

## COVER STORY

# “Oh father, why have you abandoned me?”

In 1347, chroniclers of the Black Death began reporting incidents of mothers, uncles, brothers and wives deserting their plague-stricken relatives and fleeing for their lives. **Samuel Cohn** tells the story of a horrifying, yet little known phenomenon: abandonment



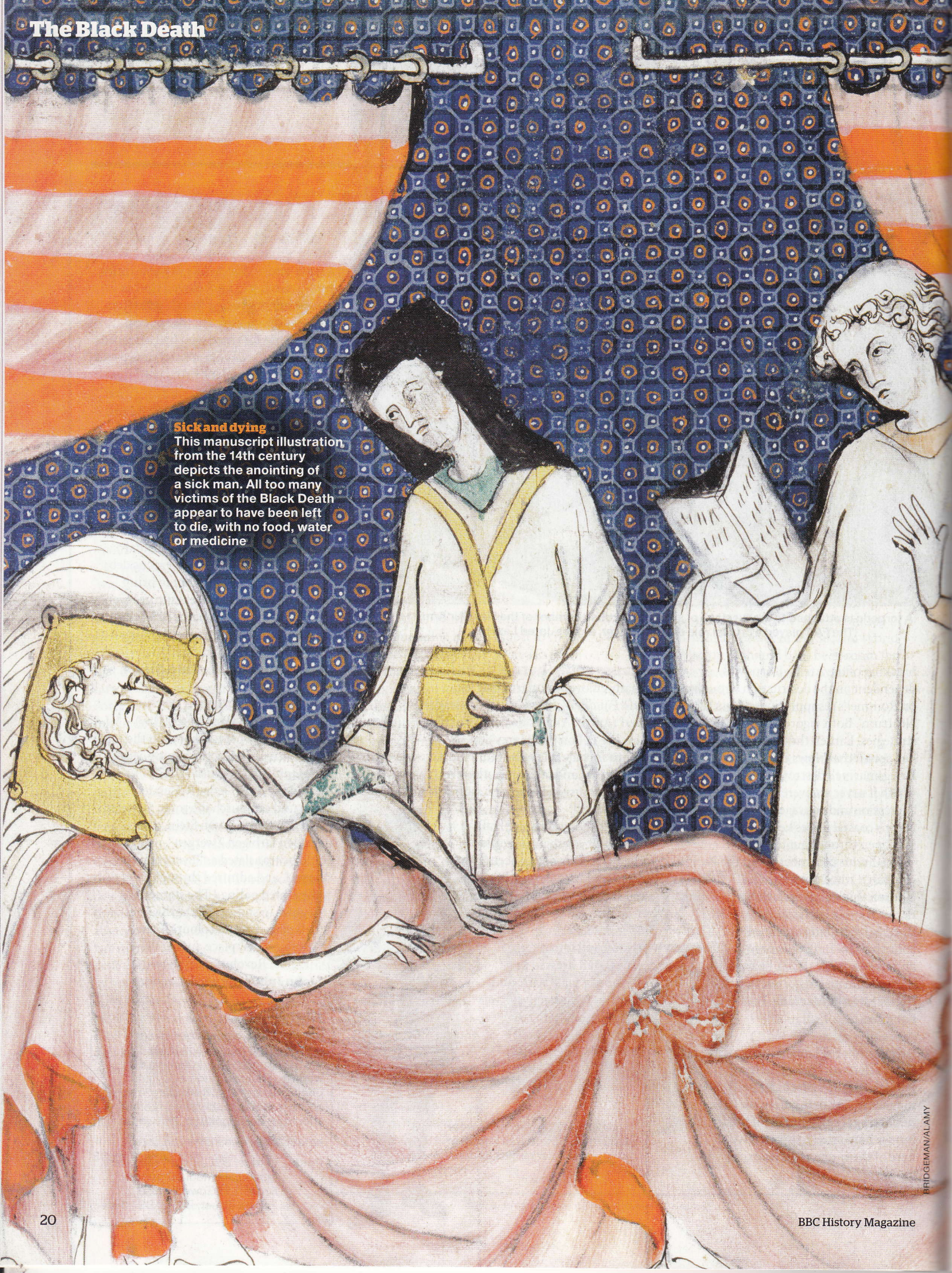
### **The face of death**

A skull carving at a medieval plague cemetery in France. The Black Death killed as many as 8 out of 10 people in some communities in Europe



