

Public Penance, Public Salvation:
An Exploration of the Black Death's Influence on the Flagellant Movement



"Panel depicting Flagellation" in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
14th century, Germany. Medium: Cotton, wool

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The Black Death ravaged the European continent, killing millions while triggering a vast array of political and religious responses. The plague profoundly impacted Christian attitudes and practices, most notably by provoking the subsequent outburst of the extremist movement, the flagellants. “Flagellants” refers to the groups of Christians who practiced public flagellation as penance, believing they could repel the wrath of God and the punishment of the Black Death. Pope Clement VI quickly deemed the movement heretical, issuing a Papal Bull against those participating. The history of the flagellant movement is extensive, but this study will focus on the years leading up to and immediately following the Black Death, specifically the activity which took place throughout Europe in 1349. The movement represented the religious hysteria caused by the Black Death as illustrated by the extreme practices of participants, the fervent devotion of followers to the movement, and the subsequent condemnation by the Church.

The Black Death brought with it a series of contradictions. The Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio provided a chilling account of the plague in Florence during the autumn of 1348. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* depicted a chaotic society ravaged by the pestilence. Yet family members often risked their health and livelihood to properly care for loved ones, which revealed the desire for structure and order also present during the plague.¹ Many accounts from feudal England also described family members who took great strides to properly care for the souls of kin in the afterlife, with expensive displays of artistic burials. The flagellant movement also represented a contradiction within medieval society, as the practice was first encouraged by the Pope and very soon

¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Introduction to the Decameron*, from Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 26-34.

condemned as heresy. Among other religious reactions to plague during the Middle Ages, the flagellant movement is unique because of participants' explicit effort to reconcile themselves and humanity to God, by offering their own brutal suffering. The men called themselves 'Flagellants' or 'Brethren of the Cross,' the latter because they consistently wore a cross on their clothes as a visible symbol of their penitential pilgrimage.²

While flagellation acted as a crucial element in the flagellants' asceticism, other components contributed to their dramatic processions. Flagellants simultaneously performed religious hymns and dance movements as they marched through towns. Medieval flagellant processions, however, were not an entirely novel practice. Crucial to the examination of Black Death flagellants is the extensive history of the tradition throughout the early Catholic Church. Various forms of asceticism were displayed in the earliest Christian era, during the third century, with images of flagellation recorded as far back as Egyptian ascetics. The movement generated during the Black Death, however, represented one particular sect that incorporated elements of pilgrimage and drama. Flagellants viewed themselves as practicing a form of asceticism, with the act of flagellation representing an offering acceptable to God. One common belief of the medieval psyche involved the notion that physical whipping was the surest way to banish one's sins and simultaneously achieve freedom from the plague.³ As Christianity spread during the Middle Ages, many religious writers prescribed bodily pain as a means of suppressing the sinful lusts of the human body, and of obtaining God's forgiveness.

² Louis E. Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 161.

³ John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 155.

Regino of Prüm, for instance, during the tenth century, ordered flagellation not only for monks, but also for laymen. Similarly, in the eleventh century, Burchard of Worms ordered flagellation as an ascetic treatment for common sinners.⁴

Anxieties regarding the approaching plague also provoked desires to embark on pilgrimage. The Papacy recognized this phenomenon and declared 1350 to be a Jubilee year in which a pilgrimage to the churches of Rome would earn pilgrims a plenary indulgence, the full remission of the penance due for their sins.⁵ Pilgrimage had long represented a powerful spiritual journey for religious men and women, with great honor and prestige promised to those who traveled. The significance of such encouragement of pilgrimage cannot be overlooked in the context of the drastic flagellant movement. Recognition by the Papacy of the increased demand for forgiveness from God signified the desire of religious men and women to quickly find salvation by any means necessary.

Questions arise, however, as to why the extreme movement emerged so suddenly, and how it gained such notoriety and fervor. The great processions of flagellants, numbering hundreds and sometimes thousands, spread in 1349 throughout Austria, Bohemia, Germany, Switzerland, the Rhine province, the Netherlands and England.⁶ Men, women, nobles and commoners closely followed and participated in these pilgrimages. Yet by the end of 1349, civil and ecclesiastical authorities united, including the King of France and the Pope of Avignon, in their efforts to suppress the movement.

