



### War and Disease: A Tale of Destruction

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War and disease have always gone hand in hand, from Antiquity to its most recent example in the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic still affecting it nowadays. In fact, war and disease are two of the horsemen of the Apocalypse (many scholars name them as pestilence, sword, famine, and death riding on their white, red, black and pale horses).<sup>3</sup> In the pre-modern world, several cases of terrible epidemics have become entrenched in our historical memory. The plague of Athens, well known in the account of its most famous witness, the historian Thucydides, decimated one third of the population and resulted in the downfall of Athens as the major player in Greek politics in the fifth century BC.

While the Persians had been unable to contend with the might of this city-state in their attempt to extend their empire over European lands, disease and famine did. Between 25 and 50 million people were also lost to the epidemic known as the Justinian plague of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD and became recurrent in the Mediterranean for a period of some two hundred years. More importantly, in addition to prompting numerous revolutions, the plague expedited the Avar invasion of the Balkans region and their advancement towards northern Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> Several scholars (starting with Ireneus) have interpreted the horses to symbolize different figures, from Christ and the Holy Spirit to the Anti-Christ.



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The black plague that affected Europe at the end of the Middle Ages also brought with it important social and political changes regarding the loss of population, its influence on wages, the reinforcement of royal power, and a generalized social upheaval that, in the case of Spain, can be related to the first pogroms against its Jewish population. **Cortijo** explores in his essay the connection between politics and disease through his exploration of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In book 2, the author includes the Funeral Oration of Pericles immediately preceding his description of the plague of Athens, as if to make the reader pay attention to the necessary connections between the two. Writing after the facts and knowing that Athenian power had been superceded by a Spartan political system that defended opposite values, Thucydides makes Pericles extoll the virtues of democracy as the great achievement of Athenians.

Geopolitics can be affected by the onset of epidemics and disease of large proportions. Conspiracy theories that currently abound to explain the spread of the Covid-19 virus from China match the accusations of poisoning wells laid against Jews in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Millenaristic movements that flourished as a result of the black plague and ultimately resulted in the split between Catholics and Protestants in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, resemble the insistence of fundamentalist Christian congregations in Spain to meet in order to atone for their sins, despite the obligatory confinement imposed by the government. At the same time, more nuanced approaches see plague and disease as a natural way to keep population growth at bay and are seen as the normal evolutionary development in the adaptation of humans to their environment.

Also, we have also been reminded by scholars such as **J. Diamond** that the history of humankind is clearly related to the spread of disease from more technically advanced societies to those that were less exposed to contact with domesticated animals. The death of millions of American indigenous inhabitants after the arrival of Spanish forces in America was no doubt connected to the spread of diseases as a consequence of the invasion more than to the military might of the Spaniards. Genetics, therefore, played a crucial role in what the anti-Spanish black legend had originally termed as genocide. Similarly, **Gómez Moreno** posits a bold hypothesis to explain the unequal distribution in the spread of Covid-19 worldwide. By looking at population genetics, he concludes that the haplogroup R1b, characteristic of Western Europe, shows a clear predisposition for being affected by the virus.



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**Joandomènec Ros** offers us in “Coronavirus, black swans and gray rhinos” a lucid essay in which he explores two animal similes (*black swans* and *gray rhinos*, thought to be equivalents of something that did not exist although both in fact have real existence) to caution us about the real predictability of catastrophes (for instance, pandemics). Politicians, who frequently only contemplate scenarios and adopt strategies that do not go beyond their four-year tenure, should allow permanent scientific experts not only to advise them but to have a more active role in dictating policies, while they should be in charge of making laws and organizing the logistics to solve problems.

**María Paz López Martínez** studies the *Book of Jannes and Jambres* that recounts a story (also present in the Bible without any mention of names) of a battle of magic powers between two rival sides: the power of God against Egyptian magic. Moses and Aaron perform wonders, while the Egyptians Jannes and Jambres try to counterattack, but with less and less success. The prodigies that ensue take the form of a series of plagues that spread over Egypt. The sixth and last one consists of ulcers. Moses and Aaron pick up a handful of ashes from an oven and throw it into the air. They turn into dust that extends throughout Egypt, causing people and animals to be covered with purulent ulcers, the magicians among them, according to Exodus.

The story, with many variations, is found in Numenius, Pliny the Elder, and Apuleius among others. The texts that have transmitted the story are fragmentary and date from between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> c., written in Hebrew, Greek, Sahidic, Coptic, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon. The main point of the story is clear: those who confront God against nature will not find rest in Hell. Following in the footsteps of Frederic Krueger, the author studies some Egyptian and Sahidic-Coptic stories of legendary magicians that might serve as a source for this story (the figure of the Egyptian magician, the two brothers who are the protagonists, the prophetic dream, the magic contest, the book on magic, the scene of necromancy, ghosts, graves, serpents, cypress tree, and deserts). The author goes on to analyze the presence of some of these motifs in Greek literary works of ancient fiction and concludes by stating that the reading of the *Book of Jannes and Jambres* could be serve the purpose of entertainment for the first Christian readers.