## Sick and dying

This manuscript illustration depicts the anointing of a sick man. All too many victims of the Black Death appear to have been left to die, with no food, water or medicine





# The Black Death

In 1355, the Italian writer and poet Giovanni Boccaccio wrote a passage of text that – even at a distance of 650 years – is truly chilling. Describing the great plague that had ravaged Europe from the late 1340s, Boccaccio related that the pandemic “caused various fears and fantasies to take root in the minds of those who were still alive and well. And almost without exception,” he went on, “they took a single and very inhuman precaution, namely to avoid or run away from the sick and their belongings.”

What Boccaccio wrote next was more shocking still. “This scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands,” he writes. “But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.”

## Extreme self-loathing

The devastation wrought by the Black Death when it swept across Europe from 1347–c1351 was massive and unprecedented. Perhaps as many as a third of all Europeans lost their lives in a succession of ruinous outbreaks of plague. Such was the Black Death’s lethal power, it’s been estimated that it took the world population 200 years to recover to the level at which it stood in the early 1340s.

And this was a psychological calamity for the people of Europe, as well as a physical one. The trauma experienced by those who lived through the Black Death was extreme, and manifested itself in equally extreme ways –



**Drawing blood**  
Flagellants – like the one shown here, whipping himself in a 1493 illustration – were a common sight across central Europe in the wake of the Black Death

most notably in outbreaks of self-loathing and terrible violence.

By the last months of 1348, across the continent, flagellants processed bare-foot, whipping themselves as they sang the passion of Christ. One German chronicler, Henry of Hervodia, described their whips: cattle prongs tipped with two to four iron bits, which tore the flesh, drawing blood that spilt down naked backs to their “lower parts”.

More deadly still was a surge of violence directed at minority groups. Jews were accused of a litany of crimes including contaminating food supplies through their concoctions “of frogs and spiders mixed into oil and cheese to destroy Christendom”. Such accusations were quickly followed by pogroms. The volumes of the *Germania Judaica*, painstakingly amassed from archives in Germany, Austria and other central European regions, report the annihilation of at least 235 Jewish communities at around the time of the Black Death.

But take a close look at the contemporary chronicles and another disturbing, and more widespread, psychological response to the Black Death emerges from the pages. It was a response that rocked society – indeed, the individual family unit – to its core. This was the phenomenon to which Giovanni Boccaccio referred in his *Decameron*, completed around 1355: abandonment.

From Krakow to Dublin, Sicily to Scotland, a picture emerges of those not yet struck down by the pandemic being gripped by such terror of being infected themselves that, instead of remaining in the family home and nursing their dying loved ones through their last illnesses, they fled for their lives.

Boccaccio’s emotive descriptions of brothers abandoning dying brothers, wives abandoning husbands and, worst of all, fathers and mothers abandoning sons and daughters, have made him the best known of the chroniclers of abandonment. But his was hardly the only account of this phenomenon – and it was far from the first.

In fact, stories of abandonment began emerging in the chronicles almost as soon as the Black Death reached Europe. No sooner had the plague made landfall at Messina, Sicily in October 1347 than friar Michele da Piazza reported: “Neither priests nor sons, nor fathers nor any other kinsmen dared enter [to bury the dead],” and that the living did not enter houses of the dead “even to collect their goods or money.”

