

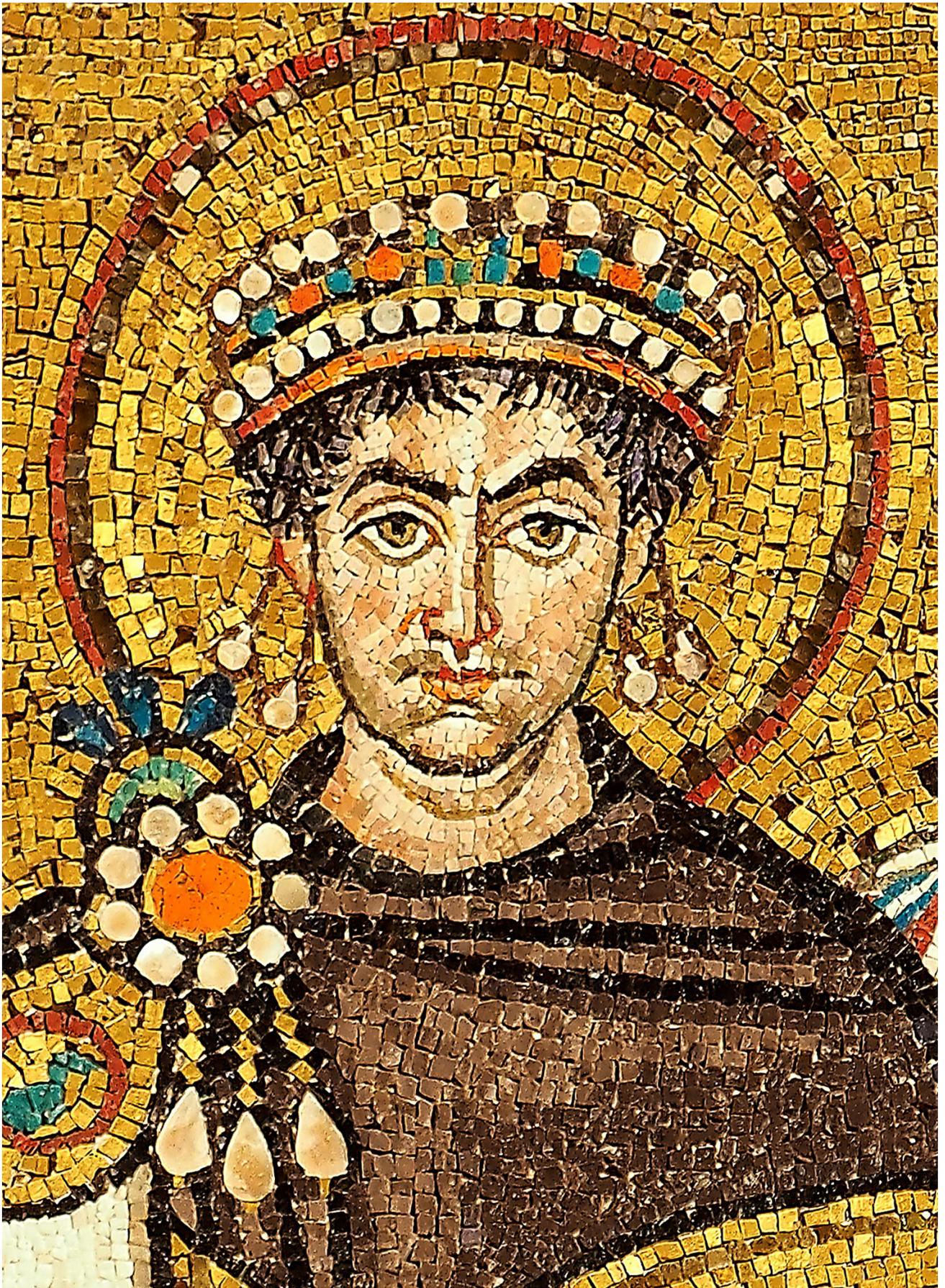
Julia Mattes

Pandemic Pictures

The Justinian Plague and the Black Death in Art

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Abstract

The Plague of Justinian, also known as the first Plague Pandemic, began in 541 in North Africa and quickly spread over the area of the late antique Mediterranean. There it continued in more than a dozen plague waves until the middle of the 8th century, causing much suffering and a great number of deaths. This disease represents the End of Antiquity. Academia traditionally considers and debates its share in the downfall of the Eastern Roman Empire. Isochronal, the effect of climate change during the Late Antique Little Ice Age, were noticeable. In addition to ancient and historic text sources, scientific studies on climate and DNA related issues recently added remarkable knowledge to this classical issue. In contradiction to this the contemporary artistic representation of this theme found very little attention in research so far. Art is a very valuable source which is not only able to mirror cognitive process and attitude but also to record significant recent events in society and in politics as well as in public and private life. Depictions of various character often not only show the presented motive but also reveal the cultural history behind it, as well as habits of everyday life which can be very valuable in understanding the zeitgeist. Images of the plague are specific since they are contemporary witnesses, or a medium of memories, that express the experiences of a huge catastrophe. Contemporary plague art is not only created by contemporaries but also by survivors which make the representations a special source.

This paper aims to examine contemporary and retrospective artworks that were created during the (Justinianic) Plague. Therefore, this study focuses on selected creations produced during the two pandemics caused by *Yersinia pestis*. The starting point is the Justinianic Plague of the 6th - 8th century and is followed by the second pandemic of the 14th - 17th century. What will these works reveal? Will similarities or differences between the art of the first and second Plague Pandemic become apparent by comparison? What do the artistic representations say about people's reactions to the plague pandemic, respectively the epidemic crisis?

Keywords

Art, Ars sacra, Black Death, Byzantium, Christian art, climate change, death, Eastern Roman Empire, escapism, epidemic, iconography, imagery, late antiquity, Late Antique Little Ice Age, medieval, pandemic, plague, plague in art, Plague of Justinian, reaction to crisis, religion, religious art, sacred art, *Yersinia pestis*.

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I Preface

A pandemic is a far-reaching event which, apart from medical aspects, causes innumerable changes in people's lives: The fear of disease, suffering and maybe death, the drastic change of everyday habits and routines as well as the influence on the economy and the daily supply of provisions. We are currently experiencing as contemporary witnesses the global Covid-19 pandemic. The everyday cycle is a sensitive gear mechanism, if one part is blocked, the next will follow and so forth until the entire system ceases to function. This can lead to an existential crisis in many fields. All these multi-layered facets are closely interlinked and it is the sum of them which causes the actual catastrophe. Hence, a pandemic is more than a natural incident based on bacteria or a virus.

This work is concerned with the *Plague of Justinian*. It is also known as the first *Plague Pandemic*, or *Old World pandemic*. Eponymous to the emperor Justinian I, it began in 541 and continued in more than a dozen plague waves until the middle of the 8th century. The pandemic struck the Eastern Roman Empire, most frequently affected the Mediterranean Basin, appeared in the Near East and reached as far as Northern Europe.

This paper deals with the issue of the Plague's representations in art.

Text sources from late antiquity and history and scientific studies do deal with the Justinianic Plague, but what about the art during the Age of Justinian I? Art represents a highly valuable and multifaceted source which reaches far beyond stylistics. It can transport multiple information on

data, zeitgeist, cognitive and psychological aspects and even the contemporary everyday life.

So, does the Justinian Plague actually appear in visual arts? If this is the case, how is it presented? What information do the artworks reveal? What do the artistic representations say about people's reactions to the pandemic crisis?

Just recently, science discovered a relation between the *Justinianic Plague* and the subsequently, albeit much later temporal sequence following medieval plague pandemic respective epidemics, also known as the *Black Death*. Both go back to the same etiologic agent: *Yersinia pestis*. Paying tribute to this, art works of this relation will be considered, too. Therefore this paper follows the art produced during the two pandemics caused by *Yersinia pestis*. The starting point is the Justinianic Plague of the 6th - 8th century, followed by the second pandemic, respectively the epidemics of the 14th - 17th century.

What similarities or differences of artworks related to this can be observed in comparison with those of late antiquity?

Acknowledging the aforementioned, a canon of different, select sources from art, history and science will be considered in order to investigate whether there is information about the social and cognitive impacts of the disease in art.

II The Plague of Justinian

The Plague of Justinian is one of the greatest internationally spreading disasters known to history. Historians studied the texts that were written by contemporaries such as Evagrius *Scholasticus*, John of Ephesus and Procopius of Caesarea, using these as plague references and compiling the relevant data.

There is reason to believe, that the plague first brokeout in mid-summer 541 in Egypt, at Pelusium, a small town located on the far eastern branch of the mouth of the Nile. According to several researchers, the origin of the disease could have been India, Central or East Africa while the very recent research points to Central Asia.¹ According to Keys' theory an unusual migratory movement of rats could have spread the plague from East Africa to Egypt.² However, due to the climatic and environmental change, it is not surprising that humans and animals were searching for food in order to survive.

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- 1 P. B. Damgaard et al., 137 ancient human genomes from across the Eurasian steppes. *Nature* 557, (2018), 369–374. In the following: Damgaard et al. 2018. - G. A. Eroshenko et al., *Yersinia pestis* strains of ancient phylogenetic branch 0.ANT are widely spread in the high-mountain plague foci of Kyrgyzstan. *PLoS One* 12, e0187230 (2017).
 - 2 D. Keys, *Catastrophe. An Investigation into the Origins of the Modern World*. (London 1999), 15-23. In the following: Keys 1999.

In the Mediterranean there were 18 plague waves in 200 years. Most data exist on the first and the last.³ From Pelusium the disease migrated in two directions. It appeared in Gaza, the Negrev and Alexandria, the second largest city of the Mediterranean. From there it was spread via seafaring and ships „(...) carrying freight, crew ... and rats, which carried a cargo of their own. (...) Within months, the ships would arrive, carrying a real demon. The collision between demon and peasant-turned-ruler [Justinian. Author's note] would mark the end of one world, and the beginning of another. Along the way, it would consume at least twenty-five million lives.“⁴

According to his court historian Procopius of Caesaria, the Emperor Justinian I was infected with the disease and rumors of his death had spread within the military. "Soon after this, a further disaster befell him. The plague, which I have described elsewhere, became epidemic at Constantinople, and the Emperor Justinian was taken grievously ill; it was even said he had died of it. Rumor spread this report till it reached the Roman army camp. There some of the officers said that if the Romans tried to establish anyone else at Constantinople as Emperor, they would never recognize him. Presently, the Emperor's health bettered, and the officers of the army brought charges against each other, the generals Peter and John the Glutton alleging they had heard Belisarius and Buzes making the above declaration."⁵ Justinian I recovered in 542. This year the malady spread further. That same year the plague reached Illyricum, Africa, and Spain. The second route of the disease was Jerusalem, Zora and the Hauram shortly after. In spring and summer 542 Antioch and some Syrian towns were infected, also Myra in Lycia, and it reached the imperial capital of Constantinople in mid-spring.⁶ The Plague „began to cross the sea to Palestine and the region of Jerusalem; was then „(...) proceeding to Gaza, Ashkelon and Palestine and simultaneously with their appearance the beginning (of the plague) took place there. Also (horrors) exceeding by far those previously narrated about the city of Alexandria took place from now on in the whole of Palestine, with the effect that villages and cities were left totally without inhabitants.“⁷ According to John of Ephesus Asia Minor was overrun by the Plague: Cilicia, Mysia, Iconim, Bithynia, Asia, Galatia and Cappadocia.⁸ The region Media Atropatene was reached in fall 542. The disease had befallen the Persian Army and the King⁹

3 D. Stathakopoulos, *Crime and Punishment. The Plague in the Byzantine Empire*. In: L. K. Little (Ed.), *Plague and the end of Antiquity*. (Cambridge 2007), 100 f. In the following: Stathakopoulos 2007.

4 W. Rosen, *Justinian's flea*. (London 2008), 10-11. In the following: Rosen 2003.

5 Procopius, *Secret History*, 4, 24.

6 Stathakopoulos 2007, 101.

7 John of Ephesus, *Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel-Mahrè, Chronicle*, 77.

8 *Ibid.*, 80.

9 Procopius, *BP 2.24.5-8*, 260-61. - John of Ephesus, *Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel-Mahrè, Chronicle*, 101. - Stathakopoulos 2007, 101.

thus inferred the war campaign and hence affected politics. „And already Chosroes had abandoned Adarbiganon a little before through fear of the plague and was off with his whole army into Assyria, where the pestilence had not as yet become epidemic."¹⁰ Procopius reports in his book *De Bello Persico* that the Persian monarch encountered two major troubles as his own son Anōshazād tried an act of usurpation and additionally his soldiers had been infected with the Justinian Plague. "(...) Chosroes was in great straits: for his son had risen against him in an attempt to set up a tyranny, and he himself together with the whole Persian army had been taken with the plague; and this was the reason why he wished just now to settle the agreement with the Romans."¹¹ Not only Procopius but also Bishop Gregory of Tours reports an incision of the Justinianic Plague in politics and military operations. He writes in his *Historia Francorum* that the king would not send military enforcement against the Lombards to Italy because "He begs your goodness to give him help against the Lombards so that they may be driven from Italy and the part which his father claimed when alive may return to him, and the other part be restored by your and his aid to the dominion of the emperor." The king replied: "I cannot send my army to Italy and expose the soldiers to death uselessly. For a very severe plague is now wasting Italy."¹² The next possible stop on the Plague route seems to be Sicily. Stathakopoulos gives the following evidence: tomb stones with inscriptions. A set-up tombstone from Sicily for three young boys, possibly brothers, who died in late December 542. Four funerary inscriptions from Sufetula, Tunisia dated to late January/February 543. They were set up for young siblings who died one after the other and were buried in the same church.¹³ There are records for the plague occurring in Italy and the Illyricum in anno 543 by Marcellinus Comes, and a group of nine epitaphs for a period of four months (early November 543-late February 544) points to the disease in the eternal city. „No similar frequency could be found in the dated epitaphs of the sixth century in all ten volumes of the most complete repertory we have. On March 23, 544 the Emperor Justinian issued Novel 122 in which he declared the plague's ravage as terminated. This was the first and best-documented wave of the Justinianic Plague."¹⁴ By 543 the pestilence had not even reached Italy but spread further to Gaul and Atropatene, before also eventually arriving in the British Isles. The second wave, from February to July 558, broke out in Constantinople. It is probably connected to the presence of the disease in Sicilia, Mesopotamia and Syria in 660-561.¹⁵

10 Procopius, BP, II. xxiv. 477.

11 Ibid., 475.

12 Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 9.20.

13 Duval, Nouvelles recherches, 277-80 after Stathakopoulos 2007, 101.

14 Stathakopoulos 2007, 102.

15 Ibid.

The third wave haunted Italy and Gaul in 571 and Constantinople afresh in 573-574. Next, Rome was victim again, in the beginning 591, followed by Ravenna, Grado and Istria in 591-592 and Antioch in 592.

The next wave broke out 597 in Thesalonicia during summertime. From there it dispersed into the Avar territory (Today European Turkey) by spring of 598 and the year after continued to the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria, Constantinople, Bithynia and Asia Minor. And also the fourth wave returned the terror of the plague to Constantinople in 599. In 599-600 it arrived in Northern Africa and Italy and finally broke out in Ravenna and Verona in 600-601. The plague is recorded for Alexandria prior to 619 and probably returned to Constantinople during the ruling time of Emperor Heradius in 618-619.¹⁶

Science traditionally heralds the fall of the Roman Empire and the end of antiquity as being due to the pandemic. The classical hypothesis is that the Plague of Justinian is considered a turning point. The end of antiquity, the beginning of the Middle Ages.

The ratio of death correlates in close connection to this. Over time academia has given different estimations on the number of plague victims, both on the Justinianic Plague and the Black Death of the fourteenth century. The traditional maximalist position claims tens of millions had lost their lives; The disease struck with several waves in Europe and the Mediterranean for nearly 200 years and is believed to have killed between 30 and 50 percent of the population of the Eastern Roman Empire. Some researchers even estimate a nine-figure sum for the worldwide number of casualties. „Die Forscher vermuten, dass frühere Pestausbrüche wie die Justinianische Pest, die im 6. Jahrhundert mehr als 100 Millionen Menschen weltweit tötete (...).“¹⁷ Contemporary chronicler do indeed describe mass mortality, both in their respective surroundings and in general.

Historians dealing with the Medieval Black Death draw a similar scenario. The Bubonic plague is considered one of the worst pandemics in history, an estimated 25 million people were killed between 1346 and 1353, assuming probably half of the European population at the time¹⁸, or at least one third. „The coincidence of timing does not, of course, prove that the pandemic caused Rome to fall, or Europe to be born; (...) The (...) Plague of Justinian, to give both pandemic and emperor their names, killed at least twenty-five million people; depopulated entire cities; and depressed birth rates

16 Stathakopoulos 2007, 103.

17 Genom des schwarzen Todes rekonstruiert, 2. https://uni-tuebingen.de/uploads/media/11-10-12GenomPesterreger_JK_T%c3%bcbingen.pdf 07.05.2012.

18 Respective in the Years, “between 1347 and 1351, half of all Europeans perished” K. Bos et al. A draft genome of *Yersinia pestis* from victims of the Black Death. *Nature* 478, (2011), 506–510.

for generations precisely at the time that Justinian's armies had returned the entire western Mediterranean to imperial control and only decades before Muhammad's followers emerged out of Arabia to conquer Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lybia, Persia, Mesopotamia and Spain. It is therefore (...) difficult to plot a course to modern Europe without acknowledging the presence of Justinian and the plague (...)“¹⁹

The Justinianic Plague has classically been considered the *End of Antiquity*.

Recently Mordechai et al. state differently. White and Mordechai have modelled the Justinianic Plague with epidemiological models and tested them with all parameter values supported by recent understanding of plague etiology. „In this paper, we have attempted to reconstruct the common scenario of the Justinianic Plague that former literature accepts. (...) While several of the bubonic plague model configurations yielded interquartile estimates arguably consistent with the upper end of maximalist estimates of mortality, plague in these models lasted for considerably less time than suggested by the primary sources. By contrast, both pneumonic models suggest that pneumonic plague by itself was unlikely to cause almost any mortality in Constantinople. When viewed in light of the historical evidence, the model results therefore indicate that the outbreak in Constantinople was very likely not a pneumonic plague outbreak.

Our results suggest that given what we know of modern plague etiology it would have been highly unlikely for a plague outbreak to have the magnitude of impact with the simultaneous outbreak duration that the primary sources describe. Since the outbreak at Constantinople underlies the scholarly understanding of the broader Justinianic Plague and has the most evidence compared to outbreaks elsewhere or later in the first pandemic, our results suggest that the Justinianic Plague behaved differently than the current maximalist consensus postulates, and thus contribute to the broader discussion of the impact of plague during Late Antiquity.“²⁰

The author embraces White's and Mordechai's innovative approach since it opens up new perspectives for this issue stuck in Plague narratives. Modeling is ideal for such calculations, however, the author points out that it omits one point of central importance: the human factor. The plague is a highly contagious infectious disease and in an urban area it will hardly be possible to reduce social contacts to nil, to an extent that there are hardly any infections. Especially, when one must assume that the population had no idea of the way the disease was transmitted and so could not

19 Rosen 2008, 3.

20 L. A. White; L. Mordechai, Modeling the Justinianic Plague: Comparing hypothesized transmission routes. PLoS One. (2020) 15(4): e0231256.

adapt their everyday behaviour in order to avoid infection.

In another study, Mordechai et al. express to find no evidence for this paradigm after having examined a series of data on written sources, legislation, coinage, papyri, inscriptions, pollen, ancient DNA and archaeological material from burials which can be linked to demographic and economic trends during the two-century period in question. „Individually or together, they fail to support the maximalist paradigm: None has a clear independent link to plague outbreaks and none supports maximalist reconstructions of late antique plague. Instead of large-scale, disruptive mortality, when contextualized and examined together, the datasets suggest continuity across the plague period. Although demographic, economic, and political changes continued between the 6th and 8th centuries, the evidence does not support the now commonplace claim that the Justinianic Plague was a primary causal factor of them.“²¹

Mordechai et al. see no massive plague mortality in contemporary quantitative datasets. „Although precise estimates are beyond the currently available evidence, the multiple quantitative and qualitative datasets collected here indicate no plague-related empire-wide demographic contraction. We have no more basis for the current maximalist estimate of a 50% demographic loss than we would have for a minimalist estimate of 0.1%. (...) On the basis of the available data, sudden and dramatic population loss was almost certainly the exception, not the rule.“²²

From an archaeologist's point of view one has to argue here, that there is one rule of thumb concerning the archaeological sources: Independently of time period and geographical region they usually have one factor in common and that is regional diversity.²³ Like all other effects of the pandemic such as food production, economy etc., the mortality rates will have been different in different regions at different times. One can certainly assume that the disease naturally hit harder in crowded cities and in places with bad hygiene than in areas with low population density. In the authors opinion the factor urbanism²⁴ plays an important role in the plague scenario and has hitherto found deficient attention by research. Additionally, the archaeological sources have not found sufficient adherence when considering the Justinianic Plague. If discussed, the focus is on paleogenetics or the detection of mass burials which certainly are important parameters but if the

21 Mordechai et al., The Justinianic Plague: An inconsequential pandemic? *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Dec (2019), 116 (51) 25546. In the following: Mordechai et al. 2019.

22 Ibid.

23 J. Mattes, Climate Change, Ecology and Early Sedantism in Interaction. In: P. J. J. Sinclair, G. Nordquist, F. Herschend, C. Isendahl (Eds.), *The Urban Mind. Cultural and Environmental Dynamics.* (Västerås 2010), 110. In the following: Mattes 2010.

24 Mattes 2010, 89-112.

archaeological context is neglected, as often is the case, from an archaeologist's point of view, these data miss important information, or even substance.

The following quote of Stathakopoulos sums up the current research situation. "We can reconstruct the date of its appearance and disappearance, attempt to trace the mortality it caused, and, in a bold moment, even try to discern its effects on the stricken populations, but all in all, we still can produce only fragmentary prose about its presence in the Late Antique Mediterranean."²⁵

Reconstructions of the dates of occurrence and the disappearances can be made, the place of its first appearance could be located and research can discern its effects on the people, but it still is fragmentary knowledge.

III The Plague of Justinian, the Black Death and *Yersinia Pestis*

The Plague is a dangerous and highly contagious disease caused by the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium, affecting humans and other mammals. It is usually transmitted to humans by bites of a rodent flea, that is carrying the plague bacterium. The flea has previously been infected with blood sucked from infected rats.²⁶ Another way of infection is by handling an animal infected with plague, also contact with contaminated fluid or tissue e.g. when skinning a slaughtered animal, handling meat etc. or by transition of infectious droplets from a sick human or animal, by direct and close contact with the person with pneumonic plague. Transmission of these droplets is the only way that plague can spread between people, or possibly animals, too. Cats are particularly susceptible to plague, and can be infected by eating infected rodents. Sick cats pose a risk of transmitting infectious plague droplets.²⁷ Treating plague patients, humans or animals, is "requiring universal precautions for medical and nursing care."²⁸

Three plague forms are known so far: the bubonic plague, the septicemic plague, and the pneumonic plague.

„Before the advent of penicillin and in the pre-antibiotic era ... the mortality, morbidity and misery wrought by micro-organisms far exceeded that of warfare and famine."²⁹

Modern antibiotics are effective in treating plague but without prompt treatment, the disease can

25 Stathakopoulos 2007, 99. - D. Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire. A systematic survey of subsistence crises and epidemics.* Birmingham Byzantine and ottoman monographs. Volume 9. (Ashgate 2004).

26 Oxford Dictionary of Public Health and Epidemiology. (Oxford 2018).

27 <https://www.cdc.gov/plague/transmission/index.html> 27.05.2016.

28 Oxford Dictionary, op. cit., 189.

29 C. Roberts; K. Manchester. *Archaeology of Disease.* (Sutton 1997), 124.

cause serious illness or death. Without antibiotic treatment the lethality is estimated with 90%-95%.

Symptoms of the Bubonic plague: a sudden onset of fever, headache, chills, and weakness and one or more swollen, tender and painful lymph nodes, the so-called called buboes, usually in the groin, armpit or neck. This form usually results from the bite of an infected flea, at least 30 different flea species are known to transmit *Yersinia pestis*, among them the oriental rat flea, *Xenopsylla cheopis*, is considered to the most efficient plague transmitter. The bacteria multiply in the lymph node closest to where the bacteria entered the human body. If the patient is not treated early with the appropriate antibiotics, the bacteria can spread to other parts of the body and cause septicemic or pneumonic plague. Septicemic plague occurs when plague bacteria multiply in the bloodstream. A patient usually falls ill with bubonic plague one to six days after being infected. It is the most common plague form.

Symptoms of the Septicemic plague: development of fever, chills, extreme weakness, abdominal pain, shock, and possibly bleeding into the skin and other organs. Skin and other tissues may turn black (gangrene) and die, especially on fingers, toes and nose, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting, bleeding (blood may not be able to clot), and shock. The Septicemic plague can occur as the first plague symptom, or may develop from untreated bubonic plague. This form results from bites of infected fleas or from handling an infected animal.

