

Ahmad al Maqrizi, The Bubonic Plague in Syria and Egypt, 1453

News reached [Cairo and Syria] that the plague in Damascus had been less deadly than in Tripoli, Hama, and Aleppo. From...[October 1348] death raged with intensity. 1200 people died daily and, as a result, people stopped requesting permits from the administration to bury the dead and many cadavers were abandoned in gardens and on the roads.

In New and Old Cairo, the plague struck women and children at first, then market people, and the numbers of the dead augmented... The [ravages of the] plague intensified in... [November] in [New] Cairo and became extremely grave during Ramadan [December], which coincided with the arrival of winter... The plague continued to spread so considerably that it became impossible to count how many dies...

In [January 1349], new symptoms developed and people began spitting up blood. One sick person came down with internal fever, followed by an unrestrained need to vomit, then spat blood and died. Those around him in his house fell ill, one after the other and in one or two nights they all perished. Everyone lived with the overwhelming preoccupation that death was near. People prepared themselves for death by distributing alms to the poor, reconciled with one another, and multiplied their acts of devotion.

None had time to consult doctors or drink medicinal syrups or take other medications, so rapidly did they die. By [January 7th,] bodies had piled up in the streets and markets; [town leaders] appointed burial brigades, and some pious people remained permanently at places of prayer in New and Old Cairo to recite funeral orations over the dead. The situation worsened beyond limits, and no solution appeared possible. Almost the entire royal guard disappeared and the barracks in the sultan's citadel contained no more soldiers.

Statistics of the dead from funerals in Cairo during... [November and December] attained 900,000... There were 1,400 litters on which they carried the dead and soon even they did not suffice. So they began carrying dead bodies in boxes, on doors taken from store and on plain boards, on each of which they placed two or three bodies.

People began searching for Quran readers for funerals, and many individuals quit their trades to recite prayers at the head of burial procession[s]. A group of people devoted themselves to applying a coat of clay to the inner sides of the graves. Others volunteered to wash corpses, and still others to carry them. Such volunteers received substantial wages. For example, a Quran reader earned 10 dirhams: the moment he finished with one funeral, he ran off to another. A body carrier demanded six dirhams in advance, and still it was hard to find any. A grave digger wanted 50 dirhams per grave. But most of them died before they had a chance to spend their earnings.

Family celebrations and marriages no longer took place... No one held any festivities

during the entire duration of the epidemic, and no voice was heard singing. In an attempt to revive these activities, the wazir [prime minister] reduced by a third the taxes paid by the woman responsible for collecting dues on singers. The call to prayer was suspended at many locations, and even at the most important ones, there remained only a single muezzin [caller to prayer].

The drum batteries before most of the officers' quarters no longer functioned, and the entourage of a commander [who controlled a thousand men] was reduced now from about fifteen to three soldiers.

Most of the mosques and zawiyas [Sufi lodges] were closed. It was also a known fact that during this epidemic no infant survived more than one or two days after his birth, and his mother usually quickly followed him to the grave.

At [the end of February], all of Upper Egypt was afflicted with the plague... According to information that arrives... from... other regions, lions, wolves, rabbits, camels, wild asses and boars, and other savage beasts, dropped dead, and were found with scabs on their bodies.

The same thing happened throughout Egypt. When harvest time arrived, many farmers already perished [and no field hands remained to gather crops]. Soldiers and their young slaves or pages headed for the fields. They tried to recruit workers by promising them half of the proceeds, but they could not find anyone to gather the harvest. They threshed the grain with their horses [hoofs], and winnowed the grain themselves, but, unable to carry all the grain back, they had to abandon much of it.

Most craft workshops closed, since artisans devoted themselves to disposing of the dead, while others, not less numerous, auctioned off property and textiles [which the dead left behind]. Even though the prices of fabric and other such commodities sold for a fifth of their original value... they remained... unsold... Religious texts sold by their weight, and at very low prices.

Workers disappeared. You could not find either water carriers, or launderers or servants. The monthly salary of a horse groom rose from 30 to 80 dirhams... This epidemic, they say, continued in several countries for 15 years.

Source: Gettleman, Marvin E. and Schaar, Stuart, "Ahmad al-Maqrizi, The Bubonic Plague in Syria and Egypt, 1453," *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader*. (Grove Press, 2012).