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THE PLAGUE AND THE WOLF AS PLACES OF MEMORY*

Abstract

The essay compares two cases of very intense panic caused by the destructive forces of nature. The panic caused by the Black Death – a topic Halina Manikowska also dealt with – is presented from the point of view of its frightening memory. The long-term evolution and changes in the then-prevailing attitudes is compared to the lasting fear and panic from the menace of wolves, which also represented a mortal danger in medieval and early modern Europe; they were also feared and had to be fought against for centuries. The nature of the danger from the presence of wolves, and the ways to defend oneself against it, was however very different from the danger related to the plague.

Keywords: Plague, Wolf, Boccaccio, Matteo Villani

Memento mori – is there a stronger command for remembrance in history? And except for the two World Wars in the twentieth century and perhaps the impact of smallpox and measles on indigenous peoples in early modern America, was there ever a larger collective experience

* This essay is the original long version that I wrote at the invitation of Étienne François for a large-scale overview of European ‘places of memory’. Only a much-shortened version of it could appear in French: ‘La peste et le loup’, in Étienne François, Thomas Serrier *et al.* (eds.), *Europa: Notre histoire* (Paris, 2017), 95–101. I am offering now this essay to pay tribute to the work of Halina Manikowska. I became acquainted with her work more than four decades ago, in connection with her research on saintly Polish princesses. We have crossed paths several times since then. Besides our common interest in saints and pilgrimages, I have also learned about her important expertise in Italian urban history. In connection with this latter field, she wrote an excellent piece on Boccaccio’s account of the Black Death: ‘Topos czy rzeczywistość? O czarnej śmierci w *Dekameronie* raz jeszcze’, *Studia Źródłoznawcze*, liii (2015), 17–54. Hopefully, she will have some interest in my own present excursion into this field.

of mass mortality than the Black Death of 1348–53, which is estimated to have cost the lives of 30 to 60 percent of the population of medieval Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean?¹

Matteo Villani, who lost his brother Giovanni in 1348, set out to continue the *Nuova cronica* of his brother with the following words:

whatever one can find in the writings (since the Deluge), nothing had the universal sentence of mortality that so encompassed the entire world as that which came in our day... It was a plague that touched people of every condition, age and sex. They began to spit blood and then they died – some immediately, some in two or three days, and some over a longer time. And it happened that whoever cared for the sick caught the disease from them or, infected by the corrupt air, became rapidly ill and died in the same way. Most had swellings in the groin, and many had them in the left and right armpits and in other places; one could almost always find an unusual swelling somewhere on the victim's body.²

Villani's comparison to the Deluge expresses the most general contemporary view on the underlying cause of the catastrophe: it was a divine retribution for sin. This interpretation also relied on a series of other biblical examples, such as the menaces described by the prophet Ezekiel (6, 11–12): “Thus says the Lord God, ... ‘Alas, because of all the evil abominations of the house of Israel, which will fall by sword, famine and plague! He who is far off will die by the plague, and he who is near will fall by the sword, and he who remains and is besieged will die by the famine. Thus will I spend My wrath on them’”. The terrible experience of the Black Death filled these biblical passages

¹ For synthetic treatments, see Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (London, 1969); Jean-Noël Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens* (Paris and La Haye, 1975), vols. 1–2; Neithard Bulst, ‘Der Schwarze Tod: Demographische, wirtschafts- und kulturgeschichtliche Aspekte der Pestkatastrophe von 1347–1352’, *Saeculum*, xxx (1979), 45–67; *id.*, ‘Der “Schwarze Tod” im 14. Jahrhundert’, in Mischa Meier (ed.), *Pest. Die Geschichte eines Menschheitstraumas* (Stuttgart, 2005), 142–61; David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge, Ma., 1997); Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in the Early Renaissance* (London, 2002); Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346–1453. The Complete History* (Woodbridge, 2004); Pierre Toubert, ‘La Peste Noire (1348), entre Histoire et biologie moléculaire’, *Journal des Savants* (Janvier–Juin 2016), 17–32.

² *Cronica di Matteo Villani*, i (Florence, 1825), 5; English translation is quoted after Herlihy, *The Black Death*, 25.

with real historical content, and the memories of past plagues and calamities contained in the Bible framed their views on the epidemics.