Symptoms of the Pneumonic plague: development of fever, headache, weakness and a rapidly developing pneumonia with shortness of breath, chest pain, cough, and sometimes bloody or watery mucous. Pneumonic plague may develop from inhaling infectious droplets or may develop from untreated bubonic or septicemic plague after the bacteria spread to the lungs. The pneumonia may cause respiratory failure and shock. Pneumonic plague is the most serious form of the disease and is the only form of plague that can be spread from person to person (by infectious droplets). The Pneumonic plague is almost 100% fatal if not treated rapidly.³⁰ In ca. 6–7% of cases, children develop a plague meningitis with 9 -14 after unsuccessful treatment.³¹

Yersinia pestis has the following ability to survive: up to 7 months in the ground, 5 -6 months on clothing, up to 40 days on cereals, 80 -90 days in milk, several weeks in water, food and grain, 2 months inside fleas, 2 months at 35° Celsius in cadavers. The pathogen is frail against sunlight and

30 R. D. Pechous et al. Pneumonic Plague: The Darker Side of *Yersinia pestis*. *Trends Microbiol.* (2016) Mar; 24 (3), 190-197.

31 S. Grygorczuk; T. Hermanowska-Szpakowicz, *Yersinia pestis* as a dangerous biological weapon]. *Med Pr.* 2002;53 (4), 343. - A. Rakin. *Yersinia Pestis. Eine Bedrohung für die Menschheit. Eine Bedrohung für die Menschheit. Letthema: Biologische Sicherheit. Bundesgesundheitsbl - Gesundheitsforsch - Gesundheitsschutz* (2003) · 46, 951. Im Folgenden: Rakin 2003.

heat above 60° Celsius. *Yersinia pestis* will die after 30 min of heat treatment at 60°C and immediately when exposed to 100° Celsius.³²

Even though there is a good possible treatment today, the plague still remains problematic as no vaccination has been developed. Due to this fact and considering its short incubation period, rapid onset and quick progress with mortality it is counted as one of the *twelve dirty dozen* agents suitable for biological warfare.

”Infectious disease has long been a major cause of death in human populations.”³³ Unfortunately this quotation is still valid for present times. Human plague infections continue to occur in rural areas in the western United States of America and in parts of Africa and Asia.

For a long time it was assumed that the plagues in late antiquity and in later centuries were independent of each other. Based on these limited details of texts written by contemporaries, many historians questioned if the Justinianic Plague really had a connection to *Yersinia pestis*. Scientists did so independently of historic sources. Then research raised the question if the two plagues could be related to one another.

The scientific breakthrough to answer this was made just a few years ago when the methods for the genetic analysis of historical samples were expanded, dramatically opening up new horizons in understanding the emergence and reappearance of diseases by major technical advances in enrichment of DNA and sequencing.

In 2011 researchers managed to completely decipher the entire genetic material of the old plague pathogen with the help of the latest DNA sequencing methods by a new methodical approach that uses tiny DNA fragments of the pathogen of the plague from medieval skeletons. This confirms that the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria are responsible for the Black Death.³⁴

This represents a major breakthrough in both paleogenetics and all research on the plague. The researchers suspect that earlier plague outbreaks such as the Justinianic plague in the 6th century, were likely caused by another, as yet unidentified pathogen.

On the other hand, Wiechman et al. prosecuted a molecular genetic investigation of a 6th century double inhumation burial from the German site of Aschheim in upper Bavaria which included analysis of mitochondrial DNA, molecular sexing, and polymorphic nuclear DNA. *Yersinia pestis*-specific DNA was detected with the results that the sequences of these amplification products shared

32 Rakin 2003, 951.

33 D. T. White; A. P. Folkens. *The Human Bone Manual*. (London 2005), 125.

34 K. Bos et al. A draft genome of *Yersinia pestis* from victims of the Black Death. *Nature* 478, (2011), 506–510.

100% identity with that of the modern *Yersinia pestis* pla sequence in GenBank and the application of a “suicide PCR” resulted in amplification products which shared a 96–98% homology with that of the modern *Yersinia pestis* pla sequence in GenBank. The astonishing result was: The identification of *Yersinia Pestis* specific DNA sequences in these two skeletons, buried in the second half of the 6th century A.D., constitutes molecularly supported evidence for the presence of *Yersinia pestis*, the causative agent of plague, during the first pandemic recorded.”³⁵

Still there was a debate whether *Yersinia pestis*, now undoubtedly known for being responsible for the plague pandemic and epidemics during the Medieval and the following three centuries was also the cause of the Justinianic Plague.

Just recently, science by genotyping analysis of DNA from multiple samples of 6th century skeletal material proved that the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* is the etiologic agent of the plague pandemic of the 14th - 17th century and also the one which caused the Justinianic Plague. “By analysing ancient DNA in two independent ancient DNA laboratories, we confirmed unambiguously the presence of *Yersinia pestis* DNA in human skeletal remains from an early medieval cemetery. In addition, we narrowed the phylogenetic position of the responsible strain down to major branch 0 on the *Yersinia pestis* phylogeny, specifically between nodes N03 and N05. Our findings confirm that *Yersinia pestis* was responsible for the Justinianic Plague, which should end the controversy regarding the etiology of this pandemic. The first genotype of a *Yersinia pestis* strain that caused the Late Antique plague provides important information about the history of the plague bacillus and suggests that the first pandemic also originated in Asia, similar to the other two plague pandemics.”³⁶

Just recently a new high-coverage (17.9-fold) *Yersinia pestis* genome was obtained from a sixth-century skeleton recovered from a southern German burial site close to Munich. The reconstructed genome enabled the detection of 30 unique substitutions as well as structural differences that have not been previously described. “In addition 19 false positive substitutions in a previously published lower-coverage *Yersinia pestis* genome were identified from another archaeological site of the same time period and geographical region that is otherwise genetically identical to the high-coverage genome sequence reported here, suggesting low-genetic diversity of the plague during the sixth century in rural southern Germany.”³⁷

Although more genomes could be detected, the place of origin of the Justinianic Plague still remains

35 I. Wiechmann; G. Grupe, Detection of *Yersinia pestis* DNA in two early medieval skeletal finds from Aschheim (Upper Bavaria, 6th century A.D). *Am J Phys Anthropol.* (2005) Jan; 126 (1), 48.

36 M. Harbeck et al. *Yersinia pestis* DNA from Skeletal Remains from the 6th Century AD Reveals Insights into Justinianic Plague. 2013 *PLoS Pathog* (9), 5.

37 M. Feldman et al. A High-Coverage *Yersinia pestis* Genome from a Sixth-Century Justinianic Plague Victim. *Mol Biol Evol.* (2016) Nov; 33 (11), 2911.

uncertain. Since 2018, there is evidence that it might have been northwestern China³⁸, Kyrgyzstan³⁹ or from the Tian Shan mountains in Central Asia⁴⁰ “All published genomes of the branches 0.ANT1, 0.ANT2, and 0.ANT5 that frame the First Pandemic lineage in the phylogenetic tree were sampled in the autonomous Xingjiang region in northwestern China or in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, an ancient second- to third-century *Y. pestis* genome branches off basal to all the First Pandemic genomes. The resulting claim that the Huns might have brought plague to Europe is, however, unsubstantiated due to the gap of more than three centuries before the onset of the First Pandemic.”⁴¹

So, the latest research has proven that the Plague of Justinian and the Black Death of the late Medieval and the following centuries actually are related and go back to the same etiologic agent of the disease.

IV Climate Change and the Plague of Justinian

Another factor that must be taken into consideration when discussing the (time of) the Justinianic Plague is climatic change, respectively environmental changes.

When the author started to approach the issue, a relation between the Justinian Plague and a simultaneous climate change seemed obvious. If it can be scientifically proven, shall be elaborated in the following.

The relevant climate period is the so called Late Holocene which lasted from the era of classical civilizations, the medieval to early modern times, in absolute figures from 300 BC to 1850 AD. The Plague of Justinian occurred during the Late Antique Little Ice Age, the LAILA, a long-lasting Northern Hemisphere cooling period in the 6th and 7th century AD. This period coincides with two to three immense volcanic eruptions in 535/536, 539/540 and 547. The extreme weather events of 535–536 were the early phenomena of the century-long global temperature decline. Dull et al. suggest a global cooling of 2 °C, respectively 3.6 °F in their study.⁴²

The problem with research on climate in the Byzantine Empire (324 - 1453 AD) is that the subject has not a long tradition and is much connected to classical philology, focusing on the criticism of written sources. Nevertheless, some publications on environmental history already occurred in the

38 Y. Cui et al. Historical variations in mutation rate in an epidemic pathogen, *Yersinia pestis*. Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A. 110, (2013), 577–582.

39 G. A. Eroshenko et al., *Yersinia pestis* strains of ancient phylogenetic branch 0.ANT are widely spread in the high-mountain plague foci of Kyrgyzstan. (2017), PLoS One (12).

40 P. B. Damgaard et al. 2018, 369–374.

41 Keller et al. Ancient *Yersinia pestis* genomes from across Western Europe reveal early diversification during the First Pandemic, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Jun (2019), 116 (25), 541.

42 R. Dull et al. Radiocarbon and geologic evidence reveal Ilopango volcano as source of the colossal ‘mystery’ eruption of 539/40 CE. Quaternary Science Reviews 222, (2016), 15.

19th and early 20th century⁴³ which include some citations from sporadic Byzantine sources. Already in the 1860s Seibel listed a great number of unusual weather phenomena, respectively, nature phenomena which were omnipresent in the first half of the 6th century:⁴⁴

-earthquakes

-comets

-floods

These events preceded and accompanied the Justinian Plague. Seibels recordings are of great value, but unfortunately they were not seriously considered by research for more than hundred years.

There are some contemporary chronicler of the Justinian Plague who reported unusual weather phenomena that indicate climatic changes.

Bishop Gregory of Tours recorded contemporary unusual phenomena, among them one, resembling an earthquake and the occurrence of the (Justinian) Plague in 6th century France in his chronicle *Historia Francorum* or *History of the Franks*.

There was a great earthquake on the eighteenth day before the Kalends [note: June 14] of the fifth month, being the fourth day [of the week], early in the morning when dawn was coming. The sun was eclipsed in the middle of the eighth month and its light was so diminished that it scarcely gave as much light as the horns of the moon on the fifth day. There were heavy rains, loud thunders in the autumn and the streams were very full. The bubonic plague cruelly destroyed the people of Viviers and Avignon.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 11.23

Now a great prodigy appeared in the Gauls at the town of Tauredunum, situated on the river Rhone. After a sort of rumbling had continued for more than sixty days, the mountain was finally torn away and separated from another mountain near it, together with men, churches, property and houses, and fell into the river, and the banks of the river were blocked and the water flowed back. For that place was shut in on either side by mountains and the torrent flowed in a narrow way. It overflowed above and engulfed and destroyed all that was on the bank. Then the gathered water burst its way downstream and took men by surprise, as it had above, and caused a loss of life, overturned houses, destroyed beasts of burden, and overwhelmed with a sudden and violent flood all that was on the banks as far as the city of Geneva. It is told by many that the mass of water was so great that it went over the walls into the city mentioned. And there is no doubt of this tale because as we have said the Rhone flows in that region between mountains that hem it in closely, and being so closely shut in, it has no place to turn aside. It carried away the fragments of the mountain that had fallen and

43 R. Hennig, Katalog bemerkenswerter Witterungsereignisse von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum Jahre 1800, vol. 2 (4). (Berlin 1904). - C. Easton, Les hivers dans l'Europe occidentale. (Leyden 1928).

44 V. Seibel, Die große Pest zur Zeit Justinians I. Und die ihr voraus und zur Seite gehenden ungewöhnlichen Natur-Ereignisse. (Dillingen 1857), 2.

thus caused it to disappear wholly. And after this thirty monks came to the place where the town fell in ruins and began to dig in the ground which remained when the mountain had fallen, trying to find bronze and iron. And while engaged in this they heard a rumbling of the mountain like the former one. And while they were kept there by their greed the part of the mountain which had not yet fallen on them and covered and destroyed them and none of them was found. In like manner too before the plague at Clermont great prodigies terrified that region. For three or four great shining places frequently appeared about the sun and the rustics used to call them suns, saying: "Behold, three or four suns in the sky." Once on the first of October the sun was so darkened that not a quarter of it continued bright, but it looked hideous and discolored, about like a sack. Moreover a star which certain call a comet, with a ray like a sword, appeared over that country through a whole year, and the sky seemed to be on fire and many other signs were seen. In the church at Clermont while the morning watches were being observed at a certain festival, a bird of the kind we call lark entered, flapping its wings above the lights, and so swiftly extinguished them all that one would think they had been taken by the hand of a single man and plunged into water. The bird passed under the veil into the sanctuary and attempted to put out the light there but it was prevented from doing so by the doorkeepers and killed. In the church of the blessed Andrew another bird did the same with the lighted lamps. And presently the plague came, and such a carnage of the people took place through the whole district that the legions that fell could not be counted.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 4, 31.

In king Chilperic's seventh year, which was the twenty-first of Chilperic and Gunthram, in the month of January there were rains and heavy thunder and lightning; blossoms appeared on the trees. The star which I called above the comet, appeared in such a way that there was a great blackness all around it and it was placed as it were in a hole and gleamed in the darkness, sparkling and scattering rays of light. And a ray of wonderful size extended from it which appeared like the smoke of a great fire a long way off. It appeared in the west in the first hour of the night. At Soissons on the day of holy Easter the heavens were seen to be on fire, and there appeared to be two fires, one greater and the other less. And after the space of two hours they united and formed a great flame and vanished.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 6.14

Procopius describes a number of heavy weather events in *The Secret History of the Court of Justinian*:

During his rule over the Romans, many disasters of various kinds occurred: which some said were due to the presence and artifices of the Devil, and others considered were effected by the Divinity, Who, disgusted with the Roman Empire, had turned away from it and given the country up to the Old One. The Scirtus River flooded Edessa, creating countless sufferings among the inhabitants, as I have elsewhere written. The Nile, rising as usual, but not subsiding in the

customary season, brought terrible calamities to the people there, as I have also previously recounted. The Cydnus inundated Tarsus, covering almost the whole city for many days, and did not subside until it had done irreparable damage. Earthquakes destroyed Antioch, the leading city of the East; Seleucia, which is situated nearby; and Anazarbus, most renowned city in Cilicia. Who could number those that perished in these metropolises? Yet one must add also those who lived in Iborra; in Amasea, the chief city of Pontus; in Polybotus in Phrygia, called Polymede by the Pisidians; in Lychnidus in Epirus; and in Corinth: all thickly inhabited cities from of old. All of these were destroyed by earthquakes during this time, with a loss of almost all their inhabitants. And then came the plague, which I have previously mentioned, killing half at least of those who had survived the earthquakes. To so many men came their doom, when Justinian first came to direct the Roman state and later possessed the throne of autocracy.

Procopius, SH, XVIII, 81.

Van Dam and Stathakopoulos mention significant snowfalls leading to impassible roads until Easter in Cappadocia and other parts of Anatolia.⁴⁵

Catalogues of environmental events that include ancient primary text sources in translation, respective primary text sources in original language also list earthquakes and tsunami which are noted in several ancient sources.⁴⁶

”However, in the year preceding the plague, earthquakes [p. 891 and heavy tremblings beyond description took place five times during our stay (...) which occurred were not rapid as the twinkling of the eye and transient, but took a long time until the hope of life expired from all human beings and was cut off, as there was no delay after the passing of each of these earthquakes. And thereafter they ceased, (or), as is written in the prophecy, after "the earth had been violently shaken".⁴⁷ This quotation does not only provide data on natural disaster but also sketches how it effected the mind and soul of the contemporary population. Already one event, be it plague or cataclysm, represents a desperate situation but two simultaneously and additionally lasting such a stretch must have created a time of fear and great despair.

In 536 an uncommon atmospheric phenomenon occurred: a dust-veil. The sun dimmed for a time period of 12-18 months.⁴⁸ Causes for the dust-veil event are debated. It might have been due to a

45 R. van Dam. Kingdom of snow. Roman rule and Greek culture in Cappadocia. (Philadelphia 2002). - D. Stathakopoulos, Famine and pestilence in the late Roman and early Byzantine Empire. A systematic survey of subsistence crises and epidemics. (Ashgate 2004).

46 N. Ambraseys, Earthquakes in the Mediterranean and Middle East: A Multidisciplinary Study of Seismicity up to 1900 (Cambridge 2009). - E. Guidoboni; A. Comastri, Catalogue of Earthquakes and Tsunamis in the Mediterranean Area from the 11th to the 15th Century. (Rome 2005).

47 John of Ephesus, 368 Is. 24, CZ, 82.

48 Keys 1999, vii

large-scale volcanic eruption in the Southern Hemisphere⁴⁹ or a massive comet impact.⁵⁰

All the mentioned events led to misharvests throughout the Mediterranean, and it seems natural that this led to migratory processes. People moved outside their usual radius in search for food for themselves and fodder for their animals. An example for this are 15000 Saracens have crossed the border to Euphratensia in search for food in 536.⁵¹ But not only written sources from history and antiquity give evidence of happenings related to climatic change.

Palaeoenvironmental science/ palaeoecology using dendroclimatology, palynology and the analysis of proxy records quite recently added very valuable new knowledge.

Although these provide great possibilities to research on climate change during the time of the Justinianic Plague in the respective region there are some basic fundamental issues that cause difficulty for differentiation.

Problems concerning relevant data are a low spatial density and heterogeneous distribution of the proxy records and their archive-specific characteristics. This represents still a major limitation for a comprehensive characterization of the relevant (Medieval) Climate Anomalies in the global and regional scale and more specifically in the eastern Mediterranean.⁵² Additionally, there are other issues with proxy data. "Although climate proxy data is increasingly available from terrestrial, lacustrine and marine environments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, there are still big gaps in the spatial coverage, many problems with poor chronological controls, and limited consensus regarding how to interpret available data in terms of climate parameters and potential drivers. The ambiguity concerns, for example, issues of synchrony and asynchrony between the sub-regions, between east and west, and between land and sea. These ambiguities must be addressed in order to acquire precise understanding of the spatial and temporal patterns of short-term (millennial-centennial-decadal) climate variability, as well as of the relative importance of different climatic driving processes and internal feedback effects at a regional scale. One region-specific 'problem' is the long presence of humans, implying that pollen records are heavily affected by human activity, which limits the potential to use pollen and inferred vegetation for climatic interpretations."⁵³

49 Keys 1999, vii.

50 M. Baillie, *Catastrophic Encounters with Comets*. (London 2000), 48-230.

51 J. Koder, *Climatic Change in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries?* In: P. Allen; E. Jeffreys (Eds.), *The Sixth Century: End or Beginning?* *Byzantinia Australiensia* 10. (Brisbane 1991), 275. - Stathakopoulos 2007, 100.

52 Xoplaki et al. *The Medieval Climate Anomaly and Byzantium: A review of the evidence on climatic fluctuations, economic performance and societal change*. *Quaternary Science Reviews* xxx (2015) 1. In the following: Xoplaki et al. 2015.

53 M. Finné; K. Holmgren, *Climate Variability in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East during the Holocene*. In: P. J. J. Sinclair, G. Nordquist, F. Herschend, C. Isendahl (Eds.), *The Urban Mind. Cultural and Environmental*

Xoplaki et al. studied the impact of climate in society and economy of the eastern Mediterranean and more specifically the Byzantine world during the period 850 – 1300 AD in order to identify relationships between climatic and socioeconomic changes. It is known as MCA, the Medieval Climate Anomaly (MCA, in this work AD 850 - 1300). This is of course later than the period in which the Justinianic Plague took place but nevertheless interesting results for Byzantine research could be accomplished by a comparative analysis of new evidence on medieval climate and society in Byzantium and existing textual, archaeological, environmental, climatological and climate-model based evidence. As a result the studied time period closest to the Plague of Justinian, is the 9th century, which showed an agricultural and demographic expansion for Byzantium that was favoured by abundant rainfall and a mild climate. No prolonged changes in either solar or volcanic activity which probably influence climate are evident during the middle Byzantine period.⁵⁴ The comparative use of palaeomodels in combination with palaeoclimate information and societal evidence significantly contributes to a better understanding of both the drivers behind the climate system „However, establishing firm links between climate change and human activity remains challenging due to the complexity and heterogeneity of available climatic and societal data.“⁵⁵

Finnè and Holmgren presented *Climate Variability in The Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East during the Holocene*. They declare general problems with relevant climate data from this region⁵⁶ and state that there unfortunately very few data available for the Justinianic time from this region. „Dry conditions were well established by 2600 BC and lasted until at least AD 600. From AD 600 and onwards the very few records available hamper any firm conclusions. Data showing changes in temperature are fewer than data showing changes in humidity, and the data that are available indicate the mid-Holocene was cooler than the late Holocene and that the period 400 BC-AD 400, encompassing the Roman period, had warmer than average temperatures over the last 6000 years.“⁵⁷ While data from Lake Mirabad in Iran suggest a drier period, two records from a Lake study of the Berket Basin in Turkey indicate the initiation of moister conditions around 450 AD „(...) with a higher water table that lasted at least until ca. AD 650 (when high resolution detailed part of the record ends).“⁵⁸

The highly resolved lake oxygen isotope record from Nar Gölu shows a rapid depletion in AD 468-

Dynamics. (Västerås 2010), 52. In the following: Finnè and Holmgren 2010.

54 Xoplaki et al. 2015, 20.

55 Ibid.

56 Finnè and Holmgren 2010, 52.

57 Ibid., 29.

58 Finnè and Holmgren 2010, 50.

561 which indicates a shift into a period of less intense summer drought.⁵⁹ Dean et al. also state that summers in the Near East were dry in Late Antiquity between 300 – 560 at Nar and in Israel between 100 – 700 AD. However, reconstructions of the severity of winters were lacking. „Here, $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{corrected-diatom}}$ is interpreted as indicating significantly increased snowfall for much of the period 301 - 801 AD (zone 1). The period 301 - 561 AD (zone 1a) coincided with a time of lower water balance, suggesting increased seasonality with winter dominated precipitation and dry summers. In zone 1b (561 - 801 AD), there seems to be less significant summer droughts with lower $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{carbonate}}$ but $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{corrected-diatom}}$ is still very low suggesting significant winter snow at this time too. This period of unfavourable climate for people ~ 300 - 700 AD (the ‘Dark Ages’) is seen across Europe. Bond event 1 is dated to around this time (...) and a decline in agriculture in NW Europe has been linked to the cooler conditions (...). The fact climate shifts seem to have been broadly synchronous from the North Atlantic to the Near East suggests a common climate driver and indeed (...) showed how the winter climate of Nar is influenced by the North Atlantic Oscillation and the North Sea-Caspian Pattern Index.⁶⁰ Links between the climates of the North Atlantic and central Turkey are also seen in later parts of the Lake Nar record.⁶¹ As the $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{carbonate}}$ record is a proxy for balance and $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{corrected-diatom}}$ may be driven by changes in the amount of spring snow melt, Dean et al preliminary suggest increased snow melt and more severe winters for much of the period 301 – 801 AD.⁶²

Luckily, just lately, international initiatives have expanded the number of quality proxy-records and developed new statistical reconstruction methods which allow more rigorous regional past temperature reconstructions and, in turn, the possibility of evaluating climate models on policy-relevant, spatio-temporal scales.

Luterbacher et al. present a new proxy-based, annually-resolved, spatial reconstruction of the European summer (June–August) temperature fields back to 755 CE based on Bayesian hierarchical modelling (BHM), together with estimates of the European mean temperature variation since 138 BCE based on BHM and composite-plus-scaling (CPS). The reconstructions of the European mean summer temperature cover more than 2 millennia. They were created by using Bayesian hierarchical modelling (BHM) and composite-plus-scaling (CPS). Both methods are based on different statistical

59 Finnè and Holmgren 2010, 51.

60 J. R. Dean et al. Paleo-seasonality of the last two millennia reconstructed from oxygen isotope composition of carbonates and diatom silica from Nar Gölü, central Turkey. *Quaternary Science Reviews* 66 (2013), 42. In the following: Dean et al. 2013.

61 Ibid., 42.

62 Ibid.

assumptions regarding the proxy records and their associated temperature signals but provide uncertainty estimates and have been tested with synthetic data in pseudo-proxy experiments. Luterbacher et al. "(...) show the area-weighted mean back to 138 BCE, but limit the analysis of the spatial results to the period 755–2003 CE due to the low number of proxies before that period."⁶³ The results compare well with independent and lower resolution proxy-derived temperature estimates but show larger amplitudes in summer temperature variability than previously reported. "(...) Our primary findings indicate that the 1st and 10th centuries CE could have experienced European mean summer temperatures slightly but not statistically significantly (5% level) warmer than those of the 20th century. (...) Further, forcings such as volcanic aerosols, solar and land-use change, are expected to have unique fingerprints of temperature change, potentially affecting some areas of Europe more than others."⁶⁴ The reconstructions indicate that warm European summer conditions prevailed from the beginning of the reconstructed periods until the 3rd century. They were followed by generally cooler conditions from the 4th to the 7th centuries⁶⁵, which is relevant for the time of the Justinianic Plague.

