

Senior Division, Non Fiction

Ainsley Hawthorn, St. John's

Plagues en Vogue (an excerpt)

Fashion as we know it didn't exist before the Black Death.

Every society had its own socially acceptable forms of clothing, but until the worst plague outbreak in human history swept across Asia and Europe in the mid-1300s, styles were slow to change. In medieval Europe, both sexes wore more or less the same ensemble for centuries – one or two tunics over a linen shift, topped in cold weather by a cloak – and these were not much different from what the Romans had worn before them. There were no quickly shifting trends, no personal aesthetics.

Then, in October 1347, twelve Genoese trading ships made port at Messina in northeast Sicily, carrying a hidden passenger with them. Within four years, up to 65 percent of the inhabitants of Europe, 52 million people, would lie dead. Before the plague, many Europeans lived in poverty, at constant risk of starvation as the demands of a growing population outstripped the limits of medieval agricultural production. Life expectancies were in decline, hunger-related illness was on the rise, and famines claimed millions of lives. The new disease struck a vulnerable populace and devastated it.

Survivors of those apocalyptic years found their lives transformed. The plague had emptied out Europe's towns and villages – manors and villas lay vacant, valuables were free for the taking. Impoverished relations of aristocratic families were suddenly rich, the only living heirs to vast fortunes. Farmhands and tradesmen soon discovered that, with the labor force so drastically reduced, they could command wages several times higher than they had before the pestilence.

Unlike other disasters, pandemics destroy people, not property. Man-made catastrophes like wars and natural events like earthquakes damage infrastructure, flatten buildings, and kill other animals. Pathogens, on the other hand, leave farmland, livestock, houses, furnishings, clothing, jewels, and cash untouched. Material goods endure and, when the death toll is high, become concentrated in the hands of a smaller number of people.