⁴ Backman, *Religious Dances*, pp. 161-164.

⁵ Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 96.

⁶ Boccaccio, however, writing from Central Italy, did not witness or describe any flagellant processions. Instead, he focused on the attempts by Florentine citizens and family members to work through the daunting mortality in more practical ways. He wrote: "In the face of its onrush, all the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing. Large quantities of refuse were cleared out of the city by officials specially appointed for the purpose, all sick persons were forbidden entry, and numerous instructions were

By October of 1349, a Papal Bull issued by Pope Clement VI strictly forbid the organized flagellant processions. The Catholic Church argued that flagellants had founded a new kind of fraternity without permission, and participated in heretical activity.⁷

Prior to examining the sudden appearance of the flagellant movement, the gruesome reality of the Black Death must be addressed. Had such an unprecedented and horrific disease not devastated the European population, the flagellant movement could not have risen and fallen so suddenly. The Norwegian historian Ole Benedictow has written extensively on the biology and spread of the Black Death. He notes that this common term for the epidemic did not emerge until many centuries later, and believes that the reason for this is most likely a misunderstanding in translation of the Latin expression *atra mors*, in which *atra* may translate to both 'terrible' and 'black.'⁸ During the height of epidemic, Europeans simply referred to the disease as 'the Pestilence' or 'the Great Mortality.'

Although the plague bacillus was not isolated and identified by the French bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin until 1894, its deadly and contagious qualities were recognized immediately. In 1346, for instance, Mongol forces besieging the Black Sea port of Caffa threw the bodies of their plague victims over the walls into the city.⁹ This early example of biological warfare demonstrated the fierceness of the disease and the utter confusion among Europeans regarding its causes or treatment. In the year 1347, with the arrival of Genoese merchant ships, Europe experienced rapid and catastrophic

issued for safeguarding the people's health, but to no avail."

⁷ Backman, *Religious Dances*, 163.

⁸ Ole Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History* (Woodbridge, Boydell: 2004), p. 1.

losses of population. The disease spread from 1348 until 1351, both in the countryside and in towns, over the whole of Europe.¹⁰

Contemporary accounts of the severity of the plague described the terror struck in the minds of young and old, healthy and weak, as it quickly became clear that no one was safe from the disease. Welsh poet Euan Gethin wrote of the plague's morbid nature, noting that he and his neighbors saw death coming "like black smoke," as the plague which cut off the young "had no mercy for fair countenance."¹¹ Gethin's account is consistent with much of the scientific evidence gathered since the outbreak. He described the ghastly symptoms when writing "woe is me of the shilling of the armpit. It is seething, terrible...it is of the form of an apple, like the head of an onion, a small boil that spares no one."¹² Victims also suffered from a "loathsome, cadaverous stink from within," according to one contemporary, while other symptoms included high fever, stomach pains and bluish-black spots on the body. Gethin's emphasis on the disease sparing no one, regardless of Christian faith or good works, is essential to understanding the subsequent emergence of the Flagellant movement. With no guaranteed physical or spiritual immunization, many vulnerable Europeans took aggressive independent action to protect themselves. The Flagellants adopted such extreme forms of penance in an attempt to either avert the plague before it struck a particular region, or in order to save their souls once death overcame them.

Even the most learned Europeans of the Middle Ages knew very little of bacteria

⁹ Robert Lacey, *Great Tales from English History* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), pp. 131-133.

¹⁰ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, pp. 1-20.

¹¹ Lacey, *Great Tales from English History*, p. 131.

or microbiological agents of disease, leading a large number of religious believers to view the plague as God's punishment for their sins. Many scholarly physicians of the time attributed the cause of the pestilence to the classical Greek theory of *miasma*. Miasma was the corruption or pollution of the air by vapors that contained poisonous elements.¹³ Most importantly, miasma was believed to be spread by wind and could infect a person by entering the skin, thereby rendering its victims helpless and leaving the disease impossible to predict. Many Christian Europeans, therefore, believed in the classical Greek theory as one physical cause of plague. At the same, they assumed that plague arrived as God's method of punishing mankind for its sinful behavior.

