

# HIST 119: The Black Death

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Office hours: Tu 3-4, Wed 2-3, and by  
appointment

Fall 2024  
Tu-Th 12:30-1:45  
Hutchison 473



Burial of plague victims in Tournai, Gilles li Muisis (d. 1352), *Annales*, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS 13076-77, f. 24v. <https://uurl.kbr.be/2028135>

This course examines the Black Death (1346-53) as an epidemiological, cultural, and historical phenomenon. Analyzing such disparate types of evidence as paleogenetics, chronicles, art, and literature, we will address questions of the plague's etiology, spread, mortality rate, and social and economic effects. Inspired by our own recent experience with COVID-19, we will also consider cultural reactions to pandemic disease and rampant death, as well as the disparate interpretations and responses of contemporaries and modern observers alike.

*All readings are to be completed before class on the day assigned (with the exception of the first day, August 27).*

Date	Topic	Reading assignment
August 27	Introduction to the course	Frank M. Snowden, <i>Epidemics and Society from the Black Death to the Present</i> (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), ch. 3-4 (pp. 28-57) (BB)

August 29	Lecture: on the eve of the Black Death	Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, <i>A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition</i> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), pp. xvi-xxviii (BB); Boccaccio, “The plague in Florence,” in Rosemary Horrox, transl. and ed., <i>The Black Death</i> , Manchester Medieval Sources (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 26-34
September 3	Lecture: the scientific analysis of plague	John Aberth, <i>The Black Death: A New History of the Great Mortality in Europe, 1347-1500</i> (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), introduction, pp. 1-13
September 5	Discussion: the new science of plague vs. the old textbook view	Monica H. Green, “What Happens When We Expand the Chronology and Geography of Plague’s History?” (video of lecture at Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research, March 16, 2020), <a href="https://youtu.be/gCUBhUOohp0?si=JSM3l_Zj8KVxyNd7">https://youtu.be/gCUBhUOohp0?si=JSM3l_Zj8KVxyNd7</a> ; “Black Death,” <i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i> , July 14, 2024, <a href="https://www.britannica.com/event/Black-Death">https://www.britannica.com/event/Black-Death</a> (BB).  For those who prefer (rather dense) reading to video, substitute Monica H. Green, “Plague ( <i>Yersinia pestis</i> ),” <i>Encyclopedia of the History of Science</i> (May 2024) doi: 10.34758/dy11-5697
September 10	Lecture: the numbers and pattern of transmission	Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 1-2, pp. 14-58
September 12	Discussion: the entry into Europe	Gabriele de’ Mussis, “The arrival of the plague,” in Horrox, <i>Black Death</i> , 14-26; Hannah Barker, “Laying the Corpses to Rest: Grain, Embargoes, and <i>Yersinia pestis</i> in the Black Sea, 1346–48,” <i>Speculum</i> 96.1 (2021): 96-126 (BB) [or her webcast summary: <a href="https://youtu.be/9hykqo2v2Uk">https://youtu.be/9hykqo2v2Uk</a> (Barker’s presentation begins at 29:25 on the video)].  See also a useful summary of Barker’s argument at <a href="https://www.medievalists.net/2021/01/black-death-europe/">https://www.medievalists.net/2021/01/black-death-europe/</a>
September 17	Lecture: medieval healing and medical responses to plague	Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 3, pp. 59-82
September 19	Discussion: medical responses to plague	“The report of the Paris medical faculty, October 1348,” in Horrox, <i>Black Death</i> , 158-63; Jacme d’Agramont, <i>Regiment de preservacio a epidimia o pestilencia e mortaldats</i> [Regimen of Protections Against Epidemics or Pestilence and Mortality], trans. M. I. Duran-Reynals and C-E. A. Winslow, <i>Bulletin of the History of Medicine</i> 23,1 (1949): 57-89 (BB)
September 24	Lecture: the contours of medieval Christian	Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 5, pp. 103-07, 112-21