Furthermore, Villani also saw the Great Plague as a possible source of renewal, a turning point in history. This is what prompted him to take up writing his *Cronica*: “I have set my mind to start with the multiple and disastrous events of ours at this time, as a renewal of time and of the world, annually including the new events that appear worthy of recording”.³

The plague is thus presented as a ‘place of memory’, a key to understanding the history of humankind. This memory is also perpetuated by one of the greatest masterpieces of medieval literature, the *Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio, which provides in its introduction the most vivid eye-witness account on how “the noble city of Florence, which in its great beauty excels all others in Italy, was visited by the deadly pestilence”. Boccaccio describes how this shockingly contagious and almost incurable disease spread in the city “with the speed of fire”, from house to house; how it destroyed families: “brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children as though they did not belong to them”. The plague also broke down the entire urban network of social relationships, “diverse fears and anxieties came to life in those who remained alive; and these fears and anxieties drew almost all to a very cruel measure: that of avoiding and fleeing the sick and their affairs”. Those who did not run away engaged in extremes of conduct, some began to “drink heavily, enjoy life to the full, go around singing and merrymaking, gratify all of one’s cravings whenever the opportunity offered, and shrug the whole thing off as one enormous joke”, while others enclosed themselves in isolation, and only a very few assisted the sick and showed real compassion. “Over a hundred thousand human lives were extinguished within the walls of the city of Florence” – estimates Boccaccio.⁴ The plague, set in such a prominent place, is not merely the background of the *Decameron*, but rather the triggering event for

³ Cf. Timothy Kircher, *The Poet’s Wisdom. The Humanists, the Church, and the Formation of Philosophy in the Early Renaissance* (Leiden and Boston, 2006), 54–63.

⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, ‘[The plague in Florence]’, in Rosemary Horrox (ed. and trans.), *The Black Death* (Manchester, 1994), 26–34; Kircher, *The Poet’s Wisdom*, 63–82; cf. Manikowska, ‘Topos czy rzeczywistość?’.

the ten days of storytelling, prompting persons to find the sense of life by a full panorama of its multiple layers revealed in the stories: the plague is a 'key to meaning'.⁵

While Boccaccio's testimony is based on what he saw with his own eyes (which he underscores), philological research has demonstrated that his historical readings must have also influenced him. Some analysts suspect that he was impacted by the graphic description of the 'plague' in Athens in 430 B.C. contained in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* (II. 53) by Thucydides. This description indeed gives a similar image of social dissolution, but as Vittore Branca pointed out, Boccaccio did not know this text.⁶ Instead, his immediate model seems to have been the description by Paul the Deacon of the Justinianic plague in the sixth and seventh centuries. A brief quote provides convincing evidence of this: "In the times of this man a very great pestilence broke out, particularly in the province of Liguria. ... there began to appear in the groins of men and in other rather delicate places, a swelling of the glands, after the manner of a nut or a date, presently followed by an unbearable fever, so that upon the third day the man died. But if anyone should pass over the third day he had a hope of living. Everywhere there was grief and everywhere tears. Inasmuch as common report had it that those who fled would avoid the plague, the dwellings were left deserted by their inhabitants and only the dogs kept house. The flocks remained alone in the pastures with no shepherd at hand. ... Sons fled, leaving the corpses of their parents unburied; parents forgetful of their duty abandoned their children in raging fever".⁷ Beyond the interesting philological similarity, we should underline another aspect: the historical memory built into the experience-based account, as a kind of hidden framework.

The memorable impact of the Black Death is also perpetuated by the letters of Petrarch, who lost his beloved Laura in 1348, and wrote the following lament to his friend Socrates (*Familiars*, VIII. 7) in 1349: "When was anything like this ever seen or heard? In which annals was it ever read: empty houses, abandoned cities, ruined fields, the earth

⁵ Aldo S. Bernardo, 'The Plague as a Key to Meaning in Boccaccio's *Decameron*' in Daniel Willman (ed.), *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth-Century Plague* (Binghamton and New York, 1982), 39–64.

⁶ Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio medievale* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1956), 302–3; cf. Kircher, *The Poet's Wisdom*, 81–2.

⁷ Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, ii, 4–5.

bursting with corpses, and horrible, vast solitude throughout the entire world? ... Will you believe such things, posterity, when we ourselves seeing them now scarcely believe them, and would hold them to be dreams unless we observed them fully awake with open eyes?"⁸

The plague, coming via Kaffa, Constantinople, Cairo, and Messina in 1347, struck the ports and the hinterland in Italy in early 1348, then quickly spread to France, Spain, England, Germany, and then, through the Baltic to Scandinavia, and arrived as far as Novgorod and Moscow in 1352. It devastated not only ports and cities, but also spread to the countryside. Picturesque and poignant testimonies abound everywhere. Guillaume Machaut, the prominent French poet, gives the following description:

For many have certainly
Heard it commonly said
How in one thousand three hundred and forty-nine
Out of one hundred there remained but nine.
Thus it happened that for lack of people
Many a splendid farm was left untilled,
No one plowed the fields
Bound the cereals and took in the grapes...⁹

