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978-1-107-62193-0 - A History of Epidemics in Britain: From A. D. 664 to the Extinction of Plague

Charles Creighton

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I.

PESTILENCES PREVIOUS TO THE BLACK DEATH, CHIEFLY  
FROM FAMINES.

THE Middle Age of European history has no naturally fixed beginning or ending. The period of Antiquity may be taken as concluded by the fourth Christian century, or by the fifth or by the sixth; the Modern period may be made to commence in the fourteenth, or in the fifteenth or in the sixteenth. The historian Hallam includes a thousand years in the medieval period, from the invasion of France by Clovis to the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII. in 1494. We begin, he says, in darkness and calamity, and we break off as the morning breathes upon us and the twilight reddens into the lustre of day. To the epidemiologist the medieval period is rounded more definitely. At the one end comes the great plague in the reign of Justinian, and at the other end the Black Death. Those are the two greatest pestilences in recorded history; each has no parallel except in the other. They were in the march of events, and should not be fixed upon as doing more than their share in shaping the course of history. But no single thing stands out more clearly as the stroke of fate in bringing the ancient civilization to an end than the vast depopulation and solitude made by the plague which came with the corn-ships from Egypt to Byzantium in the year 543; and nothing marks so definitely the emergence of Europe from the middle period of stagnation as the other depopulation and social upheaval made by the plague which came in the overland track of Genoese and Venetian traders

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[More information](#)2 *The great plague of Justinian's reign, A.D. 543.*

from China in the year 1347. While many other influences were in the air to determine the oncoming and the offgoing of the middle darkness, those two world-wide pestilences were singular in their respective effects: of the one, we may say that it turned the key of the medieval prison-house; and of the other, that it unlocked the door after eight hundred years.

The Black Death and its after-effects will occupy a large part of this work, so that what has just been said of it will not stand as a bare assertion. But the plague in the reign of Justinian hardly touches British history, and must be left with a brief reference. Gibbon was not insensible of the part that it played in the great drama of his history. "There was," he says, "a visible decrease of the human species, which has never been repaired in some of the fairest countries of the globe." After vainly trying to construe the arithmetic of Procopius, who was a witness of the calamity at Byzantium, he agrees to strike off one or more ciphers, and adopts as an estimate "not wholly inadmissible," a mortality of one hundred millions. The effects of that depopulation, in part due to war, are not followed in the history. So far as Gibbon's method could go, the plague came for him into the same group of phenomena as comets and earthquakes; it was part of the stage scenery amidst which the drama of emperors, pontiffs, generals, eunuchs, Theodoras, and adventurers proceeded. Even of the comets and earthquakes, he remarks that they were subject to physical laws; and it was from no want of scientific spirit that he omitted to show how a plague of such magnitude had a place in the physical order, and not less in the moral order.

A new science of epidemiology has sprung up since the time of Gibbon, who had to depend on the writings of Mead, a busy and not very profound Court physician. More particularly the Egyptian origin of the plague of the sixth century, and its significance, have been elucidated by the brilliant theory of Pariset, of which some account will be given at the end of the chapter on the Black Death. For the present, we are concerned with it only in so far as it may have a bearing upon the pestilences of Britain. The plague of the sixth century made the greatest impression, naturally, upon the oldest civilized countries of

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[More information](#)*Continuance of plague in Europe.*

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Europe; but it extended also to the outlying provinces of the empire, and to the countries of the barbarians. It was the same disease as the Black Death of the fourteenth century, the bubo-plague; and it spread from country to country, and lasted from generation to generation, as that more familiar infection is known to have done<sup>1</sup>.

Renewals of it are heard of in one part of Europe or another until the end of the sixth century, when its continuity is lost. But it is clear that the seeds of pestilence were not wanting in Rome and elsewhere in the centuries following. Thus, about the year 668, the English archbishop-elect, Vighard, having gone to Rome to get his election confirmed by the Pope Vitalianus, was shortly after his arrival cut off by pestilence, with almost all who had gone with him<sup>2</sup>. Twelve years after, in 680, there was another severe pestilence in the months of July, August and September, causing a great mortality at Rome, and such panic at Pavia that the inhabitants fled to the mountains<sup>3</sup>. In 746 a pestilence is said to have advanced from Sicily and Calabria, and to have made such devastation in Rome that there were houses without a single inhabitant left<sup>4</sup>. The common name for all such epidemics is *pestis* or *pestilentia* or *magna mortalitas*, so that it is open to contend that some other type than bubo-plague, such as fever or flux, may have been at least a part of them; but no type of infection has ever been so mortal as the bubo-plague, and a mortality that is distinguished by a chronicler as causing panic and devastation was presumably of that type.

