Accusation and Persecution: The Fate of Europe's Minority Populations

Introduction

In 1257, sometime in the summer or fall, on an island in what is now Indonesia, the Samalas volcano exploded, producing the largest volcanic eruption of the last 2,000 years. It sent approximately 120 million metric tons of sulfates into the stratosphere and induced a global cooling event that lasted at least two or three years. The 1257 eruption of Samalas was one of several climatic events that would eventually tip the planet into the Little Ice Age by the 15th century. 1257 was also the year the Mongol leader Hulegu arrived in the western lands of Iran and made his final preparations for the assault on Baghdad, which would establish 75 years of Ilkhan rule. During that time, the Wolf Solar Minimum (1280-1350), a period of almost no sunspots (flares coming off the sun's surface) marked an end to the prolonged warm period that had supported the general cultural flourishing of the 10th through early 13th centuries.

Although the precise ways in which the global climate contributed to the onset of the Black Death (also called the Second Plague Pandemic) remain to be determined, it is clear even now that the shifts in temperature, the altered growing seasons, occasional droughts, and the increasing number and severity of floods contributed to the food

shortages and famines that, in turn, intensified practices of long-distance trade in grain. Changing humidity, drought, and the abundance or lack of local vegetation also affected the size of rodent populations, and with them, their attendant fleas. The more the grain trade diversified, the more opportunities there were for a rodent-disseminated disease to travel, too. These environmental changes thus increased the conditions that made the spread of plague more likely.

Historians have long talked about what they call "the crisis of the 14th century," which included environmental stresses (like those noted above), wars, famines (including the Black Death), economic stresses, urban riots, and more. But among these developments, historians have always assumed that *plague was a new factor in the middle of the century*. We have found no reason to question the severity of the Black Death. But we have also seen that the growing sophistication of phylogenetic research on *Yersinia pestis* aDNA is revealing the existence of multiple strains of the pathogen in 14th-century sites. That genetic diversity in turn suggests that plague was moving along multiple routes, each of which may have had slightly different timelines and insect-rodent ecologies. These differences may also account for the varied mortality and impacts of plague, which have long been noted by historians (especially for Central Europe) but never explained. The obstacle in pinning down any new narratives for the history of plague in the 14th century is (as we saw in Lesson 3) lack of precise dating of gravesites and the genetic material retrieved from them. The century-wide dating ranges produced by radiocarbon methods are simply insufficient for our needs as historians, where we have to differentiate events on a year-by-year basis.

We cannot resolve these dating problems now. But we are in a position to question whether events of the 14th century had longer-term, and more complicated stories than previously recognized. These include

Key Terms:

Samalas volcano

"Crisis of the 14th ce-nutry"

Great Famine of 1315-1317

Nabburg

Amberg

Tàrrega

Armleder uprisings

Jewish persecutions

the well-known persecutions of minority communities within Europe. As recounted by the papal biographer we met in Lesson 1, "a certain rumor arose that there were certain evildoers, and Jews in particular, who poured potions into the waters and springs, by which action the aforesaid plague was thus aggravated." The persecutions targeting Jewish people resulted in the destruction of about 300 Jewish communities in western and central Europe from 1348-1350. Recent research on the well-poisoning accusations that accompanied these persecutions shows their similarities to earlier persecutions that happened in France and Iberia in the 1320s. Was there perhaps a plague element in those earlier persecutions, too? In what follows, we will explore this possibility as our first question of this lesson.

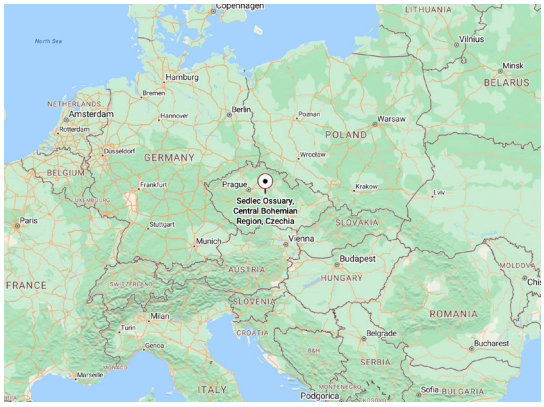
The persecutions raise two other questions as well. On the one hand, so far no trace of well-poisoning accusations has been found in the Islamic world, nor do we have evidence of sustained attacks against religious minorities there during plague outbreaks. When plague was descending on Damascus in the summer of 1348, we will recall, the city brought together *all* its citizens—Muslims, Jews, and Christians—in communal prayer. Accusations against minorities did not touch the Italian peninsula either, for the most part. Yet we know that all parts of the Mediterranean region were struck in the 1340s by the same disease that reached Continental Europe. So, our second question is, why the different responses?

Lesson 4 questions why different regions *within Europe* had identical, even coordinated responses to the Black Death, even though they did not all suffer comparable levels of mortality. Historians have long noted the seemingly more dramatic impact of plague in western Europe (where mortality might range up to 60%) compared to central and eastern Europe (where mortality may have been 10% or less). Emerging interpretations of the genetic evidence of *Yersinia pestis* suggests that the differences in mortality may have been due to different strains of the pathogen, possibly different insect-rodent ecologies, and different timelines of spread. Yet, as we will see, the persecutions of Jewish communities in 1348-1350 were very similar. Even in cities that were not struck at all by the Black Death wave, some Christians chose to eliminate their Jewish neighbors rather than risk being "poisoned."

