Images of Plague and Pestilence
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IMAGES OF Plague AND Pestilence

Iconography and Iconology

CHRISTINE M. BOECKL

SIXTEENTH CENTURY ESSAYS & STUDIES
VOLUME LIII
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Medical Aspects of Bubonic Plague and <em>Yersinia pestis</em> Infections</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Literary Sources of Plague Iconography</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. Visual Sources of Plague Iconography</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. The Black Death and Its Immediate Aftermath (1347–1500)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. The Sixteenth-Century Renaissance (1500–1600)</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6. The Tridentine World: Plague Paintings as Implementations of Catholic Reforms (1600–1775)</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7. Revival of Plague Themes and Modern Reverberations (1776–1990s)</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8. Plague Imagery, Past and Future</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Plague Texts That Influenced Visual Art</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture References</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

Fig. 1.1. Photograph of a cervical bubo. ................................. 19

Fig. 1.2. Plague Victim. Detail of St. Sebastian Intercedes during the Plague, Josse Lieferinxe, 1497–99 ....................... 20

Fig. 1.3. Detail of Plague Scene, unknown artist, before c. 1518 ...... 21

Fig. 1.4. Photograph of axillary bubo ................................. 22

Fig. 1.5. Detail of St. Roch Cured by an Angel, unknown artist, c. 1490 ................................................................. 23

Fig. 1.6. Photograph of a femoral bubo ................................. 24

Fig. 1.7. St. Gennaro Frees Naples from the Plague, Luca Giordano, 1662 ................................. 25

Fig. 1.8. Plague Victims, woodcut, from Francesco Petrarca, Artzney Beyde Gluck (Augsburg, 1532) ........................................... 26

Fig. 1.9. Doctor’s Visit to a Plague Victim, woodcut, 1512 .......... 28

Fig. 1.10. Plague Doctor in Rome, engraving, P. Fürst, 1656 .......... 29

Fig. 1.11. Carnival in Rome, Lingelbach, c. 1656 ................. 30

Fig. 1.12. Piazza Mercatello during the Plague of 1656, Micco Spadaro, 1660s ......................................................... 31

Fig. 3.1. The Morbetto, engraving, Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, 1520s ......................................................... 49

Fig. 3.2. Plague at Ashdod, engraving, S. Picart after Poussin, 1630s? ... 50

Fig. 3.3. St. Charles Administers the Viaticum to a Plague Victim, engraving, A. Bossé after P. Mignard, 1670 ................. 51

Fig. 3.4. St. Sebastian, woodcut, 1437 ........................................ 61
Fig. 3.5.  *Plague of Epirus*, engraving, Audran after Pierre Mignard, 1670s ........................................ 63
Fig. 3.6.  *Peste/Pestilentia*, engraving, Cesare Ripa, 1750s ............ 66
Fig. 3.7.  *St. Roch*, engraving, Paul Pontius after P. P. Rubens, c. 1623 .......................... 67
Fig. 4.1.  *Triumph of Death*, Buonamico Buffalmacco? c. 1330s .......... 70
Fig. 4.2.  *St. Sebastian Intercedes during the Plague*, Josse Lieferinxe, 1497–99 ........................................ 78
Fig. 4.3.  *Flagellants*, Limbourg Brothers, 1412 .......................... 82
Fig. 4.4.  *Vision of St. Michael*, Limbourg Brothers, 1412 .............. 84
Fig. 4.5.  *St. Gregory’s Procession*, Limbourg Brothers, 1413–16, finished by Jean Colombe, 1485 ...................... 85
Fig. 4.6.  *St. Nicholas Saving Florence*, Giovanni di Paolo, 1456 ........ 87
Fig. 4.7.  *Christ the Judge*, woodcut, title page of Philipp Culmacher, *Regimen wider die Pest*, before 1500 ............... 89
Fig. 5.1.  *Madonna di Foligno*, Raphael, c. 1513 .......................... 93
Fig. 5.2.  *Gozzi Altarpiece*, Titian, 1520 ................................. 99
Fig. 5.3.  *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints*, Giorgio Vasari, 1536 .................................................. 101
Fig. 5.4.  *St. Roch Ministering to the Plague Victims*, Tintoretto, 1549 ... 103
Fig. 6.1.  *Lutheran Eucharistic Feast*, Otto Wagenfeldt, c. 1650 ....... 112
Fig. 6.2.  *St. Charles Administers Extreme Unction*, Benedetto Luti, 1713 .................................................. 117
Fig. 6.3.  *St. Charles Leads Procession of the Holy Nail*, drawing, Pietro da Cortona, 1667 ................................. 119
Fig. 6.4.  *Blessed Bernard Tolomei Comforting Victims of the Plague*, follower of Giuseppe Maria Crespi, eighteenth century ........ 121
Fig. 6.5.  *Death and the Priest*, woodcut, Hans Holbein, before 1538 ... 122
Fig. 6.6.  *St. Charles Administers the Viaticum to a Plague Victim*, Josef Zirckler, 1785 .......................................... 124
Fig. 6.7.  Detail of *Allegory of the Jesuit Order*, unknown artist, 1617 .  .  .  . 126
Fig. 6.8.  *The Miracles of St. Francis Xavier*, P. P. Rubens, 1617 . . . . . .127
Fig. 6.9.  *Pallione del Voto*, Guido Reni, 1630 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .133
Fig. 7.1.  *Napoleon in the Pesthouse of Jaffa*, Antoine-Jean Gros, 1804 . . . 139
Fig. 7.2.  *Belsunce Making a Vow to the Sacred Heart during the Plague in Marseilles*, Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1854 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .143
Fig. 7.3.  *Plague in Early Christian Rome*, Jules-Elie Delaunay, 1869 . . . 144
Fig. 7.4.  *The Great Plague of London*, relief etching, William Blake, 1793 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .146
Fig. 7.5.  *Rescued from the Plague, London 1655*, Frank Topham, 1898 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .148
Fig. 7.6.  *Plague*, from “On Death, Part II,” print, Max Klinger, 1903 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .151
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Recent interest in epidemiology has generated a plethora of publications on the history of pestilential diseases, but studies on plague imagery are rather rare. In fact, the catalogue of the Library of Congress lists only a few book titles under “Plague in Art,” none in English. There are, of course, numerous published journal articles and some recent dissertations that discuss plague art.

