
© A. G. EMANOV

a_emanov@mail.ru

UDC 94(100). 653

THE GREAT PANDEMIC OF THE MIDDLE OF THE 14TH CENTURY AS THE FINALE OF MEDIEVAL HISTORY

SUMMARY. The article is devoted to the demographic catastrophe of the middle of the 14th century. Various estimates of the place and role of the «Black Death» of 1348 are considered in the world and Western Europe's destinies, different "responses" of the communities of the West and the East to the test sent by the nature. The potential of the concept of the end of medieval history in the middle of the 14th century is estimated in the article. The author analyzes "Ystoria de Morbo sive Mortalitate" by the Italian scribe Gabriel de Mussis, composed in 1348 and reporting on the beginning of the plague's spread during a siege by the Tatars of the Genoa colony of Caffa in the Crimea. The point of view of some researchers confirming the first case in world history of the application of bacteriological weapons is criticized. The doubt that the demographic disaster of 1348 led to a change in the intrinsic basis of medieval society is expressed in this article. The strengthening of irrational tendencies in human behavior; the spread of the flagellant movement, millenaristic doctrines, eschatological moods and fears are studied.

KEY WORDS. "Black Death", plague of 1348, great pandemic, demographic accident, Gabriel de Mussis, Janibeg, Golden Horde, Caffa, Crimea, Black Sea, «Great silk way», Mediterranean trade, Tartars, Italian merchants.

The phenomenon of a plague in the middle of the 14th century which received a stable nomination of the "Black Death" and was characterized as the "Great Pandemic" by contemporary historians-demographers is one of those irrational, seemingly peripheral and occasional events that one day can turn out to be the epicenter of the world history and can radically change its course.

The concept of the "black death" is not always correctly drawn from the alleged medieval Latin phrase "mors nigra", as if indicating a rapid blackening of a dead body from an unknown illness, as if charred with fire. The contemporaries, the authors of the earliest evidence of the plague in 1348 used other terms — "mors repentina" (sudden death), "morbus" (disease), "mortalitas" (fatality), "pestis" (plague), etc [1]. Some byzantine authors in such cases used the term «λοιμός» (plague, anthrax) [2].

In fact, the concept of the «Black Death» appeared a century and a half later as the result of a rather inaccurate translation, done by publishers of the 16th century. It concerned a translation of a poem written in 1350 by a Flemish astrologer Simon de Covino, in which the great plague was described, that he called «mors atra» in Latin. The translators of the 16th century rendered this phrase in French as «la mort noire»

(today the concept of «la peste noire» dominates) [3]. From it there formed the Italian version — «la morte nera» [4], the German equivalent — «der Schwarze Tod» [5], and, the most common today, the English equivalent — the «Black Death» [6].

The epidemic itself began on the border of the Christian and Muslim worlds in the northern Black Sea coast, where there was the end of the Great Silk Way and a sea route to Western Europe began. The earliest recorded evidence about the beginning of the plague was a short essay by an Italian author, Gabriel de Mussis, written in 1348. The text was found around 1840 by Augustus Henschel [7], a professor at the University of Breslau (now Wrocław), in the university library. Mussis's essay was included in the historical and geographical collection of the 14th century. It started with the following heading: «Incipit Ystoria de Morbo sive Mortalitate que fuit anno Domini MCCCXLVIII. Compilata per Gabrielem de Mussis» (Here starts the history of the plague or the great death, which happened in the year of Our Lord 1348. Compiled by Gabriel de Mussis).

What is known about the author of this work? The first publisher believed that Gabriel de Mussis was a lawyer, perhaps, a counsel in Piacenza. According to Henschel, in 1344–1346 Gabriele was in a Genoese colony in Caffa on the Crimean Black Sea coast, where he witnessed the beginning of the epidemic of the plague, narrowly escaped the infection and returned to Italy.

However, in the archive of Piacenza in the end of the 19th century an Italian historian, Gaetano Togni [8] found a series of notarial acts, composed by Gabriel de Mussis from 1308 to 1356. His discovery allowed to lift the veil of secrecy over Mussis's identity. He was born around 1280, studied law in the college of Piacenza, worked as a notaro until his death in 1356 without leaving the city. Gabriel de Mussis was not a city chronicler or an annalist who was obliged to keep records on current years. None of the subsequent official historians of Piacenza ever mentioned his name as their predecessor. The genre of a historical description of one disaster did not exist. Annals of kingdoms, chronicles of individual provinces, cities, stories of great events such as the Crusades were known in those times. But stories of plague were not known to the mankind. The reason why Gabriele decided to describe the plague was the exclusivity of the disaster that eclipsed all the events of that time, and a rapid death of those who kept records of chronicles as their duty. His «History of the disease» was not an official writing, but only a particular eye-witness account of the disaster that struck the western world. And, Mussis could not see how the epidemic started in a remote and little known Caffa. He got this information from Piacenza merchants who lived as a compact group in Caffa before the epidemic began.