As regards the breakdown of elementary human bonds of solidarity and the disintegration of social and ecclesiastical rituals for caring for the sick and the dead (already described by Boccaccio in Florence), a moving testimony comes from Avignon in 1348: "Sick relatives were cared for not otherwise than dogs. They threw them their food and drink by the bed, and then they fled the household. ... No relatives, no friends showed concern for what might be happening. No priest came to hear the confession of the dying, or to administer the sacraments to them. People cared only for their own health..."¹⁰

The memory of the Black Death was perpetuated in the subsequent centuries not only by such well-read authors as Villani, Boccaccio, Petrarch, or Guillaume Machaut, but above all by the fact that the

⁸ I quote the translation by Kircher, *The Poet's Wisdom*, 88–9; cf. Rence Neu Watkins, 'Petrarch and the Black Death: From Fear to Monuments', *Studies in the Renaissance*, 19 (1972), 196–223.

⁹ Guillaume Machaut, *Jugement du Roi de Navarre*, translation cited from Herlihy, *The Black Death*, 41.

¹⁰ Letter of Louis Sanctus de Beeringen, cited in Herlihy, *The Black Death*, 62.

plague itself kept on returning, with unpredictable intensity and regularity throughout the whole of Europe and the Near East for almost 400 years, until the 1730s. The second wave came as quickly as 1359–63, this time targeting Milan and Northern Italy (and claiming the life of Petrarch's 25-year-old son and his close friend Socrates). The recurrent nature of the plague is well illustrated by the *Ephemerides Urbevetanae*, an annual from Orvieto in Central Italy: "The first general plague occurred in 1348, this was the biggest one, and was preceded by a catarrh. Second plague, 1363. Third plague, 1374. Fourth plague, 1383. Fifth plague 1389".¹¹ In France, Jean-Noël Biraben identified sixteen larger and eight secondary waves of the plague in 189 years, so it struck about every eighth year. A second round, between 1536 and 1670 witnessed nine larger and three secondary waves, which meant a frequency of about every eleventh year.¹² The memory of recurrent plague epidemics was further eternalized by prominent intellectuals, such as Marsilio Ficino (1478–79),¹³ Niccolò Machiavelli (1527),¹⁴ Martin Luther (1527),¹⁵ or Daniel Defoe (1722).¹⁶ 'Plague tracts', written by the hundreds between the fourteenth and the eighteenth century, became a most popular literary-religious-medical genre.¹⁷ But none of the successive waves have reached the intensity of the Black Death, which thus became a horrific and menacing place of memory.

¹¹ Élisabeth Carpentier, 'Autour de la Peste Noire: famines et épidémies au XVI^e siècle', *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisation*, xvii (1962), 1082; *eadem*, *Une Ville devant la peste: Orvieto et la Peste Noire de 1348* (Paris, 1962).

¹² Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste*, i, 121.

¹³ Teodoro Katiniš, *Medicina e filosofia in Marsilio Ficino. Il Consiglio contro la Pestilentia* (Roma, 2007).

¹⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, 'Descrizione della peste di Firenze dell'anno MDXXVII'.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, 'Whether one may flee from a deadly plague. Epistle to Johan Hess', in Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works*, xliii: *Devotional Writings II* (Philadelphia, 1999), 119–38.

¹⁶ Frank Bastian, 'Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year Reconsidered', *The Review of English Studies*, xvi (1965), 151–173.

¹⁷ Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *Cultures of Plague. Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2010); Ottó Gecser, 'Doctors and Preachers against the Plague: Attitudes toward Disease in Late Medieval Plague Tracts and Plague Sermons', in Barbara S. Bowers and Linda M. Keyser (eds.), *The Sacred and the Secular in Medieval Healing: Sites, Objects and Texts* (London, 2016), 77–102; *id.*, 'Giovanni da Capestrano on the Plague and the Doctors', *Franciscan Studies*, 75 (2017), 27–47; I take the opportunity at this point to thank him for the advices I have received from him.

Besides the catastrophic effect upon the lives of individuals and urban and rural societies alike, the Black Death also became noteworthy for its psychological and religious after-effects. Jean Delumeau dedicates an entire chapter to this in his path-breaking book on the history of fear.¹⁸ In the face of such a peril, besides the already-described individual reactions, panic-ridden collective actions also emerged. Since one of the most frequently supposed underlying reasons for the terrible intensity of the plague was divine wrath, a spectacular penitent movement began to spread in these territories: the self-flogging processions of the Flagellants.¹⁹ This type of collective frenzy also quickly merged into an attempt to find and punish the ‘culprits’ who brought the poisonous infection, and the Jewish communities became the scapegoats of this religiously-inspired violence. The years following the Black Death witnessed the most extended and most deadly series of pogroms in medieval Catalonia,²⁰ France,²¹ and above all in Germany.²² According to the accusations, the plague was spread by the poisoning of wells – a conspiracy by the Jews to exterminate Christians. Another, less harmful, religious reaction to the plague was the emergence of the cult of ‘plague saints’, St Sebastian and later St Roche, as well as the ascendance of the cult of the Virgin with the Mantle protecting Christian people from the plague.²³

¹⁸ Jean Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident (XIVe–XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1978).