Research on bubonic plague and its relation to the visual arts goes back to Emile Mâle’s studies of the 1930s. His seminal work on plague iconography
(image description) was also the first of its kind to offer iconological interpretations (the meaning of images). Since then, studies on medical aspects and plague iconography were written by physicians, such as Roger Seiler, and the majority of publications were issued by two medical historians, Henri Mollaret and Jacqueline Brossollet—the first scholars to investigate scientific facts recorded in plague images. As a team they published nearly forty essays and books dedicated to the pictorial documentation of bubonic plague and have amassed one of the largest photo collections of plague imagery. Several years ago I was invited to peruse their holdings and found their collegial support invaluable for my own plague studies. Madame Brossollet described for my book some of their research experiences, the successes as well as the frustrations encountered in their quest. Shortly before her untimely death, she reviewed the essay. The scientific community lost in her an energetic scholar. I mourn a dear friend and mentor.

Jacqueline Brossollet (Pasteur Institute, Paris) on Pioneering Plague Scholarship, translated by Michelle Rayburn

For many years there was a wide gap between the history of art and the history of medicine. So, when in 1966, at the Twentieth International Congress of Medical History, I presented twenty-four plague illustrations and demonstrated their importance for our understanding of what the ancient epidemics were like, a number of doctors mockingly asked what credence could be given to artists, too often carried away by imagination. Several years after the first conference, while studying three canvases depicting the biblical plague of the Philistines—then attributed to Nicolas Poussin—I asked Anthony Blunt’s advice about some inherent differences among the paintings. My doubts concerned the knowledge that in 1630 Poussin lived in Rome, while bubonic plague ravaged Milan and Venice. He answered me courteously that these “details” were of no interest to him. Yet, these “details” in the works of artists who experienced an epidemic firsthand became the focus of our initial research.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Professor Henri H. Mollaret, director of the Plague Section at the Pasteur Institute in Paris and a World Health Organization expert on this disease, set out to explore the history of previous epidemics to better understand those experienced today. For far from merely being an illness of Europe and the Middle Ages, bubonic plague continues to
menace humanity. Even though the staggering numbers of human fatalities of earlier times have ceased—as the result of diverse medical achievements such as hygiene, vaccination, and antibiotics that provide protection and treatment—bubonic plague remains a potential danger. Although this disease is an epizootic that primarily affects numerous species of rodents, there is no guarantee that there will not be future plague epidemics also among humans. As H. H. Mollaret has proven, its bacillus, *Yersinia pestis*, remains potent for years, buried in the soil, making the disease ineradicable.

For centuries, numerous medical treatises have studied bubonic plague but they have not provided conclusive answers to the questions raised by modern epidemiology. Since earlier doctors attributed the outbreaks to airborne miasmas or to divine wrath or to the harmful conjunctions of planets, the role of the rodents and ectoparasites was never taken into consideration. We, therefore, have searched archives and chronicles seeking information describing the illness. To overcome the paucity of information, we also have consulted visual testimony of artists who lived during an outbreak of plague, examining primary documents that reflected what their eyes had observed.

Our investigation and fieldwork were extensive, taking us to curators of museums and to *curés* of parishes. We asked them to look at painted or sculpted works they had in their care. I must admit, the responses to our first letters were disappointing, probably because the relationship of plague and the arts had not been previously established—except possibly for ex-votos. But a second mailing, specifying precisely what symbols or representations could associate a work of art with plague (the arrow, the angel with the sword, the *danse macabre*, the Madonna *Misericordia*, certain plague patrons, “the sick mother and her child,” and others), produced results and allowed us to establish an important collection of photographic documentations.

To recognize which of the paintings displayed plague-related themes, we studied the above-mentioned characteristic motifs as well as sources for allegorical figures. For example, in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (1603) “Plague” was described as an emaciated old woman. The personification was portrayed as such by G. LeCourt in the plague ex-voto of 1630 for the high altar of Santa Maria della Salute, Venice, and again in the Viennese plague monument erected to commemorate the epidemic of 1679. Until these types of allegorical figures were established, “plague” was indicated in other ways. The categorization of motifs became a highly amusing game for us. However, in all earnestness, the painters unknowingly revealed to us some aspects of the disease which they themselves did not even understand, since the symptoms had been ignored by the plague physicians. Often the painters represented
what they observed in the appearance of the sick, and their renderings helped open our eyes to the past. For example, not until the end of the last century did it become common knowledge that bubonic plague was transmitted by fleas. The Pasteur microbiologist P. L. Simond, while observing scars of flea bites on plague patients, established the essential role of the parasite in 1898. Yet centuries before that discovery, some artists, B. Luini, Th. van der Schuer, and V. H. Jansens, had represented these plague marks, pustules or *charbons pesteux*. From other images we learned of the existence of certain clinical forms of past plagues, such as the sudden deaths striking the participants of the Gregorian propitiatory procession painted by the Limbourg brothers, or the grave digger’s bubo portrayed by J. Lieferinxe, or the pseudointoxicated state of certain victims seen staggering in the paintings of M. Spadaro, as well as many others.

In our numerous articles, as in our presentations at conventions or medical conferences, Professor Mollaret and I always based our findings on visual documentation, and we found recognition by our audiences who long ago stopped smirking. “Works of art are of infinite solitude; nothing is worse than criticism as a means of trying to understand them,” wrote R. M. Rilke to a young poet on 23 April 1903. His opinion is debatable when applied to the art evoking old epidemics. Texts and images complement and reinforce one another; the mass graves of the Neapolitan Piazza Mercatello during the bubonic plague epidemic of 1656, painted by M. Spadaro, find an echo in the terrifying photographs taken during the Manchurian outbreak of 1911.

