

Absence and Presence

The Black Death and Subsequent Plague Waves in Fourteenth–Fifteenth-Century East Central Europe – A Short Introduction

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Special editors of the block

It has been widely discussed if and to what extent the first wave of the Second Plague Pandemic, the Black Death (1347–52), made an impact on East Central Europe. Its virtual absence from large parts of the Kingdoms of Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, and the northern part of the Balkan Peninsula has long been explained by a lack of written sources, especially compared to the much denser documentation for England, France, and Italy. Moreover, since aDNA research has clarified that the Black Death was indeed caused by the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium,¹ most plague historians argue for a scheme of ‘same pathogen, same outcome’ across Europe, with the Central European cases unimportant exceptions to the rule they established on the better-documented areas of Western and Southern Europe.² New research with scientific proxy data seems to confirm that the absent impact of the Black Death in academic research is due to more than just a lack of sources,³ confirming the overall impression of demographic continuity and even economic, political, and cultural affluence so typical for the monarchies ruled by the Luxembourgs, Piasts, and Angevins in the second half of the fourteenth century.

In the past century and a half, significant written sources have been uncovered and published that testify to the spread of the plague in Western Europe and some parts of the Mediterranean. However, not independent of the fact that the second half of the fourteenth century in East Central Europe is seen as a period of quick economic growth and political stability, studying the demographic crises was less in the focus of research. For that reason, only in the early 2020s did scholarship critically assess the available data on the plague wave at the turn of the 1340s

1 Bos, “A draft genome of *Yersinia pestis*.”

2 Benedictow, *The Complete History*.

3 Izdebski et al., “Palaeoecological Data.”

in the region.⁴ However, more recently the focus of historical plague research has shifted from the dominant event of the Black Death to subsequent plague waves such as the *pestis secunda*, *tertia*, as well as the later waves of the second plague pandemic. Particular emphasis has been placed on the mode in which these waves emerged—their starting points, indicating post-Black Death plague reservoirs, and potential spread patterns and associated vectors like trade. Scholars have repeatedly suggested that the later plague waves were more important events for East Central Europe than the Black Death as such. Detailed reconstructions of their spread route are important for a deeper understanding of how the plague became endemic in Europe and which animal reservoirs the pathogen retreated to between outbreak waves—and yet they are not available.⁵ Likewise, all conceivable sources of indirect demographic information on the impact of subsequent waves, such as wills or similar written sources, have not been adequately addressed for the plague waves of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in East Central Europe. Furthermore, cultural phenomena connected to the recurring plague waves, like flagellants and the institutionalized memory of plague victims, but also the question of contemporary explanations of the plague would merit a more detailed examination in future research.

The three articles in the thematic block address the waves of the second plague pandemic in the region and predominantly utilize traditional written sources that have been overlooked or not interpreted in the context of the Black Death. They include narrative sources, charter evidence, testaments, letters, as well as pictorial evidence. We should also keep in mind that written sources remain crucial for findings of paleogenetic studies, expanding our understanding of medieval plague waves. Despite incomplete histories, our three contributions demonstrate how examining these sources reveals new information and how medieval studies remain a key player in future plague history.

The contribution of András Vadas provides a survey of the surviving written evidence on the presence of the plague in the Kingdom of Hungary at the turn of the 1340s. While scarce, the data still provides a basis to suggest that the disease took victims in several parts of the country and spread just as much to villages in less well-connected areas of the country. The data gathered also suggests that the disease is unlikely to have been carried from the Black Sea ports via Wallachia or Serbia.

Martin Bauch and Christian Oertel's contribution reassesses the combination of narrative sources with quantified epigraphic and administrative data, hence providing dense evidence of mortality peaks and details of the seasonality of outbreaks.

4 Guzewski, "Did the Black Death"; Nodl, "Impacts of the Plague Epidemic"; Mengel, "A Plague on Bohemia?"; Kiss et al., "Food Crisis."

5 See the recent polemics: Slavin, "Out of the West"; Green, "Out of the East"; Slavin, "Reply: Out of the West."

Even regions with limited research such as Eastern Germany, or seemingly out-researched areas such as Bohemia, can offer new insights. Their study compares mortality ratios in plague years to non-plague years, showing lower ratios in Eastern Germany and Bohemia than elsewhere in Western Eurasia. These findings align with research indicating a less severe impact of the Black Death and subsequent plague waves in East Central Europe. The differing seasonality of outbreaks, with summer peaks in coastal areas, and autumn/winter peaks inland, may even provide insights into the varied spread patterns across the region.

Igor Stamenović discusses the well-known battle of Belgrade (1456), focusing on the plague that took the lives of two of the key figures of the Christian armies' victory, John Hunyadi and John of Capistrano. He provides a detailed survey of the contemporary letters and narrative sources that testify to their deaths, trying to understand how the plague is interpreted as their cause of death. He argues that by the mid-fifteenth century the plague was largely contextualized as the wrath of God, a response to sins. This however did not fit the crusading framework of the victory and, therefore, led to a frequent omission of the cause of their deaths.

While three case studies are certainly not more than a start into the renewed research of the Black Death and other plague waves of the Late Middle Ages in East Central Europe, they concisely address questions related to the rise of aDNA-backed plague histories without reducing the potential of historical research to becoming an auxiliary science of scientific approaches. While testaments as indirect indicators of plague mortality remain to be researched beyond the examples investigated in this volume, especially for the fifteenth century⁶, the potential of narrative sources on plague outbreaks in East Central Europe is still not fully exploited. The ongoing project of the collaborative scientific database EpiMedDat (<http://www.epimeddat.net>) aims at the joint collection of historical data on highly infectious diseases in pre-modern times and already contains substantial material on East and East Central Europe between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.⁷ Drawing on this resource, and certainly adding further contributions to it, will be another promising way to reinforce the role of historical disciplines in further research on the plague and other infectious diseases.

6 For a helpful overview, see: Krzenck, *Böhmische Bürgertestamente*.

7 E.g. Seventy entries on Rus' territories, fifty-seven entries for the territory of today's Poland, fifty-one entries for Bohemia, while Southeastern Europe and the Carpathian Basin are hardly represented so far.

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