¹⁹ John Henderson, ‘The Flagellant Movement and Flagellant Confraternities in Central Italy, 1260–1400’, *Studies in Church History*, 15 (1978), 147–60; František Graus, *Pest, Geißler, Judenmorde. Das 14. Jahrhundert als Krisenzeit* (Göttingen, 1987), 13–59.

²⁰ David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence. Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1996), 231–50.

²¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath* (New York, 1991), 63–72.

²² Graus, *Pest, Geißler, Judenmorde*, 155–389; Dirk Jäckel, ‘Judenmord – Geißler – Pest: Das Beispiel Straßburg 1349’, in Meier, *Pest*, 162–78; Samuel K. Cohn Jr., ‘The Black Death and the Burning of the Jews’, *Past and Present*, 196 (2007), 3–45.

²³ Neithard Bulst, ‘Heiligenverehrung in Pestzeiten: Soziale und religiöse Reaktionen auf die spätmittelalterlichen Pestepidemien’, in (eds. A. Löther et al.), *Mundus in Imagine: Bildersprache und Lebenswelten im Mittelalter. Festgabe für Klaus Schreiner* (Munich, 1996), 63–97; Heinrich Dormeier, ‘Saints as Protectors against the Plague: Problems of Definition and Economic and Social Implications’, in Lars Bisgaard and Leif Søndergaard (eds.), *Living with the Black Death* (Odense, 2009), 161–86; Ottó Gecester, ‘Sermons on St. Sebastian after the Black Death (1348–ca. 1500)’, in id. et al. (eds.), *Promoting the Saints: Cults and Their Contexts from Late Antiquity until the Early Modern Period. Essays in Honor of Gábor Klaniczay for his 60th Birthday*

A further set of religious ideas influencing the contemporary explanations of the plague could be detected in the widespread tradition of medieval eschatological thought: the plague was, after all, one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Robert Lerner has examined the relevance of these beliefs, and pointed to the case of the imprisoned Franciscan Spiritualist prophet, John of Rupescissa, who included among the signs of the coming of the Antichrist the Black Death (with which he was also infected, although he survived). At the same time, Lerner cautioned against attributing this ‘eschatological radicalism’ to the Flagellant movement – Rupescissa and a few lesser known similar prophets belonged rather to the *longue durée* tradition of Joachimite prophecies.²⁴

Besides these social, psychological, and religious reactions to the plague, its causes and remedies were also researched by doctors and intellectuals of the age. Forty-nine masters of the Paris University held a *consilium* in 1348 – at the request of King Philip VI – where they examined the presumed celestial and terrestrial causes of the plague: astrological conjunctions and miasma (poisoned air).²⁵ This first, most popular and widely disseminated explanation was followed by a large number of plague treatises, which are also interesting from the point of view of the plague as a place of memory. Ann Carmichael examined the uses of memory in the writings on epidemics in Renaissance Italy, where one plague became related to the next via a vivid borrowing of previous stories and testimonials justifying the actions of the contemporary governing elite, and by physical artifacts presenting tangible evidence of a past plague. She pointed out that references to local historical memory seem to be more important than the generic explanations contained in experts’ plague treatises.²⁶ The memory of past plagues was also aided by the mass of last wills

(Budapest, 2011), 261–72; *id.*, ‘Intercession and Specialization: St Sebastian and St. Roche as Plague Saints and their Cult in Medieval Hungary’, in Marie-Madeleine de Cevins and Olivier Marin (eds.), *Les saints et leur culte en Europe centrale au Moyen Âge (XIe-début du XVIe siècle)* (Turnhout, 2017), 77–108.

²⁴ Robert E. Lerner, ‘The Black Death and Western European Eschatological Mentalities’, *The American Historical Review*, 86 (1981), 533–52.

²⁵ Horrox, *The Black Death*, 158–63; Faye Marie Getz, ‘Black Death and the Silver Lining: Meaning, continuity, and revolutionary change in histories of medieval plague’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, xxiv, 2 (1991), 270–1.

