

A42

MEDIEVAL FOLKLORE

An Encyclopedia of
Myths, Legends, Tales,
Beliefs, and Customs

Volume 1: A-K



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the state of scholarship pre-Baxter. Still handy is T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts* (1954), for its translated text and reproductions of the line drawings from the twelfth-century manuscript, Cambridge University Library, li. 4. 26. For a typically encyclopedic treatment of one Bestiary bird, the pelican, and its symbolism, see C. Gerhardt, *Die Metamorphosen des Pelikans* (1979).

—Malcolm Jones

Black Death

Name given to the catastrophic plague pandemic in late-medieval Europe. The plague raged throughout Europe from 1347 through 1351.

The disease, spread by fleas, has three main forms: bubonic, septicemic, and pneumonic. The bubonic form is characterized by a gangrenous pustule at the site of the initial bite, followed by swelling of the lymph nodes. As the infection progresses, buboes (subcutaneous hemorrhages) appear. Ultimately the disease leads to neurological dysfunction and, in 50–60 percent of victims, death. The pneumonic form is far more deadly, with more than 90 percent of the victims dying. Pneumonic plague occurs mostly in colder climates. In the rarest form of the plague, the septicemic form, bacilli enter the bloodstream, causing a rash, and death follows within a day. The septicemic form is always fatal. The plague bacillus, *Yersinia pestis*, is carried by two types of fleas, *Xenopsylla cheopis* and *Pulex irritans*. The flea bites serve as a primary infection source. In the case of pneumonic plague, secondary infection, from human to human, occurs through bodily secretions, most notably saliva.

The Black Death appears to have sprung up in East Asia, although the plague is known to be native to numerous parts of the world, including Yunnan, China, central Asia, Iran, Libya, East Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. Well-developed trade routes from East Asia to the Black Sea allowed for movement of goods both overland and by sea to transshipment points serving Europe. The plague reached the Crimean port of Caffa in 1345, spreading from there to the eastern ports of the Mediterranean Sea. In 1347 the plague reached Constantinople. From there it spread quickly to the European continent. The plague arrived in the Sicilian port of Messina in October 1347, and later that same year, the ports of Genoa and Marseilles. Thence it traveled west and north, reaching Paris in the spring of 1348. It skipped over the English Channel into southern England, traveled along the coast, and reached London in the autumn of 1348. In German-speaking lands it went on to both Switzerland and Austria, eventually following trade routes up through Basel, Frankfurt, Cologne, and Bremen.

Mortality rates for the plague were extraordinarily high. Even by conservative estimates, there is strong circumstantial evidence that close to one-quarter of the entire population of Europe died during the Black Death. For example, when the plague reached Holland the mortality was so high that all work on land reclamation along the Zuider Zee stopped. In Bremen, records from the period suggest a mortality rate of close to 50 percent. Some villages, certainly, were completely wiped out by the plague, but estimates of mortality for Europe suggesting close to 90 percent should be considered unlikely. Before the Black

Death the plague had reared its head in an earlier pandemic, commonly referred to as the Justinian plague, that ravaged southern Europe from 541 to 544. Later pandemics of the plague also continued to wreak havoc on Europe up through the early eighteenth century.

The extraordinary virulence of the plague, and the huge numbers of victims it claimed, profoundly affected the cultural expressions of many Europeans. The plague became the subject of legends, beliefs, ballads, paintings, and rituals, and it influenced literary works such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Recurring plague pandemics and epidemics in Europe ensured the continued relevance of many of these folkloric expressions, and legends concerning the plague could still be collected in the twentieth century.

In plague legends the disease is often portrayed in human form. One of the best-known personifications of the plague from central Europe is the Austrian *Pest Jungfrau* (Plague Maiden), who was said to fly over the land enveloped in a blue flame spreading disease and death in her wake. The celestial nature of the plague figure is also preserved in British tradition. These stories perhaps relate to the common belief that the plague was caused by the wrath of God and portended the end of the world. Other folk belief, reinforced by medieval medical conceptions of disease, maintained that the plague entered the body as a vapor. In postmedieval Scandinavian tradition, particularly from Sweden and Norway, the plague was represented as a traveling couple, often an old man and an old woman carrying a shovel and a broom: "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."

In the fourteenth century there was very little knowledge of how diseases such as the plague spread. One thing people did know, however, was that the plague came from outside their communities. Numerous plague stories mention



The burial of victims of the Black Death, from a fourteenth-century Belgian manuscript. (Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels, MS 13076, fol. 24v)

ships drifting ashore with dead crews and subsequent outbreaks of the plague. Other traditions mention an unknown animal running through the village spreading the disease. In yet other traditions, wandering mendicants or witches are identified as the disease carrier.

Some of the best-known representations of the Black Death center around the phenomenon of the *danse macabre* (Dance of Death), although the first *danse macabre* was probably not held until August 1424 in Paris. The dance, led by a figure dressed as death, was intended to scare off diseases. Later historians have attempted to link the frenetic dancing associated with the plague to the neurological damage that the disease causes, suggesting that this choreomania was a physiological result of the disease.