Map of Europe in the 14th century.

I. Pre-Black Death plague and the Great Famine of 1315-1317

As with most stories of the Black Death, modern accounts assume that the disease had newly arrived in Europe. The intensity of the response was fueled by the raw terror the new disease elicited. Yet here is a gruesome scene from 1317-1318, three decades earlier, describing conditions of crisis in Bohemia (modern-day Czech Republic):



Contemporary map showing location of Kutná Hora-Sedlec, Czech Republic.

> The accord [between the King of Bohemia and one of his nobles] is ordered, peace is proclaimed, the people rejoice as if rising from the dead. Indeed, infinite thousands of men had perished because this agreement had been so prolonged and drawn out; for during such a discord extreme famine and misery prevailed, so that within the space of a year, as I learned by experience, thirty thousand men were buried at the gate of [the Cistercian abbey of] Sedlec [in the town of Kutná Hora]. A similar *pestilence* also existed in all the states, towns, and villages, and throughout the whole country. Pits were dug in all places and filled with the corpses of the dead. For famine prevailed to such an extent, both from barrenness [of the land] and from the austerity of discord, that some of the peasants, already lacking in food and growing ill, left their homes with their wives and sought the woods, killing and eating the men they found, and thus feeding themselves.[1]

Recent archaeological excavations testify to the severe conditions described in this account. Starting in 2011 and 2016, excavations below and alongside the Church of All Saints in Kutná Hora-Sedlec produced two distinct horizons of burials containing 32 mass graves with approximately 1,200 skeletons. The more recent horizon is a Black Death event (or possibly slightly later): Coins in the graves were minted in the last year of the reign of the Czech King John of Luxembourg (1310-1346), dating the mortality to the period after 1346.

The Sedlec Ossuary, Kutná Hora, Czech Republic, made up of bones from 14th-century burials.

1. Peter of Zittau (Žitava), *Zbraslav Chronicle* (*Chronicon Aulae Regiae*), Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Pal. Lat. 950, ff. 5v–6r. Translated by Monica H. Green.

The earlier graves, however, may well be the mass graves described in the chronicle account.[2]

No aDNA testing has yet been done on these graves, but an archaeological study showed that both the age distribution of the victims and signs of their health status prior to death were typical of neither famine mortality nor of regular ("attritional") deaths in a natural population. For example, adults estimated to be 30 years of age or less were over-represented—a sign that this was not a "natural mortality" site.

If this was plague, how had it reached the interior of Europe? And how could it have done so 30 years before the Black Death? Between about 1270-1340, maritime trade around Europe's periphery expanded, especially the routes linking the Mediterranean to the North Sea. At the same time, the great Italian trading and credit companies consolidated, creating the capital wealth to underwrite sustained trading ventures. Trade in grain (a rodent's delight!) was not initially a principal element in this expanding long-distance commerce, but its importance grew in the 14th century. As changing climatic conditions increased the incidence of agricultural failures and food shortages, the practices of long-distance grain importation increased. Amid a number of smaller local food shortages and grain price spikes, two major periods of famine stand out in the first half of the fourteenth century: the Great Famine of 1315-1317, which afflicted northwest Europe, and the so-called "The First Bad Year," which afflicted parts of the Iberian peninsula and southern France in 1333-1334. Most accounts from the period speak only of famine. A site just outside of the modern city of Erfurt, Germany, for example, has a plaque commemorating the 7,895 people who were buried there in 1316 that speaks only of "dearth."

A commemorative stone, apparently erected in 1341, commemorating the 7,895 people who died near the site outside Erfurt, Germany in 1316.

But some, like the Kutná Hora-Sedlec account, add in another calamity: pestilence. Plague is a terrifying disease. It kills quickly, but not before causing fevers, swellings (the buboes), excruciating pain, and often delirium. While it is a terrible disease to suffer, it is also a horrific disease to watch in another victim. There will be no visible signs of plague in skeletal remains. But there are other ways that burial sites can show the trauma communities endured when afflicted by this devastating disease. They include evidence of intense fear that sparked violence or other uncommon behaviors.

Before we examine the archaeological evidence for these sites, let's return for a moment to what we've been calling the Nabburg Polytomy. In Lesson 3, we learned that the Nabburg Polytomy is a dividing point in the evolution of Branch 1 of *Yersinia pestis* whose timing we can logically infer to around the 1310s, even if we cannot date it exactly. It is associated with the town of Nabburg not because the dispersal happened there (it almost certainly did not), but simply because, for now, the genomes identified at the cemetery in Nabburg are our most important evidence for the fact that the split occurred, and that it did so fairly early in Branch 1's history in western Eurasia.

2. Auxane de Lépinau, et al. "Entre peste et famine: caractérisation d'une crise de mortalité par l'étude de trois sépultures multiples du site de Kutná Hora – Sedlec (République tchèque, XIVe siècle) [Between Plague and Famine: Characterization of a Mortality Crisis through the Study of Three Mass Graves from the Kutná Hora – Sedlec site (Czech Republic, 14th Century)]." *Bulletins et mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* (BMSAP) 33, no. 2 (2021), DOI: 10.4000/bmsap.7664.

