

# The Black Death: A Doctor's Narrative

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*Primary sources written around the time of the Black Death allow historians to paint a picture of what daily life was like in the fourteenth century during the pandemic. The same primary documents can be used to construct a personal narrative from several different perspectives of society. Perhaps one of the most intriguing of these narratives is the perspective of a plague doctor, which this narrative represents. This perspective may be the most interesting because it provides a context to the medical side of the story while also building history from the ground up. Sources used for this type of historical approach include medical texts and personal diaries along with societal texts documenting life during the time of the Black Death. What follows is a completely imaginative recreation of what a typical doctor (in this case, named Dr. Charles Hobbs) would have faced during the Black Death in an English town (here, called Loxin). This fictional narrative is based on primary sources and was inspired by John Hatcher's book *The Black Death: A Personal History*.<sup>1</sup>*

As the small town of Loxin, England, awoke on a brisk summer morning in the fourteenth century, it could not have known what dark, deadly figure would be knocking on its door. The people of Loxin had received news that a sickness had spread into nearby towns, devastating families, destroying entire populations, and leaving nothing behind. On that morning, a stranger stumbled into the limits of the city. That day became known as Day One.

The stranger was a judge from a neighboring town who had isolated himself from victims of the sickness, but had been instructed to warn the surrounding area in case he was the last surviving member of his town. His town, like many others, had been exposed to the sickness by engaging in battle. Soldiers had entered the town where the sickness laid

dormant and brought back items that were infected by the plague to their towns.<sup>2</sup> This method of spreading the disease also occurred in towns like Tortosa around 1650.<sup>3</sup> Once the sickness was in his town, it spread quickly and took only six months to wipe out the town completely.

He had traveled for a day when he noticed the first bubo under his left arm. When he reached Loxin, he was suffering from a headache and a fever and had developed several more buboes on his neck. His only responsibility was to warn Loxin, but when he reached the city, he took his last breath.

Five people from Loxin noticed the body while examining their crops for the day and proceeded to check if they recognized the man. They should have backed away when they noticed the swelling on the man's neck, but it was too late when they realized that the man had died from the plague, the one thing they all feared the most. These five people were the first citizens of Loxin to succumb to the Black Death. These victims, before they had time to realize it, had been infected by coming in contact with the clothes of the dead man at the edge of the city.<sup>4</sup> When they returned to the town, they had spread the sickness to others. Just a couple of days later, all five of them were nearing death before treatments could be made by any of the local physicians.

A single stranger had brought the plague to Loxin and the town had nothing left to do but accept that the plague was among them and precautions had to be taken.<sup>5</sup> The first of the plague regulations stated that sick people would be taken from the towns and into fields where they would be left to recover or to die. For the people who had come in contact with the sick, they were to be quarantined for at least ten days before coming into contact with anyone else. In other towns, those responsible for bringing the sickness to the community were required to give all of their possessions to the officials of the town.<sup>6</sup> After the body of the stranger had been buried, the officials of the city met to agree on these regulations and form a sanitary council based on the regulations of the Venice sanitary council of 1348.<sup>7</sup>

They immediately asked the local churches to recite prayers specifically requesting protection.

The local churches took the lead in ordering what should be done to prevent the spread of the pestilence by urging people to confess and holding masses and processions. These instructions were written by the bishop and read to all the population at many churches located throughout the city.<sup>8</sup> It was a belief amongst the citizens that God had inflicted the sickness upon them and all mankind as a punishment for their sins. They drew these assumptions from the plagues mentioned in the Bible, which also attributed the sins of a population to the reasoning for a plague.<sup>9</sup> The remedy posted on the door of the largest church in Loxin said:

Whenever anyone is struck down by the plague they should immediately provide themselves with a medicine like this. Let him first gather as much as he can of bitter loathing towards the sins committed by him, and the same quantity of true contrition of heart, and mix the two into an ointment with the water of tears. Then let him make a vomit of frank and honest confession, by which he shall be purged of the pestilential poison of sin, and the boil of his vices shall be totally liquefied and melt away. Then the spirit, formerly weighed down by the plague of sin, will be left all light and full of blessed joy. Afterwards let him take the most delightful and precious medicine: the body of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. And finally let him have himself anointed on the seat of his bodily senses with holy oil. And in a little while he will pass from transient life to the incorruptible country of eternal life, safe from plague and all other infirmities.<sup>10</sup>