²⁶ Ann G. Carmichael, ‘The last past plague: The uses of memory in Renaissance epidemics’, *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 53 (1998), 132–60, at 141–2.

and testaments and pious bequests.²⁷ And the growing efficiency of the administrative mechanisms of self-defense and protection – police measures, sanitary organizations, and the quarantine (the powerful mechanism which so much impressed Michel Foucault)²⁸ – led to an accumulation of know-how for handling the problems, which in turn also became a carrier of memory.²⁹

However, at what point can we consider the plague as a proper ‘place of memory’, beyond living memory? This had to come after the last spectacular aftermath/wave following the Black Death, the plague of 1720 in Marseille which ended this ever-recurring menace.³⁰ A deadly new pandemic disease – the cholera epidemics of the 1830s – later prompted the memorial resurrection of the Black Death. The German historian of medicine, Justin Hecker published his book *Der schwarze Tod* in 1832,³¹ which became the foundation stone of the new science of epidemiology, quickly translated into English, Italian, Dutch and French (and responsible for the diffusion of the designation of Black Death in English). Hecker saw the history of epidemics as a hitherto unnoticed force for historical change and progress, with a greater influence on the course of world history than wars or politics. He saw plagues as an overwhelmingly powerful natural event, a “revolution in the organism of the earth”, which come in cycles and “by annihilations, awaken new life”. Another innovation by Hecker was to assess the social impact of the Black Death, the “unbridled demoniacal passions”, the processions of the Flagellants, and the hideous pogroms against the Jewish communities.³² Hecker’s vision, founded on the combination of scientific inquiry into natural events and a document-based exploration of social and psychological effects, came to dominate historical research on plagues until contemporary times.³³

²⁷ Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death. Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore and London, 1992).

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris, 1975), 197–201.

²⁹ Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste*, ii, 106–80.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, i, 230–87.

³¹ Justin Hecker, *Der schwarze Tod im vierzehnten Jahrhundert. Nach den Quellen für Aerzte und Nichtärzte bearbeitet* (Berlin, 1832).

³² The quotes are taken from Getz, ‘Black Death and the Silver Lining’, 275–9, who, in an excellent analysis, labels Hecker’s approach as the founder of “Gothic epidemiology”.

³³ Cf. Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 289, 1; William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York, 1976); Nancy Siraisi, ‘Introduction’, in Williman, *The Black Death*, 10.

As regards scientific inquiry, nineteenth century scholarship made important progress. A series of important debates tried to decide which of the two supposed causes of plague – the miasma (poisoned air) or contagion – was responsible for spreading the disease, and the leading Italian physician and medical historian, Alfonso Corradi, forcefully argued for the latter.³⁴ A crucial turn came when, in a renewed oriental wave of the plague in Hong Kong, the Swiss physician Alexandre Yersin, a disciple of Louis Pasteur, identified the bacteria of the bubonic plague (which received later his name as *Yersinia pestis*). Yersin's empirical discovery did not lack historical background either. In his classic paper at the *Annales de l'Institut Pasteur*, he proposed that the bacillus he discovered was not only the cause of the then-present plague in China, but he also claimed that it was the same bacteria that had caused the sixth century plague in the times of Justinian³⁵ – the first pandemic plague – and also the Black Death of 1348, the second pandemic plague, with its four-century-long aftermath. A few years later a French microbiologist, Paul-Louis Simond, verified that the principle carriers of the bacteria were rats, and that fleas were the agents which transmitted them to humans.³⁶

The ensuing microbiological debates persist until today. Was the most horrifically mortal and contagious Black Death indeed caused by *Yersinia pestis*, which was identified in the third pandemic plague? Alternatively, were there other epidemics such as anthrax, or Ebola? Or a combination of bubonic, pneumonic plague and typhus, smallpox and respiratory infections?³⁷ These debates are of interest to us here from one essential point of view: by a systematic comparison of the different pandemic diseases in human history, this still ongoing twentieth century controversy contributed significantly to turning the Black Death into a universal place of memory. By combining medical diagnoses

³⁴ John Henderson, 'Historians and Plagues in Pre-Industrial Italy over the *Longue Durée*', *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 25 (2003), 481–99, at 482–5.

³⁵ For more on this plague, see Jean-Noël Biraben and Jacques Le Goff, 'La peste dans le Haut Moyen Âge', *Annales E.S.C.*, 24 (1969), 1484–510; Lester K. Little (ed.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity. The Pandemic of 541–750* (Cambridge, 2007).

³⁶ Cohn, *The Black Death Transformed*, 7–22.

³⁷ For a detailed discussion of these debates, see Cohn, *The Black Death Transformed*; Ole J. Benedictow, *What Disease was Plague? On the Controversy over the Microbiological Identity of Plague Epidemics of the Past* (Leiden, 2010); Monica H. Green (ed.), *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World. Rethinking the Black Death* (Kalamazoo and Bradford, 2015).

with all possible historical data from plague tracts, chronicles, last wills, administrative responses, etc.,³⁸ and moving forward to archaeological and anthropological examinations of graves and mortal remains,³⁹ this heated biological and epidemiological controversy has kept the plague at the center of modern historical memory, with a renewed intensity borrowed from new pandemic menaces such as HIV or Ebola.