<sup>1</sup> The references to the Justinian plague by contemporary and later historians have been collected, together with partly irrelevant matter about portents and earthquakes, by Val. Seibel, *Die grosse Pest zur Zeit Justinian's I.* Dillingen, 1857. The author, a layman, throws no light upon its origin.

<sup>2</sup> Beda, *Hist. Eccles.* Eng. Hist. Society's ed. p. 243: "qui ubi Romam pervenit, cujus sedi apostolicæ tempore illo Vitalianus praeerat, postquam itineris sui causam praefato papae apostolico patefecit, non multo post et ipse et omnes pene, qui cum eo advenerant, socii, pestilentia superveniente, deleti sunt."

<sup>3</sup> *Flores Histor.* by Roger of Wendover. Eng. Hist. Society's ed. i. 180.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* i. 228.

**Pestilence in England and Ireland in the Seventh Century.**

It is more than a century after the first great wave of pestilence had passed over Europe in the reign of Justinian, before we hear of a great plague in England and Ireland. Dr Willan, the one English writer on medicine who has turned his erudition to that period, conjectures that the infection must have come to this country from the continent at an earlier date. From the year 597, he says, the progress of conversion to the Christian religion “led to such frequent intercourse with Italy, France and Belgium, that the epidemical and contagious disease prevailing on the continent at the close of the sixth century must necessarily be communicated from time to time through the Heptarchy<sup>1</sup>.” Until we come to the *Ecclesiastical History* of Beda, the only authorities are the Irish annals; and in them, the first undoubted entry of a great plague corresponds in date with that of Beda’s history, the year 664. It is true, indeed, that the Irish annals, or the later recensions of them, carry the name that was given to the plague of 664 (*pestis ictericia* or *buide connaill*) back to an alleged mortality in 543, or 548, and make the latter the “first *buide connaill*”; but the obituary of saints on that occasion is merely what might have occurred in the ordinary way, and it is probable, from the form of entry, that it was really the rumour of the great plague at Byzantium and elsewhere in 543 and subsequent years that had reached the Irish annalist<sup>2</sup>.

The plague of 664 is the only epidemic in early British annals that can be regarded as a plague of the same nature, and on the same great scale, as the devastation of the continent of

<sup>1</sup> *Miscellaneous Works of the late Robert Willan, M.D., F.R.S., F.A.S.* Edited by Ashby Smith, M.D. London, 1821. ‘An Enquiry into the Antiquity of the Smallpox etc.’ p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> *Annals of the Four Masters*, ed. O’Donovan, Dublin, 1851, I. 183. “A.D. 543. There was an extraordinary universal plague through the world, which swept away the noblest third part of the human race.”

p. 187. “A.D. 548. Of the mortality which was called Cron Chonail—and that was the first Buide Chonail [*flava ictericia*],—these saints died,” several names following. The entries of that plague are under different years in the various original Annals.

*Beda's account of the general plague of 664.* 5

Europe more than a century earlier, whether it be taken to be a late offshoot of that or not. The English pestilence of 664 is the same that was fabled long after in prose and verse as the great plague "of Cadwallader's time." It left a mark on the traditions of England, which may be taken as an index of its reality and its severity; and with it the history of epidemics in Britain may be said to begin. It was still sufficiently recent to have been narrated by eyewitnesses to Beda, whose *Ecclesiastical History* is the one authentic source, besides the entry in the Irish annals, of our information concerning it.

The pestilence broke out suddenly in the year 664, and after "depopulating" the southern parts of England, seized upon the province of Northumbria, where it raged for a long time far and wide, destroying an immense multitude of people<sup>1</sup>. In another passage Beda says that the same mortality occurred also among the East Saxons, and he appears to connect there-with their lapse to paganism<sup>2</sup>.

The epidemic is said to have entered Ireland at the beginning of August, but whether in 664 or 665 is not clear. According to one of those vague estimates which we shall find again in connexion with the Black Death, the mortality in Ireland was so vast that only a third part of the people were left alive. The Irish annals do, however, contain a long list of notables who died in the pestilence<sup>3</sup>.