The medieval population was generally unable to mount a significant defense against the onslaught of the disease. People felt, however, they had to do something to arrest or at least divert its spread. Fire was often seen as a preventive measure that would divert the plague vapors so they would not reach a village. Others maintained that the plague was unable to cross natural boundaries, such as streams or plowed fields. Numerous rituals sprang up that were intended to halt the plague's advance. Among the more colorful of these rituals is one from Eastern European tradition in which three naked virgins were forced to plow a furrow counterclockwise around the village. In other traditions, young children were buried alive to stop the plague. One of the better-known groups to develop during the time of the plague was the flagellants, a movement that started in Germany. The movement was closely related to the persecution of the Jews, whom some blamed for the plague, maintaining that Jews were poisoning wells and thereby causing the disease. The flagellant movement eventually dissolved into millenarianism and was condemned by the pope.

Numerous postmedieval stories concern the aftermath of the plague. The majority of these stories focus on the extraordinarily high mortality rate during the plague and tell of two lone survivors' subsequent repopulation of the area. Other stories mention the unpredictability of the plague, focusing on the randomness of its distribution in a region. Yet other stories mention the remarkable survival of individuals, often individuals who drove corpses to the cemetery for burial: "She had driven all the dead to the cemetery and had only one jade to drive them with, but she didn't get sick because she smoked a chalk pipe."

Although the plague is not at present a threat, a concern with the unimpeded spread of virulent, catastrophic disease continues to find expression in contemporary folklore. The AIDS epidemic and the emergence of other viral infectious agents, including hemorrhagic fevers such as the Ebola virus, are the subject of numerous contemporary legends and various folk beliefs.

See also: Funeral Customs and Burial Rites; *Memento mori*

References and further reading: One of the best critical accounts of the plague can be found in R. S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (1983). J. Nohl's early *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague*, trans. C. H. Clarke (1926), is exhaustive and offers information on folkloric expressions associated with the Black Death. G. Marks offers a readable and engaging overview of the Black Death in *The Medieval Plague: The Black Death of the Middle Ages* (1971). A classic work is P. Ziegler, *The Black Death* (1969). Postmedieval legends concerning the Black Death have been exhaustively

studied in both J. Lindow, "Personification and Narrative Structure in Scandinavian Plague Legends," *Arv* 29/30 (1973), and T. R. Tangherlini, "Ships, Fogs, and Traveling Pairs: Plague Legend Migration in Scandinavia," *Journal of American Folklore* 101 (1988).

—Timothy R. Tangherlini

Blasons Populaires

Generally known stereotypical statements directed against another ethnic, racial, social, professional, or religious group.

While *blason populaire* (signifying "conspicuous generalization") has become the international scholarly term for verbal stereotypes, it has gained no general acceptance, nor has the term *ethnophaulisms* (disparaging statements about any given group of people). The term *ethnic slurs* has become the generally accepted designation for such stereotypes in English. Blasons populaires, or ethnic slurs, are thus verbal statements that have as their topics the generalized characteristics of another group based on stereotypes, national character, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, prejudice, racism, and so on.

It is impossible to speak of blasons populaires in terms of one genre because they may appear in many forms: single word, phrase, proverb, riddle, joke, or even short narrative. Those that are merely a word usually are nicknames for another group, such as "Krauts" for Germans or "frog eaters" for the French. Examples of short stereotypical phrases are "to go Dutch treat" or "not to have a Chinaman's chance," and two stereotypical proverbs are "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" and "The only good Indian is a dead Indian." In their longer forms these slurs usually play one ethnic or national group against the other, as in such epigrammatic characterizations as "The Pole is a thief; the Prussian, a traitor; the Bohemian, a heretic; and the Swabian, a chatterbox" or "The Russians act out of terror and compulsion, the Germans out of obedience, the Swiss because they want peace, the Poles in order to have free choice, the French for the sake of their king's glory, and the English for the love of freedom."

Ethnic slurs in the form of riddles are as popular as ethnic jokes—as, for example "What are the three shortest books in the world? *Italian War Heroes*, *Jewish Business Ethics*, and *Who's Who in Puerto Rico*." Stereotypical descriptions of outsiders are internationally disseminated, as might best be illustrated by the many traditional phrases alluding to venereal disease in which one nationality chooses a neighboring one to refer to this stigmatized disease: the "French disease" (by the English), the "Spanish disease" (by the Germans), the "Polish disease" (by the Russians), and so on.

Their form does not present a satisfactory basis for typing blasons populaires; rather, it is the function of these traditional insults or mockeries that binds them together as folk expressions. It has been noted in the scholarship on stereotypes that not all of them are necessarily malicious or evil. Stereotypes uttered as self-descriptions by a particular group are especially likely to be employed humorously or ironically. If there is such a thing as national character, then the "kernel of truth" argument would in fact hold that there is some slight validity to some stereotypes. Why would group members otherwise employ derogatory