PLAGUE – PESTILENCE – PANDEMIC

Phase 1 (3000 B.C. – 1353 A.D.)

History is a fascinating subject whether one is studying ancient empires, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and early 19th centuries or the gradual evolution of the computer that has resulted in the sophisticated instrument that ‘rules’ the world today. Of particular interest at the present time is the life-changing effect that pestilence and plague have played throughout the course of history.

Though undoubtedly there would have been outbreaks of disease and resultant contagion prior to 3000 B.C., the oldest archaeological site that we have of a major epidemic is that of HAMIN MANGHA in North-Eastern China, dated to about that time – an age when people lived in small settlements, growing crops and hunting for food. The site is that of a house in a prehistoric village of just 29 homes in which the dead – 97 children and adults but few elderly – were hurriedly buried in a mass grave and the house, measuring approximately 20 square metres was then burnt to the ground, leaving many bodies charred and deformed.

Another mass burial site from the same period was discovered at MIAOZIGOU, again in North-Eastern China, suggesting that the epidemic spread throughout the region. In 2011 a Chinese anthropological team from Jilin University in Changchun studied the prehistoric remains. Though remnants of pottery, grinding instruments, arrows and spearheads were unearthed, to date the only conclusion that the team has reached with regard to the disease is that, whatever it may have been, it struck quickly and decisively, leaving no time for proper burial at both sites.
We now fast-forward to the city-state of **ATHENS** and the five-year epidemic that struck the city in 430 B.C., during the early years of the long-drawn-out Peloponnesian war with Sparta. The plague is believed to have spread to Athens from Piraeus, the city’s port, only 5 miles (8km) away. Historians have estimated that the epidemic killed 75,000 to 100,000 people, approximately one third of the population. Such decimation of the populace was a contributory factor in Athens’ ultimate defeat.

Under Pericles – statesman, orator, cultural leader and general of the Athenian army in the early stages of the war – the strategy adopted was to retreat within the city walls. The influx of peasants from the surrounding countryside led to overpopulation and this, together with poor hygiene, resulted in the city becoming a breeding ground for disease. The cause of the plague remains unknown, but modern scholarship suggests either Typhus or Typhoid. The famed Greek historian, Thucydides, who contracted the disease himself and survived, recorded the epidemic as having emanated from Ethiopia, and showing the following symptoms: fever, coughing, sore throat, conjunctivitis, diarrhoea and loss of speech. [*How similar the symptoms are to those of Covid-19!*]

For Thucydides, a major consequence of the PLAGUE OF ATHENS was the decline in the moral standards of the Athenian citizen: “... men, not knowing where to turn grew reckless of all law, human and divine.” Democratic rule was subverted and replaced by an oligarchy – The Thirty Tyrants – though their rule was short-lived. Later plagues would follow the pattern set by Athens – degeneration of morals, disregard for the rule of law and rule by the few.

[Though not the result of a plague, the Committee of Public Safety formed during the French Revolution exemplified oligarchic rule.]
The Roman Empire reached the height of its power between 96−180 A.D., under the rule of the Five Good Emperors, the last of whom was Marcus Aurelius. The Empire reached its greatest territorial extent circa 117 A.D., stretching from Britannia and Western Europe to modern-day Iraq and Iran, with particular hegemony over the Mediterranean countries including Northern Africa and especially Egypt – encompassing an area of 5 million square kilometres and ruling over some 55–60 million inhabitants.

Rome was the social, political and military centre of the Empire; while we tend to read of magnificent buildings, emperors in purple togas and victorious legions, there was also the underside of Roman life – the plebeians (free Roman working-class citizens) but also the ‘hoi polloi’ (common people), slaves, freed men (freed slaves) and the unemployed rabble. This hodge-podge of humanity was a natural breeding ground for pestilence and plague.

Marcus Aurelius (Antoninus), the adopted son of the Emperor Antoninus Pius, reigned as Emperor from 161-180, with Lucius Verus as co-emperor until the latter’s death in 169. Immediately the new emperor faced military threats in the East from the Parthian and Armenian armies; however, a far greater threat was to arise in 165.

The **ANTONINE PLAGUE** of 165-180 was brought into Rome, and much of the Roman Empire, by legions returning from campaigns in the East. The pestilence is thought by some scholars to have been either smallpox or measles but the exact cause
remains undetermined. Much of our information is derived from the writings of the Greek physician Galen who lived through the epidemic and described it; fever, diarrhoea, vomiting, coughing and dry or pustular sores – symptoms similar to those at Athens.

At its height, the plague caused up to 2,000 deaths per day in Rome, the estimated total death toll being 5 million, in the process devastating the Roman army. Epidemiologists believe that the plague most probably emerged from China, spread by travellers journeying along The Silk Road. The pestilence is seen by many scholars as having been a major contributor to the start of the Empire’s decline, with a reduction in business and farming, price increases, reduced tax revenues and a negative effect on international trade. [History does indeed repeat itself!]