Looking back, those processions were prime opportunities for the sickness to be spread and the remedies suggested by even the most revered priest or church official did not prevent the plague from affecting anyone.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Charles Hobbs was one of the very few doctors to care for a population of about ten thousand. He was considered a second-rate physician, but maintained good relationships with his patients. He attended medical school at Avignon, which had obtained its medical faculty in 1303.<sup>12</sup>

Hobbs was one of the first to examine one of the five people who were sick. The first symptoms he noticed were indicative of the plague. The swollen lymph nodes or buboes on the neck, groin and armpit areas, along with fever,

headaches, and chills were found in his patient along with the other four victims.<sup>13</sup>

After those five people suffered from the plague, it was necessary for the physicians to create recommendations for the public in order to prevent the sickness from spreading. They first suggested that no foods such as poultry, waterfowl, suckling pig, old beef, or fat meat should be consumed. They also suggested that broths be made with cinnamon, spices, and ground pepper. The last of their recommendations was not to sleep during the daytime and not to drink much dark liquid with breakfast.<sup>14</sup> Hobbs, along with other physicians who had studied classical Greek medicine, attributed the plague to the pollution of air by elements that were poisonous.<sup>15</sup> It was deemed necessary to keep the air from becoming stiff. The entire town took part in setting the air in motion by ringing all the bells and discharging all cannons and weapons.<sup>16</sup> Birds were also used in personal quarters to keep the air moving. The physicians also considered being light-hearted and serene very important because they thought that the plague would be brought on by fear and horror.<sup>17</sup>

The citizens of Loxin were initially careful to take the advice given by the physicians, but as time passed, more people became sick and died. A few days after the first five deaths caused by the plague in Loxin, eleven more cases of the plague were confirmed. Soon, new cases were confirmed every day. The number of people dead from the plague totaled more than four hundred only two months after that stranger brought the plague to the city. All they knew was that it spread quickly and it was deadly.

None of the treatments Hobbs had prescribed according to Galenic traditions seemed to succeed.<sup>18</sup> Like most physicians who were trained at a medical university, he was taught to heal sickness through the maintenance of a balance of the four humours. They were taught that the body was composed of fire, which was hot and dry; water, which was cold and wet; earth, which was cold and dry; and air, which was hot and wet.<sup>19</sup> In an attempt to rid the body of the poison responsible for the sickness and balance the humours, he prescribed bloodletting, often until the patient lost consciousness.<sup>20</sup> He also lanced the buboes to drain the pus and cauterized them to seal the wound and allow for natural healing.<sup>21</sup> More extreme methods he tried included placing a plucked anus of a living chicken on the buboes, which would allow for the chicken to absorb the poison. He believed that the chickens would continue to

**Figure 1** (facing page): Engraving of plague doctor by Paul Fürst, 1656, from Wikimedia Commons.

Der Doctor Schnabel von Rom



Vos Creditis, als eine fabel,  
 quod scribitur vom Doctor schnabel,  
 der fugit die Contagion  
 et autert seinen Lohn darvon.  
 Cadavera sucht er zu fristen  
 gleich wie der Corvus auf der Misten.  
 Ah Credite, zihet nicht dort hin,  
 dann Romæ regnat die Pestin.

Quis non deberet sehr erschrec  
 für seiner Virgul oder stecken,  
 qua loquitur, als war er stumm,  
 und deutet sein Consilium,  
 Wie mancher Credit ohne zweiffel  
 das ihm tentir ein schwarzen Teuffel  
 Marsupium heist seine Höll,  
 und aurum die geholte seel.

I. Columbina, ad vivum delineavit.

Paulus Fürst. Excult.