In the twentieth century, Hecker's heritage also continued on another plane, the interpretation of the Black Death as a symptom of the late medieval societal and cultural crisis – one which could lead, after its horrible destruction, to a spectacular renewal. The influential cultural historian Egon Friedell wrote in his *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*⁴⁰ that the Black Death coincided with the “crisis of the European soul”, and 1348 “was the year in which modern man was conceived”. He considered the Black Death as “a sort of development-sickness in European humanity, a general psychosis ...”, and he included in this description, as “parallel epidemics”, the ravings of the Flagellants, the horrors of the pogroms against the Jews, and the apocalyptic fears.⁴¹ Friedell's vivid panorama of the various symptoms of the late medieval crisis (borrowing much from Johan Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages*⁴²) is above all a prelude to the ‘Dawn of the World’, i.e. the Renaissance.

A similar vision inspired the famous art historical monograph of Millard Meiss in 1951: *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*,⁴³ probably also stimulated by the renewed experience of a mighty cataclysm – the Second World War – and the ensuing reconstruction. Meiss proposed that it was the trauma and the crisis of the first wave of humanism, caused by the plague, the haunting macabre visions of the Triumph of Death which ultimately contributed to the creation of a new form and content in post-Giottoesque art, similarly to the effect of the Second World War on post-war art. The ensuing art historical debates questioned some of these statements, and pointed out that

³⁸ As best exemplified in Cohn, *The Black Death Transformed*.

³⁹ As seen in several essays in Green, *Pandemic Disease*.

⁴⁰ Egon Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit. Die Krisis der europäischen Seele von der Schwarzen Pest bis zur ersten Weltkrieg* (München, 1927–31), i-iii.

⁴¹ The English translation by Charles Francis Atkinson (New York, 1933) is cited by Getz, ‘Black Death and the Silver Lining’, 282–3.

⁴² Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1996).

⁴³ Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton, 1951).

some of these changes pre-dated Black Death and could be attributed to other factors – but this also underlines, from our point of view, what a powerful place of memory the plague had become. Some other works of art – such as the novel *La Peste* by Albert Camus (1947), or the dramatic panorama in the film *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergmann (1957) – contributed to this effect. And the fact that plague scholarship has been in vogue from the 1960s until our days contributes to maintaining this memorial status, which is given a new intensity by the art of micro-history. Giulia Calvi's *Histories of a Plague Year* describes the social, religious and political reactions of early modern Florence to the plague,⁴⁴ and John Hatcher's 'intimate history' of the Black Death recreates everyday life in a mid-fourteenth century rural English village, showing how they lived and died during the great plague.⁴⁵

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One may ask how all this relates to the figure of the wolf, which is juxtaposed with the plague in the title of this essay? I accepted this unusual pairing, suggested to me by Étienne François, the editor of the volume *Europa, notre histoire*,⁴⁶ as an intellectual challenge.

There is certainly a very general kind of kinship between plagues and wolves; we are dealing here with two cases of very intensive panic caused by the destructive forces of nature. Wolves also represented a mortal danger in medieval and early modern Europe. They were also feared and had to be fought against for centuries.

There is, oddly enough, also a thin thread of historical link: the wolf shows up in East European popular beliefs as a possible personification of the illness-demon causing the plague.⁴⁷ However, wolves were rarely claimed to be real mediators of the contagion: rather errant domestic dogs or cats were suspected to carry the plague and were sometimes massacred as a preventive measure,⁴⁸ and after the

⁴⁴ Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year. The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1989).

⁴⁵ John Hatcher, *The Black Death, an intimate history* (London, 2008).

⁴⁶ See the first note of this essay, marked with an asterisk *.

⁴⁷ Péter G. Tóth, "Ezen három szó: hamar, messze, későn pestis ellen orvosságod lészön". Túlélési stratégiák és elvek pestisjárványok idején 1737–1745', [These three words: soon, far-away, too late you will have remedy to the plague'. Survival strategies and principles in the times of plague epidemics], *Ethnographia*, cvii (1995), 763, 766.

⁴⁸ Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident*, 112.

modern microbiological discoveries, rats have definitely taken their place. Another, rather amusing occurrence of wolves in the plague-literature is the suggestion advanced in a nineteenth-century work of 'Gothic epidemiology' – the *Handbuch* by two German physicians, Max Neuburger and Julius Pagel – asserting that the Black Death could have been partly caused by the rise of werewolves.⁴⁹ A creature called the 'plague wolf' also exists today in cyberspace, as part of a gameplay called 'Savage Lands'.