What was recorded by Gabriel de Mussis in his terrible «History of the Disease»? «In 1346, — reported the Piacenza author, — in the countries of the East, countless numbers of Tartars and Saracens were struck down by a mysterious illness which brought sudden death. Within these countries broad regions, far-spreading provinces, magnificent kingdoms, cities, towns and settlements, ground down by illness and devoured by dreadful death, were soon stripped of their inhabitants. [...] An eastern settlement under the rule of the Tartars called Tana, which lay to the north of

Constantinople and was much frequented by Italian merchants, was totally abandoned after an incident there which led to its being besieged and attacked by hordes of Tartars who gathered in a short space of time. [...]» [8; 144-145].

The Piachenzian did not go into the heart of the conflict that took place in Tana between Tartars and Italians, but it is not difficult to reconstruct it. Similar situations had occurred before. For example, in 1307 in Golden Sara, which was the capital of the Golden Horde, and Tana, there was a fight between Italians and Tartars, because Italians, having taken the advantage of hunger and poverty in the wilderness, bought Tatar children into slavery, and then with a large profit sold them to Egypt. Italian quarters in these cities were destroyed, they hardly fled by sea, hidden in Caffa. The events in 1343 developed the same scenario.

«The Christian merchants, — continued Gabriel de Mussis, — who had been driven out by force, were so terrified of the power of the Tartars that, to save themselves and their belongings, they fled in an armed ship to Caffa, a settlement in the same part of the world which had been founded long ago by the Genoese. Oh God! See how the heathen Tartar races, pouring together from all sides, suddenly invested the city of Caffa and besieged the trapped Christians there for almost three years. There, hemmed in by an immense army, they could hardly draw breath, although food could be shipped in, which offered them some hope...» [8; 145 sq.].

Here one can see the difference between the situations in 1307 and 1343. In the first case, Caffa still did not have stone walls and could not resist the Tartar army of Tokhta Khan: the Italians were forced to flee from Caffa across the sea, betraying the city to fire. In the second case, Caffa had monumental fortifications and could safely withstand a long siege of a huge army of Janibek.

«And then the Tartars were attacked by pestilence, — the Piachenzian author wrote excitedly, — their army was reduced, losing thousands every day, in which they saw the arrows shot by from the sky in order to temper the pride of the Tartars; on their bodies appeared abscesses, on the folds of the joints, in the groin buboes were formed, they were cracked, oozing pus, people were fighting a fever and emitted a spirit, and no advice and doctors' help did not give relief ...» [8; 146].

Here, with an accuracy in methods like those of a diagnostician, who writes in a clinical card, terrible symptoms of the bubonic plague were recorded. But what happened next?

«The Tartars, — Gabriel de Mussis was concluding, — exhausted by the scourge of plague and pestilence were so frustrated and depressed that they felt doomed to death without any hope of salvation, and then they decided to put the bodies of the dead on their catapults and throw them through the walls into the city of Caffa. All over the place an unbearable stench spread, mountains of corpses were visible, from which Christians could neither hide nor flee, nor be free, and it was decided to bring the corpses to sea and throw them into the waves. Soon, all the air had been infected, water was poisoned, covered by dry rot, strengthening infection, hardly one in a thousand could escape leaving the army but being infected he carried the plague everywhere, infecting other people and settlements. So the terrible plague hit the

whole world, and no one knew how to find the path to salvation [...] The Great Mortality struck the Chinese, Indians, Persians, Medes, Kurds, Armenians, Tarsiys, Caucasians, Mesopotamians, Nubians, Ethiopians, Turksmen, Egyptians, Arabs, Saracens, Greeks and all the East ...» [8; 146-147].

There are researchers who believe that the Tatars, in this case for the first time in the history of the world, used biological warfare [9]. However, the result of its «use» was devoid of any meaningful strategic goal, as Tartars could not finally take Caffa, and they were forced to abandon the siege, leave Crimea and return to the steppe. There are also doubts about the possibility of such a contagious spread of plague from contact with the bodies of the dead, as the genuine agent of the plague is the plague bacillus *Yersinia pestis* [10], the virus that is passed on by fleas, parasites of black rats. This pathogen was detected in the end of the 19th century by a Swiss bacteriologist Alexander Yersin and was named after him.

The Tartar army besieging Caffa was approximately one kilometer away from the castle walls. Its location could be full of black rats, and with them of the deadly fleas, the disease vector. However, neither rats nor fleas were able to cover such a long distance. Trebuchets used in the Tartar army were capable of hurling 100 kg more than 200 m, but it is also the zone of invincibility for the virus.

Black rats are populations typical or the Far East. They could be brought from the Northern Black Sea coast with eastern caravans arriving from China along the Silk Way, the end points of which in the northern latitudes were Tana and Caffa. From these port cities, rats could migrate further into the holds of Italian ships, carrying a deadly infection to the West.

In 1347 the plague covered the states of the Apennine peninsula, in 1348 the epidemic struck France, the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, the German lands, in 1349 it went to England, the Baltic States, Russian principalities, and in 1350 it reached Scandinavia and the Northern Sea islands.

