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History 298

Literature Review

During the peak years of 1348 to 1351, the Black Death rapidly spread across Europe and in parts of Asia, creating the largest epidemic since the eighth century. In Italy, the plague most commonly took three forms; bubonic, pneumonic, and septicaemic. These deadly bacteria were often found in rat fleas and could be transferred through saliva. Symptoms that were easily recognisable as the plague included buboes formed around lymph nodes: other forms caused respiratory failure or rashes. People began dying in massive numbers due to the plague or of other ailments including tuberculosis and famine that easily hindered weakened populations. During the Renaissance, Italy was experiencing an increase in city populations, particularly in Florence. This led to unsanitary conditions that attracted rats and made people vulnerable to disease, allowing the plague to spread even faster. When Florence was struck, four percent of the population died immediately, and over the course of three years, one third of the Europeans died. The people of Renaissance Italy were unable to escape this devastation, and reactions ranged from fleeing cities to increased religious piety. The Black Death caused chaos and sadness that interrupted the economic, political, and artistic growth in Florence. It affected the religious and social lives of people in Florence, and this tragedy is shown in themes of death in artwork and writings from the time period.

Scholars have approached the topic of the plague in Florence in many different ways over the past several decades. There are many works that discuss the Black Death and its effect on

Italy and Europe in general, including many studies on the medical aspects of the plague as a whole. Other works give a history of medieval Florence, with limited discussion on the black death. There are fewer scholarly sources that discuss the Black Death in specific cities, and even fewer that relate it to artwork and literature of the time period. The topic of the plague has been thoroughly researched and written about, however there is more to be done with these more specific aspects.

Much of the history written on the Black Death takes a broader approach. An example of this is *The Black Death* by Joseph Patrick Byrne, published in 2004<sup>1</sup>. This book is part of a series published by Greenwood Press that covers different events during the medieval period. The author, a medieval and early modern historian at Belmont University, has also published encyclopedias on plagues and other articles on specific aspects of the Black Death. In this book, Byrne gives an overview of the plague in Europe, giving specific attention to how medieval medicine handled the disease versus how modern medicine looks at it today. He also includes a chapter on psychosocial reactions to the plague, and how European society in general was effected. Byrne is especially interested in how culture played a role in how individuals and institutions dealt with death on a massive scale. He covers how individual citizens and the state reacted, and captures this by including primary sources such as diaries from Florence. Though he does not spend much time on the effects specifically in Florence, he does devote a chapter to European artwork during the Black Death. This book, like many other histories of the Black death, is very broad in what it covers. Byrne gives a fairly complete account of the social repercussions of the plague in Europe without focusing on Florence specifically.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Patrick Byrne, *The Black Death* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004).

In historian Samuel Cline Cohn's book *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (1992), he focuses on how the plague changed mentalities about religion in Italy.<sup>2</sup> In order to do this, Cohn analyzed the wills of Italian citizens from all social statuses, allowing him to get a sense of how piety was affected by the plague. He focuses mostly on six Italian city-states; Arezzo, Florence, Perugia, Assisi, Pisa, and Siena. He writes about how these changing ideas about religion in these major cities show a desire to be saved in the afterlife. Increased piety, he argues, also depicts the idea of family legacy during a time of mass death, when giving to the church could better your memory in the city. Cohn discusses the emerging of new artwork due to this increased piety, as well as different types of burial that relieved anxieties about the afterlife. This book adds to the historiography by focusing on major cities and making comparisons between them and their changing religious values and actions.

Another approach scholars take to the history of Florence during the black death is through artwork. Many scholarly sources written about Renaissance Florence artwork, especially those published in 1980-1990s do not mention the plague as having an effect on art, and instead discuss the time period as simply a rebirth of certain styles of painting.<sup>3</sup> However, there are both early and more recent sources that discuss art in this context, though they are few. One early example is Millard Meiss's *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (1951).<sup>4</sup> In this book, Meiss, an art historian, argues that the plague of the 1300s played a key role in not only the

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<sup>2</sup> Cohn, Samuel Cline, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> For an example, see Bruce Cole, *Masaccio and the Art of Early Renaissance Florence* (Indiana University Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (Princeton University Press, 1951).

literature and economy, but also the changing artistic styles of the mid-1400s. He places emphasis on the instability and tensions of the years during and after the Black Death, and seeks to understand how this turbulence translated into the arts. He discusses how artwork before the plague depicted everyday life as generally optimistic, especially in religion, and how that theme changed drastically as people experienced the horrors of the Black Death. He focuses on Florence and Siena, both of which are known for producing much of the well known Renaissance art. This book is interesting because it is one of the earlier sources that connects art and the Black Death, and this angle of study was still fairly new in the scholarly world. Though it may be outdated in some of its approaches and details, it sets a firm beginning to this angle of study.

Another source that incorporates this connection of the Black Death and Renaissance art is Christine M. Boeckl's *Images of Plague and Pestilence* (2000).<sup>5</sup> Boeckl was born in Vienna and is now an art historian at the University of Nebraska. In this work, she gives an overview of artwork from the fourteenth to the twentieth century, covering many different forms of plague, disease, and death and how that translates into the context of art. Though most of the book steps outside of the time frame of the Renaissance, she devotes a chapter specifically to the Black Death. In this section, she uses the painting *Triumph of Death* to discuss the theme of death in the arts as well as the changing perceptions of hell, purgatory, and the afterlife in general. Though only part of the book contributes to this specific subject, she is thorough in her discussion about how this painting reflects the shifting themes of the afterlife, specifically in a religious context. She also uses other later examples that depict symptoms of the plague itself,

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<sup>5</sup> Christine M. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence* (Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2000).

highlighting the hopelessness of the time period. Though this book is an overview of several centuries, it is helpful in its analysis of famous examples that put her argument in context.

Lastly, Editor Francis Ames-Lewis gives another study on art affected by plague in the collection of essays *Artistic Centers of the Italian Renaissance: Florence* published in 2012.<sup>6</sup> Instead of focusing on depictions of plague over a time period, this study looks at major forms of media produced in Florence from 1300 to 1600, and discusses how these show patterns of religion, secularism, political, and social changes in the city. He centers this volume around many high-quality images of artwork, and gives detailed commentary on each, written by himself and other reputable historical scholars. In this overview, he spends a large chapter focusing on different forms of art before the Black Death, and another one on art produced after. This allows for a very clear comparison of the two, with several examples of paintings, church artwork, and architecture covering this entire time period. This collection is useful because of its well chosen examples depicting changing themes, and its discussion of what those changes reflected in Florence.

Scholarly work on the topic of the Black Death and its repercussions in the arts and society, specifically in Florence, take a variety of different angles. There are many different overviews of the Black Death, Florence, and Renaissance art, but few works that focus on all three. The works discussed show what the field has covered in detail as well as areas that still need to be expanded on. The scholarly discussion about art during the Black Death is still active, so there are still studies to come on this subject.

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Ames-Lewis, *Artistic Centers of the Italian Renaissance: Florence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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