

## From the Black Plague to the Coronavirus. COVID-19

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**Received:** July 01, 2020; **Published:** July 03, 2020.

Volume 4 Issue 2 July 2020

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The long list of plagues and diseases that have scourged humanity since ancient times requires not only many pages, but also theories and hypotheses, many of which would not necessarily be accurate. The reliability and precision of the information has put many historians on the spot. The purpose of this article is to take a couple of emblematic epidemics that marked a milestone in history, describe them and philosophize about their background, if that is possible or will get us anywhere. The disease, regardless of what century it appeared in, emerged in a specific context and has social and economic consequences. Specific figures and percentages hide from the philosophical exercise.

Centuries ago, during the siege by the Mongol armies to the fort of Kaffa, (today known as the Black Sea port of Feodosia in Ukraine), the soldiers began to waver due to a sudden illness (“they fell like flies”). The Black Plague or Black Death, a name given due to the coloration of the skin when the lymphatic system and vessels collapsed, spread throughout Europe between 1346 and 1353 and killed almost half of its population. Some sources attributed this to an intentional spread by the Mongols, who upon seeing their troops fall, began to launch and catapult the corpses of their soldiers; others sources spoke of divine punishment. The surviving individuals, merchants or others took their boats and fled in terror to the west in different directions, carrying the disease with them. The causal agent traveled with them on their ships, clothing and looms. As we know today, the Black Plague was a ZOOONOSIS caused by RATS CARRYING FLEAS INFECTED WITH A BACTERIA CALLED

YERSINA PESTIS (in honor of the bacteriologist Yersin, who many centuries later discovered the germ). The Black Plague had several consequences. In addition to the death of millions, it shook the economy and feudal system. However, its effect was also considered as a catalyst for the Renaissance and modernity.

Sometimes, I have the feeling that history is circular and that it rolls with memory. It rolls, turns, and stops in another century. Sometimes, death takes a breather and sends its soldiers armed with their scythes to hide, while the world population recovers and grows. The great Elias Canetti, (Nobel Literature Prize) reminds us that death pales when it sees you grow up or father a child. However, and honoring its fame, in 1665, the Black Death strikes again, with a flare-up of the epidemic in London. The chroniclers tell us that a small town west of Manchester stoically resisted the attack. The Black Plague tore through London and other cities and reached the town of Eyam in 1665. A fact for posterity, (especially now in times of social distancing), is that this town was isolated and placed under a voluntary quarantine with a defined border, for a whole year. No one entered or left the village. Food and goods were left at the border,

**Citation:** Jaime Hinzpeter C. “From the Black Plague to the Coronavirus. COVID-19”. *Orthopaedic Surgery and Traumatology* 4.2 (2020): 17-19.

made of stones with holes that contained coins with vinegar, and later collected by the neighbors. This legend was written on a sign.

A New York Times headline stated - "Rare epidemic strikes the north of China" – but, this was not in 2020 nor in 1665; it was in June 1918. The epidemic reached the East, but its origin was not in China; it was in the United States (Kansas City to be exact, according to the book *The Pale Horseman*). It was the so-called Spanish flu (name given to that plague sometime later). With over 50 million deaths, it was the largest epidemic suffered by humanity since the medieval Black Plague. A great global and collective drama ravaged the 20th century. The chronicles and writings from that time contain some dramatic testimonies. Much of the symptomatology is narrated in detail in the book *The Pale Horseman*. Nursing personnel stationed on ships that had patients who had already died from this pandemic-reported corpses with "blackened faces and hands." They also reported that the chest swelled and that the bluish tone that the patients initially had darkened until it turned black.

Another type of Black Death. Another gruesome disguise of death.

Although the Spanish flu lasted years less than the Black Plague, there were very short and seasonal outbreaks. In August 1918, the flu "came back" more violent than ever and spread like wildfire practically everywhere around the world, reaching countries as far away as Brazil, Peru and Chile, and lasting until 1920. As in the Black Death, the causative agent of the Spanish flu remained unknown (and even less so that it was a virus). However, the search took less time. In 1943, the influenza virus was isolated and "seen" (genome) in 1943.

A new outbreak will be a disguised word, a hidden appendix of a circular karma. History repeats itself, but under other names and numbers (and other germs!). It makes me think today about the countries hardest hit by the scourge of the Coronavirus, also known as SARS COV-2; the United States, Italy, France, Great Britain and the same Iberian Peninsula with Spain (neighboring Portugal has far fewer cases). Could it be because of its history of remote scourging? Countries with the epicenter of everything, commerce, migrations and participation in wars. Could it be a kind of metaphysical scar covering entire continents that has reopened? Or will it simply be a kind of collective memory of a basic organism (not even fully alive) such as viruses. In two thousand years, we still have not been able to fully understand these viruses, let alone quantify them in number, despite the fact that the viral genomes that are stored are still being studied and the vaccines are being improved year after year (a great advantage in today's world compared to the one 100 years ago). This coronavirus, months after its arrival on the planet, has still not shown its full face. Who knows if it will completely change the face of humanity, or if it will take a break, hidden among the many asymptomatic carriers it has left behind? In any case, the plagues of yesterday and today do not distinguish names or populations; they attacked Romans, Christians, and pagans alike. Merchants and workers; rich and poor. In addition, what's more, the idea of the wrath of God has always been underlying. Throughout the centuries, medieval chroniclers said that in the months before the arrival of the Black Plague to Europe, in the late 40s of the 14th century, there were sightings of locust plagues, unusually large hailstorms, and most surprisingly, lizards and snakes fell from the sky. Many people had believed, believed, and still believe in it (until 1987, 43% of Americans believed that AIDS was a divine punishment).

Faced with divine punishment, all that remained was resistance, just like the people I mentioned earlier, the English townspeople of Eyam and their voluntary quarantine. Far from accepting the destiny that was to fatally fall upon them, they considered that isolation was their only salvation even if it was a hard option. It is said that today, at the entrance to the town, in the afternoons, a black crow perches on a sign that dates from 1666 (the year after voluntary quarantine) that reads.

*"Any action taken before a pandemic will seem exaggerated ... However, any action taken after it ... will seem insufficient ..."*

Responsibility and prevention. History reminds us of this. We will continue to philosophize calmly afterwards.

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