"Straining the History of Infectious Diseases: Europe's Two Black Deaths"

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Abstract
For the past decade, a group of medical historians has been arguing for a longer chronology of the late medieval, or "Second," Plague Pandemic, looking beyond the origin dates of 1346 or the 1330s proposed by previous scholarship, and instead casting their eyes back to the mid- or even early 13th century. This analytical move has been grounded in part on the findings of another, new realm of historical analysis, paleogenomics, which, working hand-in-hand with the bioinformatics discipline of phylogenetics, has now placed plague's causative organism, *Yersinia pestis,* in evolutionary time. It has been elaborated further by new readings of documentary sources.

It is ironic, therefore, that the historians of medicine have now parted ways with the geneticists. The latter wish to hold on to the traditional dating of the "Black Death," the term popularized since the 18th century to refer to the notoriously cataclysmic mortalities documented in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East in the late 1340s. With that dating—and the assumption that plague was arriving as a *new* disease—came associated routes and trajectories for plague's (presumably rapid) passages across the Afro-Eurasian continents. These have been mapped, both figuratively and literally, onto Black Death narratives for the past 700 years.

I demonstrate that, now that *Yersinia pestis*' history has been phylogenetically divided into branching strains, there is no going back to fantasies of vast waves of a single undifferentiated "plague" sweeping across continental masses as if driven by the wind. Strains are, by definition, tied to specific chronologies and geographies (and perhaps even host ecologies), and when taken into consideration as historical delimiters, new maps and new timelines for the pandemic unfold. Europe's experience of the Black Death was caused by at least two major strains in active circulation by the 1340s, one arriving (as our major sources have always told us) from the Mediterranean, while a second one—having entered northeastern Europe more than half a century earlier—was amplified in the late 1340s by the same climatic forces that fueled the strains emerging out of the Middle East. This history of plague was inaccessible to any prior observer, even the great plague historians of the 20th century. But, having become discernible to us in the age of molecular genomics, HIV/AIDS, and COVID, we have an entirely new way to understand pandemics as biological crises and (in the case of later medieval Europe) as cauldrons of persecution on an extraordinary scale.

Keywords: Black Death; *Yersinia pestis*; epidemiological geography; pandemic origins; evolutionary genomics; paradigm shifts; climate history; minority persecutions; poison