In this Dantesque hell, filled with horrifying plague scenes, I had from the beginning a Virgil as my guide to whom I want to pay homage, all the more because he seems to be somewhat forgotten—Emile Mâle. In his works on religious art from the twelfth to the end of the eighteenth centuries, he discussed the presence of plague in detail, yet simply enough for us to understand. Because the scourge was always linked to heaven, religious art advocated atonement; prayers and processions were offered to spare a certain town from plague, to ask that the epidemic cease, or to relate the thanksgiving of survivors. These acts of faith were addressed to those who were believed to be capable of appeasing the anger of God. I counted 110 intercessory saints who were credited with having played this mediating role. Paintings and sculptures for each one of them recalled the communal spirit of a certain region, in a specific year. I am well aware of the restrictions imposed on the artists by those who commissioned these religious works—the choice of the patron saints, the implied meaning of the scenes pertaining to the Church or confraternities, along with the donors’ wishes—but, by the same token, these facts
also are guaranties of the documented scene’s authenticity.

For years I followed my passion, cataloguing all images related to bubonic plague of the city of Venice and the Veneto. Thanks to our efforts, the director of the Fine Arts Academy in Venice, who in 1978 searched for an exhibition theme, decided on the title “Venezia e la peste.” For this purpose we resurrected numerous artworks from the vaults of dusty sacristies, canvases which had been darkened by centuries of candle soot. These neglected images needed to be cleaned and restored before they could be exhibited. At times we made new discoveries, or rediscovered forgotten works; also we found images that had not been recognized previously as plague pictures. From December 1979 until May 1980, the show in the Palazzo Ducale attracted large crowds from Milan, Florence, and Rome, as the officials of Assessorato alla Cultura e Belle Arti de Venezia had predicted. Today, the exhibition catalogue, to which we contributed several chapters, is one of the few illustrated plague publications in book format. In 1994 we also published the book *Pourquoi la Peste? Le rat, la puce et le bubon*, which shows art along with documentation of modern plague epidemics.

At this point, I also wish to acknowledge the staff of Antwerp’s Musée des Beaux-Arts, who showed great interest in our inquiry and gave us the opportunity to publish repeatedly in the museum’s yearbook. In the issue of the 1965 *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten* we summarized, in a hundred pages and sixty-eight illustrations, the main themes of plague images as well as the often unrecognized influence they exerted. I remember one of Antwerp’s museum curators remarking to me that he now understood why the charitable confraternities had added another duty as a new obligation for their lay members. Until then, their charges had been to clothe the naked, to visit the prisoners, to assist orphans, to nurse the sick, to feed the hungry. After the fifteenth century, “to bury the dead” became another required “act of mercy.” This duty became important because towns struck by plague found their streets littered with bodies, and the grave diggers were unable to handle the task alone.

Additionally, we helped rectify existing misinformation; for example, a panel painting by Giovanni di Paolo, dated to the mid-fifteenth century, had long been displayed in the Louvre under the title chosen by Louis Hautecoeur, *Procession of Pope Clement VI to Castel Sant’Angelo in 1348*. We knew that this was an inaccurate statement because Pope Clement VI, who indeed had been pope during the plague of 1348, lived in Avignon where the papacy resided from 1305 until 1378; he never went to Rome. In reality, Giovanni di Paolo represented the procession of Gregory I, as described in
the *Golden Legend*, which took place during the Roman plague of 590. After the publication of our article in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1969, the Louvre agreed to modify the painting’s caption. Similarly, visitors to the same museum could hear, on an audio tour, an erroneous commentary on A. J. Gros’s *Napoleon in the Plague House of Jaffa*. Most likely, its author did not know that Bonaparte had made two visits to the plague-stricken, one in March of 1799, in the euphoria of conquest, the other in May of the same year, when the army was in full retreat. The commentator evoked the second visit to the hospital, while the painter had illustrated the first encounter with the plague victims. Thus there were certain discrepancies between what the spectators saw and what they heard on tape. Following the publication of our study of this canvas, in the 1968 edition of Antwerp’s *Jaarboek*, the audio guide was modified. In another instance, due to his thorough knowledge of seventeenth-century medical texts, H. H. Mollaret could prove in his preface to a new edition of Daniel Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (which included several illustrations) that the author had not just invented the details about the epidemic but had utilized medical documents to support his narrative. Many literary critics had dismissed the novel as pure fiction. For a long time they refused to appreciate it for what it was, a report of the tragic events which befell London in 1665.

I have always informed those who consulted our rich documents of the danger of becoming totally immersed by the far-reaching ramifications of the plague topic, which touches on all domains of life. Its diverse manifestations—often unexpected—do not exist in the history of any other illness. I have frequently expressed this by saying, “The history of plague is a subject inviting possible failure.” Christine M. Boeckl has averted in her book most of the common pitfalls of the vast, interdisciplinary field of plague studies by setting rigorous parameters for her investigation, by avoiding tempting digressions, by targeting the essence of a subject both abundant and yet neglected. I have found in her publications the confirmation of what Mollaret and I originally pioneered in our own research, and I am sure this knowledge will help her readers, as it has ours, to discern more fully the meaning in plague images.
Introduction

From the late fourteenth century on, European artists created an extensive body of images which related to the devastating effects of plague epidemics. In paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures, and other media, artists produced complex and emotionally charged works about the horrors of disease and death but also about hope and salvation.

Pestilence, like death, war, and famine, is a universal theme, mentioned in numerous books of the Bible and the works of Homer in antiquity. Early literature, in both classical civilizations and Judeo-Christian tradition, equates plague with divine punishment for human transgressions. Unfortunately, no contemporary illustrations of such texts have survived—if they ever existed. Plague scenes appear late in Western art. Possible reasons for the slow development of a specific plague iconography (image description) include difficulties in characterizing the medical symptoms and, more important, the absence of the disease from Europe between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. When a virulent strain of bubonic plague arrived from Asia in the late Middle Ages, the disease remained a constant threat for the next four hundred years. Because the pathogen that caused bubonic plague was not discovered until the 1890s, many unrealistic theories evolved about its origin and infectious nature; some of them are visualized throughout the history of plague art.

The study of plague iconography is unique because it has a distinct beginning, the year 1347, when bubonic plague struck Europe with such unprecedented force that it was later known as the Black Death. It is equally remarkable that the visual tradition begun in the late Middle Ages continues until today. Thus the value of this inquiry lies in the well-defined time frame and self-contained iconographic topic.

