

Account 1: Italy

Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1353

*In the introduction of his famous book *The Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio describes the Black Death. His novella was a frame story of 100 tales told by ten fictional characters over ten days, hence the name *Decameron*.*

In the year of our Lord 1348, Florence—Italy's finest city—was struck by a terrible plague that, whether by planetary influence or divine punishment, had first broken out years earlier in the Levant and, sweeping westward, now made dreadful havoc here. Despite every human precaution—purging the city, barring the sick, and fervent prayers—the pestilence spread invisibly, leaping from garments and possessions of the ill to the healthy.

Fear drove the living into two camps: some formed secluded, temperate communities, shunning all contact with the sick; others, convinced that pleasure was their only cure, caroused from tavern to tavern, looting abandoned houses and mocking their doom. With magistrates and clergy stricken or confined, law and order collapsed: every man did as he pleased.

Many carried flowers or fragrant herbs to comfort their minds against the stench of death; others embraced flight, abandoning city and kin for the countryside, believing no exile could escape God's wrath. Yet neither seclusion, revelry, nor flight spared all.

Citizens avoided one another—even relatives addressed each other only from a distance. Guilds and shops lay silent; only apothecaries and churches remained open, and even parents sometimes refused to tend their own children.

In rural districts, too, labor and livestock were abandoned. Traditional burial rites vanished: gravediggers—demanding high pay—dumped corpses by the hundreds into hastily dug trenches, while countless victims lay unwept in streets and homes.

Thus divided in their responses, Florentines found that no single measure could save them all.

Account 2: Mamluk Egypt & Syria (Ahmad al Maqrizi)

From October 1348 onward, death raged unchecked: by some counts 1,200 Florentines perished daily. Burial permits were abandoned, and corpses lay unburied in gardens and roadways. In both New and Old Cairo, the plague first claimed women, children, and market folk, then spread so rapidly its toll defied counting.

By January 1349 new symptoms—internal fever, uncontrollable vomiting, and spitting of blood—precipitated deaths within nights. With no time for physicians or remedies, bodies piled in streets and markets until burial brigades were hastily formed. Pious volunteers recited funeral prayers or washed and carried the dead for high wages—Qur’ān readers earned 10 dirhams per service, body-carriers six in advance, and gravediggers up to 50 per grave—though few survived long enough to spend their earnings.

Public life collapsed: weddings and festivals ceased, the adhan fell silent in many mosques, and nearly every zawiya [Sufi lodge] closed. Infants rarely lived past a day, and their mothers soon followed. At harvest time fields went untended as farmers and servants vanished; even at cut-rate prices cloth and goods remained unsold, while workers from water-bearers to horse-grooms demanded inflated wages (a groom’s pay leapt from 30 to 80 dirhams). According to some accounts, this scourge persisted intermittently for fifteen years.

Account 3: The Plague in East & West

Ibn Khaldun on the Plague

Civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out. It overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility [decline], when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed [limited] their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems, was impacted in proportion to its more affluent civilization. It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whomever is upon it.