Many Christians also placed blame for the sudden outbreak of plague on the actions of Pope Clement VI. The Black Death seemed to strike as God's visitation on a sinful world, but more particularly on a sinful Church that had been neglecting a humble lifestyle. When Pope Clement VI assumed control of the Catholic Church following the rule of Benedict XII, the internal affairs of the Church were described as "luxurious, wasteful, and sumptuous."¹⁴ This theory of papal wrongdoings helps to identify why the flagellant movement struck most intensely in Germany, where intense political confusion added to the agitation of citizens. By seeking to cleanse both individual and societal sins of the day, flagellant sentiment quickly turned against the hierarchy and against Church property wealth. Many believers also turned their attention inward, reflecting on individual sin, but remaining fixated on righting the evils of the Church.

The savage nature of the plague directly contributed to the emergence of the

¹² Ibid., pp. 131-132.

¹³ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, pp. 1-8.

flagellant movement. As Marchionne di Coppo Stefani of Florence described, Florentines did little else except to carry dead bodies to be buried, while others “were placed on top of them and shoved and then another layer of Earth, just as one makes lasagna with layers of pasta and cheese.”¹⁵ This gruesome depiction of mortality and closeness to death revealed the sincere fear among European citizens of meeting death without proper penance. As Ole Benedictow argues, the most frightening feature of the deadly plague in the mind of Marchionne di Coppo Stefani was that Christians died without confession and without receiving the last rights, thus facing eternal punishment.¹⁶ This widespread and fearful mentality helps to explain why the flagellant movement emerged so suddenly.

With unpredictable disease threatening the livelihood of entire towns, masochistic flagellant processions no longer appeared so strange. For concerned believers, the only hope of eternal salvation lay in the immediate remission of sin through flagellation. Hundreds gathered and followed the movement as it progressed across the continent. Religious devotees seized upon every method in their power to repent before the inevitable moment of death would reach them. Contemporary descriptions revealed the religious fervor with which flagellants adhered to their practices. Gilles li Muisés, Abbot of St. Giles at Tourani, wrote two accounts of the plague and served as a prominent chronicler of the movement. The author noted that throughout Hungarian and Germanic villages, men gathered in crowds of two or three hundred, depending on the size of the local population. Gilles li Muisés described how the groups traveled through the countryside, holding public processions in the city center twice a day “beating themselves

¹⁴ Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Medieval Papacy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 154.

¹⁵ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, p. 285.

with whips until blood flowed."¹⁷ Participants wished not only for redemption, but also for the immunity from the disease itself. By involving villages and making a public spectacle twice a day, townspeople believed that the plague would either skip over their city or disappear altogether.

Because of widespread religious convictions at the time, the act of flagellation was not in itself so appalling. When the Black Death reached Avignon in 1348, Pope Clement VI ordered public flagellant processions as a physical protection against the disease, hoping that those affected by the pestilence would be cured. During these processions, participants walked barefoot with ashes in their hair, scourging themselves sharply on their backs.¹⁸ Yet the particular ritual practices of the flagellant movement during the Black Death, promising the remission of sins, not only threatened the Papacy, but also struck fear and apprehension in minds of many townspeople.

Flagellant practices represented one particular outcome of the religious hysteria triggered by the emergence of plague. By the early months of 1349, the movement spread through southern, central, and western Germany moving up the Rhine Valley until finally reaching Flanders in July 1349.¹⁹ Groups of flagellants marched from town to town and in public places, baring their backs and beating each other and themselves, while simultaneously calling on the townspeople to repent. Historian John Aberth has also emphasized that achieving individual immunity from the disease was not the only benefit of the movement. Those living in towns that welcomed the groups could also share in the

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 285.

¹⁷ 'The Chronicle of Gilles de Muisis' in Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 151.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 161-164.

penitential benefits.²⁰ By including fearful townspeople in the process of forgiveness, regardless of wealth or status and without the interference of a strict papacy, the flagellants garnered immediate support. The theatrical elements of their processions helped to solidify popular confidence in ensuring protection from plague.

