

*IMAGES  
OF  
THE PLAGUE*

*The Black Death  
in Biology, Arts, Literature & Learning*



\* scendete quanto maggiore è stata del salire, et dello \* smontare la grauezza. Et si come la estremità della allegrezza il dolore occupa: così le miserie da soprauegnēte letitia sono terminate. A queste briue noia (dico briue in quāto in poche lettere si contiene) seguita prestamente la \* dolcezza, et il piacere, ilquale io ui ho dauanti promesso, et che forse \* non sarebbe da così fatto initio, senon si dicesse, aspettato. Et nel uero, se io potuto hauesse honestamēte per altra parte menarui a quello, che io desidero, che per così aspro sentiero, come fia questo, io lo haurei uolentier fatto. Ma percioche, qual fosse la cagione, perche le cose, che appresso si leggerāno, auuenissero, nō si poteua senza questa rammomeratione dimostrare, quasi da necessità costretto, a scriuerla mi cōduco. Dico adūque, che gia erano gli anni della fruttifera incarnatione del figliuolo di Dio al numero peruenuti di mille treceto quarant'otto, quādo nella egregia città di \* Firenze, oltre ad ogni altra \* in Italia bellissima, peruenne la mortifera \* pestilentia, laquale, ò per operatione de corpi superiori, ò \* per le nostre inique opere da giusta ira di Dio a nostra correttioe mandata sopra i mortali, alquāti anni dauanti nelle parti Orientali incominciata, quelle d'innumerabile quantità di uiuenti hauēdo priuate, senza restare d'un luogo in un'altro cōtinuandosi \* uerso l'Occidente miserabilmente s'era \* ampliata: et in quella nō ualendo alcun senno, ne humano prouedimento, per lo quale fu da molte immōditie purgata la città da ufficiali sopra ciò ordinati, et uietato l'entrare ui dentro a ciascuno infermo, et molti cōsigli dati a conseruatione della \* sanità, ne anchora humili supplicationi nō una uolta, ma molte, et in processioni ordinate, et in altre guise a Dio fatte dalle diuote persone, quasi nel principio della primavera dell'anno predetto horribilmēte \* cominciò i suoi dolorosi effetti, et in miracolosa maniera a dimostrare, et nō come in Oriente haueua fatto: doue a chiunque uscìua il sangue del naso, era manifesto segno d'imitabile morte, ma nasceuano nel cominciare d'essa a maschi, \* et a le femine parimēte, ò nella anginaia, ò sotto le ditella certe enfiature, delle quali alcune cresceuano, come una comunal mela, altre come uno uouo \* et alcune piu, et alcun'altra meno, lequali i uolgari nominauano



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*University Art Gallery  
Fine Arts Building  
State University of New York at Binghamton*



## LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Mme Jacqueline Brossollet, Paris, France

Dr. Philip J. Weimerskirch, Rochester, New York

Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Edward G. Miner Library, School of Medicine and Dentistry,  
The University of Rochester, Rochester, New York

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection,  
New York, New York

The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan

State University of New York at Binghamton, Binghamton, New York

The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, New York

The American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York



*The Burial of Plague Victims at Tournai*

Ms. 1376-7, fol. 24v. Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, Bruxelles

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Grace L. Houghton, Exhibit Coordinator



