

From Chronicles to Plague Columns: the Black Death in Bohemia

by Mark Whelan

In 1348 a group of Bohemian students decided to interrupt their university studies in Bologna and return home. On the road to their native land they came across towns and cities littered with human bodies struck down by a dreadful 'disease' that was spreading uncontrollably through Christendom. The sight of the rotting corpses incited great anguish and sorrow among the young travellers, and their attempts to nurse the rare survivor they chanced across back to health with water and nourishment invariably failed. This disease went on to kill all but one of the party of students, with the sole survivor arriving in Bohemia no doubt terrified and exhausted. This traumatic account is preserved in the *Chronicle of Francis of Prague*, a chronicler attached to the court of King and Emperor Charles IV, who composed his work in the 1350s and early 1360s. The 'disease' which Francis related we know today as the 'Black Death', a term invented in the 1830s by a German physician to describe the epidemiological event that spread throughout Eurasia and North Africa between 1347-1351, killing anywhere between twenty-five and eighty percent of the population. The enormous death toll left in the Black Death's wake and the upheaval it promoted continues to influence how large epidemics are seen to reshape societies and cultures, and it is no surprise that in the face of Covid-19 politicians and journalists have invoked the medieval plague to help explain and interpret events and processes in a world seemingly gripped by another pandemic.

The debates surrounding the impact of the Black Death on the Kingdom of Bohemia are particularly well known in historical circles on account of an infamous map recording the progress of the plague through Europe published by a French scholar in the 1960s. In this map, the author decided to shade in the central European area surrounding Bohemia (as well as a small portion of territory in the Pyrenees), for it was their belief that it was 'partially or totally spared from the plague'. Over the next couple of decades the map was enthusiastically printed in a wide variety of scholarly textbooks, articles and monographs, often without attribution or context, and soon the belief that Bohemia was spared the ravages of the plague in the later 1340s and early 1350s became commonplace in academic and popular scholarship. It was only in 2011 that

an American medievalist, David C. Mengel, addressed the issue in an article published in the historical journal *Past & Present* and returned Bohemia to the 'mainstream', putting to rest the myth of a pocket of plague immunity in Central Europe.

The fact that Bohemia was believed to have been spared exposure to outbreaks of plague in the fourteenth century is puzzling, for there is a wealth of evidence to suggest otherwise. Francis of Prague's *Chronicle*, for example, not only records the fate of the aforementioned Bohemian students in 1348, but went on to describe further plague-related deaths of Bohemians in Rome in 1350. In 1343, well before the emergence of the Black Death, Pope Clement VI had announced that 1350 would be a 'Great Jubilee', a special holy year where God's grace would be particularly manifest. Any pilgrims who made the journey to Rome in 1350 would, therefore, earn remission of all sins and other impressive spiritual benefits. Francis of Prague described how many Bohemians flocked to Rome in 1350 in pursuit of these benefits only to perish there of plague, depicting the city as overwhelmed with pilgrims who fell to the disease. The concerns aired about mass gatherings by today's political leaders had their counterpart in the medieval period too, for contemporaries then were similarly quick to make the link between the gathering of large bodies of people and the increased transmission of disease. In the case of the Italian commune of Pistoia in 1348, to take but one example, the city council there banned all from attending funerals, except for the deceased's blood brothers and sisters and their children.

The Black Death visited Christendom frequently in the years following the initial outbreak of 1347-1351, forcing contemporaries to reflect on medical affairs more generally and consider how best to avoid succumbing to the disease. Scholars and writers in Bohemia took part in this process, and in 1371 the court physician to Charles IV composed for his master a medical treatise advising on how to escape falling victim to the plague. Seen from a certain light, the physician's second of eight points would probably earn the praise of modern medical authorities working with social distancing in mind: 'Get yourself away from any place where plague is prevailing and from people infected with it'. Whether Charles IV ever followed this advice or even read the treatise we do not know, but he was never infected. Royalty elsewhere in Christendom were not so lucky: in Paris, where Charles IV had

spent much of his childhood, Queen Joan of France perished from the plague in December 1349.