In addition to the violent physical lashings, flagellant processions also maintained elements of pilgrimage and dance. Several contemporary descriptions of the movement exist, most notably by Heinrich von Herford, a Dominican from Westphalia, who witnessed flagellant activity in 1349. Heinrich von Herford recorded that flagellants attempted to replicate the sufferings of Christ, reflected in the red cross worn on their clothes and in the crucifixes they carried before them in procession. Flagellant groups flocked together from various regions, arriving in cities, towns and villages to form themselves into a procession with hoods pulled down over their foreheads, with “sad downcast eyes” as they went through the streets “singing a sweet hymn.”²¹ Repeating this tradition in every town they entered, the devotees then entered the local church and shut themselves in while they stripped off their clothes. After covering themselves with a pleated linen cloth with their backs remaining bare, they took whips in their hands.

Each whip consisted of a stick with three knotted thongs hanging from the end. Two pieces of sharp metal were run through the center of the knots. Using these whips flagellants beat and whipped their bare skin until their bodies were bruised and swollen and blood spattered the walls nearby. “I have seen,” Von Hereford recalled, “how sometimes those bits of metal penetrated the flesh so deeply that it took more than two

¹⁹ Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, p. 155.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

attempts to pull them out.”²² According to Heinrich von Hereford, the north door of the church would then be opened, as the eldest flagellant emerged and threw himself to the ground. The next participants would then do the same, some laying on their belly or back. In order to gain public support, flagellants attempted to invoke as many parallels to the life and suffering of Christ.

Historian Louis E. Backman has identified several elements of pilgrimage and religious dance within these processions. Backman argues that flagellants considered themselves pilgrims, in part because they wore short pilgrim pelerines over their shoulders, which could be raised over the head. Flagellants marched barefoot and wore pointed hats with upturned brims, frequently carrying pilgrims' staffs.²³ Backman incorporates contemporary images to illustrate these descriptions. The images convey the melancholy nature of the processions, but also the strict organization involved. Flagellant processions remained consistent throughout the regions they appeared in, combining aspects of both Pagan and Christian pilgrimage traditions.

Although debate exists surrounding the specific characteristics of religious pilgrimage, contemporary sources reveal that the flagellants believed themselves to be pilgrims. Their processions consisted of ritualistic practices as they journeyed from town to town in an effort to share their penance with the public. Frederick Closener, a priest and a writer who completed his chronicle in 1362, provided a detailed description of such pilgrimages. He made the significant comment that after the flagellants had formed a

²¹ Ibid., p. 157.

²² “The Chronicle of Heinrich von Hereford” in Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 150.

²³ Backman, E. Louis. *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 163.

large ring and the leaders had struck up their hymn, the scourging began and the pilgrims moved around the circle “two by two while the brethren sang.”²⁴ One common hymn began with the words “Mary, Mother and Maiden pure, have mercy on thy Christendom, have mercy on thy children, living in this evil world,” sung in a low, solemn tone. This musical aspect of flagellant processions represented the efforts of flagellants to appeal to townspeople in a manner they could easily relate to.



Flagellants according to a colored pen-drawing in the Constance chronicle. Fourteenth Century. Their heads are covered. All are naked except for a foot-length cloth from the waist [As seen in Backman, *Religious Dances*].

²⁴ Backman, *Religious Dances*, p. 170.

Several contemporary depictions are preserved and presented by Backman. One image is found in the *Constance Chronicles*, written during the end of the fourteenth century. Participants are shown with their pilgrims' pelerines, and from the waist down they wear a foot-length garment. The flagellation is in progress and absolution is being given by the foreman for publicly confessed sins.²⁵ Such images follow the descriptions of Heinrich von Hereford, suggesting that the flagellant practice was consistent and methodical in its gatherings. The processions involved very little improvisation. Instead of heretical outbursts with little organization, the processions remained cohesive and planned events which followed specific guidelines.

When flagellants approached a new town, they moved in procession singing traditional songs familiar to locals. One such tune originated during the Crusades, but was revived for the specific purpose of being sung in flagellant processions. When entering a new town, the flagellants often sang: "Christ himself road to Jerusalem. He had a cross in his own hand. Help us, Holy Ghost."²⁶ By incorporating such musical elements, flagellants enabled their movement to be viewed as a more complete form of religious pilgrimage. The recognition of such hymns by the local communities added legitimacy to flagellant practices.