	life and religious responses to disasters	
September 26	Discussion: the flagellant movement	“Intercessionary processions (1),” in Horrox, <i>Black Death</i> , 111-12; Heinrich of Herford, “Book of Memorable Matters”; Fritsche Cloener, “Chronicle”; Gilles li Muisis, “Chronicle”; and King Philip VI of France, “Mandate to Suppress the Flagellants,” in John Aberth, <i>The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, A Brief History with Documents</i> , The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 118-39 (BB); Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 7, pp. 145-68
October 1	Lecture: the cult of the saints	
October 3	<b>Midterm exam (in class)</b>	
October 8	Discussion: plague saints	Gilles li Muissis, “A prayer made to St. Sebastian against the mortality which flourished in 1349,” in Horrox, <i>Black Death</i> , pp. 125-26; William Caxton, trans., “Life of St. Roch,” from <i>The Golden Legend</i> (modernized English spellings) (BB); testimony of Johanna du Clerigo and Yvo an Dagaut (and introduction) in Laura A. Smoller, “The Canonization Process for St. Vincent Ferrer,” in Thomas Head, ed., <i>Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology</i> (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 798-800 (BB)
October 10	Discussion: Emotional responses	Michele da Piazza, “The plague in Sicily,” “The plague in Avignon,” and “Petrarch on the death of friends,” in Horrox, <i>Black Death</i> , pp. 35-45; Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 9, pp. 195-213
October 15	Fall break	
October 17	<b>No class: time to work on paper</b>	
October 22	Lecture: the accusation of well-poisoning	Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 8, pp. 169-94
October 24	Discussion: well-poisoning accusations	Herman Gigas, “Well-poisoning”; Heinrich Truchess, “The persecution of the Jews”; “Measures taken against the Jews in Lausanne”; “Examination of the Jews captured in Savoy”; “Letter from Cologne to Strassburg”; “Mandate of Clement VI concerning the Jews”; “Accusations of well-poisoning against the poor”; and Henry Suso, “An accusation of well-poisoning”; in Horrox, <i>Black Death</i> , 207-226
October 29	Lecture: Islamic responses to plague	Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 5, pp. 107-12; Justin Stearns, “New Directions in the Study of Religious Responses to the Black Death,” <i>History Compass</i> 7/5 (2009): 1363-1375 (BB)
October 31	Discussion: Islamic responses to plague	Ibn al-Wardi, “An Essay on the Report of the Pestilence,” transl. in Michael Dols, “Ibn al-Wardi’s Risalah al-naba’ ‘an

		al-waba. A Translation of a Major Source for the History of the Black Death in the Middle East,” in <i>Near Eastern Numismatics. Iconography, Epigraphy, and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles</i> , ed. D. K. Kouymijian (Beirut, 1974), pp. 443–55 (BB)
November 5	Lecture and viewing: the Black Death and art	Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 6, pp. 122-44
November 7	Lecture: environmental aspects	Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 4, pp. 83-102
		<b>Paper due November 10, by 11:59 p.m.</b>
November 12	Lecture: public health responses to the plague	Guy Geltner, “The Path to Pistoia: Urban Hygiene before the Black Death,” <i>Past and Present</i> 246 (2020): 3-33 (BB)
November 14	Discussion: public health measures	“Ordinances against the spread of plague, Pistoia, 1348,” “Plague regulations of Bernabò Visconti, lord of Milan, 1374,” “London butchery regulations, 1371,” in Horrox, <i>Black Death</i> , pp. 194-205; Miquel Parets, <i>A Journal of the Plague Year: The Diary of the Barcelona Tanner Miquel Parets, 1651</i> , ed. and trans. James S. Amelang (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 59-71 (BB)
November 19	Lecture: economic and social effects	Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , ch. 10, pp. 214-32; “The ordinance of labourers, 18 June 1349,” in Horrox, <i>Black Death</i> , 287-89
November 21	Discussion: is this the end of the world?	Laura Ackerman Smoller, “Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages,” in Paul Freedman and Caroline Bynum, eds., <i>Last Things: Eschatology and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages</i> (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), pp. 156-187 (BB)  <i>Also bring your copy of Horrox to class with you.</i>
November 26	Lecture: living with plague; the plague generation and beyond	Paula Findlen, “Petrarch’s Plague: Love, Death, and Friendship in a Time of Panic,” <i>The Public Domain Review</i> (June 11, 2020), <a href="https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/petrarchs-plague/">https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/petrarchs-plague/</a>
November 28	Thanksgiving	
December 3	Lecture: the Black Death in the modern imagination	Faye Marie Getz, “Black Death and the Silver Lining: Meaning, Continuity, and Revolutionary Change in Histories of Medieval Plague,” <i>Journal of the History of Biology</i> 24:2 (1991): 265-89 (BB); Laura Marris, “Blood Memory,” in Alice Kaplan and Laura Marris, <i>States of Plague: Reading Albert Camus in a Pandemic</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 107-115 (BB); Aberth, <i>Black Death</i> , Epilogue, pp. 233-36