The Florentine chronicler Marchionne di Coppo Stefani’s descriptions of abandonment were even longer than Boccaccio’s, and they displayed similar levels of disgust. He claimed that, after being left to their fates by their loved ones, many sufferers “died without



**Jews are burned alive by their Christian neighbours, as shown in a 14th-century Flemish illumination. Modern historians have written extensively on spasms of violence and self-loathing but the most widespread psychological response to the Black Death appears to have been abandonment**

confession or other sacraments”, and others by starvation because “no one would bring them food”. Stefani also laced his abandonment tales with accusations of cruel deception, relating how the fit and well would tell their ailing loved ones: “I am going for the doctor.” They would then, he tells us, lock the door without leaving food, water or medicine and were never seen again.

But where did they go? Boccaccio provides a possible answer. He tells of people bonding together in small groups to “entertain themselves with music and whatever other amusements they were able to devise”. In the introduction to his famous collection of 100 stories, he describes a band of distinguished youth fleeing to the hills of Settignano, where they delighted themselves without once mentioning the Black Death or those they left behind facing the carnage back in Florence.

Despite the delightful stories told by his band of genteel ladies and men, Boccaccio’s introduction to their tales hints that such escapees from Florence’s Black Death horrors were acting callously. The vast majority of chroniclers were equally scathing of those who abandoned their friends and family members. Louis Sanctus, the northern





musician at the papal court of Avignon, was the only chronicler to express any sympathy with those who refused to visit the plague-afflicted, explaining that such close proximity would almost certainly lead to sudden death.

Conversely, Matteo Villani, Florence's principal chronicler of the Black Death, went as far as to suggest that had citizens not abandoned the sick in such numbers, the rate of mortalities would have been lower. Citizens who fled, he argued, had violated Christian tenets and aped the habits of infidels. For the German Matthias of Neuberg, "such things" were just "too horrible to write or tell" – and Matthias had just recounted the burning alive of entire Jewish communities.

And it wasn't just survivors abandoning their kith and kin who attracted the chroniclers' ire. Along with numerous writers, Boccaccio was equally horrified by the flight of doctors, notaries and gravediggers, lambasting their refusal to render essential services to the stricken.

Some members of the clergy also came under fire – though they had their defenders. Both Michele da Piazza and Jean de Venette – the first writing from Messina; the other in rural Beauvaisis in northern France – castigated

After declaring, "I am going for the doctor", they would lock the door **and leave, never to be seen again**

"the cowardly priests" (de Venette's words). But they absolved their fellow friars for not having abandoned their flocks. The abbot of Tournai defended his town's clergy, arguing that they heard confessions, administered the sacraments, and visited the afflicted. Yet, according to the Florentine poet Pucci, neither friar nor priest dared to approach the ill.

### **Suffer little children**

One of the most striking visions of Black Death abandonment came from a lawyer of Piacenza, Gabrielle de' Mussis. "Have pity,

have pity, my friends," laments a plague sufferer. "At least say something, now that the hand of God has touched me. Oh father, why have you abandoned me? For you forget that I am your child? Mother, where have you gone? Why are you now so cruel to me when only yesterday you were so kind? You fed me at your breast and carried me within your womb for nine months."

Most modern historians of the Black Death have tended to pay abandonment stories little attention – and de Mussis' tale offers a clue as to why. That's because it was almost certainly fabricated. Many academics simply don't believe that these stories are based in reality – dismissing them as mere literary devices employed to dramatise the horrors of the pandemic. What's more, they argue, these accounts were often copied from a factually dubious original and simply passed around from one country to the next.

But does this theory stand up to scrutiny? Could the proliferation of abandonment stories really be a case of fake news promulgated around Europe on an industrial scale?

In the days before the printing press, it was surely impossible for such stories to travel distances of more than a thousand miles





Plague victims are buried in Tournai, 1349, in a 14th-century illumination. After the Black Death of 1348, attitudes and actions towards sufferers in subsequent plagues shifted from callous indifference to anguish and assistance

– sometimes in a matter of days – appearing over vast expanses of Europe, from the shores of Croatia to the heart of Paris.