On the other hand, there are many crucial differences. In the first place, the relation of humans to this prominent predator, a powerful symbol of the wilderness, was far from being wholly negative. It is enough to recall the founding myth of Rome, where the twin brothers Romulus and Remus were fed by a she-wolf – and the festivity of *Lupercalia* generated by this myth, which perpetuated this memory throughout Antiquity. Wolves were much cultivated in early medieval Nordic societies as well: Odin himself was a kind of wolf-god. For the Vikings, as well as for the Gauls, wolves symbolized a kind of martial identity, a combination of violence and force; this is what explains their lasting use in name-giving and heraldry.⁵⁰

The rural, agricultural societies of early medieval Christianity were naturally more hostile to wolves, which represented a constant peril for both livestock and humans. As a consequence, coordinated actions against them appeared already in Merovingian times. Charlemagne and the capitulary of 813 instituted for each county two *luparii* specialized in hunting down wolves, and send the emperor each year a pelt of the killed wolves, for which they obtained remuneration.⁵¹

Medieval chronicles frequently mention fear- and awe-inspiring wolves who were able to kill several dozens of humans. At the same time, the legends on hermits and saints abound in stories of taming this wild enemy: the most famous being the case of Saint Francis of Assisi taming the wolf of Gubbio.⁵² Beast-epics in medieval literature

⁴⁹ Max Neuburger and Julius Pagel, *Handbuch der Geschichte der Medizin* (Jena, 1902), i, 747 – cited by Getz, 'Black Death and the Silver Lining', 281.

⁵⁰ Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006), 154–64.

⁵¹ Robert Delort, 'La guerre du loup', *L'Histoire*, liiii (1983), 6–19, at 8, 12.

⁵² Rodger M. Payne, 'The Wolf in the Forest: St. Francis and the Italian Eremitical Tradition', in Cynthia Ho, Beth A. Mulvaney, and John K. Downey (eds.), *Finding Saint Francis* (New York, 2009), 63–78.

often make fun of the greedy and cruel, but also gullible and stupid wolf (Ysengrin), outwitted by the clever fox Renart.⁵³ Religious exempla and moral preaching, on the other hand, tend to represent the wolf as a diabolic creature: this is what we read in the famous story of the ‘holy greyhound’ narrated by the thirteenth-century Dominican inquisitor Stephen of Bourbon.⁵⁴ The wolf has been, in addition, a symbol of heretical falseness since biblical times: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravaging wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

The ambivalence towards wolves began to gradually turn into an extreme hostility: towards the end of the Middle Ages the wolf became the principal enemy in the wilderness. In the times of Philip the Fair the early medieval wolf-experts, the *luparii*, appear again in the administration. In 1395 Charles VI, King of France, authorizes people “of all estates to kill and chase all wolves and she-wolves”. In 1421, the *Journal d’un bourgeois de Paris* describes how the wolves invaded Paris several times and devoured more than several persons.⁵⁵ In the times of Francis I, in 1520, a special ordinance was issued on regulating and intensifying the work of the wolf-chasers, which became a special armed unit, with dogs trained for chasing the wolves. In 1583, Henry III obliges every household in each parish to send out a man three times a year to chase the wolves. A systematic annihilation of wolves began in early modern Europe.

The image of the dreadful werewolf, the sorcerer who periodically turns into a raving wolf and commits aggressions against humans, began to show up in the context of this ‘war on wolves’.⁵⁶ This shape-changing sorcerer, the belief in which existed already in late Antiquity, placed all the negative anthropomorphic qualifications on wolves during the times of massive early modern witchcraft prosecutions, and the inquisitorial reports of some spectacular trials in France and Germany develop this figure into a bloodthirsty, cannibalistic monster.⁵⁷

⁵³ Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness*, 118–33.

⁵⁴ Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le Saint lévrier. Guinefort, guérisseur d’enfants depuis le XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1979), 14, 17.

⁵⁵ Colette Beaune (ed.), *Journal d’un Bourgeois de Paris de 1405 à 1449* (Paris, 1990), 170, 172, 176, 390.

⁵⁶ Delort, ‘La guerre du loup’, 11–12.

⁵⁷ Caroline Oates, ‘Metamorphosis and Lycanthropy in Franche-Comté, 1521–1643’, in Michal Feher et al. (eds.), *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*

However, the beliefs in the werewolf were, once again, rather ambivalent. A famous witch-trial of an eighty-year-old Livonian sorcerer named Thiess took place in 1691. He claimed to be a werewolf who went in a wolf's shape to hell to fight the witches and wizards in order to recapture cattle, grain and fruit from them. Carlo Ginzburg became aware of this beneficent sorcerer in his research on the Friulan *benandanti*,⁵⁸ and though their assimilation to shamanism has been questioned,⁵⁹ their resemblance more to cunning folk than to witches or to the devilish demonological image of the werewolves in France and Germany can hardly be questioned.