Rome experienced two more epidemics – the Cyprian Plague and Justinian Plague, each in turn proving more virulent, more rapidly incubated and more widespread than its predecessor. The PLAGUE OF CYPRIAN was named after St Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, who lived through the first eight years of the epidemic, recording his first-hand observations of the pestilence in his work De Mortalitate (‘On Mortality’).

The Cyprian Plague was thought to have originated in Ethiopia, reaching Rome in 250 and lasting nearly 20 years. From there it spread to Greece and its surrounds and thence to Syria, while also crossing the Mediterranean to North Africa and especially Carthage. The symptoms of the disease were similar to those recorded during the earlier Antonine Plague – but with the addition of deafness, blindness and paralysis of the legs and feet. The disease was undoubtedly highly contagious, being transmitted via direct and indirect contact, including clothing. At its height it reportedly killed 5,000 people per day in Rome, including two emperors.
Contributing to the rapid spread of the disease was the disorganisation within the Empire: Germanic tribes invaded from the north, Parthian armies attacked in the east, while weak and competing emperors failed to instil the necessary order amongst both the citizens and the army. Co-emperors, Decius and Herrenius were both killed in battle in 251 fighting the Goths. Hostilian ruled for only a few months before dying of the plague. He was followed by six emperors, five of whom were assassinated, the sixth, Valerian, dying in captivity in Persia. In 268 Claudius Gothicus was proclaimed emperor but his reign, too, came to an untimely end with his death in the last months of the plague in 270.

One consequence of the Cyprian Plague was the spread of Christianity amongst the urban population. Pagans were unable to offer any explanation for the onset of the disease, while Christians tended to the sick and assisted with burials. Those Christians who themselves perished from the disease were seen as martyrs.

The most deadly of the three Roman pestilences was the PLAGUE OF JUSTINIAN in 541 – 542, but with recurrences until 750. Named after the Emperor ruling at the time, the epidemic centred on the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire and especially its capital Constantinople. Though transmission was again effected along The Silk Road, on this occasion the plague was mainly sea-borne, having been carried by ship up the Red Sea to Pelusium and thence to neighbouring Alexandria. From there it spread rapidly to ports throughout the Mediterranean.

The cause of the plague was Yersinia pestis, a bacterium carried by black rats infected by fleas, found especially in grain ships arriving in Egypt from the East. Once
ashore, the grain was stored in vast granaries, an ideal breeding ground for the rats and fleas. The origin of the Justinian Plague is deemed by epidemiologists to have been central Asia, Qinghai in China the most likely source. DNA analysis of bones found in graves reveal the plague to have been bubonic, most probably accompanied by pneumonia and septicaemia. Victims suffered from swellings in the groin and armpits and were racked by delusional fevers.

Procopius, the principal Byzantine historian of the 6th century, lived in Constantinople during the period of the plague. In his ‘Secret History’ he recorded that, at the height of the infection, nearly 10,000 people per day died in Constantinople. Modern historians halve this number but all agree the total death toll of 30-50 million. Scholars and epidemiologists see the Justinian Plague, bubonic in character, as being the precursor of the Black Death.

The accompanying map shows the extent of the Germanic invasions up to the year 500. In 541, Justinian was faced not only with plague within Constantinople but with waves of attacks from the north, incursions in and around Carthage and a protracted war with Persia in the east. However, at the time of his death in 565, The Byzantine Empire was the largest and most powerful state in Europe.

Following Justinian’s death the power and extent of the empire fluctuated through periods of decline and recovery. The rise of Islam was a major threat and much of Asia Minor was lost to the Turks in the late 11th century. The sacking of Constantinople in 1204 proved the death knell to the Empire though it survived for a further two centuries. With the final Fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453 the Eastern Roman Empire came to an end.
The period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 and the later years of the 13th Century, ushering in the birth and early growth of the Italian Renaissance, is known as The Middle Ages. This 900 year period is divided into The Dark Ages, extending to the 10th Century, the High Middle Ages of the 11th-13th centuries, and the Late Middle Ages.

After the destruction of the Greek and Roman civilisations and the barbarian invasion into Mediterranean Europe, people forgot how to read and write and sculpt and build. The magnificent libraries were destroyed; the Greek and Latin languages fell out of use; art, theatre, mathematics, science, medical knowledge, astronomy, philosophy – the basic elements of cultural civilisation as it had been known – disappeared.
In the absence of a central governing power, marauding bands flooded into Western Europe, many only intent on war and pillage. Settled populations were dispersed and migration of wandering people increased. However, the Franks slowly became the dominant tribe and Charlemagne ruled as King of the Franks from 768, King of the Lombards from 774 and Holy Roman Emperor from 800, being crowned in Rome by Pope Leo III. Charlemagne’s Carolingian Empire united most of Western Europe for the first time since the classical era of the Roman Empire. Though the Carolingian Empire was short-lived – Charlemagne dying in 814 – it did lay the foundation for the modern states of France and Germany.