# IMAGES OF THE PLAGUE

## *The Black Death in Biology, Arts, Literature & Learning*

### INTRODUCTION

✕ *The diverse images of the Black Death in literature, art, and medicine reflect the upheaval caused by the plague during three centuries of European life. The exhibit ranges from household objects to sculpture, from popular astrology to medical theory, from book illustration to fresco—dating from the mid-fourteenth through the sixteenth century, throughout Europe, from Sicily to England. ✕ The shock and fear caused by the sudden and high mortality of the Black Death impelled people to seek refuge and safety in various ways. The upsurge in religious piety which we see reflected in frescoes, altarpieces, and sculpture, with the Triumph of Death as a frequent subject matter, as well as numerous images of the Virgin, St. Sebastian, and St. Roch, coexists with precautionary amulets and predictive astrology. The safe-conduct pass and the writings of physicians in the sixteenth century demonstrate early attention to public health. ✕ The unsuspecting populace did not realize that the most sure remedy against infection might have been cleanliness, here represented by some household articles. People contracted bubonic plague because of bites from fleas carrying the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* from the bloodstream of infected rats. The resulting disastrous illness in the human population affected Europeans' everyday thoughts and actions for centuries.*



## **Almanac fuer Nuernberg**

**Published in Einstätt by Michael Reyser, 1487**

✠ The Paris *Consilium*, written by the University of Paris Faculty of Medicine in October, 1348, considered astronomical forces to be a main cause of the plague. At 1 p.m., March 20, 1345, an important conjunction of three higher planets occurred in the sign of Aquarius; this, plus other astronomical events, particularly movements of Jupiter and Mars, produced pestilential vapors. Their theory had great influence throughout Europe. ✠ During the centuries that plague epidemics were experienced, various precautions against these pestilential vapors were prescribed. Two of the most important remedies were pill-taking and bleeding, and the best days for attending to these remedies are listed on this broadsheet for Nuernberg for the year 1487. This almanac is fairly well preserved in spite of having served as the inner cover of a later book binding. Only one line, in the middle of the leaf, is missing.

*Lent by The Edward G. Miner Library*

## **Astrological Medical Calendar**

**Almanac and calendar (with thunder prognostications  
in English)**

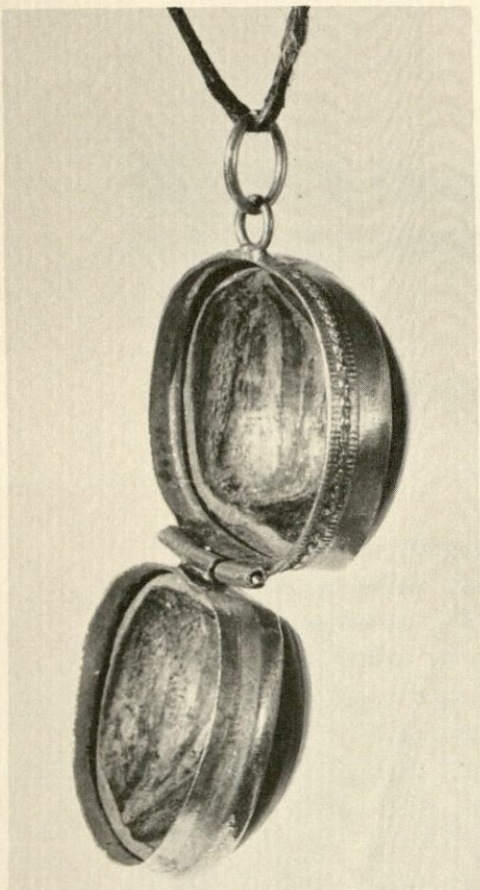
**Vellum, three pieces, formerly a roll**

**England, 1433**

✠ A popular form of prognostication in the Middle Ages was based on the occurrence of thunder during certain times of the year. The months in which thunder was heard determined the predictions of periods of peace, war, famine and abundance, disease and death of animals and men. ✠ The zodiac, or vein man chart was an important part of every physician's equipment. He consulted it in order to determine the most favorable time to bleed a patient. Every part of the body was believed to be related to a zodiacal or astrological sign, and this determined the time and type of treatment for that part of the body. So strong was this belief in the relationship between Man's well-being and the order of the Universe, that many cities legislated that medical practice conform to these calendars.