In the meantime, the extermination of wolves proceeded. In England and Wales, they disappeared by the end of the Middle Ages, and in Scotland by the eighteenth century.⁶⁰ In France, some panics concerning certain especially murderous wolves appeared, such as the fear in 1764 of the 'Beast of Gévaudan' (a village in Central France) – an extraordinarily aggressive huge beast killing mostly children – stimulated intensive action. Troupes of royal hunters were sent there by Louis XIV and were engaged in a prolonged fight against the wolves for three years, while the killings by the wolves also continued. This 'war' claimed the lives of hundred and one humans and more than two hundred wolves. However, the real change in this field was brought about in France by the Revolution, which armed the peasants, gave them hunting rights, and offered premiums for each killed wolf. Throughout the nineteenth century wolves were killed in France by the tens of thousands and came close to extinction.⁶¹

(New York, 1989), i, 304–63; Sophie Houdard, 'Le loup-garou ou les limites de l'animalité', in Jean de Nynauld, *De la lycanthropie, transformation et extase des sorciers 1615*, édition critique (Paris, 1990); Martin Rheinheimer, 'Die Angst vor dem Wolf. Werwolfglaube, Wolfsagen und Ausrottung der Wölfe in Schleswig-Holstein', *Fabula*, xxxvi (1995), 25–78; Willem de Blécourt, 'The Werewolf, the Witch, and the Warlock: Aspects of Gender in the Early Modern Period', in Alison Rowlands (ed.), *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2009), 191–213; *id.*, 'The Differentiated Werewolf: An Introduction to Cluster Methodology', in *id.* (ed.), *Werewolf Histories* (New York, 2015), 1–24.

⁵⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, *I Benandanti. Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (Torino, 1966), 47–51.

⁵⁹ Willem de Blécourt, 'A Journey to Hell: Reconsidering the Livonian 'Werewolf'', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, ii (2007), 49–67.

⁶⁰ Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness*, 7.

⁶¹ Delort, 'La guerre du loup', 13–16.

At the same time, the fear of the wolves was eternalized by folktales in popular culture, reworked and popularized in the fables of La Fontaine and later the Brothers Grimm. Every child in modern Europe knows of the frightening wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, and the story of Mowgli in Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894) only partially counterbalanced this fearful memory. The haunting images of wolves were especially reinforced by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), who was frequently accompanied by a hungry pack of wolves "with white teeth and lolling red tongues, sinewy limbs and shaggy hair".⁶² The werewolves also gained new public attention via the book by the popular writer and folklore collector Sabine Baring-Gould, who in 1865 published *The Book of Were-Wolves*,⁶³ which remains one of the most frequently cited works on lycanthropy until today.

To conclude, let us turn back to the comparison of these two places of memory. The wolves, claiming the lives of a few tens of thousands of humans throughout European history, seems somehow to be more alive in human memory than the terrible plagues which killed populations in Europe and beyond by the hundreds of millions. A possible reason for this could be that the confrontation with these prime predators and the ultimate victory over them constitutes a meaningful epic with a happy conclusion. The wolves, invested with anthropomorphic qualities, seem to be all too human. Thomas Hobbes draws on the ancient proverb *Homo homini lupus est* ('A man is a wolf to another man') in his *De Cive*. The lasting antagonism between humans and wolves can be seen as the opposition of Nature and Culture, Wilderness and Civilization. The memory of this long fight is the victory of humanity over brutal animal drives and desires, a struggle that has both a psychological significance and contains traumatic memories for humans, reflected also in the beliefs associated with werewolves – as Sigmund Freud⁶⁴ and Robert Eisler⁶⁵ both recognized.

⁶² Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Harmondsworth, 1993), 13.

⁶³ Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Were-Wolves* (London, 1865), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/goth/bow/> (Accessed: 4 June 2019).

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Aus der Geschichte einer infantilen Analyse [Der Wolfsmann]', in *id.*, *Studienausgabe*, vii (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), 128–231; Carlo Ginzburg, 'Freud, l'uomo dei lupi e lupi mannari', in *id.*, *Miti, emblemi, spie. Morfologia e storia* (Torino, 1992), 239–51.

⁶⁵ Robert Eisler, *Man into Wolf: An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism and Lycanthropy* (Santa Barbara, 1978) [1948].

In the face of these meaningful memories, the shock of the Black Death and the histories of the plague in general offer less material to come to terms with this danger – the stories can only speak of unavoidable loss or fortuitous survival. Human efforts to understand the causes and find remedies were a failure for a very long time. When the modern discoveries came about and the plague (more or less) vanished – there must have been a greater urge to forget than to remember. Nevertheless, it still became a rather frequented place of memory. The fear of the onset of other kinds of plagues still remains with us today.

proofreading James Hartzell

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