Beda follows his general reference to the plague by a story of the monastery of Rathmelsigi, identified with Melfont in

<sup>1</sup> "Eodem anno dominicae incarnationis sexcentesimo sexagesimo quarto, facta erat eclipsis solis die tertio mensis Maii, hora circiter decima diei; quo etiam anno subita pestilentiae lues, depopulatis prius australibus Britanniae plagis, Nordanhymbrorum quoque provinciam corripens, atque acerba clade diutius longe lateque desaeviens, magnam hominum multitudinem stravit. Qua plaga praefatus Domini sacerdos Tuda raptus est de mundo, et in monasterio, quod dicitur Paegnalaech, honorifice sepultus. Haec autem plaga Hiberniam quoque insulam pari clade premebat. Erant ibidem eo tempore multi nobilium simul et mediocrium de gente Anglorum, qui tempore Finani et Colmani episcoporum, relicta insula patria, vel divinae lectionis, vel continentioris vitae gratia, illo secesserant.....Erant inter hos duo juvenes magnae indolis, de nobilibus Anglorum, Aedilhun et Ecgerberc," etc. Beda's *Hist. Eccles.* ed. Stevenson. Engl. Hist. Soc. I. p. 231.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> *Annals of the Four Masters*, I. 275.

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[More information](#)6 *Renewed outbreaks in monasteries, 685.*

Meath, which he heard many years after from the chief actor in it. Egbert, an English youth of noble birth, had gone to Ireland to lead the monastic life, like many more of his countrymen of the same rank or of the middle class. The plague in his monastery had been so severe that all the monks either were dead of it or had fled before it, save himself and another, who were both lying sick of the disease. Egbert's companion died; and he himself, having vowed to lead a life of austerity if he were spared, survived to give effect to his vow and died in the year 729 with a great name for sanctity at the age of ninety.

The plague of 664 is said, perhaps on constructive evidence<sup>1</sup>, to have continued in England and Ireland for twenty years; and there are several stories told by Beda of incidents in monasteries which show, at least, that outbreaks of a fatal infection occurred here or there as late as 685. Several of these relate to the new monastery of Barking in Essex, founded for monks and nuns by a bishop of London in 676. First we have a story relating to many deaths on the male side of the house<sup>2</sup>, and then two stories in which a child of three and certain nuns figure as dying of the pestilence<sup>3</sup>. Another story appears to relate to the plague in a monastery on the Sussex coast, seemingly Selsea<sup>4</sup>. Still another, in which Beda

<sup>1</sup> Thorpe, in his edition of Florence of Worcester, for the Eng. Hist. Society, I. 25.

<sup>2</sup> The first of Beda's incidents of the Barking monastery relates to a miraculous sign in the heavens showing where the cemetery was to be. It begins: "Cum tempestas saepe dictae cladis, late cuncta depopulans, etiam partem monasterii hujus illam qua viri tenebantur, invasisset, et passim quotidie raperentur ad Dominum."

<sup>3</sup> "Erat in eodem monasterio [Barking] puer trium circiter, non amplius annorum, Æsica nomine, qui propter infantilem adhuc aetatem in virginum Deo dedicatarum solebat cella nutrirī, ibique medicari. Hic praefata pestilentia tactus ubi ad extrema pervenit clamavit tertio unam de consecratis Christo virginibus, proprio eam nomine quasi praesentem alloquens 'Eadgyd, Eadgyd, Eadgyd'; et sic terminans temporalem vitam intravit aeternam. At virgo illa, quam moriens vocabat, ipso quo vocata est die de hac luce subtracta, et illum qui se vocavit ad regnum coeleste secuta est." Beda, p. 265. Then follows the story of a nun dying of the pestilence in the same monastery.

<sup>4</sup> Beda, Lib. iv. cap. 14. In addition to the instances in the text, which I have collected from Beda's *Ecclesiastical History*, I find two mentioned by Willan in his "Inquiry into the Antiquity of the Smallpox," (*Miscell. Works*, London, 1821,

*Plague in the Northumbrian monasteries, 685.* 7

himself is supposed to have played a part, is told of the monastery of Jarrow, the date of it being deducible from the context as the year 685.