*Lent by The Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M. 941*





*Amulet (noisette)*  
Courtesy of Mme Jacqueline Brossollet

**Amulet (Noisette)**  
**France, 17th century (modern copy)**

✠ The amulet is a hazelnut or filbert mounted in hinged bands, permitting the amulet to be opened and closed. In use, it would have been filled with mercury which was thought to ward off the plague. In order to combat the epidemic of 1631 in France, the decree was given that "several barber-disinfectors were designated to fumigate infected houses into which they penetrated with the greatest precautions, wearing around their necks some mercury in a *filbert*."

*Lent by Mme Jacqueline Brossollet*

**Ascanio Centorio degli Hortensii, I Cinque Libri  
degl'avvertimenti . . . fatti et osservati in Milano  
Venice: Gioliti, 1579**

✠ The plague epidemic which occurred in Italy in 1576 and 1577 was experienced in Milan with "only 18 thousand persons dying in about sixteen months." Centorio gives useful advice for all the cities of Europe which find themselves "in similar misfortune and calamity."

*Lent by the Edward G. Miner Library*

**Visit to the Plague Patient**  
**Gentile Bellini, from Johannes de Ketham's**  
**Fasciculus Medicinae**  
Woodcut—two editions  
**Venice, 1493 (with cat) and 1512**

✠ The plague victim, tended by members of his household, is visited by the doctor. To guard against infection as he takes the patient's pulse, the physician holds a spice-and-vinegar-soaked sponge to his nose. The attendants flanking the doctor carry lighted torches whose smoke was thought to purify the air and immunize those in the presence of the plague victim. The man at the right carries what appears to be a parchment-covered drug jar filled, perhaps, with prophylactic ingredients such as herbs, or one of the plague waters.

*Lent by Philip J. Weimerskirch*



**Rolando Capelluti, *Tractatus de curatione pestiferorum  
apostematum*  
[Rome: Stephen Plannck, ca. 1481-87]**

✠ Rolando Capelluti, "Chrysopolitanus, philosophus Parmensis," was born in Scutari and practiced in Parma during the plague epidemic of 1468. He describes the results of the terror felt by the citizens who feared the plague: "Nullus amor, nulla caritas in Parmagensibus erat, sed omnis immanitas et crudelitas in eis regnabant." (There was no love, no esteem in Parma, but cruelty and barbarism of every kind prevailed.) The copy exhibited here is the third edition.

*Lent by The Edward G. Miner Library*

**Philippus Culmacher, *Regimen wider die Pestilenz*  
[Leipzig: Martin Landsberg, 1490-95]**

✠ Of particular interest in this German plague tractate is the woodcut on the title page. At the center top of the illustration, Christ is separated by a V-shaped pattern from other elements in the illustration. To the left the Virgin holds the crucified Christ in a pietà pose; below the center of the V is an angel with an unsheathed sword, denoting the sending of the plague. To the right stand St. Sebastian, with an arrow protruding from his side, and St. Roch displaying a bubo on his thigh. At the bottom level blessing and praying figures attend plague victims around a smiling figure of death, seated on a stretcher, holding a scythe.

*Lent by the Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia*

**Deep Dish (Brasero)  
Ceramic lustreware  
Spain, Manises (Valencia), 15th century**

✠ The size and shape of this basin suggest that it was designed to contain water for personal ablutions. It would have been grouped with a laver for dispensing water, and a towel, in the living quarters of a well-appointed household.

*Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection.  
Accession no. 56.171.154*



Drug Jar (**Albarello**)  
Ceramic lustreware  
**Spain, Manises (Valencia), second half of the 15th century**

✠ Apothecary jars were among the most abundant lustreware products exported from Valencia. The surface decoration consisted mainly of floral and foliate patterns, but many carried glazed labels or legends indicating their contents and urging caution in their use. Occasionally the labels specified the use for which the contents were intended, e.g., herbs "against the plague." The albarellos were generally sealed by tightly-stretched pieces of parchment across the top.

*Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection.  
Accession no. 56.171.88*

Giovan Filippo Ingrassia  
**Informatione del Pestifero, et Contagioso Morbo . . .**  
**[Palermo: Mayda, 1576]**

✠ Ingrassia studied medicine at the University of Padua, taught medicine and anatomy at the University of Naples, and in 1556, by decree of Philip II of Spain, was made *protomedicus* of Palermo. He published other medical books, and made important contributions to the study of anatomy, legal medicine, and public health. This work on the plague is based on the epidemic in Sicily in 1575 and 1576. The hospital which housed plague victims and the area for disinfecting clothes and linens are illustrated in two engravings, and a third illustration, which is repeated on the title page, depicts justice.

*Lent by The Edward G. Miner Library*



## **Limbourg brothers, Procession of St. Gregory**

### **The Belles Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry (facsimile)**

New York, The Cloisters

Paris, c. 1406-08

### **The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry (facsimile)**

Chantilly, Musée Condé 65

Paris, 1411-16

✠ Demonstrating a concern for the Black Death in France, the Limbourg brothers introduced a cycle which was novel in a Book of Hours, the Procession of St. Gregory. The *Belles Heures* uses a series of four illustrations depicting the end of a plague in Rome in the year 590. The first shows the institution of the Great Litany by St. Gregory; the second, the Great Litany procession; the third, St. Gregory seeing the angel atop Hadrian's tomb sheathing the sword, signifying the end of the plague; and the fourth, a procession of flagellants. The *Très Riches Heures* has only a double-page illustration, showing the Great Litany procession with St. Gregory witnessing the angel sheathing the sword. From this event, Hadrian's tomb came to be known as "Castel Sant'Angelo." This illustration was not completed by the Limbourgs; Jean Limbourg was dead by March 9, 1416, and the two other brothers were dead by September or October of 1416. They probably died of the plague.

*Photographs courtesy of George Braziller, Inc., New York*

## **Petrus Ludovicus Maldura/Franciscus Diedus**

### **In vitam Sancti Rochi contra pestem**

**Moguntiae: Friedberg, 1495**

✠ Although the title page lists the author as Petrus Ludovicus Maldura, the main author is probably Franciscus Diedus. The woodcut illustrates the legend of St. Roch, here attended by the angel who dresses his bubo and the dog which brings him a piece of bread.

*Lent by the Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia*



**Petrus ludovicus Maldura**  
**ra In Vitam sancti Rochi**  
Contra Pestem Epidimic Apud dñm dignissi  
mi intercessoris Unacū eiusdem Officio.

M



Title page, Petrus Ludovicus Maldura  
*In vitam Sancti Rochi contra pestem*  
Courtesy of The Library of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia



**Johannes Mercurius, *Contra pestem*  
Probably after 1500**

✠ Johannes Mercurius Corrigiensis, or Giovanni Mercurio from Correggio, was described by contemporary writers as an eloquent speaker and a great celebrity who wandered and exhorted in various lands, dressed in sackcloth and girded with ropes. He is known to have been in Rome in 1484 and Florence in 1486, and he also travelled to Cesena, Lucca, Bologna, and Ferrara. His rhetorical skills and natural eloquence gave him broad appeal, and his self-image as a prophet coupled with his exceptional abilities provided him with a following. As evidenced by this plague tract, he was an expert in alchemy. ✠ At the beginning of this tract, Johannes Mercurius tells us that he had revealed to him by the divine spirit a remedy and medicine straight from God. This medicine against the plague was a theriac, bezoardic medicine. A plague-stricken person, after taking the medicine, was required to hold fast to the thought that, when "this lash from God" was removed, he would "escape wholly and be completely free from every other fatal and savage pestilence." The patient was also advised especially not to eat or sleep during the twenty-four hours in which the cure was being accomplished. A number of other helpful prescriptions are also given.