In this book, except when specified as bubonic plague, the terms pestilence and plague are used interchangeably to denote a deadly epidemic disease. Since bubonic plague is the only major illness for which an intricate iconography was developed, its images present a special opportunity to study
changing attitudes toward physical afflictions. Moreover, the value of many plague subjects is enhanced by their firm dates or links to a specific epidemic, contributing to our knowledge of chronology. The works discussed range from masterpieces created by Raphael, Titian, Tintoretto, P. P. Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, and Nicolas Poussin to minor works; however, all give important historic evidence and shed light on contemporary philosophies of life and death.

*Images of Plague and Pestilence* pursues three goals: one, to present for the first time an overview of various sources of plague iconography; two, to select a few significant paintings dating from the fourteenth to twentieth centuries and investigate their iconology (meaning of the image); and three, to highlight the most important innovative artistic works that originated during the Renaissance and the Catholic Reformation. This interdisciplinary study of the changing iconographic patterns and their iconological interpretations opens “windows” to the past. The discussion of style is of secondary importance. However, since the images are the primary documents, I have used the periodization customary in art history.

Each chapter begins with comments on the intellectual background that shaped plague images at that time. From ancient Greece through the eighteenth century, frequent epidemics evoked traditional religious practices and even superstitions, and those repercussions can be observed in the visual arts. As long as people felt they were at the mercy of an unpredictable deity, outbreaks of plague often reversed progressive ideas. By the time of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, bubonic plague was finally on the wane in Europe. At that point artworks dealing with the subject of pestilence showed a trend toward greater secularization.

The achievements of Jacqueline Brossollet and Henri Mollaret are recounted in the preface. At first, many of their suggestions based on medical facts were rejected by museum staff and art historians alike. Today we cannot imagine plague research without their numerous publications.

The first chapter is concerned with medical questions. It incorporates scientific knowledge gathered during the Vietnam War, when thousands of people were infected with the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*. This section includes medical photographs illustrating the disease’s symptoms, which can be compared to renderings of plague buboes and other pathological evidence found in paintings several centuries old. Because the symptoms have not changed over the years, this comparison gives the viewer a rare opportunity to measure the realism expressed in individual works of art. The reader will also be able to recognize whether the artists had firsthand knowledge of bubonic
plague or merely repeated *schemata*. Ancient medical theories are scrutinized for their influence on the visual arts. Moreover, changes in religious attitudes need to be considered in order to evaluate the reason for less realistic medical illustrations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Chapters 2 and 3 detail the development of plague iconography, which drew upon literary as well as visual sources. Both sources are of equal importance since in the West the concept of sister arts, poetry and painting, are essentially connected. The reciprocal influences are difficult to separate. Additionally, we have to assume that a vital oral tradition helped shape the imagery. This section of the book is intended to be used primarily as reference material, presenting facts and defining terms that are referred to in later chapters.

Numerous classical writers, in addition to Homer, describe plague epidemics—among them Thucydides, Sophocles, Lucretius, Virgil, and Ovid. Christian authors include Procopius, Gregory of Tours, and Paul the Deacon, who related the story of the sixth-century Justinian pandemic. Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* contains the most famous contemporary secular account of the Black Death. Geoffrey Chaucer, Giuseppe Ripamonte, Daniel Defoe, Alessandro Manzoni, and Albert Camus described later epidemics. The most pertinent religious texts were derived from the Old and New Testaments, Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, other hagiographic accounts, and plague sermons. An original feature of this study is the comparison of historic texts with later translations or interpretations that register the people’s rising concern about bubonic plague.

Visual plague motifs, both religious and secular, appear in many different media. This book does not examine the entire collection of known plague objects but discusses iconographic examples from a variety of media. However, the discussion of iconological interpretations is restricted to the analysis of paintings, drawings, and prints. Some of the plague symbols trace their written sources to antiquity, others to the seventh century. The year 1347 constitutes a *terminus post quem* as artists began to invent new plague imagery. Because of the sudden and traumatic experience of the Black Death, several existing themes, such as the “Dance of the Dead” (*danse macabre*), “Triumph of Death,” and the “Madonna of Mercy” (*Misericordia*), also were adopted and later adapted for plague subjects. Most scholars are well acquainted with Raphael’s scene of the Phrygian plague that depicts a dead or dying mother with an infant at her breast. It is less well known that this sixteenth-century motif was not repeated in a plague context until 1631 when Nicolas Poussin and his followers made it emblematic of the disease.
For hundreds of years the cliché was regurgitated in secular and religious works alike, lasting into modern times. However, this figural group is by no means the only indicator that a subject deals with pestilence. Establishment of a chronology for individual motifs will contribute to more accurate dating and a better understanding of yet-to-be-discovered works of art.

The four chapters that follow examine the iconological importance of paintings created in different time periods—the macabre Black Death of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the cerebral High Renaissance, and the euphoric Baroque of the reformed Roman Catholic Church. Reverberations in the postplague era, the esoteric Romantic period, and AIDS images of the twentieth century are briefly reviewed in chapter 7. The iconological analysis of chapters 4 through 7 addresses the questions when, where, and above all why plague art was produced.

The appendix includes extensive quotations from literary sources that relate to plague epidemics, although such quotes had to be limited to those that have found visual expression over the centuries. These prototypes are of particular importance because the experience of a pestilential epidemic triggers the inherent human response to rely on earlier written documents. No matter how distant in time, scripture, chronicles, or poetic treatment of similar subjects were frequently consulted to ease the tension and anxiety of the people during an outbreak of disease. These accounts extend from antiquity to modern times and make fascinating reading in themselves.

Because plague literature in general is vast, the bibliography included here must be selective. This study emphasizes the latest international discussions on plague including a variety of sources taken from Internet compilations and publications not readily available in the United States. Studies on plague art, on the other hand, are not as numerous as one might assume; therefore, most titles of relevant books, journal articles, and dissertations have been cited either in the bibliography or in the endnotes. It was not possible to write a book of this scope until now because much of the scholarship is quite recent. Our knowledge has been enriched by a wealth of publications ranging from popular essays on historic pandemics, triggered by the AIDS crisis, to original documentary evidence on demographics, the latest medical facts, religious practices, and more. In addition, several current scholarly articles studying specific artworks in depth have produced a breakthrough in the interpretation of plague imagery.