The desire to take flight in times of plague highlighted by Charles IV's physician was something felt more commonly across Christendom. A German manuscript from the late fifteenth century, now held by the Wellcome Trust in London, recorded the following advice for preserving oneself against the dangers of plague: 'Clever doctors have three golden rules to keep us safe from pestilence: get out quickly, go a long way away and don't be in a hurry to come back'. For many, however, flight was simply not an option, and detailed local studies undertaken by Czech scholars are bringing nuance to the experience of the kingdom in the era of the Black Death. Using registers compiled in the Archbishopric of Prague, the so-called *Libri confirmationum* (*Books of Confirmations*) which record the transfer of parish benefices, Martin Nodl has estimated that over half of the parish priests died in the deanery of Rakovník (north-east of Plzeň) in 1380 alone, when a particularly savage outbreak of plague ravaged Bohemia. How far this mortality rate can be applied to the demographic experience of Bohemian society in general is hotly debated, for the mortality rate for parish clergy was probably higher than for the average layman. Parish priests, after all, administered the holy sacraments to the sick and dying and were, so to speak, on the 'front line', directly exposed to those infected with the Black Death. As elsewhere in Christendom, parish clergy fulfilled their spiritual duties to their flock and paid for it with their lives.

In recent years, archaeological research has shed more light on the Black Death's impact in Bohemia. The discovery in 2017 of thirty-two mass burials from the fourteenth century in the vicinity of the Church of All Saints in Kutná Hora has so far resulted in the unearthing of roughly 1,200 skeletons, making it the largest medieval cemetery for plague victims in Europe and a find of great significance. The hitherto largest example to have been excavated was in the vicinity of Bishopsgate, London, holding around 700 skeletons. Dating mass graves can be rife with problems, but the dating of the majority of the thirty-two mass burial sites in Kutná Hora rests on firm evidence, for many of them include coin types minted by John 'The Blind' of Luxemburg, King of Bohemia (1310-1346), placing them firmly in the first half of the fourteenth century. The fact that many of the

coins unearthed alongside the skeletons come from the last minting of his reign in 1345/6 suggests that the sites relate to the mortality of 1348-1350, when the Black Death first struck the region. Aside from the wealth of bio- and osteo-archaeological data that scientific analysis of the skeletons will eventually provide, of significant cultural and historical interest is the fact that the mass graves are laid with consistent care and respect. Burial parties positioned the corpses in supine positions in cross-stacked layers in neat rectangular pits, with child cadavers placed in pit corners to make the most effective use of space before they were carefully sealed. As elsewhere in Europe, detailed analysis of the archaeological record simply does not bear out stereotypical depictions in modern media of plague-stricken communities shovelling their dead by the cartload into hastily dug pits. Even in crisis, concern for the deceased and a sensitive respect for the importance of proper burial never disappeared.

The outbreak of pestilence described in Francis of Prague's *Chronicle* that struck the Bohemian students in 1348 and evidenced by the Kutná Hora burials was but one in a series of outbreaks that would strike Bohemia, with the plague returning to the kingdom at least once every decade thereafter until the early 1400s. Plague, in fact, became endemic in Europe, and returned to visit European ports and cities well into the 1700s. The long history of plague continues to mark the topographies of cities today, Prague included. Three so-called 'plague columns', structures erected to show civic gratitude for the passing of the period of illness, still stand in Prague today, commemorating the brutal outbreak of pestilence in 1713-15 in which over a quarter of the city's population may have perished. Leaving aside the horrific death toll, the anguish, torment and upheaval caused by the Black Death reduced many contemporaries to despair, and it is hoped that Covid-19 will come and go leaving nowhere near as salient an impression on society. But if not, and if Covid-19 is to remain a feature of society for some time, perhaps the overriding conclusion one should draw from the study of past pandemics - the Black Death included - is the fundamental resilience of human nature in the face of enormous challenge, and the ability of human beings to make life work and continue even in the most exceptional of circumstances.

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*Anti-clockwise from above:
A mid 14th-century depiction of plague burials from
Tournai, now in Belgium, by Pierart dou Tiel.*

*The Plague Column in Šultysova Street in Kutná
Hora. It was built by the Jesuit sculptor František
Baugut between 1713 and 1715.*

*The Church of All Saints at Sedlec on the edge of
Kutná Hora. Recent research suggests that skeletons
found next to the church date from 1348-1350, when
the Black Death first struck the region*