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As we also learned in Lesson 3, genetics has no inherent mechanism of dating. Divergences only signal "before/after" turning points. The Nabburg Polytomy is clearly older than any of the other divergences that would create strains circulating in the 14th century. That includes the well-dated genomes found at Kara-Djigach, where the headstones firmly date the outbreak to 1338-1339. In other words, we have good reason to believe that different strains of plague had already entered Europe before the 1330s.

II. Studying plague through archeology: Nabburg and Amberg

To better understand the spread and impact of plague in Europe before the 1330s, it is helpful to turn to recent archaeological discoveries in the present-day country of Germany. In what follows, we'll walk through what the archaeological findings at these two sites—in the nearby Bavarian towns of Nabburg and Amberg—reveal about the history of plague.

Nabburg

Nabburg is a town on the banks of the Naab River, a tributary of the Danube. It lies in present-day Bavaria, in the south-eastern portion of modern Germany. As you can see on this map, Nabburg lies almost exactly in the center of Europe. Wherever plague had come from, it had already traveled a long distance to reach this small town.

Nabburg's St. John's Cemetery (*Sankt Johans Friedhof*) is a Christian burial ground. It is part of the parish church of St. John the Baptist, a Gothic building that was begun at the end of the 13th century. Although Nabburg was mentioned as a settlement as early as 929, it only received a city charter in 1296, apparently around the time the Church of St. John was consecrated, and the cemetery came into use.

Contemporary map showing the location of Nabburg, Germany.

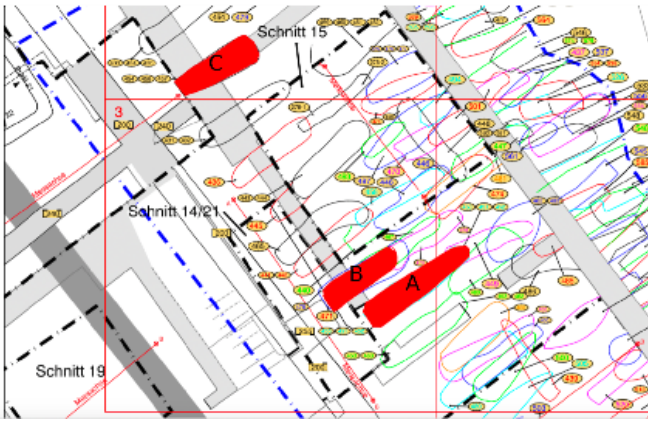
The excavations of the cemetery area were done between 2008 and 2012. During the excavation in front of the west choir in the summer of 2012, around 200 graves could be seen in an area only 13 x 6 meters (43 x 20 feet). More graves are likely to be found there, since the site wasn't completely excavated. Several bodies from Nabburg were radiocarbon-dated, including three of the four bodies that yielded *Yersinia pestis* genetic material. The earliest bodies date from the late 13th century; those with *Yersinia pestis* fall within a carbon-14 dating range

spanning the late thirteenth through the 14th century. These broad time spans are, unfortunately, typical for radiocarbon dates, meaning we have to look for other indicators to narrow down the range.

We know that all the bodies that yielded *Yersinia pestis* came from the western edge of the cemetery, its oldest part. So, even though we cannot yet specify a precise date for this outbreak, the evidence allows us to consider that it might be part of the documented "pestilence" in the area of 1317. Besides this archaeological evidence, genetic material for *Yersinia pestis* was retrieved from the Nabburg site. Of the three genomes sequenced, the one designated NAB003 (from burial number 452) is the most complete. Evolutionarily, it is the oldest genome from Branch 1 of *Yersinia pestis* (thus, post-Big Bang) that has been found in Europe. That's why, as discussed in Reading 3, we've used this town to label the so-called Nabburg Polytomy. Like the archaeological evidence, the Nabburg strain's genetic character alone doesn't *prove* its date in the early 14th century, but it is compatible with such an assumption.

Work on the Nabburg cemetery does not yet provide a full bioarcheological or demographic survey of the ca. 200 bodies retrieved during the 2008-2012 excavations. Thus, we cannot yet say anything general about the distribution by age or sex. For our present purposes, the most distinctive feature are the graves that have two, three, or even four bodies buried together. For example:

- Graves **450 to 452**. Triple burial of two young women and a man directly one above the other in a narrow burial pit
- Graves **441/442**. Simultaneous double burial of a man and a small child lying at his side
- Graves **456/457**. Simultaneous double burial of a woman and a child
- Graves **471/474**. Simultaneous double burial of woman and man; the man lies prone (face-down) under the woman



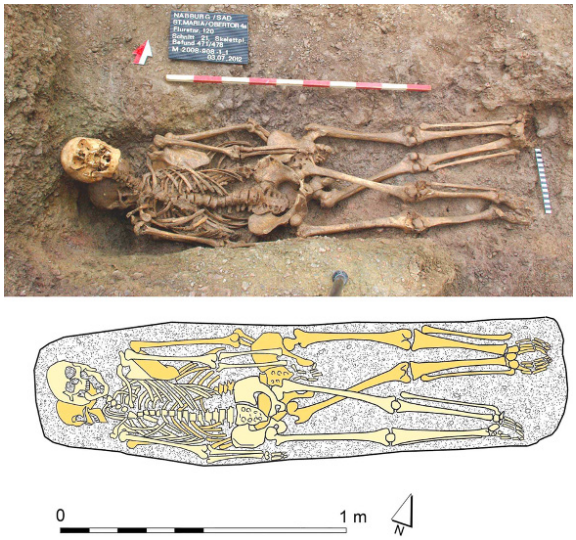
Detail of a plan showing the location of graves on the western edge of the Nabburg cemetery, the oldest part of the burial ground. The graves marked in red yielded Yersinia pestis aDNA.

