Plagues in Nomadic Contexts – Historical Impact, Medical Responses and Cultural Adaptations in Ancient to Medieval Eurasia

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Bericht von: Kurt Franz, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg; Ortrun Riha, Universität Leipzig

On 7-9 October 2010, an international conference on 'Plagues in Nomadic Contexts – Historical Impact, Medical Responses and Cultural Adaptations in Ancient to Medieval Eurasia' was held in Leipzig. It was convened by Kurt Franz (Oriental Institute, University of Halle-Wittenberg) and Charlotte Schubert (Historical Seminar – Ancient History, University of Leipzig), on behalf of the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB 568) 'Difference and Integration: Interaction between Nomadic and Settled Forms of Life in the Civilisations of the Old World', and by Ortrun Riha, director of the Karl Sudhoff Institute for the History of Medicine and Sciences (University of Leipzig). It was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

The meeting aimed at integrating for the first time historical study of nomadism and the history of medicine. Epidemic disease has so far been examined almost exclusively in relation to settled societies and to agrarian economies. Now posed was the question: How and to what extent have epidemics affected societies involved in nomadic ways of life? Has the presence of nomads influenced the impact and perception of epidemics? A working hypothesis of the conference was that epidemics, and responses to them, have developed differently in societies in which nomads have had a distinct role.

Speakers were invited to address these issues with regard to the reconstruction of epidemics and their impacts; the endeavours of healers and physicians; and attempts to give social meaning to epidemics.

The conference began with greetings by the SFB's vice-speaker, JÜRGEN PAUL (Halle). He accentuated as a major outcome of the research centre's work that a fully nomadic group is a fictional type. Since 'nomads' regularly make use of the same resources, connections and interactions with settled people are normal. Epidemics transcend borders and different modes of life; they affect mobility and group responses in mixed societies.

Following Paul's presentation, the opening address was given by the doyen of the medical history of classical antiquity, VIVIAN NUTTON (The Wellcome Trust Centre For The History Of Medicine at UCL, London). Largely denying the possibility of a retrospective diagnosis of epidemics and plague in particular, he focussed on what the explanations of epidemic tell us about society and culture. In ancient Greece, divine anger and mechanical causes like polluted air were the most widely accepted explanations. Individual responsibility was limited to individual illness. Unlike Latin antiquity (more so the Middle Ages) with its inclination to stigmatise extra-social agents, among them foreigners, Greek authors rated the Other low. Nomads were acknowledged in their capacities as wandering healers come with cures or healing music. Public civic religious action was conceived of as the most appropriate measure. Greek concepts show a society which was self-conscient enough to cope with epidemic within an extant cultural framework.

ORTRUN RIHA (University of Leipzig) introduced the Karl Sudhoff Institute, the founding place of the History of Medicine as a discipline. Section 1 then explored 'Contagion and spaces.' To provide a solid base, ARNE C. RODLOFF (University of Leipzig) outlined the microbiology of plague and its epidemiological impacts. He described the typical features of *Yersinia pestis*, its four biovars, and their contemporary geographic extension. The audience was struck by the facility of *Yersinia pestis* for genetic modification and of its potential as a lethal weapon. Recent progress in the detection of ancient plague DNA, it was pointed out, is now due to yield

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new historical insights.[1]

Historical debate was opened by RUTH I. MESERVE (Indiana University at Bloomington) who showed that the nomadic use of pastures in Central Eurasia has been closely tied to traditional shamanic folk medicine. It relates to geographic space and to the distribution of natural resources and disease areas. Mental maps show that infection paths are localised and boundaries and spatial markers are put up against the spread of disease, combining empiric and cosmologically defined spaces. Also, nomadic etiology in many cases infers disease from 'dead land' (*körös ügei*): pasture that has 'lost its skin' through building, farming, etc.

KURT FRANZ (University of Halle-Wittenberg) investigated the importance of steppes/deserts and their nomadic inhabitants for medieval Middle Eastern perspectives on plague. He argued that the traditional and theological Islamic stance that there is no contagion, but only divine will was contradicted by a number of medical authors and chroniclers who sought to substantiate the idea of infection through the medium of nomadic space and people: Dry wildernesses (*tawahhush*, etc.) were deemed salubrious places that prevented corruption of the air and body whereas contagious 'poison' would be endemic to many humid agricultural areas. This view drew on the literary image of the Bedouin as a savage accustomed to want and therefore robust.

With regard to eighteenth-century Ottoman Syria, YARON AYALON (University of Oklahoma at Norman) argued that while city-dwellers were more stricken by plague than mobile herders, economic interactions over time could level the differences. Nomads, for example, visited (sub)urban markets to sell lambs right when grain harvests were being transported and temperatures rising. This abetted an increase of rats and of infected ratfleas in the towns' outskirts. These held the more filthy crafts and also invited the temporary encampments of trading nomads now exposed to greater risks.