**Kleidung wider den Tod zu Rom. Anno 1656.**  
 Also gehen die Doctores Medici dahi zu Rom, wann sie die, ander Pest ertrancchte Per-  
 sonen besuchen, sie zu curiren und fragen, sich wider den Gift zu sichern, ein langes Kleid von ge-  
 wärdtem Tuch ihu Angesicht ist verlarvt, fuden Augen haben sie grosse Crystalline Brillen, wider  
 Nasen einen langen Schnabel voll wirtreichender Specereij, in der Hände, welche mit Hand schuhert  
 wol versehen ist, eine lange kütze und darmit deuten sie, was man thun, und gebrauchet soll.



**Figure 2:** Illustration of Black Death patients, 1411, from Joseph P. Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006).

die if they absorbed the poison causing the sickness and the method would continue until a chicken lived.<sup>22</sup> He also tried cupping, which involved him placing a glass cup over an open wound and heating the glass to create a vacuum which would suck out the poisonous blood.<sup>23</sup> Similar to cupping was the use of leeches on open wounds or on different areas of the body. While these methods may have proved somewhat successful in the past, he noticed that they did not succeed in treating the plague. Plague victims can be seen in Figure 1.

Dr. Bernard Jarrett, a barber-surgeon, was Hobbs' associate and friend. He was a key component in the practice of the methods prescribed by Hobbs. Surgeons or barber surgeons like Jarrett were the "heavy lifters" of the medical profession. They learned their profession through the system of apprentices and masters.<sup>24</sup> Jarrett perhaps had more experience with the human body than did Hobbs because he handled autopsies and dissections.<sup>25</sup> Jarrett was responsible for a number of things including dentistry, setting broken bones, dressing wounds, conducting amputations, operating

on multiple parts of the body, and bloodletting. When Dr. Jarrett was being a barber he would cut, style, and shave hair, wash customers' upper bodies, clean their teeth, cut their nails, and remove lice.<sup>26</sup> He, like many other barber-surgeons, set up practice near Hobbs' office in order to be sure that his assistance would always be required. His office could only be differentiated from Hobbs' office by the sign hanging on his building that featured a bowl of blood.<sup>27</sup>

Down the street from doctors Jarrett and Hobbs was the most popular apothecary. When herbal remedies were needed, he was the one to visit. Hobbs knew how this apothecary worked, always keeping secrets about which patients received which remedy and never revealing exactly what was included in a serum or pill. Nevertheless, the apothecary received good money for what he gave to the people when they complained of an ailment.<sup>28</sup> Although the people of the town praised his healing abilities, Hobbs knew he was a fraud. This particular apothecary would even suggest a daily medicinal schedule with the first day consisting of juniper, rose, cloves and rue; the second day

included poley, rosemary, marjoram, thyme, green rue, and wormwood; the third day with more juniper and berries soaked in vinegar; the fourth day required more juniper and lavender to be poured on a sponge; the fifth day said to use more spices, such as coriander and cumin along with incense; the sixth day required orange peels and the essence of cloves to be poured on a rag; and on the seventh day, a patient took either angelica, valerian, or wormseed mixed with pomander, styrax, or calamita.<sup>29</sup>

Members of the town often trusted the advice of folk healers, which were usually women practicing a type of medicine reliant upon personal experience, common sense, and “superstitious gobbledygook.”<sup>30</sup> These practitioners, who did not have a medical license, were also not commonly members of a professional guild in which physicians, surgeons, barber-surgeons, and apothecaries were found.<sup>31</sup> When the treatments prescribed by the physicians did not appear to be working, the people of the city turned to their “healers” for help. When these remedies did not prove helpful, they began to fear that any remedy would only quicken the progression of the sickness because they feared it was the end of the world.<sup>32</sup>

For some members of the community, treatments prescribed by physicians and remedies mixed by apothecaries were simply not enough to thwart their fear of contracting the plague. They would trust in wearing an amulet, which would display certain words, have signs papers attached, or have spells written on them.<sup>33</sup> The most common amulet amongst the townspeople had “Pestilentia lenit Pietas” written on it.<sup>34</sup> The churches supported the wearing of these amulets along with fervent prayer and repentance.<sup>35</sup>