Multiple burials mean these are groups of people (perhaps family members?) who died at almost the same time. And importantly, of the four individuals from which researchers were able to obtain plague aDNA, all four were in multiple burial sites. Here is a detail of the map of the site; the graves marked red yielded plague aDNA.

Of these multiple burials, one stands out. Bodies 471 and 474 (in area "A" on the map) are a male and female, buried one on top of the other. The female (who yielded a partial plague genome, NAB005) is on top, in a supine position (i.e., facing up). The male is directly beneath her, lying face down ("prone"). This is an extremely unusual burial position for Christian burials. As the archaeologist who investigated the site noted, "By turning them over, certain dead people were

were 'radically excluded from the community of the living and the dead,' while at the same time the aim was to 'eliminate their power as feared revenants.'"[3]

What's a "revenant"? Literally, it means "one who has come back." We would call them zombies. While none of these plague victims were outcasts (they were, after all, buried in a consecrated Christian burial ground), the peculiar placement of these bodies raises questions about how the local community made sense of the sudden (and perhaps, rather gruesome) deaths of these individuals. For the moment, let's stop at the zombies and move onto the other cemetery.



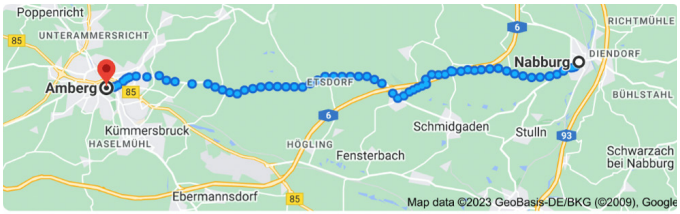
Nabburg Graves 471/474. Simultaneous double burial of woman and man at the far western edge of the cemetery. Plague DNA was retrieved from the woman. The man lies prone under the woman, a very unusual burial position for the 14th century.

Amberg

Amberg is just a few hours' walk from Nabburg, about 16 miles (26 km). The two towns likely had regular commercial and social ties. It is therefore highly significant that, in the cemetery associated with Amberg's Holy Spirit Hospital, established on the edge of town in 1317, archaeologists have found multiple burials similar to those harboring plague in Nabburg.

The site was only recently excavated in several digging campaigns between 2016 and 2018. In all, at least 613 individuals from around 450 medieval and early modern graves were identified. The graves that concern us here come from the earliest burial horizon; as such, the likelihood is high that they date from 1317, a year when we know from other sources that a terrible famine and pestilence was devastating northwest and central Europe.

As noted above, the grant of the land in 1317 to the city of Amberg establishes a beginning date for when the cemetery of the Holy Ghost Hospital might have been established. The hospital itself was founded in 1326. Given that the epidemic documented by the burials must have been an emergency situation, it's possible that the land was given precisely in order to be a burial ground.



5 hr 51 min (25.8 km) via Krumbacher Str.

Directions

Contemporary map showing the walking distance from Nabburg to Amberg, Germany.

3. Mathias Hensch,"'Das Ungewöhnliche im Grab': Bemerkungen zu einigen Gräbern des 14. Jahrhunderts auf dem Spitalfriedhof von Amberg in der Oberpfalz," *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Archäologie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit* 36 (2023): 126. Cf. Mathias Hensch, "Sankt Johans Freidhof in Nabburg – Gewöhnliche und ungewöhnliche Einblicke in die spätmittelalterliche Begräbniskultur Ostbayern," in *'…und es hat doch was gebracht!' Festschrift für Karl Schmotz zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ludwig Husty, Walter Irlinger, and Joachim Pechtl, Internationale Archäologie – Studia honoraria 35 (Marie Leidorf, 2014), 423–440.

Like at Nabburg, many of the graves at Amberg have multiple bodies buried together. However, where the maximum number found in a single grave at Nabburg was three people, here there are graves with four, five, or in one case eleven people. The cemetery was clearly used for some time after the St John's Hospital was founded in 1326, and the site in general tends to contain older individuals, the demographic that would most likely have been inmates at the hospital (which, like most medieval institutions, functioned rather like a hospice for long-term care of the elderly, frail, or poor, and not a surgical or treatment facility). However, in this earliest burial level, there is a notable presence of younger individuals.

There are other peculiarities about the graves here. In most of the twelve multiple graves, the bodies are found in strikingly small grave pits, clearly not meant to accommodate as many bodies as they ended up holding. This had the effect of contorting some of the bodies into strange positions. In every multiple grave, at least one deceased person was buried lying on his/her stomach (prone).