December 5	Discussion: Camus's <i>The Plague</i>	Albert Camus, <i>The Plague</i> , trans. Laura Marris (New York: Vintage, 2022)  <b>Please read only this translation of Camus's novel.</b>  <b>There will be an essay question about Camus on the final exam.</b>
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**Final exam: Our exam will be held on Sunday, December 15, at 7:15-10:15 pm.**

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For further reading suggestions:

Joris Roosen and Monica H. Green, "The Mother of All Pandemics: The State of Black Death Research in the Era of COVID-19 – Bibliography," which is regularly updated, at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x0D\\_dwyAwp9xi9sMCW5UvpGfEVH5J2ZA/view?pli=1](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x0D_dwyAwp9xi9sMCW5UvpGfEVH5J2ZA/view?pli=1)

and

Nükhet Varlık, "Plague in the Mediterranean and Islamic World," *Isis* 114, S1 (2023): S313-S362 (BB), a wonderfully thorough and thoughtful bibliographic essay, plus bibliography, at <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/726989>

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### **Learning objectives**

At the end of this course, students will be able to

- Discuss various interpretations of the Black Death, its causes, and its effects
- Analyze primary sources regarding the Black Death
- Identify the thesis in works of historical scholarship
- Formulate an argument based on primary and/or secondary source evidence and express it clearly in written form
- Use primary and/or secondary sources to support claims made orally and in writing

### **Course materials**

The following books are available for purchase at the campus Barnes & Noble. All also should be available as reserves via Rush Rhees Library. Additional readings are accessible through Blackboard (marked BB in the syllabus).

*Required:*

Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Laura Marris (New York: Vintage, 2022). ISBN: 978-0593082096.  
Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death: A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994). ISBN: 978-0719034985.

John Aberth, *The Black Death: A New History of the Great Mortality in Europe, 1347-1500* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). ISBN: 978-0199937981

The history department's Kelly Family Book Fund can assist students with financial need by purchasing materials for history courses. This fund was established to provide support for course materials for students in need who are pursuing an undergraduate degree in history. All students taking a history course may apply; preference will be given to those who are majoring in history. To apply for assistance in purchasing your textbooks, use the following link:

<https://forms.gle/c2WArDa5g696oKeU6>.

### **Assignments**

- Attendance at and participation in all class discussions and activities—10%
- Discussion assignments—10%
- Midterm exam (October 3, in class)—25%
- Paper (due November 10, by 11:59 p.m.)—27%
- Final exam (December 15)—28%

#### *About the discussion assignments:*

For each discussion, you must post on Blackboard a response to the readings that includes a quotation that you would like to discuss from each of the assigned readings, plus a sentence or two explaining why you have chosen that quotation. **Please do not quote from the editors' introductions to primary texts;** the aim is to think about how historians can use primary sources as evidence to prove a point, so our discussions of primary sources will involve our analysis of the medieval texts themselves, not their editors' comments on them. **All reading responses must be posted by 11:59 p.m. on the day before the discussion in order to receive credit. Because I use these postings and comments to structure our class discussions, I cannot give credit for late submissions and postings.**

#### *Citations:*

All work in this class should be appropriately footnoted, and the paper should also include a bibliography of works cited, separated into primary and secondary sources. All citations should be follow the University of Chicago Manual of Style Notes and Bibliography (Turabian) format. For a quick start, see [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html). The full Chicago Manual of Style is available online through River Campus Libraries: [https://rochester.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01ROCH\\_INST/1vg5sr1/alma9937102513405216](https://rochester.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01ROCH_INST/1vg5sr1/alma9937102513405216).

#### *About the paper:*

Your paper should identify and discuss three areas in which the treatment of the Black Death in either Frank Snowden's 2019 *Epidemics and Society* or the 2024 *Encyclopedia Britannica* needs to be updated. You should support your points with evidence from primary and secondary sources, citing at least one scholarly book, book chapter, or journal article in support of each of your three "corrections." (That is, your bibliography must include at least three scholarly works, in addition to the primary sources you cite.) The paper should be properly footnoted, in University of Chicago Humanities/Turabian (notes and bibliography) style, and should include a bibliography of "Works

Cited” at the end. Papers should be 1500-2000 words in length (approximately 6-8 pages, excluding footnotes and bibliography), double-spaced, and in standard 12-point type.

