

Chapter 1

Black Death

ABSTRACT

Epidemics have constituted a problem for humanity throughout history because they not only affect the individuals they infect, but the entire society in many ways. In fact, the plague epidemic, which started in 1347 and is called the Black Death, caused the death of millions of people and it became the biggest fear of the society, deeply affecting the society in a psychological way. Black Death has been the greatest threat for humanity, causing the death of about 40% of European population. As a result, the world's social structure has changed completely. Even after these events were resolved, its impact on people continued for a long period of time. Before and after the epidemic, the transition from grain to livestock, from economic consumption to luxury consumption, especially with regards to food consumption in Europe, and the food prescriptions used to prevent the epidemic underline the importance of gastronomy for humanity even in this tragic period.

INTRODUCTION

Three of the numerous plague epidemics, being large and small, that occurred in different periods and in different geographies, took a wider place in historiography due to being on a large-scale or intercontinental mass epidemic, namely, a pandemic. The first of these three pandemics is the Plague of Justinian in Istanbul (Constantinople) in the 6th century (542), the second one is the plague epidemic which emerged in the 14th century and that is called

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Black Death, and the last one is the third plague, namely Plague Epidemic, that got intense at the end of the 19th century (Varlık, 2017).

The first known major plague epidemic in history was seen on the Mediterranean coast in AD 542. The plague epidemic of Justinian, seen during the reign of Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (Justinian the Great), was a pandemic that affected the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire and especially its capital Constantinople, as well as the Sassanid Empire and port cities all around the Mediterranean since merchant ships carrying grain from Egypt harbored rats carrying plague-infested fleas (Arık, 1991). It was seen as an important factor in the fall of the Roman Empire and its influence ended in 750. It has been asserted that this epidemic, which started in Egypt in 542, spread to Ireland via Constantinople by following the trade paths. Procopius being Roman writer of the 6th century stated that during this epidemic, which lasted for three years, 5-10 thousand people died in a day in Constantinople. It is estimated that the disease has spread to northwestern Europe, while epidemic affected Egypt, northern Africa, Palestine and Syria, Anatolia, Italy, Gaul and Germany. It caused the deaths of 25-100 million people, comprising half of the European population at that time. Death toll was so high that it had serious consequences in medieval European society. Lack of adequate number of farmers led to the abolition of serfdom, general questioning of authority and riots, and the complete abandonment of many provinces and villages. Although there have been other epidemics of plague in Europe, no other epidemics have been recorded for the next 600 years (Alfani & Murphy, 2017; Cartwright, 2020).

Even though its beginning is considered to be 1348 in some sources, the Black Death (or the Black Plague or the Great Plague), which continued between 1347-1352 with its generally accepted dates, was effective all over the world, especially in Europe, and it ended the lives of millions of people in a short time. It is the name given to the great plague epidemic. This epidemic is the second largest plague epidemic in history. As a matter of fact, it is a disaster that has caused more loss of life than many wars in history. Its effect was so significant that it caused nearly 100 million deaths in a few years. It is known that only in the European continent, after the epidemic, the population of about 50-60 million (about one third of the European population at that time) decreased and the continent's population in the 13th century was reached again in the 16th century (Nikiforuk, 2018). The first known information about the emergence and spread of the epidemic is that the disease started in China and Central Asia and spread all over the world from there. Although it is not fully proven, it is known in the sources that

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