Amberg has not yet been tested for genetic evidence of *Yersinia pestis*. However, we can be confident that some trauma like a plague outbreak had hit the town because of the frequency of multiple bodies being buried together. Here is how the burials at Amberg have been described:

> Due to the narrowness of the pits, they [the bodies in the multiple graves] were partly buried in unnatural, bent posture. Six times alone, the dead were laid face down in these tombs, with their upper bodies turned on their bellies. Even deceased in individual graves in the immediate vicinity of these multiple burials had been buried in prone position. In addition, there were found in this burial horizon side and stool positions, and even bodies tied up into small bundles. A prone burial facing to the ground was actually forbidden in the Christian Middle Ages. The departure of otherwise dogmatically observed burial rites suggests an extreme exception, which the group of the burials must have been at that time.[4]

View of a section of the Amberg cemetery with three multiple graves from the earlier 14th century next to the north wall of the hospital church.

Had we only one or two burials with bodies lying prone, we could dismiss them as accidents. The presence of multiple or even mass graves as here, however, shows that both towns experienced epidemics. And the confirmation of the presence of *Yersinia pestis* in Nabburg (in multiple bodies, no less) makes it clear that we are looking at a plague outbreak.

4. Mathias Hensch, "Einblick in drei Jahrtausende Siedlungsgeschichte: Ausgrabungen beim ehemaligen Amberger Spital," *Das Archäologische Jahr in Bayern* 2017 (2018): 102; translated by Monica H. Green.

Since the Amberg site hasn't yet been tested for the presence of *Yersinia pestis*, it cannot be stated with certainty that it, too, represents a plague epidemic. But the parallels between the two sites—their proximity, the presence of multiple burials, and their relative date of deposition—suggests that we may be looking at cultural responses to plague outbreaks in the early 14th century. The extremely unusual face-down burials (and other anomalies) at both sites suggests that we are witnessing the first reactions of intense fear in the face of a new, lethal, and devastating disease.

Detail of a multiple burial at Amberg, Grave 233, showing a man lying at the bottom of the pit in a prone position. A large limestone sits on the back of his head, with further stone deposits around the skull.

These two sites, Nabburg and Amberg, appear to be from the 1310s or so (thus around the same period as the Great Famine of 1315-1317) and at least one was certainly the site of an outbreak of plague. And in both places people responded with something like fear at these deaths. But in neither case do we see any evidence of violence. As we will see below, though, other sites dated to other times reveal that the plague did at times spark troubling violence.

III. The causes of plague, the causes of suspicion: plague as poison

As we saw in Lesson 1, plague was a known entity from the beginning of Islam in the 7th century, mentioned in the sayings of the Prophet (hadith). According to these early Islamic sources, death by plague was a path to martyrdom for the faithful. Among some Christians in Europe in the early 14th century, in contrast, we instead see a rise in conspiracy theories that the disease was spread by poisons. Although 14th-century Christians also invoked divine retribution and celestial phenomena to explain widespread calamities, accusations that the disease was spread by poisoning could explain why illness and death were occurring in specific localities. The apparent randomness of deaths added to the terror.

In 1321, a sustained chain of accusations began in France and Iberia that individuals or even whole groups of people were engaged in poisoning wells. For reasons that are still unclear, many of the initial accusations targeted people living in leprosy houses (including, but not always limited to, those suffering from Hansen's Disease, as leprosy is now called). Later, in the summer of 1321, groups of Christians accused Jews in France and Muslims in Iberia of intentional poisoning. Importantly, however, most of these accusations were against specific individuals, not whole groups.

That the accusations of well-poisoning started in 1321, and in such a remote area, is significant. The earliest documented accusation occurred at Périgueux, an otherwise obscure town in the center of France. There is not yet evidence that plague was involved in spurring these accusations. Yet if it was—if this slowly spreading crisis coming out of the center of France was an instance of plague's focalization in the French countryside following importation of the disease during the Great Famine—then we can well imagine that it would be poorly understood by those experiencing it.

Later in the century, a French chronicler, Jean de Venette (d. ca. 1370), captured the cultural memory of events immediately preceding the Black Death and put his finger on the changed circumstances:

> Men ascribed the [new] pestilence to infected air or water, *because there was no famine or lack of food at that time but, on the contrary, a great abundance*. One result of this interpretation was that the infection, and the sudden death which it brought, were blamed on the Jews, who were said to have poisoned wells and rivers and corrupted the air. Accordingly the whole world brutally rose against them, and in Germany and in other countries which had Jewish communities many thousands were indiscriminately butchered, slaughtered and burnt alive by the Christians.[5]

Of course, we now understand that plague is not a disease that transmits via water and that such conspiracy theories were wholly baseless. Still, people facing the epidemic sought to explain why so many people were becoming ill at the same time. In Mediterranean Europe, the Black Death was understood immediately as an importation. By the fall of 1347, plague was reported in Sicily. By the end of the year, or early in 1348, it had reached northern Italy and Marseille on the French coast. From that point on, we see increasing reports of plague in inland cities, along waterways and major trading routes. In Occitania (southern France, near the border with Spain), plague arrived at about the same time. Here, it is clear that well-poisoning accusations were revived almost as soon as mass deaths began.