Insisting on the topic of *bellum iustum*, **Rocha do Nascimento** offers us a detailed overview of the concept of just war. He first reviews its theorization among the Greeks (Thucydides’s *Peloponnesian War*, Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*) and



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Romans. He explains the concepts of *clarigatio*, *feciais* (*pater patratus*), *indictio belli* and *Belonarii* among the Romans. He then explains the constitution of the concept of *bellum iustum* proper in St Augustine (*De civitate Dei* and *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*): war based on legality, just cause, correct intention, last recourse, proportionality. Scholastic thought also dealt with this concept and created the ideas of war only declared by the *auctoritas principis*, just cause, *intentio recta*, impossibility of doing justice through non-violent means. After an exposition of the main tenets of the Islamic religion, the author reviews the Christian Church's official doctrine on war (provided that this institution, as he reminds us, is not pacifist in nature): legitimate defense, permanent damage caused by aggressor, exhaustion of other means, conditions for success, use of arms does not create greater problems, validity of moral law during armed conflicts, human treatment of non-combatants. Finally, he analyzes the confrontation of Christianity and Islam during the Crusades starting in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and states that the use of force became necessary to repel Islamic attacks on the Christian West. Despite seeking dialogue through missionaries (which bespeaks of a preference for pacific means of spiritual *conquest*), this could not be achieved (the Islamic religion saw in the use of force its natural way of expansion). Nonetheless, war could only be waged under legal authority and for a just cause.

**Gustavo Cambraia Franco** studies St Anthony of Lisbon's ideas with regard to moral and bodily sickness. The author focuses on the saint's sermons, in particular sermons I, XI, XVII, XIX, and XXIV of his *Post-Pentecostes* series. In them, St Anthony conceives of theology as a scholastic science that serves to design a moral behavioral map by establishing an analogy between disease and medicine, between the seven deadly sins and the theological and moral virtues. The author analyzes the widespread theory of the four meanings (*quadruplex sensus*) of the Bible as unified in the organic whole of the spiritual life. In this regard, physical disease is interpreted as originating in sin and vice, bridging the fields of medicine and religion. Following a Platonic/Augustinian tradition (before becoming a Franciscan, St Anthony professed as an Augustinian monk), the five corporal senses are conceived as openings to all sorts of vices (moral diseases) that can only be cured by Christ's medicine through virtuous works, restoring health with the final triumph of justice and knowledge. The moral degeneration produced by the original sin not only introduced vice/corruption in human life but also bodily degeneration. The five senses become the entry for numerous diseases, sickness and death. Christ and his ministers on earth (priests)



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are the only real doctors with power to heal with words and grace, ultimately intent on reinvigorating human soul.

**Gilberto Callado de Oliveira** analyzes *war* as intrinsically linked to devastation in the classical world. He contends that Christianity introduced via Constantine (*in hoc signo vinces*) – St Ambrose (*De officiis ministrorum*) and particularly St Augustine the concept of a just war, provided that the Bible accepts without hesitation the existence of a *ius ad bellum*. Some centuries later, St Thomas Aquinas will use St Augustine's ideas to develop further this concept in 40q. II, II of his *Summae Theologiae*. There he studies the legality of an offensive war and war based on the idea of legitimate defense, the involvement of bishops and clergy in war, the use of deception in war, and warring during religious festivities.

Furthermore, just war requires the *auctoritas principis*, a just cause, a peaceful final objective (*pacem constat belli esse optabilem finem*) and the prohibition of pillaging, tournaments and duels. With regard to particular wars (*particularia bella*), the philosopher studies how in them there is a conflict of rights between the defense of life and the right to one's defense: *unus quidem conservatio propriae vitae, alius autem occisio invadentis*. War, for him, can become *peccatum* and must be avoided at all costs. It is only allowed when the common good is sought. While modern war has always verged on the side of excess and devastation, Aquinas's reflections on *bellum* alert us to view warring as *peccatum* that ought to be necessarily moderated by charity and is only *just* or *allowed* when very specific conditions are present.