Thank to modern scientific methods and ancient text source it is certain that a climate change took place during the time of the Justinian Plague.⁶⁶

The samples from the Near East, Israel and central Turkey do prove climate change took place during late Antiquity. They indicate an unfavourable combination of dry summers and a decline of precipitation between 300 – 560 AD. Additionally, the $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{corrected-diatom}}$ indicates increased snow melt, hence more severe winters. But even after consulting scientific data it must be stated that climate change during the 6th century, especially when considering Constantinople, remains a difficult issue and does not yet help to achieve a detailed picture thus no fine shaped conclusion can be made. Hence, a relation between the spreading of the Justinian Plague, climate Change and urbanism can not be determined, and at this state of research only be assumed probable for placed with a certain population density.

The fact that the Justinian Pandemic occurred in a time of critical climate change and a changing environment, especially in the years of 535-536, in the author's opinion strongly suggests a relation between climate and the disease dynamics of the Plague. Considered individually or all together,

63 J. Luterbacher et al., European summer temperatures since Roman times. *Environ. Res. Lett.* 11 (2016), 02001, 4. In the following: Luterbacher et al. 2016.

64 *Ibid.*, 10.

65 *Ibid.*, 5.

66 Finnè and Holmgren 2010, 29-60. - Mattes 2010, 89 – 112.

these factors must have had an impact on economy, politics, social and religious life and on cultural creation.

V The Plague in Ancient Contemporary Sources

As mentioned previously, ancient chroniclers reported the Justinian Plague in their writings. This chapter is preparatory to the following art section of this work. To better understand the art of antiquity it is necessary to study the contemporary text sources in addition. In order to get closer to the Justinian mind, selected texts from subset writers will be investigated. What mind set and cognitions will they reveal? Do the sources give information on how the witnesses reacted to the horrors of the plague?

There are sources in Arabic, Greek, Latin and Syriac.

Written Arabic was still very rare in the sixth century. It seems the Arabian Peninsula itself had escaped the plague pandemic. In the sixth year of the Islamic era, corresponding to 627–628 AD, Arabic sources do contain a number of references to a plague outbreak which devastated Sasanian Iraq. It was named *the Plague of Sharawaygh* for the Sasanian ruler it killed along with many citizens of the capital Ctesiphon. Little 2006, 8. Then, after the death of Mohammed in 632 and the consolidation of power within Arabia under the first caliph, the Arabs went on the offensive in Syria, Palestine, and Iraq and with the conquest of Syria complete by 638, the Arabs were beset for the first time with a major epidemic, called the *Plague of Anwas* for the village where they first encountered it. Little 2006, 8.

Agathias, John of Ephesus, Procopius of Caesarea and Evagrius ‚Scholasticus‘. Composed their texts in Greek, others wrote in Latin. Agathias or Agathias Scholasticus of Myrina was a Greek poet and historian, active in the reign of emperor Justinian I. Procopius of Caesarea, *Procopius Caesariensis* represents a prominent late antique Byzantine scholar who, among other things, was accompanying the Byzantine general Belisarius in Justinian‘ s wars. He is considered the last great historian of antiquity and the most important source at the time of Emperor Justinian.

John of Ephesus, also known as John of Asia, was a late antique bishop and Syrian-Roman church historian. He was one of the earliest and the most important historians to write in Syriac.

Evagrius ‚Scholasticus‘ was an Antiochene lawyer and survivor of the Justinian Plague. When he was six years old, he suffered from its fevers and swellings and had to experience plague waves coming back repeatedly. The plague broke out in 594 while he was at work writing on his

Ecclesiastical History, and in a passage of that book he notes that this was the fourth episode of the plague in his experience, going back to 542 when the disease first arrived in Antioch. In each of the later outbreaks he lost servants and family members, including a daughter and a grandson.⁶⁷

Little states that Procopius, Agathias, and Evagrius, were knowledgeable about earlier epidemics, yet clearly stressed the dreadful newness of the epidemics that started in 542.⁶⁸

The two most prominent Latin sources are Paul the Deacon, or *Paulus Diaconus*, sometimes suffixed *Cassinensis*, a Benedictine Lombard monk, scribe and historian who lived and wrote two full centuries later than Gregory of Tours. The latter named was a Bishop of Tours and a Gallo-Roman historian.

VI.I The Justinian Mind – Plague Narrative and Cognitions in the Face of Catastrophe

John of Ephesus gives a detailed overall impression of the Justinian Plague in the year 855 of Alexander, which is a term for the Seleucid era and equals the years 543/544 AD. He describes that the reaper takes people from all ages and of all social ranks. His texts have a very religious connotation as he refers to the prophet and uses the expression *wrath of God* which appears in several contemporary texts. Hence, Christian people felt, they had failed and were now punished for their sinful doing by a God sent pestilence.

Lamentation and mourning also occur frequently in contemporary sources. The Justinian Plague caused so much suffering and deaths that it seems it was time, as he quotes the prophet, for "the earth will sit in sorrow and all its inhabitants will mourn."⁶⁹

The year 855 of Alexander there was a great and mighty plague in the whole world in the days of the emperor Justinian. Now, for the beginning of this narrative the blessed prophet Jeremiah has proved most helpful to us, being versed in raising songs of lamentation amid groans over the afflictions and the ruin of his people. Thus he would be a model for the present writer - or lamenter - in (putting down) the story of this terrible and mighty scourge with which the whole world was lashed in our days; though this time not over the afflictions of one city, Jerusalem, or of one people only, the Jews, would he have to weep and lament, but over (those of) many cities which (God's) wrath turned into, as it were, a wine-press and pitilessly trampled and squeezed all their inhabitants within them like tiny grapes. (He would have to weep and lament) over the whole earth (upon) which the command went out like a reaper upon standing corn and mowed and laid down innumerable people of all ages, J48 all sizes and all ranks, all together;

67 Agathias, *The Histories* 5.3, 10, 37–41, 145–46. - L. K. Little, *Life and Afterlife of the First Plague Pandemic*. In: L. K. Little (Ed.) *Plague and the End of Antiquity. The Pandemic*. (Cambridge 2007), 9. In the following: Little 2007.

68 *Ibid.*, 18.

69 John of Ephesus, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III*, 81.

- o v e r corpses which split open and rotted on the streets with nobody to bury (them);
 -o v e r houses large and small, beautiful and desirable which suddenly became tombs for their inhabitants and in which servants and masters at the same time suddenly fell (dead), mingling their rottenness together in their bedrooms, and not one of them escaped who might remove their corpses out from within the house;
 -over others who perished falling in the streets to become a terrible and shocking spectacle for those who saw them, as their bellies were swollen and their mouths wide open, throwing up pus like torrents, their eyes inflamed and their hands stretched out upward, and (over) the corpses rotting and lying on comers and streets and in the porches of courtyards and in churches and martyria and everywhere, with nobody to bury (them);
 -over ships in the midst of the sea whose sailors were suddenly attacked by (God's) wrath and (the ships) became tombs for their captains and they continued adrift on the waves carrying the corpses of their owners;
 -over other (ships) which arrived in harbours, were moored by their owners, and remained (so), never to be untied by them again;
 -over palaces which groaned one to the other;
 -over bridal chambers where the brides were adorned (in finery), but all of a sudden there were just lifeless and fearsome corpses;
 -over virgins which (had been) guarded in bedchambers and (now) there was nobody to carry them from (these) bedchambers [p. 811 to the tombs];
 -over highways which became deserted;
 -over roads (on) which (the traffic) was interrupted;
 -over villages whose inhabitants perished all together;
 -over many things of this kind, which defeat all who have the power of speech in (their skill with) words and stories.
 Thus over these things the prophet might weep and say, "Woe upon me not 'because of the destruction of the daughter of my people,

The Prophet „(...) might, I imagine, use the words of the prophecies of his fellow prophets to bring forward and say to the remnant among humanity who had survived, "Lament, wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God, not only 'because the cereal offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of your God', but because (God's) wrath, due to sins, has suddenly turned the holy house of God into a tomb for dead corpses and it reeked of dead bodies instead of living worshippers"

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 76

Symptoms and Characteristics of the Disease

The symptoms and medical conditions of the Justinian Plague which are described in text sources of late antiquity equal the bubonic plague and are quite accurate, in fact so that they equal modern medical knowledge of the disease. Compare chapter III.

According to the ancient sources the characteristic symptoms of the Bubonic plague are one or more swollen, tender and painful lymph nodes (buboes). This form usually results from the bite an infected flea. The bacteria multiply in the lymph node closest to where the bacteria entered the

human, and without treatment of appropriate antibiotics, the bacteria can spread to other parts of the body. Patients usually develop sudden onset of fever, headache, chills, and (extreme) weakness. Symptoms also can include gangrene, (skin turning black), abdominal pain, diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting, bleeding (blood may not be able to clot), and shock. The suddenness with which the disease affects its victims has to be stressed. Contemporary witnesses and survivors of the Justinian Plague, describe the medical condition as follows. The descriptions are identical to the ones in modern medical books.

A very grievous plague followed these prodigies For while the kings were quarreling and again preparing for civil war, dysentery seized upon nearly the whole of the Gauls. The sufferers had a high fever with vomiting and excessive pain in the kidneys; the head and neck were heavy. Their expectorations were of a saffron color or at least green. It was asserted by many that it was a secret poison. The common people called it internal pimples and this is not incredible, seeing that when cupping glasses were placed on the shoulders or legs mattery places formed and broke and the corrupted blood ran out and many were cured. Moreover herbs that are used to cure poisons were drunk and helped a good many. This sickness began in the month of August and seized upon the little ones and laid them on their beds. We lost dear sweet children whom we nursed on our knees or carried in our arms and nourished with attentive care, feeding them with our own hand. But wiping away our tears we say with the blessed Job: "The Lord has given; the Lord has taken away; the Lord's will has been done. Blessed be his name through the ages."

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 5.34

Death was sudden. A wound the shape of a serpent would appear on groin or armpit and the man would be so overcome by the poison as to die on the second or third day. Moreover the power of the poison rendered the victim insensible.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 4.31

Not only those who died, but also those who escaped sudden death (were struck) with this plague of swellings in their groins, with this disease which they call boubones, and which in our Syriac language is translated as 'tumours'. Both servants and masters were smitten together, nobles and common people impartially. They were struck down one opposite another, groaning. As to God's sentence, it was explained (as being decreed) so that the people should be astonished and remain in amazement about His righteous judgements which cannot be understood, nor comprehended, by human beings (...) Also we saw that this great plague showed its effect on animals as well, not only on the domesticated but also on the wild, and even on the reptiles of the earth. One could see cattle, [p. 96] dogs and other animals, even rats, with swollen tumours, struck down and dying. Likewise wild animals could be found smitten by the same sentence, struck down and dying. This terrible sign came upon the people of this city suddenly after removal of the poor.

John of Ephesus, CZ, Chronicle, 86

Another sign would separate those to be snatched away from those who would survive and remain (waiting) for either death or life. It appeared in this way: three signs became visible in the middle of the palm of a man's hand in the form of black pocks which did not depart (from the skin) but (remained) deep (in it). They were like three drops of blood deep within. On whomsoever these appeared, the moment they did so the end would come within just one or two hours, or it might happen that (the person) had one day's delay. These (signs) were (to be found) on many (people). To others however, neither this (happened) nor that, but as they were looking at each other and talking, they (began to) totter and fell either in the streets or at home, in harbours, on ships, in churches and everywhere. It might happen that (a person) was sitting at work on his craft, holding his tools in his hands and working, and he would totter to the side and his soul would escape. It might happen that (people) came to the bath to bathe as usual and they would not be able to take off their clothes, but would fall and expire. It might happen that (a person) went out to market to buy necessities and while he was standing and talking or counting his change suddenly the end would overcome the buyer here and the seller there, the merchandise remaining in the middle together with the payment for it, without there being either [p. 971 buyer or seller to pick it up.

John of Ephesus, CZ, Chronicle, 88

for refuge they were dying constantly. But later on ' they were unwilling even to give heed to their friends when they called to them, and they shut themselves up in their rooms and pretended that they did not hear, although their doors were being beaten down, fearing, obviously, that he who was calling was one of those demons. But in the case of some the pestilence did not come on in this way, but they saw a vision in a dream and seemed to suffer the very same thing at the hands of the creature who stood over them, or else to hear a voice foretelling to them that they were written down in the number of those who were to die. But with the majority it came about that they were seized by the disease without becoming aware of what was coming either through a waking vision or a dream. And they were taken in the following manner. They had a sudden fever, some when just roused from sleep, others while walking about, and others while otherwise engaged, without any regard to what they were doing. And the body showed no change from its previous colour, nor was it hot as might be expected when attacked by a fever, nor indeed did any inflammation set in, but the fever was of such a languid sort from its commencement and up till evening that neither to the sick themselves, nor to a physician who touched them would it afford any suspicion of danger, 'it was natural, therefore, that not one of those who had contracted the disease expected to die from it.J But on the same day in some cases, in others on the following day, and in the rest not many days later, a bubonic swelling developed ; and this took place not only in the particular part of the body which is called "boubon," 1

1 I.e. "groin."

Procopius, HISTORY OF THE WARS, II. Xxii. 11-17, 457

that is, below the abdomen, but also inside the armpit, and in some cases also beside the ears, and at different points on the thighs. Up to this point, then, everything went in about the same way with all who had taken the disease. But from then on very marked differences developed ; and I am unable to say whether the cause of this diversity of symptoms was to be found in the difference in bodies, or in the fact that it followed the wish of Him who brought the disease into the world. For there ensued with some a deep coma, with others a violent delirium, and in either case they suffered the characteristic symptoms of the disease. For those who were under the spell of the coma forgot all those who were familiar to them and seemed to be sleeping constantly. And if anyone cared for them, they would eat without waking, but some also were neglected, and these would die directly through lack of sustenance. But those who were seized with delirium suffered from insomnia and were victims of a distorted imagination ; for they suspected that men were coming upon them to destroy them, and they would become excited and rush off in flight, crying out at the top of their voices. And those who were attending them were in a state of constant exhaustion and had a most difficult time of it throughout. For this reason everybody pitied the no less than the sufferers, not because they were threatened by the pestilence in going near it (for neither physicians nor other persons were found to contract this malady through contact with the sick or with the dead, for many who were constantly engaged either in burying or in attending those in no way connected with them

Procopius, HISTORY OF THE WARS, II. Xxii. 17-23, 459

Death was sudden. A wound the shape of a serpent would appear on groin or armpit and the man would be so overcome by the poison as to die on the second or third day. Moreover the power of the poison rendered the victim insensible.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 4.31

Despite the high mortality rate attested by both historic sources and modern medical knowledge, Procopius of Caesarea describes, that not everybody was infected with the Plague, some escaped it totally, others made a recovery and some were lucky to survive it.

As for the plague, of which I have made mention in the former books of my history, although it ravaged the whole earth, yet as many men escaped it as perished by it, some of them never taking the contagion, and others recovering from it.

Procopius, SH 6, 33-34

The Plague in the Capital of the Byzantine Empire

John of Ephesus also gives a description of how the Plague affected Justinian Constantinople.

Research debates the number of victims – they generally can only be roughly estimated but the Bishop gives concrete numbers as to the casualties in the Capital. He also describes how the

everyday life of the inhabitants was interrupted by the Plague as businesses and food supply stopped because simply no one (able) was left to do job.

When thus the scourge weighed heavy upon this city, first it eagerly began (to assault) the class of the poor, who lay in the streets. It happened that 5000 and 7000, or even 12,000 and as many as 16,000 of them departed (this world) in a single day. Since thus far it was (only) the beginning, men were standing by the harbours, at the crossroads and at the gates counting (the dead). Thus having perished they were shrouded with great diligence and buried; they departed (this life) being clothed and followed (to the grave) by everybody. Thus the (people of Constantinople) reached the point of disappearing, only few remaining, whereas (of) those only who had died on the streets-if anybody wants us to name their number, for in fact they were counted-over 300,000 were taken off the streets. Those who counted, having reached (the number of) 230,000 and seeing that (the dead) were innumerable, gave up (reckoning) and from then on (the corpses) were brought out without being counted. When those for whom the enshrouders and grave-diggers were (too) few had been removed and (put) in a large common grave, He stretched His destructive hand over the rulers of the world and the renowned in the realm of earthly men, the mighty in riches and those resplendent in their power. From now on the common people, together with the nobles could be seen to be smitten by a single great and harsh blow, and suddenly to fall, apart from a few.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 86

And in all ways everything was brought to nought, was destroyed and turned into sorrow alone and funeral lamentations: everyone's hands were weakened, buying and selling ceased and the shops with all their worldly riches beyond description and moneylenders' large shops³ (closed). The entire city then came to a standstill as if it had perished, so that its food supply stopped. There was nobody to stand and do his job, with the result that food vanished from the markets and great tribulation ensued, especially for the people prostrate with exhaustion from illnesses. Only a few were strong (enough) to bring to any bazaar anything worth one obol, but if they wished they took a dinar for it. Thus everything ceased and stopped. What was most pressing of all was simply that everybody who was still alive should remove corpses from his house, and that also other (corpses) should disappear from the streets by being removed to the seashore. There boats were filled with them and during each sailing they were thrown overboard and the ships returned to take other (corpses). It would be seemly for the hearer of these things to shed tears for us rather than for the dead and to lament with sighs for what our eyes saw. Alas, my brothers, for this cruel sight!

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 88-89

When they went about they came and found a house all closed up and stinking, while people trembled at its smell. They entered and found in it about twenty people dead and rotten, with worms creeping all over

them. Although terror seized them, they brought people, who having received large payments, picked them up in cloaks and removed them bearing them on carrying poles. Others were found all dead but with babies alive and crying; other women were dead in their beds but the babies, their children, were alive sleeping beside them, holding and sucking their breasts although (the mothers) were dead. In (some) palaces life expired totally, in others, one remained out of a hundred (nobles), each of whom had been attended by many servants, but (now) had remained alone, or perhaps with few (servants only). But sometimes neither he nor any of his people (remained). Also those who (once) had been served by a multitude of servants, (now) stood and served themselves and the diseased in their home.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 92

Thus when the bearers became few, the whole city, (once) rich in inhabitants, splendid with power, and opulent, suddenly became a gloomy and putrid tomb for its inhabitants, so that now also the graves were insufficient. And this was more painful than anything, for the (corpses) from the city collected together in tribulation were cast down on boats (and having been transported) from this side across (the bay).

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 90-91

The Plague in the Countryside

If one compares the description of the Plagues' effects in the capital and in the country, there is generally no difference. Both in the big city and in the villages so many people had passed away that the necessary work could not be carried out. Fields and animals were unattended, ran to seed and became feral, the harvest had gone to waste.

The average rule from an epidemic point of view is, the lower the number of human contacts, the lower the risk of infection. So living in a crowded place must naturally contain a higher risk for being infected with a highly contagious disease such as the Plague. Nevertheless, from John's writing, one can conclude that living in the countryside with a lower population density did not protect people from the pestilence.

we travelled in terror (on our way) from Syria to the capital (during) the height of the plague. Day by day we too-like everybody-knocked at the gate of the tomb. If it was evening we thought that death would come upon us in the night, and again if morning had broken, our face was turned the whole day toward the tomb.

In these countries we saw desolate and groaning villages and corpses spread out on the earth, with no one to take up (and bury) them; -other (villages) where some few (people) remained and went to and from carrying and throwing (the corpses) like a man who rolls stones (off his field), going off to cast (it away) and coming back to take (another stone) and again having thrown (it) upon a heap, returns to pull forth (the next one) and thus rolls (them) the whole day; -others, heaping

them up, dug tombs for them;
 --(still) others who had totally disappeared, having left their homes
 void of (their) inhabitants;
 -staging-posts on the roads full of darkness and solitude filling with
 fright everyone who happened to enter and leave them;
 --cattle abandoned and roaming scattered over the mountains with
 nobody to gather them;
 -flocks of sheep, goats, oxen and pigs which had become like [p. 881
 wild animals, having forgotten (life in) a cultivated land and the human
 voice which used to lead them;
 -areas that were tilled and full of all kinds of fruits (which) had
 become overripe and fallen for lack of anyone to gather (them);
 -fields in all the countries through which we passed from Syria to
 Thrace, abundant in grain which was becoming white and stood erect,
 but there was none to reap or gather in;
 -vines for which the time to be stripped of their fruits had come and
 passed: the (following) winter being severe, they shed their leaves
 while the fruit still remained hanging on the vines, there being no one
 to pick or press them.
 How is one to recount or to write anything about this sight full of
 terror, the appearance of which was bitter, and the lament over it
 painful, which we met day after day on our journey, unless he who saw
 (it) should say together with the prophet, "the earth will sit in sorrow
 and all its inhabitants will mourn.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 80-81

Mass Death and the Treatment of the Corpses

Another aspect, not only valuable to understand peoples' reaction to the crisis but also for potential archaeological investigations, is how the huge amount of dead bodies treated. It seems, that the emperor provided possibilities for (mass) graves when the situation got out of control. John also describes that so many people died, entire families and lineages were extinct, that often no heirs were left. His narrative warns of moral hazard: People breaking into houses of deceased plundering are punished by death while those keeping straight to the moral compass asking for worldly gift get their wishes granted and survive.

The city stank with corpses as there were neither
 litters nor diggers and the corpses were heaped up in the streets.
 Thus when the merciful emperor, in whose days these things took
 place, learned of it, he stirred himself up with zeal and showed
 diligence, giving orders for 600 litters to be produced (...) and gave
 instructions to take and spend as
 much gold as should be necessary for supervising these matters and for
 encouraging people with great gifts not to be negligent but to dig large
 ditches and to fill them by piling up the corpses.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 91

Very large pits were dug
 (...) in every one of which 70, 000 (corpses) were put. He placed there
 (some) men who brought down and turned over (corpses), piled them
 up and pressed the layers one upon another as a man might heap up
 hay in a tack. (...) Also he placed by the pits men holding gold and
 encouraging the workmen and the common people with gifts to carry
 and to bring up (corpses), giving five, six and even seven and ten
 dinars for each load. So also he walked around in the city urging
 (people) to bring out (the corpses).

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 91

bitter wailing and sad funeral
 laments, having seen white hair of the old people who had rushed all
 their days after the vanity of the world and had been anxious for
 gathering (means) and waiting for a magnificent and honourable
 funeral
 (to be prepared) by their heirs, who (now were) struck down upon the
 earth, (this) white hair (now) being grievously defiled with the pus of
 their heirs.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 89

There was nobody to tell about wills and inheritances, and if it
 happened that somebody required it according to the secular (law), or
 appointed heirs, these might quickly precede (their) benefactors (in
 death). Whoever they may have been, no matter whether poor or rich,
 or (whatever) open treasure (was involved), or large shop, or whatever
 [p. 1031 one might desire, (the moment that), in hope that perhaps he
 would escape (death) and come into possession, he put his hands upon
 it to take (it), immediately the angel of death would appear, as if
 standing behind the man, and he would faint and be struck down.
 Therefore the needy did not give heed to any gifts which someone
 might wish to grant them, and they would not accept (them) from him.
 Those who did accept, perished. There were, however, (some) needy
 people (who) having survived until then thought:
 "Perhaps we shall escape (death), so if a man (is willing to) give, let
 us ask and accept the gift. Without having to enter someone's house
 and take something from those who have died, let us just ask for a
 favour."

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 93

„(...) and corpses which were split open, were eaten by dogs and
 exposed, having been cast about in great terror.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 76

(All in all) not many (people) but (only) few in number could now
 be seen in this great city, the queen of the world, out of (once)
 innumerable (inhabitants), thousands and tens of thousands.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 98

in the streets and harbours [p. 991, their corpses having been dragged (there) like those of dogs;
 -(for) lovable babies being thrown in disorder, while those who were casting them onto boats seized and hurled them from a distance with great horror;
 -(for) handsome and merry young men (now) turned gloomy, (who were) cast upside down one under another (in a) terrifying (manner);
 -(for) noble and chaste women, dignified with honour, who sat in bedchambers, (now with) their mouths swollen, wide open and gaping, (who) were piled up in horrible heaps, all ages lying prostrate, all statures bowed down and overthrown, all ranks pressed one upon another, in a single wine-press of (God's) wrath, like beasts, not like human beings.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 90

Those who trampled stood (below) and when a man or a woman or a young man or a child was put (down) they would tread (them) with their feet to press them down and to make place for others. The (corpse) which was trampled sank and was immersed in the pus of those below it, since it was after five or as much as ten days that (the corpses) reached (this place of) pernicious prostration. What mind could bear and endure this suffering of white hairs of old age which were not even, as is written, buried "by the burial of an ass"?

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 96

Searching for an Explanation why the Catastrophe happened

Obviously people were asking themselves why the plague came up on them, why this catastrophe happened. Educated folks and scholars were looking for answers and, as it seems, could not provide sufficient ones. As the period in question is very religiously coined, it is not strange that a common idea of the plague's background, too is a religious one. Repeatedly the wrath of God is stated to be reason. Humans were sinners and due to a sinful life, God became angry and punished them. The wrath of God is mentioned several times, with and without the combination with the sword of God. Another repeated pictures the wine-press of the fury of God. God is so angry on the people, that he squeezes their lives out like grapes in a wine press.

