

1349: The Plague comes to Norwich

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The sickness is here, and according to all the news that merchants and traders are bringing from all corners of the country, especially the south, sickness is spreading everywhere. Sickness travels in the air, with the animals, Jews, or in the water, no one knows (University of Paris, 1358). However, the sickness, or the black plague they call it, is spreading, and there is no escaping it. Emptying the town and telling people to go live in the country is not a solution that we can resort to, as the traders coming in are telling us that sickness is devastating all settlements. Furthermore, we cannot ask people to leave. If people leave, the economic system of our system will collapse; there will be no one to pay for the military, the offices, the walls, or the maintenance of the bridges. Therefore, the priority of the city and me, as the city's bailiff, is to ensure peace and an air of calm. Panic or false rumors needs to be strongly debunked and stopped from spreading. People are feeling panic, attacking those they think are sick, or attacking the Jews; these things only result in utter chaos. Chaos would only mean more work for the city council and more workload for the bailiffs. All of us in this room can agree that the last thing we want is brawls on the streets while farmers, traders, and artisans flee the city.

I believe there are several things we, as caretakers of Norwich, need to be considering. Firstly, we need to come up with ways to contain the sickness. We do know that sickness comes with outsiders and that it spreads fast. However, we cannot stop the trade as the cost will kill us nearly as fast as the black plague would. So, what can we do to ensure that sickness does not spread like wildfire?

I believe that we need to be discussing how to take care of those who fall sick. The information we have from the travelers is that towns and cities that timely isolated their sick saw the spread slow down. We need to dedicate quarters of the city towards the southern gate to the

sick. If the sick die, their bodies can easily be carried out enclosed in wooden boxes of the southern gate and buried outside the city walls (Health Ordinances of Pistoia, 1348). That way, the contamination can be restricted as much as possible. I suggest we dedicate an area next to an exit for the sick. Anyone who shows symptoms of the black plague needs to be isolated immediately and sent to the area. I believe that we need to be fastidious in dealing with those who are sick, as it is of immediate importance for the well-being and stability of the city of Norwich.

Coming to the second matter of this meeting is closing the gates and blocking the bridges leading to the city, as suggested by some of my friends here. I agree that we need to be cautious and not hold festivals and allow big parties without any purpose to enter the city. However, as a former member of the trader community, on behalf of my merchant friends, I cannot support the suggestion of closing down the city. There is no way of confirming that people, not rats carry the black plague. We do not know if the plague is God's wrath or mischief by the non-believers or the pagans. All we know is that it is a sickness that kills all and spreads everywhere. We know that there is no running away from it. There is news that there are villages that closed their gates to all the outsiders, but traders that came after saw nothing but dead in those villages (William de la Dene, 1350). If the sickness was in the city already, stopping the traders would not make people any less sick. We need to pray to God for mercy and hope that we can weather this storm that is upon us.

The reason you seem me supporting not stopping trade is the livelihood of many of our people depends on it, and if the trade is stopped, people will start to die of hunger if not of the black plague. A wool trader does not earn profits for himself only; the shepherds need the trader to buy the wool from him, and that money he gets from traders he used to buy the food from the

farmer who needs the money to buy clothes for winter for his family. I, as a bailiff, can speak from experience that people are the angriest and tend to commit most crimes when they are poor and hungry. Making people go hungry so that the plague can be avoided is not a choice I think we should be making. I think I speak on behalf of all my esteemed colleagues when I say that closing down the city will only make our jobs much harder and the chaos and increase the panic among the people.

Lastly, I believe we need to also prepare for the worst; if the plague spreads and causes as much destruction as we have heard from the news the travelers carry, we need to prepare for the worst. I direct this to my fellow friends from the merchant's council. All of you are men of means and have been given by God great wealth. This is your time to give some back to the people of God. We do not know how this plague will affect us, but we do know that food is one of the things that runs low the fastest in times of calamities. If farmers start falling sick, we will have fewer working hands. Hence, we need to stockpile food and ensure it is protected from rodents and wild animals. I ask the generous members of the merchant's council to donate funds to the city so we can buy food from anywhere possible and stockpile for hard days coming our way. I do know that as a merchant, you are thinking, why are you liable to pay for something you are not directly responsible for? And I will think that exact thing as I come from the trader community. I also did not believe that doing business was not beneficial for me. I believe that donating money to your city for its food security will benefit you in the long run. We do not know how long this plague will last, but we know it will pass as all diseases do. However, we as a city have a better chance of surviving if we have enough food and we can focus the city's resources on taking care of the people. If the city survives, it will be good for the merchant community. If the city collapses from the chaos of the plague, the trader community will also

lose their business fronts, suppliers, and workforce (Ordinance of Laborers, 1349). Hence, I believe it is a beneficial investment for the merchants to invest safekeeping of the city of Norwich and its people.

I now rest my case, give my fellow bailiffs present their arguments, and negotiate their plans. I will state that we must approach this plague as any other sickness and be overwhelmed by fear. If we, as the city's leaders, let the stories incite fear in us about the horrors of the plague, I shudder to imagine how it will affect the city's people. Fear creates chaos, and chaos in itself is an illness that only causes people to act out in the worst ways possible. Let us do what we can to contain the situation, work on contingency plans, and keep faith in the mercy of God.

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