*Lent by The Library of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia*

**Francesco Petrarca, *De remediis utriusque fortunae*  
Written probably in the Carthusian monastery of Erfurt  
before 1430**

✠ *De remediis* is a series of dialogues between a fool, driven by his good or evil fortune, and wisdom, which teaches him moderation. The plague which killed Petrarch's beloved Laura was an outstanding example of ill fortune.

*Lent by the University Library, State University of New York at Binghamton*



Marcantonio Raimondi, after Raphael  
**The Plague in Crete (Il Morbetto)**  
Early 16th century

✠ Raphael's composition, engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi, uses parallelization with an event in classical mythology to dramatize the effects of the plague in early sixteenth-century Italy. The inscription on the pedestal comes from Vergil's *Aeneid*: *Linguebant dulces animas, aut aegra trahebant corp[ora]* (The people gave up their sweet lives or dragged along their sick bodies). The ancient plague being illustrated was actually a famine; however, the elements of distress and sorrow are understood in any century.

*Lent by Philip J. Weimerskirch*

**Rattus rattus**, called the Black Rat or Roof Rat  
**Mounted specimen**

✠ Plague is a rodent disease transferred to humans by the bite of fleas which are carrying the plague-bacillus *Yersinia pestis* (formerly *Pasteurella pestis*) taken in with blood sucked from diseased rats. *Rattus rattus* was the major rodent vector for the Black Death.

*Lent by The American Museum of Natural History*

**Rattus rattus and Rattus norvegicus**  
**Study skins**

✠ Throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period only the "black rat," *Rattus rattus*, seems to have lived in northern Europe. The "brown rat" or "sewer rat," *Rattus norvegicus*, moved into Europe in the eighteenth century and replaced its predecessor to a large extent. Some historians have attributed the otherwise unexplained disappearance of major plague epidemics from Europe after 1665 to this ecological shift since the fleas of the sewer rat are generally less effective vectors of *Yersinia pestis*. In addition, the brown rat lives less frequently in close proximity to humans, preferring basements, sewers, and riverbanks in contrast to the black rat's inclination toward attics, thatched roofs, etc. *R. rattus* is smaller than *R. norvegicus*: eleven ounces average in contrast to a pound or more, and body length of seven inches compared to nine inches. *R. rattus*, however, may at times seem larger because of its much longer tail.

*Lent by The American Museum of Natural History*



## Safe Conduct Pass Naples, 1632

✠ The plague was often spread throughout the land by people fleeing or passing through the affected cities. The city of Florence suffered such severe and repeated attacks, that the disease came to be known as the "plague of Florence." In 1450, Tuscan pilgrims traveling to Rome to celebrate the Holy Year contracted the plague in Florence, only to die upon reaching Rome. ✠ The safe conduct pass reassures the reader that its bearer is not a carrier of the disease.

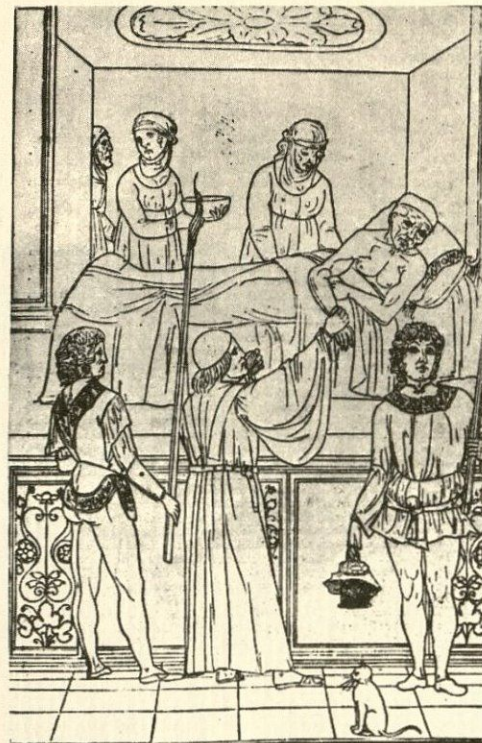
*The under-signed is leaving from this illustrious and most loyal City of Naples in order to go to the place indicated below. And since the aforesaid city is sound and free of any contagious disease by the grace of God, one can have commerce and converse with him without any apprehension whatever concerning the aforementioned (sort of) contagious disease.*