During the High Middle Ages, Europe’s population increased, trade thrived, and the climate warmed considerably resulting in increased crop yields. The system of Feudalism came into being, the Crusades attempted to win back territory lost to the ‘infidels’ and a cultural revolution flourished. So often one thinks of the Middle Ages as being a period of cultural famine but the theology of Thomas Aquinas, the paintings of Giotto, the poetry of Dante and Chaucer, and Gothic architecture – the Cathedral of Chartres in particular – gainsay such thinking.

The Late Middle ages, principally the 14th century, is seen as an era of famine, plague and war. The transition from the Medieval Warm period to the Little Ice Age resulted in wide-spread crop failures and the ensuing Great Famine of 1315-1317. This, in turn, caused the rural communities to flood into the cities in search of work. Pestilence and plague had found a new breeding ground.
The **BLACK DEATH**, which was at its most virulent between 1347–1351, was an epidemic of bubonic plague – as with the Plague of Justinian, being caused by the same bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, carried by black rats and fleas and causing swollen lymph nodes in the armpit or groin. In the early 1340s reports reached Europe that a ‘Great Pestilence’ was spreading in China, India, Persia and Syria – overland along The Silk Road.

It reached the Crimean port of Feodosia on the Black Sea, from where 12 Genoese merchant ships set sail for the Sicilian port of Messina, sailing via Istanbul (formerly Constantinople). In October 1347 the ships docked and it
was discovered that most of the sailors were dead, those alive suffering from black, bloody boils, accompanied by fever, vomiting, diarrhoea, aching limbs and almost certain death. The port authorities ordered the death ships to leave the harbour, but it was too late – the Black Death had arrived. *[Was this a resurgence of the Justinan plague?]*

The pandemic rapidly spread throughout Western Europe – north to Scandinavia, east into Poland and Russia, west into Britain and south into the Iberian Peninsula and the shores of North Africa.

Agnolo di Tura, a Sienese chronicler who buried his wife and five children, described the plague as follows: “….. in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead …. And there were also those who were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city.”

Many people believed that the pandemic was God’s punishment for sins committed. The purging of supposed heretics followed and, as had happened before and would recur throughout history, the Jews were seen as the transgressors – many thousands being murdered in 1348-1349.

Fatality numbers varied greatly, from 75–200 million. A figure of 50 million deaths is probably relatively accurate, this number comprising just under half the population of Europe at the time. The number could have been greater had the authorities in Venice and Ragusa (modern-day Dubrovnik) not introduced an isolation policy and a quarantine requirement for all
sailors coming from plague-infested areas. Such requirements were copied by other cities. Ragusa was also the first city to introduce an isolation clinic in the form of a temporary plague hospital, situated on the nearby island of Mjlet.

Florence lost 60% of its inhabitants, numbers dropping from 120,000 to 50,000. Yet this same city became the birthplace of the Renaissance. Under the patronage of the Medici family (Giovanni, Cosimo, Piero and Lorenzo from 1397-1492 and later from 1512 onwards) art, sculpture, architecture, literature and science blossomed.

[It would be so easy for me to let myself be ‘red-herringed’ and to spend time in Renaissance Italy, but we must return to the less inviting subject of plague and pestilence – moving first to Central and South America and thereafter to London and Marseille.]

NOTES:

QUARANTINE: During the Black Death, sailors arriving at Mediterranean ports were held on their ships for 30 days (Trentino); this was later changed to a forty day (Quaranta Giorni) period. Hence the present day term.

THE SILK ROAD: was a network of trade routes linking the two great civilisations of Rome and China – wools, gold and silver went east and silk went west. There was also the interchange of cultures, philosophies and religions. The Road, really no more than a well-established caravan track, was 4,000 miles (6,400 km) long. Its importance declined in the mid-15th Century.

Sources:

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COMMENTS:

- Firstly, this little project would have remained as scribbled pencil notes on an A4 pad had my willing, unpaid secretary not come to the rescue! Thank you Evie.

- Why was it written? With the Lockdown precluding my one-to-one teaching, I found myself with time in which to indulge in my favourite hobby – writing.

- Why History? For A Level in 1956 at Marlborough I was fortunate to have inspirational teachers of History and English – Dennis Silk and Wiggy Gough. They instilled in me a fascination for British and World History and a love of English and especially Poetry.

- Why this particular subject? With Covid-19 beginning to spread worldwide, it seemed logical to discover the chronological history of plagues and pandemics.

- What will happen when I finish Phase 4? I shall probably donate the completed whole to the Peers Village Library for anyone who is interested to read it.