Initially, these accusations were raised against "vagabonds" and other random travelers. A letter, dated April 17, 1348, from the magistrate of Narbonne in southern France to the council of Girona, on the other side of the Pyrenees, captures how quickly the belief that the pestilence arose from astronomical influences was combined with a belief in human maleficence:

A double interment of two plague stricken individuals, a male and a female, from a southern French site, likely dating from the 1330s.

5. Rosemary Horrox, ed., "The plague in France according to Jean de Venette," in *The Black Death* (University of Manchester Press, 1994), 56, emphasis added.

> Although some people still maintain that the mortality has natural causes and arises from the conjunction of the two planets which are now reigning; we believe that it is certainly the combined effects of the planets *and the potions* which are causing the mortality. The illness brought about by these things is known to be contagious, for when one person dies in a house, their servants, friends and family are afflicted in the same way by the same disease and within three or four days all lie dead together.[6]

The magistrate reported that a number of towns in southern France (like Carcassonne and Grasse) had been struck, some already reporting mortality of a quarter of the population. A number of suspects had already been arrested, some of them confessing under torture to having dispersed the poisons. They were executed.

Studying plague-era violence through archeology: Tàrrega

By May 1348, plague had arrived in the Catalan city of Barcelona (in present-day Spain). Then it moved about 100 kilometers (60 miles) inland to Cervera. Then, just 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) west to the town of Tàrrega. In all three towns, members of the Jewish communities were attacked. We don't have any evidence that these attacks were motivated specifically by fears of well-poisoning. Rather, crowds in all three towns seemed to be taking advantage of the relative weakness of the king to vent anger and disrupt economic forces they felt were oppressing them. The attacks were followed by several years of legal efforts to restore property and loan documents, many of which had been destroyed in the rioting. If the Jews were assumed to have *caused* the plague, an important sign of resentment lies in the degree of violence unleashed on the victims at Tàrrega, who experienced the most lethal attacks.

The accidental discovery in 2007 of several mass graves in Tàrrega presented medieval historians and archaeologists with an extraordinary opportunity: To engage with the physical evidence of the massacre of a Jewish community that had been known for centuries through legal records and an animated account by a Jewish observer in a nearby town, who had seen some of the refugees of the incident. Being faced with the physical evidence of violence seems to elicit a straightforward explanation: This is simply antisemitism, an upwelling of a visceral hatred in the majority Christian community that was already there. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that in a time of devasting pestilence that hatred should turn into actual violence toward the Jewish minority.

Example of a lethal cranial injury, probably inflicted by a sword, from the Tàrrega Jewish Cemetery.

6. Rosemary Horrox, ed.,"Accusations of well-poisoning against the poor; Narbonne 17 April 1348," in The Black Death (University of Manchester Press, 1994), 223.

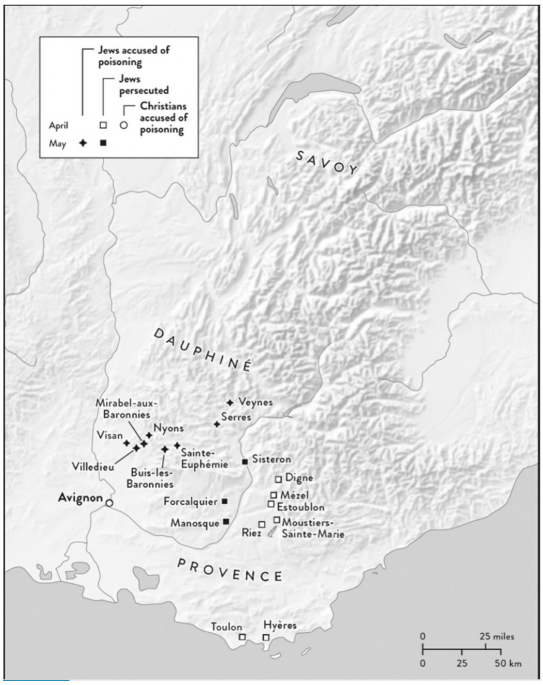
We don't know whether plague had yet reached the Jewish community of Tàrrega before this attack occurred; the bodies were never tested for the pathogen and, since they have been reburied, that analysis will likely never occur. But there are now close to two dozen 14th-century archaeological sites associated with plague that have been or are being excavated. As more and more burial sites are studied, we will develop a better understanding of the range of responses plague might elicit. And for those sites where high-quality *Yersinia pestis* genomes have been retrieved, the combination of genetic and bioarcheological analysis allows us to connect local factors (including emotional responses to plague's gruesome mortality) with some understanding of the larger spread of the disease. In the process, we can rethink and redraw our epidemiological maps.

Enlargement of the obverse ("heads") side of three small-value coins found in the Jewish cemetery at Tàrrega from the reigh of King Pere IV, used to help date the site.

IV. From ad hoc riots to murderous paranoia: judicial accusations in central Europe

As plague continued to spread during the Black Death, the well-poisoning accusations fused with long-standing antisemitic sentiments. Unlike the 1320s, where the well-poisoning accusations seem to have been limited to western France and Iberia, during the Black Death the accusations soon reached eastern France and penetrated into central Europe, including Germany. In the latter region, the accusations and persecutions moved in advance of the plague itself.