For discussion purposes, plague paintings are organized into three categories. The first includes votive commissions that show the Trinity, the Virgin, and saints such as Sebastian, Gregory, Roch, and Charles Borromeo,
who were invoked as healers and intercessors. Since epidemics affected a whole region rather than an individual, the votives, although the gift of a single patron, would frequently represent the entire community. Some of these works included accurate topographical details and architectural renderings of the cities petitioning God. These devotional gifts were created to assure health, give thanks, and avert future epidemics.

The second group, comprising sacred and profane works, describes the devastation of the plague. They show greater diversity than ex-votos in both design and function. Most of these narratives report events from the lives of saints who had been actively involved in comforting victims of pestilential diseases. Such images rarely functioned as devotional art but frequently proclaimed didactic and polemic messages. The relatively rare secular plague themes generally depicted cities in the throes of an epidemic. They were displayed in private art collections rather than in religious settings.

A third set is even more difficult to classify because its themes are highly symbolic. Throughout the ages the word _pestilence_ has suggested many different concepts. The late Middle Ages associated plague with eschatology. In the Renaissance, after the Protestant Reformation, “pestilence” served as a metaphor for heresy. In the Baroque period, Cesare Ripa included in his _Iconologia_ the description of a female personification, _Pestil/Pestilentia_, thus making us aware of the allegorical aspect of the illness. During the nineteenth century, plague paintings alluded to new threats such as cholera and yellow fever. Even today, the word _plague_ is used as an analogy for a threat unknown to or uncontrollable by medical science. In this sense it describes the latest scourge: AIDS.

Throughout this book, the visual and literary traditions are stressed, along with select, recurring, plague-related topics that remained constant. Much of the catalogued plague art has not been previously considered beyond a literal reading. Closer examination, however, reveals changing artistic perceptions which depended largely on the transformation of prevailing ideas. Most important, this analysis shows that the theme of pestilence does not deal exclusively with death but touches on many aspects of people’s lives.

My interest in the depiction of plague epidemics originated in Austria during World War II. What impressed me most at that time was not so much the sheer horror of the holocaust but the resiliency of humanity. Since then I have continued to investigate how people of earlier periods coped under extreme pressure. I found that the survivors and the creators of plague art frequently expressed positive sentiments; the reason for these pictorial conventions are explored here.
Illustrations are indicated by **bold** locators.

**A**  
*Acta Sanctorum*, 40  
Aesculapius, 35, 144  
afterlife, 69–71, 74, 132, 134, 156, 187n130  
AIDS, 34, 150, 152–53, 157  
and *Yersinia Pestis*, 196n245  
*Allegory of the Jesuit Order*, 125, **126**, 129  
animals, dying, 9–10, 26, 49, 94, 147, 174n9  
Apocalypse/Last Judgment, 38–39, 47, 69–70, 97, 104, 147, 153, 157  
Apollo, 35, 46–47, 92, 102, 141, 144, 158  
Asia, 1, 7, 9, 15, 137, 175n12  
astronomical phenomena, 14, 47, 96–97, 132, 190n176  
Athens, plague of, 35  

**B**  
bacteria/bacillus, 7–8, 10–12, 15–16, 18, 173n6  
*Belles Heures*, 81, **82**, 83, **84**, 188n149  
Belsunce, Henri de (bishop), 35, 43, 64, 113, 160, 195n234  
*Belsunce’s Vow*, Jean-Léon Gérôme, **143**  
Benedict XII (pope)  
*Benedictus Deus*, 69–71, 74  
theory of afterlife, 69–71, 185n118, 187n133  
Bertrand, J. B., 155  
*Biblioteca Sanctorum*, 40  
Biraben, Jean-Noel, 9  
Black Death, 1, 7, 9–10, 13, 45, 90, 152.  

*See also* bubonic plague; plague  
accounts of, 3  
art as a psychological defense, 75  
and theological changes, 72–76  
Blake, William, 195n239  
The Great Plague of London, 145, **146**, 147  
*Blessed Bernard Tolomei Comforting Victims of the Plague*, Giuseppe Maria Crespi, 120, **121**  
Blunt, Anthony, 109  
Boccaccio, Giovanni, 34  
*Decameron*, 36, 162–64, 180n52  
descriptions of Black Death, 186n126  
body and soul, 70, 113, 132  
Bonaparte, Napoleon, 138–41, 156, 174n7  
Borromean plague, 104, 107, 117. *See also* epidemics  
Borromeo, Charles, 6, 40, 42, 58–59, 114–16, 155. *See also* plague: intercessors  
quadroni, 59  
Borromeo, Frederico, 155  
buboes, 2, 18, 103, 132, 140, 157, 173n2.  
*See also* plague: bubo in art  
artistic depictions, **20–21**, **23**  
change in depiction during seventeenth century, 109, 135  
change in depiction during sixteenth century, 92, 105  
photographs of, **19**, **22**, **24**  
and St. Roch, 48, 58, 92  
as symptoms of plague, 11–12
bubonic plague. See also Black Death; plague and AIDS, 150, 152
Black Death, 9–10
causes of, 14, 156
diagnosis, 8, 14, 17, 149
DNA, 8–9, 175n12
Enlightenment attitudes toward, 107, 157
fatality rate, 12
and femoral infections, 21
history of, 1, 7–12
as modern danger, x–xi
remedies, 15–17
research on, ix–xi
subsiding in Europe, 137
symptoms of, 11
transmission of, 10–11, 155, 176n12, xii
vaccine, 8
burials/graves, 63, 77, 185n113
Butler, Thomas, M.D., 11, 175n12
C
Cambi, Giovanni, 155
Camus, Albert, 37, 142
canon of justification, 110, 113, 157
Carracci, Lodovico, St. Charles Baptizes an Infant in a Plague Encampment, 115–16
Castel Sant’Angelo, 52, 56–57, 83
Catholic Reformation. See Counter-Reformation
cholera, 138, 141–42, 150
Christ the Judge, Philipp Culmacher, 89
ciborium, 86, 111, 115, 120
Clement VI (pope), 179n46, xiii
clergy, status of, 111, 120, 157
clouds, 15, 36–37, 47, 65, 158, 183n85. See also plague: symbols/signifiers
communion, 43, 110–11, 114, 116–17, 192n195, 192n204. See also Eucharist
corpses, unburied, 35, 63, 132
Cortona, Pietro da, St. Charles Leads the Procession of the Holy Nail, 119, 142
Council of Trent
Decree on the Arts, 108–9
implications for plague imagery, 105–6, 108–9, 114, 120, 134, 157
Counter-Reformation, 108–11, 123, 125, 157, 159
Crespi, Giuseppe Maria, Blessed Bernard Tolomei Comforting Victims of the Plague, 120, 121
Crivelli, Carlo, 21
Culmacher, Philipp, Christ the Judge, 89
Cyprian (bishop of Carthage), 40–41
D
danse macabre (Totentanz, Dance of the Dead), 3, 43–45, 132, 134, 158, 182n80
Dante, 69, 128
David, Jacques L., 138
death
“bad,” 74, 109
“good,” 73, 134
sudden plague deaths, 32, 56, 64, 88, 177n19
Death and the Priest, Hans Holbein, 122
Defoe, Daniel, Journal of the Plague Year, 37, 147, 163, xiv
Delaunay, Jules-Elie, Plague in Early Christian Rome, 142, 144