DURING these times there was a pestilence, by 5*2 A.D. which the whole human race came near to being annihilated. Now in the case of all other scourges sent from Heaven some explanation of a cause might be given by daring men, such as the many theories' propounded by those who are clever in these matters ; for they love to conjure up causes which are absolutely incomprehensible to man,
Procopius of Caesarea, PW 2.22–23, 451–73

"wine-press of the fury of the wrath (of God)"

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 96

but because of the desolation of the entire habitable earth of humanity, which has been corrupted by its sins; and because the world in its entirety has already been made desolate for some time and has become empty of its inhabitants". He might, I imagine, use the words of the prophecies of his fellow prophets to bring forward and say to the remnant among humanity who had survived, "'Lament, wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God, not only 'because the cereal offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of your God', but because (God's) wrath, due to sins, has suddenly turned the holy house of God into a tomb for dead corpses and it reeked of dead bodies instead of living worshippers". Again he might also repeat these words, "The earth shall sit in sorrow and all its inhabitants mourn.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 75

Psychological reaction to fear, disease, suffering and mass death

The chroniclers report of great grief and sorrow and that the gigantic amount of suffering and death caused by plague was such a catastrophe that words failed to express it and in consequence, people turned mad even those who were blessed with a firm mind: even the wise lost their mind. Apparently many people fell into this psychological condition which may describe a psychosis as a protective mechanism to escape a reality that was too krass to endure: Therefore it was not easy to find anyone who was firm in mind, but, as it is they reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits' end; people were easily led to madness of mind. Another reaction that can be detected from the ancient text, is that people were religious and calling a saints name or Mother Mary when they thought themselves in danger. Additionally, the demon the occurs several times. People seemed to imagine that demons brought this catastrophe up on them.

As another reaction to the plague, superstitious practices developed, especially among the commoners, from which people hoped to have a protective effect against the pestilence. John of Ephesus blames demons for this, wanting to lead people astray. The superstitious custom of throwing vessels out of windows came up and additionally the idea that clerics with tonsure were death in disguise. Procopius reports, that people were hiding inside their houses, because they were afraid of demons.

But also people had to arrange themselves with the threatening reality and a certain adaption in combination with tiredness can be read from the text sources.

I am weary of relating the details of the civil wars that mightily plague the nation and kingdom of the Franks;

Gregory of Tours, Historia Francorum, 5

The (imperial) palace was overwhelmed and overcome by sorrow. The emperor and the empress to whom myriads and thousands [p.1021 of commanders and the whole great senate had bowed and paid honour every day, (now) were miserable, and like everybody sank into grief, being served only by few. (We omit) the rest of these matters which cannot be reported by people at all, (which took place) when devastation and destruction befell this (city), coming upon innumerable people of all kinds, upon many times as many as anywhere else, including the great city of Alexandria. Only now the hearts of people were numb and therefore there was no more weeping or funeral laments, but people were stunned as if giddy with wine. They were smitten in their hearts and had become numb.

What however was painful was that corpses should be dragged out and thrown down, people dealing with other people-with (their) dead-as with dead beasts: they dragged and threw, dazed and upset, (fulfilling) thus what was called in the Scripture "the burial of an ass". It befell everybody here. From now on, as in Alexandria; nobody would go out of doors without a tag (upon which his name was) written and which hung on his neck or his arm.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 92 – 93

that boy sitting and weeping,
his soul (being) close to expiring from weeping.

*John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 78,
Cp. Ezek. 21, 3*

„Whom would compunction of heart, terror and sadness not seize as he stood (there) and in great terror and bitter sadness disconsolately watched lovely young men like flowers being seized by their hair, dragged and cast from above into the depths of lowest Sheol: as they fell their bellies were split asunder, and the sight of their youthfulness was laid bare down there: (it was a matter) of great horror, shattering and bitter, with no (hope of) comfort. [p. 1071 How can any eye endure seeing these heaps of little children and babies piled up in mounds like dung on the earth? Who would not weep more over us, who behold the sight to which our sins have brought us, rather than over the dead? Even if we shall later be blamed for deficiency of mind by the wise, it becomes us, confronting this sight, O brothers, to raise wailing and lamentations for ourselves and not for those (dead) and say: "Woe to you, our eyes, for what you see! Woe to you, our bitter life, for the destruction you have encountered, which has come upon the kindred of your body, while your eyes look on." It would be much better for us who saw (it) to be mingled with those who drank the cup

of wrath,"" who ended their journey and did not experience that destruction; or with those whose heart is darkened together with their eyes, mind and thought. What words or what mouth, tongue, voice and word would suffice a man to tell about (all this)? How can I, miserable, who have wanted to recount (it), not resemble someone who has fallen into the depths of the sea (...) but (instead) is battered and dashed by the heavy and powerful waves and therefore is close to perishing by drowning?

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 97

And what more is there to say or tell about the unspeakable things which befell this city more than any other, to the extent that even the wise lost their mind and "the stratagems of the crafty",⁴ as it is written, were dissolved and brought to nought? Therefore it was not easy to find anyone who was firm in mind, but, as it is [p. 1081 written, "they reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits' end".⁴ It happened in this way: being stupefied and confused each talked to his friend like men drunk as a result of liquor, thus through drunkenness resulting from the chastisement people were easily led to madness of mind.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 97

A rumour from somebody spread among those who had survived, that if they threw pitchers from the windows of their upper storeys on to the streets and they burst below, death would flee from the city. When foolish women, [out of their] minds, succumbed to this folly in one neighbourhood and threw pitchers out The rumour spread from this quarter to another, and over the whole city, and everybody succumbed to this foolishness, so that for three days people could not show themselves on the streets since those who had escaped death (in the plague) were assiduously (occupied), alone or in groups, in their houses with chasing away death by breaking pitchers.

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 97

(...) appeared to them, wishing to mock the garb of piety, that is the (monastic) habit of the "shorn"-of the monks and of the clerics. Therefore when either a monk or a cleric appeared the (people) gave a yell and fled before him, supposing that he was death (in person) who would destroy them. Thus this foolishness was manifested in (the idea) that death would come in the likeness of the "shorn" ones. It befell simple people especially and the populace of the city, so that hardly anybody wearing the monastic habit would appear on the streets, for on seeing him they fell upon each other, fled and huddled together crying: "Where are you going? We belong to God's Mother! We belong to such and such a martyr (patron)! We belong to such and such an apostle!"

This foolishness persisted with some even longer, for as long as two years: on seeing a monk or a cleric they cried, "We belong to God's Mother !

John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle III, 97 - 98

for refuge they were dying constantly. But later on ' they were unwilling even to give heed to their friends when they called to them, and they shut themselves up in their rooms and pretended that they did not hear, although their doors were being beaten down, fearing, obviously, that he who was calling was one of those demons. But in the case of some the pestilence did not come on in this way, but they saw a vision in a dream and seemed to suffer the very same thing at the hands of the creature who stood over them, or else to hear a voice foretelling to them that they were written down in the number of those who were to die. But with the majority it came about that they were seized by the disease without becoming aware of what was coming either through a waking vision or a dream. (...)

Procopius, HISTORY OF THE WARS, II. Xxii. 11-17, 457

The Justinian Plague in Continental Europe

The Merovingian Bishop Gregory of Tours mentions the Justinianic Plague several time in his works *Historia Francorum*. He describes how the Plague was transmitted aboard a Spanish ship and spread from people having bought goods from the vessel and additionally mentions several French towns which were effected by the pestilence.

The bubonic plague cruelly destroyed the people of Viviers and Avignon.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 11.23

Now Childeric fought at Orleans and Odoacer came with the Saxons to Angers. At that time a great plague destroyed the people. Egidius died and left a son, Syagrius by name.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 2.18

A long time after, the blessed man was taken from his cell, chosen bishop, and ordained against his will. And when he was, I think, in his tenth year as bishop, the plague grew worse in Albi, and the greatest part of the people had now died and few of the citizens remained, ...

Gregory of Tours, Historia Francorum, 7.1

Since we have told above that the city of Marseilles was sick with a deadly plague it seems suitable to give more details of what the city suffered. In these days bishop Theodore had gone to the king to speak to him against the patrician Nicetius. But when he got no hearing from king Childebart on this matter he made ready to return home. Meantime a ship from Spain put in at the port with its usual wares and unhappily brought the seed of this disease. And many citizens bought

various merchandise from her, and one household in which were eight souls was quickly left vacant, its inmates all dying of this plague. But the fire of the plague did not at once spread through all the houses, but after a definite time like a fire in standing grain it swept the whole city with the flame of disease. However the bishop went to the city and shut himself within the walls of St. Victor's church with the few who then remained with him, and there devoted himself to prayer and watching while the people of the city perished, praying for God's mercy that the deaths might at length cease and the people be allowed to rest in peace. The plague passed away in two months, and when the people, now reassured, had returned to the city the disease came on again and they who returned perished. Later on the city was many times attacked by this death.

Gregory of Tours, Historia Francorum, 6.22

The king himself, as we have often said, was great in almsgiving and unwearied in watches and fasting. It was told at the time that Marseilles was suffering greatly from the bubonic plague and that the disease had spread swiftly as far as the village in the country of Lyons called Octavus. But the king like a good bishop was for providing remedies by which the wounds of the sinful people could be cured, and ordered all to assemble at the church and engage devoutly in prayer. He directed that nothing else than barley bread and clean water should be taken in the way of food and that all without intermission should keep watch. And this was done and for three days he gave alms with more than usual generosity and he showed such fear for all the people that he was now believed to be not merely a king but a bishop of God, placing all his hope in God's mercy, and in the purity of his faith turning all his thoughts to him by whom he believed that these thoughts could be given effect. It was then commonly told among the faithful that a woman whose son was suffering from a fourday fever and was lying in bed very ill, approached the king's back in the throng of people and secretly broke off the fringe of the royal garment and put it in water and gave to her son to drink, and at once the fever died down and he was cured. I do not regard this as doubtful since I have myself heard persons possessed by demons in their furies call on his name and admit their ill deeds, recognizing his power.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 9.21

Since we have told above that the city of Marseilles was sick with a deadly plague it seems suitable to give more details of what the city suffered. In these days bishop Theodore had gone to the king to speak to him against the patrician Nicetius. But when he got no hearing from king Childebert on this matter he made ready to return home. Meantime a ship from Spain put in at the port with its usual wares and unhappily brought the seed of this disease. And many citizens bought various merchandise from her, and one household in which were eight souls was quickly left vacant, its inmates all dying of this plague. But the fire of the plague did not at once spread through all the houses, but after a definite time like a fire in standing grain it swept the whole city with the flame of disease. However the bishop went to the city and shut himself within the walls of St. Victor's church with the few who then remained with him, and there devoted himself to prayer and watching while the people of the city perished, praying for God's mercy that the

deaths might at length cease and the people be allowed to rest in peace. The plague passed away in two months, and when the people, now reassured, had returned to the city the disease came on again and they who returned perished. Later on the city was many times attacked by this death.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 9.22

Gregorii Episcopi Turonensi in his writings, connects the plague with the occurrence of snakes and prodigies, e.g. snakes occur as a bad omen of the plague which is about to follow.

In the fifteenth year of king Childebert our deacon returned from Rome with relics of the saints and related that in the ninth month of the previous year the river Tiber so flooded the city of Rome that ancient temples were destroyed and the storehouses of the church were overturned and several thousand measures of wheat in them were lost. A multitude of snakes, among them a great serpent like a big log, passed down into the sea by the channel of this river, but these creatures were smothered among the rough and salty waves of the sea and cast up on the shore. Immediately after came the plague which they call inguinaria. [note: affecting the groin (inguen)] It came in the middle of the eleventh month and according to what is read in the prophet Ezekiel: "Begin at my sanctuary," it first of all smote the pope Pelagius and soon killed him. Upon his death a great mortality among the people followed from this disease. ...

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 11.1

In the territory of Paris real blood fell from the clouds and dropped on the garments of many men and so defiled them with gore that they shuddered at their own clothes and put them away from them. This prodigy appeared in three places in the territory of that city. In the territory of Senlis a certain man's house when he rose in the morning appeared to have been sprinkled with blood from within. There was a great plague that year among the people. The sickness took various forms and was severe with pimples and tumors which brought death to many. Still many who were careful escaped. We heard that at Narbonne in that year the bubonic plague was very fatal, so that when a man was seized by it he had no time to live.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 6.14

In like manner too before the plague at Clermont great prodigies terrified that region.... And presently the plague came, and such a carnage of the people took place through the whole district that the legions that fell could not be counted. For when sepulchers and

gravestones failed, ten or more would be buried in a single trench. Three hundred dead bodies were counted one Sunday in the church of the blessed Peter alone. Death was sudden. A wound the shape of a serpent would appear on groin or armpit and the man would be so overcome by the poison as to die on the second or third day. Moreover the power of the poison rendered the victim insensible. At that time Cato the priest died. For when many had fled from the plague he never left the place, but remained courageously burying the people and celebrating mass. He was a priest of great kindness and a warm friend of the poor. And if he had some pride, thus virtue I think counterbalanced it. But the bishop Cautinus, after running from place to place in fear of this plague, returned to the city, caught it and died on the day before Passion Sunday. At that very hour too, Tetradius his cousin died. At that time Lyons, Bourges, Cahors, and Dijon were seriously depopulated from this plague.

Gregory of Tours, Historia Francorum, 4.31

VI The Plague in Art – Plague, Death and Iconography

The relationship between art and society is complex. It can be observed particularly well in portrait painting. For a long time, portraits were not realistic representations of people, but purely symbolic. A ruler was represented by a canon of symbols and sometimes certain inscriptions. The individual facial features did not matter. The individual portrait as we know it today does not occur until the late Middle Ages.

Just like society, art is also in a constant state of flux. It is influenced by cultural changes, and it changes the culture. Art can be many things and serve many purposes. It can manifest status, wealth, power, faith, critique, opposition, individuality, ideology and much, much more. Additionally, art can be a mirror of society and the background of an individual art works can reveal a canon of information.

Art is a very valuable source to not only mirror cognitive process and attitude but also to record significant recent events in public and private life in general, in society and in politics. Depictions of various character often not only show the presented motive but also reveal cultural history and habits of everyday life which can be valuable in understanding the zeitgeist.

Images of the plague are specific: They are the visual depiction of a crisis experience. In fact, they rarely occur until Medieval and the following periods. Plague motifs are both of religious and secular character and appear in different media. The following chapters present an overview of

select artworks of various sources of plague iconography but due to the limited time and resources can not examine the complete amount of artworks with respective motifs.



Fig. 1. Byzantine architecture of Constantinople. The Cisterna Basilica, Yerebatan Sarnıcı, or Sunken Palace was commissioned by emperor Constantine I and rebuilt under Justinian I in 532 AD. Photo by Julia Mattes.



Fig. 2. The Medusa head pillar inside the Cisterna Basilica, Istanbul. Photo by Julia Mattes.

VII The Justinian and late Byzantine Period

Late Byzantine art as well as Justinian art consists predominantly of architecture, architectural decorations, icons, ivory carving and mosaic. There are wall paintings, illumination and sculpture. Among the Byzantine architecture of Constantinople, the Cisterna Basilica, or Yerebatan Sarnıcı, respectively *Yerebatan Saray* must be named. The Subterranean Cistern or Subterranean Palace is the largest of several hundred ancient cisterns that lie beneath the city of Istanbul. This subterranean cistern, is called Basilica because it was located under a large public square located on the First Hill of Constantinople which was named Stoa Basilica as prior to constructing the cistern, a great

Basilica of the 3rd and 4th century stood in place. Its structure was probably commissioned by emperor Constantine I and the final building was conducted under Justinian I from 532 AD onwards. The enlarged cistern provided a water filtration system for the Great Palace of Constantinople and other First Hill buildings. It continued to provide water for the Topkapı Palace after the Ottoman conquest in the 15th century and into modern times.

Icons are of central importance, especially the adoration of the Mother Mary. The cult around her increased even more in the context of the plague. Processions in the streets are documented, where people threw themselves on the ground when catching a glimpse of the image of the Mother of God.⁷⁰ John of Ephesus writes about people developing fear death and thus dedicate themselves to the mother of God, respectively Saints or Apostles: They „huddled together crying (...) We belong to God’s Mother! We belong to such and such a martyr (patron)! We belong to such and such an apostle!” This foolishness persisted with some even longer, for as long as two years: on seeing a monk or a cleric they cried, “We belong to God’s Mother!”⁷¹

Another contemporary reaction to the Justinian Plague is possibly, that the number of newly built church and other sacral buildings increased.⁷² Additionally, renovations, maintenance work and adornment of sacred architecture increased as well, while the number of erected profane buildings decreased. Esch states a ratio of 0,94 to 0,08 inscriptions per year and states that this tendency continues during the successor emperors up until Heraklios and the Umayyads as well as the Abbasids.⁷³ Additional facets which fit into this line is decline in civic building standards. The classical large dimensioned and over-decorated monuments gradually disappear, along with them their characteristic elements, such as classical orders and porticos. „The new constructions are smaller in scale and executed with very limited material means. The walls are made of stone in the lower parts and of bricks in the upper. In order to spare the latter, a large mortar shift was applied, although this method made the whole construction weak. At the time some old monuments already lay in ruins, and the building *spoila* gradually came into use.”⁷⁴

The emperor Justinian I was a great commissioner of sacred architecture and founder of ecclesiastic

70 M. Esch, Die Justinianische Pest. Die erste Welle im östlichen Mittelmeerraum 541-543 n. Chr. Bayrische Archäologie 3 (2020), 22-29. In the following: Esch 2020.

71 John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle, 97 – 98.

72 "Generally the numbers of churches which were built after the Justinian' s reign was limited. Rather than constructing new buildings, older ones were restored or rebuilt." E. Balicka-Witakowska, Constantinople in the Transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. In: P. J. J. Sinclair, G. Nordquist, F. Herschend, C. Isendahl (Eds.), The Urban Mind. Cultural and Environmental Dynamics. (Västerås 2010), 358. In the Following: Balicka-Witakowska 2010.

73 Esch 2020, 28.

74 Balicka-Witakowska 2010, 354.

institutions. He commissioned several church buildings in honour of the Mother of God. A remarkable and luckily still preserved example is *Our Lady of Saydnaya*, دير سيدة صيدنايا البطريركي. It is located in Saydnaya, Syria. The building was erected in 547 and belongs to the most ancient monasteries in the world and in the region of the Middle East and North Africa. (Compare fig. 1). It is an important pilgrimage site for Christians and Muslims, who visit the icon of Mary attributed to Saint Luke. So, this church was definitely built during the time of the Justinianic Plague. Prokopios, in the function of the emperor's chronicler ascribes thirty-three churches to Justinian I. The most prominent construction by Isodore of Miletos and Anthemios of Tralle is the Hagia Sophia. Other churches erected under the patronage of the emperor are St. Anthimios, Sts. Menas and Menaeos, Sts. Peter and Paul, Sts. Segios and Bacchos, St. Eirene in Galata, St. Thecla, St. Theodora, St. Theodota, St. Thyrsos and St. Tryphon; and others.⁷⁵ Examples of restored sacred buildings are Holy Apostles, St. Akakios, St. Agathonicos, Sts Cosmas and Damianos, St. Ia, St. Laurentios, St. Mokios, St. Priscus and Nicolas, St. Pantaleimon and St. Platon. Churches during the Justinian period were not purely for religious purposes but incorporated educational, charitable, social and even legal functions such as schools, hospices, orphanages and notaries. Circa 150 monastic houses are documented for the time between 450 – 520, both for male, respectively female monastic communities. Monastic written sources from this time are rare but it is definite that Justinian I and his wife were actively founding monasteries aswell. The emperor founded the Sergiou on his property, close to Hormisdas palace in the centre of the old city, which is said to have hosted several hundred monks. The empress had given a villa in Sykai, today's Gala to anchorite refugees who were in need of clerical exile: Z'ura and his followers who fled from Amida.⁷⁶ One important aspect in connection to the increase of religious buildings could be the fact, that Constantinople was filled with unemployed cleric.⁷⁷ In the author's view, this might also come into play when founding new churches and respective institutions. Balicka-Witakowska regards urban life as the factor for the advance of Christianity in this city, but the author considers it presumably that the increase of religiousness as a reaction to the Justinianic Plague represents a major parameter for this development. „It is symptomatic that Constantinople, which was founded with the idea of making it the New Rome, appears at the threshold of the Middle Ages as the New Jerusalem.“⁷⁸

75 Procopius, *De Aedificiis* 1, 4, 6, 9. - Balicka-Witakowska 2010, 350 p.

76 Ibid.

77 Balicka-Witakowska 2010, 350.

78 Ibid., 329.



Fig 3. The Hagia Sophia was built in 537 as the patriarchal cathedral of the imperial capital. It was the largest Christian church of the eastern Roman Empire. Photo by Julia Mattes.



Fig. 4. Interior view of the Hagia Sophia, showing antique marble columns. Photo by Julia Mattes.

Monumental Byzantine art strikes one as being primarily religious or imperial. These two themes are often combined, as in the portraits of later Byzantine emperors, like e.g. the late antique mosaic portraiture of emperor Justinian I. in San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. Here an enhanced selfreligiocification of the emperor Justinian I. can be observed. The emperor appears as a central figure with a richly bejewelled and pearl hung crown, surrounded by his clergymen and his spear- and shield bearing soldiers. He is presented in all his splendour, illuminated by a rich golden background and conveys the three adjectives that describe the nature of Byzantine society: autocracy, piety and richness. Justinian I: a rich man (the golden adornment of his crown and clothing), a pious man (represented by clergy members bearing Church symbols) to his left side, a powerful man (represented by the symbolic appearance of his army to his right side). As the only one in the picture, the figure of Justinian I. is decorated with a nimbus, which mirrors the veneration of the emperor as the deputy of Christ.



Fig. 5. The Justinianic Plague led to an increase of adoration of the Mother Mary. This 6th century mosaic depicts the Virgin Mary and emperor Justinian I, who founded the Church in honour of Our Lady of Saidnaya, in Syria.

This can be interpreted as a continuation of the Roman imperial cult. Subsequently, towards the end of the early period of Byzantine art a number of artworks fell prey to the Byzantine Iconoclasm. The fight between iconoclasts and iconodules during the First Iconoclasm and Second Iconoclasm, ending not before the mid-9th century, shaped the development of the Byzantine art.



Fig. 6. Emperor Justinian I and his suite. Mosaic from 547. Basilica San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.

Unfortunately, even after a thorough search, the author must conclude that no explicit depictions of the plague from the Justinian period could be found. International experts on the Justinian period, such as Dionysios Stathakopoulos⁷⁹ and Lee Mordechai⁸⁰, consulted in the matter, support this. Hence trying to examine the plague's impact on Justinian society by analysing its contemporary imagery, sadly turned out to be a dead end. As for the cognitive background for the lack of plague pictures during the Justinian period, the author concludes the following. The dominance of religious motifs may be explained because the world suffered from the plague, maybe devoting art in a religious manner was a way to react, if not a psychological coping strategy. The multiple depicted Saints and the beautiful, often richly adorned Icons from this period could have served as a form of aesthetic and general escapism. Maybe the eye needed beauty, the souls of the mourning needed comfort and the mind a peaceful place to rest, to collect strengths and build resilience to face the cruel reality full of fear, suffering, disease and death. The multiple depiction of saints is certainly another specific development in this line. It is striking that the events of the Justinian plague were illustrated and written centuries *later* rather than recently.

79 Correspondence with D. Stathakopoulos. "I am afraid I have never come across an image relating to the plague at any time in the Byzantine tradition." 25.11.2020.

80 Correspondence with L. Mordechai. "Unfortunately there are no known contemporary representations of the Justinianic Plague." 24.11.2020.

Images not of the plague itself but at least death related motifs occur in the late Byzantine period. As in the continental European pictorial sources, the late Byzantine (and Balkan) material does not show the plague itself, and it takes time until the 13th century until death, respectively the process of dying is explicitly depicted in some form. “Byzantines who tried to avoid terms of death and dying. It rather incorporates a sort of dualism in rendering death, which was characteristic for the East Orthodox iconography.”⁸¹ In both continental European art and in late Byzantine art, angels and demons (both iconography roots in ancient Egyptian art) and hell are depicted in the 12th century. Demons are often found as architectural details inside and outside church buildings, e.g. frequently as stone sculptures on the corners of a capital.⁸² The late Byzantine picture material does show human death. Many examples are found in the martyr cycles “(...) the so-called illustrated Menologia, with hundreds of bloody ways of execution of the martyrs and other saints. But there were also illustrated chronicles and Old Testament books with a number of battle scenes and dozens of mutilated bodies. Today, the rare, preserved manuscripts of such books are the Venice Alexander, the Bulgarian copy of the Manasses Chronicle”⁸³ and the Madrid Skylitzes Chronicle.⁸⁴ Also the weighing of the souls is an iconographic expression of death that is found frequently.⁸⁵ Cvetković outlines different variants of depicting death in his article: A fresco of ‘the Resurrected’ depicts several anonymous dead rising from their tombs. It is from Mileševa monastery and dated ca. 1225.⁸⁶ The portraits of noble people from Veluče monastery are presented as a post-mortem fresco.⁸⁷ The resurrected and especially the portraits of the deceased appear very alive like and painted in a careful way. The noble man is depicted with a nimbus which gives him a saint-like, iconic appearance. The idealised portrait in ‘alive-condition’ of the deceased in late Byzantine art and the iconic manner in which both saints and peoples’ portraits are presented may be a direct effect of the plague: Death was omnipresent – so portraits were a way to conserve the beloved persons, to cherish their appearance, their memory. These images can be very richly ornated, sometimes with gold, which might be an expression of the value of the deceased persons. The Saint like glorification of the individual is certainly an expression of this sentiment. Maybe this has its origin in a compensation for the lives ended so abruptly and often far too early. Additional examples

81 B. Cvetković, The Living (and the) Dead Imagery of Death in Byzantium and the Balkans. In: IKON 4 - 2011, 27. In the following: Cvetković 2011.