Flagellants relied heavily upon communal support and donations. Their methods of obtaining support, however, were subtle. The participants continued on their pilgrimage for thirty-three days, in imitation of Christ's years of life on earth.²⁷ By associating themselves with such blatant Christian parallels, flagellants hoped to attract

²⁵ Backman, *Religious Dances*, p. 165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

the approval of townspeople. As flagellants exited town churches, they asked for nothing, requesting neither food nor lodging, but accepted “with gratitude the many offerings freely made to them.”²⁸ Accepting charity remained a crucial component of pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages. It also signaled that the movement could not remain successful without public support. This aspect helps explain why the movement faded so rapidly once it was deemed heretical and devilish.

The flagellant movement was unique for its elements of intense religious drama. Louis E. Backman has analyzed various forms of plague dances throughout the Middle Ages, which participants believed would repel the disease. Many of these dances, which became incorporated into the Christian flagellant movement, maintained similarities with Pagan practices. Throughout the plague, for instance, it was common to dance in rings. Flagellants, therefore, moved in a ring while they lashed themselves. By incorporating familiar physical movements into their public processions, the group garnered further support. Backman asserts that Christian inhabitants of Wertheim danced around a fir tree in the forest until the plague left their city.²⁹ This occurrence at Wertheim reveals why the Catholic Church quickly began to suppress the flagellant movement. Pagan practices threatened Papal order, specifically during the economic and social upheaval caused by the plague. The flagellant movement borrowed older elements of dance and combined them with new rituals in order to produce dramatic and interesting processions for participants. Flagellants further aggravated the Papacy by integrating multiple dramatic elements, not all of which were entirely orthodox. However, the flagellant movement was

²⁷ Backman, *Religious Dances*, p. 166.

²⁸ ‘The Chronicle of Heinrich von Herford’ in Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 151.

not the only phenomenon during this period which incorporated death and dance.

The overwhelming influence of closeness to death during the Middle Ages cannot be overlooked. Although accounts of mortality rates vary depending on the source, historians agree that at least half the people in Avignon died during the plague. Similar statistics were reflected in numerous regions throughout Europe. The Black Death caused unprecedented mortality, which helps to explain the intense religious fervor of the flagellant movement. For poor peasants living in Denmark or Prussia, the fear of entire families being ravaged by disease and killed within days, with no chance to attain salvation, terrified them. Pre-plague images exist of multiple versions of the *Dance of the Dead*. Historian Colin Platt has explored these increased levels of artistic expression which included the *dance macabre*, often depicted throughout the Middle Ages as a dance with three living and three dead men. The ancient legend depicted the dead men warning the living “as we are now, so shall ye be.”³⁰ These heightened apocalyptic expectations further propelled religious sentiment. No aspect of society was left unaffected by the onslaught of plague and fear of death.

However, during and immediately following the Black Death, reactions to the disease were not characterized by religious hysteria alone. Penitential beliefs were not the only forms of religious fervor increased by the onslaught of plague. The epidemic also brought with it a heightened obsession with the art of dying. The latter half of the

²⁹ Backman, *Religious Dances*, p. 170.

³⁰ In the Late Middle Ages, many Europeans bought manuals on the Art of Dying (*Ars Moriendi*) while others left the message “Learn to Die” (*Disce Mori*) on their monuments. Platt also describes various late-medieval treatments of the *Three Living and Three Dead*, which he notes were often treated so realistically in many cases that they undeniably implied intense familiarity with death's corruptions. Platt, Colin. *King Death: The Black Death and Its Aftermath in Late-medieval England*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996, pp. 150-164.

fourteenth century witnessed the building of many new churches, a practice widely considered to be a powerful method of assuaging the wrath of God and of preventing approaching plague.³¹ A number of Italian cities also experienced the formation of fraternities dedicated to tending and burying plague victims.³² Such activity serves to dispel the notion that the Black Death encouraged only gruesome, masochistic behavior. The devotion of Christians who feared death and eternal damnation did not only turn towards public processions of penance. Along with this increasing interest in more personal forms of religious devotion, a clear increase in the popularity of saints, including St. Roche and St. Sebastian, can be seen.