Section 2, on 'Explanations and imaginations,' examined the epistemic potential of nomads in relation to health and disease. This aspect was considered by every speaker of the conference, but it was a particular focus for the contributions on Greek antiquity, Byzantium, and Latin Europe which have not seen any sizable nomadic population. At the same time, perceptions of external nomads did influence the understanding of epidemics. CHARLOTTE SCHUBERT (University of Leipzig) pointed out that a most prominent nomadic figure, the legendary Anacharsis with his double Toxares, Skythians, attracted veneration by Greeks. Lukian presents their nomadic origin: the first as a sage, part of the tradition of the Seven Sages, and the latter as a healer. His kenotaph in Athens was visited by those ill with fever. At the time Skythian nomads were not unconditionally equated with Barbarians and could be appreciated for their skills. In Ionian geographical notions, they became a northern counterpart to the southern nomads of Libya, the region which served as the assumed origin point of epidemics.

Proceeding to Byzantine explanations of epidemics, KARL-HEINZ LEVEN (University of Erlangen) distinguished the 'conventional' explanations of theological authors from the 'unconventional' explanations of chroniclers. The first drew on classical literary models: miasmata, divine examination, and divine punishment (e.g., for migrating Barbarians who desecrated churches and saints' graves), etc. The latter favoured a sceptical abstention. They stated the inexplicability of epidemic (e.g, when the people of Constantinople were struck and the mobile Huns spared), or personified plague as an actively wandering and even willful agens. Personification and demonisation became dominant patterns of explanation.

MICHAEL MEIER (University of Tübingen) commented on debates regarding the character and aftermath of the Justinianic Plague of 541/542, suggesting that its main impact was in the history of mentalities. General uncertainty, doubts of divine justice, and apprehensions about the end of time intensi-

[1] A most recent aDNA analysis has now overcome long-standing dispute on the etiology of the European Black Death, proving that it was indeed caused by plague bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. See Stephanie Haensch et al., „Distinct Clones of *Yersinia pestis* Caused the Black Death," PLoS Pathogens 6 (10): e1001134 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.ppat.1001134> (01.12.2010).

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fied a defeatism arisen from expectations of the end of the world in the year 500. On the other side, the cult of Mary, sacralisation, and liturgisation balanced this trend and ultimately triumphed, a mental shift of prime importance in the ending of antiquity and Christianity's assumption of its medieval shape.

Following this, KLAUS BERGDOLT (University of Cologne) focused on the Black Death in Europe 1347-49 and the change of times it engendered. Looking at its impact on Italian society and culture, he postulated that the combined social, political, and economic crisis caused the end of the Middle Ages. The effects cut deeply into the history of mentalities.

At the beginning of section 3, 'Livelihoods and mobility', STUART J. BOSCH (Assumption College, Worcester, Mass.) drew a daring but revealing comparison between Egypt and England regarding the interdependencies of landholding structures and economic collapse or success, when challenged by a heavy population decline: The Mamluk system could not cope with that sharp drop and decayed. By contrast, English peasants benefitted from depopulation through individual bargaining and decreased rents.

ORTRUN RIHA (University of Leipzig) provided an introduction to medieval and early modern concepts of plague and outlined etiological concepts as well as the therapeutic approach. At the end, it was not medicine that met the challenge: In the case of an epidemic, public health policy was called for as exemplified by European plague treatises included in the Sudhoff Institute's document collection.

Another view on mobility regarding Mamluk Egypt was presented by SARAH BÜSSOW-SCHMITZ (University of Halle-Wittenberg). Despite the traditional call for general immobility in the face of plague, reactions included flight from the towns but also to towns, apparently motivated by their relative wealth. Bedouins tended to avoid afflicted towns and individuals and often retreated to remote steppe but conomic interdependence and population densities in the zones of contact prevented isolation.

Continuing with Mamluk Egypt, BOAZ SHOSHAN (University of the Negev at Beer-Sheva) embarked on a historical reconstruction of the Black Death's relative impact on peasants as opposed to Bedouins. A long term near-symbiotic coexistence, although interspersed with political tension, changed under the impact of demographic loss, agrarian havoc, and a decaying irrigation system into a downward spiral to the benefit of the Bedouins. Appropriation of agrarian lands and sometimes local political take-over were reinforced by tendencies towards desertification and a recession of cultivable land in the delta.

The final section 4 addressed large-scale circumstances and effects of the Black Death in Eurasia. In an attempt to explain the spread of the Black Death on the east-west axis, with the exception of China, PAUL D. BUELL (Charité, Berlin) suggested that while this spread may have been an indirect result of the Mongols' move west and the intensified and accelerated exchange it created, there is little direct evidence associating the Mongols with plague. By contrast, the lack of relevant descriptions of disease from China during this period – the Golden Age of Chinese medical writing – was taken as proof that this region was spared despite a close association with nomadic peoples. Critical was the peculiar pathobiology of China and the fact that under the Mongols and during early Ming it was increasingly isolated from the overland Silk Road leading directly to Central Asian plague foci. The Indian Ocean, not effectively travelled by rats and fleas until modern times, had become the main channel of trade.