diagnoses, 149
difficulties of, 8, 14, 17
Diana (sister of Apollo), 46, 102, 185n112
disciplinati (flagellants), 47, 81, 82, 105, 188n151
Doctor’s Visit to a Plague Victim, 28
dogs, 10, 57, 64, 100, 176n15
Dürer, Albrecht, 87–88, 150, 152
E
emblem books, 36
England, 72–73, 114, 144–49, 153
Enlightenment, 2, 107, 157
epidemics
Athenian plague, 35, 173n3
Black Death, 1, 7, 9–10, 13, 45, 90, 152
Borromean plague, 104, 107, 117
epidemics continued
  Davidian plague, 47, 52, 100
  Egyptian plague, 138
  Epirus (Aegina), 35, 62
  Florence, 34, 36, 72, 76
  Justinian plague, 7, 12, 53
  London’s Great Plague, 16, 37, 107, 145–49, 153
  Manzonian plague, 107
  Marseilles, 17, 37, 64, 107, 138, 142, 155–56, 195n234
  Naples, 17, 64, 107, 132, 190n176
  Phrygian plague, 3, 48
  Rome, 14, 55, 83, 91, 94, 107
  Vienna, 42, 118, 178n30
  eschatological themes, 96–98, 128, 147, 150, 153, 156–58. See also Apocalypse/Last Judgment
  Eucharist, 43, 158, 192n193, 192n195. See also communion; sacraments; viaticum
  importance in plague imagery, 88, 90
  liturgical objects, 111
  and Protestant Reformation, 110–11
  Eusebius (bishop of Caesarea), 41
  ex-votos/votives, 43, 45, 60, 98, 108, 131, 135, 137–38, 156
  devotional prints, 60, 182n79

F
  fear, 8, 18, 37, 39, 73, 109, 139, 156
  female plague saints, 60
  Flagellants, Limbourg Brothers, 82
  fleas, 8–12, 21, 27, 152, 173n6, xii
  Florence, 34, 36, 72, 76
  France, 36, 57, 64, 73, 123, 138, 141
  funerals, 63, 73-74, 86, 113
  Fürst, P., Plague Doctor in Rome, 27, 29