And if they were mere literary devices, copied and layered onto accounts of the plague for dramatic effect, why were they so varied? Boccaccio was unique in describing people bonding with ones they trusted and escaping to the countryside. Matteo Villani was alone in suggesting that had citizens not abandoned the sick in such numbers, the death toll would have been lower.

The anonymous author of the *Storie Pistoiesi* and the chronicle of the abbot of Cremona both claimed that abandonment was more common when the dying relative was stricken with pneumonic plague. By contrast, Matteo Villani, a chronicler from Rimini, argued that the first sight of buboes made relatives run. These wide discrepancies hardly point to one chronicler slavishly copying another.

## A change of heart

But there's another reason to suspect that the abandonment stories were grounded in solid historical fact – after 1348, they all but disappear. In contrast to the Black Death experience of 1347–51, in the hundreds, if not thousands, of accounts of later plagues to the end of the 18th century, abandonment stories vanish almost completely. And, of the few that remain, none fills page-plus descriptions as they had for the earlier outbreak. Instead, expressions of horror changed dramatically in accounts of plagues after 1348.

In 1405, Padua's Gatari chroniclers recounted a "ferocious plague" that struck their city. War in the countryside sparked crop failure and malnutrition, which drove

peasants into Padua. Overcrowding and worsening sanitary triggered the tell-tale signs of buboes and death within two or three days. The Gatari then went on to describe the mass burials that inevitably followed: "Every day a large ditch was dug in the churchyard and in every ditch 200 or even 300 were thrown, one over the other, covered little by little with dirt. And these were citizens... Some carried their fathers on their shoulders to the grave; others, their sons in their arms; husbands, wives; wives, husbands; brothers, sisters, with such anguish, screams, and cruel cries that could be heard in heaven."

## Lamenting the dead

Unlike the accounts of 1348, Gatari's descriptions of plague in 1405 mention nothing of cruel abandonment splintering families, or of doctors, notaries and priests abjuring their duties. Now, at the head of the carts collecting the dead, was a priest followed by fathers, sons, husbands, wives, brothers and sisters who, despite fears of contagion, carried the dead on their shoulders. Instead of callous indifference without tears – treating deceased family members as no more than "dead goats" (to use Boccaccio's words) – screams over lost loved ones now reached the heavens.

If the descriptions of flight and neglected duties were literary devices without foundation in social realities, why did they suddenly disappear after 1348? Why did chroniclers like Stefani and Giovanni di Pagnolo Morelli, who described in great detail abandonment during the Black Death of 1348, suddenly stop doing so in descriptions of subsequent plagues that they lived through? The answer is surely a transforma-

After the initial shock sparked by 1348's terrible mortality rates, people began to realise that **abandonment was counter-productive**

tion in social attitudes to plague-sufferers.

While the Black Death tore societies apart – shattering their foundation stones: the family unit – later ones united inhabitants across city walls, factions, class and gender. This was seen during the widespread and deadly plague of 1399–1400, which gave rise to the Bianchi peace movement: men, women and children across social classes and the clergy marched together through central and northern Italy to condemn factional violence and even small acts of litigation among neighbours.

As reports by Matteo Villani and the Pisan chronicler Rinieri Sardo suggest, one reason for the about-face in this emotional history appeared as early as the last stages of the Black Death itself. After the initial months of shock sparked by unprecedented levels of death in 1348, people began to realise that there was nowhere to hide and that flight and abandonment were counter-productive. First at Ragusa (present-day Dubrovnik) then city-states across the Italian peninsula, municipal governments supported these new instincts with plague legislation, hospitals and charitable organisations.

In the interests of community and self-preservation, these later waves of plague stimulated charity and self-sacrifice rather than hate, violence and abandonment. **H**

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