**Anton M. Espadaler** pays attention to leprosy as one of the most terrible and widespread medieval diseases, at a time when it was considered a menacing monster that represented evil as an uncontrollable force, considered to be transmitted sexually. He analyzes an episode in the *Romanç de Jaufré* (ca. 1272-76) that offers us the most detailed portrait of a (giant) leper (vv. 2312-2333), even surpassing the descriptions of the disease in *De signis leprosorum* by Arnau de Vilanova: bloated body and limbs, gangrenous joints, sunken eyes and nose, reddish and wrinkled skin, hoarse voice, receding and bleeding gums, etc. The giant of *Jaufré* has kidnapped the son of a lady who requests Jaufré's help. The giant keeps many children in his house, probably a reference to Constantine's legend that detailed the emperor's baths in youngsters' blood to cure his own leprosy. The author reviews other instances in which leprosy is related to sexual sins and its cure is



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performed with young blood in medieval literature (*Amich e Melis*, *Queste du saint Graal*, *Vida de sant Honorat*). On the other hand, *Guilhem de la Barra* by Vidal de Castelnoudari (1318) offers us a much more gentle picture of a leper in whose house the protagonist finds all sorts of courtesies.

**Mário Jorge da Motta Bastos** provides us with a comprehensive overview of the *pestilências*, *pestelenças* and *pentinências* that have appeared as ecological disturbances in world history since the Hittites or the Biblical plagues of Egypt and Armageddon, including those of Athens in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the one that decimated Europe in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the so-called plague of Justinian in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, among others. His focus of attention is the analysis of the black plague (bubonic plague) of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. He explains its origin and dissemination and in particular its socioeconomic consequences in the Iberian Peninsula, providing as with a complete summary of scholars' conclusions on this topic over the last decades. He devotes part of his article to the analysis of the demographic crisis in Portugal ("muy despovorada e falecida de companhia") as a result of the black plague, the role of agriculture, the concentration of property, cities as spaces of death, etc. His analysis also takes into account the spread of contagion, plagues, and disease in Portugal during the 15<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. He concludes by quoting Oliveira Marques, who had stated that in the Ancient Régime, "every Portuguese (and the same could be said of French, Italian or English people) who lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries experienced an average of two or more epidemics during his lifetime, and several of his family members or friends would have died as a result. Thus, we can understand the efforts on the part of doctors, healers, magicians, philosophers, and politicians to find remedies to protect the population".

**Adela KotáĚková** reviews the treatment given to the Borgia family in television series (in particular *Borgia* by Tom Fontana, 2011-2014, focusing on Pope Alexander VI and his sons). The enemies of this family disseminated a legend that presented them as perverse, incestuous, amoral and power hungry. Despite the fact that these abominations have centered much of the analysis of this family's history, Fontana's script presents them in a more favorable light as defenders of Renaissance values, equating them to the role of the Medici family in Florence (Alexander VI studies a map of the world before deciding the partition of America between Spain and Portugal, Cesar shows knowledge of ancient Roman festivities or appreciates the value of the statue of *Laocoon and his sons*, or Lucrecia reads *Iphigenia* evolves from a medieval religiosity to the complexity we expect from a



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Renaissance princess). The author reviews how the Borgias dealt with sickness and health therapies.

It is a mixture of medieval remedies (incantations, superstitions, magic, withcraft), spiritual therapies, natural methods based on popular tradition and new medical experimentations with several substances and techniques (in particular referring to a new disease, syphilis) that represent the arrival of modern medicine and pharmacology. The series also presents Roderic as a skilful military strategist and diplomat in his dealing with other Italian families, the French and the Spaniards. Ceasar is presented as a perfect *condottiero*, a political and military genius who uses war for his own gain as well as persuasion, threats, bribery and deception. He is also knowledgeable about tactics from the Classical Antiquity and about technological innovations in fortification and weaponry. On the other hand, the TV series abounds in some historical misrepresentations. For instance, it presents the Borgia as defenders of an Italian unity against the invaders, or offers a unitary vision of Spaniards as a single identity: that is, quite frequently it projects on the past the national identities of the present.

From pandemia to pandemia, from the plague of Athens in the Peloponnesian War to the Borgia's preoccupation with medicine, disease and incantations in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> c., the articles in this monograph delve into the intricate connection of war and disease in the classical, medieval, and Renaissance world. Death and survival, destruction versus humanity, God versus human nature resound as topics that portray the human strife for survival as a conflagration of biblical proportions being constantly fought on earth. Some concrete examples from the *Book of Jannes and Jambres* and the *Romanç de Jaufré* elaborate in a literary fashion the ravages of war and disease as a confrontation of good and evil and in its dreadful manifestation of leprosy. And if the plague was an opportunity for Pericles to remind his co-citizens about the essence of Athenian democracy (free participation in public affairs), disease was also utilized by St Anthony to establish an easily understandable allegorical comparison between bodily and moral sickness. The spread of disease brought about by war also served as an opportunity for the Christian church to link the moral and legal aspects involved in destruction as it tried to establish a theory of *just war*, that is a way to exert some control over devastation and ruin. As a recurrent topic, disease and war have always made humanity question human resilience and our place in the large scheme of the universe. The arrival of coronavirus has also made us think the role of government and public policy in understanding the



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disease and effecting change from social institutions in a renewed effort to reign over two of the most devastating scourges in the history of humanity: war and disease.