When Hobbs couldn't help his patients, he began to fear for his own health. He easily could have fled the town as many other physicians and barber-surgeons did after only staying long enough to confirm that what the first five people had contracted was the plague. Hobbs was one of those doctors who valued his patients. He knew that he had to stay to provide for the citizens of Loxin. He was not focused on gaining riches from dying patients; instead, he was dedicated to trying to relieve the city of the plague.<sup>36</sup>

Weeks later, more people had become infected and the bodies were beginning to pile up. Among those affected was Hobbs's wife.<sup>37</sup> With nothing left to lose but himself, Hobbs dedicated himself to remain in the town to care for the sick while the healthy fled to safer places. He, along with other secondhand physicians who were trained as apprentices, became plague doctors for the town of Loxin.

They became the primary medical team hired by the city of Loxin to provide treatment for patients suffering from the plague while also remaining isolated from all other healthy people.<sup>38</sup>

In order to provide medical care for the sick, the city established several pest houses that provided a space in which the plague doctors could treat their patients and remain cut off from all healthy individuals.<sup>39</sup> The plague doctors had no protection from coming in contact with the sick except for the outfit they donned. This outfit can be seen in Figure 2.

Their outfit was developed by Dr. Charles de l'Orme, who had designed the uniform to protect him while caring for the sick in order to protect his royal patients who were not infected.<sup>40</sup> The plague doctors of Loxin followed his recommendations and wore an outer layer of black canvas that was covered in wax along with leather pants, boots, a hat, and gloves that were also covered in wax. This layer of wax was believed to help protect the plague doctors from being infected. The scariest portion of the outfit was the head piece. On top of a leather hood and mask, which were held to the face by leather bands, was a protruding beak. Inside of the beak were compounds believed to keep the plague air away. In order to provide more distance between the plague doctor and patients, a stick would be used to move bed sheets.<sup>41</sup> In reality, Hobbs and the other plague doctors did more counting bodies than providing treatment.<sup>42</sup>

From the initial outbreak of the plague, many members of the community had fled the town. Only the sick and those who cared for them remained, excluding a small amount of people who isolated themselves from all others. The town had become a shadow of what it was, as most towns had become once the plague had shown its face. The only people who remained untouched seemed to be judges, priests, and notaries who had refused to come in contact with those stricken by the plague.<sup>43</sup> Those who died from coming in contact with the infected included parish curates and chaplains who would administer sacraments and hear confessions.<sup>44</sup>

All order had broken down in the city. Days were filled with wailing and crying while others lived like there were no rules and committed thefts from those already killed by the plague.<sup>45</sup> Although there was much to eat for the people who believed they were surviving the plague, they were scared to interact with anyone for fear of catching the deadly sickness.

Eight months from Day One, the city was bare. Dr. Hobbs was the last of the plague doctors to survive the devastation. He watched as his friends, family, and patients wasted away. In

the beginning, he made an effort to bury every single body that had died from the plague. As time passed, the plague killed such a large number of men and women that no one was around to bury the bodies of the dead. In the last days of the town, men and women would be seen throwing their own children into mass graves on their way to church.<sup>46</sup> Hobbs recalled only one other plague with such devastating results. This plague was recorded by Bede who claimed, "there were not enough left alive to bury the dead."<sup>47</sup>

As a habit, Hobbs had kept a journal all of his life. He now possessed the only record of the fall of Loxin with detailed information about how many patients died each day, what seemed useful in preventing the spread of the plague, and information he believed critical to protect other towns. In one passage he wrote that it was "a plague so virulent that children fled from their infected parents and mothers abandoned in horror a baby upon whom the marks had begun to appear."<sup>48</sup> In another he jotted, "the dead left unburied in the streets or thrown wantonly into rivers and the sea."<sup>49</sup> As he wrote these passages, he began to realize that he was all that Loxin had left. All others had fled and the other plague doctors had succumbed to the illness they were treating.

When the plague first arrived at Loxin, the doctors relied on their teachings to provide treatments and prevention while the church turned to Biblical interpretations.<sup>50</sup> Dr. Hobbs was the last person alive in Loxin and survived just long enough to see what damage was truly done before he himself exhibited the first signs of the plague that had destroyed his own city. He took no measures to ease the pain of the buboes or relieve the fever or headaches that overtook him. Instead, he welcomed death as a release from the darkness of what used to be known as Loxin.