G
  Galen, 17–18, 154
  Gérôme, Jean-Léon, Belsunce’s Vow, 141–42, 143, 153, 195n234
  Giordano, Luca, St. Gennaro Frees Naples from the Plague, 21, 25, 132, 134
  Giussano, Giovanni Pietro, The Life of St. Charles Borromeo, 163
  Golden Legend, 14, 39–40, 156
  Gregory I (pope), 56, 81, 83, 86
  nineteenth-century republication, 142
  and plague angels, 52
  plague attributes, 46–47, 181n66, xiv
  St. Sebastian, 55, 77, 79–80
  Gozzi Altarpiece, Titan, 99
  Great Plague of London, William Blake, 146
  Gregory I (pope), 41, 56–57, 74, 155, 181n66
  in Belles Heures, 81–86
  represented in art, 56–57
  Grimm, Jürgen, 33, 36, 38, 180n51
  Gros, Antione-Jean, Napoleon in the Pest-house of Jaffa, 138, 139, 141, 153, 194n230, xiv
  health, public, 12–14, 16, 150, 155
  health boards, 12–13
  herb/medicinals. See remedies/precautions
  heresy, association with plague, 5, 79–80, 125, 128–30, 142, 144–45, 157–58
  Hippocrates, 17, 154
  historiography, 152, 158, 173n1, ix–xiv
  Holbein, Hans, 107, 152
  Death and the Priest, 122
  Homer, Iliad, 35, 154, 164
  hospitals, 13, 16, 106, 113-14
  I
  iconography, definition, 1
  iconology, definition, 2
  J
  Janssens, Victor Honoré, 26, xii
  Jesuits. See Society of Jesus
  Justinian plague, 3, 7–8, 12, 36, 40, 53, 159, 183n96. See also epidemics
  K
  King David, 38, 54–55, 100, 118, 154–55, 183n98
  Kircher, Athanasuis, 155
  Klinger, Max, Plague, 149–50, 151, 153
leprosy, 18, 154
Limbourg brothers
*Flagellants*, 82
*St. Gregory’s Procession*, 85
*Vision of St. Michael*, 84
Lingelbach, *Carnation in Rome*, 30
Livy, 35
London, 16, 37, 107, 145–49, 153
Louis XIV, 141
Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 14–15, 37
*Lutheran Eucharistic Feast*, Otto Wagenfeldt, 112
Luti, Benedetto, *St. Charles Administers Extreme Unction*, 117
macabre, 37, 43, 64, 69, 132
*Madonna di Foligno*, Raphael, 93
Mâle, Emile, 158, ix–x, xii
Manzoni, Alessandro, *The Betrothed*, 37
Manzonian plague, 107. See also epidemics
Marseilles, 17, 37, 64, 107, 138, 142, 155–56, 195n234
Marshall, Louise, 74–75, 102, 158
Martin, A. Lynn, 9, 129
Meiss, Millard, 72, 76, 186n125
memento mori, 47, 69, 88, 90, 123, 152
miasma, 15, 36–37, 48, 65, 97, 118, 120, 150, 174n9, 177n26, 183n90
Mignard, Pierre
*Plague of Epirus*, 62, 63
*St. Charles Administers the Viaticum to a Plague Victim*, 51, 59, 114–15, 120, 123–25, 192n200
Milan, 13, 104, 107, 155
Miracles of St. Francis Xavier, Peter Paul Rubens, 127
*Misericordia* (Madonna of Mercy), 3, 45, 53, 80, 187n147, xi
Mollaret, Henri, 158
*Morbeto*, Marcantonio Raimondi, 49
Naples, 17, 64, 107, 132, 190n176
*Napoleon in the Pesthouse of Jaffa*, Antoine-Jean Gros, 139
Netherlands, 123, 125, 145
Nicholas of Tolentino, 74–75, 86, 87, 189n156
*Nikopoeia*, 53, 96
Niobe, 102
Noah, 42, 190n176
nursing orders, 12, 55, 113–14, 134–35, 157
Ogata, Masanori, 8, 174n12
*ostentatio vulneris*, 48, 88
Pallione del Voto, Guido Reni, 133
Paolo, Giovanni di, *St. Nicholas Saving Florence*, 87
Paris, 15, 43, 138, 141–42
Passover, 38
Pasteur, Louis, 6, 177n26
Pepys, Samuel, *Diary*, 37, 147, 166–68
*Pestbilder*, 46. See also plague: symbols/signifiers
*Pestblätter*, 43, 60, 61, 182n79
*Peste*, as allegory, 36–37, 65, 66, 180n58. See also plague, personification of pestilence, 1, 5, 33–34, 38–39, 45, 180n50. See also plague
artists’ fascination with, 153
and Byzantine icons, 53
Petrarca, Francesco
*Plague Victims*, 26
*Triumph of Death*, 36
*Piazza Mercatello during the Plague of 1656*, Micco Spadaro, 27, 31
plague, 180n50. See also Black Death; bubonic plague
and animal mortality, 9–10, 26, 49, 94, 147, 174n9
plague continued
art, religious functions
  canonization campaigns, 57, 59, 86, 121, 125, 128, 134, 157
  commemorative, 6, 80, 132, 182n80
  memento mori, 47, 69, 88, 90, 123, 152
  as political device, 123, 134, 140–41, 157, 194n233
  propagation of Catholic faith, 129, 135, 152, 157
  as psychological defense, 75, 156
  sacramental images, 110–11, 114–18
  votive, 43, 45, 60, 98, 108, 131, 135, 137–38, 156
bubo in art
  axillary bubo, 11, 21, 22, 140
  cervical bubo, 11, 20, 79
  femoral bubo, 11, 21, 24, 58, 103
causes of, 8–9, 14–15, 154–55
Christ's suffering, 75–77, 134, 156, 188n151
confraternties, 55, 60, 97, 103, 105, 156, 188n151, xiii
discourses, 13–15
doctors, 17, 27, 28–29
early accounts of, 35–36
historical accounts of, 9, 154–55, 159, 174n9
intercessors, 40, 53–54, 156, 181n68, xii
  Blessed Bernard Tolomei, 120, 193n211
  Christ, 38, 41, 48, 80, 131
  Christian martyrs, 46, 53
  King David, 38, 54–55, 100, 118, 154–55, 183n98
  St. Adrian, 53
  St. Camille de Lellis, 113
  St. Charles Borromeo, 6, 40–41, 58–59, 114–16, 155
  St. Christopher, 46, 53
  St. Francesca Romana, 60
  St. Francis Xavier, 98, 125, 129–30
  St. Gregory I, 41, 56–57, 74, 155, 181n66
  St. Ignatius, 126, 128–29, 132
St. Michael, 52, 83, 88, 184n102
St. Nicholas of Tolentino, 74–75, 86, 189n156
St. Roch, 40, 48, 57–58, 65
St. Rosalia, 60, 62, 184n107
St. Sebastian, 46–47, 55–56, 60, 61
St. Thecla, 53, 60
Trinity, 51–52
Virgin Mary, 48, 52–53, 86, 97, 130, 183n95, 191n181
and modern medicine, 7–9, 156
paintings, 4–5
  allegories, 64–65, 66–67, 108
  narrative/history, 62–68, 108
  in northern Europe, 104, 123, 125
personification of (allegorical figures of),
  36, 64–65, 108, 125, 135, 157–58, xi
precautions, 15–17, 86–87. See also remedies/precautions
psychological responses to, 65, 75, 140, 149, 154–59
sanitary cordon, 17, 178n30
scholarship, Brossollet and Mollaret, 158
sculpture, 21, 46, 54, 68, 159
sermons, 40–43
symbols/signifiers
  angels, 52, 54, 56–57, 65, 80, 102, 142, 157
  animal carcasses, 26, 49, 94
  architectural motifs, 47–48, 95
  arrows, 35, 46–47, 54–55, 76, 80, 128, 157
  astrological signs, 14, 47, 96–97, 132, 190n176
  clouds, 15, 36–37, 47, 65, 158, 183n85
  corpses/cadavers, 35, 48–49, 63, 149–50, 157
death/skull, 47, 54, 64, 149–50
display of wounds, 26, 48, 58, 76, 88, 100
fig plant, 18, 47, 98, 158
flagellum, 47, 54
gestures/poses, 47–48, 65, 129, 141, 158
plague, symbols/signifiers continued
stalks of wheat, 54
sword, 46, 52, 54, 88, 142
wind, 118, 150, 158
treatment of, 17–18, 26–27, 28–31
urban conditions, 12–13, 27, 31, 147
Plague, Max Klinger, 151
Plague at Ashdod, Nicholas Poussin, 50
Plague in Early Christian Rome, Jules-Elie Delaunay, 144
Plague of Epirus, Pierre Mignard, 63
Plague Scene, 21
Plague Victims, Francesco Petrarca, 26
Pneumonic plague, 7, 12, 15, 18, 26, 69
Pourquoi la Peste?, xiii
Poussin, Nicholas, Plague at Ashdod, 39, 48, 50, 64, 129–31, 152, 183n90
Protestant Reformation, 91, 108, 110–11, 114, 116–17, 125, 159
psychomachia, 71, 77
Pulex irritans. See fleas
Purgatory, 109, 159, 187n133
in the fourteenth century, 74
and plague, 74–75, 86
Q
quarantines, 15, 17, 137–38, 178n30
R
Raimondi, Marcantonio, Morbetto, 49, 92, 95, 106
Raphael
Madonna di Foligno, 92, 93, 96–98, 105
and plague gestures, 48
Plague of Phrygia, 3, 35, 49, 62, 92–95, 105, 131, 149
rats, 9, 39, 152, 174n12
remedies/precautions against plague
physical, 14–17
spiritual, 86–87
Reni, Guido, Pallione de Voto, 131–32, 133
Rescued from the Plague, London 1655, Frank Topham, 148
Ripa, Cesare
Iconologia, 5, 36, 65, 167, xi
Pestes/Pestilentia, 66
Ripamonte, Giuseppe, 65, 155
Roman Art Academy of St. Luke, 109
Romanticism, 137–38
Rome, 14, 55, 83, 91, 94, 107
Rubens, Peter Paul
The Miracles of St. Francis Xavier, 125, 127, 129–31
St. Roch, 65, 67
Rubric (Rituale Romanum), 43, 115, 118, 191n189
S
sacraments
confession/penance, 73, 87, 110–11, 116–17
Eucharist/communion, 43, 110–11, 114, 116–17, 192n195, 192n204
infant baptism, 115
last rites/extreme unction, 87, 110, 117, 192n193
salvation, 74, 108–11, 156–58
scapegoat, Jews as, 13, 177n22
Schefer, Jean Louis, 37
Schröter, Elizabeth, 96–97, 158
Schutzmantel, 80
septicemic plague, 7, 12, 18, 26
Siena, 120
Silk Road, 15
Simond, P. L., 147, 173n6, xii
sin, 71, 154
smallpox, 18, 128, 173n2, 174n11
Society of Jesus, 126, 128–29, 135
Sophocles, Oedipus the King, 35
Spadaro, Micco, The Piazza Mercatello during the Plague of 1656, 31
St. Charles Administers Extreme Unction, Benedetto Luti, 117
St. Charles Administers the Viaticum to a Plague Victim, Josef Zirckler, 124
St. Charles Administers the Viaticum to a Plague Victim, Pierre Mignard, 51
St. Charles Borromeo. See Borromeo, Charles
St. Charles Leads Procession of the Holy Nail, Pietro da Cortona, 119
St. Christopher, 46
St. Gennaro Frees Naples from the Plague,
Luca Giordano, 25
St. Gregory. See Gregory I (pope)
St. Gregory’s Procession, Limbourg Brothers, 85
St. Michael, 52, 88, 184n102
St. Nicholas Saving Florence, Giovanni di Paolo, 87
St. Roch, 40, 48, 57–58, 65
represented in art, 21, 57–58, 104
St. Roch, Peter Paul Rubens, 67
St. Roch Cured by an Angel, 23
St. Roch Ministering to Plague Victims, Tintoretto, 103
St. Sebastian, 46–47, 52, 55–56
and AIDS, 152
intercession in Pavia, 56, 77, 78
in plague votives, 80
represented in art, 55, 60, 61, 76–77, 78
St. Sebastian Intervenes during the Plague,
Josse Lieferinxe, 20, 78