82 c.f. Crypt of Sankt Peter und Paul Cathedral, Brandenburg an der Havel, Germany.

83 Cvetković 2011, 28.

84 J. Scylitzae. *Synopsis Historiarum. CODEX MATRITENSIS GRAECUS VITR.* 26-2.

85 V. Marinis, Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium. The Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy, and Art. (Cambridge 2016). In the following: Marinis 2016.

86 Cvetković 2011, 36, picture 12.

87 Ibid., figures 15, 16.

for images connected to death are people stretched out on their deathbeds (Death of Tzar Samuel, Vat. Slavo 2, fol. 183v, dating to 1345) and the Cup of Death (Tomič Psalter, Cod. Muz. 2752, fol. 3r, dating ca.1360; G. Mitrofanović, Death of Strez, Refectory in Monastery Chilandar, 1622).⁸⁸ The fresco of a monk on his death bed praying to an icon can be found in the chapel of St. George, Chilandar Monestary, Mount Athos.⁸⁹ The above-mentioned cup of death is a frequent motif. Scholarly literature contains the point of view that the Byzantine art avoided showing decaying corpses. In this point the author agrees with Cvetković who rightly pointed out exceptions, e.g. the icon of saint Sisoës. “It is only partially true since the moralizing imagery was indeed built on direct counterpointing of the living with the dead.”⁹⁰ Another popular image of death, which actually does include a displayed corpse, is the icon of saint Sisoës who is frequently depicted contemplating at an open sarcophagus keeping the skeletal remains of Alexander the Great, an image which seems to appear in monasteries in Greece around 1453. These miniatures motifs occur widely in Greek and Slav hagiographical and liturgical texts.⁹¹ “(...) the imagery of death in East Orthodox Christianity because it reflects its multi-layered semantics and often blurred polysemy of the Byzantine iconographic and pictorial language. Iconography of death incorporates not only imagery of the dead alone, but also theological notions of the hereafter and resurrection, based on an overall optimism. Such an optimistic vision of the salvation and redemption (...).”⁹² The same is true for Western Christian art of the time of concern. Like in Byzantine art, angels and demons, the latter incidentally depicted with green skin, are a way of addressing death related themes. There seem to be no depictions of the plague until Medieval times. A few images occur in book illuminations of the 13th century, but they do not become more numerous before the century that is known as the crisis time of the Medieval, that is the 14th century. Images of the plague itself seem very rare, but the author succeeded in finding some.

One example that is unusual in several ways, is a fresco inside the former abbey Saint-André in Lavaudieu, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Département Haute-Loire, France. First mentioned in 909 and

88 Cvetković 2011, picture 8, 33; picture 9, 35; picture 9, 35.

89 Marinis 2016, 57, picture 29.

90 Cvetković 2011, 29.

91 R. Stichel, Studien zum Verhältnis von Text und Bild spät- und nachbyzantinischer Vergänglichkeitsdarstellungen. In: *Revue des études byzantines*. (Paris 1973), 374-375.

92 Cvetković 2011, 28.

established in 1046⁹³ the architecture of the abbey is described as “romano-byzantine”.⁹⁴ The church contains several frescos, some of which decorate the wall of the nave above its arc. Among other motifs there is a fresco, situated in the middle part of the South wall, depicting the plague. It is dated by an inscription the early 1400.⁹⁵ The fresco to the right of the plague scene shows Christ enthroned and blessing a nun dressed in black. The text underneath tells the age of the sequence of images. An inscription gives the date 1315, when Louise de Vissac was prioress. "In 1315, Louise de Vissac, after prior consultation with my mixed sisters, sold goods from this church in order to have these frescoes painted with the proceeds."⁹⁶ Plague related motifs do not often occur during this period, but then only rarely is the Plague itself depicted and in this case, even more rare, the Plague appears in the personification of a woman. This allegory of the Black Death is the central figure of the picture. She is standing upright in a strong but easy manner which symbolizes her power and how lightly she is able to kill her victims. The figure is dressed in a long red dress, belted at the waist in a simple manner and on top of this a long cloak with a white inside and a black outside. Gown and cloak are floor length. Her head is covered by its black hood, that hides half of her face. The style reminds of Byzantine fashion, e.g. the garment of Mary in the mosaic of empress Irene and emperor Comnenus in the Hagia Sophia. The arms of the Lavaudieu figure are spread open and lifted upwards. She holds twelve white arrows, six in each hand. To the left and the right side of the figure there is a crowd of people. The individuals are depicted at the moment when they are struck by her arrows and when collapsing and falling to the ground. The people sink left and right to the ground. Pope, bishop, canon, monk, nun, no one is spared. Many of the arrows stick in the victim's heads, but some also have hit places typical for the occurrence of plague buboes: the groin and the armpit. The background of the fresco is coloured in dramatic red. White letters are painted above the head of the Plague personification, accentuated by a white point each at the beginning and the end of the letters.⁹⁷ They could possibly form the word:

. M O R S .

93 M. L. Giron, Peinture murale de l'abbaye de Lavaudieu, fin du douzième siècle. In: Réunion des sociétés savantes des départements à la Sorbonne. Section des beaux-arts, Ministère de l'instruction publique, (1896), 20^e, 296. In the following: Giron 1896.

94 Giron 1896, 297.

95 "La date 1315 sur un cartouche." https://www2.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/merimee_fr? 08.12.2020

96 https://www2.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/merimee_fr? 8.12.2020
https://www2.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/merimee_frACTION=CHERCHER&FIELD_1=REF&VALUE_1=PA00092685ACTION=CHERCHER&FIELD_1=REF&VALUE_1=PA00092687 8.12.2020.

97 Unfortunately the resolution of the digital picture was not high enough to clearly identify the two last letters.
<https://www.art-roman.net/lavaudieu/lavaudieu14x.jpg> 05.12.2020.

The clothing of the plague victims seem to resemble more the French medieval fashion at the time, but it is notable that the personification of the plague appears more Byzantine in contradiction. There are two possible interpretations by the author. The first is that this plague image does not depict the medieval plague but rather the Justinian Plague itself. If the dating of the fresco in analogy to its adjoining fresco anno 1315 is correct, there was not yet a Plague wave in France. The arrival of the Plague in France is dated to 1347. The pestilence was brought via ships in the port of Marseilles.⁹⁸ The disease had spread to Paris, Bordeaux, Bayonne and Weymouth in 1348. According to these facts, the scene does not depict a contemporary happening but a historic event. Instead, the picture could depict the Justinian Plague reported by ancient chroniclers and could be a reminder that such a catastrophe could happen again any time and so serve as a memento mori for the viewers. This presupposes that the artist and or the principal were conversant with ancient history and knew about the Justinian Plague. This hypothesis also connects closely to the dating of the fresco to 1315 AD and the arrival of the plague being correct. If so, this fresco could be the only explicit depiction of the Justinian Plague known so far.

The fact that not only the Black Death but also the Justinian Plague affected France strengthens the interpretation of the fresco depicting the Plague of Justinian. Gregory of Tours, a contemporary to the Justinian Plague in France, wrote about it in his chronicles *Historia Francorum* and *Liber vitae patrum*. The Bishop noted the first appearance of the plague in Gaul, which is probably had reached from a western port, took place in the Rhone Valley in Anno Domini 543; the Rhone Valley, exactly the area where the Abbey and its Fresco are situated. Gregory of Tour writes his uncle, Bishop Gallus of Clermont fell ill and died of the plague and further reports that the illness raged in many regions and most notably it depopulated the province of Arles.⁹⁹ Gregorii Turonensis episcop mentions that the disease caused a lot of death. “Now Childeric fought at Orleans and Odoacer came with the Saxons to Angers. At that time a great plague destroyed the people.”¹⁰⁰ Gregory also mentions a number of unusual environmental and weather phenomena (see climate chapter) in connection to the occurrence of the plague in his region which he describes as follows:

In the church at Clermont while the morning watches were being observed at a certain festival, a bird of the kind we call lark entered, flapping its wings above the lights, and so swiftly extinguished them

98 G. Fouquet, G. Zeilinger. *Katastrophen im Spätmittelalter*. (Mainz 2011), 109.

99 Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 199–200; idem - *Historia Francorum* 4.5, 144–45 - *Life of the Fathers*, 39 – 40. *Liber vitae patrum* 6.6, 684–85.

100 Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 4, 18.

all that one would think they had been taken by the hand of a single man and plunged into water. The bird passed under the veil into the sanctuary and attempted to put out the light there but it was prevented from doing so by the doorkeepers and killed. In the church of the blessed Andrew another bird did the same with the lighted lamps. And presently the plague came, and such a carnage of the people took place through the whole district that the legions that fell could not be counted. For when sepulchers and gravestones failed, ten or more would be buried in a single trench. Three hundred dead bodies were counted one Sunday in the church of the blessed Peter alone. Death was sudden. A wound the shape of a serpent would appear on groin or armpit and the man would be so overcome by the poison as to die on the second or third day. Moreover the power of the poison rendered the victim insensible. At that time Cato the priest died. For when many had fled from the plague he never left the place, but remained courageously burying the people and celebrating mass. He was a priest of great kindness and a warm friend of the poor. And if he had some pride, thus virtue I think counterbalanced it. But the bishop Cautinus, after running from place to place in fear of this plague, returned to the city, caught it and died on the day before Passion Sunday. At that very hour too, Tetradius his cousin died. At that time Lyons, Bourges, Cahors, and Dijon were seriously depopulated from this plague.

Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 4, 31

One could of course argue that the picture solemnly depicts an allegory of death or that the artist did not explicitly wanted to depict the (Justinian) Plague but some kind of lethal pestilence, respectively the connection of disease with death and just chose to design the clothing of the central figure in a Byzantine fashion. It is of course feasible, that the Byzantine clothing was chosen purely for aesthetic reasons. This is possible but altogether unlikely because of the depiction of the many plague arrows and some victims being hit by them in spots that are typical for the occurrence of medical symptoms of the plague. Additionally, it is not likely that the artist thought the Justinian Plague to be the origin of the Black Death as this relation was only recently confirmed by science.

There is more Byzantine reference in the church of Saint-André. L. M. Giron rightly states that the Lavaudieu fresco *le Triomphe du Christ*, the triumphant Christ, shows the Byzantine school but also – for wall paintings in France – a rare Greek gesture. “La peinture murale de (...) le Christ a les proportions démesurées que la tradition byzantine attribuait aux personnages divins exprimer la grandeur spirituelle par la grandeur corporelle (...). A Lavaudieu, il est resté sévère avec ses yeux fixes et obscurs, comme ces prunelles d’email noir que lui faisaient les mosaïstes de Byzance, avec la ligne sèche et brisée de ses sourcils, de sa bouche et le trait dur qui arrête sa barbe et sa chevelure rousses taillées et disposées à la nazaréenne. Le Christ est revêtu d’une robe talaire jaune, sur laquelle est jeté un manteau brun rouge très ample, reproduisant, l’un et l’autre, les plis smétriques,

traditionnels, presque identiques de l' école byzantine. Le Christ bénit de la main droite, non à la manière latine, mais à la manière grecque, - ce qui est exessivement rare, en France, dans nos peintures murales (...)”¹⁰¹



Fig. 7. A rare and early personification of the plague, possibly the only depiction of the Justinianic Plague. Fresco from 1315. Saint-André in Lavaudieu, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Département Haute-Loire, France.

VIII The Late Medieval Period

The author could find two more examples depicting a personification of the plague respectively death. Both are miniatures and probably date to the 14th century. In general, it's noticeable that the number of European artworks dealing with the plague increases in connection with the plague waves in the 14th century. Bockler goes so far as to state “The year 1347 constitutes a terminus post quem as artists began to invent new plague imagery.”¹⁰² Nevertheless the personification of the Plague is

¹⁰¹ Giron 1896, 299.

¹⁰² Ch. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence. Iconography and Iconology Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies*, Vol. LIII (Kirksville 2000), 3. In the following: Boeckl 2000.

rare in the (late) Medieval. It seems to take until the 1700s before it becomes frequent and more standardised. “In the Baroque period, Cesare Ripa included in his *Iconologia* the description of a female personification, *Peste/ Pestilentia*, thus making us aware of the allegorical aspect of the illness.”¹⁰³

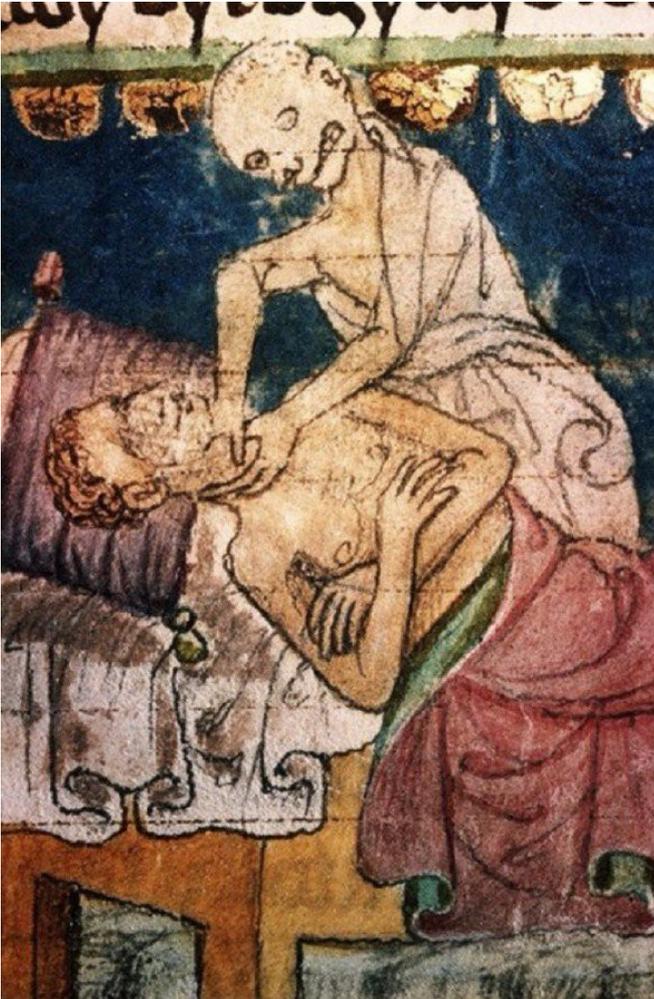


Fig. 8. Death is strangling a Victim of the Plague. 14th century illumination. Stiny Codex, collection of University Library, Prague.

The first example by an anonymous artist is to be found in *Stiny Codex*, and is called “the Death Strangling a Victim of the Plague.”¹⁰⁴ It shows a man lying stretched out in his bed who is strangled by a white humanoid figure clad in a white piece of cloth. The cloth resembles a burial shroud wrapped in the fashion of an antique toga. The head resembles a skull rather than a living human face. The white figure has its hands around the neck of the human. Between the strangling hands there is a spot on the neck that might be interpreted as a swollen lymph. But maybe this is purely meant to depict a strangled neck. The victim has a black spot under the right armpit which, in case it is no accidental colour spot or trace of ageing paper/dirt, can be interpreted as a plague bubo. So, in this picture, the plague is thematised by depicting a personification of death violently taking the life of a plague victim by forceful strangulation.

A second example of the rare explicit plague depiction is to be found in a book written in English language.¹⁰⁵ The stylistics of the illumination dates into the late 13th or the 14th century. A man lying on his deathbed, his arms folded crosswise around his chest, is killed by a skeleton which thrusts a spear into the bleeding right side flank of the man. In the background a friar is standing near the bed.

¹⁰³ Boeckl 2000, 5.

¹⁰⁴ *Stiny Codex*, collection of University Library, Prague.

¹⁰⁵ The author could, even after a thorough search not find the title of the book or its whereabouts.

<https://www.worldhistory.biz/ancient-history/61603-1350-1453.html> 2.11.2017.

Above is a portrait of Jesus who watches this scene. Next to Jesus there is a banner reading: “tho it be late exe ... thou shall have.” The banner above the friar’s head reads: “Comitt thy body to the grave: pray christ thy ... (soul?) to safe.” The banner on top of the death personification reads: “I .. a day for to .. o my pray.” This miniature is unusual as death is personified as a skeleton, a form of personification that becomes more usual in the fifteenth century when depictions of the *Danse Macabre* come into fashion. The choice of weapon, in this case a spear is a usual tool for iconography when depicting that death is brought to someone, respectively someone is killed. Spears and arrows are the frequent weapons of death. Compare Chapter Below. The spear in combination with a skeleton appears in the following centuries and is e.g. seen in the 17th century art work of Hans Holbein’s *Der Ritter, der Tanz des Todes*. dating to 1651.¹⁰⁶ In this picture a Landsknecht with a sword is fiercely fighting a spear-armed skeleton. Except for its ascribed title *The plague claims a victim* no further plague specifics can be identified by the author.

A 14th century painting, ascribed to Giovanni di Paolo presents an *allegory of the plague*. The picture ornates a Biccherna, a wood cover, used to protect official documents of the civic government for the year 1437.¹⁰⁷ Here the Plague comes in the shape of a rider on a black horse. The rider is a black demon with black wings. He holds a bow, aiming, ready to shoot the death bringing arrow into a group of well-dressed people who are assembled inside a noble stone house. Four of this group of six have already been hit by a white arrow of the demon, symbolizing they are doomed, if not already dying. Underneath the horses’s hoofs, four dead bodies lie on the floor in an unordered manner. Plague victims already. The people inside the villa will be next as the black horse canters towards them. Eleven crests are framing the bottom part of the painting. The personification of the plague depicted with holding bow and arrow continues into the following centuries. This plague personification also carries a long scythe in its belt, a tool that becomes a more frequent equipment of death in pictures of later centuries and until today. A skeleton with a scythe as personification of *the reaper* is probably the most well known image of the death in Western (popular) culture, centuries ago as well as in present times.

106 The art work is currently kept in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

107 Allegorie der Pest als Schwarzer Reiter. Anonymus respective ascribed to Giovanni di Paolo. Tavoleta di Biccherna, Deckel des Sieneser Amtsbuches (Biccherna) für das Rechnungsjahr 1437, Kunstgewerbemuseum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Nr. K 9224.



Fig. 9. *Allegory of the plague*. Giovanni di Paolo ascribed. *Tavoletta di Biccherna*, 1437, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin State Museums.

here is another ‘demon image’ visualizing the Plague. In the author’s view it is probably the Justinian Plague because the illumination presumably visualizes the plague at a time when Gregor I. was pope (590 – 604) as he is depicted in the bottom part of the picture. The dating of the artwork is 1450 and the title is *the plague above a city* respectively *La peste en Allemagne au 6e siècle; élection du pape Grégoire*.¹⁰⁸ The picture is ascribed to Maître François and presents five brownish dragon-like, winged creatures flying or hovering above a medieval city.¹⁰⁹ Their feet look thick and clumsy, their heads appear dragon-like with one exception that resembles the head of a

monkey; the bodies are snake-like, fitting the ancient word for dragon, which is *lind(w)orm*, or *Lindwurm* in German.¹¹⁰ The style is typical for the late Medieval continental European illustration; no Byzantine stylistic elements occur. Interestingly enough this miniature visualizes the Plague of Justinian while it also seems not to have been made by Byzantine artists of that period. The fact that the image of demons representing the Plague already existed at the time of the Justinian Plague is proven by a text line from John of Ephesus's Chronicle: “Again it was told that at the same time in another city on the border of Palestine, demons appeared to (its inhabitants) in the shape of angels.”¹¹¹

108 <https://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/12-507108-2C6NU0ZTH58G.html> 5.12.2020.

109 Vincent de Beauvais, *Miroir historial*. Tome III. Chantilly, Musée Condé. Ms. 722/1196, fol. 7. recto.

110 Zoomorphic plague demons occur in some artworks as well as in medieval texts. A chronic reporting the outbreak of the plague in Medina blames black demons in the shape of dogs for this event. Compare P. Dinzelsbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter. Teufels-, Todes- und Gotteserfahrung: Mentalitätsgeschichte und Ikonographie*. (Paderborn 1996), 186. In the following: Dinzelsbacher 1996.

111 John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, *Chronicle*, 79.



Fig. 10. The plague above a city in the 6th century. Another rare depiction of the Justinianic Plague, here in the shape of lindworms. Maître François ascribed. Illumination of 1450. Vincent de Beauvais, *Miroir historial*. Tome III. Chantilly, Musée Condé. Ms. 722/1196, fol. 7. recto.

Among the earliest depictions of the plague, also referred to in literature as the very first plague picture, is an image in a book by the chronicler Aegidius Mucius.¹¹² He was a French born member

¹¹² The name and its notation differs manifold. Gilles Li Muisis or Gilles Le Muiset are two frequent versions.

of the Ordo Sancti Benedicti, who became abbot and who also was a poet. His two chronicles, *Chronicon majus* and *Chronicon minus*, deal with world history, spanning from its creation up to 1349, later expanded by another writer to encompass 1352. This is a source valuable for the history of northern France and Flanders in the first half of the 14th century. It contains one of the first, in literature often described as the first, depiction of the plague. This image does not show the disease itself or any medical symptoms. It depicts mass death illustrating how the plague raged in Tournai anno 1349.¹¹³ Fifteen people, fourteen men and one woman, are carrying plague victims to be buried. The left side of the picture is crammed with coffins and people who carry them while the middle and the right side depict men who are digging graves. The coffins are not transported in an orderly manner but upside down and in a medley. Another significant fact is that none of the depicted persons can be identified as cleric. A possible interpretation for this is that the number of deaths might have been so high that no time and effort could be taken to honour the individual deceased with a proper Christian funeral including priestly supervision. There was no time and no energy for rites. Another striking point is, that the depicted figures seem to belong to different social strata. This is true for the dead as well as for the living. That the plague victims belong to different social strata can be observed by the fact that there are not only coffins but also a body wrapped in a burial shroud. There is a single wooden plank laying nearby, indicating that the corpse has been transported on it previously, as was custom for the less fortunate who were buried cheaply since they could not afford the purchase of a coffin. There are commoners alongside rich (and possibly noble) people. The first mentioned are depicted in earth-coloured clothing, their heads covered. Some of them wear shorter tunics, which indicates they needed practical attire to be able to carry out physical work as well as not being rich enough to afford clothing made of sufficient fabric to cover the legs. The latter mentioned wear expensive tissues of bright red colour, long robes covering the legs and feet. This indicates wealth, and their uncovered hair and beard style identifies them as members of the upper class. A rich man carries the coffin by himself, no servant is conducting this task for him. The author can't tell if the artist metaphorically wanted to express that the Black Death affected poor and rich alike, or if this picture is an expression of a situation in which the actual disaster was so enormous and the death rate was so high that there were not enough people left alive to be hired to carry coffins and dig ditches. Under ordinary circumstances the worlds of these people from different social strata would rarely have met. But the Black Deaths is a great leveler in respect of fate, pain and devastation. Descriptions of non-formal burials can also be found in the writings of

113 The Chronicles of Gilles Li Muisis (1272-1352) KBR, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Brussels, MS 13076-77, f. 24v.

John of Parma who as one of few survived the plague and described the quick death and the terrible circumstances the disease brought upon the people in his environment. Der jähle Tod, “(...) der die Menschen ohne den Beistand ihrer Verwandten und Freunde, ohne die Tröstungen der kirchlichen Sterbenssakramente mitten aus dem Leben riss, das Verscharren der Leichen gleich Tieren in Massengräbern ohne Totenbegräbnis, weil sämtliche sozialen Bindungen, auch die, welche die religiösen Bruderschaften zusammenhielten, zerrissen waren, Schrecken und Panik in den Häusern, auf den Gassen und Plätzen Flucht der Wohlhabenderen, weil die Menschen sich gegenseitig misstrauten.”¹¹⁴



Fig. 11. The plague in Tournai anno 1349. Due to the high number of casualties there was no time for proper funerals. This picture is often referred to as the earliest Plague image. Illumination, between 1272-1352. The Chronicles of Gilles Li Muisis, KBR, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Brussels.

Later examples of devastating mass death are to be found in paintings from the 17th and 18th century that show plague inflicted mass death in Naples and Marseilles. Luca Giordano, alias *Luca Fa Presto* was commissioned by the viceroy for the church built after the dreadful epidemic of 1656 to create a tableau which was dedicated to the city's patron saint, San Gennaro for freeing Naples from the plague.¹¹⁵ The perspective thrusts the spectator immediately into the scene, close to the dead

¹¹⁴ G. Fouquet, G. Zeilinger; *Katastrophen im Spätmittelalter*. (Main 2011), 103.