*The Black Plague affected the areas of the Middle East, Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia during the years 1346 to 1353.<sup>51</sup> It is estimated to have killed a third of the population of Europe.<sup>52</sup> There are three periods of plague epidemics, which are referred to as pandemics. The first was Justinian's Plague (541 to 544 C.E.) which is believed to have been the bubonic strain of the plague. The second, the Black Death, peaked in the mid-fourteenth-century and continued to show up with outbreaks into the eighteenth century. The Black Death was a combination of all three strains: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. The third*

*pandemic, which was an outbreak of the bubonic plague, occurred between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century and affected five continents.<sup>53</sup> Outbreaks such as the one which affected the fictional city of Loxin were common and quickly spread the plague across countries and continents. The plague is believed to have been brought by Italian merchant ships to Constantinople and other seaports along the Mediterranean coast from Crimean in 1347.<sup>54</sup>*

*Since these pandemics, the Black Death has been studied many times in order to understand the cause and how to treat it if ever another outbreak occurs. It has been assessed that the primary means of spreading the bubonic plague occurs by fleas. The current treatment for this disease starts with an aggressive dose of antibiotics. To protect those who aren't infected, prophylactic antibiotics are used.<sup>55</sup>*

*Modern medicine, developed from the failures and successes of medieval medicine, has advanced far enough to allow a cure and prevention for the Black Plague if identified early enough. Primary sources, such as those used in this narrative, provide current historians and scientists with the information to further their techniques to protect against another pandemic such as the Black Death. These primary documents also provide information that can be utilized to recreate the Black Death from many different perspectives, such as the one given here. From several different primary and secondary sources, an understanding can be reached and exhibited in a story such as the one of the city of Loxin.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death: a Personal History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> James S. Amelang, ed. and trans., *A Journal of the Plague Year: The Diary of the Barcelona Tanner Miquel Parets, 1651* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 28, 83.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: a Chronicle of the Plague* (New York: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 108.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>8</sup> Hatcher, *The Black Death*, 81.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Horrox, *The Black Death*, 149.

<sup>11</sup> George Deaux, *The Black Death, 1347* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1969), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph P. Bryne, *Daily Life During the Black Death* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Sandra Moss, "Bubonic Plague," in *Pestilence, Pandemics, and Plagues*, ed. Joseph Byrne (London: Greenwood Press, 2008), 74.

<sup>14</sup> Nohl, *The Black Death*, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death, 1346-1353: The Complete History* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Nohl, *The Black Death*, 95.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1995), 33.

<sup>20</sup> Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society*, 127.

<sup>26</sup> Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>29</sup> Nohl, *The Black Death*, 93-94.

<sup>30</sup> Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 42.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 225.

<sup>33</sup> Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 52.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> Deaux, *The Black Death*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Amelang, ed., *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 68.

<sup>38</sup> Carlo M. Cipolla, "A Plague Doctor," in *The Medieval City*, ed. Harry A. Miskimin, et al., (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 131.

<sup>40</sup> Jackie Rosenhek, "Doctors of the Black Death," *Doctor's Review*, October 2011, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.doctorsreview.com/history/doctors-black-death/>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Cohn, *The Black Death Transformed*, 121.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>45</sup> Jerrold Atlas, "The Black Death: An Essay on Traumatic Change," *Journal of Psychohistory* 36 (Winter 2009): 250.

<sup>46</sup> "A firsthand account of the Black Death written at the Cathedral of Rochester, 1314-1350, Cotton Faustina B C," British Library, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/images/medieval/rurallife/transcript107637.html>.

<sup>47</sup> G.H. Martin, *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337-1396* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 100-1.

<sup>48</sup> Deaux, *The Black Death*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Roger French, et al., eds., *Medicine from the Black Death to the French Disease* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 1.

<sup>53</sup> A. Lloyd Moote and Dorothy C. Moote, *The Great Plague: the Story of London's Most Deadly Year* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 44.

<sup>55</sup> Moss, "Bubonic Plague," 75.

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