V
Vasari, Giorgio
St. Roch Altarpiece, 100, 105, 157

Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints,
101
Venice, 15, 57, 98, 103
vera pestis. See bubonic plague
viaticum, 86, 110–11, 115, 117
Vienna, 42, 118, 178n30
Vietnam War, 2, 7, 26, 34
Virgil, Aeneid, 35–36, 91–92, 94–95, 168
Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints,
Giorgio Vasari, 101
Virgin Mary, 48, 52, 86, 130, 183n95,
191n181. See also plague: intercessors
as Apocalyptic Woman, 53, 97, 131,
190n179
Madonna of Constantinople, 53
Misericordia (Madonna of Mercy), 3, 45,
53, 80, 187n147
Nikepoia, 53, 96
Vision of St. Michael, Limbourg Brothers,
84
Voragine, Jacobus de, Golden Legend, 169–71
votives. See ex-votos/votives

W
Wagenfeldt, Otto, Lutheran Eucharistic Feast, 112
Wobreck, Simon de, Palermo Delivered from Pestilence, 104–5
women
exposure to infection, 155
and nursing, 12, 55, 113–14, 134–35,
157
as plague saints, 60
pregnant, 31, 179n49, 188n149
Virgin Mary, 48, 52–53, 86, 97, 130,
183n95, 191n181
World Health Organization, 7

X
Xenopsylla cheopis. See fleas

Y
yellow fever, 5, 138, 173n2
Yersin, Alexandre, 8, 149–50, 173n6
Yersinia pestis (*Pastuerella pestis*), 2, 7, 8, 10, 18, 156, 175n12, 196n245, xi

Zirckler, Josef, *St. Charles Administers the Viaticum to a Plague Victim*, 124

**Scripture References**

See also Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scripture Reference</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exod. 12:29-33</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sam. 5:4-6</td>
<td>39, 129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Sam. 24:10-25</td>
<td>38, 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Chron. 21:1-28</td>
<td>38, 54, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Chron. 22-28</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Chron. 3:1-2</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job 25:15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job 27:15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalms 37:2-4</td>
<td>5, 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezek. 14:21-22</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt. 24:32</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt. 24:36</td>
<td>38–39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt. 24:37-38</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 13:28</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke 21:29-31</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. 6:1-8</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. 6:1-17</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. 8:1</td>
<td>39</td>
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<td>Rev. 12:1-3</td>
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<td>Rev. 16:2</td>
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<td>Rev. 18:8</td>
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