¹¹⁵ The painting is oil on canvas, measures 400 cm x 315 cm and is located in Santa Maria del Pianto, Naples.

bodies and dying people lying randomly on the ground, giving a direct gruesome portrayal of the devastation the disease caused.



Fig. 12. *San Gennaro, the city's patron freeing Naples from the plague. The picture was commissioned by the viceroy after the dreadful plague epidemic of 1656. Luca Giordano, oil on canvas, 1660, Santa Maria del Pianto, Naples.*

The same motive can be found in the baroque painting *Largo Mercatello a Napoli durante la peste del 1656* by Domenico Gargiulo, known as Micco Spadaro. Plague victims and dead bodies are confined to the market square. It is a depiction not only of devastation but also of help and humanity. Those still alive come to this place to help. The dying and rescuers fill today's Piazza Dante. Among the corpses, however, even the viceroy García de Avellaneda y Haro, Count of Castrillo, appears to be helping. He crosses the square on horseback riding through a scene which appears as chaotic as the immediate moment after a battle. The picture gives an idea of the catastrophic situation the inhabitants found themselves in. According to historians 50% - 60% of the ca. 450 000 inhabitants of the city died of the plague. Celano of Naples wrote: "In the terrible year 1656, our poor city was murdered by a very

fierce pestilence, which in only six months reaped, with horrors that cannot be written down except by those who saw them (like me), four hundred and fifty thousand people. This is a rough calculation done at the time. There was no place left to bury who ever had died. These eyes of mine saw the via Toledo, where I it lived, so paved with corpses, that a carriage heading for the Palace had to passed baptized flesh."¹¹⁶

116 "Nell'anno in faustissimo 1656, la nostra povera città fu assassinata da una fierissima pestilenza, che in solo sei mesi mieté, con orrori da non potersi scrivere se non da chi l'ha veduta (com'io), quattrocentocinquantamila persone per lo computo che in quel tempo si poté fare alla grossa. Non vi era luogo da seppellire, né chi seppellisse; videro questi occhi miei questa strada di Toledo, dove io abitava, così lastricata di cadaveri, che qualche carrozza che andava a Palazzo non poteva camminare se non sopra carne battezzata" C. Celano, *Notizie del bello, dell'antico e del curioso della città di Napoli*. (Napoli 1856).



Fig. 13. *The Piazza Mercatello during the plague in 1656*. Domenico Gargiulo, 1656, oil on canvas, Santa Maria del Pianto, Naples.

A picture similar to the mercatello a Napoli is the painting *Chevalier Roze à la Tourette* from 1720 by Michel Serre.¹¹⁷ It is an example typical for the 18th century artworks dealing with the subject of pestilence as it shows a tendency toward greater secularization. Like the Italian baroque, it depicts a plague mass dying scene in urban surroundings where a hero appears on horseback to help the sick and dying. The painting depicts the outbreak of the Plague in Tourette, Marseille in 1720 and like the two foregone examples the painter lived during the time the disease broke out.

Another picture in the Aegidius Mucidus or Gilles Li Muisis chronicle is not explicitly dealing with the disease, but it is Plague related. The illumination depicts a group of flagellants.¹¹⁸ The practitioners seem to be taking part in a procession. In front of a yellow background they march from the left side of the picture to the right side. Eight people clad in white robes and black hats, holding flagella in their hands with which they whip their own backs.

¹¹⁷ The painting is oil on canvas, measures 125 cm x 210 cm and is located in the Musée Atger, in Montpellier, France.

¹¹⁸ The Chronicles of Gilles Li Muisis (1272-1352) KBR, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Brussels, MS 13076-77, fol. 16v.



Fig.14. Chevalier Roze à la Tourette depicts the 1720 outbreak of the plague in Marseille. Michel Serre, oil on canvas, 1720, Musée Atger, Montpellier.

They follow a cross bearer carrying a huge wooden cross with a sculpture of Jesus Christ. To the right of this figure, a group of three men forming the top of the procession are painted in colourful civic clothing. They are wearing blue, respectively bright red leg wear and half long tunics of bright red, blue and yellow colour. One man covers his head with a bright yellow gugel. The other two men show their bare curly hair. The man in the middle carries a flag, flanked by the two others carrying a pole each in both hands. Flagellantism was a Christian lay movement that grew quickly during the 13th century, before just as quickly subsiding. In the context of the Black Death it became popular again during the 14th-century until pope Clemens VI condemned public flagellantism in a papal bull. The mortification of the flesh was carried out to various degrees but often did not stop when the wounds were bleeding heavily from being hit by whips or iron spikes attached to the torture instruments. People were searching for answers to why this catastrophe had come upon them. The plague as God's punishment for the wretched sinners seemed one possible answer.¹¹⁹ So, self-mortification and self-inflicted suffering seemed a way of asking for God's remission. Salvation through suffering.

¹¹⁹ B. Tuchmann, *Der ferne Spiegel: Das dramatische 14. Jahrhundert.* (München 2010), 106 pp.

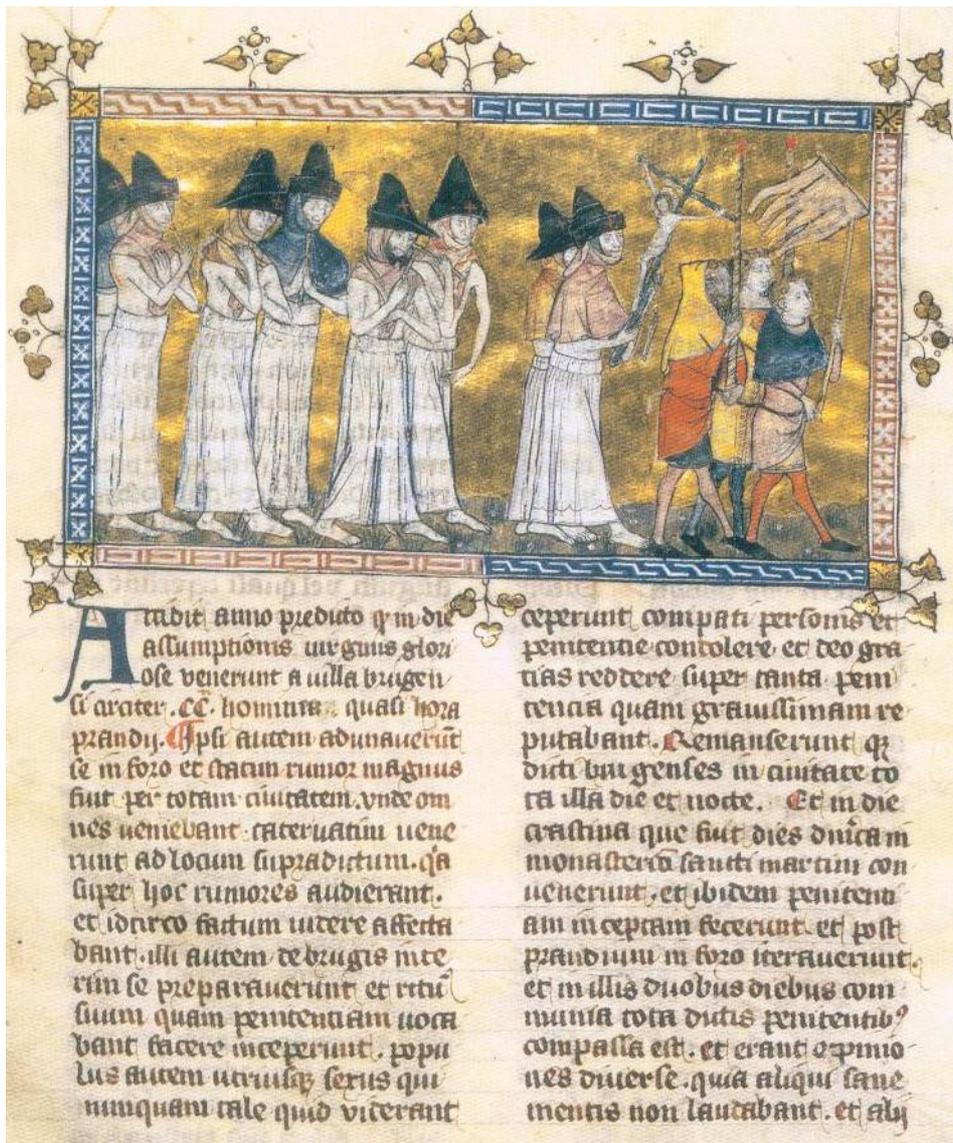


Fig. 15. Group of Flagellants in 1349. The plague was seen as God's punishment for the wretched human sinners, so self mortification seemed a way to ask God's remission. Illumination, between 1272-1352. *Chronicles of Gilles Li Muisis, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Brussels.*

IX Depicting medical conditions

Images from 14th and 15th century books, often bibles, occasionally show people with medical conditions which are often misinterpreted, even by experts, as images of the plague. The bodies of the depicted figures are covered with large blisters. Plague victims immediately spring to mind but these images usually show leprosy or smallpox, respectively the boils which is one of the ten plagues of Egypt. An example for this is represented in a medieval book miniature in the

Toggenburg chronicle. It is a bible, also known as *Chronik des Rudolph von Ems*, dating from anno 1411. The place of origin is Oberrhein in Switzerland. The picture shows a woman on the left side and a man on the right side. Both are in a lying down position, their heads on separate pillows, and they wear typical head dresses of the time. Their bodies are partly covered with blankets, the upper bodies and the legs of the man are naked and exposed. The bodies are, from the neck to the feet covered with huge boils. A fair-haired man with long hair and a beard, Moses, is standing in the background, his arms reaching up to the blue sky, while his hands are near a quantity of small dark particles, soot from a furnace, which are about to turn into the sixth of the Plagues of Egypt, ready to be sent off.¹²⁰

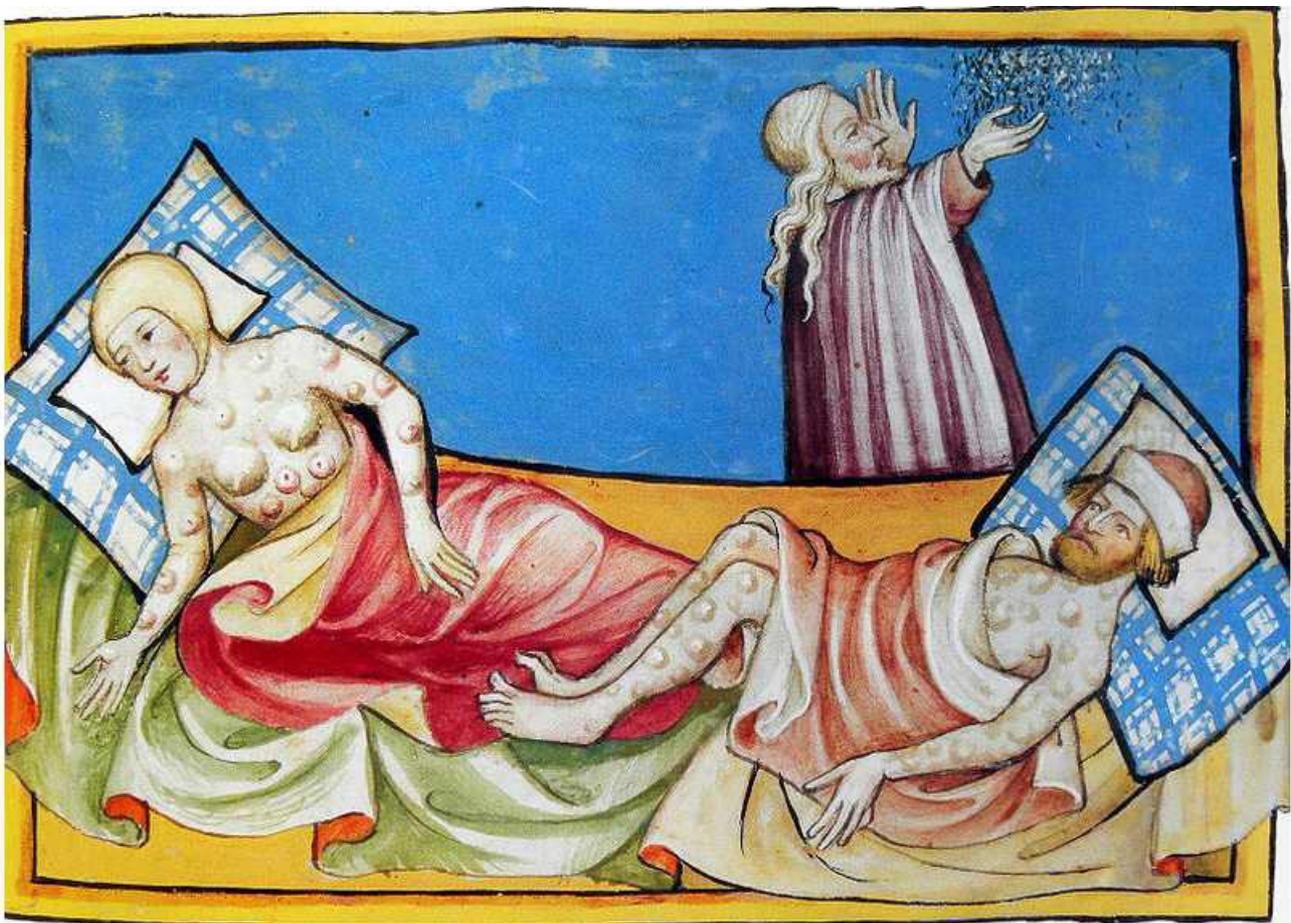


Fig. 16. This Bible scene depicts Moses sending of soot from a furnace, which is about to turn into the sixth of the plagues of Egypt, the plague of boils. Anonymous, Illumination, 1411, Toggenburg-Bibel, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin State Museums.

The matching bible passage is found in Exodus 9:8–9 "Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron,

¹²⁰ Toggenburg-Bibel. Beulenpest (Zehn Plagen, die über Ägypten kommen), Buchminatur, Seite, Inventarnummer: 78 E 1, fol. 80 verso, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/item/SG3FOBR75EKO4KWRCV56Z3IJKQ4GR5TZ> 5.12.2017.

'Take handfuls of soot from a furnace and have Moses toss it into the air in the presence of Pharaoh. It will become fine dust over the whole land of Egypt, and festering boils will break out on men and animals throughout the land.' So they took soot from a furnace and stood before Pharaoh. Moses tossed it into the air, and festering boils broke out on people and animals. The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians."¹²¹ The term *pest of the boils* represents the small pox and is referred to as the disease *Blattern* in German translations of the Bible.¹²² Reflecting on this picture the question arises: Does it not only represent the biblical theme but also the artist's own experience? The author holds it possible that it might have been so. It is possible that this is not just limited to the stylistic design of the figures, clothing and furniture that speak a medieval European design language. Possibly the artist himself had to experience raging epidemics in his environment, resulting in a true-to-life illustration of the medical condition of a pestilence which inspired him to turn the plague of the boils into the plague of Egypt.

The pictures of sick people with swellings or lumps have been and still are often misinterpreted as plague bubo and hence mistaken as the depiction of the plague. Examples which probably illustrate leprosy rather than the plague are the following. One is rather early from the second part of the encyclopedia *Omne Bonum (Circumcisio-Dona Spiritui Sancti)* dating between 1360 – 1375. It depicts a group of four monks, identifiable by their tonsure, standing before a Bishop who is executing a specific hand gesture. All visible body parts of the monks, faces and hands, are covered with red flakes. Their facial expressions are tired and dire. The number and the nature of the reddish spots resembles the clinical picture of leprosy, not of the Black Death. This example was often mistaken for the plague but was recently corrected.¹²³

Also mistaken for depicting the plague is the miniature from the chronicle *La Franceschina* written ca. 1474, a chronicle by the Franciscan Jacopo Oddi of Perugia.¹²⁴ It portrays Saint Francis, emphasized by a golden Nimbus, and three monks inside a medieval building while taking care of the sick. The monks wear brown robes¹²⁵, a sign of their vow of poverty, with short hoods and white

121 Exodus, 9:8–10, 11.

122 "Die sechste Plage: Blattern" Die Bibel oder die ganze heilige Schrift des Alten und Neuen Testaments nach der Übersetzung Martin Luthers. (Stuttgart 1972) Zweites Buch Mose 8.9, 83. - "Nehmet eure Fäuste von Ofenruß und Mose streue gen Himmel vor den Augen des Pharao: und er wird zu Staub werden über dem ganzen Lande Aegypten. Und sie nahmen den Ofenruß und stellten sich vor den Pharao, und Mose streute ihn gegen den Himmel; und er wurde zu Blatter-Geschwüren, die an Menschen und Vieh ausbrachen. 2. Mose 8.9, 10. Die heilige Schrift. Aus dem Grundtext übersetzt. (Wuppertal 1975), 50.

123 Detail of a historiated initial 'C' (Iericus): Clerics with leprosy receiving instruction from a bishop. Royal 6 E VI f. 301 <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IIIID=40313>

124 *La Franceschina*, Perugia, Biblioteca Augusta, MS 1238 f. 223r.

125 In general brown was the medieval colour of the poor. The Franciscans, like the Augustinians, Carmelites and

cingula. This indicates their membership of the Franciscan order. Long pointed hoods mark a membership of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, also Franciscan Friars. There are five sick person in all, of whom four are lying in bed and one is sitting on a wooden bench holding an object in his left hand, which could indicate he is 'ringing a bell' for help or fanning for air. This figure is the only patient whose body is clothed. All patients have their heads covered, as was decent for the time while their naked bodies are covered all over with rufous lumps. This is why they are often mistaken for plague victims. The author is of the opinion that the disease that has befallen these people is leprosy because of the many red lumps on their bodies and because their faces are disfigured and deformed. Compared to the normal looking faces of the monks they partly appear grotesque.



Fig. 17. St. Francis and monks treating sick patients. The image is often understood as an illustration of the Black Death, but the symptoms depicted equal leprosy. Illumination, ca. 1474, La Franceschina chronicle, Biblioteca Augusta, Perugia.

Dominicans are a mendicant order, devoted to a lifestyle of poverty.

None of the patients show traces of hair on the head. A loss of scalp hair indicates a late stage of the disease, called lepromatous leprosy. But the individual fingers are still visible and not (yet) deformed. The two sick on the right side of the picture show very deformed faces, especially in the region under the noses and around the mouths. This resembles the clinical picture of the characteristic destruction of the nasal cartilage and coarsening of facial features which can lead to the condition of the *leonine facies*, the so-called lion face. Pictures that do show actual plague victims with the characteristic medical symptom of the bubo can be found in 15th century book illustration on the pestilence. Among them are medical books, not so much thorough medical scripts but rather guide books on how to behave appropriately with this disease. A woodcut printed 1483 in German Augsburg shows a plague doctor lancing a bubo. This plague bubo which is typically positioned in the region of the armpit on a patient and in all other ways like shape and size is depicted very accurately. The doctor does wear his ordinary daily attire including a hat but does not wear any protective gear, no plague mask, no gloves or the like. The author of this late medieval medical book ‘fast köstlichen und gründlichen Spruch von der pestilentz, wie man sich mit allen sachen zu derselben zeyt halten solle. . . . In reymen weifs gesetzt’ is Hans Folz.¹²⁶ Hans Folz was a Meistersinger, a master barber and a *Wundarztmeister*; an autodidactic medical doctor versed in academic medicine. In the book mentioned above he describes the symptoms plague victims normally show when being close to their hour of death.

Other examples of figures exhibited with accurate Plague symptoms are the two Plague Patrons Saint Roch (Sankt Rochus) and Saint Sebastian. Like a number of other Plague Patrons, they were addressed as intercessors and healers. The cult of Saint Sebastian already originated in connection to the Justinianic Plague. “No study of the impact of the plague pandemic on religion, in particular western Christianity, would be complete without reference to the creation of a new saintly cult specifically intended to deal with plague, namely that of St. Sebastian. (...) the Justinianic Plague’s gift to the Black Death.

126 H. Folz. Fast köstlichen und gründlichen Spruch von der pestilentz, wie man sich mit allen sachen zu derselben zeyt halten solle In reymen weifs gesetzt. Augsburg 1483, private collection.

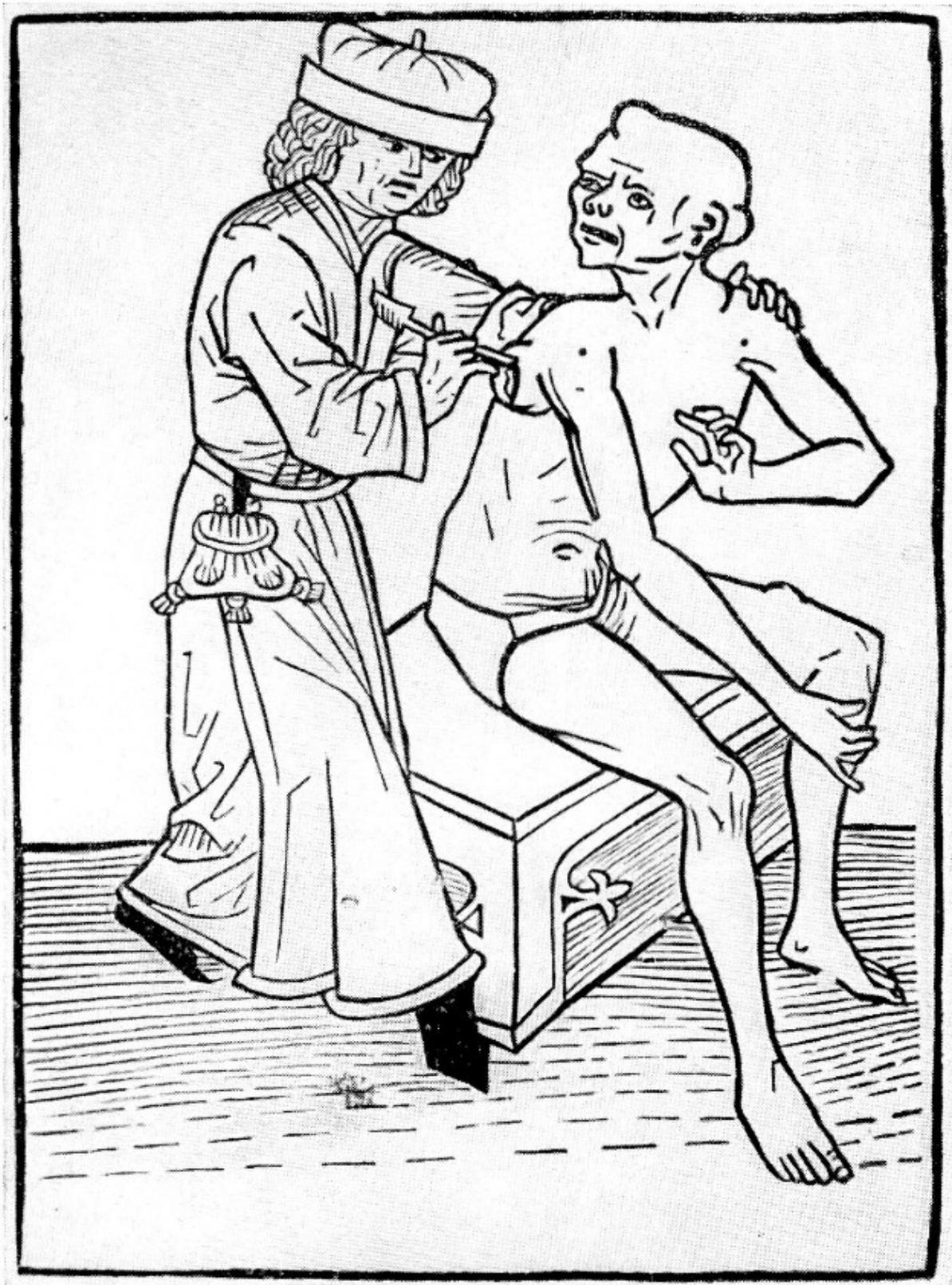


Fig. 18. Plague doctor lancing a plague bubo which is accurately positioned in the region of the arm pit on a patient. The woodcut illustrates the medical book by Hans Folz, 1483, Augsburg.

The connection between Sebastian and plague was made, at the latest, in the year 680. Following his report of the plague outbreaks of that year in Rome and in Pavia, Paul the Deacon goes on to say that a certain man at Pavia had a revelation in which he was informed that the epidemic would not cease there until an altar of St. Sebastian the Martyr was set up in the church of St. Peter in Chains. Accordingly the Pavese had relics brought from Rome and an appropriate altar set up just as the miraculous voice had instructed; sure enough, the pestilence ended.¹²⁷

The two above named Saints are frequently depicted and sculptured from the 14th century onward. The increase of material from this time is very likely connected to the Plague waves of the 14th century and several echo waves that haunted Europe until ca. 1750. The attributes for Saint Sebastian are a crown and traditionally arrows, which often symbolize Plague arrows. The figure is frequently presented as tied to a post, pillar or a tree and shot by arrows. This Saint can also to be found depicted with one or several plague buboes. The attributes of Saint Roch are a pilgrim's hat, a pilgrim's staff, a dog offering bread and most importantly a wound on his thigh, which is often presented as a plague bubo. There are medieval prayers documented, which served as talismans written on small pieces of paper which could be carried about in everyday life, e.g. tucked into the brim of a hat or sleeve. Documented examples [from the 14th or 15th century? Author's note] are: "a peste, fame el bello, libera nos Domine" or popular lyrics such as "Saint-Sébastien; ami de Dieu / Garde-nous de pest en tout lieu."¹²⁸ These so-called *Pestblätter*, plague sheet, are single wood prints, or popular prints, and were produced in connection with the devastating plague epidemics of the 14th century. People's need to possess images that supported them in their personal dialogue with God and offer protection had increased. The plague sheet, or *Seuchenblätter* which emerged during the 15th century, initially showed pictorial representations of the saints venerated as plague helpers (Mary, John the Baptist, Sebastian and Roch).¹²⁹ After Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press around 1450, these plague sheet also carried prayer texts and later even medical advice.¹³⁰

127 Little 2007, 28 p.

128 M. R. Katz, Preventative Medicine: Josse Lieferinx's Retable Altar of St. Sebastian as a Defense Against Plague in 15th Century Provence. In: *Maladie: Representations dans la littérature et dans le Arts Visuels*. Interfaces No. 26. (2006,) 07; 70. In the following: Katz 2006.