### **Grading scale**

A	100-93%
A-	92.9-90%
B+	89.9-87%
B	86.9-83%
B-	82.9-80%
C+	79.9-77%
C	76.9-73%
C-	72.9-70%
D+	69.9-67%
D	66.9-63%
D-	62.9-60%
F	Below 60%

In case of some mix-up, it is a good idea to save all returned work until you receive your grade at the end of the semester.

### **Statement regarding credit hours**

The College’s credit hour policy on undergraduate courses is to award 4 credit hours for courses that meet for the equivalent of 3 periods of 50 minutes each week. Students enrolled in HIST 119 are expected to devote at least one hour each week to analyzing the course readings, working alone or in groups, and to reading and researching their papers.

### **General policies**

#### *Late work:*

Late work will be penalized 5% for each calendar day late, with the exception of the discussion assignments, which **must be received by the specified date and time to receive credit.**

#### *Attendance:*

Attendance at and participation in all classes is crucial. Three unexcused absences will lower your grade by 5%; after six unexcused absences, I reserve the right to impose a failing grade in the course. For the sake of accounting, three tardies will constitute one absence.

#### *Students with disabilities:*

The University of Rochester respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities. In the event you encounter any barrier(s) to full participation in this course due to the impact of disability, please contact the Office of Disability Resources. The access coordinators in the Office of Disability Resources can meet with you to discuss the barriers you are experiencing and explain the eligibility process for establishing academic accommodations. You can reach the Office of Disability

Resources at: [disability@rochester.edu](mailto:disability@rochester.edu); (585) 276-5075; Taylor Hall. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me as well.

*Classroom etiquette:*

Please turn off cell phones or set them to a silent alert. Do not take them out in class unless instructed to do so. In the rare event you must enter late or leave class early, or enter and leave the classroom during our class period, please let me know in advance.

*Academic honesty:*

All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance with the University of Rochester's Academic Honesty Policy. Cheating and plagiarism are serious offenses and will be treated as such. Anyone who engages in such activities will be turned over to the College Board on Academic Honesty for disciplinary action, as outlined at <http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/>. Submitting as one's own any work produced by another, including by AI such as ChatGPT, constitutes plagiarism. Close paraphrasing of another's words is also plagiarism. For helpful discussions of plagiarism (including subtle instances), see the American Historical Association's "Defining Plagiarism," <https://www.historians.org/resource/defining-plagiarism/>.

*Incomplete contracts:*

According to a new UR policy, students can request an incomplete notation (I) for a course when there are circumstances beyond the student's control, such as illness or personal emergency, that prevent the student from finishing the coursework on time. Students are expected to contact their instructors directly, and as soon as possible, when these situations occur. Awarding an incomplete is always at the discretion of the instructor. Approval from the College Deans' Office will now also be required, in addition to approval from the instructor of the course, before an Incomplete notation will be entered on a student's record. Students must have completed the majority of coursework in the class to be eligible for an Incomplete notation, and the student cannot be required or expected to audit the course in a future semester in order to complete the outstanding work.

*A note regarding the use of computers in the classroom:*

While I do not (yet) ban laptops from the classroom, there is a significant body of research that shows that people retain material more effectively when they take notes by hand rather than on a computer. (E.g., <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop/>.) Needless to say, the opportunities for distraction are much greater if the Internet and the world of social media beckon. Similarly, while there are numerous readings posted on Blackboard for the class, researchers have demonstrated that reading a physical, hard copy of a text results in more focused and critical reading. (E.g., <https://newrepublic.com/article/135326/digital-reading-no-substitute-print>.) Ideally, you will print out readings that have been posted on Blackboard to read them. **At the very least, you should plan to bring some version of the text(s) under discussion to class (hard copy or digital) with you.**

*Disclaimer:*

The instructor reserves the right to change topics and assignments on the syllabus at any point in the semester. Any such change will be posted on Blackboard.

*Copyright notice:*

Copyright © by Laura Smoller as to this syllabus and any in-class lectures.