*Lent by the Edward G. Miner Library*

## St. Fiacre Alabaster England, 15th century

✠ Born in Ireland toward the end of the sixth century, Fiacre traveled to France, where he sought a life of seclusion. He spent his time at prayer, fasting, and physical labor in the garden. It is through this last activity, and miracles relating to it, that he came to be known as the patron saint of gardeners. During his lifetime he is said to have been able to effect cures of blindness and other diseases merely by the touch of his hands.

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*A Plague Patient in 15th-century Padua  
Gentile Bellini, from Johannes de Ketham's  
Fasciculus Medicinae, Venice: 1493  
Courtesy of Philip J. Weimerskirch*





*Saint Roch (from Heitz's Pestblätter)*  
Original in Biblioteca Classense, Ravenna  
© 1969 by George Deaux. From the book *The Black Death 1347*,  
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**St. Roch**  
**Lindenwood**  
**Germany, ca. 1500**

✠ St. Roch was born in Montpellier, ca. 1295, the son of the ruler of the city. At the age of 20, after the death of his parents, he renounced his position, distributed his money and worldly goods to the poor, and commenced his wanderings in the garb of a pilgrim. ✠ Passing through the plague-stricken cities of Italy, he was able to cure the victims with the sign of the Cross. He was, himself, stricken with the disease and, upon his recovery, returned to France, where he was mistaken for a spy, and imprisoned. His true identity was revealed after his death, five years later, in 1327. ✠ The miracles and cures that are associated with St. Roch have led to his being venerated as the protector and patron saint of the plague-stricken. Representations of the saint usually show him dressed as a mendicant pilgrim, his robe drawn up to reveal the plague bubo on his thigh.

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*Accession no. 60.126*

**Giovanni Battista Susio**  
**Libro del Conoscere la Pestilenza**  
**Mantua: Giocomo Ruffinello, 1476**

✠ Susio's work, dedicated to "the most serene Guglielmo, Duke of Mantua and Monferrato," is contemporary with that of Ingrassia and Centorio, but describes the plague as it occurred in Mantua. Susio, a physician who practiced in Mantua, wrote at least two other works on medicine, published in 1558 and 1559.

*Lent by The Edward G. Miner Library*



**Francesco Traini, Triumph of Death**  
**Photocopies of the fresco, Campo Santo, Pisa, ca. 1350**

✕ The Triumph of Death fresco by Traini is important in a number of ways: it is one of the earliest, most complete, and monumental reactions against the Black Death which had just begun to devastate Europe. The theme of the encounter of the three living and the three dead is united for the first time with Death who disdains the one who wants to die, falling instead upon the one who is not awaiting him. Also incorporated in this fresco is the exaltation of the sanctity of the hermetic life, the struggle between angels and demons for possession of the souls of the dead, and the sinking of the damned into the furnace of Inferno. At the extreme right of the fresco, in contrast to the anchorites who choose a life of sacrifice, are young men and women seated in an orange grove, living a worldly life of vain pleasure.

*Gift of the University of Michigan Museum of Art*

**Turret Laver/Aquamanile**  
**Bronze**  
**West European, ca. 1400**

✕ Lavets, or containers designed to dispense water, were often fashioned into fanciful forms, such as fantastic animals and birds, or, in this instance, a tower. This laver was probably designed for personal use in the living quarters of a home.

*Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection.*  
*Accession no. 47.101.56 ab*





*Three Doctors at the Bedside of a Plague Victim*

Frontispiece from a Strasbourg medical treatise of 1519

by Hieronymus Brunshwig

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