129 P. Heitz; W. L. Schreiber (Eds.) *Pestblätter des XV. Jahrhunderts*. Einblattdrucke des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts. (Straßburg 1901).

130 J. Marr. *Kriege und Seuchen. Spätmittelalterliche Katastrophen und ihre Reflexion in den deutschen Einblattgedrucken von 1460 bis 1520*. (Trier 2010), 283.

The following painting presented, includes the depiction of a paper carried in the hat of a man, which might be of this sort. A fact that speaks for the little paper piece having an apotropaic effect is the circumstance that the man wearing it is one of two undertakers and while he is the one who survives the work of burying plague dead, his colleague, depicted without a talisman, collapses dead at the place where he was standing. (See below.) Alternatively this paper could give information about personal data in case of death. John of Ephesus reports such custom in his chronicle documenting the Plague of Justinian. The plague "(...) befell everybody here. From now on, as in Alexandria; nobody would go out of doors without a tag (upon which his name was) written and which hung on his neck or his arm."¹³¹

During this time paintings of the plague patrons were commissioned for private use and for the public. A picture of the respective Saint made addressing him by prayer more immediate and maybe people hoped for a protective effect as well. Some pictures were certainly commissioned *ex voto*, as votive gifts after surviving the Black Death and others were probably commissioned in order to receive celestial help for surviving a coming or an ongoing plague wave. Chronicle recorded for San Gimignano in Tuscany, Italy: "A different, earlier outbreak of plague in San Gimignano prompted the town's priors to promise the populace a painting of Saint Sebastian for his chapel in the communal Collegiata (...)"¹³²

The following tableau presented, is painted by Josse Lieferinxe, formerly known by the pseudonym the Master of St. Sebastian. He was contracted by the Confraternity of St. Sebastian to paint an altarpiece dedicated to their patron saint in the church of Notre-Dame-des-Accoules in Marseille, France.¹³³ The oil on wood painting depicts an urban plague scene. The centre of the picture, and in the centre of attention are three dead human bodies wrapped in shrouds. One is being placed in his grave by a grave digger (who wears a little white piece of paper in his hat – see 'talisman' above), on top of another corpse. Another dead body lies close to the grave and yet another is being carried there. In the background of the tableau, medieval city walls with a great gate are depicted. A carriage leaves the city, fully loaded with plague victims. Even further away inside the city walls two men are shown wrapping another

131 John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, *Chronicle*, 93.

132 A. L. DesOrmeaux, *The Black Death and its effect on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art.* (n. p. 2007), 89. In the following: DesOrmeaux 2007.

133 The painting is oil on wood, measures 81.8 cm height and 55.4 cm width. Six panels of this altarpiece are kept in the Johnson Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museo di Palazzo Venezia in Rome, respective the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg.

plague victim in a pall. On the left side of the picture a man with his arms stretched out in a help seeking gesture and a horror-struck facial expression is caught short before his death. He is fully clad and on the right side of his neck a red and swollen plague bubo is painted. The man turns his head away from it, probably to escape the painful pressure of the swelling. He is interpreted as a gravedigger, struck by sudden death before he could deposit his burden.¹³⁴ Behind him stands a crowd of horrified citizens watching helplessly how the man dies. Opposite them, on the right side of the painting, a cleric group is depicted. The monks carry out a funerary service. An angel and a devil, opposing each other are flying above the medieval town. On top of this scene, God Father is depicted. He is faced by a naked, kneeling and pleading Saint Sebastian's whose body is covered with arrows. He is obviously begging for mercy and pleading on behalf on the citizens. This painting indicates that the painter was familiar with the medical conditions of the Plague as he painted a very natural looking plague bubo, here a cervical bubo, in its accurate position on the neck, a symptom prior to sudden death, which was often reported in the writings of contemporary witnesses. Because of this, the author concludes that this picture probably mirrors the environment and the life experience of the painter.

Referring to this painting, Katz notes rightly the effects of the disease on society: "The Marseilles retable is a middle-class endeavour, reflecting the residual anxiety of a population sector that was neither poor enough to succumb instantly, nor rich enough to flee the city. Also, death was not the only threat in times of epidemic - there was also the economic jeopardy merchants faced should an entire city be placed under quarantine, or the civil unrest that could result from an underclass destabilized by illness and loss of income. Thus, an outbreak of plague would endanger all strata of society, though only its poorest and most vulnerable might die of it. The investment in an altarpiece to ward off plague in one's parish would be a prudent, if not obligatory, undertaking."¹³⁵

Another problem concerning research on the Black Death is that the majority of sources, be they art or literature etc. were created, respective commissioned in privileged environments: in convents and monastery by clerics; in castles by nobles, by wealthy citizens. This gives little to no insight into the world of the poor and underprivileged and how they experienced the plague, how it influenced their everyday life and what specific fears it brought to them. Maybe

134 Katz 2006, 59-82.

135 Ibid., 71.

the despair was even greater because they had no money for a decent funeral and because of this were scared of not finding salvation and the mercy of resurrection. This would mean there was not even spiritual comfort for the people stricken hardest by the disease and who had the least chances of survival, no comfort and no hope, not even in the face of death. The author however fully agrees with Katz on the economic and social effects of the plague and thinks these can be very possibly be transfer to the Justinian situation.



Fig. 19. Saint Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken. Josse Lieferinxe, oil on panel, between 1497 – 1499, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

X Plague columns, Plague crosses and Plague stones

Plague related art of post-byzantine character is also found in plague columns. Columns belong to the city of Constantinople since ancient time. A historiated column marked the forum of Arkadios in 393, which, as one of three fora was built by Theodosios I.¹³⁶ Maybe the tradition of late antique columns served as an example for post-byzantine Plague columns. Yandim mentions the existence of the latter in her doctoral thesis on icons from Antalya and Tokat. She mentions that the worshipping of Saint Charalampos intensified during and after the 17th century because of a plague epidemic. He was worshipped alongside Western saints like Roch, Spyridon, Athanasios, Georgios, Nikanor, Johannes Prodromos (all patron saints against diseases) and that plague columns devoted to them were erected in regions under Venetian reign.¹³⁷ Charalampos was not originally a plague patron saint. In the 17th century a plague epidemic broke out on the Ionian Islands, and the port cities were particularly affected as a result of sea trade. The Byzantine calendar of saints, the Synaxarion, does not list Charalampos as the patron saint against the plague, it is assumed that this quality was assigned to him in post-Byzantine times, as can be seen in the more recent Synaxaria.¹³⁸ These motifs endured and stayed popular during the baroque period. Another artistic expression of this period, connected to the Black Death, is the *plague column*, popularly called *holy column*, the first of which appeared during the baroque and into the 18th century. A single, somewhat sculptured column was usually erected in public places to commemorate the plague or give thanks for its expiration. They often depict the trinity, Mother Mary or one of the twenty-eight saint plague patrons e.g. Saint Anton, Saint Roch, Saint Rosali or Saint Sebastian. Remaining examples are to be found in Roman-Catholic areas of Austria, Germany, Hungary, Switzerland, Slovakia and Czech Republic. The dating varies between the 17th and the 18th century.

An alternative to the column are the so-called *plague crosses* and *plague stones*. They are erected either as wayside crosses, in graveyards or in public places, sometimes also functioning as a landmark. Besides being a memorial monument to remember the gruesome time of the disease they can mark graves of individuals or mass graves of victims in a plague pit. Plague crosses are found in many European countries from medieval times until the 19th century. They can either be made of wood or of stone and are also found inside churches. A very old example from Germany is the

136 Balicka-Witakowska 2010, 341.

137 S. Yandim, Ikonographische, stilistische und kunstsoziologische Studie zu den postbyzantinischen Ikonen in den Städten Antalya und Tokat. Desgl. Diss. Philipps-Universität Marburg (Marburg 2004), 112-113. In the following: Yandim 2004.

138 Ibid., 113, footnote. 383.

Baindter Pestkreuz, dated around 1350. It is kept in the Parish Church St. Johannes Baptist (former Klosterkirche Unserer Lieben Frau), Baindt, Ravensburg county. It is a slender cross made of simple wood, decorated with a wood carving of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns.

Plague Stones are often set like a landmark in the country. They are prevalent in the 1600s. In Wentworth, Yorkshire¹³⁹ and Friargate Derby in England, there are examples with a carved hollow in them which was filled with vinegar as disinfectant. People placed money in the hollow in exchange for goods which had been left for them. Hence, these artefacts are called vinegar stones. In this context Frank Renaud, a medical doctor, recorded roughly a century later, referring the 17th century monuments, interesting customs people had developed to carry on with their everyday business while trying hard not to be infected. “Macclesfield [near Prestbury, note by the author] was visited by the plague in 1603 and 1646, and on each of these occasions Greenway cross was used as a plague cross, to which country people came to sell their provisions to the dwellers in the town. The practice was for the sellers to place their goods near to the cross and then to retire, after which the townspeople came and paid the price marked, letting the money fall into a basin or socket filled with water, by which process all infection was supposed to be destroyed. The double-socket stone at Stretford street was used in this way when the plague ravaged Manchester. The late Mr. Thomas Legh of Lyme mentions the continuance of this practice of passing money through water during the outbreak of the plague he witnessed at Alexandria, and he speaks of it as being thought the only efficacious way of destroying the plague germs that attach themselves to money carried near the person.”^{140 141}

139 <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/1318227> 28.12.2012

140 F. Renaud, *Remains, Historical and Literary, Connected with the Palatine Counties of Lancaster and Chester*, Volume 97, (Cheshire 1876), 76. In the following: Renaud 1876.

141 Also interesting in this context is the description of how the plague broke out and how victims were provided with food. “Concerning this outbreak of plague at Bowstone and Brownside farms, it is traditionally recorded that the dread scourge made its appearances there in 1646, and that the infection was brought in a bundle sent from London. The reality of the outbreak is attested by three flat gravestones that lie on these bleak uplands whilst the fragment of a fourth was utilised as a doorstep. Inspired with terror so common to persons in plague-smitten districts, it is said that provisions, fixed on the end of long poles, were passed through the windows to those who suffered, by those who had hitherto escaped.” Renaud 1876, 75-76.

XI The Arise of the Macabre

Besides plague columns and plague crosses, *transi* are additional plague related sculptured art works. After the plague, funerary monuments became increasingly elaborate and appeared more frequently than before in Europe. The *transi* or *cadaver monument* are special sculptures usually positioned above tomb slabs, sarcophagi and cenotaph. They frequently depict a *gisant*, or *tomb effigy*, which is often presented in an intact condition AND additionally with morbid and macabre details, such as stages of decay or solely in the latter condition. The iconography shows parallels to the *Dance of Death*, which became particularly popular in the late middle ages. The first tombs with *transi* originated at the end of the 14th century and spread from France over large parts of Europe. The motif's popularity peaked in the 15th and 16th centuries, but persisted well into the 17th century, especially in Catholic countries like Italy and Spain. "This reflected people's interest in being remembered and prayed for so that, even if one died unexpectedly and unprepared, and one's soul was destined for purgatory, one could still attain salvation. (...) the body is above a macabre corpse. This representation can be viewed as an 'anti-tomb' (...) Some *transi* tombs were commissioned before the individual perished, making one question why people would want their eternal memory to be maintained through such a repulsive image. The awareness of death precipitated by the Black Death created an anxious society concerned with earthly actions, such as humility, that would ensure salvation; making one's effigy hideous is humble."¹⁴² The *transi* experience a similar development like the *Dance of Death* (see below). "After the Black Death, funerary monuments became increasingly elaborate and appeared more frequently than before. (...) This reflected people's interest in being remembered and prayed for (...)."¹⁴³ Schulte explains the upcoming of the macabre that the horrific mortality of epidemics, of un-lived life, made the Christian doctrine of desirable death as the entrance into eternal life no longer sufficient to deal with the collective experience of death; the desire to live shapes the common mentality. To the extent that the fate of having to die penetrates the collective consciousness, to the extent that the image of the decaying corpses imposes itself upon the survivors of the plague, its visualization advances to one new, dominant theme of profane art. A decisive aspect of the religious crisis is the profanation of thinking, in the late Middle Ages. It makes the corpses eaten by worms dominate the collective art, just as the epidemic mass mortality dominates the life of the people: Death takes everyone, regardless of the person; life appears as a dance with death, which results in a futile hunt for earthly happiness. "Angesichts des

142 DesOrmeaux 2007, 48-49.

143 Ibid., 48.

grauenhaften Seuchensterbens, des ungelebten Lebens, reichte die christliche Lehre vom erstrebenswerten Tod als Eingang in das ewige Leben nicht mehr aus, um die kollektive Todeserfahrung zu verarbeiten; der Wunsch zu leben prägte die gemeinschaftliche Mentalität. In dem Maße, in dem das Los des Sterbenmüssens in das kollektive Bewußtsein dringt, in dem sich mit den Pestkatastrophen den Überlebenden das Bild der verwesenden Leichname aufdrängt, tritt die Vergegenwärtigung der Hinfälligkeit des menschlichen Körpers aus den engen Kreisen monastischer Betrachtung heraus und avanciert zu einem neuen, dominierenden Thema der profanen Kunst. Und dieser Schritt erst signalisiert einen dritten, entscheidenden Aspekt der religiösen Krise: die Profanisierung des D e n k e n s, des religiösen Lebens, der Kunst – die 'desacralisation generale des esprits' im 15. Jahrhundert. Das M a k a b r e tritt auf den Plan. Die von Würmern zerfressenen Leichname beherrschen die kollektive Kunst, so, wie der (massenhafte Seuchen-)Tod das Leben der Menschen: Der Tod holt alle, ohne Ansehen der Person; das Leben erscheint als Tanz mit dem Tod, d. h. Als hinfällige Jagd nach irdischem Glück."¹⁴⁴ Transi, along with other creations of this period, mirror the rudiment of a new, profane art which distances itself from normative ecclesiastic thinking and express peoples collective awareness for the common-having-to-die phenomenon. The pictorial representation of the human corpse in the state of its decay as an allegory for the destruction of the entire human existence expresses the whole despair and a fundamental will to live of the late medieval people, which is no longer satisfied with the 'tamed' death of the Christian view of life. „Zugleich kommt es zu ersten Ansätzen einer neuen, profanen Kunst, die ein beginnendes Heraustreten des Denkens aus dem Rahmen der kirchlichen Normierung signalisiert. Wobei dieser Ablösungsprozess - und dies belegt wiederum die ganze Ambiguität der spätmittelalterlichen Religiosität - sich größtenteils in kirchlich-theologischen Bahnen, innerhalb dessen, was als Religion, als Theologie erfahren wurde, vollzog. In dem Maße, in dem das allen gemeinsame Schicksal des Sterben müßens in das kollektive Bewußtsein eindrang, wurde der durch die sozialgeschichtliche Entwicklung initiierte Individuationsprozeß in einem profanen (besser: profaneren) zeitgenössischen Denken reflektiert, und zwar als Klage über die Vergänglichkeit, als Sehnsucht nach einem schöneren Leben, nach tiefer menschlicher Liebe, nach unvergänglichem Ruhm, als Aufforderung zum Lebensgenuß angesichts des stets gegenwärtigen Todes. Das Aufkommen der makabren Themen, die literarische Deskription und die bildliche Darstellung des menschlichen Leichnams im Zustande seiner Verwesung als einer Allegorie für die Zerstörung der

144 B. Schulte, Die deutschsprachigen spätmittelalterlichen Totentänze. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Inkunabel ‚Des dodes dantz‘. Lübeck 1489. NIEDERDEUTSCHE STUDIEN Schriftenreihe der Kommission für Mundart- und Namenforschung des Landschaftsverbandes Westfalen-Lippe. J. Goossend (Ed.) Band 36, (Münster 1990), 29. In the following: Schulte 1990.

gesamten menschlichen Existenz bringt die ganze Verzweiflung und einen grundlegenden Lebenswillen der spätmittelalterlichen Menschen zum Ausdruck, der sich mit dem ‚gezähmten‘ Tod christlicher Lebensauffassung nicht mehr zufrieden gibt.¹⁴⁵

The art of this period is an inditiment about transience. It is an expression of the lust for life, a longing for a more beautiful life, for human love, for immortal fame which is occasionally mirrored by self-portrayal *transi*. The art of this period is also an invitation, an appeal to enjoy life in the face of ever-present death.

An artistic genre of allegory which developed in close connection to the plague is the *Dance of Death*, respective la *Danse Macabre* or the *Totentanz* in German. It developed during the late medieval. Probably the first occurrence of a *Dance Macabre* in visual art, or at least among the earliest known, was a wall painting at the cemetery Cimetière des Innocents in Paris anno 1424 which sadly doesn't exist anymore. The theme seems to have originated in literature. Six manuscripts of the 14th century contain Johan Le Fèvre's poem *respit de la mort* (respite from death) mentioning the words "macabra la danse"¹⁴⁶ dating to 1376. Apart from literature and music, the *Dance of Death* soon became a popular image for the European visual arts. They appeared from the late medieval, during the 16th – 18th century and occasionally in the second half of the 19th century. The horrors of World War I and World war II led artists to return to this theme.¹⁴⁷ The depictions are frequently frescos and murals, many book illustrations, printmaking and woodcuts e.g. by Hans Holbein the younger who gave a new artistic form to the theme. His dancing death does not only take rich and poor alike, spares no age and no class, but also cheekily and suddenly appears in everyday life: at work, interrupting a dance or showing up at the monarch's dining table during a meal. The skeleton is no quiet, passive death but a lively one, crushing directly into the lust for earthly life. Holbein left the traditional choreia, respectively the line of dancers and divided his *Imagines mortis* into 40 single images to depict the individual scenes. The woodcuts were realised by Hans Lützelburger and published since 1530 and as a book and since 1538 in large quantities, edited and unedited under various titles and in a great number of different copies. Obviously, people craved this *Totentanz* images so that Holbein's artworks became off-the-shelf articles.

145 Schulte 1990, 64.

146 Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Départements des manuscrits, Français 994. - Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Départements des manuscrits, Français 1543. - Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Départements des manuscrits, Français 19137.

147 Especially German artists took up the *Totentanz* subject, exempli gratia Lovis Corinth, Otto Dix, Albin Egger-Lienz; Werner Heuder, Felix Nussbaum and Joseph Sattler.



Fig. 20. *The Abbess. Dance of Death. Scene 34 from Imagines mortis. Woodcut by Hans Holbein the Younger, ca. 1524.*

The *Dance of Death* was also realised in paintings and sculpture, the latter are often found in Church buildings. Two mural painting examples are known from Basel in Switzerland. The so called *Baseler Totentanz* or *Predigertotentanz*, dating to 1439/1440 was painted on the wall of the graveyard of the Basel domenic monastery. The so-called *Kleinbasler Totentanz* was

created 1460 in Basel-Klingental. Bernt Notke painted the series *Lübecker Totentanz* on canvas around 1460. *Des Dodes Dantz*, a wallpainting of the 1480s, located in the St. Mary's Church in Lübeck in north Germany, is partly ascribed to Notke. It sadly was destroyed during the Allied bombing of the city in World War II. In St. Nicholas' Church in Tallinn, Estonia a fragment of a *Danse Macabre* by Notke can be found. Two other examples, dated ca. 1471 are in the chapel of Sv. Marija na Škrilinama in Beram, Istria and a circle in the Holy Trinity Church of Hrastovlje, painted by Vincent of Kastav, is dated 1490. There are some surviving fragments of *Dance of Death/ Totentanz* in St. Marien Church in Berlin. The fresco shows twenty-eight representatives of the different social strata and measures 22 meters in length and 2 meters in height. According to the city church "several sources place the date of creation at around 1484, a year in which the plague took many peoples' lives."¹⁴⁸ The Lübeck paintings probably served as a paragon for the Berlin work. Unfortunately it was not possible to access the church building for photographic documentation due to the Covid-19 pandemic and additional renovation works.



Fig. 21. *Totentanz*. By Bernt Noktke, oil on canvas, late 15th century, Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn.

A surviving example of the 16th century is the *Dresdner Totentanz*, a sandstone relief from ca. 1534, today to be found in the *Dreikönigskirche*, *Three Kings Church*, in Dresden. Originally it decorated the *Gerogentor*, the tower gate of the Dresden castle, which was redecorated by George the Bearded, Duke of Saxony (27.08.1471 – 17.04.1539). The relief was one of few things to survive the great fire, which almost entirely destroyed gate and castle. Death was omnipresent in the 16th century, too. Duke George lost his wife and all his five sons and three daughters. The epithet *the bearded* came about as George, as a reaction to his wife's death, let his beard grow.¹⁴⁹ "Kein Wunder, dass wir hier und anderwärts in der Stadt aus jener Zeit mannigfache künstlerische Hindeutungen auf den Tod finden. Mit der Darstellung des Todes

148 <https://marienkirche-berlin.de/kirchen/st-marienkirche/> 3.12.2020.

149 P. Schumann. Dresden. (Leipzig 1909), 2. In the following: Schumann 1909.

aber einte Herzog Georg, der hartnäckige Verfechter des katholischen Glaubens inmitten eines Volkes, das sich mehr und mehr der protestantischen Lehre zuwandte, eine künstlerische Darstellung seines Glaubensbekenntnisses: eine Mahnung zugleich und ein Trost im Leid.”¹⁵⁰

The Saxon Duke commissioned this relief. He is depicted in it, holding a rosary in his hand. Walking next to him is his son Johann with the Order of the Golden Fleece attached to his chest, depicted as a knight and nobleman. The rosary is a statement of the Duke’s Catholic faith at a time when more and more of his subjects were turning to Protestantism. But the artwork also is an expression of personal feelings: a grieving father mourning his son. The depiction of the filius as a decorated nobleman is not only an expression of rank and stand, but may also be fatherly pride. It also certainly implies the hope of being reunited with the beloved child again, one day, when it would be his turn to dance with the skeleton and to follow it.

Related to this theme is the 15th century English poem of the three dead kings *De Tribus Regibus Mortuis*. It is depicted as memento mori as wall paintings in many European churches. Often *three Living and three Dead* are shown instead of the three kings. One remaining example is the *Danse Macabre, Dit des trois morts et des trois vifs*, L’Annonciation, in the Church Saint Michel, Yonne in France which dated to the first half of the 16th century.¹⁵¹

The *Dance of Death* combines three elements: the figure of death, an allegoric group formed by a row of people of different social classes and estates and the motif of dance. The individual motif and the combination of the three are both profane and religious expression of life and especially of death. Dancing in general, especially wild and frolicsome did not have a positive image with the medieval clergy. It was considered a devilish circle, a circle with the devil in the centre, an expression of horniness, satanic lushness, devil's work, dance had a supernatural obsessive-compulsive character as it can lead to trance and ecstasy. Contemporary witnesses report the occurrence of ‚dance epidemics‘ in chronicles.¹⁵² Two medieval German words which are formidably expressive are *Tanzwut*, dancing mania, also known as dancing plague or choreomania and *Veitstanz*, the latter is referring to Saint Vitus, one of the fourteen Holy Helpers. The dancing mania were happenings of the 14th and 15th

150 Schumann 1909, 20.

151 <https://www.pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/palissy/PM89000533> 2.11.2020.

152 Schulte 1990, 137. - F. M. Böhme, Geschichte des Tanzes in Deutschland. Beitrag zur Sitten-, Literatur- und Musikgeschichte. Nach den Quellen zum ersten mal bearbeitet und mit alten Tanzliedern und Musikproben herausgeben. Bd. L. (Leipzig 1886), 40.

century. They occurred in different European places, e.g. in the cities of Aachen and Strasbourg. It might have been a mass psychogenic disorder or, more likely, simply a reaction to life's misery (among it possibly the plague). The outbreaks of choreomania generally occurred in times of hardship and a thousand, respectively tens of thousands of people would dance for hours, days, weeks or even months. Even children were among the 'dancing maniacs'. The dancers could not 'regain control of their limbs. Exhausted and repentant, they fell into a deep sleep. Some of them never awoke.'¹⁵³



Fig. 22. *Danse Macabre*. Dancing, especially wild and frolicsome had a bad image with the medieval clergy. It was considered a demonic circle with the devil present, creating e.g. satanic voluptuousness, lasciviousness and other sinful craving leading people to sinful doing. *Tanz der Gerippe* by Michael Wolgemut, woodcut, 1493.