By the early fifteenth century, victims of the plague began to revere St. Roche, who was believed to have contracted and recovered from the pestilence while nursing the sick in northern Italy.³³ Anxieties and fears generated by the Black Death motivated further veneration of specific saints. The most popular of these holy figures, however, was St. Sebastian, often invoked throughout Europe as the patron saint of plague. His relics in Flanders and Italy drew pilgrims throughout the epidemic. One Scottish chronicler considered that the best hope of safety from the plague lay in devotion to the Saint.³⁴ As the Black Death swept across the European continent, contemporaries often described the pestilence as arrows being fired at the victims. Graphic depictions and imagery of Sebastian's naked body, pierced by the arrows during his first attempted

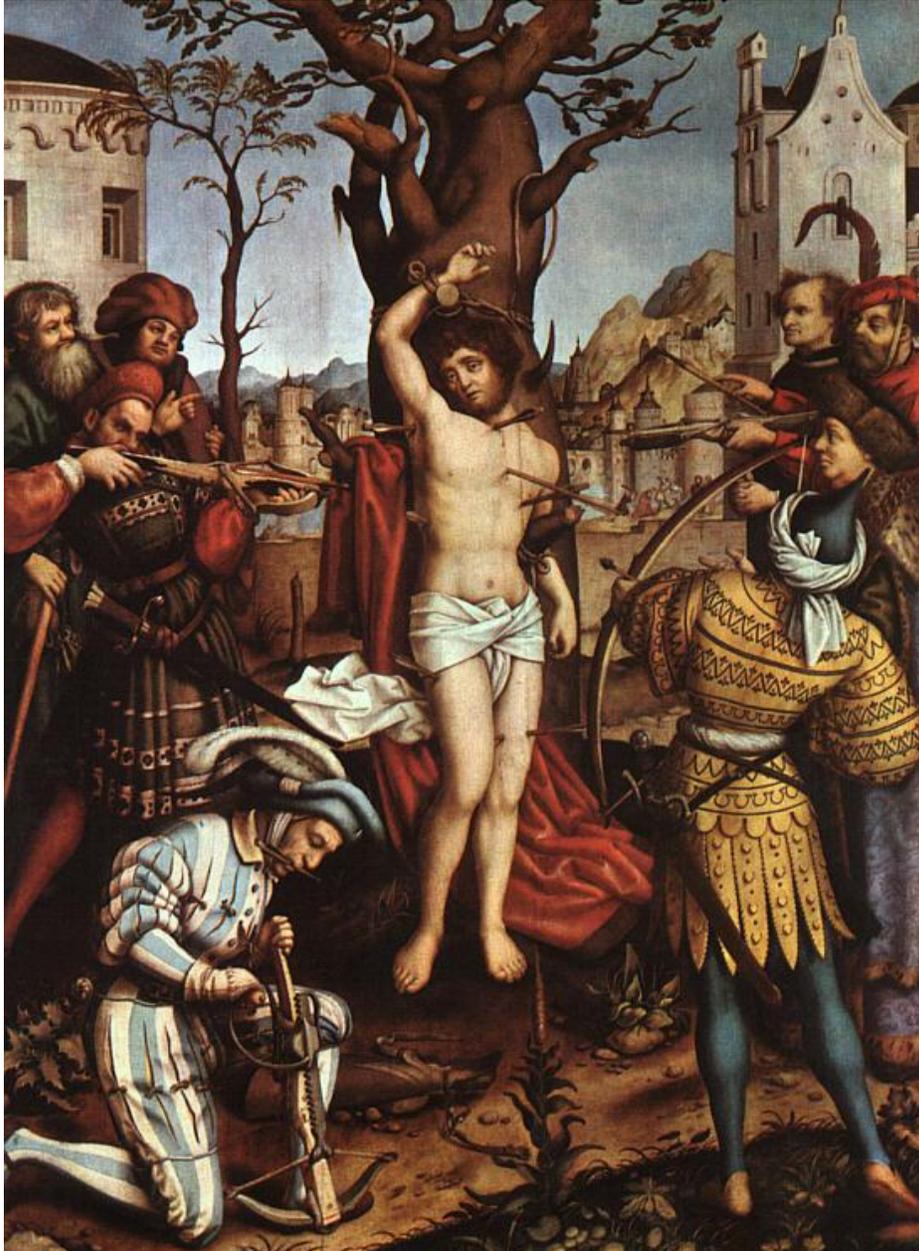
³¹ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, p. 285.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 96-103.