This demographic catastrophe has not long been seen in the Russian medieval studies. Although in the West the first monographic studies on the «Black Death» began to appear in the early 20th century [11]. The most significant works began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. It is enough to remember the names of F. Ziegler [12], W. Bovski [13], F. Cartwright [14], M. Postan [15], and some others. There a variety of sources were analyzed, experts in various fields were involved, including anthropologists, biologists, historians of medicine. At the same time, the epidemic was considered as one of the consequences of the turn of the 13th — 14th centuries, an intense exchange between the West and the East, the resumption of the «Great Silk Way». Two worlds came into the contact, differing not only politically, socially or ideologically, but also biologically degradable, having various immune systems, an adaptation to its own specific microenvironments; it took over a century to form a new level of immune protection.

There were identified the scales of the demographic catastrophe in the middle of the 14th century. Almost two-thirds of the population of Europe died, and what is more in countries that were directly facing the Mediterranean Sea and were trade-

related with the East, the death rate was even higher, and the individual settlements died out completely. The outbreak of the epidemic was in the summer months, reaching the absolute maximum in September. The decline was observed in the winter season. As the nearest counter-measure quarantines were introduced, cordons were established prohibiting the passage of ships arriving from the East in European ports; strict rules of sanitation were developed. One of the means of combating the plague was fuming burning incense. Medievalists drew attention to the fact that the plague was more destructive in urban areas in Europe, more weakly affecting rural areas; some agricultural areas of Central Europe, isolated from the outside world by a mountain relief, remained intact oases in the middle of the devastating disaster of the «Black Death».

The «Black Death» in the middle of the 15th century, by the conviction of many professionals, especially as reputable as David Herlihy [16], Lars Boerner and Battista Severnini [17], put Western Europe before the daunting social, economic and, obviously, political challenges, the solution of which led to the radical transformation of the feudal society into the modern European one. One of the latest researchers of this problem, Klaus Bergdolt, a German scientist, happily connecting the degrees of Doctor of History and Medicine, considers with certainty that the «Schwarzer Tod» of the middle of the 15th century marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern times [5].

The arguments seem to be very thorough. Indeed, the decline in the population of Western Europe by 75% led not only to a drastic labor shortage, an unprecedented re-evaluation of its value, its multiple increase, but also to strengthening the personal and individual principles, to establishing a legal relationship between the parties of the socio-economic process, to the expression of the rational and human creativity. Just at that time there arose an interest in the compensation of losses of labor forces with machinery, technical improvements, and advanced technologies. Not by chance during the coming years following the plague there were great discoveries and inventions in technology, at the same time there arose new forms of economic organization on the free, contractual basis.

Still, there is some doubt about the depth and comprehensiveness of such a transformation. The trends of secularization of consciousness, of practical human activity had taken place before. However, the suddenly erupted epidemic was then perceived not as a conscious impulse to creativity, but as God's punishment for excessive pragmatism, for disastrous service to money. It seems that the rationally inexplicable «Black Death» strengthened not rationalism, but deep religious and mystical feelings peculiar to the medieval mentality. One has only to recall the example of Giovanni Boccaccio, an unwitting witness of the tragedy of those years who composed the famous «Decameron» in the first year of the plague, but soon renounced his creation and chose the path of repentance. In the same vein there are mass movements of flagellants, a spread of millenarian teachings, of eschatological moods, of mass fears etc.

REFERENCES

1. The Black Death / translated and ed. by R. Horrox. Manchester: UP, 1994.
2. Albert, J. The Black Death. The great mortality of 1348–1350. A brief history with documents. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
3. Audouin-Rouzeau, F. Le chemins de la peste. Le rat, la puce et l'homme. Paris : Éd. Tallandier, 2007.
4. Hatcher, J. La morte nera. Storia dell'epidemia che devastò l'Europa nel Trecento. Bologna : B. Mondadori, 2010.
5. Bergdolt, K. Der Schwarze Tod: die Große Pest und das Ende des Mittelalters. München: C.H. Beck, 2000.
6. The Black Death / translat. and ed. by R. Horrox. Manchester: UP, 1994.
7. Henschel, A.W. Document zur Geschichte des Schwarzen Todes // Archiv für die gesamte Medizin. Jena, 1841. S. 45-57.
8. Tononi, A.G. La peste dell' anno 1348 // Giornale ligustico di archeologia, storia e letteratura. Genova, 1884. Ann. XI. N III–IV. P. 139-151.
9. Wheelis, M. Biological warfare at the 1346 siege of Caffa // Historical review. 2002. Vol. 8. N 9. P. 4-7.
10. Kirsten, B. A draft genome of *Yersinia pestis* from victims of Black Death // Nature. 2011. N 478. P. 506-510.
11. Levett, A.E. The Black Death. Oxford, 1916.
12. Ziegler, Ph. The Black Death. L.: Collins, 1969.
13. The Black Death — A turning point in history / Ed. by W. Bowsky. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.
14. Cartwright F. Disease and history. L.: H.D. Ruppert, 1972.
15. Postan, M. Essays on medieval agriculture and general problems of the medieval economy. L.: UP, 1973.
16. Herlihy D. The Black Death and the transformation of the West. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard college, 1997.
17. Boerner, L., Severgnini B. Epidemic trade. Berlin: Freie Universität ; Copenhagen: Business school, 2012.