¹⁵³ J. Waller, A forgotten plague: making sense of dancing mania. *Lancet*. (2009) Feb 21, 373.



Fig. 23. The Dance of Death combines three elements: the figure of death, an allegoric group formed by a row of people of different social classes and estates and the motif of dance. Drawing, Pen and brown ink, brush and brown ink, watercolour, gouache, gold paint by anonymous, German, 16th century. MET Museum, New York.

The *Dance of Death* painted on the walls of churches or cemeteries conveys the religious and didactic message of the *memento mori*. It reminds each person of the individual responsibility of leading his or her Christian way of life within the frame of the feudal division. According to Brigitte Schulte this creation serves both aesthetic-artistic and didactic-edifying intentions that are behind the design of the *Dance of Death*. The aesthetic-artistic part is a way of processing the cruel reality and trying to cope with the epidemic's fatal casualties. "(...) die Verarbeitung des Seuchensterbens. (...) D. h. im Totentanz als einem Werk bildender Kunst wie Literatur verdichtet sich die kollektive kulturgeschichtliche Erfahrung des Massensterbens aufgrund der verheerenden Seuchenkatastrophen, die die Menschen des ausgehenden Mittelalters heimsuchten. Dabei geht das Kunstwerk ‚Totentanz‘ über eine einfache Abbildung der Wirklichkeit weit hinaus; es transzendiert diese durch die Fiktion und objektiviert so die singuläre Erfahrung. Als literarisch-künstlerische Gestaltung arbeitet der Totentanz dabei mit den zwei Ebenen des literarischen Werkes, der textimmanenten fiktiven Wirklichkeit und deren hermeneutischen Anknüpfungspunkten in der realen Lebenswelt der Rezipienten."¹⁵⁴ In the *Danse Macabre* cycles individuals experience their last hour. They are often depicted reflecting their emotions of fear, begging for delay, while trying to negotiate with death, their fear of the judgment in which they have to answer for their actions and doings. The self-accusation and finally the recommendation of the soul to the hopefully gracious and merciful God is depicted. "Auf der Text- und Bildebene des Totentanzes werden Menschen im Augenblick des individuellen Sterbens dargestellt. Gezeigt wird ihre Angst vor dem Gericht, in dem sie ihr Tun und Treiben verantworten müssen, ihre Bitte um Aufschub, Selbstanklagen und schließlich die Anempfehlung der Seele an den gnädigen Gott."¹⁵⁵ The image level of the *Dance of Death* depicts people at the moment of their individual deaths. It is what Schulte calls so exactly a "fantastic reality."¹⁵⁶ The Medieval viewer is obviously alive since he or she can look at the artwork, but at the same time can probably relate to the familiar people who already died of the plague or will die in the future. This is also timeless. Even a contemporary viewer is reminded of the limited span of life, knowing that the fantastic reality of a dancing death will one day, on an unspecified date in the future, turn into a true event in one's own life. Thus, the *Totentanz* images serve as a *memento mori*. The *Dance of Dead* clearly humbles its viewers as it depicts all people of the medieval society; people of different social status, (poor, wealthy, rich), different sexes (men, women), different age groups (old, young) and different estates (clerics, noble, citizens) demonstrating mortality and death

154 Schulte 1990, 143.

155 Ibid., 144.

156 Ibid.

are in fact inescapable and the same for everyone. Thus the *Dance of Death* is an expression of totality. The horrible experience of mass death led to the creation of an artistic alternative to the epidemic-shaken rigid medieval social structure: the ultimate leveler. At least in the face of death. Or in other words: Death appears as the ultimate equalizer.

XII The Three Weapons of Divine Execution

When contemplating plague iconography three weapons occur frequently: Arrow (with and often without the combination of a bow), spear and sword. Examples of demons shooting plague arrows are often depicted. An illumination in the manuscript *cronica* by Giovanni Sercambi depicts the epidemic in 1348 by showing a pile of dead people, arrows stuck in their bodies. They seem to have suddenly fallen dead just where they stood. Flying above them there are humanoid demons with dragon-like wings, holding bows in their hands, shooting arrows at their victim. One demon holds two round vessels in his hand, emptying its dark content onto the group of humans.¹⁵⁷ Compare above *Allegorie der Pest als Schwarzer Reiter* by anonymous, respectively ascribed to Giovanni di Paolo. Tavoleta di Biccherna, Deckel des Sieneser Amtsbuches für das Rechnungsjahr 1437, Kunstgewerbemuseum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Nr. K 9224. All these weapons are frequently depicted in illumination and wood print but also occur in religious sculpture, wall painting and other media. Images of Christ shooting one, or simultaneously several, arrow(s), at victims date to the 13th, 14th and 15th century.¹⁵⁸ An early example of the *Christ as the warrior* theme is an illumination found in the Stuttgarter Psalter, dating to ca. 820. It is written in Carolingian minuscule. The illustration of psalm 91:13 *super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis et conculcabis leonem et draconem* depicts Christ standing on two beasts, a dragon and a lion, and is about to stab the lindworm under his right foot with the lance. The image shows the stylistics of Carolingian illumination which is related to late Byzantine art style. Christ appears in scale armour, typical for the early medieval, and a helmet that resembles the Spangenhelm or segmented helmet, which belongs to the military equipment of late antiquity and early medieval. Additionally Christ wears a short red cape and sandals.¹⁵⁹ The spear as a divine tool continues during the Medieval and the Renaissance. A woodcut from 1500 shows God surrounded by clouds, holding one spear in his left

157 Within this chronic there is a similar scene depicting two demons with a scythe each are flying above a group of dead people. Lucca, Archivio di Stato, MS 107.

158 Dinzelbacher 1996, 142, fig. 30; 143, fig. 31.

159 Stuttgarter Psalter, Cod.bibl.fol.23, Psalm 91:13, 107v, http://digital.wlb-stuttgart.de/sammlungen/sammlungliste/werksansicht/?no_cache=1&tx_dlf%5Bid%5D=1343&tx_dlf%5Bpage%5D=19&tx_dlf%5Bdouble%5D=0&cHash=d3866fae34e18c9b0d15ddcf371d14db 05.03.2017.

and two spears in his right hand. The sharp points are directed downwards, ready to be used as darts, onto a group of humans who crouch down under the protective coat of a *Madonna Misericordia* (see below). The coat is spread out like a tent with the help of two longwinged angels.¹⁶⁰



Fig. 24. Christ stabbing beasts with a spear. Illumination by anonymous, ca. 820, Stuttgarter Psalter. Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart.

The third typical weapon depicted in this context is the sword. A very early example of Christ depicted as a rider, possibly as an apocalyptic horseman, using a sword, and simultaneously bow and arrow, dates to the first half of the 12th century, it was created between 1175-1185. The figure on horseback is a pen-drawing, coloured decoration in the initial 'G' in Rupert von Deutz *Expositio in Apocalypsim*.¹⁶¹

160 Compare woodcut, Franzensberg um 1500, in Dinzelbacher 1996, 173, figure 40.

161 Apk 19, 11-16, Stiftsbibliothek, cod. 83, fol. 158r – Heiligenkreuz, Austria.
<https://realonline.imareal.sbg.ac.at/en/detail/nr-003268/> 5.12.2020.



Fig. 25. Christ as apocalyptic horseman using sword and bow simultaneously. Illumination, Anonymous, respective Rupert von Deutz, between 1175-1185. Zisterzienserabtei Stift Heiligenkreuz, Handschriftenkammer, Stiftsbibliothek Heiligenkreuz, Austria.

The sword of God appears in several Bible texts and probably served here as template for the respective illustration. "Wenn ich mein blitzendes Schwert schärfe und meine Hand zur Strafe greift, so will ich mich rächen an meinen Feinden und denen, die mich hassen, vergelten."¹⁶² The expression of the Sword was already used in the earlier times of Christianity. Interestingly, John of Ephesus uses it when describing the Plague of Justinian. In his chronicle, he refers to Ezekiel. "My sword will be drawn forth out of its sheath and will destroy both righteous and sinner"¹⁶³ The chronicler also uses the expression the sword of death to paraphrase the tragic casualties of the Justinian Plague, "And the sword of death fell upon (these people) and towards evening no living soul could be found in the city, but it was as is written in the prophet, "Now all of them have perished since they did not remember the name of the Lord. So it befell them too."¹⁶⁴

And next blood soaked arrows are mentioned together with the sword. "Ich will meine Pfeile mit Blut trunken machen, und mein Schwert soll Fleisch fressen, mit Blut von Erschlagenen und Gefangenen, von den Köpfen streitbarer Feinde!"¹⁶⁵ The sword is also an iconography used in several following centuries but in contrast to the two other weapons it seems to appear less frequently. According to Dinzelbacher's study it does mean the imposing of a lethal disease. He cites several texts from the 13th to the 16th century describing the plague ravaging different cities, e.g. Pisa, Rome and Perugia as a sword being the wrath of God, respectively is God referred to as a strict king desiring castigating the citizens of Perugia with three swords.¹⁶⁶ God unsheathing a sword, beneath him a group of humans, is depicted in a votive painting commissioned by Ulrich Schwarz of Augsburg, painted by Hans Holbein the elder in 1508.¹⁶⁷ An example for the depiction of several plague weapons was created by Albrecht Dürer in 1511. The woodcut *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is a single sheet of the series *Apocalipsis cum figuris*. It mirrors plague and faith. One rider uses a trident, the second one waves a scale, the third horseman wields a sword and the fourth is an archer, whose arrows can hit anyone, he is considered to bring plague. So, in this artwork arrow (and bow) and sword are depicted together.¹⁶⁸

162 Das fünfte Buch Mose, Die Bibel oder die ganze heilige Schrift des Alten und Neuen Testaments nach der Übersetzung Martin Luthers. (Suttgart 1972), 32:41.

163 John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle, 80 Is. I, 28 after Cp. Ezek. 21, 3.

164 John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahr̄e, Chronicle, 80 Is. I, 28.

165 Das fünfte Buch Mose, Die Bibel oder die ganze heilige Schrift des Alten und Neuen Testaments nach der Übersetzung Martin Luthers. (Suttgart 1972), 32:42.

166 Dinzelbacher 1996, 161.

167 Oil on softwood; 87,2 cm x 76,4 cm, Inv.-Nr. 3701, Städtischen Kunstsammlungen, Augsburg.

168 Woodcut, 39,4 cm x 28,1 cm; TLMH Gr 0123/64, Thüringer Landesmuseum Heidecksburg.

The above examples show God's executioners. The late Medieval is also a time when the iconographic theme God (be it God father or God son) himself seizes arrows or spears to assault humans. Previously it was other beings like demons¹⁶⁹ or angels acting for God. Now God acts himself. The personification of death uses the same weapons. The arrow as a projectile of disease is often found in art and literature of the 14th century.¹⁷⁰ For Dinzelbacher the fears of that era, are expressed in this one aspect of the image of God. The Lord himself destroys his own creatures directly without using other powers such as angels, devils or demons. "Die Ängste jener Epoche konkretisieren sich einerseits in der Betonung eines (von der Bibel her latenten) Aspektes des Gottesbildes: der Herr selbst vernichtet seine Geschöpfe direkt, ohne sich anderer Mächte (Engel, Teufel) zu bedienen, und andererseits in der Erschaffung des personifizierten Todes mit seinem Pfeil."¹⁷¹ These two themes remain present in art and literature during the Renaissance and the Baroque – both periods haunted frequently by epidemics.¹⁷² This seems to be an iconographic neocreation of the late Medieval to which Dinzelbacher connects the following underlying mindset of the principals. He assumes that this might not be valid for different parts of society belonging to different social – and educational levels. One can agree with this, as the living conditions of individuals were very different and thus they had different problems in everyday life. Dinzelbacher interprets the iconographic themes mentioned above as a direct expression of the contemporary people's fear which he substantiates by the existence of repentance-processions and indulgence.¹⁷³

"Seit etwa dem späten 14. Jahrhundert taucht im Gottesbild des Christlichen Europas eine neue Konzeption auf: die der tötenden Gottheit. (...) Dies nicht erst im eschatologischen Zusammenhang, beim Endgericht, sondern noch im Verlauf der "Heilsgeschichte", die hier zu einer Unheilsgeschichte wird. (...) So läßt der Herr etwa auf einem mit 1424 datierten Altarretabel der Karmeliterkirche in Göttingen einen Hagel von Pfeilen auf Männer und Frauen, Kinder und Greise herab regnen, die nackt und bloß oder schon eingehüllt in ihre Leichentücher unter ihm liegen

169 The Plague depicted as (a) demon/s is to be found in early images but shows a continuity into the late Medieval. Interestingly enough the picture probably visualizes the plague in a time when Gregor I. was pope (590–604) as he is depicted in the bottom part of the picture. An illumination from 1450, *the plague above a city*, depicts five brownish dragon-like, winged creatures flying or hovering above a medieval city. Their feet look thick and clumsy, their heads appear dragon-like for one exception that resembles the head of a monkey; the bodies are snake like, fitting the ancient word for dragon, which is *lind(w)orm*, or *Lindwurm* in German. In Vincent de Beauvais, *Miroir historial*. Chantilly, Musée Condé. Ms. 722/1196, fol. 4.

170 Dinzelbacher 1996, 137.

171 Ibid., 138.

172 Loc. cit.

173 Ibid., 139.

(...)”¹⁷⁴ An important medium for the spreading of this theme were illuminated manuscripts. The *sujet* continues during the next two centuries. There are also examples of wood sculptures depicting a carved God aiming with bow and arrow.¹⁷⁵ Renaissance and baroque artist dealt with the theme in painting and in sculpture. The arrow or several arrows (often two or three) as God’s weapon(s) is also replaced by flashes, held by God’s hand, representing his wrath. One example for the depiction of God, with one bow and three arrows, is the painting *Double Intercession: Christ and the Virgin Interceding for Humanity before God the Father* by Lucas Cranach the Elder¹⁷⁶ dating to 1516-1518.¹⁷⁷ This painting includes two other aspects that often accompany the depiction of a destructive God or Jesus: The act of intermediation, or theological intercession, from one saint or several saints, respectively Mother Mary. They function as advocates for the human targets. Mother Mary is depicted with a long pallium, or coat. The depicted garment is often a medieval cloak, a so-called *Radmantel*.¹⁷⁸ The Mother of God protects small human figures by keeping them under her cloak. This became an individual iconography, the so called *Madonna della Misericordia* or *Schutzmantelmadonna*.¹⁷⁹ Early examples date to the 12th century, for example the *Madonna of the Franciscans*, by Duccio di Buoninsegna which was painted ca. 1290-1300. The painting shows three praying Franciscan friars crouching down at the feet and under the blue coat of Mary.¹⁸⁰ These images probably derive from Roman legal custom according to which a person could be given legal protection by covering them with one’s own coat. Dinzelbacher suggests that the transfer from Roman law to Christian iconography goes back to the fact that a garment relic of Mother Mary is verifiable in Constantinople since the 5th century and this piece of garment happened to be a cloak.¹⁸¹ It is said that Latin Christianity believed that the relic provided protection from Islamic aggressors. According to legend, the attackers' projectiles ricocheted off this coat.¹⁸² During the sacking of Rome in 1204 by the Crusaders, the coat found its way into the West.

174 Dinzelbacher 1996, 139.

175 Compare *Christus und Maria interzendieren vor Gott Vater*, Reste eines Flügelretabels, A. 16. Jh. Museum Ulm, in: Dinzelbacher 1996, 145, picture 32.

176 The picture could also be from Lucas Cranach the Elder’s workshop.

177 Oil on lime wood, Museum of Fine Arts Budapest, inventory number 128. <https://www.mfab.hu/artworks/double-intercession-christ-and-the-virgin-interceding-for-humanity-before-god-the-father/> 5.12.2020.

178 Medieval cloak form.

179 The German technical term means 'sheltering-cloak Madonna' and is an exception +. As in many other languages she is named Mother of Mercy or Virgin of Mercy. *Madonna della Misericordia* in Italian, in Spanish *Virgen de la Merced* or *Nuestra Señora de la Misericordia*, in French as the *Notre-Dame de la Merci*, in Polish as the *Matka Boża Miłosierdzia*, in Portuguese *Nossa Senhora das Mercês*, in Catalan as the *Mare de Déu de la Mercè* and in Greek as the *Παναγιά του ἐλέους*.

180 Duccio di Buoninsegna - Siena, circa 1255-1319, (dipinto) *Madonna dei francescani* ultimo decennio del XIII sec. tempera su tavola. Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena. [https://pinacotecanazionale.siena.it/opere/#!prettyPhoto\[opere\]/51/](https://pinacotecanazionale.siena.it/opere/#!prettyPhoto[opere]/51/) 8.12.2020.

181 Dinzelbacher 1996, 172.

182 Ibid.

This motif of the *Schutzmantelmadonna* continues during the Renaissance, the Baroque and the following centuries; in Catholic European regions, e.g. south Germany, well into the 1900s (often in painting and sculpture) and in Orthodox regions like Russia into the 20th century (icons). The to-be-protected-subjects are often depicted, but another variation is also to not show them but solemnly present Mother Mary with open arms lifting the front part of her cloak; a symbolic gesture of protection. The viewer or recipient can feel welcome to seek shelter in the safety near the Mother of God while the *Schutzmantel* acts as a tent-like safe space.

XIII Conclusion

Despite a thorough search, no contemporary image of the Justinianic Plague could be found in artworks of the respective period.

As a result the following can be stated: Rather than depicting the Justinianic Plague in artworks, there was a surge in religious practices. People at the time seem to have reacted to the crisis with increasing devoutness and religiousness. Imagery and an enhanced self-religiocification of Emperor Justinian I can be witnessed.

Additionally, epigraphs state an increase in sacral building activity and a decrease in profane construction. The adorations of icons are predominant, even a rise in the already popular cult of the Virgin Mary can be observed.

Regardless of the maximalist problem – whether the number of casualties was moderate, high or very high – in any case the experience of a pandemic certainly was threatening and sorrowful for the people. Additionally, the environment must have been hostile, taking climatic changes during the LALIA into account and also supply shortfall and economic problems.

The exclusion of death and the Plague from artworks is striking. The author interprets this as a psychological response, a way to elude the gruesome reality by excluding its explicit depiction.

It is notable that the events of the Justinianic Plague were illustrated in chronicles centuries after the actual occurrence of the pandemic.

Nor does the late Byzantine and Balkan material depict the Plague. It is not until the 13th century that death-related images appear, and, more rarely, the process of dying, respectively, is explicitly depicted in some form. Death-related motifs can be found in the form of wall paintings, miniature illuminations and sculpture. Late Byzantine portraits of the deceased are presented in a highly idealized manner, often in a beautiful iconic style, thus letting the respective persons seem to be

alive. This certainly expresses appreciation and love of the next of kin but could also serve as a form of coming to terms. Maybe here, as certainly in the case of the richly endowed Justinianic icons, the eye needed beauty, the soul of the mourner needed comfort and the mind a peaceful place to rest. The author suggests that the terror of the Plague probably had such a strong impact that another visual world was needed, functioning both as a safe space and as aesthetic escapism representing a coping strategy. Escapism to collect strength and build resilience in order to face the cruel reality of fear, suffering, disease and death.

Generally, two parallels between Justinian, respectively late Byzantine art, and European plague-related art can be observed. Firstly, a tendency to avoid direct imagery of the Plague itself and secondly, a focus on the depiction of religious motifs. Even if the art of the latter named develops a certain degree of profanation during the late medieval, it is still coined in a religious way. This might be connected to the pandemic, respectively the epidemics. The above-mentioned concept of escapism may also be applied to western works of art. There are numerous depictions of saints during the times of the Plague from the 14th century onward throughout all the periods in which the plague waves kept returning – maybe sacred art created not only a spiritual but also an aesthetic sanctuary for the viewer. A sacred, calm fortress, the hope for help against an invisible enemy that killed so many, along with the final promise of salvation.

In avoiding explicit images of the Justinianic Plague the Byzantine artwork shows an analogy to western medieval art. In the latter there are generally no explicit plague depictions before the 14th century.

Nevertheless, the author detected some exceptions. The earliest example found is the fresco from the French abbey Saint-André which is dated to 1315. It does show a personification of the Plague as a woman wearing a Byzantine style cloak of black colour, which the author interprets as an extremely rare depiction of the Justinianic Plague from this period, if not the only known example to date.

Another piece depicting the Plague of Justinian is also of French origin: An illumination in a chronicle dating from 1450 which presents the Plague in the shape of brownish dragons hovering over a medieval city. The style is typical of the Late Middle Ages.

Depicting the Plague itself remains infrequent but becomes a bit more usual in the 14th century, which needs to be understood in the context of the plague waves of the time. Usually these depictions take the form of personification or more often allegory in the shape of demons, riders and skeletons. The connection of the Justinian Plague and demons already occurs in late antique contemporary written sources.

Some artworks are actually of documentary character. A very rare, direct plague image is the scene of a plague-related mass burial at Tournai anno 1349, again an illumination, this time in an illustrated chronicle ascribed to Aegidius Mucidus. Other plague-related scenes from everyday life are pictures of ritual flagellantism, also to be found as illuminations.

More frequently than the plague, death appears in the form of demons or skeletons. The corpses become a popular motif when *The Dance of Death* sujet of the late 14th century enters the stage for the first time in the history of iconography. Originating from literature, the *Dance of Death*, or the *Totentanz*, gained enormous popularity during the 15th century and thereafter.

These images mark the first step towards the profanation of traditionally sacral images and clearly express the levelling effect of death on all members of society.

Additionally, these images mirror a religious crisis, since the concept of a promised reward of resurrection after a life full of suffering seems no longer sufficient for the contemporaries. Therefore, these pictures carefully begin to express the wishes of individuals, their lust for life in the face of omnipresent death.

The way some of them are performed also transport a degree of black humour. These images add the macabre and a sense of gallows humour to the topic. The images of dancing skeletons in a humorous way might also have been intended to take the horror away from death or at least to alleviate it.

During the 14th and 15th centuries a novelty appears. Both in the Pestblätter woodcut prints which served as a talisman against the pestilence and partly as a kind of medical advice sheet, as well as in illuminations, mostly (featured) in chronicles and bibles, medical symptoms are explicitly depicted for the first time. Additionally, some paintings show plague patients with explicitly exhibited symptoms. After critically studying a number of images from this period and analysing the medical symptoms, one can conclude many of these pictures are frequently mistaken for being plague images, whereas they actually depict the diseases leprosy and the boils respectively. While images of demons hunting or killing plague victims with arrows and scythes were more frequent earlier, a new iconographic creation can be observed in the Late Medieval period. The experiences of the pandemic and epidemics led to creating the image of the Lord himself, and Jesus respectively, taking lives. The concept of a God who kills appeared in the 14th century art. Previous depictions show God sending other forces in the shape of angels, devils, demons, creatures etc. to execute his will. Like these creatures God uses arrows, plague arrows, to take the lives of his victims. Respectively the sword and the spear appear in the same context, probably as these

represent the standard equipment of the medieval warrior. Sword, spear and arrow (sometimes, but not necessarily always, combined with a bow) represent the three weapons of divine execution. The plague arrow remains important even during the Renaissance and Baroque period. This concept of a destructive Lord provoked the appearance of a counterpart, advocating mercy for the human targets: Mother Mary clad in a long coat under which she protects the potential victims from harm. This motif has been used in Christian art until recent times. The origin of the Schutzmantelmadonna's protective cloak dates back to 5th century Constantinople, thus closing the circle and bringing the subject back to this journey's beginning.

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- CCL Corpus christianorum, series latina. (Turnhout 1953).
- CCCM Corpus christianorum, continuatio mediaevalis. (Turnhout 1971).
- CFHB Corpus fontium historiae byzantinae. (Vienna, Washington 1967).
- CIC Corpus Iuris Civilis. (Eds.) P. Kreuger, T. Mommsen, R. Schoell, and G. Kroll. 3 vols. (Berlin 1880).
- CMG Corpus medicorum Graecorum. (Berlin, Leipzig, 1908).
- CSCO Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium. (Eds.) J.-B. Chabot et al. (Paris, Louvain 1903).
- CZ The Chronicle of Z̄uqn̄ in, Parts III and IV, A.D. 488–775. Trans. A. Harrak. Medieval Sources in Translation 36. (Toronto 1999).
- MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica. (Hannover, Berlin 1826).
- AA Auctores Antiquissimi
- Ep Epistolae
- LL Leges
- SRG Scriptores rerum Germanicarum
- SRL Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum
- SRM Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum
- SS Scriptores
- ODB Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium. (Eds.) A. P. Kazhdan & A. M. Talbot. (Oxford 1991).
- PG Patrologia cursus completus . . . series graeca. (Ed.) J.-P. Migne. (Paris 1857–86).
- PL Patrologia cursus completus . . . series latina. (Ed.) J.-P. Migne. (Paris 1844–64).
- PNAS Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences
- PO Patrologia Orientalis
- 313314 Bibliography
- Procopius Procopius of Caesaria
- BP De bello persico. Opera Omnia. (Ed.) J. Haury, rev. G. Wirth, 4 vols. (Leipzig 1961–64), vol. 1.
- HA Historia arcana. Ibid., vol. 3.
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