ULI SCHAMILOGLU (University of Madison at Wisconsin) then broached the hitherto untouched topic of how the nomadic-sedentary relationships in Western Eurasia underwent ethno-linguistic transformation in the 13th to 16th centuries and how this related to plague. He traced the collapse of centralised government, the abandonment of cities, and the rise of new nomadic confederations back to the Black Death.

The final discussion was initiated by two general responses. NICOLA DI COSMO (Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, N.J.) distinguished the major strands of discussion: the difficult and challenging task of connecting local and trans-continental phenomena; the question of nomads as unintended facil-

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itators of epidemics and their specific reactions to them; how to include concrete environments more or less favourable to nomads in the history of epidemics. JOSEF VAN ESS (University of Tübingen) noted that while the dawn of two new epochs in the Mediterranean and European region have been connected to epidemics, Middle Eastern history has not been so divided. Islamic doctrine saying that epidemic is a punishment for the non-believers and at the same time a martyrdom to the believer meant a leap into absurdity. Muslims have been badly equipped to respond to epidemics as forces transforming society, Van Ess argued.

The conference sought to overcome the concentrations of disciplines on single regional and cultural theatres, whether European, Middle Eastern, or Asian. Instead it has shown that epidemics and human reactions to them show comparable features, across disciplines:

The concept and discourse analysis is preeminent over attempts at retrospective diagnosis and epidemiology; local events and responses to epidemics are key and can affect supra-regional outcomes very differently; nomads have been ascribed a significant role in the course and aftermath of epidemics, and their behaviour, faced with epidemic, resembled that of sedentary people more often than not.

The nomadic context of epidemics has been shown to be substantial. 'Plagues in nomadic contexts' has thus offered a new way to connect the study of history, culture, and the history of medicine.

Conference Overview:

Opening address:
VIVIAN NUTTON (London): „Plague, Epidemic Disease, and the Other in Classical Antiquity"

Public lecture:
KLAUS BERGDOLT (Cologne): „Die Pest 1348 – Das Ende des europäischen Mittelalters (The Plague of 1348 – The End of the European Middle Ages)"

Papers:

ARNE C. RODLOFF (Leipzig): „Mikrobiologische, epidemiologische und immunologische Grundlagen der Pest (Microbiological, Epidemiological and Immunological Foundations of Plague)"

RUTH I. MESERVE (Bloomington, Ind.): „Traditional Disease Boundaries and Nomadic Space in Central Eurasia: The Search for Order"

KURT FRANZ (Halle): „Well off in the Wilderness? Muslim Appraisals of Bedouin Life in Times of Plague"

YARON AYALON (Norman, Okla.): „When Nomads Meet Urbanites: The Outskirts of Ottoman Cities as a Venue for the Spread of Epidemic Diseases"

CHARLOTTE SCHUBERT (Leipzig): „Griechen, Nomaden und Seuchen: Eine verlorene Spur? (Greeks, Nomads and Epidemics: A Missed Clue?)"

MISCHA MEIER (Tübingen): „Die 'Justinianische Pest': Mentalitätsgeschichtliche Auswirkungen einer Pandemie (The 'Justinianic Plague': The Impact of a Pandemic on Mentalities)"

KARL-HEINZ LEVEN (Erlangen): „Die Tollwut der Barbaren: Über wahre und falsche Ursachen von Seuchen bei byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibern (Barbarian 'Rabies': True and False Causes of Epidemics as Seen by Byzantine Historians)"

STUART J. BORSCH (Worcester, Mass.): „Epidemic and Landholding Structure in Egypt and England"

ORTRUN RIHA (Leipzig): „Flieh weit und schnell: Medizinische Empfehlungen in mittelalterlichen Pesttraktaten (Cito, longe, tarde – Medical Recommendations in Medieval Plague Treatises)"

SARAH BÜSSOW-SCHMITZ (Halle): "'The Disease Killed the One Who Stayed as well as the One That Moved': Theories, Perceptions and Practices Concerning the Plague in Mamluk Chronicles"

BOAZ SHOSHAN (Beer-Sheva): „Fellahin and Bedouin: The Aftermath of the Black Death in Egypt"

PAUL D. BUELL (Berlin): „Qubilai and the

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Rats“

ULI SCHAMILOGLU (Madison, Wisc.): „The Black Death and the Transformation in the Nomadic-Sedentary Relationship in Western Eurasia in the 13th–16th Centuries“

General responses:

NICOLA DI COSMO (Princeton, N.J.)

JOSEF VAN ESS (Tübingen)

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