At some point in late spring or early summer of 1348, it became clear that the force and duration of the plague outbreak advancing from the Mediterranean was going to continue unabated. The generic antisemitism that had separately fueled attacks on Jewish communities in Provence and Catalonia (including Tàrrega) fused with rumors of well-poisoning to create a sustained series of accusations specifically against Jews for supposedly having plotted to poison wells and public waterways. In May, in the region north of Provence known as the Baronnies, a shift occurred. Whereas the earlier attacks on Jewish communities in coastal Provence were carried out by local mobs, in the Baronnies local officials took charge, with the approval of the local lord.



Attacks on Jewish communities in Provence in spring 1348.

The first document confirming that well-poisoning accusations were being levied against Jews is from early June 1348. Notably, as we saw in the *Life* of Pope Clement VI (in Reading 1), Christians were also being accused at the same time. The document from Savoy (a largely mountainous region in the southeastern part of modern France) records that on June 5, 1348, the council advising the Count of Savoy wrote to an official in another town:

> It came to [the council members'] attention that there is a rumor circulating, which emerged due to false claims, about toxic poisons and other potions. Some of those subjected to you [the castellan] bring reproach and admonishment against the Jews of our lord the count [of Savoy] and other Jews passing through your lands. And they also [act against] some other Christians as they are passing through your territory, because of these potions and poisons. And concerning these [poisons], [the officials] accuse [the suspects], saying that they put these poisons and potions in the water. And when [the officials] discover that [the Jews and Christians] mentioned above are passing, they search and investigate even Christians who seem as strangers, under pretext of these poisons, and wish to see these [poisons] which they carry.[7]

Pope Clement VI himself (whose papal court was based nearby at Avignon) would attempt to intervene. On July 5, September 26, and again on October 1, he reissued the bull (a kind of proclamation) *Sicut Judeis* with a "mandate to all prelates and other clergy to act against those who persecute the Jews, especially in connection with the outbreak of the plague." In the last iteration, he argued that Jews were dying from plague in as great numbers as Christians, and therefore could not have been responsible for poisoning them (since they would have known where the poisons had been placed). He also pointed to recent outbreaks of the plague in places that had no Jewish populations; the accusations thus had no logical merit.

Pope Clement VI, cameo in Notre-Dame de Paris.

In German-speaking regions, however, such arguments had little effect. Faster than the plague itself, the accusations against Jews spread north into the regions that are now Switzerland and Germany. The most extensive documentation exists for the persecution of the Jewish community at Strasbourg, on the present-day border between France and Germany. There, the city council initially resisted calls to implicate its Jewish community in the well-poisoning accusations. They sent letters to neighboring mayors, councils, and local lords requesting proof that Jews were to blame for plague's spread. Of the responses they received, 19 survive. These refer to further letters sent from other cities and regions, telling of interrogations of Jews and their testimony derived from "due legal process" (which included torture). Almost invariably, these trials ended in mass public burnings.

7. Tzafrir Barzilay, *Poisoned Wells: Accusations, Persecution, and Minorities in Medieval Europe, 1321–1422* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 118.

Earlier scholars studying Christian attacks on Jewish communities during the Black Death had assumed that attackers were either acting out of fear of the unknown, advancing pandemic or were opportunistically taking advantage of the chaotic situation to seize all the Jews' property and cancel debts to them. The latter charge has particularly been levied against political elites, because in many cases the attacks came before plague was ever seen locally.

However, new evidence about the plague's earlier arrival allows us to draw new conclusions. As noted above, it has long been recognized that, unlike the situation in southern France and Catalonia, the attacks on Jewish communities in German territories *preceded* the arrival of the Black Death wave of plague. In fact, close scrutiny of local evidence shows that some regions in Germany saw no impact of the Black Death at all. While evidence from England shows that *news* of the terrible outbreak was indeed sufficient to prompt local action in advance of the disease's arrival, England may well have shared with Germany a common trait: distant memories of the earlier catastrophes of the past several decades. Although the evidence is only suggestive (since we have no accompanying documentation to explain the behaviors), the burial peculiarities we find both in Nabburg and in nearby Amberg hint that plague deaths—three decades before the Black Death began—provoked severe unease among those who survived the outbreaks. The burials suggesting fear of revenants (disquieted souls, what we would call "zombies") stand out in these two burial grounds, in one of which the presence of *Yersinia pestis* has been confirmed.

20 years later, between 1336 and 1338, massacres of Jews occurred in Germany, known collectively as the *Armleder* persecutions. The geographic distribution of these uprisings shows them at first centered in a narrow wine-growing region in the center of Germany and then spreading during the subsequent two summers not broadly to all communities with Jewish populations, but rather along specific downstream rivers leading eventually to the Rhine River. In the spring of 1338, parallel uprisings occurred along the Rhine, in the region of Alsace (now part of eastern France).