Of the two Northumbrian monasteries founded by Benedict, that of Wearmouth lost several of its monks by the plague, as well as its abbot Easterwine, who is otherwise known to have died in March, 685. The other monastery of Jarrow, of which Ceolfrith was abbot, was even more reduced by the pestilence. All who could read, or preach, or say the antiphonies and responses were cut off, excepting the abbot and one little boy whom Ceolfrith had brought up and taught. For a week the abbot conducted the shortened services by himself, after which he was joined by the voice of the boy; and these two carried on the work until others had been instructed. Beda, who is known to have been a pupil of Ceolfrith's at Jarrow, would then have been about twelve years old, and would correspond to the boy in the story<sup>1</sup>.

The nature of these plagues, beginning with the great invasion of 664, can only be guessed. They have the look of having been due to some poison in the soil, running hither and thither, as the Black Death did seven centuries after, and re-

pp. 109, 110): "About the year 672, St Cceda, Bishop of the East Saxons, being on a visitation to the monastery of Lestingham, was infected with a contagious distemper, and died on the seventh day. Thirty monks, who came to visit the tomb of their bishop, were likewise infected, and most of them died" (*Vita S. Ccedae*, vii. Jan. p. 375. Cf. Beda, iv. 3). Again: "In the course of the year 685, the disease re-appeared at Lindisfarne, (Holy Island), St Cuthbert's abbacy, and in 686 spread through the adjoining district, where it particularly affected children" (*Vita S. Cuthberti*, cap. 33). Willan's erudition has been used in support of a most improbable hypothesis, that the pestilence of those years, in monasteries and elsewhere, was smallpox.

<sup>1</sup> *Historia Abbatum Gyrvensium, auctore anonymo*, §§ 13 and 14. (App. to vol. II. of Beda's works. Eng. Hist. Society's edition, p. 323.)

§ 13. Qui dum transmarinis moraretur in locis [Benedict] ecce subita pestilentiae procella Britanniam corripuens lata nece vastavit, in qua plurimi de utroque ejus monasterio, et ipse venerabilis ac Deo dilectus abbas Eosterwini raptus est ad Dominum, quarto ex quo abbas esse coeperat anno.

§ 14. Porro in monasterio cui Ceolfridus praeerat omnes qui legere, vel praedicare, vel antiphonas ac responsoria dicere possent ablati sunt excepto ipso abbate et uno puerulo, qui ab ipso nutritus et eruditus.

In the Article "Baeda," *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, the Rev. W. Hunt points out that the boy referred to in the above passage would have been Beda himself.

maining in the country to break out afresh, not universally as at first, but here and there, as in monasteries. The hypothesis of a late extension to England and Ireland of the great European invasion of bubo-plague in 543, would suit the facts so far as we know them. The one medical detail which has been preserved, on doubtful authority, that the disease was a *pestis ictericia*, marked by yellowness of the skin, and colloquially known in the Irish language as *buide connaill*, is not incompatible with the hypothesis of bubo-plague, and is otherwise unintelligible<sup>1</sup>.

For the next seven centuries, the pestilences of Britain are mainly the results of famine and are therefore of indigenous origin. So strongly is the type of famine-pestilence impressed upon the epidemic history of medieval England that the chroniclers and romancists are unable to dissociate famine from their ideas of pestilence in general. Thus Higden, in his reference to the outbreak of the Justinian plague at Constantinople, associates it with famine alone<sup>2</sup>; and the metrical romancist, Robert of Brunne, who had the great English famine of 1315–16 fresh in his memory, describes circumstantially the plague of 664 or the plague of Cadwallader's time, as a famine-pestilence, his details being taken in part from the account given by Simeon of Durham of the harrying of Yorkshire by William the Conqueror, and in part, doubtless, from his own recent experience of a great English famine<sup>3</sup>. But before we come to these typical famine-pestilences of Britain, which fill the medieval interval between the foreign invasion of plague in Beda's time and the foreign invasion of 1348, it remains to dispose in this place of those outbreaks on English soil which do not bear the marks of famine-sickness, but, on the other hand, the marks of a virulent infection arising at particular spots probably from a tainted soil. These have to be collected from casual notices in the most

<sup>1</sup> The history of the name *pestis flava ictericia* is given by O'Donovan in a note to the passage in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, I. 275: "Icteritia vel aurigo, id est abundantia flavae bilis, per corpus effusae, hominemque pallidum reddentis," is the explanation of P. O'S. Beare. The earliest mention of "yellow plague" appears to have been in an ancient life of St Gerald of Mayo, in Colgan's *Actu Sanctorum*, at the calendar date of 13th March.

