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SUMMARY OF THE VIDEO ABOUT BOCCACCIO AND THE BLACK DEATH

<https://www.ancient.eu/article/1537/boccaccio-on-the-black-death-text--commentary/>

The black death is the name given to the plague that outbroke in Europe between 1347 and 1352 in reference to the black buboes growths which erupted on the body of those infected. It came from the east where it raged between 1346 to 1360.

One of the primary sources on the outbreak was the Italian writer and poet Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), best known for his work *The Decameron*, which tells the story of 10 people who entertain themselves with stories while in isolation from the plague. The outbreak would completely alter the European social structure, as well as the belief systems of many of those who survived it.

A BACKGROUND TO THE PLAGUE

The plague was caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which was carried by the fleas of rodents, primarily rats, who were transported between regions through trade or by troops returning from or heading toward deployment. This bacterium was not identified until 1894, and so the people of 14th century had no idea as to the cause of the plague or how to fight against it and the disease was therefore attributed to God's wrath.

The point of origin most scholars agree on are the Genoese ships from the port city of Kapha on the black sea but is also thought to have possibly been spread along the silk road routes. The city had been under siege by the Mongol golden horde, under the command of Khan Jonabek from 1342 to 1357, whose troops were infected by the plague of the near East. When soldiers died, Jonabek ordered their corpses catapulted over the walls of Kapha to infect the city's population. Then, merchant ships spread the plague across Europe.

BOCCACCIO'S NARRATIVE

In 1348 it struck Florence, Boccaccio's native city. The same year Boccaccio would begin writing the Decameron. The introduction to the Decameron, which details the outbreak in the city, is given by the narrator of the work as background before the appearance of the ten main characters, all of whom meet in the midst of the plague, before deciding to leave for the country. It is unclear whether Boccaccio was actually present in Florence when the plague was raging there, but he certainly could have been and so would serve as an eyewitness to the devastation of the city.

Although Boccaccio claims that the first symptoms of the disease was the appearance of buboes, most records of the plague indicate that it began with fever, then body aches and fatigue. It is possible Boccaccio made use of poetic license and reversed the order of symptoms to give the worst up front for dramatic effect, but it also could simply be that this was his personal experience of the plague.

THE TEXT

The pestilence killed an infinite number of people as it spread relentlessly from one place to another. Almost at the beginning of springtime of the year, the plague began to show its sorrowful effects in an extraordinary manner. It did not assume the form it had in the east, where bleeding from the nose was a manifest sign of inevitable death, but rather showed its first signs in men and women alike by means of swellings, that the people called "*gavoccioli*" buboes. The symptoms of the illness changed to black or livid spots appearing every part of the body and neither a doctor advice nor the strength of medicine could do anything to cure this illness. In fact, the number of doctors, other than the well trained, was increased by a large number of men and women who had never had any medical training.

There were some people who thought that living moderately and avoiding any excess might help a great deal in resisting this disease and so they gathered in small groups and lived entirely apart from everyone else. Others thought the opposite, they believed that excessively enjoying life was the best medicine for such a disease, so they practiced to the fullest what they believed by going from one tavern to the another all day and night. Many others adopted a middle course between the two attitudes described, they satisfied their appetites to a moderate degree.

Many ended their lives in the public streets while many others who died in their homes were discovered dead by their neighbors only by the smell of their decomposing bodies, the city was full of corpses that would arrive in front of a church at every hour that the amount of holy ground for burials was certainly insufficient for giving each body its individual place. Huge trenches were dug in all of the cemeteries and into them the new arrivals were dumped by the hundreds, until the trench was filled.

CONCLUSIONS

Boccaccio's observation that religious supplications were of no use is reported by other sources on the plague which, like his, make clear that there was no other response which was any more useful. Various tracts were published offering advice, but their suggestions were no more effective than prayer, fasting and penitence had been. the medieval Italian writer Tommaso Del Garbo who offered practical advice for people entering the homes of the infected. Quarantine and social distance therefore were the only practical measures taken that proved effective against the plague.

The perceived failure of religion to stop or at least alleviate the suffering and death of the plague turned many away from the medieval church to seek answers elsewhere an impulse which would eventually give rights to the humanistic world view of the renaissance.