³³ Horrox, *The Black Death*, pp. 94-110.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 97.

murder by Emperor Diocletian, came to symbolize his power to resist plague.³⁵ Such images frequently appeared in churches.



Holbein, *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, c. 1516

A common prayer made to St. Sebastian represented widespread and more

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 95-98.

orthodox displays of religious devotion to combat the Black Death than flagellant processions. The following condensed verse appears in the Chronicle of Gilles li Muisis from the same year:

Oh St. Sebastian, guard and defend me
 Morning and evening, every minute of every hour
 Protect and keep me and all my friends from this plague.
 We put our trust in God and St. Mary,
 ending you, O holy martyr.
 Oh martyr Sebastian!
 Be with us always, and by your merits
 keep us safe and sound and protected from plague.
 Command us to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary,
 so that when we die we may have our reward:
 to behold God in the company of martyrs.³⁶

The widespread promise of forgiveness helped the flagellants to become particularly appealing to European Christians. The eternal forgiveness associated with the movement not only included the participants themselves, but also townspeople and witnesses who believed. Passionate devotion by members of the movement helped ease anxieties of looming death. Members of the flagellant movement performed gruesome masochistic acts with an intense devotion. Many threatened Europeans, desperate for a miracle to save them, found hope in the extreme practices of the flagellants. Noticing the passion of followers, Heinrich von Herford commented that “a man would need a heart of stone to watch this without tears.”³⁷ Regardless of the violent nature of the processions, the sincerity of participants demanded attention and respect. Because of this enthusiasm, the flagellants created a great deal of commotion which distressed town authorities. Wherever flagellants traveled, religious fervor followed.

Jean de Venette, a French friar who survived the Black Death, provided a

³⁶ “A prayer made to St Sebastian” in Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 125-126.

chronicle explaining the progress of the plague as it moved through Europe. In any given period, Jean Venette wrote, “the plague came and went like a tornado.”³⁸ Its appearance and movement were entirely unpredictable. Because of this widespread panic, Jean de Venette commented that while members of the flagellant movement scourged themselves with iron spikes, “some foolish women had clothes ready to catch the blood and smear it on their eyes saying it was miraculous blood.”³⁹ Jean de Venette’s account reveals the passion with which many medieval European Christians adhered to his or her faith. Just as the earliest Disciples of Christ risked violation of Roman law by collecting relics of Jesus or the apostles, witnesses of the flagellants desired a tangible token of their penance for healing and protective strength. Similarly, in Osnabrück, many wives and other women reportedly “clamored for them.”⁴⁰ Although only men participated in the processions, women and children remained devoted followers with the promise of remission of sins for being involved. Communal participation elevated the movement in popularity and also increased the threat to the Papacy.

The sudden condemnation of the flagellants by the Catholic Church distinguished the movement from other religious reactions to the Black Death. As the plague spread, Church and secular institutions grew powerless. The inability to protect nobles and clergy from plague triggered an immediate questioning of Papal and secular authority. Pilgrimage, religious songs, and even self-flagellation had been approved by the Church prior to the outbreak of plague. Yet the flagellants were quickly relegated to the status of

³⁷ ‘The Chronicle of Heinrich von Herford’ in Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 151.

³⁸ Horrox, *The Black Death*, pp. 54-58.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 54-58.

⁴⁰ Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 153.

heretics. As Heinrich von Herford explains, flagellants overreached their authority by preaching and promising full remission of sins to followers. By promising forgiveness to participants, flagellants directly undermined Church authority. Whereas the ability to heal and prevent catastrophe was formerly in the hands of Church members, the pestilence struck without discrimination. Heinrich von Hereford also explained that members of the flagellant movement quickly overestimated their power and popularity. The chronicler noted that the members were not content with penitential whippings alone and “annoyingly and persistently took upon themselves to job of preaching.”⁴¹ By not speaking directly of the clergy or the sacraments of the Church with proper reverence, flagellants estranged themselves from mainstream Catholicism.