<sup>2</sup> *Polychronicon*, Rolls edition, v. 250.

<sup>3</sup> *The Story of England*, Rolls series, ed. Furnivall, II. 569.



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[More information](#)*Outbreaks at Canterbury, 829 and Croyland, 1304.* 9

unlikely corners of monastic chronicles; but it is just the casual nature of the references that makes them credible, and leads one to suppose that the recorded instances are only samples of epidemics not altogether rare in the medieval life of England.

**Early Epidemics not connected with Famine.**

The earliest of these is mentioned in the annals of the priory of Christ Church, Canterbury. In the year 829, all the monks save five are said to have died of pestilence, so that the monastery was left almost desolate. The archbishop Ceolnoth, who was also the abbot of the monastery, filled up the vacancies with secular clerks, and he is said to have done so with the consent of the five monks "that did outlive the plague." The incident comes into the Canterbury MS. of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle<sup>1</sup> under the year 870, in connexion with the death of Ceolnoth and the action of his successor in expelling the seculars and completing the original number of regulars. So far as the records inform us, that great mortality within the priory of Christ Church two centuries after it was founded by Augustine, was an isolated event; the nearest general epidemic to it in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was a great mortality of man and beast about the year 897 following the Danish invasion which Alfred at length repelled.

That such deadly intramural epidemics in monasteries were not impossible is conclusively proved by the authentic particulars of a sudden and severe mortality among the rich monks of Croyland at a much more recent date—between the years 1304 and 1315. In the appendix to the chronicle of Ramsey Abbey<sup>2</sup> there is printed a letter from Simon, abbot of Croyland, without date but falling between the years above given, addressed to his neighbours the abbots of Ramsey, Peterborough and Thorney, and the prior of Spalding. The letter is to ask their prayers on the occasion of the sudden death of thirteen of the monks of Croyland and the sickness of others; that large number of the

<sup>1</sup> Rolls series, ed. Thorpe, I. 136, 137 (Transl. II. 60). Also in Gervase of Canterbury, Rolls series, ed. Stubbs, II. 348.

<sup>2</sup> *Chronicon Abbatiae Ramesiensis*, Rolls ed. 1886, p. 397.

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[More information](#)10 *Similar instance among English at Rome, 1188.*

brethren had been cut off within fifteen days—"potius violenter rapti quam fataliter resoluti"<sup>1</sup>. The letter is written from Daddington, whither abbot Simon had doubtless gone to escape the infection.

These are two instances of deadly epidemics within the walls of English monasteries. In the plague-years 664—685, and long after in the Black Death, the mortalities among the monks were of the same degree, only there was an easy explanation of them, in one if not in both cases, as being part of an imported infection universally diffused in English soil. What the nature of the occasional outbreaks in earlier times may have been, we can only guess: something almost as deadly, we may say, as the plague itself, and equally sudden. The experience was not peculiar to England. An incident at Rome almost identical with that of Vighard in 668 is related in a letter sent home in 1188, by Honorius the prior of Canterbury, who had gone with others of the abbey on a mission to Rome to obtain judgment in a dispute between the archbishop and the abbey, that the whole of his following was stricken with sickness and that five were dead. John de Bremble, who being also abroad was ordered to go to the help of the prior, wrote home to the abbey that when he reached Rome only one of the brethren was alive, and he in great danger, and that the first thing he had to do on his arrival was to attend the cook's funeral<sup>2</sup>.

There is no clue to the type of these fatal outbreaks of sickness within monastic communities. One naturally thinks of a soil-poison fermenting within and around the monastery walls, and striking down the inmates by a common influence as if at one blow. There are in the medieval history previous to the Black Death a few instances of local pestilences among the common people also, which differ from the ordinary famine-sicknesses of the time. The most significant of these is a story told by William of Newburgh at the end of his chronicle and

<sup>1</sup> According to an inquisition of 2 Edward III., the abbey of Croyland contained in 1328, forty-one monks, besides fifteen "corrodiarii" and thirty-six servitors. *Chronicle of Croyland* in Gale, I. 482.

<sup>2</sup> *Epistolae Cantuarienses*, Rolls series, No. 38, ed. Stubbs, Epist. CCLXXII. p. 254, and Introduction, p. lxvii.