a vapor in most of Europe, it is conspicuously absent in this form in eastern Norway and Sweden. Remarkably, the couple with shovel and broom does not seem to appear outside Scandinavia.

This survey of Scandinavian plague legends suggests that the legend migration followed the same routes as the disease migration—the main trade routes. Once the disease arrived, a need existed in the tradition. The legends followed close behind to fill this need. Once a form for the plague had been established, other forms had difficulty entering the tradition. In Denmark, the form was that of a fog; in Norway, that of a person. Because of these differences in underlying form, legends concerning the shape of the plague did not migrate freely between the countries.

Notes

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¹For other discussions of mortality during the plague, see Gasquet (1908), Gottfried (1983), Heillener (1967), Hirst (1953), Hoeniger (1882), Nohl (1926), and Ziegler (1969). More examples of plague in literature may be found in Crawford (1914) and Grimm (1965).

²The course the plague followed is well known to the port of Messina. At that point, the dispersal became remarkably wide. The path traced here is a combination of the accounts found in Gasquet (1908), Gottfried (1983), Nohl (1926), and Ziegler (1969).

³Lindow ignores these legends because they do not constitute a personification of the plague.

⁴In turn, these legends relate to those of the type ML7083.

⁵This type seems related to the Eddic poem, *Hárbarðsljóð*, in which Þórr, returning from *Jötunheimr*, is confronted by Hárbarðr, Óðinn disguised as a ferryman.

⁶Lindow discusses this phenomenon in greater detail.

⁷In this legend, it is the sending vapor, and not the plague, which is trapped. This is an interesting twist on the north German legends in which the plague vapor is trapped. For legends of this sort, see Jahn (1886).

⁸This legend probably helps account for the higher mortality along the coast, where the spread was facilitated by the water commerce. As mentioned above, the overland transmission of the plague was a slow process. With the numerous valleys and unpassable mountain ranges in Sweden and Norway, the overland transmission of the disease must have been particularly hindered. The legend mentioned appears in Bergström and Nordlander (1885:#30). This legend, however, seems more closely related to a legend in Stompdahl (1929:III, 167–169), reprinted in Christiansen (1977), in which a Finn tricks the invading army into jumping off of a cliff, thereby saving the wedding party in the valley below.

⁹Anna Kristina-Söderborg from Dialekt och Folkminnesarkivet in Uppsala writes, “There is nothing [in our archive] about plague as cloud, fog, mist or blue flame” [personal correspondence].

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