We will examine the geographic pattern of persecutions in Germany in class discussion. As with the attacks in Tàrrega and western Europe, it is usually said that persecutions of Jews in Germany were motivated either by general religious hostility, or by economic resentment of the role Jews often played in the debt economy. Those factors cannot be dismissed. But the locus and timing of the *Armleder* uprisings may be related to environmental disruptions, too. Agricultural lands were being abandoned in central Germany at this time, indicating that people of the region were sensing a change—that these were no longer healthy places for human habitation. For example, we know that the 1349 execution of the Jewish inhabitants of the city of Erfurt occurred on the

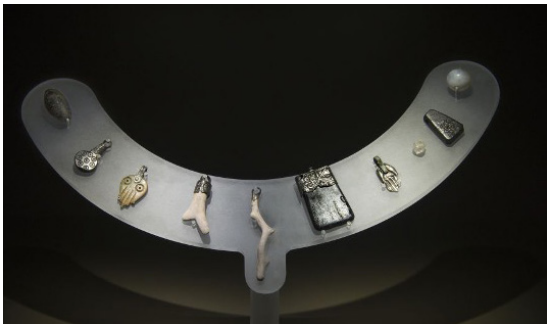
A marker showing the height of the water during the late June 1342 flood in Hannoversch Münden, in Lower Saxony.

night of April 19th to the 20th. In the days preceding, two intense frosts killed off the vines of what should have been the wine crop that year. Whatever prompted either the massacres or the land abandonment, a sequence of disasters—a massive infestation of locusts in central Europe from 1338 to 1341, followed by the still unmatched floods in Germany in late June 1342—meant that news of "pestilence" in 1348 would have been seen as part of a litany of catastrophes.

To sum up: when we look at a map of the persecutions of Jews in Europe in 1348-1350, we find that there are three patterns: the western region (Provence to Catalonia) where the attacks *coincided* with the arrival of plague, but where the accusations of well-poisoning (revived from the 1320s) seem to have circulated separately; the central region along the Rhône River (Savoy and the areas that now make up Switzerland), where the accusations of well-poisoning *took on judicial precision* and became more tightly focused on individual Jews but stayed more or less in line with the advance of plague; and the German regions where the accusations against and destruction of Jewish communities were *not always linked with the arrival of plague* (aside from rumors of its coming), but where the memory of plague and other recent environmental catastrophes may have linked readily with news these communities were hearing from the already devastated areas of southern France.

IV. The Aftermath

In some places where Jewish communities had been destroyed, they never returned. We know of several collections of jewelry and coins hidden away by families when they knew attackers were coming; those like the Treasure of Colmar (see image) were only discovered in the course of modern times as old buildings were being renovated. In other situations (including Tàrrega), there were attempts at restitution for those who had fled and survived. In a few cases, Jews were explicitly invited to return. The Jewish community of Erfurt, in present-day Germany, for example, had been completely exterminated in March 1349. The archbishop of Mainz, who was the local "lord" who held dominion over the Jews, prosecuted the Christian leaders and other local authorities who had led the attack against the Jewish community, and forced the town's citizens to pay restitution. In 1354, the city subsidized the construction of new houses and a synagogue, inviting Jews from surrounding regions to come and



Top: A Jewish wedding ring, retrieved as part of the Treasure of Colmar (located in present-day eastern France), discovered during renovations in 1863. Jews in Colmar were arrested on December 27, 1348, and were executed sometime before April 2, 1349. Bottom: A necklace of amulets from a mass grave at Tàrrega.

After the Black Death, direct persecution of Jewish communities during plague outbreaks in Europe mostly stopped. A final papal refutation of well-poisoning accusations in 1422 is the last we hear of them. Nevertheless, the damage was done in terms of strained relations between majority Christian and minority Jewish communities. By about 1500, virtually all Jewish communities in western Europe had been expelled, save for Italy and a small region of southeastern France. Plague, in contrast, lived on, not disappearing from Europe until the 18th century.

Tombstones from a medieval Jewish cemetery on display in Erfurt, Germany.

Plague was such a regular and feared experience in early modern Europe that cities would celebrate the end of a plague episode by erecting a "plague pillar" (Pestsäule). This is an image of one erected in Vienna, Austria, after a particularly prolonged period of plague, from 1679 to 1693.

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Page 3:
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Page 4:
Screen capture of map showing the location of Kutná Hora-Sedlec, 2025.
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Page 5:
The memorial stone from Schmidtstedt, remembering the victims of the Great Famine, Angermuseum Erfurt, photographed by Dirk Urban, https://mittelalter.hypotheses.org/12120

Page 6:
Screen capture of map showing the location of Nabburg Germany, created by Monica H. Green, 2023.

Page 7:
Detail of a plan showing the location of graves on the western edge of the Nabburg cemetery, personal image from Matthias Hensch, shared with permission, May 19, 2023.

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Fig. 17, Nabburg Graves 471/474, photograph by, Rudi Röhrl, BLfD, Regensburg office, in Mathias Hensch, "Sankt Johans Freidhof in Nabburg – Gewöhnliche und ungewöhnliche Einblicke in die spätmittelalterliche Begräbniskultur Ostbayern," in '*…und es hat doch was gebracht!' Festschrift für Karl Schmotz zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ludwig Husty, Walter Irlinger, and Joachim Pechtl, Internationale Archäologie – Studia honoraria 35 (Marie Leidorf, 2014).
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Page 14:
Pope Clement VI Cameo, Notre-Dame de Paris, PHGCOM, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PopeClementVICameo.jpg

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Page 15:
A marker showing the height of the water during the late June 1342 flood in Hannoversch Münden, Lower Saxony, January, 2016, Axel Hindemith, CC BY-SA 3.0 DE, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hochwassermarken_Pfeiler_Blasiuskirche_M%C3%BCnden.jpg

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