The flagellants were officially condemned in October 1349 by Pope Clement VI on the grounds that “many of them cruelly extended their hands to works of impiety under the color of piety” and seemed “not afraid to shed the blood of Jews whom Christian piety except and sustains.”⁴² The Papal Bull ordered against the flagellants referred to the group as devilish, and condemned the priests and monks who followed them to prison. Papal leaders often exaggerated the nature of violence within flagellant practices, hoping to lessen public support for the movement. Although some flagellants are reported to have killed Jews at Frankfurt and Cologne in the summer of 1349, their arrival in various cities did not overlap with the Jewish pogroms that took place throughout Germany and Switzerland during the Black Death.⁴³ Violence against the Jews, which included elaborate theories that they caused the plague by poisoning wells,

⁴¹ Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 152.

⁴² Backman, *Religious Dances*, p. 163.

represented a very different and separate reaction to the pestilence.

The broader extent of violent actions committed by flagellants remains unclear among reports of social unrest in towns during the plague. Rosemary Horrox has noted that the most radical of the flagellants of Thuringia did sometimes physically attack churchmen who opposed their movement. These outbreaks, however, appear to have been an outgrowth of their extraordinary penance. Participants no longer believed in the actions of a priest and therefore resented their presence in towns.⁴⁴ With so little time to live before the indiscriminate plague struck, flagellants believed they could quickly admonish one another of sin more effectively than a priest. Further violence occurred when flagellants encountered two Dominicans in a field and instantly felt so infuriated by their practices that they tried to kill them. Although one Dominican managed to make his escape, the aggressive flagellants killed the other and left his body under a pile of stones on the outskirts of Myson.⁴⁵ Such incidents, however, appear to be isolated acts of assault which had no direct connection with the larger flagellant movement.

Condemnation by the Church signaled a return to order in the aftermath of plague. The flagellants initially ignored the sentence of excommunication pronounced against them by the bishops. They took no notice of the papal order against them until nobles and more powerful citizens began publicly keeping them at a distance. When small flagellant groups arrived in England in early 1350, they received a less than enthusiastic reception. Rumor had reached Englishmen that flagellants were acting “ill

⁴³ Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, p. 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴⁵ Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 152.

advisedly” as Church authorities no longer supported them.⁴⁶ Similarly, in spite of the women and children clamoring for their presence, the leaders of Osnabrück never allowed the flagellants to enter their town.⁴⁷ The situation as Osnabrück appears to have been the last major attempt by the flagellants to continue their public penitential processions. Afterwards, the movement disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

The flagellants reappeared briefly between 1351 and 1353. There was a glimpse of them in 1357, but they were soon suppressed by secular intervention.⁴⁸ In 1400, the movement revived for a brief movement in Flanders, but failed to garner the level of public attention and adoration it had achieved during the Black Death. In 1348, Heinrich von Hereford described the flagellants as a “race without a head” which aroused universal wonder by their sudden appearance in huge numbers.⁴⁹ Although the “race without a head” is a reference to the Cedar of Lebanon prophecy, which focused on the resurrection of a new Emperor to initiate a golden age of social justice on earth, Hereford was also alluding to the lack of leadership within the movement. This therefore allowed the group to dissolve as suddenly as it had emerged.

The flagellant movement cannot be disregarded as a completely irrational response to the Black Death. The unprecedented religious sect appeared in 1349 and quickly gained notoriety for its strict asceticism combined with penitential ideals. Many European chroniclers of the late fourteenth century described the effects of the Black Death which swept across continental Europe, including economic, social and religious

⁴⁶ Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, p. 155.

⁴⁷ Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 153.

⁴⁸ Backman, *Religious Dances*, p. 163.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

changes. The flagellants, although extreme, represented one particular reaction in an age when neither state nor medical institutions offered any substantial assistance. The stunning mortality of the time combined with the overwhelming fear of death fueled the movement. Flagellant followers were devoted, their practices consistent and organized, and their intentions genuine. In order to appeal to wider audiences, they incorporated numerous dramatic elements with the promise of forgiveness. While gruesome and unsettling for modern observers, the movement remains a powerful reminder of the extent to which devoted Christians would act in fear of death without salvation.

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